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TRUMP IS BACK Gaza ceasefire begins, handover of hostages started



President-elect Donald Trump, right, and Melania Trump clap during a fireworks show at Trump National Golf Club in Sterling, Va., ahead of the 60th Presidential Inauguration

AGENCIES ■ DEIR AL-BALAH (GAZA STRIP)

A ceasefire between Israel and Hamas initiated in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, ushering in an initial six-week period of calm and raising hopes for the release of dozens of militant-held hostages and an end to the devastating 15-month war. A last-minute delay by Hamas put off the truce's start by nearly three hours and highlighted its fragility. First Red Cross convoy picked up three women Israeli hostages in Gaza. Even before the ceasefire took effect, celebrations erupted across the territory and some Palestinians

began returning to their homes. Israel, meanwhile, announced the names of the first three hostages expected to return home later Sunday, in exchange for the planned release of 90 Palestinian prisoners. The truce, which started at 11.15 am local time, is the first step toward ultimately ending the conflict and returning nearly 100 hostages abducted in Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack. An Israeli official confirmed that Romi Gonen, 24, Emily Damari, 28, and Doron Steinbrecher, 31, were set to be released later Sunday. Gonen was abducted from the Nova music festival, while the others



Displaced Palestinians flash V-sign as they return to Rafah, while a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas went into effect, in Rafah, Gaza Strip

were kidnapped from Kibbutz Kfar Aza. Damari is an Israeli-British dual citizen.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, said the

families had approved the publication of the names. Hamas was supposed to provide the names before the start of the ceasefire, originally planned for 8.30 am and when the ceasefire took hold, Israeli fire killed at least 26 people, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. It did not say whether they were civilians or fighters. The military has warned people to stay away from Israeli forces as they retreat to a buffer zone inside Gaza.

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PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President-elect Donald Trump is spending the eve of his inauguration in a series of Washington events that celebrate his return to power and his "Make America Great Again" movement as he prepares to move back into the White House at a time of deep national political divisions. Washington has prepared in unprecedented ways to keep the unfolding events safe and secure. But unlike when Trump helped spark a mob of his supporters to attack the Capitol and tried to retain power in 2021 after his loss to Democrat Joe Biden, officials are not expecting massive protests, unrest and violence this time. Instead, the city is braced for crowds celebrating Trump's second term and MAGA's total control of the Republican Party. It is a remarkable turnaround after Trump left the nation's

capital four years in disgrace and skipped the inauguration of his successor. Trump blasted his way through the 2024 GOP presidential primary and won November's election by an Electoral College margin unseen since Democrat Barack Obama was reelected in 2012. Yet even with that comfortable victory and his party in full, albeit narrow, control of Congress, the incoming president remains one of the most polarising figures in US history, with nearly as many fierce detractors as ardent supporters. That means it could be difficult to fulfil postelection pledges about promoting bipartisanship while healing political differences. He told NBC News on Saturday that unity would be a theme of his inauguration speech Monday at the Capitol, along with strength and fairness. "January 20th cannot come fast enough," he posted on his

social media site. "Everybody, even those that initially opposed a Victory by President Donald J. Trump and the Trump Administration, just want it to happen." Keeping to tradition, Trump spent Saturday night at Blair House, the president's official guest residence on Pennsylvania Avenue, across from the White House. He arrived there after a party at his golf club in Sterling, Virginia, about 30 miles west of the city, that illuminated the night sky. He had arrived in Washington from his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, aboard a C-32, the military variant of the Boeing 757, painted in the iconic presidential powder blue and white colour scheme. The aircraft that would be known as Air Force One if the president were aboard carried the president-elect as Special Air Mission 47.

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Valmiki Basti key to elite New Delhi seat

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

New Delhi's Valmiki Basti is set to play a pivotal role in deciding the fate for Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal, as well as BJP candidate Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma and Congress candidate Sandeep Dikshit in the upcoming Delhi elections. Residents of the Basti have expressed concerns over their sitting MLAs limited presence in the area and the negative impact of the excise policy on the rising problem of alcoholism. However, there remains a notable sympathy among the populace for the former Chief Minister Kejriwal who has faced jail time, alongside an appreciation for the ruling party's initiative that offers free bus rides to women. The area holds significant importance in both Delhi and national politics, as it was here that Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the 'Swachh Bharat' Abhiyan and former CM Arvind Kejriwal introduced the 'jhaadu' (broom) as the symbol of his party in 2013. Valmiki Basti comprises approximately 321 houses and has a voter



File photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer



base of around 6,000 to 7,000 residents.

A vendor named Ram Karan expressed his belief that Kejriwal was unjustly imprisoned by the BJP in connection with the money laundering charges linked to the excise policy case. "They have done him a great injustice by sending him to jail, and so far, they have been unable to prove the charges against him," he stated.

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GRAP III back after two days

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Rising air pollution level has once again forced the authorities to impose vehicle ban on BS 3 petrol and BS 4 diesel cars as the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Sunday imposed the Stage-III ('Severe' Air Quality) restrictions under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) for Delhi-NCR with immediate effect. The stage 3 also bans the entry of non-essential BS 4 diesel trucks into Delhi. The restrictions are not applicable for commercial vehicles involved in essential services. Persons with Disabilities shall be permitted to ply BS - III Petrol / BS - IV Diesel LMVs, provided that these are specifically adopted for them and are run only for their personal use. "After comprehensively reviewing the

overall air quality scenario and related aspects, it was decided by the Sub-Committee unanimously to study the trend further, before taking a call on invoking stringent actions/restrictions under Stage-III of the extant schedule of GRAP", CAQM said in a statement on Sunday. Delhi's average AQI exhibited an increasing trend during the day today which prompted the CAQM Sub-Committee on GRAP to call a meeting today at 4 PM to review the air quality scenario and forecast for meteorological conditions and AQI by IMD/IITM. The committee noted that the average AQI for Delhi has been on a declining trend improving from 370 at 3PM to 368 at 4PM, and the IMD/IITM forecast further expected it to improve by the evening. Accordingly, Sub-Committee decided to again hold a review meeting at around 8 PM.



Smoke billows out after a fire broke out in a camp during Mahakumbh, at Sangam in Prayagraj

No casualty in Mahakumbh fire; PM talks to Yogi

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Prayagraj witnessed a massive fire on Sunday during the ongoing Mahakumbh, as pandals in Sector 19, near the Shastri Bridge, were consumed by flames. Approximately 200 tents were impacted, with approximately 20 of them completely reduced to ashes. Although no casualties were reported, the fire resulted in substantial damage to valuables, and several LPG cylinders exploded, worsening the situation. Initial reports indicate that the fire started from the tent belonging to Gita Press. Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to inquire about the fire incident.

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Police claims Saif attacker nabbed



Police personnel take the accused, arrested in connection with the alleged attack on Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan, to a hospital for medical examination before producing him at a court, in Mumbai

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The 72-hour-long drama involving the elusive accused in the murderous attack on Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan finally ended on Sunday, as the Mumbai police finally arrested the real culprit - a Bangladeshi national - behind the sensational crime from the neighbouring Thane city. A day after the Railway Protection Force (RPF) personnel detained a 31-year-old suspect in connection with Thursday's attack on Saif, the Mumbai police zeroed in on the real accused - identified as Shariful Islam Shahzad (30) - from Hiranandani Estate at Thane (west). Shariful, who hails from Rajabariya village in Nalchity sub-region of Jhalokati district in southern Bangladesh, had illegally crossed over to India some six months and been living in Mumbai under the false name of Bijoy Das.

The police said that during the questioning after his arrest, Shariful admitted to having committed the crime. After his arrest, Shariful was produced before a holiday court in Mumbai, which remanded him in police custody for five days. The police had sought Shariful's custody for 14 days to establish the motive behind his breaking into Saif's house, to ascertain where he had hidden the cloths that he wore at the time of crime, what was the motive behind his entry to Saif's house, where did he procure the weapon, how did he enter India and how did he break into Saif's house and why did he assume a false name after coming to India. During the knife attack carried out on him allegedly by Shariful in the small hours of January 16, Saif had sustained six stab wounds, including the one in his spine while he was grappling an intruder in the actor's 12th floor apartment in posh "Satguru Sharan" building at Bandra (W) in north-west Mumbai. The knife attack on the actor had taken place between 2 am and 2.30 am on Thursday, after a failed attempt of a burglary. After his admission to the Lilavati Hospital, the actor had undergone a surgery for removal of a knife stuck in his spine and also plugging the leakage of spinal fluid. During a surgery carried out on him immediately afterwards, the doctors attending on Saif removed a 2.5-inch piece of knife from Saif's spine. During the preliminary interrogation, Shariful admitted to have sneaked into the actor's building on the night of January 15. Earlier, while seeking the custody of the accused for 14 days, the police cited several grounds for his custody. "The robbery was the motive behind the crime was robbery," a senior police officer said. The theft attempt failed after a house maid saw and raised an alarm, prompting Saif to come out of his bedroom. The actor resisted Shariful's attempt, resulting in a scuffle between the two-in which the latter stabbed him six times before fleeing the building empty handed.

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Exiled Kashmiri Pandits seeks homeland in Valley as UT

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Members of the exiled Kashmiri Pandit community Sunday took a pledge to intensify their struggle to reclaim their separate 'homeland' with a Union Territory status in Kashmir valley on the occasion of the completion of 35 years in exile. On 19th January 1990, the Kashmiri Pandit community was driven out of their homes under the shadow of guns. To mark this day, each year 'Holocaust Remembrance Day' is observed to mark their ongoing struggle for a permanent resettlement. Over 500,000 Kashmiri Pandits were forced to flee,



leaving behind their homes, businesses, and ancestral heritage. Paying solemn tributes in the memory of countless martyrs, killed at the hands of Pakistan-sponsored terrorists, the members of the Kashmiri Pandit community, sporting bandanas, took out a solidarity march and also organized a signature campaign in the Jagti township on the outskirts of Jammu. To highlight their struggle and the living conditions in exile, Panun Kashmir along with Youth for Panun Kashmir also organized an exhibition of posters depicting their plight. Images of vandalized temples, broken homes, and martyred Kashmiri pandits were put on display to depict the sufferings

and pain they went through during the 35-year-long period of exile. Sushma Pandita, seated inside a temporary tent in a park inside Jagti township, explained that 35 years ago when we first reached Jammu we were accommodated inside a makeshift tent city. "We were living in our multi-floor houses in the valley. Since then we have been living in these camps where we were accommodated in one-room and later two-room apartments. We have spent 35 years of life in these miserable conditions. We will not live in these matchbox houses now. We want to return to our homes and hearths".

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Milkipur bypoll: 10 candidates in fray

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

With the rejection of four nomination papers, 10 candidates are left in the fray for the by-election to Milkipur assembly seat in Ayodhya district. As many as 14 candidates had filed their nomination papers for the Milkipur assembly bypoll. The polling will be held on February 5 and counting of votes will be taken up on February 10. Even as 10 candidates are in the fray, there is likely to be a direct contest between Bharatiya Janata Party and Samajwadi Party. Chandrabhanu Paswan is the BJP candidate while Ajit Prasad is SP candidate. Azad Samaj Party led by Chandrashekhar Ravan, MP, has also fielded its candidate. The Milkipur bypoll is politi-

cally very significant for both the BJP and the SP. The outcome of this electoral battle could help shape the initial narrative for the 2027 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections. The Milkipur assembly constituency reserved for Scheduled Castes, fell vacant after the 2024 Lok Sabha election, when SP MLA Awadhesh Prasad contested and won the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat of which Milkipur is an assembly segment, in Ayodhya district. Coming within months of the Ram temple inauguration in January 2024, that loss had dealt a bitter blow to the BJP: it was tantamount to Hindutva being humbled in its symbolic homeland. Thoughts of redemption will therefore be uppermost in the party's mind. BJP candidate Chandrabhan

Paswan, a first-timer in electoral battle, is a member of the Pasi community. The SP has fielded Ajeet, the son of Lok Sabha MP Awadhesh Prasad. This makes the contest a direct face-off between two candidates of the same community. With the Congress and, interestingly, even the Bahujan Samaj Party, opting out of the electoral battle, it is a bipolar contest in a seat where the Dalit votes total 27 per cent. An SP victory in Ayodhya's politically charged landscape would signal that its expanded caste arithmetic is intact, putting it on course to challenging BJP supremacy in Uttar Pradesh and generating some early momentum for the larger battle in 2027. Its old loyal cohort of Yadavs (15 per cent) and Muslims (8

per cent) make up a formidable near-quarter of the electorate – a fact that sealed the party's six victories here since 1991 (the BJP has won only twice). With both candidates being from the Pasi community (15 per cent), it is to be seen whether the voters of non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (14 per cent) extend their support to the samajwadis. Also, observers expect the BJP to press the entire weight of its formidable electoral machinery to wrest a victory in Milkipur at all cost. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has accorded the bypoll the utmost priority over the past six months. He has visited Ayodhya over 20 times, overseeing the BJP campaign. Addressing party workers ear-

lier this month, he exuded confidence, citing the BJP's November triumph in Kundarki, a constituency with over 60 per cent Muslim population and considered an SP bastion. "If we can win Kundarki in the name of development, we can wrest Milkipur too," he said. BJP has projected Ayodhya as a symbol of development. Its ground level campaigns by party workers duly convey its development works and welfare schemes. To reach out to Scheduled Caste voters, the party has deployed several local Dalit leaders like Pushpendra Pasi, who has been appointed assembly seat convener, and party district general secretaries Radhey Shyam Tyagi and Shailendra Kori.

New DM takes charge

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The newly appointed District Magistrate of Lucknow, Vishak G, took charge at the Collectorate here on Sunday. Vishak G has taken over from his predecessor, Surya Pal Gangawar. Sharing his vision for the city, he said, "Lucknow, being a capital city, has multiple departments working on various important projects. During my tenure in Kanpur, I observed that when multiple departments are involved in major projects, it's crucial to ensure effective coordination so that everything remains in sync. Addressing interdepartmental issues, particularly regarding traffic and encroachments, is one of my key priorities." He further explained that his immediate focus would be to assess the ongoing challenges and strategise accordingly to resolve them. When asked about any significant initiatives he had undertaken in Aligarh or Kanpur that he would like to replicate in Lucknow, he pointed to a new initiative he had launched under the Swachh Bharat Mission in Aligarh. "In Aligarh, I introduced a door-to-door garbage collection system in the rural areas under the campaign 'Ek Rupaiya Mein Swachhata'. In urban areas, municipal corporation already manages cleanliness. This initiative charged a nominal fee of Re 1 per day for garbage collection, which helped fund the improvement of sanitation infrastructure in gram panchayats," he explained. Vishak added that the initiative



The newly appointed District Magistrate, Vishak G, took charge on Sunday

was highly appreciated by the Ministry of Rural Development. "This was one of the first such initiatives in the state and country. We collected Rs 50 lakh in 'swachhata' fees from various villages in Aligarh. I aim to replicate this in Lucknow and expand it further," he said. He also mentioned that while he had begun the initiative in Kanpur, it was in Aligarh that it saw significant progress. "We made a presentation to the Government of India just a week ago regarding the success of this initiative," he noted. Regarding the issue of poor road conditions, Vishak stated that a meeting would be scheduled with the Public Works Department (PWD), Lucknow Municipal Corporation, and NHA1 to address the matter and plan the necessary inter-

ventions. He emphasised the importance of accessibility to the public, saying, "My goal is to be accessible to the people and resolve their issues within a given time frame so they do not escalate." On the topic of employment for youth, he expressed his commitment to creating more investment opportunities to prevent young people from seeking jobs outside the state. Vishak also discussed plans for the city's historical monuments. "I will collaborate with the Tourism department and other relevant bodies to increase public awareness about these monuments and work toward their conservation," he said. Finally, he assured that strict action would be taken against land mafia operating in the district.

Double-decker bus carrying devotees to Kumbh overturns

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A double-decker private bus carrying Maha Kumbh devotees overturned in the Para Police Station area here on Sunday morning, police said. "The bus was travelling from Delhi to Prayagraj. Near the Tikunia turn, due to overload, it became unbalanced and overturned," said Deputy Commissioner of Police, West Zone, Vishwajeet Srivastava. Police stated that several people were injured, including women and children. Some were given first aid at the community health centre, while others were taken to Lok Bandhu Hospital. After the incident, the bus driver fled the scene. Police are searching for him. "A six-year-old girl was seriously injured, and after being rescued, she was sent to the hospital," said a statement from the Lucknow fire department.

The bus was booked by a travel agent named Aman. There were 35 to 40 devotees on board, travelling to Prayagraj where the Maha Kumbh is taking place. According to passengers, the accident happened due to sudden braking. The bus was travelling at high speed, and the abrupt braking at the turn caused it to lose control and overturn. However, the police stated that heavy luggage was loaded onto the roof of the bus, which contributed to the accident. Upon receiving the information, personnel from Para, Dubagga, and Talkatora police stations reached the scene. The DCP confirmed that the condition of the injured is stable and out of danger. Meanwhile, a truck laden with iron materials overturned into the Sai river from the Lucknow-Kanpur highway due to fog in the early hours of

Sunday, trapping the driver inside for several hours. The incident took place at the Lucknow-Unnao border in the Banthra police area at 3 am on Sunday. "Upon receiving the information, the Sarojininagar Fire Station team reached the spot at 4:05 am. After this, the SDRF was informed at 5:15 am, and half an hour later, the SDRF team also arrived at the scene. Both teams conducted the rescue operation, and the injured truck driver was extricated by cutting the cabin at 9:30 am," said the fire department, adding that the driver was taken to Sarojininagar CHC in critical condition. "The truck (UP75 M1897) was loaded with iron sheets. The driver, Dinesh (28), is a resident of Harwa village under Shrivratan Ganj Police Station in Amethi district," said Fire Station Officer, Sarojininagar, Sumit Pratap Singh.

Absconding accused held for ₹85-lakh job fraud

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Police on Sunday arrested an accused who had allegedly defrauded Rs 85 lakh from different individuals, officials said here. The accused duped people with fake appointment letters under the pretext of facilitating government jobs, they added. The accused had been absconding by changing his name. Identified as Shyam Kunwar Dubey aka Baba Ji aka Guru Ji, he had a bounty of Rs 10,000 on his arrest. He was nabbed near Laxman Mela ground on Sunday. Explaining the modus operandi, the police said Shyam Kunwar Dubey used to lure unemployed youths by promising them jobs clerks and peons in Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi Municipal Corporation, and Sampurnanand Sanskrit

University. He collected about Rs 85 lakh from the victims in cash and through online transactions and absconded after giving fake training and appointment letters to the unsuspecting victims. Amit Kumar, a Lucknow resident, and his 15 companions had filed a complaint against Dubey at Hazratganj Police Station on November 21, 2023. In the initial investigation, a case was registered under Section 406 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), but considering the seriousness of the matter, sections 420, 467, 468, 471, and 120B of the Indian Penal Code were added to it. Cases of fraud are also registered against the accused at Chetganj Police Station in Varanasi. The court had also issued non-bailable warrants and attachment orders against him.

Visitors from diverse backgrounds at Khadi Mahotsav

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The week-long 'Khadi Mahotsav 2025', held at Indira Gandhi Pratishthan in Lucknow and organised by the Khadi and Village Industries Board of Uttar Pradesh, attracted visitors from diverse backgrounds, particularly the youth, who showed increasing enthusiasm for Khadi products. "During the festival, Khadi and other items worth over Rs 2.54 crore were sold, underscoring the rising demand for indigenous products. The event aimed to contribute to the vision of a self-reliant India, bringing together entrepreneurs from Uttar Pradesh as well as other states like Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Rajasthan," a government spokesperson said. Participants showcased a wide range of high-quality Khadi and rural industry products, earning widespread appreciation. Among the items, Khadi garments crafted with modern techniques garnered particular interest from the younger generation. The products on display included cotton, woolen, and poly-silk garments, wooden and clay toys and utensils, pillows, sheets, and various other items like coats and sarees. In addition, entrepreneurs were

provided with online marketing facilities to expand their reach and access a wider market. The Khadi Mahotsav served as a platform to inspire and encourage local entrepreneurs. The festival uplifted small-scale business owners, helping them showcase their craftsmanship and set new benchmarks for Indian businesses. Artists, weavers, and entrepreneurs had the opportunity to display their talents and learn new techniques, aligning with CM Yogi Adityanath's vision to increase employment and boost the economy through local products, the spokesperson said. Awareness about indigenous products has surged over the past seven and a half years, with local festivals playing a crucial role in providing employment for artisans and contributing to India's overall development, he noted. "The event not only promotes Khadi and village industries but also unites talent from across the nation. With eco-friendly Khadi and handloom products gaining popularity in modern fashion and witnessing a growing demand in international markets, Khadi Mahotsav is emerging as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth and a celebration of India's cultural heritage," the spokesperson said.

Italian team recites Ramayana chaupai, Shiv Tandav Stotram

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A delegation from Italy, led by Mahi Guru, the founder and trainer of the Meditation and Yoga Centre in Italy, met Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday after taking a holy dip in the Sangam at the Prayagraj Maha Kumbh. The group, which included several women from Italy, shared their spiritual experiences of the event and expressed their admiration for Indian culture and traditions. During the meeting, the delegation also recited 'chaupai'

MEETING WITH CM

from the Ramayana, Shiv Tandav Stotram and sang various bhajans, creating a deeply devotional atmosphere. The delegation described the Maha Kumbh as a live demonstration of India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage. They shared how participating in the Naga sadhus' rituals, bhajan-kirtan and other religious practices profoundly impacted their understanding of Indian traditions. The women of the Italian delegation said that their experi-

ence at the Maha Kumbh had left them deeply impressed by the depth of Indian culture and spirituality. They appreciated the warmth and hospitality they experienced during their visit and noted how the event had reinforced the importance of spirituality and unity in diversity. Chief Minister Yogi welcomed the delegation and expressed his gratitude for their visit. He praised their enthusiasm in experiencing the essence of India's spiritual and cultural practices and encouraged further exchanges to strengthen ties between India and Italy.

