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INSIDE

MONEY 10
GDP GROWTH LIKELY TO BE 6.3 PER CENT IN FY25, SAYS SBI REPORT

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INDIA BLOC FALLS IN DELHI



RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Head of the Delhi Assembly elections, Opposition parties INDIA Bloc's rift widened as Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) on Wednesday announced its support for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). This comes after Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT) and Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (SP) too announced to support the AAP in the upcoming assembly polls in Delhi. This has sparked speculation of a significant rift within the alliance, particularly concerning the Congress party, which is running alone in the Delhi polls and finds itself isolated despite claiming leadership in the alliance.

AAP Supremo and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said he is "personally grateful" to TMC chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for the support.

Responding to this, Kejriwal thanked the TMC chief. Kejriwal took said TMC extended support to AAP in the assembly polls, adding that he is personally grateful to Mamata. TMC and SP had thrown their weight behind the AAP in the 2020 Delhi assembly elections as well. Earlier on Tuesday, TMC leader Kunal Ghosh had said that Delhi residents will defeat the saffron party in the upcoming assembly elections.

All the four parties - AAP, Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party and Congress - are partners in the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) and had jointly fought the Lok Sabha elections last year. With major INDIA bloc allies supporting AAP, the Congress has found itself cornered in the three-way battle against the AAP and the BJP. The current situation fuels existing speculation about leadership within the INDIA Bloc.

Mamata Banerjee has openly expressed her desire to lead the coalition, a move that has reportedly put pressure on the Congress party, who are seen by many as facing a leadership crisis. The support from both the SP and TMC appears to be a direct challenge to Congress's position.

The support for AAP is particularly noteworthy since it appears to directly undermine Congress's election strategy. Sharad Pawar of the NCP and Lalu Prasad Yadav of the RJD have also publicly backed Banerjee's leadership ambitions, further intensifying pressure on Congress.

SP chief Akhilesh Yadav declared his support for the AAP in the upcoming Delhi assembly elections, signaling a significant crack in the opposition's INDIA alliance. Kejriwal extended his gratitude to the former Uttar Pradesh CM.

AAP, BJP workers crossfire over PM home, CM's mahal



Police and security personnel stand guard outside Prime Minister's official residence at Lok Kalyan Marg, in New Delhi. Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After the announcement of Assembly polls, a high voltage political drama unfolded in Delhi as the showdown between the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the "Sheesh Mahal" controversy. A group of AAP workers led by Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh and Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj tried to reach the Prime Minister's official residence on Lok Kalyan Marg, but were stopped by police en route. This was followed by an attempt to conduct a media tour of the Chief Minister's residence at 6 Flag Staff Road, Civil Lines which was also thwarted by the police.

In its turn, the BJP also took media to the AB 17 Mathura Road bungalow allotted to Chief Minister Atishi to show that she already had a government residence and sought to know why she was asking for a separate bungalow. Sachdeva charged, "The AAP leaders are doing drama and trying to divert attention from the Sheesh corruption and irregularities

committed in the construction of Sheesh Mahal (6, Flagstaff Road, occupied by Arvind Kejriwal as chief minister). Why did they not think of showing the Sheesh Mahal earlier and now insist on a visit when the administration is bound by a model code of conduct?"

In a veiled attack on AAP leaders, BJP national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi, addressing a press conference, said their conduct was also an example of "political etiquette and ethics" being demolished. This shows the writing on the wall is clear to them that the AAP is losing the Delhi assembly polls, he said. Earlier, outside the Chief Minister's house, the AAP leaders engaged in a heated argument with the police and staged a dharna outside the 6 Flag Staff Road bungalow after being denied entry, which they had invited the media to tour with them in a bid to counter the BJP's "Sheesh Mahal" jibes. Police set up barricades and deployed personnel in front of the bungalow, preventing the AAP leaders from entering the premises.



Nagpur: Preparations underway at Meditirina Hospital for patients of Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV), a day after two suspected cases of the virus were reported from the city, in Nagpur, Maharashtra. PTI

No panic over HMPV, but vigilance increased

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Human Metapneumovirus (HMPV) cases continue to rise, bringing the total to 11 so far amid growing concerns linked to a potential resurgence of respiratory illnesses from China, States are intensifying efforts to manage the outbreak, which is primarily affecting infants and young children.

On Wednesday, a six-month-old baby tested positive for HMPV at Hiranandani Hospital in Mumbai's Powai. Out of the total cases reported so far, two were reported in Bengaluru, one in Gujarat, two in Chennai, three in Kolkata, and now three in Maharashtra.

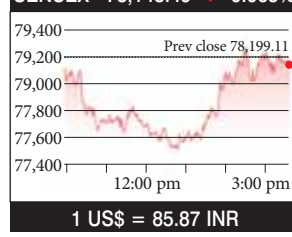
While the Centre has reassured the public that there is no need to panic-emphasising that HMPV is not a new pathogen and not causing a widespread outbreak-health departments in several states are taking no

chance. The Jammu and Kashmir health department has established a specialized ICU ward in Jammu to handle potential cases, while Uttarakhand has issued guidelines for the prevention of respiratory diseases like HMPV.

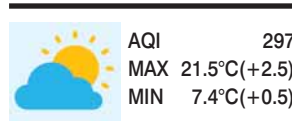
Sunita Tamta, Director of Uttarakhnd Medical Health and Family Welfare, described the HMPV as being similar to the flu virus. She urged citizens not to panic, emphasizing the importance of increased precautions. "If you experience flu-like symptoms, maintain distance and use a handkerchief or tissue while sneezing or coughing," she advised.