Another birthday celebration video goes viral

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Following this, several high-end vehicles are shown, with roughly six cakes placed on the bonnet of one of the cars. About eight to ten young people are present, and while some of the group are bursting party bombs, another young man is seen cutting the cake. During this, a person can be seen firing in the air from behind. The video is believed to have been recorded on Thursday night, or three days ago, near the Summit Building police outpost. One of the individuals in the video is reportedly the son of a local MLA, who is known to

frequently travel in luxury car fleets in the Vibhuti Khand area. After the video went viral, the Vibhuti Khand police have launched an investigation. Police station incharge Sunil Kumar Singh mentioned that it is still unclear where exactly the video was recorded, but efforts are underway to identify the individuals involved using footage from cameras installed around the Summit Building and on Shaheed Path. This incident follows another recent episode where a large group of youths gathered at the Engineering College cross-

ing to celebrate the birthday of Raghavendra, also known as Raghav, a resident of Gayatri Nagar in Madaion. In this case, the road was blocked with more than 50 luxury vehicles, and the youths danced on car roofs while loud music played. Several rounds of firing were also reported. The situation escalated when the video went viral on social media. With the help of footage, the Madaion police arrested several youths involved in that incident but have so far been unable to trace the birthday celebrant, who continues to update his social media regularly.

CITYBRIEFS



MoU SIGNED
Indian Bank has partnered with Action Construction Equipment Limited (ACE) in Lucknow to empower farmers by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU). The collaboration offers farmers easy access to loans for purchasing tractors, harvesters, and agricultural equipment with minimal documentation, lower interest rates, and quick approvals. Loans will be available through both digital and traditional channels at Indian Bank branches nationwide. At the event, Indian Bank's Chief General Manager Sudhir Kumar Gupta and ACE's Chief General Manager Ravindra Singh Khaneja discussed loan schemes and product details. This initiative supports farmers' economic development and aligns with the government's vision. **ANTI-ENCROACHMENT SQUAD CRACKS WHIP**
The Lucknow Development Authority's anti-encroachment squad on Sunday demolished unauthorised constructions in Gomti Nagar Extension and sealed a multi-storied apartment in Chinhat, officials said

here. The squad, led by Devanshu Trivedi, targeted semi-finished structures on 18 bighas of land, which had been illegally occupied using fake documents, they added. This action followed multiple complaints to LDA Vice Chairman Prathmesh Kumar about the land grab and ongoing illegal construction activities. Authorities were warned that, if left unchecked, the area could become a full-fledged illegal housing society with the support of influential individuals. When the locals failed to provide valid documentation to prove their ownership, the operation proceeded, freeing the land for public use. In addition, the LDA's second team, led by AK Singh, demolished illegal portions of a multi-storey complex in Sushant Golf City that were not part of the approved layout plan. Despite two notices warning the owner, the illegal portions were not removed voluntarily. Finally, a multi-storey apartment in Chinhat was sealed as the builder had altered the original layout plan. The owner may seek leniency from the LDA tribunal for minor modifications, officials said.

CLASSIFIEDS
NOTICE

Inform That, I Prasan Kumar Mishra S/o Late Santosh Kumar Mishra R/o 24 B, Krishna Bihari Nagar Varma chauraha City & Distt. Fatehpur U.P. 212601. I Declares my Name Prasan Mishra (Educational Records & Passport) is wrong. Correct Name is Prasan Kumar Mishra (Aadhar Card). All concerned, Please Note this. For All Future Purpose.

NOTICE

Everyone is informed that my correct name is Sufiya Begum. Whereas in my Aadhar card, Yanlan Begum has been written by mistake. I should be known as Sufiya Begum. Sufiya Begum W/o Mohammad Raza R/o Mohalla Bharav, Phaphund, Auraiya

Study highlights overexploitation of Marwar tree

SHARMILA KRISHNA ■ LUCKNOW

A recent study conducted by the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeosciences (BSIP) highlights the overexploitation of the Marwar tree (Tecomella undulata), an endangered species commonly known as 'desert teak', and stresses the need for its protection. This tree plays a critical role in the ecology of arid lands. The study suggests that while climate change may favour the tree's distribution in the future, human interference must be carefully controlled. Senior BSIP scientist Jyoti Srivastava explained that the tree is a keystone species in the dryland ecosystem.

"The tree is highly adaptable to climatic extremes, including harsh temperatures, low precipitation, and prolonged drought. It holds socio-cultural and economic significance in the region and is deeply embedded in people's daily lives. It is mentioned in several Indian epics, including the Mahabharata. Beyond its cultural relevance, it provides cattle fodder, firewood, timber, and medicinal products. It also offers shelter and food for wildlife, maintains soil fertility through fungal associations, and helps prevent desertification," she said. She noted that the tree, once widespread across India's drylands, is now endangered. "Today, it is found only in the

drylands of northwestern India, Saurashtra, and the southern coast of Tamil Nadu. Protected areas for the species are limited, with a single conservation centre located near Akoli village in Jalore district, Rajasthan. The shrinking distribution of the tree will negatively affect regional ecology since it is a keystone species. It will also have detrimental impacts on the agrapastoral community, including reduced cattle fodder in desert regions, a decline in raw materials for the local furniture industry, and a disruption of traditional medicinal practices," she added. The study analysed how the distribution of the tree has changed over time and its

potential response to future climate change. "Our research helped identify the key environmental factors that influence its distribution. We used species distribution modelling (SDM) and fossil pollen data to understand the tree's historical and future distribution. By applying SDM, we were able to predict the tree's distribution 22,000 years ago, before significant human impact." "The results showed that, in the past, the tree's distribution was more limited, with a stable, cold, and dry climate compared to the present. As temperatures in the drylands gradually increased and rainfall became more erratic, the tree's distribution expanded.

Future predictions suggest that the tree's distribution will increase in northwestern India and Saurashtra due to rising temperatures during monsoons and unpredictable rainfall patterns. If human interference is reduced, the tree could expand further under favorable future climate conditions," she explained. The study recommends that conservation efforts focus on limiting human interference and establishing additional protected areas for the species. "Conservation strategies should prioritise limiting human impacts and expanding protected areas in northwestern India and Saurashtra to safeguard the tree's habitat," she concluded.

Unity is key to united India: Yogi on Maha Kumbh message

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, on Sunday, said that the message of Maha Kumbh is clear: this country will remain united and strong only through unity.

"We are all coming together with this message of unity and integrity. This is the message of Prime Minister Modi," he added.

The chief minister made the remarks at a press conference in Prayagraj after reviewing the preparations for Mauni Amavasya. He said, "A large number of devotees are arriving at the Maha Kumbh from across the country and abroad. Many foreign devotees were deeply moved after taking a holy dip at the Sangam."

He mentioned that some tourists from Europe had also visited and the way they were singing praises of Prayagraj was truly overwhelming. "They did not know Hindi, Sanskrit or Awadhi, but they were chanting Hindi chaupais, Sanskrit mantras and verses connected to Sanatan Dharma with great devotion. The reverence they expressed for Mother Ganga and the sacred places here was overwhelming," he remarked. The chief minister highlighted the grand scale of the Maha Kumbh and lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for the event. He emphasised that everyone is fully dedicated to bringing this vision to life at the local level. He also thanked the media for helping promote Prayagraj's positive image.

"The main bathing events of Paus Purnima and Makar Sankranti have concluded, while the two mahasnas - Mauni Amavasya on January 29 and Basant Panchami on February 3 - are still to come. Over 7,000 organisations have already arrived," he noted.

The chief minister informed that an aerial survey of the entire Maha Kumbh area was conducted on Sunday. He added that the total number of people present at Maha Kumbh, including devotees



Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath addresses mediapersons, while Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya looks on, in Prayagraj on Sunday

bathing at the Sangam, residents of Kumbh tents, and other connected groups, exceeds one crore.

"There is a massive presence of saints and devotees currently in Prayagraj, with numerous religious rituals being conducted. Whether domestic or foreign, all are deeply moved after bathing at the Sangam," he added.

Notably, governors and chief ministers of various states, as well as Supreme Court and High Court judges, along with representatives from different states, have continuously been visiting and bathing at the Sangam. Yogi also mentioned that on Makar Sankranti and Paus Purnima, he was unable

to bathe at the Sangam, as he had chosen to restrict himself for the convenience of saints and devotees. The opportunity to witness the devotion and sentiments of the saints and pilgrims was truly overwhelming, he added.

CM ASKS OFFICIALS TO STRENGTHEN SECURITY, COMMUNICATION

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has directed officials to enhance crowd management and communication systems in the Maha Kumbh Mela area for the upcoming Republic Day festival as well as Mauni Amavasya and Basant Panchami Amrit Snans. He emphasised the

need for robust security arrangements during the Amrit Snans on Mauni Amavasya and Basant Panchami. The chief minister reviewed the Mela area in Prayagraj on Sunday. Later, he held a meeting with the officials and gave necessary guidelines regarding further arrangements.

He said, "For better crowd management on special days, movement on the pontoon bridges should be kept one-way. The entire Mela area should be declared a no-vehicle zone on Mauni Amavasya and Basant Panchami. The sentiments of the devotees must be respected, and officials should proactively assist any

one in need."

The chief minister stated that in the coming days, several dignitaries, including the President of India, vice president, prime minister and union home minister are expected to visit Prayagraj. Additionally, the state cabinet meeting is scheduled to be held here on January 22. He directed that all necessary preparations for these events should be completed on time.

During the meeting held at the ICCA auditorium, the chief minister stated that approximately 1.5 crore devotees are currently present in the fair grounds, and over seven crore people have already taken a holy dip at Triveni. He high-

lighted that the massive turnout during Paus Purnima and Makar Sankranti was well-managed, and every visitor left satisfied.

The chief minister estimated that 8-10 crore people are expected to visit on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya. Additionally, large crowds are anticipated on Republic Day. He emphasised the need for robust arrangements to ensure the convenience and safety of the visitors.

The chief minister directed officials to ensure uninterrupted electricity and water supply, proper maintenance of toilets and cleanliness, upkeep of pontoon bridges, and a well-planned crowd management strategy. He emphasised the need for consistent publicity of traffic management and parking arrangements to keep visitors well-informed.

He emphasised the need to improve mobile network services in the fair area, stating that reliable connectivity is essential for everyone, including the media, police, and devotees. He stressed the importance of enhancing tower capacity and coverage, especially in view of Mauni Amavasya. He instructed that arrangements be made to ensure devotees can bathe at the nearest ghats to their approach points, minimising the distance they need to walk. Addressing railway officials, the chief minister highlighted the vital role of railways in ensuring smooth operations. Referring to the experience of Makar Sankranti, he stated that after bathing, devotees wish to return to their destinations promptly, necessitating the operation of Mela Special Trains throughout the day. He suggested having separate railway stations for routine trains and Mela Special Trains and proposed that routine trains be diverted or canceled wherever feasible. He directed railway authorities to implement special arrangements from January 25 to February 5 with utmost vigilance.

MAHA KUMBH SNIPPETS

PIPA BRIDGES VITAL LINKS

The temporary pipa bridges are playing a key role in the grand arrangements of the Maha Kumbh. These bridges are serving as vital links between the Sangam area and the Akhada area during the massive event.

The administration has divided the sprawling 40-square-kilometre Mela area into 25 sectors. These pipa bridges are an integral part of the Maha Kumbh, offering a low-maintenance solution for the vast crowds. However, their operation requires constant monitoring, ensuring the safety and smooth movement of devotees 24x7. Engineer Alok Kumar from the Public Works Department explained that the pipa bridges are temporary structures built with large hollow iron containers (pontoon) floating on the water's surface. These are commonly known as 'pipe ka pul' in Prayagraj. These bridges have been built to facilitate movement not only for the public but also for the grand entry of 13 akhadas, chariots, elephants, horses, and over 1,000 vehicles during the Amrit Snan at Maha Kumbh. The construction of 30 pipa bridges over the Ganga river for the Maha Kumbh is the largest such project to date. After the conclusion of the fair, these bridges will be dismantled and stored for future use at other locations. The technology of pipa bridges is over 2,500 years old. They were first used in 480 BC by Persian King Xerxes I during his invasion of Greece.



RAJASTHAN CM TAKES HOLY DIP

Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma visited Prayagraj for the Maha Kumbh festivities on Sunday morning, offering prayers and taking a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam. He arrived late



Saturday night, toured the Rajasthan Pavilion in Sector 7, and explored the sacred site by boat early Sunday morning. He also interacted with devotees from various districts of Rajasthan. At the Triveni Sangam, he performed rituals, including offering prayers to Maa Ganga and worshipping Lord Mahadev with milk and holy water. The Rajasthan chief minister also participated in the Ganga Aarti and visited the Bade Hanuman Ji temple to offer prayers. Sharma expressed his admiration for the grand arrangements at the Maha Kumbh, commending Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for his leadership and seamless execution of the event.

12 state pavilions showcasing India's cultural heritage

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh celebrates India's cultural diversity. On the sands of the Sangam, 12 magnificent pavilions representing different states have been set up, offering a glimpse into the country's rich cultural heritage.

Thanks to the efforts of the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and his government, all the cultural prosperity of states can now be witnessed at one place. In Sector 7, visitors can immerse themselves in a vibrant mix of cultures, from Nagaland's Chang Lo dance and Leh's Shondol folk dance to the traditions of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan.

Madhya Pradesh's pavilion is captivating visitors with stunning performances of the trib-

al Bhagoria dance. This dance is part of the Bhagoria festival, celebrated by tribal communities before Holi, featuring colourful costumes, the sound of drums and cymbals and young dancers playing with gulas, making the Maha Kumbh even more special. Through this dance, the deep roots of tribal culture and the message of preserving it are also conveyed. Additionally, religious films are being shown every ten days, and from 6 pm to 10 pm, while folk dances and music performances mesmerise the devotees.

The Vedic clock installed at Madhya Pradesh Pavilion has become a major attraction for the devotees. It is the world's first Vedic clock, unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 29 last year in Ujjain. The clock has been set up outside the pavilion, drawing visitors from far and wide



to Sector 7 to witness its unique design. The Rajasthan pavilion is also a major centre of attraction at the Maha Kumbh, showcasing the state's rich history. The pavilion features glimpses of Rajasthan's famous forts, including Hawa Mahal, Jaigarh Fort, Chittorgarh Fort and the Vijay Stambh. In addition, the hospitality

extended to the devotees at this pavilion is also remarkable, with special food arrangements made for the visitors. People can be seen queuing up to savor the special dishes. Rajasthan's folk music, dance and cultural programme will continue for 45 days, adding to the vibrant atmosphere. Gujarat's Garba, Andhra

Pradesh's Kuchipudi, Uttar Pradesh's Jogini dance, Uttarakhand's Chholiya and Chhattisgarh's Cherchera are leaving a distinct impression on the Maha Kumbh stage. Each state has showcased its cultural heritage in a unique way. The Mask dance from Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Nagaland's Changlo and Leh-Ladakh's Shondol also add vibrant hues to the Maha Kumbh's cultural tapestry.

The North Central Zone Cultural Centre also features activities promoting arts and literature. Through cultural performances, music, dance and exhibitions, the diverse aspects of Indian culture are being showcased.

The pavilions at the Maha Kumbh provide a unique blend of India's unity and diversity serving as an unprecedented effort to connect people across the nation.



A devotee blows a horn during Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj on Sunday

PTI

Ekta ka Maha Kumbh, says Modi in Mann ki Baat

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the nation on Sunday in the first Mann ki Baat programme of the year, where he prominently mentioned Maha Kumbh 2025, describing it once again as "Ekta ka Maha Kumbh".

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister Modi for discussing the significance of Maha Kumbh in his address. Taking to social media, Chief Minister Yogi stated that the prime minister has guided the nation by emphasising the social, cultural and spiritual importance of Maha Kumbh. He called it a living symbol of India's unity and a grand gathering that represents spirituality, equality and harmony.

Chief Minister Yogi further noted that under Prime Minister Modi's leadership and vision, Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayagraj is serving as a global showcase of India's rich cultural heritage and traditions. On the increasing participation of youth in the Maha Kumbh, the chief minister said that the prime minister's message to the youth to follow their civilisation and culture with pride will inspire them to connect with the spirit of "Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat". During his Mann ki Baat pro-



Devotees during Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj on Sunday

gramme, Prime Minister Modi reflected on the uniqueness of Maha Kumbh. He said the auspicious beginning of the grand event had already brought together an unforgettable crowd and an extraordinary display of equality and harmony.

Maha Kumbh is a festival that transcends all forms of discrimination, caste, and economic barriers. People from all over India and from all over the world gather on the sacred

sands of the Sangam. Whether rich or poor, everyone takes a dip in the holy confluence, shares meals in bhandaras and receives prasad, embodying the true spirit of unity, he added.

Modi further highlighted how Maha Kumbh binds the nation through sacred traditions, from north to south and east to west. He connected the event to other cultural gatherings such as Pushkaram, celebrated in South India along the rivers

Godavari, Krishna, Narmada and Kaveri. These traditions, he said, strengthen the thread of unity that runs through India. He expressed happiness and satisfaction over the significant participation of youth in the Maha Kumbh. He noted that this time, the youth's involvement in the Kumbh is remarkably extensive. He emphasised that when the younger generation connects with their civilisation with pride, it strengthens their roots and secures their



golden future. He also highlighted the large-scale digital footprint of this year's Kumbh, remarking that its global popularity is a matter of pride for every Indian. Describing festivals as a medium of social interaction, Prime Minister Modi highlighted the recent grand fair organised at Gangasagar in West Bengal. On the auspicious occasion of Makar Sankranti, lakhs of devotees from across the globe participated and took a holy dip

during the fair. He noted that festivals like Kumbh, Pushkaram and Gangasagar Mela play a significant role in fostering social interaction, harmony and unity. "These celebrations connect people to India's rich traditions and, just as the scriptures emphasise dharma, artha, kama, and moksha, our festivals also strengthen the spiritual, social, cultural and economic fabric of society," he remarked.

Maha Kumbh marks a new chapter in industrial dev

Invest UP pandal inaugurated

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

A new chapter of industrial development unfolded at Maha Kumbh on Sunday with the inauguration of the Invest UP pandal in Sector 25 of Mahakumbh Nagar. The pandal showcases the state's industrial policies, investment plans and development projects.

The primary aim of Invest UP pandal is to position Uttar Pradesh as a major centre for industrial investment, providing investors with detailed information on the government's industry-friendly policies.

The Invest UP pandal was inaugurated by Uttar Pradesh's Industrial Development Minister Nand Gopal Gupta 'Nandi'. On this occasion, the minister stated that under the inspiring guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the strong leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Uttar Pradesh is emerging as one of the country's most attractive destinations for investment. He further highlighted that new industrial policies such as the Single Window System and Special Economic Zones are transforming Uttar Pradesh into an ideal location for investors. The pandal also featured investment projects, industrial areas and major achievements of the state, presented through digital and interactive mediums. A large number of people visited the pandal, gaining insights into industrial investment and the state's development initiatives. Nandi emphasised that the government's objective is not only to foster industrial development but also to create abundant employment opportunities for the youth of the state, ensuring their prosperity.

Minister lays foundation stone for park beautification in Kashi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Uttar Pradesh Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Stamp and Court Registration Fees Ravindra Jaiswal on Sunday laid the foundation stone for park beautification, tree plantation and road construction work worth ₹1.25 crore. He laid the foundation stone for the construction of a 100-metre-long kutcha lane from Pannalal Rajbhar's house to Shobha Rajbhar's house in Ward Akatha Tadiya Chakbihi of the City North assembly constituency under the Chief Minister Urban Underdeveloped and Slum Development Scheme whose cost is ₹12.95 lakh. He also laid the foundation stone for the beautification and tree plantation work of various parks in Pahadia ward selected by the Varanasi Development Authority (VDA) costing about ₹1 crore. The minister while instructing the officers present on the spot said that the works whose foundation stone has been laid should be completed immediately with quality by running a campaign on a war footing. He



UP Minister Ravindra Jaiswal laying foundation stone for development work in Varanasi on Sunday.

emphasised that negligence at any level will not be tolerated. On the occasion Shatrughan Singh, Chandrika Singh, Ajit Singh, Atul Singh, corporators Sanjay Jaiswal and Rajesh Yadav, Arvind Jaiswal, Manoj Jaiswal, Harishchandra Maurya, Alok Dev Mishra and colony residents were present.

TABLETS DISTRIBUTED

A free tablet distribution programme was organised in the Meridian Nursing and

Paramedical College auditorium on Sunday to technically empower the nursing and paramedical trainee students under the Swami Vivekananda Yuva Empowerment Scheme of Uttar Pradesh government. The chief guest and Zila Panchayat Chairperson Poonam Maurya started the free tablet distribution programme by garlanding the idol of Maa Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda and lighting the lamp.

In her address, she advised the students that in the present time it is necessary to be technically competent to improve the educational quality for which the state government has started this scheme. The nodal officer of the distribution programme and District Other Backward Classes Welfare Officer Ritesh Bindal also advised the students to study diligently. In the end the managing director of the school, Dr Piyush Yadav, thanked the guests who attended the programme and asked the nursing trainees to make good use of the tablets received to further advance their nursing knowledge.

Director Vivek Kumar Yadav, Dr PN Yadav, Dr AK Pandey, Principal Chandrashekhar, KG Ramesh Rajbhar, Bharti Singh, Shikha Srivastava, Archana Pandey, Panna Rai, Dr Rajesh Kumar Chaurasia, Chandra Kumar Yadav, Hariyasar Singh, Kavita, Priyanka, Khushboo, Virendra Kumar, Neha, Sadhna, Anjali, Amrita, Abhishek, Gulshan, Pratiksha, Ravindra Yadav and Arvind were present in the programme.

BJP workers listen to 'Mann Ki Baat'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) workers from 28,087 booths of Kashi region, including Varanasi district and city units, listened to the 118th edition of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Mann Ki Baat' programme. This programme is usually broadcast on the last Sunday of the month, PM Modi presented his views on Sunday due to Republic Day celebrations on that day. In the 118th episode of the programme, PM Modi talked to the people about many important things.

In the first 'Mann Ki Baat' of the year, Modi said every time 'Mann Ki Baat' takes place on the last Sunday of the month, but this time we are meeting on the third Sunday a week earlier instead of the fourth Sunday, because Republic Day is on Sunday next week. He also wished all the countrymen a Happy Republic Day in advance. He said that this time Republic Day is very special. "This is the



Regional BJP chief Dilip Patel and others listening to 'Mann Ki Baat' in Varanasi on Sunday.

75th anniversary of the Indian Republic. This year marks 75 years of the implementation of the Constitution. I salute all those great personalities of the Constituent Assembly, who gave us our sacred Constitution", the PM said. Talking about the ongoing Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, PM Modi said there is no discrimination, no casteism anywhere in this tradition that has been going on for thousands of

years. "In Kumbh, the rich and the poor all become one. These festivals of ours are festivals that increase our social interaction, harmony and unity", the PM said. Speaking on the 'Pran Pratishtha' of Ramlala in Ayodhya last year, he said this Dwadashi of Pran Pratishtha is the Dwadashi of re-establishment of India's cultural consciousness. Therefore, this day of Paush Shukla Dwadashi has also become a

day of Pratishtha Dwadashi in a way.

BJP regional president Dilip Patel listened to 'Mann Ki Baat' with booth office-bearers and workers at booth number 132, Sundarpur, Ravidas Mandal, Varanasi city. In this sequence, district president and MLC Hansraj Vishwakarma listened to PM Modi's programme at booth number 185, Kanchanpur while city chief Vidyasagar Rai at booth number 64 under Cantt Mandal of Cantt Assembly. Public Relations Officer in charge of PM's parliamentary office here Shivsharan Pathak was present with party workers at the parliamentary office located in Jawahar Nagar (Bhelapur). During this, Nandji Pandey, Anurag Sharma, Jagannath Ojha etc were prominently present. Regional media in-charge Navratan Rathi listened to PM Modi's programme at booth number 327 located at Gurdham and co-media in-charge Santosh Solapurkar at booth number 257 of Bindu Madhav ward.

CDO reviews preparations for UP Day, Voters' Day



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The National Voters' Day will be celebrated at Namo Ghat on January 25 while UP Day will be organised with full grandeur at the same venue on January 24. A meeting regarding preparations for both the events was held in the Vikas Bhavan auditorium on Saturday under the chairmanship of Chief

Development Officer (CDO) Himanshu Nagpal. The CDO directed the departmental officers concerned to organise these programmes with full grandeur as per the guidelines of the government. As per the instructions of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the 15th National Voters' Day will be celebrated on January 25 at the district and booth level like every year.

The theme of the day is 'Nothing like voting, I vote for sure'. To ensure maximum participation of youth and women on January 25, online/offline games, slogan, writing, essay, writing, song, skits competitions, 'prabhat pheri' etc will be organised in schools/colleges. On January 25 oath taking programmes will also be organised through Electoral Literacy Club (ELC) formed in educational institutions and principals/directors of educational institutions", he informed. On the occasion of National Voters' Day, a rangoli competition will also be organised by the students of inter colleges for voter awareness at Namo Ghat from 11 am. The band party of NCC students will also participate in it. Youth awareness, singing, playing etc programmes will be organised by the Youth Welfare department

in the villages under the tehsil area, the CDO said, adding that in all the assembly constituencies, the youth will be administered oath at the polling stations through BLOs. Similarly, all Election Registration Officers (EROs) will also organise oath taking ceremonies at their respective tehsils/voter registration centres. Street plays, awareness/cultural programmes, chaupals, seminars etc will also be organised in rural areas. Civil security volunteers of the district will organise voter awareness oath in their respective sectors. On the occasion of National Voters' Day, the CDO directed the officers to organise programmes to honour senior citizens and transgender voters. All departmental officers were prominently present in the meeting.

Power employees continue protest

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

On the call of Viduyt Karmachari Samyukta Sangharsh Samiti, Uttar Pradesh, the electricity employees of district on Sunday continued their protest like other districts and project headquarters of the state. A huge public awareness meeting of electricity workers was held at Hanuman Temple located in Bhikaripur in which the engineers and employees participated. In the meeting it was decided that on January 23 on the day



of the pre-bidding conference for the appointment of consultant for the privatisation of electricity, 100 per cent of employees will come out of the office during the lunch break and protest. Besides, on the same day in the capital Lucknow, the electricity employees of all the offices in

Lucknow will gather at Shakti Bhawan headquarters and will protest against the pre-bidding conference in a peaceful manner. On the call of the Sangharsh Samiti, the electricity employees will work the whole day wearing black bands for the next week and hold protest meetings. The meeting was chaired by OP Singh and conducted by Saurabh Srivastava. The meeting was addressed by SK Singh, PD Pandey, OP Singh, Vijay Singh, Madan Srivastava, Santosh Verma, Ramkumar Jha, Ramashankar Pal, Ranjit Patel,

Udaybhan Dubey, Sanjit Kumar, Jaiprakash, Manoj Sonkar, Jamuna Pal etc. Earlier, tying black armbands they expressed their protest against the privatisation move of the Power department. Through a protest meeting at the electricity office located in Kajiakpura, the employees along with consumers made the public aware. They also made the consumers aware towards the second phase of OTS which has been extended till January 22, in which consumers will get more benefit of interest waiver.

Union Bank's special schemes for MSME sector praised

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The Union Bank of India (UBI), Zonal Office, organised a special customer symposium for members of the Indian Industries Association (IIA) here. Lucknow zonal chief Rajesh Kumar along with Kanpur area chief Rajat Kumar Nanda, Deputy Zonal chief PK Awasthi and IIA Chairman Dinesh Barasia inaugurated the programme by lighting the ceremonial lamp. MLP branch chief Mahesh Bangale informed about different loan schemes of the bank which included the equipment finance to purchase machinery, Ayushman Plus for the health, Nari Shakti for women entrepreneurs, cluster schemes for the union solar and hospitality sectors. He also informed about the recently launched technology-based loan approval (STP) system which facilitates customers to complete loan sanction process on their own through online mode. Area chief Rajat Kumar Nanda threw light on the efforts of the bank for providing prompt services to the industries.



UBI Lucknow Zone Chief Rajesh Kumar inaugurating the symposium by lighting ceremonial lamp with other officers

special needs of customers. He said in a bid to speed up the MSME loan approval process, the bank had also set up processing centres. IIA president Dinesh Barasia described the MSME sector as a fast-moving and important part of Indian economy. He also praised the special schemes of the Union Bank for the MSME sector. Deputy zonal chief Prashant Desai proposed the vote of thanks to all the members of the IIA. Dy Zonal Chief Sunil Singh Negi, chief manager Manish Sachan and all branch managers of Kanpur Nagar were also present. Senior Manager Manish Srivastava conducted the proceedings.

Dharna for separate Purvanchal state staged

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Giving momentum to the demand for formation of a separate Purvanchal (eastern UP) state, a dharna was organised near Varanasi Junction (Cantt) railway station from 11 am to 2 pm on Sunday under the leadership of national president of Purvanchal Movement and Bahujan Samata Party Rajesh Azad. Speaking on the occasion, Azad said formation of separate Purvanchal state is very important for solving the issues of unemployment, protecting cultural values and welfare of farmers, labourers and women. Following the teachings of Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the participants urged the government to fulfil their old demand. Dr Rashmi Agarwal, Narendra Prakash Srivastava, Chinmay Chatterjee, Rekha Srivastava, Ritu Sahni, Neeta Dhar, Sujat Ramnagari etc were also present on the occasion.

MGKV V-C highlights role of teachers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth (MGKV) Prof Anand Kumar Tyagi said that teachers determine both direction and condition of society. He was speaking as the chief guest at Yuva Shakti Samman Samaroh under Kartavyabodh Pakhwada-2025 organised under the auspices of city unit of Rashtriya Shaikshik Mahasangh (RSM) Uttar Pradesh, at SHEPA Institute in Nibiya, Bachhanv here on Sunday. "All teachers are very important, whatever be their level and RSM brings all of them together and provides them an opportunity for discussion. We have to turn students towards nation building. India is a young country. Only by making good use of youth power can we take society and country forward", the V-C said. Prof Tyagi added, "We can progress in the world only on the strength of knowledge and teachers have the knowledge, we have to pass it on to our students with full honesty and dedication. We do not only have to give information, but also impart knowledge. National character has to be kept above everything else. We have to innovate, accumulate knowledge and pass on that knowledge to others. We also have to focus on sustainable development. We have to inculcate human approach in our students so that they have a connection with society". In his address special guest and V-C of Maharaja Suheldev University, Azamgarh, Prof Sanjeev Kumar said that youth are the asset of any society. He said a teacher always remains



young because the brain always keeps learning something new. Remaining mentally young is the identity of a real youth, he added. Former principal of Handia PG College and vice-president of Vidya Bharti Uttar Pradesh Dr Raghuraj Singh said along with duty, there should be a sense of cooperation, goodwill and love towards all. "We should all be self-reliant, self-studying. There should be religion along with work, sacrifice along with enjoyment. There should be respect for the whole creation. Satyayug, Treta, Dwapar and Kalyug eras were also mentioned. We were also shown the path in relation to education, education and knowledge", he stated. Presiding over the function, former MGKV V-C and Director of SHEPA Institute Prof Prithvish Nag said technology has made us young. He stressed on the full implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP)-2020. Patron of Vishay Parvatan Mahasangh Dr Dina Nath Singh said that Kartavya Both Diwas is organised every year between the birth anniversaries of Swami Vivekanand and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. On the occasion 34 young teachers of universities, colleges and secondary and primary schools who teach with full dedication, innovation and devotion in the field of teaching were also honoured.

They included Prof Arvind Kumar Mishra of BHU, Prof Prabhat Kumar Singh, Prof Prem Prakash Solanki, Dr RP Sonkar, Principal Dr Raghendra Pandey, Prof Mithilesh Pandey, Prof Manoj Mishra, Dr Himanshu Singh, Dr Shyam Babu Verma, Dr Manoj Kumar Singh, Dr Maya Singh, Dr Santosh Saroj, Dr Aradhana Shrivastava, Rajni Rai, Jai Prakash Yadav, Madhusudan Singh, Dr Ravi Singh, Himanshu Agarwal and Rajesh Kumar Singh. Prominent among those present were Prof Daya Shankar Yadav, Dr Arun Rai, Prof Nalin Mishra, Dr Asha Singh, Vijay Singh, Dr Ramji Pathak, Prof Madhavi Tiwari, Prof OP Chaudhary, Dr Aastha Singh, Dr Archana Singh, Dr Sunil Kumar Singh Gautam etc were present. At the beginning garlands were offered on the photos of Maa Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, after which Mangalacharan was recited by Dr Saroj Kumar Pandey and Amitabh Mishra and welcome song and Kulgeet were sung by the students of SHEPA and Dr Narendra Devpathak presented Vande Mataram at the end. The programme was conducted by Dr Jagdish Singh Dixit while the vote of thanks was proposed by programme secretary Amitabh Mishra and welcome speech was given by programme coordinator Prof Anju Singh.

Man meets tragic end

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A man was killed when a container coming on the wrong side on Kanpur-Jhansi highway in Kanpur Dehat first rammied into a stationary bus and then hit eight people standing on the roadside in front of a guest house near Dingh village late on Saturday night. As a result they were seriously injured and taken to the district hospital where doctors declared one dead. A three-year-old girl after first aid was referred to Kanpur. Reports said that the marriage of Satish Kumar's daughter of Jagdishpur under Bhognipur police station, Kanpur Dehat, was scheduled to be held on Saturday at the a guest house situated in Dingh village. After attending the marriage, Omi Singh (50) of Jagdishpur along with Guddu Yadav, Satish Kumar, Lalita, Lokpal, Rita, Yugraj and Pari (3), daughter of Sonu, were standing on the roadside to return home. Suddenly, the container coming from the wrong side, after hitting the stationary bus in front of the guest house, hit the people standing on the roadside injuring them seriously. At the district hospital, Dr Nishant Pathak declared Omi Singh dead while Pari (3) was referred to Kanpur after first aid in view of her serious condition. Devipur outpost in charge Ramkishan Verma said the container had been impounded. On receipt of complaint, a first information report (FIR) will be lodged and necessary action taken be against the guilty, he said.

Kanpur Premier League from Feb 28 to March 9



KCA Chairman Dr Sanjay Kapoor addressing mediapersons at Green Park stadium.

The Kanpur Cricket Association (KCA) will organise Kanpur Premier League (KPL) on the lines of Indian Premier League (IPL) at Green Park stadium here from February 28 to March 9. All the T-20 matches will be played under flood lights. Six teams named after the six assembly constituencies of the city will

vie for the title. Organised on the theme of 'Khelega Kanpur, Dekhega India', the selection trials will start at the Kamla Club ground from January 27. After the trials, selection matches will also be conducted. On the basis of best performer in selection matches, players will be divided into pools for participating in the auction to be held on IPL pattern on

February 9. Addressing mediapersons, KCA chairman Dr Sanjay Kapoor said ₹7.50 lakh was fixed purse value for the franchise in the auction. BCCI Vice-President Rajiv Shukla will play the role of mentor. He said the victorious team will be awarded cash prize of ₹11 lakh. Besides match awards, best batter, bowler and all-rounder prizes, a special award awards the maximum six-hitter. Ten special prizes will be given daily among the spectators of the stadium. He revealed plans to add two more teams next year anticipating KPL's own broadcasting company within three-four years. Indian international cricketer Kuldeep Yadav and former IPL player Ankit Rajput have been appointed the brand ambassador and co-brand ambassador of KPL respectively, he added.

'Mangal Bhawan' to be constructed



JCI Kanpur Industrial hands over cheque of ₹1.75 crore to Mayor Pramila Pandey and Municipal Commissioner Sudhir Kumar.

The JCI Kanpur Industrial and Kanpur Nagar Nigam (KNN) will construct a 'Mangal Bhawan' for the low-income group in Brijendra Swarup Park area of Benajhabar here. This community building will be developed as a 'baratshala' (wedding hall). The 'bhoomi puja' and foundation laying ceremony was organised on Saturday. Mayor Pramila Pandey along with office-bearers of JCI Kanpur Industrial laid the foundation and unveiled the 3D model of the Mangal Bhawan. Urban Development Minister

Arvind Kumar Sharma addressed the audience online. On the occasion, JCI office-bearers handedover a cheque of ₹1.75 crore to Mayor Pramila Pandey and Municipal Commissioner Sudhir Kumar for the construction of the community building. A cheque of ₹25 lakh had already been given to them in the past. JCI Industrial Chairperson Neha Garg, Project Adviser Vikas Jaiswal, President Pranit Agarwal, Akash Goenka, Mangal Bhawan team chairman Akash Goenka, co-president Bhavuk Goel, Amit Garg and Pranit were present.

Fanfare marks NTPC Auraiya's foundation day celebrations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The 38th foundation day celebrations of NTPC Auraiya project were organised with fanfare. Project chief Abhay Kumar Srivastava inaugurated the programme by unfurling the NTPC flag in front of the administrative building. The NTPC song sung on the occasion added grandeur to the show. Extending greetings on the occasion project chief said started on January 17, 1987, this project had been established as 663 MW production capacity on barren land. From the year 2020, NTPC Auraiya had also started producing 40 MW green energy with the help of latest ground and floating solar system. This progress is the result of hard work and dedication of all those who contributed to carry this project to new heights. He said



NTPC Auraiya Project chief Abhay Kumar Srivastava unfurling NTPC flag to mark the inauguration of foundation day celebrations.

allenges into opportunities. NTPC Auraiya has been actively contributing to the all-round development of nearby villages and their residents through its corporate social responsibility (CSR). Praising the conduct of 'walk with the leader' and yoga programmes under the project policies, he said these were being organised keeping in view the health and all-round development of citizens. Thereafter, he cut the cake to mark the 38th foundation day celebrations in presence of Additional General Manager (Contract & Material) Ved Prakash Pandey, Chief Medical Officer (Health Centre) Dr Vijay Nayak, Additional General Manager (Human Resources) Tanmay Dutta, other HoDs, office-bearers and employees. The programme ended with a discussion on climate change.

PM Modi praises ECI for its commitment to fair polling

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the Election Commission on Sunday, saying it has used the power of technology to strengthen people's power and also shown commitment to a fair polling process.

Modi's praise for the poll body in his monthly Mann ki Baat broadcast came ahead of its foundation day on January 25, observed as the National Voters' Day, and amid frequent criticism from the opposition for its alleged pro-BJP bias.

Noting that January 25 is important because on this day the Election Commission of India was established, Modi said Constitution makers have accorded a very important place to the EC and equally to

people's participation in democracy.

"When the first elections were held in the country in 1951-52, some people were doubtful whether the country's democracy would survive. But our democracy proved all the apprehensions wrong - after all, India is the mother of democracy," he said.

In the past decades as well, the country's democracy has strengthened and prospered, the prime minister asserted.

"I would also like to thank the EC, which has modernised and strengthened our voting process from time to time. The Commission has used the power of technology to give more strength to the power of the people. I congratulate the EC for its commitment to fair elections," he said.

"I would like to urge the people of the country to use



their right to vote, always, in maximum numbers and also become a part of the country's democratic process and strengthen this process," he said in his first Mann Ki Baat of 2025 which was held on the third Sunday this month as against the last, which is usually the case, as next Sunday is Republic Day. His remarks come amid Opposition parties' criticism and questioning of the integrity of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). Modi's remarks can be seen as an endorsement of the EVMs.

Pointing out that this year's Republic Day is very special as it is the 75th anniversary of the Indian Republic, Modi said, "I salute all those great personalities of the Constituent Assembly, who gave us our sacred Constitution. During the Constituent Assembly, long deliberations were held on many subjects. Those discussions, the thoughts of the members of the Constituent Assembly, their words, are our great heritage." The prime minister played short audio clips of three members of constituent assembly, Chairman Rajendra Prasad, B R Ambedkar and Syama Prasad Mookerjee - to highlight the values they promoted.

Speaking of the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, he said people of various castes and regions

have come together. There is no discrimination of any kind, he added.

He also pointed out that this month the first anniversary of the 'Pran Pratishtha Parv' of Ram Lalla was celebrated on the day of 'Paush Shukla Dwadashi'. Modi further said that in the beginning of 2025 itself, India has attained many historic achievements in the field of space.

During the broadcast, he also highlighted that a few days ago, Indian scientists have undertaken space docking of satellites.

Modi also highlighted how IIT Madras's ExTeM Centre is working on new technologies for manufacturing in space.

Ahead of Subhas Chandra Bose's birth anniversary on January 23, Modi hailed his valour.

LoP Rahul Gandhi launches 'White T-shirt Movement'



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi on Sunday announced the launch of a 'White T-shirt Movement', championing the rights of the masses, even as he accused the Narendra Modi government of turning its back on the poor. Gandhi announced the launch in a social media post and urged people to be a part of it. "If you believe in economic justice, oppose rising wealth inequalities, fight for social equality, reject all forms of discrimination, and strive for peace and stability in our country, wear your white T-shirts and join the movement," said a video voiceover posted by Rahul Gandhi.

"Today the Modi government has turned its back on the poor and the working class and has left them to their own devices. The government's entire focus is on enriching a select few capitalists," he said.

He said that because of this, inequality is constantly increasing and the condition of the workers "who nourish the country with their blood and sweat" is getting worse and they are forced to endure various kinds of injustice and atrocities.

"In such a situation, it is the responsibility of all of us to raise our voice strongly to get them justice and rights. With this thought, we are starting the #WhiteTshirtMovement," he said on X.

"I appeal to my youth and working class colleagues to participate in this movement

in large numbers. To join this campaign and get detailed information about it, visit this link

<https://whitetshirt.in/home/hin> or give a missed call on this number -- 9999812024," the post further read.

The website of the 'White T-shirt Movement' states that a 'white T-shirt' is not just a piece of cloth but is a symbol of the party's five guiding principles -- compassion, unity, non-violence, equality, and progress for all.

"These values resonate the spirit of India's 8000-year-old civilisation, which is based on harmony and diversity. Today, growing inequalities that are rooted in income, caste and religion demand action beyond ideology," it says

The message further reads, "Our commitment must be derived from the philosophy of Dharma and Karma. Dharma being the duty to selflessly serve society, while Karma is the resolve to uphold rights and fight for justice."

The website says that the five principles can create a society where every individual is valued and freedom is not held hostage by the ambitions of a few. "Let us all be agents of change and embrace this way of life with pride. The white T-shirt is our symbol - a call for a just and unified India. By wearing it, we honour the spirit of Bharat Jodo, which echoes the goals of the Bharat Jodo Yatra: bridging divides and building a cohesive, equitable nation," it says.

SKM welcomes Government decision to hold talks with agitating farmers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Samyukt Kisan Morcha on Sunday hailed the Central Government's proposal of talks with farmers as a great victory and welcomed fast-track farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal's decision to receive medical support. "SKM considers union government's decision to hold discussions with farmers organisations a great victory," they said in a statement. Union Agriculture Ministry officials and farmers are meeting on February 14.

The group, which led the 2020-21 farmers' protests against the three now-repealed farm laws, said the government was forced to hold discussions due to the farmers' growing unity. "SKM welcomes the decision of fast-track farmer leader Sardar Jagjit Singh Dallewal to receive medical support and wishes him a quick recovery and good health. The continuous efforts made by SKM leaders for farmers' unity and pan-India agitation against the anti-farmer union



government has forced the Govt. To retract from its divisive strategy," the collective said.

The SKM also called upon all farmers to "respond and rise in protest" against the Union government and force it to "roll back its anti-farmer policies."