Echoing similar concerns, Dr. Hamid Zargar, Medical Superintendent of Gandhinagar Government Hospital said, "we are not taking any chances and have prepared a special ICU ward to handle any eventuality. God forbid if a pandemic occurs, we are ready."

MARKETS



WEATHER



DU's LSR, 14 others get bomb hoax threat calls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

More than 15 educational institutions including Lady Shri Ram College across the national Capital received bomb threats, which later turned out to be hoaxes. Since May last year, more than 100 schools have been receiving bomb threats through mails. According to the police on Wednesday, more than 15 schools including Bal Bharati Public School in Ganga Ram, Laxman Public School in Hauz Khas, Fr. Agnel School in Gauta Nagar, Bluebells School in Kailash, Modern School in Vasant Vihar, Amity School in Saket, Salwan Public School in Mayur Vihar, G D Goenka school, Spring Bell Nursery School in West Patel Nagar, Tagore international in Amar Colony and Delhi Public School in East of kailash among others.

According to police sources, the mail was received from an e-mail id 'troisims@gmail.com'. The content of the mail mentioned that since exams are going on in the schools, this will be the best time to strike and create maximum damage.

The mail was received around 10:15 am, a senior police officer said, adding that after thorough checking it turned out to be hoax.

"We received two different bomb threat calls from Lady Shri Ram College at 11.40 am. Another bomb threat call was received from Tagore International School in the East of Kailash area at 11.17 am," an official said.

He said teams were immediately rushed to the site, but nothing suspicious was found. A dog squad and bomb disposal squad were part of the teams rushed to the spot, a police officer said.

Since May last year, over 50 bomb threat emails have targeted not only schools but also hospitals, airports and airline companies in Delhi, but the police have yet to make any breakthroughs in these cases. The Delhi Police has been unable to crack the cases due to VPNs (Virtual Private Network) and proxy servers which acted as key barriers in solving cases and legal frameworks for obtaining information from these services are inadequate, leading to delays in investigations.

Google holes up Assam cops as criminals in Nagaland

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ GUWAHATI

A 16-member team of the Assam Police inadvertently strayed into Nagaland's Mokokchung district during a raid while they were following directions on Google Maps, and was attacked by locals and held captive overnight.

According to a senior official of Assam Police, the incident occurred on Tuesday night when a team of the Jorhat District Police was carrying out a raid to apprehend an accused. "It was a tea garden area, which was shown in Assam on Google Maps. However, it was actually inside Nagaland. The team went inside Nagaland in pursuit of the criminal due to confusion and misleading guidance on GPS," he said.

The locals thought the Assam Police team to be some miscreants carrying sophisticated arms and detained them, he said. "Of the 16 personnel, only three were in uniform and the rest were in civil dress. This also led to confusion among the locals. They also attacked the team and one of our personnel was injured," he added.



Upon receiving the information of the hostile situation in Nagaland, the Jorhat Police immediately contacted Mokokchung Superintendent of Police, who sent a team to the spot to rescue the Assam Police personnel. "The locals then realised that it was a genuine police team from Assam and released five members, including the injured person. "They, however, held the remaining 11 persons as captives overnight. They were released in the morning and reached Jorhat later," the official said.

In recent times several untoward incidents leading to even casualties have been reported related to following the google maps.

One Election, complex views



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

First meeting of Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) meeting on one Nation one poll bills on Wednesday witnessed exchange of opinions between the Opposition and ruling party MPs. Opposition MPs criticised the bills as an attack on the basic fabric of the Constitution and federalism and BJP MPs hailing it as reflective of popular opinion. All MPs were given a trolley carrying over 18,000 pages, including one volume of the Kovind committee report each in Hindi and English, and 21 volumes of annexure, besides a soft copy as well.

The MPs attending the meeting of the 39-member JPC expressed their views and asked questions following a presentation by the Ministry of Law and Justice on the provisions of the bills and the

rationale guiding them. Opposition MPs, including Congress' Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, questioned the claim that simultaneous polls will reduce expenditure. They asked if any estimate was made following the 2004 Lok Sabha elections when EVMs were used for the first time in all 543 seats and are believed to have brought down the cost incurred.

BJP MPs, the sources added, countered the charge that the 'one nation one election' proposal flouted constitutional values by requiring an early dissolution of several state assemblies and locking their term with the Lok Sabha's. Noting that Seven State Assemblies were dissolved early in 1957 to ensure all state elections are held alongside the national elections, Sanjay Jaiswal asked if the likes of then president Rajendra Prasad, who was also the chairman of Constituent Assembly, and

other eminent lawmakers, including those in the Nehru government, acted in violation of the Constitution. Another BJP MP, V D Sharma, said the idea of simultaneous elections was reflective of the popular will. He also noted that the high-level committee headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind had consulted over 25,000 members of the public, with an overwhelming majority supporting the idea.

The BJP MPs reiterated that a continuous cycle of elections hampers development, the country's growth and is a drain on the exchequer. One nation one election will be a boost to growth and development, they added.

Shiv Sena, which was represented by Shrikant Shinde, cited the case of Maharashtra where Lok Sabha, assembly, and local body polls are held back to back within few months, stressing that this derails development work as the entire state machinery is busy in the conduct of elections. Several opposition MPs, including those from the Congress, DMK and the Trinamool Congress, echoed their parties' stated views that the proposed laws run contrary to the Constitution and are attack on its basic fabric as well as federalism.