They termed the National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing (NPFAM) an attempt to bring back the repealed farm laws. The farmers' body also called upon all its units to send out memorandums to Members of Parliament through email instead of holding Kisan Dharna at MP offices on

Monday and asked them to focus on SKM's tractor rallies on January 26.

A meeting of the general body of SKM will be held in New Delhi on January 24.

"SKM once again calls upon and warns the union government to desist from acting against the interests of farmers, the Annadatas of the country. SKM resoundingly informs and announces to the government that farmers of this country are united in their demands which have to be met by the Union Govt and till then, democratic agitations in all forms shall continue against the Union Government," the SKM said.

India, Italy decide to expand counter-terror cooperation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Italy have vowed to enhance their cooperation in combating terrorism including by effectively countering the "misuse" of technology for terrorist activities. Extensive deliberations were held on ways to expand bilateral cooperation in dealing with terrorism at a meeting of the India-Italy Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter-Terrorism and Organised Crime held in Rome on January 16 and 17, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in a readout on Sunday.

The two sides discussed emerging domestic, regional and international terrorist threats and exchanged views on a wide range of areas of cooperation in counter-terrorism and transnational organised crime, it said. Recognising the need for enhancing cooperation for effectively countering the misuse of technology for



terrorist purposes, the two sides shared experiences in preventing and mitigating the menace, the readout said. India and Italy also stressed the importance of an effective prosecution of those responsible for terrorist acts. In the talks, the two strategic partners reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen cooperation in the multilateral fora, including in the UN, GCTF (Global Counterterrorism Forum) and FATF (Financial Action Task Force), the MEA said. "The two sides also discussed ways and means to advance the ongoing negotiations on

various bilateral agreements," it said.

The meeting was co-chaired by K D Deval, Joint Secretary for Counter-Terrorism in the MEA, and Alessandro Azzoni, Senior Deputy Director for Political Affairs and Director for Security at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Indian delegation also met officials of Italy's Inter-Agency Law Enforcement Academy in Caserta and discussed strengthening of capacity building measures between the academy and its counterpart organisation in India.

Government suspends officers of Kadipur Tehsil after irregularities in property registrations found

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

To crack down on corruption prevalent in the revenue department. Irregularities in over 1,500 property registrations were found in Kadipur Tehsil here in Gurugram. Following a complaint related to illegal registries and General Power of Attorney (GPA), the government suspended Amit Yadav, Naib Tehsildar of Kadipur Tehsil, and initiated a departmental enquiry against him.

It is being said that an inquiry against Yadav has also been completed in which massive irregularities in property registration were revealed. Following an enquiry conducted by the administration, preparations are now being made for a charge sheet against the suspended Naib Tehsildar. The source claimed that based on this enquiry, an FIR would be registered against the suspended officer and the people responsible for this illegal practice soon. The



information about the irregularities found in these registries has been sent to the headquarters by the administration. Apart from this enquiry, a parallel investigation of the entire matter was also given to SDM Gurugram Ravinder Kumar. That investigation has also been completed. According to sources, during the investigation, it was disclosed that there were over 260 such registries were done without proper documentation, and even stamp duties were not up to mark, which has also caused a loss of revenue. "The investigation of alleged registries and GPA done in Kadipur tehsil has been completed. In connection with

this information has also been sent to the government. The case will be registered after the investigation report which will be submitted by the SDM Gurugram," an officer privy to the matter said.

Meanwhile, the sources claimed that the charges of illegal registries and GPA were fixed at the Kadipur Tehsil. The suspects used to take Rs 50,000 to Rs 2 lakh per GPA and Rs 1.5 lakh to 3 lakh was fixed per registry. Apart from this, a private individual was also appointed at the Tehsil office to collect money from middlemen and parties for executing illegal property registration. Recently, A "secret" letter compiled by the Haryana Revenue and Disaster Management Department had also revealed that 370 patwaris (revenue officials) as corrupt. The list also includes 170 private individuals who double up as middlemen-cum-assistants for these officials. A

report has been sought from respective Deputy Commissioners from across the state within 15 days.

The officials are accused of taking money from people directly or through middlemen in lieu of getting their work such as take-see (partition of land records), land measurement, mutation of property and corrections in land records done in the Revenue Department. Gurugram district has the maximum number of middlemen (26), who allegedly take money on patwaris' behalf. "These private individuals appointed by these officials exploit common people by demanding bribes in exchange for completing official procedures. Sometimes, the visitors approaching the patwari offices are deliberately turned away, forcing them to meet these unauthorised agents to get their work done," Ramesh Yadav, the complainant said.

Haryana's Industry and Commerce Minister visits proposed route of metro expansion

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

As part of the process of Metro expansion between Millennium City Center to Cyber City in Gurugram, Haryana's Industry and Commerce Minister Rao Narbir Singh visited the proposed route of expansion with the officials of Gurugram Metro Rail Limited (GMRL) GMDA and gave them necessary guidelines on Sunday. The process of making the DPR of the Metro project is ongoing. Special attention will be given to the facilities of the general public under the guidelines of the Cabinet Minister.

Singh inspected the entire proposed route and instructed the officials to take the work of Metro forward at a fast pace keeping in mind the convenience of the people. Apart from this, while instructing the officials, he said that people should not



face any kind of inconvenience during the construction of Metro and the traffic should run smoothly, a good plan should also be made in that regard.

"Whenever a big construction infrastructure is built, the officials should make such a plan that it lasts for a long time and people get benefits. In this entire project, special care should be taken that the existing services like drainage system, electricity, drinking water, sewerage and other important facilities in the proposed route should be disturbed as little as possible,"

he said. The cabinet minister also instructed the GMDA officials that whatever construction work the authority has to do with this project regarding the flyover or underpass should also run parallel to the metro construction work.

While giving instructions to freeze the alignment work on the proposed route in a month, he said that the officials should take special care in this entire work and that the drainage system of Gurugram should not be affected in any way in this entire process.

It is worth noting that in relation to the project, Chief Minister Naib Singh Saini has already held a meeting with the concerned officials in Gurugram in December. In which it was told by officials that the detailed project report (DPR) of the metro rail running between Millennium City to Cyber City, Gurugram has been

approved by the Haryana Government and the Central Government and the foundation stone of this project was laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Rewari on February 16, 2024.

In the meeting, the officials said that the construction work of the metro expansion in Gurugram will start on May 1, 2025. There will be a total of 27 stations on this 28.50 km long metro rail line and a depot will also be built, out of which 8 stations will be model stations.

Rs 896.19 crore will be spent on this project by the Central Government and Rs 4556.53 crore by the Haryana Government. Apart from this, this metro will be based on CBT, i.e. Communication-Based Train Control Signal, and the maximum speed will be 80 km per hour. Initially, 3 coaches will be installed in this metro connectivity, and after that, it will be increased to 6 coaches.

Modi, Shah hails NDRF on foundation day

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/AMARAVATI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday hailed the National Disaster Response Force, describing the courage, dedication and selfless service of the brave personnel as a shield in times of adversity. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) is a premier central agency tasked with responding to disasters. It is celebrating its 19th raising day.

In a special event at Amaravati, Home Minister Amit Shah said backed by resilient infrastructure in the area of disaster management, India has emerged as a global leader in the sector by adopting a 'zero casualty' goal during calamities. "On this special occasion of the raising day of the National Disaster Response Force



(NDRF), we salute the courage, dedication and selfless service of the brave personnel who are a shield in times of adversity," Modi said in a social media post. Their unwavering commitment to saving lives, responding to disasters and ensuring safety during emergencies is truly commendable, the prime minister said. "The NDRF has also set global standards in disaster response and management," he said.

Focus at 24th party Congress will be on increasing mass base: CPI (M) leader Prakash Karat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Strengthening the CPI (Marxist) and increasing its mass base will be the focus of the 24th party Congress scheduled to be held in Madurai in April, interim co-ordinator of the party Prakash Karat said. The Congress will also deliberate on the election of the new general secretary, the party's top post.

Karat said increasing the party's mass base is key as the Left has not grown in the country in the past few years. "The CPI(M)'s 24th party congress is going to be held in the first week of April in Madurai in Tamil Nadu. In this congress, we are going to discuss how we can strengthen the CPI(M) as a national party, increase its political influence and, mass base," Karat told PTL. "We think this should be

given priority because the left in recent years has not grown in the country," he said.

The CPI(M), which fielded 52 candidates in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, won four seats in all, two in Tamil Nadu and one each in Kerala and Rajasthan - up from three in 2019.

In 2004, at its peak, the CPI(M) had sent 43 MPs to the Lok Sabha, getting around 5.4 per cent of the total votes. Karat added that the unity of Left parties is also an important issue that will be taken up.

"We are already working out how to unite all the Left parties and forces together so that we can project the Left platform and alternative policies," he said.

The party's former general secretary said that a stronger Left would contribute to the creation of a stronger, united opposition to the ruling



Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "And the third thing, which is that this is not contradictory to each other, we think a stronger Left will also contribute to stronger united opposition to the BJP, that is the secular opposition parties. The left will be an important component of this wider unity," he said. The CPI(M) and other Left parties are a part of the opposition's INDIA bloc.

The party, founded in 1964 and the largest of the Left bloc, faced a setback last year with the sudden demise of sitting general secretary Sitaram Yechury. Karat said while his absence is felt, the party has a strong, collective leadership.

"For our party, it was a very crucial juncture, we had just begun the preparations for our party congress, which normally starts six months

ahead of the meeting. His absence is definitely, keenly felt... But the party has a strong collective, leadership," Karat said.

In the party congress, the CPI(M) will elect a new central committee, a politburo, and a general secretary.

As a part of the preparations, the party is holding several state-level meetings.

A three-day central committee meeting to discuss a draft political resolution for the upcoming party congress, held in Kolkata, concluded on Sunday. The central committee is second after the politburo in the CPI(M) leadership chain.

The resolution will be debated and adopted at the party congress and will set the party line on various issues.

According to the CPI(M) constitution, the All-India Party Congress is the supreme

organ of the party and is convened by the central committee ordinarily once every three years.

At the meeting, the outgoing central committee will recommend a panel of names for the election of a successor committee.

A delegate can raise objections about any name in the panel proposed as well as propose any new name or names, with prior approval of the member. The central committee then elects from among its members a politburo, including the general secretary. The number of members in the politburo is decided by the central committee.

There are 16 members in the CPI(M) Politburo at present, and 83 members are there in the central committee. The 24th Congress of the CPI(M) will be held from April 2 to 6.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Trump in the Oval Office

As Trump begins his second term, he is likely to reshape domestic policies and redefining America's role in the world

Donald Trump will begin his second term as President of the United States today, marking a significant moment in US political history. The swearing-in ceremony has dignitaries from around the world in attendance. Notably, Chinese Vice President Han Zheng will represent China, highlighting the importance of US-China relations in the coming years. President Trump's second term is anticipated to commence with a series of decisive actions. Reports suggest that he plans to issue approximately 100 executive orders on his first day in office, targeting areas such as immigration, trade and energy. These orders aim to deport illegal immigrants, end birthright citizenship and reinstate the 'Muslim ban.'



Economically, he plans to raise tariffs, cut taxes and eliminate regulations. Trump seeks to boost fossil fuel production by reducing green energy initiatives. His cultural policies include banning transgender women from female sports and restricting hormone treatments for minors. In the international arena, President Trump's approach to China is poised to be assertive. He has proposed imposing tariffs ranging from 10 per cent to 20 per cent on imports, with the possibility of escalating to 100 per cent for BRICS countries like China and Russia if they move away from using the US dollar. Additionally, Trump has indicated a focus on addressing issues such as fentanyl trafficking and the operations of Chinese companies like TikTok in the US. A recent phone call between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping covered topics including trade, fentanyl and TikTok, suggesting a complex and potentially contentious relationship moving forward. Another area which is more relevant to us here is his attitude towards Indian companies and tech professionals working in the US with H1-B visas. The relationship between the United States and India is expected to experience both opportunities and challenges during President Trump's second term. The personal rapport between President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi may facilitate continued cooperation. However, Trump's 'America First' policies could lead to heightened trade barriers, especially in sectors like information technology and pharmaceuticals, where India has significant interests. Despite these potential hurdles, India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region and its role in diversifying global supply chains away from China may provide avenues for strengthened collaboration between the two nations. As President Trump embarks on his second term, the global community will be closely monitoring how his administration's policies unfold, particularly in relation to major economies like China and India. The decisions made in the coming months will have profound implications for international trade, security and diplomatic relations.

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Need for a unified global strategy against terrorism



SUDHIR HINDWAN

Nations must come together to share a common vision and adopt a multilayered approach that prioritises security, innovation and collaboration



In the face of escalating transnational terrorism, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive global anti-terror strategy. Such a plan should involve a shared strategic vision and a unified, multilayered approach to ensure safety and security across borders. To counter the evolving threats, nations must develop a fresh perspective that emphasises mature international cooperation and robust retaliation strategies to deter destabilising activities. **Strengthening International Cooperation** Collaboration among nations is essential to design and implement an integrated strategic framework. This includes pooling development funds, fostering mutual trust and crafting plans to address shared security challenges. India, with its growing prominence on the global stage, is well-positioned to lead such efforts. Its successful handling of key responsibilities—such as the G20 Presidency, leadership in the Quad Group, and chairing organizations like Interpol and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—demonstrates its capability to drive global strategic initiatives.

India's role in enhancing multi-layered security cooperation can serve as a model for addressing issues like the financing of terrorism, enhancing policing collaboration, countering cyber threats, and leveraging technological advancements. Tightened border and maritime security measures, coupled with efficient intelligence-sharing, are critical components of this strategy. **Adapting to Evolving Challenges** The nature of global threats has become more severe, with adversaries employing increasingly sophisticated tactics. This calls for an adaptable and proactive approach to strategic policy-making. Nations, particularly in Asia, must diversify their strategies and implement forward-looking recommendations to effectively counter emerging challenges. A modernised approach to safety and security is imperative to outpace organised threats and propaganda-driven terror networks. **Bridging Policy Gaps** A significant gap exists between theoretical strategies



IN A GLOBALISED WORLD, THE IMBALANCE OF POWER AND INEQUALITY IN THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY OFTEN FUEL TERRORISM

and their practical application in countering terrorism. Regional political actors must engage in rigorous policy analysis and embrace innovative approaches to address these shortcomings. More integrated programs that support both military and law enforcement agencies are necessary to strengthen their efficiency in combating propaganda and terror. Community development within regional alliances like the Quad can also foster resilience against destabilising forces. **Addressing Underlying Socio-economic Factors** In a globalised world, the imbalance of power and inequality in the international economy often fuel terrorism. Socio-economic disparities create fertile ground for non-state actors to exploit psychological vulnerabilities and propagate extremist ideologies. To counter this, nations must dismantle the mechanisms that enable the spread of false narratives and ill-intentioned ideologies. **Specialised Counter-Terrorism Frameworks** A robust counter-terrorism strategy must include spe-

cialised think tanks and talent development programmes. These institutions can provide tactical expertise, real-time feedback, and innovative solutions to address evolving threats. Interactive communication between intelligence, law enforcement and military branches can further enhance operational efficiency. A modern, vigilant, and assertive network of military, police, and paramilitary forces must replace outdated systems to address the complexities of modern terrorism. **The Path Forward** To combat terrorism effectively, nations must overcome entrenched mindsets and outdated practices. Strategic planning should evolve to address the realities of state-sponsored terrorism and propaganda. Establishing a new consensus on international security and fostering a collaborative global environment are vital for achieving long-term stability. (The author is a recipient of the Bharat Gaurav Award, is a professor and expert in international relations; views are personal)

PICTALK



A farmer prepares an agricultural land for paddy cultivation, in Nadia

PTI

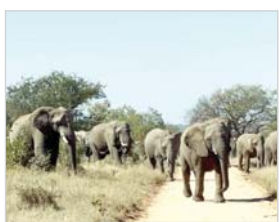
When elephants roamed beyond: A remarkable journey through China



C K NAYAK

A historic event captivated the world as a herd of 15 wild elephants embarked on a 500-km journey from Xishuangbanna to the bustling city of Kunming

Some time back an extraordinary event unfolded in China: for the first time in recorded history, a herd of 15 wild elephants embarked on an unprecedented journey. Leaving their natural habitat in Xishuangbanna (commonly referred to as Banna), the elephants traveled over 500 kilometers to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Xishuangbanna, an autonomous prefecture for the ethnic Dai people, lies in the southernmost part of Yunnan, bordering Myanmar and Laos. This remarkable migration captured the attention of the world, with live 24/7 broadcasts and drones following their every move. The Chinese authorities, committed to the conservation of these majestic creatures, responded with care rather than confrontation. However, their journey caused panic among local residents, who abandoned their homes in fear. Despite trampling crops and cornfields along the way, the elephants did not harm any humans. In some instances, curious jumbos ventured



into deserted homes, with one even slipping under a bed. Yet, they remained peaceful throughout their expedition. During their long journey, the elephants maintained their routines, munching on leaves, bathing in mud, and sleeping. In a touching moment, a calf was born mid-journey. Eventually, after weeks of gentle coaxing and careful management, the herd returned to their home in Xishuangbanna. The reasons behind this unusual migration remain unclear. Experts speculate that an inexperienced leader might have led the herd astray, or that they were seeking a new habitat due to environmental changes. While conservation efforts in China have resulted in a gradual increase in the elephant population, these efforts are complicated by

human activity. Large-scale commercial rubber cultivation, introduced to Banna, has significantly disrupted the region's rainforest ecosystem. These plantations, consisting of monocultures of Brazilian rubber trees, replace diverse habitats, further encroaching on the elephants' range. Asian elephants, an endangered species, number only about 300 in the wild in China, primarily in Banna. Protecting these animals is a national priority. Emergency workers and volunteers were mobilised during the migration, providing tonnes of corn, pineapples and other food to ensure both the safety of the elephants and the local population. Trucks and drones were deployed to guide the animals along safe paths, offering them a feast akin to a celebratory banquet. Xishuangbanna is a biodiversity hotspot, home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. The region's tropical climate and historical isolation have preserved its rich ecosystems. In addition to Asian elephants, the area supports other endangered species

such as green peacocks, wild oxen, and monkeys. The Wild Elephant Valley Forest Park, located 47 kilometers north of Jinghong city, serves as a key conservation site. Spanning 369 hectares, this park provides a haven for wildlife and a unique opportunity for visitors to observe elephants. The reserve features observation towers, allowing visitors to watch wild elephants bathing, playing, and strolling. A cableway provides breathtaking views of the valley, while the park's elephant-domestication school entertains visitors with performances by trained elephants, including dancing, headstands, and football tricks. Looking ahead, the Chinese government plans to establish an Asian Elephant Breeding Centre in Banna to further conservation efforts. These initiatives aim to protect not only the elephants but also the rich biodiversity of this unique region, ensuring a harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife. (The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SELECTORS RETAIN ROHIT SHARMA

Madam — The news that the selectors have retained the Indian skipper Rohit Sharma for the upcoming series against England for ODIs and for the Championship Trophy. While Rohit was averaging 6 runs in his last six innings, on the other side, the Karun Nair is waiting for his chance by having proved his immense worth with 752 runs in 7 innings with an average of 752 with 5 recent unbeaten centuries to his credit at the much-acclaimed Vijay Hazare Trophy, still waiting for his place patiently. It is also disproving the Board's statement that the players must play the local games to prove themselves to claim their place at the international level was not considered in Karun Nair's case.

One can expect that during the crisis in the upcoming series, when the team struggles, in the name of injury, Nair may get a call back from Rohit to join the team, as we have seen such inclusions in the past. One thing is evident that the selection criteria lack complete transparency and without the godfather, finding a place is becoming increasingly difficult in the team. Ironically, Sanju Samson was dropped for the series by assigning reasons that the board was not happy because he didn't play the local games. Stranger than fiction of selection won't do good for the sport and currently for the Indian cricket.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

JOBS OVER FREEBIES

Madam—The Delhi assembly elections have transformed into a marathon race for freebies without realising the negative impact on the state's economy and the diversion of massive funds for turning the potential workforce passive. Delhi loses its charm if the development, infrastructure, education, health, job creation and entrepreneurship are sacrificed. Delhi people should not ask for jobs as the parties are promising enough for their sustenance. Alas! After all, votes appear to decide their lives. The taxpayers pay taxes for the development, security and growth of the nation but virtually provide funds for freebies.

Centre announces 8th Pay Commission



In a major decision, the Union government has announced the 8th Pay Commission to revise salaries and pensions of over 1 crore central government employees and pensioners. With more money in the hands of the employees and pensioners after the implementation of recommendations of the next pay commission, the gov-

ernment is expecting a boost for overall consumption and demand in the economy. Though every employee deserves more, the appointment of a pay commission is an exercise against fiscal prudence.

At a time when 60 per cent of revenue expenditure is spent only on salary, pension, interest and subsidies, leaving only 40 per cent for development activities, the implementation of the 8th pay commission will further shrink the share of development activities in revenue expenditure. Every pay commission brings inflation to the economy, which affects the poor most. In addition, the financial condition of the states is not ready to bear the burden of another pay commission.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

Delhi is one of the biggest sources of revenue collection in income tax and GST. At least the taxpayers should have the option in their ITRs to invest or spend their taxes towards national security, education, industrial and civil infrastructure, health and welfare schemes.

All the welfare schemes and freebies are funded at the cost of higher electricity, water and municipal taxes paid by the non-eligible class besides taxes paid by them. In the long run, the taxpayers may be demotivated to pay taxes honestly as the political parties are squandering their hard-earned money on freebies, which are the antithesis of growth and development. At least the BJP was expected to promise jobs to the youth and empower them instead of turning them into dead wood like other parties. We should not lose the demographic dividend by parasitising the youth.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

EXPECTATIONS BURDEN WOMEN

Madam — Refer to The Silent Struggles of a Daughter-in-Law. A call to change

(January 18). The natural shift in family roles—where elders move from decision-makers to mentors (less responsibility, less freedom) and younger generations take on more responsibilities and more freedom in decision-making—can become complicated when societal pressures interfere. High expectations with society's rigid rules on newer generations often result in rigid roles, particularly for daughters-in-law, who are expected to navigate complex expectations. This situation may hinder the balance within the family.