Allahabad HC stays civil court case on Sambhal Jama Masjid

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Allahabad High Court on Wednesday stayed further proceedings before a civil court hearing the dispute over Jama Masjid in UP's Sambhal. Justice Rohit Ranjan Agarwal passed the direction on a revision plea filed by the mosque's management committee.

The plea was filed after a Supreme Court order related to the matter and challenges the proceedings aside from the maintainability of the suit filed over the dispute in the Sambhal district court. The plea alleged the suit was filed on the afternoon of November 19, 2024, and within hours, the judge appointed a court commissioner, and directed him to carry out an initial survey at the mosque site.

The survey, it said, was carried out the same day, and again on November 24. The court, the plea said, directed for the survey report to be filed by November 29. After hearing counsel for parties, the high court ordered the respondents to file their reply within four weeks and posted the matter on February 25. The suit before the Sambhal



district court was filed by Hari Shanker. The court fixed February 25 for further hearing of the matter. The order of the court came within days of submission of the survey report in the district court by a court commissioner. The commissioner had conducted a survey in the masjid in November at Sambhal, which had witnessed large scale violence in which had witnessed large scale violence in which four persons were killed and scores others injured. According to the sources, the survey report contained video footage and photographs taken during the survey inside the mosque in two phases on November 19 and 24 respectively.

The lawyer for the Mosque Committee sought quashing of the district order saying that the survey order was issued by the civil court on the day the petition seeking the same was filed by the Hindu petitioners.

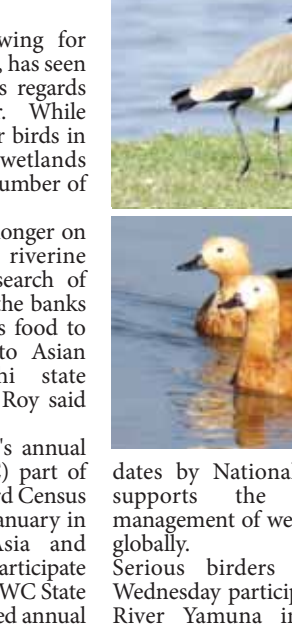
Waterbird census records changes in Yamuna's birds

T K ROY ■ NEW DELHI

Ravaged river Yamuna, flowing for nearly 22 kms through Delhi, has seen a mixed bag on its wetlands as regards arrival of water birds this year. While some species of migratory water birds in lesser number arrived, the wetlands managed to attract maximum number of Gulls.

Gulls continuously cannot stay longer on the most degraded, polluted riverine habitat and keep moving in search of food, roosting and attracted to the banks of Yamuna where public throws food to them for feeding, according to Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) Delhi state coordinator and ecologist T K Roy said here on Thursday.

He said Wetlands International's annual Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) part of the global International Waterbird Census is carried out in the month of January in 27 countries together in Asia and Australasia. Indian volunteers participate in it under coordination of the AWC State Coordinators as per the confirmed annual



Ruddy Shelduck



Flock of Gulls



Great Cormorant

in Delhi. Still some species of migratory water birds in lesser number arrived and maximum number of Gulls.

During AWC 2025 recorded partially increased water bird species diversity i.e. 25 species of total population 2,123 includes 16 resident species and 09 migratory species in comparison to AWC 2024 i.e. 22 species of total population 2,037 includes 08 resident species and 14 migratory species.

In 2025, among 09 migratory species include largely Black-headed Gulls 1,636 and among 16 resident species largely Black-winged Stilts 110, Little Cormorant 104, Indian Cormorants 53 in comparison to last year (2024) 14 migratory species largely Black-headed Gulls 1,646, Great Cormorant 81 and among 08 resident species largely Black-winged Stilt 198.

Among the migratory duck species recorded only Ruddy Shelduck 06 instead of 16 Common Teal last year, Pallas's Gull 09 instead of 01 last year and resident birds Grey Heron 59 than 24 last year and IUCN Red-listed Near Threatened (NT) resident species River Lapwing 09

recorded in 2025 than last year 03 and Painted Stork 14 this year than no record last year.

On River Yamuna last four years, AWC recorded variable species diversity in numbers. Among these resident species either decreased or increased in number recorded as follows:

- Black-winged Stilt decreased, Red-wattled lapwing increased
- Grey Heron increased, Indian Spot-billed Duck decreased
- Little Cormorant increased, River Lapwing increased
- Among the winter migratory species, Great Cormorant from East and Southeast Asia increased. Brown-headed Gull migrating from Central Asia decreased,
- Black-headed Gull migrates from Central Asia and Siberia increased and Pallas's Gull migrates from Central Asia partially increased.

— Writer is an Ecologist, Ornithologist and State Coordinator at AWC Delhi State Coordinator; Wetlands International (South Asia)

Govt school students experience corporate and cultural excellence

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In an initiative led by Deputy Commissioner Ananya Mittal, 420 students from 14 government schools in the district were taken on an educational tour to various renowned companies, sports complexes, art and cultural centers, and technical training institutions located in the city. The students, coming from remote rural areas, had the opportunity to explore the rich legacy of art and culture, the thriving sports tradition, the work culture of world-class companies, and a combination of technology and practical knowledge. The tour included visits to notable sites such as the J.R.D. Tata Sports Complex, N.T.T.F., Jharkhand Rifle Club's shooting range, Tata Steel USIL, Tribal Culture Center, CSIR-NML, and Tata Motors. The students, selected through internal competitions at their respective schools, participated in this



exposure visit as part of a broader effort to provide them with practical knowledge and career insights. Schools involved in the tour included Utkramit Plus Two High School from

Jwalahkata, Manoharlal Plus Two High School from Chakulia, Shival Plus Two High School from Musabani, and several others from across the district. The participating stu-

dents expressed their gratitude for the opportunity, sharing how this visit allowed them to gain first-hand experience of the operations of large companies and institutions they had

previously only read about in books. They found the experience to be enlightening and inspiring.

District Magistrate Mittal expressed his happiness with the success of the initiative, noting that it would help students develop a sense of cultural, historical, and national awareness. He emphasized that the objective of the exposure visit was to give students broad experiences and open up multiple career paths for them in the future. The initiative also aimed to promote practical education and observational learning, helping students learn and absorb new concepts with an open mind. The next exposure visit, scheduled for January 16, will involve students from Ashtakoshi Plus Two High School, Bhalukpatar, Dumuria, visiting the Indian Danish Tool Room in Adityapur. Mittal expressed hope that such visits would continue to support the comprehensive development of students.

H blast furnace achieves historic 50 million tonnes milestone

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

Tata Steel marked a historic achievement as its H-Blast Furnace in Jamshedpur became the first in India to surpass 50 million tonnes of hot metal production without undergoing mid-term repairs. This landmark accomplishment not only underscores Tata Steel's operational excellence but also sets a new benchmark in the Indian steel industry.

Commissioned in 2008, the H Blast Furnace, with a working volume of 3230m³, has consistently outperformed expectations. Its annual production has exceeded 3 million tonnes, maintaining approximately 20% higher output than its designed capacity. This milestone highlights the furnace's robust design, innovative process controls, and the dedication of cross-functional teams at Tata Steel.

"Achieving 50 million tonnes of hot metal production without mid-term repairs is a monumental milestone for Tata Steel and a testament to the exceptional engineering and operational



expertise of our teams," said Chaitanya Bhanu, Vice President - Operations, Tata Steel Jamshedpur. "This achievement not only showcases our focus on sustainable and innovative steel-making practices but also solidifies our position as a global leader in the steel industry."

The H Blast Furnace has earned recognition for its exceptional performance at both national and international levels. Notably, it holds the record for achieving the highest coal injection rate in India for nine consecutive

years. The furnace has also been honoured for its energy-saving innovations, receiving accolades from the President of India.

Further distinguishing itself, the H Blast Furnace has set industry benchmarks in hot metal quality, particularly in maintaining stringent control over silicon content. Its contributions to process safety have been acknowledged by the World Steel Association for two consecutive years, reflecting Tata Steel's commitment to excellence and safety in operations.

DC Bokaro seeks accountability, suspends salaries



PNS : BOKARO

Deputy Commissioner Vijaya Jadhav chaired a crucial District Health Committee meeting at the Collectorate on Wednesday, where she reviewed the performance of

key health initiatives across the district. The discussion focused on critical areas such as ANC registration for pregnant women, distribution of essential medicines, postpartum care, and the implementation of the

Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK). Subpar performance in blocks like Nawadih, Kasmar, and Gomia was flagged, prompting the Deputy Commissioner to demand clarifications from the responsible officials. In a stern move, she ordered the suspension of their salaries until further notice.

The Deputy Commissioner stressed the need for enhanced accountability, instructing MOICs to reside at their block headquarters and actively monitor government health programs. She emphasized timely ANC checkups, regular use of ANC kits during

Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Days (VHSND), and meeting the operational standards set for Ayushman Bharat health centers. Further, the free ultrasound services for pregnant women under a private clinic partnership were to be widely publicized, with daily reports submitted on its implementation.

Expressing dissatisfaction with the progress in family planning initiatives, the Deputy Commissioner directed officials to intensify efforts in achieving targets. She also mandated coordination with Block Development Officers (BDOs) to ensure proper provision of

meals and transport expenses for mothers under the JSSK scheme. Additionally, she instructed the organization of special health camps in blocks like Kasmar, Nawadih, and Gomia to address service gaps and improve the outreach of government health schemes. The meeting concluded with a strong call for immediate reforms and improved inter-departmental collaboration. The Deputy Commissioner urged all officials to focus on achieving targets and improving service delivery to ensure the district's health programs meet the government's standards and serve the community effectively.

Bokaro Steel Plant first to implement CII GreenCo rating



R SHARMA : BOKARO

Bokaro Steel Plant (BSL) of the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) has been chosen as the first unit within SAIL to implement the Confederation of Indian Industry's (CII) GreenCo Rating System. This initiative aims to enhance sustainability practices and improve environmental performance.

The GreenCo Rating System evaluates industries on ten key areas, including energy efficiency, renewable energy, water conservation,

waste management, and greenhouse gas reduction. It provides a lifecycle-based approach to sustainability and categorizes companies from Platinum+ to Certified, encouraging continuous improvement.

The inauguration took place on January 8 at the HRD Main Auditorium, led by Acting DI Ranjani and attended by all Executive Directors. The event included a welcome address by NP Srivastava, a vote of thanks by Anupama Tiwari, and presentations by the CII GreenCo

team and AGM (Environment), Nitesh Ranjan, on BSL's environmental initiatives.