To achieve the ultimate goal of love, care, and empathy, families must embrace internal management and communication rather than following society's rigid rules that allow shared responsibilities and individuality. This fosters understanding and reduces the generational gap, creating harmony and mutual respect among family members. The ultimate goal is a stable and loving society.

Riti Dwivedi | Indore

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

A REUNION OF HEARTS, MINDS AND THE DIVINE

Today, we are connected not just by the bonds of friendship but by the threads of technology



RAVI VALLURI

Three decades ago, we were perhaps merely a group of motley friends and acquaintances. We were a bunch of strapping youngsters and petite women who had flowered from their teens, all tutees in an estimable institution. Three decades back we professed and cherished a heterogeneity of political ideologies spanning the left, right and center spectrums, in an era of a controlled economy and what also was the pre-globalisation era. This was a generation ago. Meanwhile, the Soviet economy crumbled and disintegrated, the Berlin Wall collapsed and diverse countries swiftly embraced consumerism and capitalism. A talismanic Zuckerberg bought a contrivance called WhatsApp from Jan Koum. All the technology and gadgets have provided seamless connectivity and people across the globe have been moored, and so it was with us. In a trice, we were all trussed up through WhatsApp.

A few months of endless chatting on WhatsApp resulted in a clarion call for a reunion. This was followed by frenetic preparations and a homecoming took place at the opulent Rajputana Sheraton, Jaipur. The assembly and the bonding were indeed amazing. For three days and four nights we were to shed our past baggage and live another life. The friends of yesteryears conducted themselves as a group of children rediscovering their roots. This is purely a physical pining. The geometry and architecture of the human mind are unmindful, unsuspecting and unaware of the exalted, elevated and lofty state it is capable of. This is the pining and longing for the Divine. The same longing that Radha Arjuna or Sudama possessed for Lord Krishna. This is true of all religions, faiths and spiritual masters. Like Yusuf, Dawud, Sulayman, and Ibrahim beckoned Allah. Akin to what the apostles, and more recently, Saint Teresa felt for Jesus or Ananda for Buddha. This is divine love without any attach-



ments and entanglements. This is not an emotion of craving but that of five Es. What are these five Es? The devotee, seeker and devout are subsumed with exhilaration, ecstasy, euphoria, elation, exultation and ebullience. This is the authentic and genuine pining for the Divine. It is a meditative state in which the seeker or the disciple basks in the glory of the Master and utters his name with the doctrine of the three Cs: credence, confidence, and conviction.

Yes, the enlightened Buddha does say nothing is permanent in life, and impermanence is the only constant factor. However, the heart and mind aching for the Divine is voracious. It transcends all boundaries and frontiers. Feelings and emotions encompass the human mind with constructive and efficacious thoughts, where it becomes intrepid to scale and surmount any misadventure. To elaborate further, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar poses a teaser, "Do we give quality time to the Divine?" He goes on to add, that we do that only after partying hard, watching some tantalizing movies and entertaining guests. The remainder or balance of our time is set aside by the mind to pine for the Divine.

The universe thus showers upon us only that quantum of benediction and bounty, depending upon our tapas or the tractive effort of the mind. However, through methodical and punctilious practice of techniques like yoga, pranayama, meditation and the unique rhythmic breathing technique of Sudarshan Kriya, the mind can achieve the state of continuous communion with the Divine by remaining in the present moment. So, what happened to the group that met after thirty years? They are in abiding and sustained touch. Perhaps a dash of spiritual spark is required to cement the bonding from within and without.

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

LPG subsidies: Give it to the poor and needy



UTTAM GUPTA

As state-owned oil companies grapple with massive losses from selling LPG below cost, the Govt is set to allocate Rs 35,000 crore in subsidies to mitigate the financial burden



During the current financial year (FY) 2024-25, the state-owned Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) are expected to incur an under-recovery of Rs 19,550 crore, Rs 10,400 crore and Rs 10,570 crore respectively on sales of LPG to household consumers. To make up for this loss totalling Rs 40,500 crore, the Union Government is likely to provide a subsidy of Rs 35,000 crore. In the Budget for 2025-26, to be presented on February 1, 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will make a provision of Rs 10,000 crore in the revised estimate (RE) for the current FY and the remaining Rs 25,000 crore in the budget estimate (BE) for 2025-26.

The under-recovery arose because these corporations sold LPG for Rs 803 per 14.2-kg cylinder against the cost of supplying at the retail point being higher. The cost is calculated as the refinery-gate price or RGP (taken as import parity price or IPP and export parity price or EPP in the ratio of 80:20) plus freight, marketing costs, marketing margin, dealers' commission, and taxes and duties. During the current FY, the cost is Rs 1043 per cylinder, and the loss is Rs 240 per cylinder which on total sales of 169 crore cylinders would be Rs 40,500 crore. Modi - government had stopped giving subsidies on LPG during FY 2021-22. Then, how come, it continues to make huge payments from the budget? LPG is an environment and human-friendly fuel that meets the needs of millions of households (HHs).

Subsidy on LPG ought to be given only to those HHs who are poor. The government also needs to track the income status of the beneficiaries and withdraw support from those who become better off and can pay cost-based prices. Ignoring these cardinal principles, the subsidy was given to anyone who had an LPG connection. It went to all and sundry including the rich. The poor who alone should have got it sat at the bottom. According to the Economic Survey (2015-16), only 0.07 per cent of LPG subsidies in rural areas went to a fifth of the



LPG IS AN ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN-FRIENDLY FUEL THAT MEETS THE NEEDS OF MILLIONS OF HOUSEHOLDS (HHS). SUBSIDY ON LPG OUGHT TO BE GIVEN ONLY TO THOSE HHS WHO ARE POOR. THE GOVERNMENT ALSO NEEDS TO TRACK THE INCOME STATUS OF THE BENEFICIARIES AND WITHDRAW SUPPORT FROM THOSE WHO BECOME BETTER OFF AND CAN PAY

poorest households. In urban areas, the poorest fifth got only 8.2 per cent.

A lot of subsidies went to fake beneficiaries or the diversion of stocks (albeit subsidised) of LPG cylinders to hotels, restaurants, and other commercial users. Despite lacking sound justification, sheer populism drove politicians to give subsidies to all and sundry. They found ways to give it without taking the burden on the Centre's balance sheet. Initially, the subsidy on LPG (besides petrol and diesel) was cross-funded/subsidised by charging more on the sale of other products such as fuel oil, naphtha, ATF, etc. hence, no burden on the budget. In 2002-03, the Vajpayee-led NDA government ended the above system and decided to give subsidies on these products directly from the budget with the intent to eventually disband them. But, that was not to be.

The UPA government which took charge in 2004, even while continuing with subsidised sales, used disingenuous methods such as the issue of oil bonds to IOCL/BPCL/HPCL (instead of losses incurred by them due to selling these products at below-cost prices), and sale of domestic crude oil by stated owned upstream oil and gas companies viz. Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India Limited (OIL), etc. at a discounted price to these fuel refiners-cum-retailers.

In June 2010, petrol was decontrolled followed by diesel in November 2014. As for LPG, the Kelkar Committee recommended the removal of 25 per cent of the subsidy in 2012-13 and 75 per cent in the following two years. Modi Government which took charge in May 2014, started acting on it but in a calibrated manner. On January 1, 2015, it launched a direct benefit transfer (DBT) of subsidy.

Under DBT, oil PSUs deliver the cylinder to the beneficiaries at a full cost-based price and follow it up by depositing a subsidy in the beneficiary's account.

In turn, they claim reimbursement of the subsidy amount from the Centre. This helped in eliminating fake beneficiaries and curbing misuse that was inherent in the erstwhile system wherein subsidy was embedded in the price. But, the government couldn't muster the courage to trim the number of beneficiary HHs sans Modi requesting the rich to give up on their own.

The FY 2020-21 was a boon, viewed from a subsidy angle. In that year, there was a steep decline in international prices (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) leading to a fall in the cost of supplying an LPG cylinder to a low of Rs 600; hence, it could be given to all HHs at Rs 600 requiring no subsidy support. The BE of Rs 36,000 crore for that year was used largely to clear past dues of oil PSUs and provide free gas connections under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY). During 2021-22 when the international price rose due to waning COVID and demand revival, the cost of LPG zoomed to over Rs 900 per cylinder.

This prompted the government to give subsidies but only to the PMUY beneficiaries. They were 9.6 crore out of a total of 33 crore HHs. It spent Rs 14,000 crore during that year. During 2022-23, it spent Rs 9,170 crore. But, this doesn't tell the full story. From June 2020 to June 2022, the government had asked the three fuel retailers namely IOCL/BPCL/HPCL to sell LPG at a price below cost and gave them a one-time grant of Rs 22,000 crore to compensate for the losses incurred in 2021-22 and 2022-23 (against under-recovery of Rs 28,250 crore).

This was nothing but subsidy (albeit 'hidden') given to all and sundry, and not just PMUY beneficiaries. In the Budget for 2023-24, it kept the BE for LPG subsidy at Rs 2,257 crore. As in the previous two years, that allocation was meant to cover subsidy to PMUY beneficiary HHs @ Rs 200 per cylinder for up to 12 refills per year. However, to benefit all the 33 crore HHs, on August 29, 2023, the Union Cabinet approved a reduction in the price by Rs 200 per cylinder effective from August 30, 2023, thereby enabling the PSU retailers to sell it at Rs 903 per cylinder (Delhi). Taking 4 fills per HH, @Rs 200 per cylinder, the annual burden comes to Rs 26,400 crore (200x4x33).

Since the decision was effective from August 30, 2023, for the remaining seven months of FY 2023-24, the outgo would be around Rs 15,300 crore. On March 9, 2024, the fuel retailers namely IOCL/BPCL/HPCL were asked to cut the price by another Rs 100 per cylinder (courtesy, of general elections) to Rs 803.

During the current FY 2024-25, the price has remained unchanged despite the cost remaining at an elevated level. The under-recovery for 2023-24 and 2024-25 thus comes to over Rs 40,000 crore of which the Centre now wants to reimburse Rs 35,000 crore. This and the earlier payment of Rs 22,000 crore for loss incurred by IOCL/BPCL/HPCL during 2021-22 and 2022-23 could have been avoided if only it had stuck to its earlier stance of restricting LPG subsidy only to the poor HHs and keeping it transparent. But, this is unthinkable in the current political climate wherein all decisions based on sound economic logic are hamstrung by populism.

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

The silent epidemic: The untold story of gender inequality against men in India

Indian society, long entrenched in patriarchy and gender inequality against women, is now grappling with an overlooked dimension of the issue—gender inequality against men

Indian society has always been dominated by patriarchy and gender inequality against women. However, the two recent suicides of a techie and a head constable, both alleging extortion and harassment by their estranged wives and families, point to a highly skewed, female-oriented and obsolete legal framework. Gender inequality largely remains a half-told story, deprived of the male counterpart.



KAJLEEN KAUR

The legal system in India favours women with the dowry laws in India being specifically highly discriminatory. As per section 113B of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 (now Bhartiya Saksham Adhikar, 2023) if a married woman commits

suicide within 7 years of marriage, it is assumed that the husband or his family abetted suicide, while the same does not apply to women. Marriage litigation experts claim that when women file complaints against their husbands and families, the dynamics of abuse and unclear documentation frequently make

these cases highly complex and a woman's statement is usually considered at face value, creating a significant imbalance in the legal process.

Additionally, females also get a preference in the custody of children especially in younger ages below 5 years, in most divorce cases, as per the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022 data, men accounted for 1,22,724 suicides out of a total of 1,70,896.

This is 71.81 per cent of all suicides. The data also highlights that a man commits suicide every 4.45 minutes while a woman every 9 minutes. Moreover, the rate of

suicide among married men is three times that of married women. In 2021 as many as 81,063 married men committed suicide while the women's figure stood at 28,660.

Family problems and marriage-related issues were the leading causes of suicide in metropolitan cities, accounting for 32.5 per cent of the cases. Gender inequality towards men finds limited discussions both culturally and in academic research, not just in India but globally. However, a closer look at the facts reveals a biased feminist societal structure predominantly.

According to the founder of a Delhi-based organisation, Purush Ayog, society stereotypes assume that 'males



cannot be victims', which leads to ignorance and neglect of the issues facing them. A study by Stoet and Geary, 2019 for 134 countries claimed that men were more disadvantaged in 91

(68 per cent) countries than women. They argued that the Global Gender Gap was flawed, due to lopsided measuring techniques, which did not include situations where men are disadvan-

taged, due to the absence of literature.

Another study in France found that discrimination against men in female-dominated workplaces is more prevalent than discrimination against women in male-dominated workplaces. Similar examples of reverse sexism, with anti-male prejudice are vastly prevalent, but ironically barely quoted. The mental health research is also focussed on women, and scholars warn of the problems faced by men as a 'silent epidemic'. In the legal framework, the female culprits are less likely to have longer and more stringent imprisonment for similar crimes. Women's liberalisation and empowerment are necessary

for a progressive social structure and developed economy. Still, a gender-equal status should not be thrived at the cost of male exploitation.

In modern-day society, with evolving gender roles and relationships; better education and awareness; and a feminism gaining force, balanced matrimonial laws are more pertinent than ever. The government must consider amending marriage laws to include prenuptial agreements to address financial complexities, disputes, and legal rights.

(The author is assistant professor at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi; views are personal)

Lot of interest in PM Modi's policies at WEF meeting in Davos, says Vaishnaw

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Sunday said there was a lot of interest globally in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's economic policies, which would be the focus of discussions at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Vaishnaw, who is leading the Indian delegation at the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting beginning Monday, said there was a lot of interest in India's growth story among the international community, particularly about the digital transformation and the new digital architecture. "In the World Economic Forum in Davos, there is lot of interest in understanding our thought process, the prime minister's economic policy, about the digital transformation, about the way India has created new digital architecture



under the Digital India programme and also the way technology has been democratised. There is a lot of interest on this," he said. There will be detailed discussions about inclusive growth, the investment in social, physical, digital infrastructure and on democratising technology, he added.

"The prime minister has put huge focus on inclusive development and a growth that brings a big transformative change in the lives of the people at the bottom of the pyramid, people who have been left out of development over many decades in the past," said Vaishnaw, the minister for information and broad-

casting, railways, and electronics and information technology. "Whether it is bank accounts, providing toilets, gas connections, tap water connections, getting the basic infrastructure in villages done, infrastructure in urban areas done, this is something which the world wants to understand," he added. Besides Vaishnaw, Union ministers CR Patil, K Ram Mohan Naidu, Chirag Paswan, and Jayant Chaudhary are expected to attend the WEF from January 20 to 24. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, and their Andhra Pradesh counterpart Chandrababu Naidu will also attend the WEF meeting. US President-elect Donald Trump is expected to join the meeting via video link after he assumes office on Monday.

Retired Government official held under 'digital arrest' for 18 days, duped of ₹40 lakh by fraudsters

STAFF REPORTER ■ FARIDABAD

A retired government official from Faridabad was duped of Rs 40 lakh by fraudsters posing as TRAI and Mumbai Police officials, who placed her under 'digital arrest' for 18 days. According to the police on Sunday, the victim, Monika, who retired from her post as Labour Welfare Commissioner with the Central Ministry, lives with her 90-year-old mother in Faridabad, while her daughter resides in Delhi, police added. "On November 11 last year, she received a call on her mobile from an unknown number and was held hostage for the next 18 days," police said. According to the victim's complaint, the caller introduced himself as a representative of the Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRAI) and informed her that an account had been opened in Canara Bank, Mumbai, using her Aadhar card and phone number. The caller also mentioned a large transaction made from



that account involving the CEO of a private aviation company. The victim denied opening any account in Mumbai, to which the caller replied that a huge transaction had been made from the account. The caller then transferred the call to another individual, who introduced himself as a Mumbai Police officer. During a video call, the alleged officer showed documents related to a loan from the bank account

and sent her an arrest warrant via WhatsApp. The fraudster, claiming to cooperate with the investigation, insisted on house arrest and kept WhatsApp voice calls active day and night, instructing the victim not to tell anyone about the situation or she would be arrested, police said. During this period, the accused transferred Rs 40 lakh from her account, promising to return the money after the

investigation was complete, police said. On the 18th day, when the accused stopped responding during a video call, Monika realised she had been duped. Due to fear I did not complain to anyone for about 15 days but finally now moved to police", she said in her complaint. A senior police officer said that an FIR has been registered and an investigation is underway.

Kejriwal silent when he found that Saif attacker was Bangladeshi national: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP President Divendra Sachdeva on Sunday attacked AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal on his silence, stating that when actor Saif Ali Khan was attacked, he sought sympathy from the media by claiming that Saif is a national treasure but has been silent when found out that the accused was a Bangladeshi national. "However, after it came to

light that the attacker is a Bangladeshi citizen, Kejriwal has chosen to remain silent, raising questions about why this has happened?" the BJP leader questioned. The Delhi BJP President emphasized that Arvind Kejriwal, who showed deep concern after Saif Ali Khan was attacked, now has a responsibility to condemn the Bangladeshi individual involved in the attack. "From the very beginning, the BJP has maintained that Rohingyas and Bangladeshis



Ranjan Dimri

are a security threat across the country, including Delhi. Despite this, Arvind Kejriwal continues to provide them shelter and sustenance in the capital," he claimed. Sachdeva further alleged that AAP leaders, including the MLA from Okhla, provide financial aid of Rs 10,000 to illegal Bangladeshis and facilitate free electricity and water for them. "Additionally, they are involved in creating illegal Aadhaar cards and fake voter IDs for these individuals," he

said, demanding that Kejriwal disclose the connections of the attacker with other individuals or groups. Meanwhile, AAP spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar, in a post on X, said, "Modi Ji and Amit Shah Ji should apologize to Saif Ali Khan and his family. Due to their failures, Bangladeshi infiltrators have come to different parts of the country in the last 10 years. Modi ji has been a total failure in protecting the country."

Delhi Police Crime Branch dismantle international dark web drug cartel

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police's Crime Branch on Sunday claimed to dismantle an international dark web drug cartel, seizing 6 kilograms of hydroponic weed worth over Rs 2 crore. The seizure was made under Operation Kawach, carried out ahead of the Delhi Assembly elections, targeting illicit liquor, drugs, and illegal arms. "Using blockchain-based privacy-centric communication apps and the sophisticated dead delivery

method, the syndicate operated through the dark web, with payments made via cryptocurrencies," a senior police officer said. He said the bust led to the arrest of 46 year old Abdul Malik alias Parvez, and 35 year old Mayank Nayyar, both from Delhi and key figures in the racket. "An investigation into the matter began when police intercepted several drug parcels at the Foreign Post Office, containing over 5kg of hydroponic weed imported from the USA," the officer said.

TRUMP IS BACK

From page 1

Sunday will be Trump's first full day back in the capital since the election. It gives him a chance to enjoy the moment and fire up his core supporters before Inauguration Day's heavy dose of official pomp, including the swearing-in at noon. Trump planned to place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery before addressing a rally downtown at Capital One Arena, home of Washington pro basketball and hockey teams.

With frigid temperatures expected Monday, Trump directed his oath of office - now set for the Capitol Rotunda - and most of Monday's outdoor events be moved indoors. The traditional parade will be held, in some form, at Capital One Arena. Trump also was to attend a candlelight dinner Sunday where he was expected to speak. Biden, in his final full day in office, scheduled a trip to South Carolina, a state that holds special meaning after his commanding win in the 2020 Democratic primary there set

him up to achieve his life's goal of being elected president. Biden, accompanied by his wife, first lady Jill Biden, was set to visit a church in North Charleston to worship and speak on the legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the White House said. Monday is also the federal holiday honouring the slain civil rights leader. The president used his farewell address earlier in the week to warn of a growing "oligarchy" of ultra-rich interests gaining power and threatening the nation's very democracy.

No casualty in Mahakumbh fire...

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Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who was attending the Mahakumbh, quickly visited the site to monitor the relief and rescue operations. The fire broke out at around 4:15 PM and was brought under control within 30 minutes. More than 50 fire tenders, equipped with advanced firefighting tools, were dispatched to extinguish the flames. ADG Prayagraj Zone Bhanu Bhaskar stated in a press briefing that preliminary investigations suggest an LPG cylinder explosion as the likely cause of the fire. "No injuries to any pilgrims have been reported," he confirmed, attributing the minimised

damage to the prompt response of fire officials and local volunteers. Prayagraj District Magistrate Ravindra Kumar Mander further said: "At 4:30 PM today, we received information about a fire in the Gita Press tent within the Kumbh area, Sector 19. Fire brigade and police teams quickly responded to the scene. In addition to the Gita Press tent, 10 Prayagraj tents were also destroyed. The fire has been extinguished, and the situation is now under control. Fortunately, no casualties have been reported." Authorities are currently conducting a thorough investigation into the incident to ensure the safety of pilgrims and to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

Police claims Saif attacker nabbed

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Preliminary investigations have revealed that after stepping out of Saif's building post crime, Shariful headed straight to Bandra railway station where he boarded a Churchgate-bound train in the early hours of Thursday and got down at Dadar, from where he walked to some location in Worli. Later in the morning, he headed to Thane. En route, he changed clothes and his appearance. After seeing his photographs and video clips go viral on social media, Shariful reportedly hid himself at Thane creek near Thane's Kasarvadavali area. "Using the technical intel, we traced the accused to Thane," Deputy Commissioner of Police (IX) Dikshit Gedam said. "After his illegal entry to Mumbai, he was working for a house-keeping agency after coming to Mumbai. He does not have any prior criminal record, and further investigations are on," Gedam said. The preliminary investigations have revealed that when he entered Saif's home, he did not

know that he had barged into a celebrity's home. Incidentally Shariful is the third person that the Mumbai police have taken into custody in connection with the murderous attack on Saif. Earlier, the Mumbai police had revealed that they had detained one Waris Ali but was let off later, while another suspect named Akash Kailash Kanojia who they arrested from the Mumbai-Kolkata Jnaneshwari Express at Durg in Chhattisgarh on Thursday. Both Ali and Kanojia were apparently 'clones' of the real accused who is now in custody, after remaining absconding for three days. The Bandra police have registered a case against Shariful under sections 311 (robbery or dacoity with the intent to cause grievous hurt or death, 331(4) (house-breaking) and other relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita and Passport Act, 1967. Meanwhile, Saif is stated to be convalescing well at the Lilavati Hospital where he underwent multiple surgeries after the brazen attack and is likely to be discharged in a couple of days, medicos indicated.