The three-day program, running until January 10, focuses on familiarizing participants with the GreenCo framework. Insights from the initiative will help determine its implementation across other SAIL units, aligning with SAIL's commitment to sustainable industrial practices and environmental stewardship. Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL)

Press Club demands journalist safety law

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In protest against the brutal murder of journalist Mukesh Chandrakar in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, the Press Club of Jamshedpur, led by President Sanjeev Bhardwaj, submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh through the Deputy Commissioner of East Singhbhum on Wednesday. In the absence of the Deputy Commissioner, the delegation handed over the memorandum to ADM Law & Order Aniket Sachan.

The memorandum demanded a fair and high-level investigation into the murder of Mukesh Chandrakar, urging the Chhattisgarh government to ensure the perpetrators are given the strictest punishment. The delegation also called on the state government to clarify its role in ensuring justice for the slain journalist.

Simultaneously, the delegation also submitted a letter to the Chief Minister, condemning the recent incident in Giridih where journalists were assaulted while collect-



ing news related to illegal toll tax collection. The delegation demanded immediate action from the state government to ensure the safety of journalists. In particular, they called for the establishment of a Journalist Protection Law in Jharkhand to safeguard the rights and security of reporters.

The delegation further emphasized the need for an in-depth investigation before registering cases against journalists under charges such as obstruction of government work. They demanded immediate action against individuals involved in crimes against journalists, including swift arrests. The memorandum stressed that in cases where journalists are killed or injured, both

economic and social security for the journalists and their families must be ensured.

Additionally, the delegation urged the government to introduce provisions for insurance or group insurance for journalists and their families, as well as pension or special packages as financial support.

The delegation included Press Club President Sanjeev Bhardwaj, former President B. Srinivas, General Secretary Vikas Srivastava, former General Secretary Shyam Jha, Joint Secretary Ved Prakash Gupta, Kulwinder Singh, Madan Sahu, Mohammad Anwar, Nikhil Sinha, Chandrashekhar, Dhananjay Kumar, Dashmat Soren, and others.

Bizarre case of bank fraud comes to light in Daltonganj

PNS : DALTONGANJ

A bizarre case of withdrawal through the numbers of cancelled cheques has come to light in Daltonganj. The cheques bearing the same numbers were presented to the bank and money withdrawn.

A fraudulent withdrawal of around two lakhs of rupees has shocked and stunned the district welfare officer here in Daltonganj.

The fraud was committed in respect of the cheques drawn by the Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd here in Daltonganj. The executive officer of the Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd Sewaram Sahu who is the district welfare officer here has lodged the FIR with the town police station on January 4.

The FIR has been registered under sections 316 (5) and 61(2) of the BNS said the officer in charge of the town police station Deobrat Poddar. Sub inspector of police B K Mehta is the investigating officer of the case.

According to Sewaram Sahu " There were two cheques of the year 2022, which stood cancelled." The fraudulent withdrawal was made from each of the cancelled cheques said Sahu.

The two cheques were worth rupees 99,000 plus and 97,000 plus said Sahu who has lodged the FIR.

Their withdrawal was done on 31. 12. 24 and 1.1.25. Sahu admitted, "These two cheques were cancelled but intimation of it was not given to the bank for the purpose of information to be kept in the system of account of the Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd".

The Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd has a single signatory account with the Dharmshala road branch of the PNB here in Daltonganj.

The single signatory account is operated by the executive officer of the Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd.

The branch manager made it clear "This bank had no intimation of cheques cancelled. This Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd should have intimated us in time."

Further this branch was told of the fraudulent withdrawals after the commission of offence reiterated the branch manager Poddar.

The two cheques, as claimed to be cancelled two years ago by the Jharkhand Rajya Adivasi Sahkari Vikas Nigam Ltd, were presented in a bank in Varanasi as these cheques were multi city cheques and were 'payable at par cheque'.

The amount 99,000 plus and 97,000 plus was credited to one account each in Canara Bank and HDFC Bank.

The credited amount was immediately withdrawn from the account by the person concerned who so played foul.

BJP launches Special Membership Campaign at Jugsalai



PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

A special membership drive was conducted today under the BJP Jugsalai Unit at Gaushala Chowk, led by Unit President Hemendra Jain. Hundreds of people participated in the drive, enrolling as online primary members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The event was graced by the presence of BJP's state spokesperson Amarpreet Singh Kale and senior leader Lallan Chauhan.

Addressing the gathering, Amarpreet Singh Kale stated, "BJP is the world's largest party, one that believes in internal democracy. The goal of this campaign is to connect people from all walks of life with BJP. Party workers must reach every household, putting in their full effort and dedication, to make this campaign successful."

Lallan Chauhan emphasized, "The goal of this campaign is to not only engage existing members but also to

bring new voters into the fold. This campaign will be truly meaningful when people from every section of society join the BJP."

District Secretary Anil Modi added, "This campaign will be carried out at all booths and Shakti Kendras in Jugsalai to ensure that the Unit membership drive achieves top rankings."

Prominent leaders and workers present at the event included Anil Modi, Prakash Joshi, Nagendra Pandey, Chandrashekhar Das, Ganesh Ravidas, Pintu Saini, Upendra Chatrath, Sundar Gupta, Ravindra Bhatia, Manish Joshi, Sunil Sahu, Vikas Singh, Anoop Khan, Vikas Mahto, Ravishankar Tiwari, Anil Sharma, Jackie Saraswat, Ritesh Jain, Anil Chauhan, Sunil Singh, Anil Seth, Rashpal Saini, and other party workers.