Valmiki Basti key to elite New Delhi seat

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He also voiced his concern about the potential demolition of slums if the BJP comes to power. "On one hand, they might provide flats to a few slum dwellers, but on the other hand, they will leave many homeless by demolishing jhuggis if they win the elections," said the 35-year-old. Rameshwaram, who works with the New Delhi Municipal Council, expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of regularisation for contractual workers, despite AAP supremo Kejriwal's promise to do so. "Contractual workers can be removed from their positions at any time. Kejriwal had promised to regularise them, but that promise remains unfulfilled," he stated. Despite his concerns, he intends to support the AAP in the upcoming elections, citing his belief that "Kejriwal is with the poor people." He noted, "Kejriwal's initiative for free bus rides for women has been a

tremendous help. Many women from the Basti, especially those working as house help, have benefited greatly. Previously, they had to spend money on transportation, but now they can take the bus for free and go wherever they need to. The money saved from this goes towards the welfare of their entire families." Echoing similar sentiments, 59-year-old Mukesh, a worker in the NDMC, recounted an instance where he overheard a woman getting off the bus saying that the free bus rides allowed her to treat her grandson to a plate of chole bhature for just Rs 10. "The impact of the scheme is visible in many households. While some might see the free bus rides as insignificant, there are countless individuals who experience its profound effects in their daily lives," he remarked. He further noted that free electricity and Mohalla Clinics are beneficial schemes, although they have not been able to take advantage of them since they reside in the NDMC area. A

retired NDMC worker also expressed skepticism about the BJP's claims that if their candidate wins in this constituency, all pending tasks and development projects will be completed. "They have the Lieutenant Governor, a central government, and all seven MPs in Delhi are from the BJP, yet they still can't get things done here. What guarantee do we have that they will deliver when they have an MLA? At least we know there's another party we can turn to if they fail to deliver," remarked 70-year-old Jai Kishan. Residents expressed concern that the Centre appointed Lieutenant Governor, Vinai Kumar Saxena, has been granted excessive powers, seemingly overriding those of the Chief Minister. "They are suppressing him with so many constraints. The LG is not allowing him to work effectively. How can he have more power than the Chief Minister?" questioned 50-year-old Raju. On the other hand, some locals are

frustrated with Kejriwal's lack of presence in the area. "We haven't seen him much in the Basti, despite supporting him with our votes. He only visited briefly before filing his nominations, and even then, we weren't informed," remarked a 35-year-old resident. He further commented on the adverse effects of the liquor policy on families. "Even if a liquor policy was necessary, he shouldn't have introduced promotions like 'one plus one'. In many households, this has had a detrimental effect, with men drinking excessively and causing disturbances. Additionally, many black marketers exploited the scheme to stockpile such liquor. This shouldn't have happened," he stated. The NDMC worker mentioned that he plans to vote for the BJP. "We are facing soaring electricity bills. We have asked the BJP to help us by addressing these exorbitant charges. We are hopeful that they will resolve our issues as soon as they are elected to power," he added.

Exiled Kashmiri Pandits seeks homeland in Valley as UT

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Addressing the gathering, Dr Agnishekhar of Panun Kashmir reiterated their commitment to continue their struggle to reclaim their separate Homeland in the valley. Referring to the distribution of 65 lakh Property cards by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Dr Agnishekhar claimed none of the members of the exiled Kashmiri pandit community received it. He said he has been living in exile in Jammu and other cities across India yet we have been forced to fill in the address of Kashmir valley from where we were driven out forcibly. The successive

governments marginalized us and false narratives were peddled to mislead the people outside Jammu and Kashmir. Dr Agnishekhar said when Articles 370 and 35-A were Abrogated in August 2019 we welcomed the same as we expected the move may also open up the gates of our 'Ghar Wapsi' at the earliest. Expressing dismay Dr Agnishekhar said we continue to remain on the margins. Our genocide has not been recognized. The properties of Kashmiri pandits were put to distress sale and all those Kashmiri pandits, who were given jobs under the PM's package, have been targeted in the Kashmir valley and have no social life. He added, on its

part the government claims they have restored normalcy in the valley, the tourist footfall has increased and film shootings are happening. He said for us it's a cruel joke. "We are ready to return to Kashmir valley in our separate homeland where we will get all the constitutional guarantees and foolproof security arrangements. From where no terrorist organization can uproot us, where we enjoy the support of fellow Indians." Dr Agnishekhar said, "We have given this roadmap 35 years ago and till the time the government is ready to create a conducive atmosphere we will continue to suffer in exile."

Gaza ceasefire begins, handover of hostages started

From page 1

Israel's hard-line national security minister, meanwhile, said his Jewish Power faction was quitting the government in protest over the ceasefire agreement. Itamar Ben-Gvir's departure weakens Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition but will not affect the truce. In a separate development, Israel announced it had recovered the body of Oron Shaul, a soldier killed in the 2014 Israel-Hamas war, in a special operation in Gaza. The bodies of Shaul and another soldier, Hadar

Goldin, remained there after the 2014 war and had not been returned. The ceasefire deal was announced last week after a year of mediation by the United States, Qatar and Egypt. The outgoing Biden administration and President-elect Donald Trump's team had both pressed for an agreement to be reached before the inauguration on Monday. Netanyahu on Saturday warned that he had Trump's backing to continue fighting if necessary. The 42-day first phase of the ceasefire should see 33 hostages returned from Gaza

and hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and detainees released. Many displaced Palestinians should be able to return home. There is also supposed to be a surge of humanitarian aid, with hundreds of trucks entering Gaza daily, far more than Israel allowed before. The United Nations' World Food Program said trucks started entering through two crossings after the ceasefire took hold. This is just the second ceasefire in the war, longer and more consequential than a weeklong pause in November 2023, with the potential to end the fighting

for good. Negotiations on the far more difficult second phase of this ceasefire should begin in just over two weeks. Major questions remain, including whether the war will resume after the first phase and how the rest of the hostages in Gaza will be freed. Across the Gaza Strip, celebrations erupted as people hoped for respite after the fighting killed tens of thousands, destroyed large areas of the territory and displaced most of its population. Masked militants appeared at some celebrations, where crowds chanted slogans in

support of them, according to Associated Press reporters in Gaza. The Hamas-run police began deploying in public after mostly lying low due to Israeli airstrikes. Some families set off for home on foot, their belongings loaded on donkey carts. In the southern city of Rafah, residents returned to find massive destruction. Some found human remains including skulls in the rubble. "It's like you see a Hollywood horror movie," resident Mohamed Abu Taha told the AP as he inspected the ruins of his family's home. Reactions in Israel were varied, as people hoped for

the hostages' safe return but remained divided over the agreement. "It's a new day," Nissan Kalderon, the brother of hostage Ofer Kalderon, 54, told Israeli Channel 12. "Don't stop. Bring all the hostages home." Asher Pizem, 35, from the city of Sderot near Gaza, said he eagerly awaited the hostages' return but said the deal had merely postponed the next confrontation with Hamas. He also criticized Israel for allowing aid into Gaza, saying it would contribute to the militant group's revival. "They will take the time and attack again," he said while

overlooking Gaza's smoldering ruins from a small hill in southern Israel with other Israelis who gathered there. Israel's Cabinet approved the ceasefire early Saturday in a rare session during the Jewish Sabbath, more than two days after mediators announced the deal. Over 46,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which says women and children make up more than half the fatalities but does not distinguish between civilians and fighters. The Hamas-led attack on southern Israel that sparked

the war killed over 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and 250 others. More than 100 hostages were freed during the weeklong ceasefire in November 2023. Some 90 per cent of Gaza's population has been displaced. The United Nations says homes, the health system, road networks and other vital infrastructure have been badly damaged. Rebuilding - if the ceasefire reaches its final phase - will take several years at least. Major questions about Gaza's future, political and otherwise, remain unresolved.

'Trump wants to visit China, talked about possible trip to India'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President-elect Donald Trump wants to travel to China after he takes office as part of his effort to deepen relations with Beijing, and also has talked to advisors about visit to India, a media report said Saturday.

Trump, who arrived at the Dulles International Airport aboard a special plane along with First Lady Melania and son Barron, had during his election campaign threatened to impose additional tariffs on China.

"President-elect Donald Trump has told advisors he wants to travel to China after he takes office, according to people familiar with the discussions, seeking to deepen a relationship with Xi Jinping strained by the president-elect's threat to impose steeper tariffs on Chinese imports," The Wall Street Journal reported.

"Trump has also talked to advisors about a possible trip to India, according to people close to him," the financial daily said. According to familiar sources, a preliminary level of talks were initiated when External Affairs Minister S

Jaishankar visited Washington DC around Christmas last month.

India is all set to host the QUAD Summit composed of leaders from Australia, Japan and the United States. The visit could happen as early as April or in the fall later this year. It is also being considered as a possibility that Prime Minister Narendra Modi might be invited by Trump for a White House meeting this spring.

A day earlier, Trump had spoken with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Xi has deputed Vice-President Han Zheng to attend Trump's swearing-in ceremony, the first time a senior Chinese official will be present at a US presidential inauguration. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar would represent India at the inaugural.

Trump invited Xi to his inauguration, however, the Chinese leader never attends the swearing-in of foreign leaders. After the talks, Trump said he held a "very good" phone call with Xi.

"I just spoke to Chairman Xi Jinping of China," Trump wrote on Truth Social. "It is my

expectation that we will solve many problems together, and starting immediately," Trump said the pair discussed trade, fentanyl, TikTok and other subjects, and asserted that the call was "very good" for both countries.

"President Xi and I will do everything possible to make the World more peaceful and safe!" Trump said.

According to The Wall Street Journal, a Beijing meeting would come at a fraught moment in the relationship between the world's leading superpowers. Along with potential new tariffs on Chinese imports, Trump has also pushed Beijing to crack down on Chinese chemical producers that supply the ingredients for fentanyl to Mexican cartels, it said.

TRUMP LIKELY TO SIGN 100 EXECUTIVE ORDERS

When Donald Trump walks into the White House Monday afternoon soon after his swearing-in, 100 plus executive orders would be waiting for him on his Oval Office Desk, which his team has prepared for him to kickoff his second term without wasting any



File photo of Donald Trump

minute.

These executive orders are mainly aimed at fulfilling his poll promises. In an interview to NBC news, Trump said he is planning to sign a "record-setting" number of executive actions on day one. "Well, at least in that category," Trump said when asked if these executive orders would be more than 100. An executive order is an order issued unilaterally by the president who carries the force of law. Unlike legislation, executive orders do not require Congressional approval. Though Congress cannot overturn them, they can be challenged in the court of law.

"We have a record-setting number of documents that I'll be signing right after this (inauguration) speech," Trump said. He would be sworn-in as the 47th President of the United States on January 20.

One of his close associates Stephen Miller told a news channel that these would mainly be around five topics: sealing the Southern border, mass deportation, preventing transgender people from women's sports, removing restrictions on energy exploration and improving government efficiency.

Among his executive orders is expected to be pardoning his

supporters who were arrested by law enforcement agencies for their role in the attack on the US Capitol on January 6 four years ago.

Trump, 78, is also expected to roll back some of the executive orders and actions of the outgoing President Joe Biden. Prominent among them include the Paris Climate agreement, lifting restrictions on fossil fuel production and expanding domestic oil drilling. "This flex of power will quickly implement much of his agenda as Congress takes up his legislative priorities," Sara Carter said.

"I've been told it's going to be shock and awe as far as executive orders and all the lists of things that are going to happen on January 20th. And that they're going to throw a lot into the first day," Fox News anchor Bret Baier said. Many call it an ambitious agenda.

"I don't think it's hyperbole. Is it ambitious? Yes. But it's absolutely doable," said EJ Antoni, public finance economist at The Heritage Foundation, who has analyzed past executive orders told The Washington Times. "When you think about the amount of

time his team has had to prepare those executive orders, it's perfectly reasonable to think those orders will be on the Resolute Desk on the day of the inauguration," he said.

Republican Senator Ted Cruz Congressman Jodey Arrington have introduced legislation to repeal an Executive Order issued by President Biden on January 6, that banned American energy exploration on over 625 million acres of offshore territory. Trump is expected to reverse this through his own executive order.

In an interview to NBC News in December, Trump said he would fulfill a campaign promise to levy tariffs on imports from America's biggest trading partners. He is likely to sign executive orders previously announced tariffs on countries like China, Mexico and Canada.

Biden on his first day had issued nine executive order. Six of these were overturning the decisions of his predecessor Trump. In the first week, he had signed 22 executive orders. During his campaign trail, Trump had given an indication of his first day executive orders.

"On day one, I will launch the largest deportation program of criminals in the history of America," Trump repeatedly said on the campaign trail. "I want to close the border, and I want to drill, drill, drill," he said at another rally.

Politico said Trump's emphasis as he enters the Oval Office on Monday is sending a loud signal that the border is closed to illegal crossings and that anyone who is living in the US unauthorised, especially those who have committed crimes, is not safe from deportation.

"He'll do so through a slew of executive orders and actions, launching the process of resur-recting policies from his first term, shredding Biden administration immigration policy and taking what Trump officials have labeled the "hand-cuffs" off of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials," the media outlet reported.

Axios reported that Trump is setting the stage for an explosive first day in office: pardons for Jan. 6 rioters, a vacuum sealing of the southern border and a massive regulatory roll-back affecting vast swathes of the American economy.

Who is Itamar, Isarel minister who resigned from Netanyahu cabinet?

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Israel's far-right national security minister resigned from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Cabinet on Sunday to express his disapproval of the Gaza ceasefire deal.

The resignation of Itamar Ben-Gvir does not threaten the ceasefire, but it does weaken Netanyahu's governing coalition. If other far-right lawmakers leave the government — as Ben-Gvir has encouraged them to do — the prime minister could lose his parliamentary majority, potentially forcing early elections.

It was the latest act of defiance by the 48-year-old ultranationalist settler leader who transformed himself over the decades from an outlaw and provocateur into one of Israel's most influential politicians.

The ceasefire will pause the war and free dozens of hostages held by militants in Gaza. Ben-Gvir opposed the deal because it requires Israel to free hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and to withdraw troops from Gaza's southern border with Egypt — and because it leaves open the possibility of Hamas staying in power in Gaza.

Ahead of the resignation, he said the ceasefire was "reckless" and would "destroy all of Israel's achievements." In his Cabinet post, Ben-Gvir oversaw the country's police force. He used his influence to encourage Netanyahu to press ahead with the war in Gaza and recently boasted that he had blocked past efforts to reach a ceasefire.

He also has paid multiple visits to Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site — the contested hill-

top compound that houses the Al-Aqsa Mosque — including last month. In one such visit in July, he said he came to pray for the return of the hostages "but without a reckless deal, without surrendering."

The move, while legal, was seen as a provocation, violated a longstanding ban on Jewish prayer there, and threatened to disrupt months of sensitive negotiations. The site is revered by Jews as the Temple Mount. Ben-Gvir has been convicted eight times for offences that include racism and supporting a terrorist organisation. As a teen, his views were so extreme that the army banned him from compulsory military service. Ben-Gvir gained notoriety in his youth as a follower of the late racist rabbi Meir Kahane. He first became a

national figure when he broke a hood ornament off then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's car in 1995.

"We got to his car, and we'll get to him too," he said, just weeks before Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist opposed to his peace efforts with the Palestinians.

Two years later, Ben-Gvir took responsibility for orchestrating a campaign of protests, including death threats, that forced Irish singer Sinéad O'Connor to cancel a concert for peace in Jerusalem. The political rise of Ben-Gvir was the culmination of years of efforts by the media-savvy lawmaker to gain legitimacy. But it also reflected a rightward shift in the Israeli electorate that brought his religious, ultranationalist ideology into the mainstream and diminished hopes for Palestinian independence.

TikTok shuts down as US ban takes effect

PTI ■ HOUSTON

TikTok's app effectively shut down in the US, just hours before a law banning the popular video-sharing platform was set to go into effect.

"A law banning TikTok has been enacted in the US. Unfortunately, that means you can't use TikTok for now," a message reads when American users open the app.

"We are fortunate that President Trump has indicated that he will work with us on a solution to reinstate TikTok once he takes office. Please stay tuned!"

While the Biden administration dismissed TikTok's shutdown threat as a "stunt" and handed enforcement to the Trump administration, TikTok maintained that without clear assurances, it had no choice but to suspend its services in the US.

An internal email to employees stated that President Trump has expressed his intention to work



on a solution to restore TikTok once he assumes office on January 20th. TikTok assured teams are working to resume services as soon as possible.

On Saturday evening, a warning appeared in both TikTok and CapCut apps at 9 PM Eastern time:

"We regret that a US law banning TikTok will take effect on January 19th, forcing us to temporarily suspend our services. We're working to restore our service in the US as soon as possible. Thank you for your support. Stay tuned." By 10:30 PM ET, users were blocked from accessing both

apps, with TikTok displaying a message that the app "isn't available right now," but expects resolution under President-elect Trump.

It comes after days of speculation and confusion over the platform's future.

The Supreme Court on Friday unanimously upheld the divest-or-ban law, which gave TikTok's China-based parent company ByteDance until Sunday to divest from the app.

The law directed Apple and Google to remove the service from app stores.

It also required web-hosting firms, including TikTok's back-end cloud provider, Oracle, to stop supporting the app or face penalties that could reach into the billions of dollars, NPR reported.

Trump said Saturday that he would most likely give TikTok a 90-day extension.

"The 90-day extension is something that will be most likely done, because it's appropriate. You know, it's appropri-

ate. We have to look at it carefully," Trump said in a call with "Meet the Press" moderator Kristen Welker. "It's a very big situation." The law, which passed Congress with wide bipartisan majorities and was signed by President Biden in April, allows the president to provide a 90-day extension, as long as progress is being made toward a divestiture.

Following Friday's Supreme Court decision, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew thanked the president-elect for his commitment to finding a solution to keep the app accessible in the US. Chew, who met with Trump at Mar-a-Lago last month, is set to attend Monday's inauguration, the Hill reported.

While the app's message and Trump's remarks suggest the app could be revived in the US soon, it remains unclear exactly what that would look like and how long a divestiture deal could take to hammer out.

British Indians welcome launch of Bradford City of Culture 2025

Bradford/London (PTI): Bradford in the northern England county of West Yorkshire recently launched its City of Culture 2025 festivities, with British Indians enthusiastically joining in to showcase the region's diversity, vibrant bazaars and curry restaurants.

Bradford was designated the UK City of Culture for 2025 after winning government backing from a record-breaking 20 bids.

The initiative, covering the entire Bradford district across West Yorkshire, opened last weekend with a glittering performance that paid homage to the region as a melting pot of cultures — with one in three residents identifying as being of South Asian heritage.

"Our communities can and should be empowered to come

together, tell their story and create change in their local area. That is what the UK City of Culture competition is all about," said Lisa Nandy, the British Indian Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

"So much enthusiasm and hard work has gone into organising Bradford's year. There is a real buzz in the city as people get ready to showcase their talents. I would encourage everyone to go and see some of the fantastic events in the new year," she said.

A year-long roster of performances, exhibitions, events and activities inspired by the extraordinary variety of the landscape, from the city's historic centre to the bucolic countryside that surrounds it, will pay homage to

Bradford's potent heritage as everything from a former industrial powerhouse to the world's first UNESCO City of Film.

Deepak Sharma, Trustee of Bradford Hindu Council — one of the many community groups who were hard at work since 2018 to put together the winning bid, is ecstatic about the Diwali, rangoli and Yoga events in the pipeline for the year. "What our community is looking to do with Bradford is looking to showcase our roots and diversity here," said Sharma, born in Bradford to parents who migrated from Punjab. "We're going to do some rangoli with children, Yoga for International Yoga Day and a series of events planned for the summer such as mehndi festivals.

Biden spending final full day in office in South Carolina which helped him become president

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Joe Biden is spending his final full day in office Sunday in South Carolina, a state that holds special meaning after a commanding win in the 2020 Democratic primary there set him up to achieve his life's goal of being elected president of the United States. On the eve of Monday's inauguration of Republican President-elect Donald Trump, Biden planned to deliver a final farewell from the state that brought him to the dance, as he likes to say. Biden, accompanied by his wife, first lady Jill Biden, was scheduled to visit Royal Missionary Baptist Church in North Charleston to worship and speak on the legacy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.,

the White House said. Monday is the federal holiday honouring the slain civil rights leader. Afterward, the Bidens will tour the International African American Museum. It was built on a waterfront site where tens of thousands of enslaved Africans were brought to the US from the late 1760s through 1808, according to the museum's website. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-SC, a key Biden ally, said the trip was Biden's way of saying "thank you" to the state. "Joe Biden is showing once again who he is by coming back to the state that really launched him to the presidency," Clyburn told The Associated Press in an interview.