NCAMP commences at IIT-ISM Dhanbad

PANKAJ : DHANBAD

Over 200 delegates from more than 100 institutes across India and abroad convened on Wednesday at IIT ISM to participate in the 24th National Conference on

Atomic and Molecular Physics (NCAMP 2025). The four-day event, organized by the Indian Society of Atomic and Molecular Physics (ISAMP) in collaboration with the Department of Physics at IIT (ISM), will run from January 8 to January 11 here.

The conference aims to foster meaningful scientific interaction and knowledge

sharing among students, early-career researchers, and established scientists in the atomic, molecular, and optical physics community. Through plenary and invited talks, oral and poster presentations, and vibrant discussions, participants will showcase their research and stay updated on emerging theoretical and experimental advancements.

Golden Jubilee Celebration of ISAMP 2025 also marks the Golden Jubilee of the Indian Society of Atomic and Molecular Physics, which was established in 1976. A special session this afternoon will com-

memorate this milestone, along with an election to constitute the society's new committee. The event was inaugurated by Prof. Sukumar Mishra, Director of IIT (ISM), in the presence of Bhas Bhatpat from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune. In his keynote address, Prof. Mishra emphasized the interdependence of science, technology, and policy, stating, "Science, technology, and policy must synchronize for meaningful outcomes. Fundamental ideation begins with basic science, matures into technology, and ultimate-

ly transforms ideas into products, driving economic growth when integrated into policy." Addressing the gathering Bhas Bhatpat reflected on the evolution of atomic physics, stating, "What began as a focus on spectroscopy and collisions has expanded into diverse fields, including quantum technologies. It's fitting that we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of ISAMP alongside 100 years of quantum theory, which traces its roots to observations in atomic physics." Prof. Bobby Antony, Head of the Department of Physics at IIT (ISM), outlined the rich scientific program of

NCAMP 2025. "The conference will feature 20 invited talks, 6-8 young scientist presentations, 40 oral presentations, and 120 poster presentations," he said. The inaugural session concluded with a vote of thanks delivered by Prof. P.M. Sarun, expressing gratitude to the participants, speakers, and organizing teams for their contributions to making the event a success.

NCAMP 2025 promises to be an intellectually enriching event, driving discussions that bridge fundamental research and technological advancements in atomic and molecular physics.

Govt to decide on MSP of vegetables and forest produce: Minister

PNS : RANCHI

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) of forest produce and vegetables of Jharkhand will be decided. The Agriculture Department is preparing to decide MSP for forest produce including vegetables. The Agriculture Department is discussing bringing forest produce like Mahua under the purview of MSP. However, this discussion is preliminary. This information was given by the state's Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Cooperative Minister Shilpi Neha Tirkey in Nepal House after the departmental review.

After taking oath as minister, in the second monthly review meeting, Shilpi Neha



Agriculture Minister Shilpi Neha Tirkey holds a departmental review meeting in Ranchi on Wednesday. PNS

Tirkey took detailed information about the schemes run by the department. The Minister discussed the Action Taken Report regarding the schemes. During this, she looked angry about the work of VLW. VLW has been appointed by the Agriculture Department. Their salary is

also paid from the Agriculture Department. But VLWs do more land work for Awas Yojana and MGNREGA.

Tirkey has instructed VLWs to work for the schemes of the Agriculture Department. She has said that very soon a state level seminar will be organized for VLWs and responsibilities will be assigned to them. During the review meeting, it also came to light that the schemes of the Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Cooperative Department are not reaching the needy beneficiaries. Only some special farmers are getting more than one scheme of the department. Agriculture Minister Shilpi Neha Tirkey said that not a single applica-

tion related to irrigation has been received in Mandar and Chanho. This is surprising. In fact, farmers do not even have the correct information about the department's scheme.

The minister said that a divisional level agricultural fair has been organized in Chanho on January 18. She instructed the officials to implement the government's schemes 100 per cent on the ground. She said that migration can be stopped by implementing the schemes on the ground. The minister said that Birsra Gram Pathshala Yojana is a good scheme. But the farmers could not get its benefits only because it remained confined to government papers.



Justice BB Mangalmurti, Chairman of Jharkhand Real Estate Appellate Tribunal, met Chief Minister Hemant Soren at the Chief Minister's Residential Office and wished him a Happy New Year. The Chief Minister also wished him a Happy New Year. PNS

BJP questions delay in appointment of Information Commissioners

PNS : RANCHI

BJP's state spokesperson Ramakant Mahato has said that the Hemant government of the state does not want to form an information commission due to the fear of its misdeeds being exposed. And as usual, it is misleading the court by giving misleading information.

Due to which the state government is not only being criticized but also defamed. Mahato said that the records of corruption and loot set in the last five years by the Hemant Soren government, which is running with the support of Congress and RJD, which has been the mother of corruption, cannot be exposed. The government has been trying to do this since the beginning.

BJP spokesperson Ramakant Mahato has slammed the state government and said that when JVM formally merged with BJP, the party appointed Babulal Marandi as the leader of the party. But, the Tribunal Court of the Assembly Speaker kept the matter pending as part of a political conspiracy. As a result, the matter remained pending for a long time. While Babulal Marandi kept voting for the party in the elections of Rajya Sabha MPs.

Mahato said that after that in the year 2023, Amar Kumar Bauri was appointed as the BJP Legislative Party leader who became the Leader of the Opposition in the House. While Mr. Bauri was the Leader of the Opposition, the government also issued an advertisement for the formation of the Information Commission. But due to the government's indifference, the commission could not be formed. The government remained neck deep in corruption. From the Chief Minister to the Cabinet Minister, everyone went behind bars on corruption charges.

Even now Chief Minister Hemant Soren is out on bail. Shri Ramakant has accused the State Government that many constitutional institutions have not been formed in the State for many years. Which are directly related to the public. The Government is adopting an indifferent attitude in the formation. Like State Women Commission, Lokayukta, Human Rights Commission, State Food Commission etc. And the post of Chairman of Jharkhand Public Service Commission is lying vacant for the last many months. The Chairman of the State Staff Selection Commission is working as an in-charge. From where the Government is continuously working to shatter the dreams of the youth.

Workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Systems held



PNS : RANCHI

Two days' workshop on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems organized by Directorate of Economics and Statistics (DES), Department of Planning and Development, Govt. of Jharkhand in collaboration with UNICEF & UNESCAP concluded today in Ranchi. Over 50 participants from planning & development department, health department and local bodies participated in the workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to improve birth registration in Jharkhand by strengthening the skill & capacity of stakeholders around Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems. This workshop also provides opportunity among stakeholders to share insights and best practices and identify actionable strategies for improvement around CRVS in Jharkhand.

Mast Ram Meena, Principal Secretary, Planning and Development; Dr Kaninika Mitra, Chief, UNICEF Jharkhand; Rajeev Ranjan, Director, Directorate of Economics and Statistics; Dr. Petra Nahmias, Chief, Population and Social Statistics, UNESCAP & Raj Mitra, UNESCAP/UNICEF & Onkar Nath Tripathi, Social Policy Specialist, Jharkhand along with his counterpart in Bihar Abhay Singh addressed the workshop.

Speaking on this occasion, Mast Ram Meena, IAS, Principal Secretary, Planning and Development, Government of Jharkhand said, "The purpose of this initiative is to capacitate the statistical officers, planning development officers, urban bodies' officials and health officials around civil registration and vital statistics. As birth and death registration is an essential service to the

population, we need to identify the field level constraints and bottlenecks, such as lack of awareness and barriers to accurate data collection etc. This workshop will show the path for small and focused interventions and also ensure registration of every child and address challenges around birth & death registration effectively."

Rajeev Ranjan, Director, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, said, "This workshop is a very important step to discuss and talk about hurdles and challenges around birth & death registration in Jharkhand. This workshop will equip participants with comprehensive understanding of the framework, thus enabling them to identify key challenges within the CRVS system from both client and service provider perspectives and establish a solid foundation for continued efforts in system enhancement and redesign."

Stressing on the importance of ensuring birth and death registration for every individual, Dr Kaninika Mitra, Chief, UNICEF Jharkhand said, "Accurate registration of vital events serves as the cornerstone for all planning and development efforts. Without reliable vital statistics, we cannot measure progress, track health outcomes, or plan the future in an informed way. This is why strengthening the civil registration and vital system (CRVS) is not just a technical or administrative task—it is a moral imperative to ensure the rights and well-being of every individual in Jharkhand."

The participants who attended the workshop were Medical Officers, District Statistical Officers, Assistant Statistical Officers, Block Statistical Officers and the Data Entry Operators from urban bodies among others.

Ministers to enter new bungalows after Kharmas

A total of 11 bungalows which is according to Vastushashtra have been built for ministers in Smart City Dhurwa

PNS : RANCHI

The newly constructed bungalows (Ministers New Bungalows) prepared for the ministers in the Smart City of the capital Ranchi are now ready for griha pravesh. According to the information, the griha pravesh of the ministers will take place after Kharmas ends.

Kharmas, a religiously significant period in Hinduism, begins December 15, 2024, and ends January 14, 2025. During this time, auspicious activities are avoided as the Sun transits Sagittarius. Instead, devotees engage in spiritual practices like prayer, fasting, and charity.

A total of 11 bungalows have been built for ministers in Smart City Dhurwa. Recently, Chief Minister Hemant Soren inspected the Smart City Ranchi residential complex, the newly constructed bungalows designated for state government ministers.

During his visit, the Chief Minister provided detailed instructions to officials



regarding various aspects of the newly constructed residences. He emphasised that all work on the bungalows and the surrounding residential complex must be completed by January 15 enabling the allocation of houses to the ministers.

The special thing is that these bungalows have been built completely according to Vastushashtra. The main gate of all bungalows has been placed towards the east according to Vastu. Doors and windows have also been fitted according to Vastu.

Health of ministers has

also been taken care of in the bungalow. Swimming pool, gym, play zone, volleyball, and badminton courts have also been built in it. The entire area has been made green. Club house facility has also been provided in it.

On other hand the MLAs of Jharkhand will get an amount of Rs 60 lakh as advance for building a house only when there will be clear ownership of the land after them. The State Government has amended the provisions for sanctioning the advance amount. The Finance Department has issued its



order. Under the issued order, the advance will be given to those MLAs whose tenure is pension-providing at the place where the MLA wants to settle down during or after his tenure. No loan or advance should have been taken for this purpose from other government sources, Housing Board, semi-government bodies or local bodies.

After this, if they promise to return the outstanding loan or advance received from other sources in one installment along with interest, then the MLA can be sanctioned an advance for

house construction.

The MLA should also have clear ownership of the land. If the advance is for purchasing a house-flat built by private parties, then there should be no liability of anyone on the house-flat. For purchasing a flat, the applicant will have to submit the agreement made between the land owner and the registered builder. The approved map of the proposed flat will also have to be submitted. The new project being done by the registered builder should also be approved by RERA.