The president delivered a televised farewell address to the nation on Wednesday. Back in

2020, Biden saw his campaign flounder after he lost the opening contests in New Hampshire, Iowa and Nevada. But at the fourth stop, South Carolina — where Black voters make up a majority of the Democratic electorate — he was lifted to victory after Clyburn's endorsement. "I know Joe. We know Joe. But most importantly, Joe knows us," the congressman said at the time. After winning election and taking office, Biden pushed for South Carolina to move to the head of the line and be the state that opened the Democratic Party's nominating process for 2024, instead of New Hampshire. He easily won the state's primary that year. "In 2020, it was the voters of South Carolina who

proved the pundits wrong, breathed new life into our campaign, and set us on the path to winning the presidency," Biden said in a statement after winning the primary for the second time.

"Now in 2024, the people of South Carolina have spoken again and I have no doubt that you have set us on the path to winning the Presidency again — and making Donald Trump a loser — again." It didn't turn out that way.

After faltering in a debate against Trump, Biden dropped out of the race under pressure from many Democrats, though Clyburn notably was not among them. Biden endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris, who replaced him as the Democrats' nominee. She lost to Trump.

Nearly 60 people killed in Colombia

San Juan (AP): Officials in Colombia say about 60 people have been killed in the country's northeast region following failed attempts to hold peace talks with the National Liberation Army. Among those killed are seven people who sought to sign a peace deal, as well as community leader Carmelo Guerrero, according to a report that a government ombudsman agency released late Saturday. Officials said the attacks occurred in several towns located in the Catatumbo region, with at least three people who were part of the peace talks being kidnapped. Hundreds of people are fleeing the area, with some hiding in the nearby lush mountains. Colombia's government has demanded that the National Liberation Army, known as ELN, cease all attacks and allow authorities to enter the region and provide humanitarian aid.



Christian Orthodox believers walk after a swim in the icy water of the Danube river in Belgrade, Serbia, on Sunday

AP/PTI

Families of wildfire victims mired in grief

AP ■ LOS ANGELES

The house was burning with her brother-in-law and nephew inside when Jackie McDaniels flagged down a firetruck and begged for help. "Whoever is in there is no longer alive," she recalled one of the firemen telling her before urging her to flee her Altadena neighbourhood. "I pray to God that they were. But it was horrible to have to leave them there." Now McDaniels, like so many, is facing the gripping realities of grief and questions about what more could have been done. Experts say these survivors are victims themselves; the fires that swept through the Los Angeles area this month were fast-moving and fierce. "It's really just a different beast of a fire when it's this propagating entity of just total mayhem," said Benjamin Hatchett, a fire meteorologist with the Cooperative Institute for Research in the Atmosphere

at Colorado State University. But that doesn't ease the pain or the questions for the families of the more than two dozen killed, some unable to escape, others unaware of what was coming, having survived other blazes unscathed. Among the dead is Dylce Curry, who rubbed shoulders with some of the elites of old Hollywood in her youth. To family, she went by a different name. "Momma Dee, that's the fire," her granddaughter and namesake, Dylce Kelley, recalls saying as she drove the 95-year-old to her Altadena home on January 7 after a day of medical tests.

But the flames they saw seemed so far away and power was still on. Now Kelley wishes she would have asked more questions, wishes she would have returned earlier.

"I will live with that regret for the rest of my life," she said. That saddens Jennifer Marlon, a wildfire and climate research scientist at Yale's School of the

Environment. She said larger factors were at play, the summer the warmest on record in California, drying out the vegetation that fuelled the flames. "These are, by and large, not situations that people could have really anticipated," she said. "It's incredibly tragic that people are blaming themselves and wracked with guilt." Yet it is a common response, said Tory Fiedler, a Red Cross disaster mental health manager who is helping to coordinate the response to the wildfires.

"Most of us get our sense of self and value from what we do in service to others," she said. "When I'm not able to do that, I feel bad about that," she added. "I feel guilty that I didn't get to help. I didn't do enough. I survived and other people didn't, and I can't help them. And it's not just I survived and other people didn't, but I don't know what to do about that."

Compounding the pain is the

fact that many families are still awaiting formal notification from the medical examiner, a process that could take weeks. During that painful wait, Carol Smith has been praying. Her son, Randy Miod, a 55-year-old surfer, known to friends as Craw Daddy, had lived in his Malibu home for three decades, first as a renter and then the owner.

Known as the "Crab Shack," it was a popular hang-out spot for surfers, with loaner boards always available.

She said he never evacuated for wildfires, including during the Franklin Fire in December that knocked out power to his home for three days. "I'm scared," she recalled him telling her the last time they spoke. She begged of him, "Please, go somewhere safe, so I don't worry." But he wasn't budging, telling her: "I've got the hose. And he said, 'Pray for the Palisades and pray for Malibu. And I love you.'"

Budget FY26: Government could cut customs duty on raw materials to boost manufacturing

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government could reduce customs duty on inputs used in manufacturing medical equipment, electronic goods and footwear industries in the forthcoming Budget to boost local manufacturing, according to tax experts. Deloitte India Partner, Indirect Tax, Harpreet Singh said key demands from the Customs side from the 2025-26 Budget, to be tabled in Parliament on February 1, would be rationalisation, simplification of the regime, and litigation and dispute management. "In the lines of the phased manufacturing plan, we expect some duty cuts in raw materials in electronics, home appliances, healthcare products, and pharmaceuticals. These are the industries where the government wants to give impetus in terms of manufacturing, and hence, we will see the raw materials declining in these sectors," Singh told PTI. On the proposed Customs duty rationalisation



announced in the Budget in July 2024, Singh said the sectors which could see rationalisation are healthcare, manufacturing of medical equipment, white goods, electronics, footwear and toys. The 2024-25 Budget announced that a comprehensive review of the Customs Duty rate structure will be undertaken over the next six months to rationalise and simplify it for ease of trade, removal of duty inversion and reduction of

disputes. To reduce classification disputes, the Budget had announced a review of the customs duty rates. Currently, there are more than a dozen customs duty rates, and the government is looking at reducing the number of rate slabs to 4 or 5. The "government may come out with different slabs for various products, depending on where it is placed in the value chain. Goods may be categorised as Value added/primary and

raw material/Intermediary, and accordingly, slab rates may be fixed," said Anurag Sehgal, Managing Director at Price Waterhouse & Co. LLP. Nangia Andersen LLP Executive Director, Indirect Tax, Sivakumar Ramjee said there is a call for simplifying the customs duty structure to minimise rate multiplicity, correct duty inversions, if any, and reduce classification disputes by way of clarification and rationalisation of duties on

recyclable and reused materials to support sustainable manufacturing practices. "What is expected is a more streamlined rate structure is expected to support domestic manufacturing and align with the 'Make in India' initiative," Ramjee said. Ramjee further said that the industry anticipates the introduction of an amnesty scheme aimed at resolving long-standing customs disputes. With over 40,000 cases pending in courts and tribunals, such a scheme could reduce litigation and enhance the ease of doing business. Huge money is stuck in litigation, and the government should prudently bring a one-time dispute settlement scheme in the Customs law to settle the outstanding Customs disputes, which is increasing year-on-year, he added. Grant Thornton Bharat Partner Manoj Mishra said about Rs 50,000 crore is locked up in Customs disputes, and an amnesty scheme will help in dispute settlement.

FPIs take out ₹44,396 Crore from equities in January amid weak earnings outlook, rising dollar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign investors have pulled out Rs 44,396 crore from Indian equities this month, driven by strength of the dollar, rising bond yields in the US, and expectations of a weak earnings season. This came following an investment of Rs 15,446 crore in the month of December, data with the depositories showed. The shift in sentiment comes amid global and domestic headwinds. "The continued depreciation in Indian rupee is exerting significant pressure on foreign investors leading them to pull the money out of the Indian equity markets," Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director - Manager, Morningstar Investment Advisers India, said. In addition to that, higher valuation of Indian equities, despite recent corrections, expectation of a rather weak earnings season and uncertainty over the pace of economic growth are making investors wary, he added. According to the data, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) offloaded shares worth Rs 44,396 crore from Indian equities so far this month (till



January 17). FPIs have been sellers on all days this month except January 2. "The principal reasons for the sustained FPIs selling are the strength of the dollar and the rising bond yields in the US. With the dollar index above 109 and the 10-year US bond yield above 4.6 per cent, it is logical for FPIs to sell in emerging markets, particularly in the most expensive emerging market India," V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. Since US bond yields are attractive, FPIs have been sellers in the debt market, too. They withdrew Rs 4,848 crore from debt general limit and Rs 6,176 crore debt voluntary retention route. Vipul Bhowar, Senior Director - Listed Investments,

Waterfield Advisors, said that a cyclical improvement in corporate earnings, along with stronger GDP growth driven by resilient domestic consumption and increased government spending on infrastructure projects, could lead to a potential turnaround in FPI flows into India. The overall trend indicates a cautious approach by foreign investors, who scaled back investments in Indian equities significantly in 2024, with net inflows of just Rs 427 crore. This contrasts sharply with the extraordinary Rs 1.71 lakh crore net inflows in 2023, driven by optimism over India's strong economic fundamentals. In comparison, 2022 saw a net outflow of Rs 1.21 lakh crore amid aggressive rate hikes by global central banks.



Want to be a leader in every segment we operate in says ITC Chairman Sanjiv Puri

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

ITC is sharpening its competitiveness and strengthening innovative capacity under its "Next Strategy" as the multi-conglomerate aims to be a leader in the segments in which it operates, said its Chairman and Managing Director Sanjiv Puri. The cigarettes-to-consumer goods conglomerate has articulated a strategy of the organisation, the 'ITC Next Strategy' aiming to shape a future-ready enterprise and define the next phase of growth and profitability, Puri told PTI. As part of the ITC Next Strategy, it identified levers of competitiveness, which include digitalisation, sustainability, innovation and supply chain efficiency, among others for its future growth. "These have been identified as areas where specific interventions have been made to become competitive and contemporary. The objective is to keep innovating while leveraging enterprise strengths," said Puri. The idea is to be a leader and to be a very large-scale business, in which ITC has made "appreciable progress" in its ongoing journey over a period of time. "For us, ITC's Next strategy is a journey in action. While we have made appreciable progress in many areas, I would not say that this journey is anywhere near completion. Our vision is to be a very large player in every

segment that we operate in," said Puri. He further added: "In some segments, we are already leaders. It is our goal to be a leader in every segment we operate in." According to Puri, the world is now much more volatile and uncertain given the geo-political and geo-economic situation and the existential climate crisis. "Given this context, we believe that a large and growing organisation like ours must remain nimble and consumer-centric, sharpening our competitiveness and strengthening our innovative capacity. To do that, we have created an organisation in which people have more ownership and are empowered with a fair degree of freedom and flexibility," he said. ITC, an over Rs 70,000 crore group which operates in Cigarette to FMCG and agriculture, paper board to IT sector - has defined the portfolio strategy for the organisation, across its businesses. "... We plan to keep on growing our core and growing the core itself is a mega opportunity in India, given the per capita incomes, the per capita consumption and also the penetration levels. The second piece is to address adjacencies, and thirdly, start creating categories of the future. The idea is to continuously contemporize and refresh while building the portfolio," said Puri.

India not seeking duty concessions on liquor, cigarette in FTA with Oman: Sources

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India is not seeking customs duty concessions on over 100 product categories such as liquor, and cigarette in the proposed free trade agreement (FTA), which is under negotiations between the two countries, sources said. They also said that though the FTA negotiations were concluded, Oman has sought revision of its market access offers on some products. The two sides have discussed three to four issues flagged by Oman, and any potential changes would be minimal, they said. India is expected to gain greater market access for about 98 per cent of its goods in Oman, along with significant access to the services sector. "There could be about 125-130 tariff lines (or product



categories), where we have not asked for duty concessions and that included goods like liquor, and cigarettes," they added. On January 14, India and Oman held the fifth round of talks for the agreement, which is aimed at boosting bilateral economic ties. The negotiations for the agreement, officially dubbed as Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), formally began in November 2023. Oman's import duty ranges from 0 to 100 per cent along with the existence of specific

duties. On specific meats, wines and tobacco products 100 per cent duty is applicable. According to industry sources, India should not extend duty concessions on petrochemical products, a key demand of Oman. Indian petrochemical industry which comprises both large public sector units and private players have raised their serious concerns and requested the government not to accede to this demand of Oman, they said. "In petrochemical sector, feedstock constitutes a significant portion (about 65-70 per cent) of the total product cost such as Polyethylene (PE), Polypropylene (PP), Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC), Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) etc. Therefore, feedstock pricing makes a critical determinant of overall competitiveness in the petrochemical industry,"

the industry sources said. They added that Oman has a distinct feedstock cost advantage due to its abundant natural resources and has a significant exportable surplus of petrochemical products with minimal domestic demand. "Any tariff concessions to Oman would lead to an influx of low cost petrochemical imports, adversely affecting the Indian petrochemical industry," they said. Oman is the third largest export destination among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. According to the think tank GTRI (Global Trade Research Institute), Indian goods worth USD 3.7 billion like gasoline, iron and steel, electronics, and machinery will get a significant boost in Oman, once both sides reach a comprehensive free trade agreement.

Insurance industry pivotal, says GIC Chairman



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The insurance industry, which safeguards millions of lives and businesses, often faces unwarranted criticism fueled by isolated grievances and sensationalism. Despite these perceptions, its contributions are pivotal. In FY 23-24 alone, the industry settled claims worth Rs 1.72 lakh crore, including Rs 80,000 crore for health insurance, with a claim settlement ratio exceeding 80 per cent. In this regard, Tapan Singhel, Chairman, General Insurance Council and MD & CEO, Bajaj Allianz General Insurance, said that, as per the IRDAI annual report, last year, the General Insurance industry settled crores of claims worth Rs 1.72 lakh crore, out of which it paid more than Rs 80,000 crore towards health insurance. "Yet those who benefit rarely make the news. On the flip side, isolated grievances and odd bad experiences become the face of the industry. Social safety nets like Ayushman Bharat, covering 55 crore beneficiaries, and the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, which disbursed Rs 1.64 lakh crore in claims over eight years, prevent poverty

and support vulnerable populations. Without the insurance industry's support, the scheme would not be in place or effective in states adopting an insurance or hybrid model. Insurance also underpins critical sectors, mitigating financial risks in agriculture, motor, and disaster recovery, and ensuring economic resilience," said Singhel. Notably, Singhel mentioned the industry boasts an impressively low grievance ratio of 0.003 percent against 2.96 billion policies and actively combats fraud, detecting Rs 1.73 lakh crore in fraudulent claims over five years. "Contrary to the belief that insurers generate massive profits, the industry operates at a loss, with a combined ratio of 115 percent, paying Rs 115 for every Rs 100 earned in premiums. Employing over 6 million people, insurance is a cornerstone of economic growth. While improvements are possible, insurance remains essential for societal progress, demanding constructive engagement rather than destructive criticism. Without it, the social and economic consequences would be dire," added Singhel.

Domestic composite materials industry to touch USD 2.8 Billion by 2030: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Domestic composite materials industry is expected to grow at a 7.8 per cent annual growth rate to reach USD 2.8 billion by 2030, a report said. Composite materials or fibre-reinforced plastics (FRP) help in the circular economy as these are manufactured by combining multiple materials with different properties. The Indian composite materials market is estimated at USD 1.8 billion in 2024, FRP Institute said in its report. "The Indian composite materials market is likely to grow at a healthy CAGR of 7.8 per cent over the next six years to reach USD 2.8 billion in 2030," the Chennai-based body said. The major growth



drivers for the industry will be increasing demand from sectors like electrical vehicles (EVs), renewable energy, transportation and construction industries, consumer and white goods, construction and defence. Government projects like

smart cities, hydrocarbon, freshwater transportation, sewage treatment system, and rehabilitation of water and sewage pipelines will also aid the growth of composite materials consumption. According to the report, India has an extremely low per

capita consumption of composites at 0.55 kg as compared to matured markets such as the US with 11.5 kg followed by Germany at 7.7 kg. FRP Institute along with industry stakeholders will discuss the ways and opportunities to increase the consumption of the materials in India at the upcoming 'International Conference and Exhibition on Reinforced Plastics (ICERP 2025)' scheduled for January 21-23, 2025 in Mumbai. FRP Institute Chairman Shekhar Sardesai said ICERP 2025 will offer an opportunity for professionals to explore new technologies, latest industry trends, and emerging applications of composites across important industries of India's growth story.

Budget 2025-26 needs to focus on capex, infrastructure spending: RBI MPC member Nagesh Kumar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Budget for financial year 2025-26, needs to focus on capital expenditure and infrastructure spending to boost economic growth and make it more sustainable, RBI Monetary Policy Committee member Nagesh Kumar said on Sunday. The eminent economist noted that sustaining infrastructure expenditure and building it further would be very helpful for creating a much more robust trajectory of economic growth for India. "In the context of the slight economic slowdown that we observed in the second quarter,



and overall, there is a need to boost growth and make it more

robust, more sustainable. "The finance minister would

do well to continue this momentum (in Budget 2025-26), which she herself started two years ago, of putting great emphasis on capex, infrastructure spending and increasing it to very healthy levels," he said in an interview to PTI Videos. The Union Budget for 2025-26, set to be presented by Sitharaman on February 1, arrives amidst global economic uncertainties and moderating domestic growth. "Because after suffering from the COVID pandemic, the Indian economy suffered a lot, after that it showed a robust recovery, but this pent up demand which drove the Indian economic growth for

the past few years, is now coming to an end. "And so then the Indian economy is back to the trajectory which was there in pre-COVID times, and it now needs to be given a little bit of a boost to public spending," he said. Sitharaman in her last year's budget had said that the government will provide Rs 11.11 lakh crore for capital expenditure for 2024-25 and introduce viability gap funding to spur private investment in infrastructure. India's second quarter (July-September) GDP growth has slumped to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent. Responding to a question on

weakening of rupee, Kumar said it is more than rupee depreciation, it is the strengthening of the dollar. According to him, all different currencies are weakening vis-a-vis dollar, because the dollar is becoming very strong, and that is largely due to the strong performance of the American economy and the expectation that the new administration led by Donald Trump will do something to strengthen the US economy. "So this weakness of the rupee is largely the strengthening of the dollar and which is also leading to the outflows of FII positions from India. So when there is too much demand for dollars, the rupee tends to

depreciate," Kumar observed. He said the fact that other currencies are also depreciating, one has to take a relative look. "My feeling is that rupee is still in real terms a bit appreciated and overvalued," Kumar said, adding that managing rupee at a more competitive exchange rate, which is not overvalued, is healthy for exports, for India's manufacturing efforts. The rupee is currently hovering around 86.60 against the greenback. It had also touched an all-time closing low of 86.70 on January 13. Replying to a question on resurgence of giveaways, also called freebies, Kumar said it is a concern for long-term

development. "Because the resources which could have been used for development purposes, for building infrastructure, for closing the gaps in the infrastructure that exist in the lagging regions or different states are promised to be given as handouts. "It is not a very healthy trend, and should be curbed, because people should be aware of where the money will come from," he said. Emphasising that there is a need to make voters aware that resources which are promised to them are not really freebies, Kumar said freebies cost the public in other forms in terms of development.



DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT MEN'S SKINCARE

By Dr MEGHNA MOUR

The men's skincare industry is witnessing a noteworthy transformation, driven by changing perceptions, rising awareness, and evolving consumer behaviours. Globally, the men's skincare products market size was valued at USD 16.94 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow to USD 29.61 billion by 2033. Closer to home, the Indian men's grooming market is estimated to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.1% from 2024 to 2030. The growing prominence of social media, influence of celebrities, and exposure to global beauty standards have also inspired a considerable number of Indian men to pay closer attention to their appearance, actively seeking ways to enhance it. Against this backdrop, let's explore the myths and facts surrounding men's skincare and the key trends shaping this segment in 2025.

MYTH 1: Skincare is not masculine
FACT: Skincare is health care
 Historically, skincare has been misperceived as a feminine activity, creating a stigma that dissuaded many men from prioritising it. However, in



today's world, skincare is increasingly seen as an essential aspect of self-care and overall wellness. Experts stress that skin health is as crucial as other aspects of physical well-being, such as diet and exercise. Brands are addressing this shift by introducing gender-neutral products and campaigns that promote inclusivity. The aim is to dismantle outdated stereotypes and encourage men to

embrace skincare as a vital component of their daily lives.

MYTH 2: Men's skin is the same as women's
FACT: Men's skin has unique needs
 A common misconception is that skincare products are universally effective. However, men's skin differs from women's. It is thicker, has higher



collagen density, and tends to produce more oil due to testosterone levels. Recognising these differences, brands are now developing targeted formulations to address specific concerns like excess sebum, larger pores, and post-shave irritation, ensuring that men receive tailored solutions for their skin.

MYTH 3: Sunscreen is optional

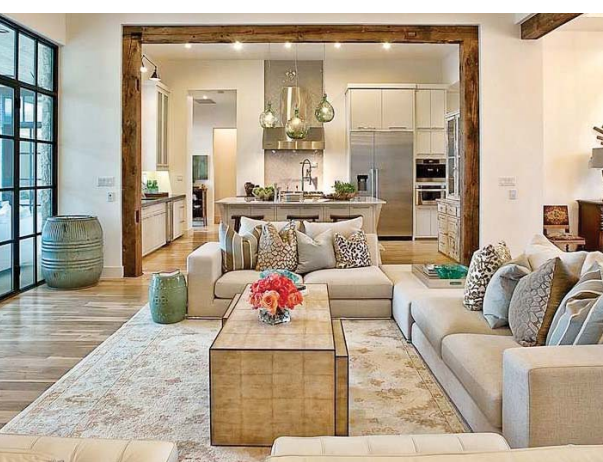
FACT: Daily SPF is non-negotiable
 Despite the proven benefits of sunscreen, many men have traditionally neglected sun protection. This oversight contributes to premature aging, hyper pigmentation, and increased skin cancer risk. In 2025, lightweight and non-greasy sunscreens designed specifically for men are driving a shift in habits. These products are often integrated into daily-



use items like moisturizers and serums, making sun protection more accessible and convenient.

MYTH 4: Aging signs cannot be reversed
FACT: Prevention and repair are possible
 While aging is inevitable, modern skincare science offers tools to slow down and even repair its visible effects. Products with retinol, peptides, hyaluronic acid, and collagen-boosting ingredients are increasingly popular among men looking to address wrinkles, fine lines, and sagging skin.

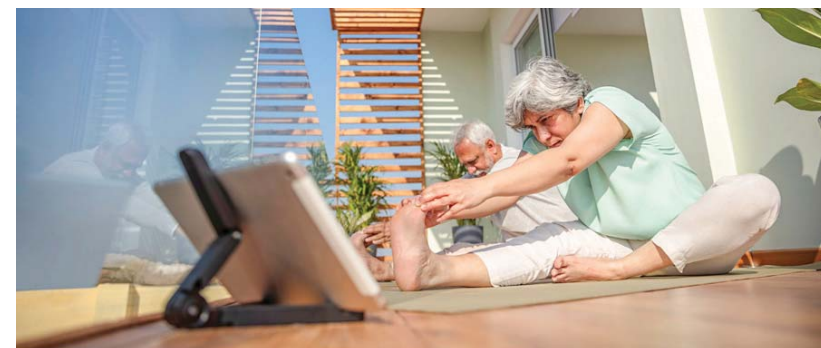
MYTH 5: Natural ingredients are always better
FACT: Science-based solutions matter
 While natural ingredients are popular, they aren't always suitable for every skin type. Men are learning to embrace scientifically backed formulations with proven efficacy over trendy, all-natural claims. Ingredients like niacinamide, salicylic acid, and ceramides remain staples for addressing common concerns such as acne, uneven tone, and hydration.
 — The author is an MBBS, DDV, DVD and Aesthetic Physician



OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF SEDENTARY LIFESTYLES

By Dr APOORVA SHRIVASTAVA

In today's world, sedentary lifestyles have become increasingly prevalent, driven by technological advancements, desk-based jobs, and reduced physical activity. While these changes have brought convenience, they have also contributed to a surge in health problems such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and musculoskeletal disorders. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, and one highly effective solution lies in accessible, high-quality active physiotherapy.



By ANURAAG BHARDWAJ
 Our surroundings profoundly influence our mental and emotional well-being, shaping how we think, feel, and interact with the world. Thoughtfully designed spaces have the power to reduce stress, boost creativity, and inculcate a sense of belonging. By blending nature, aesthetics, privacy, and community, architecture becomes a tool for healing and connection. Go through how innovative design can enhance mental wellness and enrich our lives.

BIOPHILIC DESIGN: Incorporating natural elements like plants, water features, and natural light into our environments can have a profound impact on reducing stress and improving cognitive function. Studies have shown that exposure to natural environments can lower cortisol levels, blood pressure, and heart rate, while also improving mood and cognitive functioning¹. This is because natural environments have the power to calm our minds and promote relaxation

SENSE OF PLACE AND COMMUNITY: Architecture plays a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging and connection to our surroundings. When buildings are designed with the community in mind,

SPACES THAT HEAL



they can create a sense of place and identity. This, in turn, can lead to increased social connections, a sense of belonging, and improved mental health. For instance, public spaces that incorporate natural elements, like parks or gardens, can become community hubs, promoting social interaction.

Having access to quiet, private spaces is essential for mental rejuvenation. These spaces allow us to retreat from the world, recharge, and reflect. In today's fast-paced world, it's easy to get overwhelmed, and having a private sanctuary can be a lifesaver. Architects and designers can incorporate private spaces into buildings, such as meditation rooms, quiet lounges, or even private offices.

AESTHETICS AND BEAUTY: Visually appealing and inspiring spaces can uplift our mood and reduce stress. When we're surrounded by beauty, it can stimulate our minds, promote creativity, and even reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Architects and designers can incorporate aesthetic elements, such as natural materials, artwork, or stunning views, to create spaces that inspire and uplift us.

In conclusion, our surroundings play a significant role in shaping our mental health. By incorporating biophilic design, providing private spaces, and creating aesthetically pleasing environments, we can promote mental well-being and improve our overall quality of life.

— The author is an architect and is the founder of Anjaney Vastu & AB Architects

THE SEDENTARY EPIDEMIC: Prolonged sitting and limited movement are now recognised as significant health risks. Studies show that sitting for more than eight hours a day without regular physical activity increases the risk of premature death by up to 20%. Additionally, sedentary behavior often leads to muscle weakness, joint stiffness, and poor posture, which can result in chronic pain and reduced mobility. These issues are not limited to adults. Children and teenagers, too, are increasingly falling victim to inactivity, with screen time often replacing outdoor play. This highlights the urgent need for interventions that promote movement and physical well-being across all age groups.

THE ROLE OF ACTIVE PHYSIOTHERAPY: Active physiotherapy stands out as a powerful tool in combating the ill effects of sedentary lifestyles. Unlike passive treatments that involve modalities like heat, ice, or electrical stimulation, active physiotherapy emphasises patient involvement through therapeutic exercises, stretching, and strengthening routines. This approach not only alleviates pain and restores function but also empowers individuals to take charge of their health. High-quality active physiotherapy programs focus on personalised care. A thorough assessment identifies specific issues, such as tight hamstrings, weak core muscles, or joint misalignment,



and targets them with tailored exercises. This individualised approach ensures faster recovery and long-term benefits. Moreover, active physiotherapy can improve cardiovascular health, enhance muscle tone, and boost mental well-being. Regular movement releases endorphins, reducing stress and anxiety—common side effects of sedentary lifestyles.

ACCESSIBILITY: BRIDGING THE GAP: Active physiotherapy, despite its effectiveness, often remains inaccessible due to factors like cost, geographic constraints, and a lack of awareness. Bridging these gaps requires targeted strategies to make this essential service more widely available. Expanding tele-physiotherapy platforms can allow individuals to access guided active

rehabilitation programs from their homes, breaking location barriers. Establishing affordable physiotherapy clinics in underserved areas can further ensure inclusivity.

A PATH TO HEALTHIER LIVES: The challenges posed by sedentary lifestyles are undeniable, but they are not insurmountable. Active physiotherapy provides an evidence-based, patient-centered approach to restoring health and preventing future issues. By making high-quality physiotherapy accessible to all, society can take a significant step toward combating the epidemic of inactivity and fostering a culture of movement and vitality.

— The author is CEO & Founder, Resolve360



SKY will be missed in CT, he could have been the 'X-factor': Raina

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India all-rounder Suresh Raina feels middle-order batter Suryakumar Yadav will be sorely missed in the upcoming Champions Trophy as he could have provided the 'X-factor' in Dubai, where Rohit Sharma's side will play all its games. Suryakumar and fast bowler Mohammed Siraj were the two big names missing from the Champions Trophy squad announced on Saturday. They are among a total of six players who featured in the 2023 ODI World Cup squad. The others to miss out are Prasidh Krishna, Shardul Thakur and Ishan Kishan, while Ravichandran Ashwin has recently retired from the game. "Surya was an integral part of the World Cup squad, he is a 360 player who can score at 9 runs per over at any stage of the game. He can dominate the opposition and bats in a

different way," Raina said on Star Sports Press Room. "If Surya was there there would have been an X-factor, he will be missed. The responsibility will be now on top 3 who are not in form. Surya is someone who can bat in any position." Raina also said with uncertainty looming large over Jasprit Bumrah's fitness and Mohammed Shami returning from an injury, Siraj would have been a better option although he still feels, the Hyderabad pacer can still make it to the squad. "Siraj was in a different form in Australia but you can change the squad till 12 February. So I feel Siraj can be back in the side if Bumrah is not fully fit," he said. "Harshit Rana has done well. He has good pace, good bumper, variation, yorker and pace. He and both Arshdeep Singh can bowl at the death but I still feel, Siraj is a better option if Bumrah is not there." While Bumrah is racing



against time to be fit from back spasms that he suffered during the recent Sydney Test against Australia, Shami is returning to the ODI set up for the first time since the 2023 World Cup after recovering from a heel injury. While Rohit will lead the side, young talented batter Shubman Gill has been named as the vice-captain for the Champions Trophy, and Raina termed the decision as a forward-thinking move. "Gill got the vice-captaincy at the right time. He is the next superstar of India cricket, and has done remarkably well in ODIs. Rohit knows how to mentor a youngster and what value Shubman will bring in," said Raina, a member of India's 2013 Champions Trophy-winning side. With Dubai pitches tend to play slow and offer turn, Raina said left-arm spinner Kuldeep Yadav and all-rounder Hardik Pandya will play vital role in the bowling department. "Shami lacks of match

practice, Bumrah is still uncertain and Kuldeep is returning back from an operation. What will be important is to see who will partner Kuldeep in the spin department." India had won the Champions Trophy twice - in 2002 jointly with Sri Lanka and in 2013 in England, and Raina has no doubts that Rohit and his men can go all the way. "Rohit has the capacity, he has team but what will be important is out 11 player combination out of 15. The wickets will be a bit slow, but we have the capacity." Raina too backed Rishabh Pant to be first choice wicket-keeper in the Indian team, which also has KL Rahul. "Definitely Pant, his wicket-keeping has improved. But he has to play with more responsibility in a 50-over game. If he stays there for 40-50 balls he can take the game away from the opposition but he needs to spend more time at the crease."



ITF W50 singles event: Tatiana Prozorova saves six match points to emerge champion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tatiana Prozorova saved six match points to bag the singles title at the ITF W50 tournament, edging past second seed Panna Udvardy in a marathon final here on Sunday. Seventh seed Prozorova saved three match points in the 12th game of the second set and then three more in the tiebreaker to force a decider and finally prevailed 4-6 7-6(6) 6-4 in the three-hour-long final that was littered with breaks and unforced errors from the two players. "I am really happy that I could win this match and save so much points and also didn't miss my chance. I am really happy to win my first title in this year, in January and I will look forward to playing next tournament here in New Delhi," said Prozorova. It was Prozorova's first singles title in four months, her last trophy coming in September 2024 when she triumphed at the ITF W100 event in Incheon. Udvardy, who hails from Hungary and featured in top-100 in 2022, was playing her first final since June 2024 when she ended a runner-up in the WTA 125 event on clay in Italy and yet again missed out on a title. The two players traded early breaks to be at 3-3. From there, Prozorova had the chance to keep it a close affair but unforced errors let her down. She was down 0-40 in game

seven but managed to save all three break chances. She netted a backhand at deuce and then hit a forehand marginally long to drop her serve again. Udvardy too struggled to keep the ball within the lines and also her first serve troubled her. She saved four break points in the game eighth but eventually lost her serve, making it 4-4. Prozorova, by dropping her serve again, allowed Udvardy to be in a position from where she could have served out the opening set and the Hungarian did not miss the opportunity this time. Udvardy bagged the set when Prozorova hit a forehand long. Prozorova did not help her cause by not holding her serve at the start of the second set, handing that one-break cushion to her rival. Udvardy, though, could not consolidate the advantage, hitting a forehand error on a breakpoint in game six to allow her rival make it even-Stevens again. At 5-5, 30-all, Prozorova hit a backhand wide but Udvardy could not convert the chance. However, the Hungarian got the break when her rival again made a backhand error. Udvardy came to serve out the match, and had three match-points but lost all and was facing a breakpoint when she netted a forehand at deuce point. Prozorova grabbed the opportunity with a crushing backhand down-the-line winner, stretching the set to tie-break

India begin women's U-19 WC title defence with nine-wicket win over West Indies

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Indian bowlers shot a clueless West Indies batters out for a measly 44 to set up a commanding nine-wicket win to begin their title defence on a resounding note in the women's U-19 World Cup here on Sunday. Left-arm spinners Parunika Sisodia (3/7) and Aayushi Shukla (2/6) as well as pacer VJ Joshitha (2/6) toyed with the West Indies batters to bowl the Caribbeans out in just 13.2 overs in the Group A match at Bayuemas Oval. Kenika Cassar top-scored for the West Indies with a 29-ball 15 while opener Asabi Callender contributed 12. All the other West Indies batters could score in single digit figures with five of them getting out without opening account.



India chased down the target of 45 in just 4.2 overs, reaching 47 for 1 with opener Trisha G getting out for 4 on the second ball off Jahzara Claxton. Wicketkeeper-batter G Kamalini (16 not out off 13 balls) and Sanika Chalke (18 not out off 11 balls) took India home for an easy win. India play hosts Malaysia in

their next group match here on Tuesday. Sri Lanka is the other team in Group A. The top three teams from each of the four groups will progress to the Super Six stage, with the three teams from Group A and Group D combining to form one Super Six group and similarly with the top three teams of Group B and Group C in the other

group. The teams will also carry forward their points and net run rates and will play the two sides who were not in their group in the first stage and who finished at a different position from them. As an example, if India finish second in Group A, then they will play the winner and the third-place team of Group D. The top two teams from each Super Six group will progress to the semi-finals. The final will be played here on February 2. Brief Scores: West Indies U-19 Women: 44 in 13.2 overs (Kenika Cassar 15; Parunika Sisodia 3/7, Aayushi Shukla 2/6, VJ Joshitha 2/6). India U-19 Women: 47 for 1 in 4.2 overs (Sanika Chalke 18 not out, G Kamalini 16 not out; Jahzara Claxton 1/18).

India defender Pritam Kotal joins Chennaiyin FC

PTI ■ CHENNAI

India defender Pritam Kotal on Sunday joined Indian Super League (ISL) side Chennaiyin FC, leaving Kerala Blasters FC on a two-and-a-half-year deal. The 31-year-old Kotal, who has more than 50 caps for India has been a regular feature in the ISL for the last decade. Kotal began his youth career with Chirag United before moving to the I-League and eventually to ISL. The West Bengal player has captained Mohun Bagan Super Giant in the past, leading them to eight consecutive wins in Kolkata derby. He has also been a member of the ISL winning sides in 2016 and 2019-20. The move will strengthen the defence line of the Marina Machans. With the Indian



team, Kotal won the 2016 South Asian Football Championship and was also a member of the sides that won the 2018 Intercontinental Cup and the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. He received the AIFF Player of the Year award in 2015. "The coach explained he really wanted me in his team, so when I got the offer, I had no doubts about joining. This is a very good team that plays well. My goal from hereon would be to try and win every match and go to the playoffs," Kotal said.

Defending champion Aryna Sabalenka moves into Australian Open quarterfinals

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Aryna Sabalenka has advanced to the quarterfinals at the Australian Open, where she's three wins from achieving something no woman has done since the 1990s. The two-time defending champion extended her winning streak at Melbourne Park to 18 matches with a 6-1 6-2 win over 14th-seeded Mirra Andreeva to open play Sunday on Rod Laver Arena. Martina Hingis, from 1997 to 1999, was the last woman to win three straight Australian Open singles titles. Sabalenka hugged Andreeva after the match, waved to the crowd, took a photo with her Polaroid camera and gave a thumbs up to mark the occasion. She's won 24 consecutive sets in Melbourne. "I'm super happy to get through this difficult match in straight sets," she said. It



was over in just over an hour. Apart from the fifth game of the second set, when Sabalenka has triple breakpoint but Andreeva rallied by winning five straight points to hold, just about everything went the way of the No. 1-ranked player. Sabalenka didn't face a break point until midway through the second set, when she saved three in one game. It seemed like she was testing

her serve under pressure. No. 3 Coco Gauff, who has won all 16 sets she's played this year, was playing Tokyo Olympic champion Belinda Bencic in the second match on Rod Laver on Day 8. On the men's side, No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz was playing Jack Draper in the afternoon and Novak Djokovic was continuing his quest for a record 25th Grand Slam singles title in a night match against Jiri Lehecka.

Viktor Axelsen, An Se-Young claim India Open titles

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Olympic champions Viktor Axelsen and An Se-Young secured the men's and women's singles crowns respectively with dominating wins in lop-sided finals at the India Open Super 750 badminton tournament here on Sunday. Axelsen, a 2017 and 2019 winner, prevailed 21-16 21-8 over last year's finalist Lee Cheuk Yiu of Hong Kong in the men's singles summit clash at the KD Jadhav indoor hall which was almost full despite the fact that no Indian was competing in the two finals. Axelsen, a two time world champion, thus erased the disappointment of falling in the opening round of Malaysian Open super 1000 last week to the same opponent. In the women's singles, it was another graceful performance from An Se-



Young as she effortlessly packed off P Chochuwong 21-12 21-9. Malaysian combination of Goh Sze Fei and Nur Izzududin, who had ended India's Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty's run at the semifinals, produced another superlative show to outwit Korean pair of Kim Won Ho and Seo Seung Jae 21-15, 13-21, 21-16 in the men's doubles final. In the women's doubles final, Japan's Arisa Igarashi and Ayako Sakuramoto beat Kim Hye Jang and Kong Hee Young of South Korea 21-15 21-13

In the mixed doubles final, China's Jiang Zhen Bang and Wei Ya Xin prevailed 21-18 21-17 over Thom Gicquel and Delphine Delrue. Axelsen vs Lee Lee, 2019 Hong Kong open winner, had finished as runner-up in the last edition and his dream of winning the title remained unfulfilled after he went down in the final for the second time in two years. Lee made a good start, opening up a 6-3 lead. But Axelsen slowly build up the momentum to gather a 11-8 advantage at the break. Lee kept fighting but couldn't pose a real threat as Axelsen took five game points and converted after Lee went long. The script didn't change despite the change of sides as Axelsen moved from 10-6 to 19-6 with a series of booming smashes to dismantle Lee's defence and complete the win in no time.

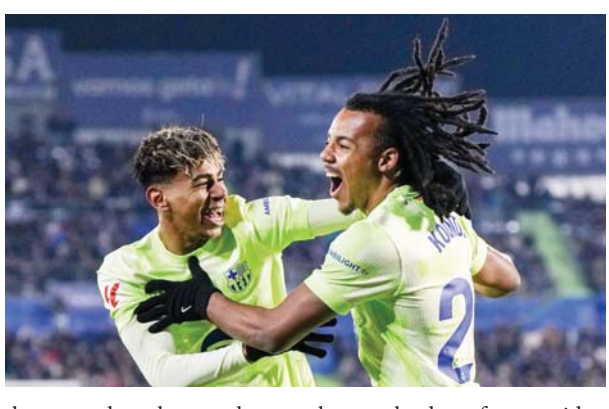
Barcelona again held to draw at Getafe, Griezmann misses penalty as Atletico's win streak ends

PTI ■ BARCELONA

Barcelona was bested by Getafe's defence again in a 1-1 draw in La Liga, while Atletico Madrid's club record winning streak ended after a late penalty miss by Antoine Griezmann. Barcelona got its first goal in five visits to Getafe thanks to Jules Koundé in the 10th minute on Saturday, but Getafe equalized and clamped down to get a fourth consecutive draw at its stadium against the powerhouse. The last time Barcelona won at Coliseum Stadium was in 2019, making the fixture an annual quagmire for the Catalan club. Real Madrid will aim to take

advantage of the slips by its title rivals when it hosts Las Palmas on Sunday. Atletico's 15-win streak ended in a 1-0 loss to Leganes, its first loss since October 27. Atletico remained one point ahead of Madrid. Barcelona was five points behind the front-runner. This round marks the beginning of the second half of the league. Barcelona frustrated again Barcelona was coming off huge wins: A 5-2 thrashing of Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup final and a 5-1 win over Real Betis in the Copa del Rey. Barcelona visits Benfica in the Champions League on Tuesday. But José Bordalás's Getafe, with its physical, defensive style, once again frustrated

Barcelona in Hansi Flick's first visit as its coach. "This was another exercise in survival," Bordalás said. "Taking a point today is like getting a win." Koundé put Barcelona ahead when Pedri threaded a pass to meet the right back's move into the area. Goalkeeper David Soria blocked his first effort but Koundé scrambled the rebound out of Soria's grasp and over the line. Moments after Raphinha headed a cross by Koundé into the side netting, Getafe leveled in the 34th during a defensive letdown by the visitors. Mauro Arambarri put in a loose ball after Iñaki Peña did well to make a one-handed save of a volley by Cobi de Costa. "We controlled the game but



they scored on the one chance they had, it is too bad," Koundé said. "We didn't have our finishing touch." Griezmann misses spot kick Griezmann had a chance to at least snatch a point for the

league leader after a video review awarded Atletico a 90th-minute penalty for a handball by defender Sergio González. But the French forward stroked his spot kick wide. Griezmann and Julián Alvarez

hit the woodwork in the first half, but the leaders couldn't respond after Leganes defender Matija Nastasic scored with a 49th-minute header. Last week, Atletico broke its own record of 13 consecutive victories from 2012-13. Leganes returned to the first division this season and has become a giant-slayer in the top-flight. The modest club from Madrid stunned Barcelona when it was leader in December. Its win over Atletico lifted it into 15th place. "We don't have anything special, this is just the result of the hard work we put in each week," Leganes goalkeeper Marko Dmitrovic said. "We have beaten two of the

three big teams in the league, so we have no excuse not to perform like this each time out." Atletico, which was the biggest spender for Spanish clubs in the summer, is trying to win its third league under Simeone after titles in 2014 and 2021. Simeone said that during those championship runs, his side lost to smaller clubs Almeria (in 2014) and Levante (in 2021), and that didn't stop them from still beating Barcelona and Madrid to the title. "We had 15 wonderful games, a record in the history of this club. It was a great run that benefited us in the league, Copa del Rey and Champions League," Simeone said. Atletico defenders Javi Galán

and Clement Lenglet received their fifth yellow cards of the season and will miss the next round against Villarreal. But first, Atletico hosts Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League on Tuesday. Kike Garcia blasts Betis Alaves striker Kike Garcia scored a hat trick to lead a 3-1 win at 10-man Real Betis. The 35-year-old Garcia, known more as a workhorse than a big scorer, earned a penalty after being fouled by Marc Bartra and opened the scoring in the 11th. After Betis lost Romain Perraud to a red card for a dangerous foul in the 55th, Garcia spun before firing home in the 80th and thumped in a header for his treble.

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