U-19 Athletics concludes at 68th National School Games

Jharkhand with 33 points stands at 9th spot



PNS : RANCHI

The Under 19 Athletics Competition at the 68th National School Sports Competition concluded on Wednesday, as players from all over the country displayed their sporting talent in various disciplines of athletics.

Kerala became the over-



all winner of the Under 19 Athletics Competition with 138 points. Maharashtra with 123 points and Tamil Nadu with 104 points secured the second and third spots respectively in the competition.

Amongst the boys, the best athlete award was bagged by Saif Chafekar of Maharashtra who scored a

total of 1,134 points while Chiranath of Karnataka stood second with 1,068 points and Saravan KC of Kerala stood third with 1,042 points. Amongst the girls, Vanshika of CBSC grabbed the first prize with 988 points followed by Thea of Tamil Nadu with 968 points and Harshita Goswami of Delhi with 951 points.

Kanke MLA Suresh Baitha was present as the chief guest at the prize distribution ceremony.

The host state Jharkhand got a total of three medals in the Under 19 Athletics Competition. Jharkhand has received medals in the boys 400-meter race, girls long jump and girls 400-meter hurdle

race. Saket Minj has won the gold medal in the boys 400-meter race where as Preeti Lakra clinched the gold medal in the girls long jump and Shivani Kumari won the silver medal in the girls 400-meter hurdle race. Jharkhand stands at the ninth position in the medal table with 33 points.

Players from various parts of the country displayed their strength in a total of 41 events in the Under 19 Athletics Competition. The Under 14 Athletics competitions will be conducted in Jharkhand from January 11 to January 14.

The state of Jharkhand has got the hosting of four sports events for the year 2024-25. Preparations for successful organisation have been started by the School Education and Literacy Department of the State government.

SENIOR JOURNALIST RANA GAUTAM PASSES AWAY

PNS : RANCHI

Senior journalist of the State capital and executive member of Ranchi Press Club Rana Gautam breathed his last on Wednesday. He was suffering from cancer for the last one year. He was being treated at Tata Cancer Hospital Mumbai and hospitals in Ranchi. His last rites will be performed on Thursday at 12 noon at Harmu Muktidham. Before this, his body will be kept for darshan at Ranchi Press Club.

Ranchi in June 1971, Rana Gautam's father Rajendra Prasad is a retired Additional Collector. After getting his early education from Ranchi, Rana Gautam chose journalism as a career since 1992. He made his own identity as a crime reporter in Deshpran, Aaj, Ranchi Express, Khabarmantra and Hindustan. In the year 2023, he contested the Ranchi Press Club elections and was elected to the executive. Due to his gentle nature, he was very popular in the field of journalism.

There is a wave of mourning among the journalists of the capital due to the death of Rana Gautam. On hearing the news of his death, journalists started flocking to his house. Those who went to his house to express condolences include Ranchi Press



Club President Surendra Lal Soren, Secretary Amarkant, Joint Secretary Ratan Lal, former President Rajesh Singh, senior journalists Neeraj Sinha, Alok Sinha, Chandan Bhattacharya, Vijay Mishra, Monu Kumar, Saurabh Shukla, Navneet Nandan, Bobby, Prasenjit Mukherjee, Dev Kumar etc.

IIM-R concludes MDP for DVC Executives

PNS : RANCHI

IIM Ranchi successfully concluded the Management Development Programme (MDP) on Strategic Financial Management for the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) executives. This three-day intensive training programme was meticulously designed to enhance strategic financial expertise and address stress management among senior professionals, equipping them to tackle the evolving challenges within their demanding roles.

Prof. Deepak Kumar Srivastava, Director IIM Ranchi, engaged with the participants, celebrating DVC's legacy as a dream project envisioned by Jawaharlal Nehru and modeled after American infrastructure. He emphasized the importance of lifelong learning and outlined flexible programs such as the MBA Executive in hybrid

mode and Executive PhD, which enable professionals to pursue higher education while maintaining their careers. In a gesture of appreciation, the Director presented mementos to the participants, acknowledging their dedication to the programme.

Prof. Amit Sachan, Dean Executive Education, acknowledged the participants' commitment to professional development. Prof. Sachan highlighted the critical role of financial management in driving organizational success and underscored the programme's value in empowering leaders with actionable insights.

Prof. Manish Bansal praised the programme's focus on core areas such as finance and accounting. He expressed heartfelt gratitude to the organizing team for their relentless efforts in ensuring the event's success. Participants shared over-



whelmingly positive feedback, applauding the seamless execution, relevant content, and engaging sessions that significantly contributed to their professional growth. The event concluded on a high note fostering cama-

raderie and meaningful connections among attendees. This programme reinforced IIM Ranchi's commitment to advancing executive education and enabling transformative leadership within organizations like DVC.

India and EU reaffirm commitment to democracy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and the European Union (EU) on Wednesday reaffirmed their commitment to principles and values of democracy, rule of law and human rights and agreed on the need to safeguard freedom and diversity of civil society actors. The issues were extensively discussed here at the 11th India-EU Human Rights Dialogue.

The two sides discussed the issues related to civil and political rights, social, economic, and cultural rights, countering religious hatred, elimination of discrimination in all its manifestations, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and opinion, both online and offline, a joint readout said. While the EU reiterated its opposition to capital punishment, India reiterated its stand on recognition of the right to development as a "distinct, universal, inalienable and fundamental human right," it said.



India is among few countries that still have death penalty. "During the dialogue, India and the EU reiterated their commitment to the shared principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law, and to the promotion and protection of all human rights," the readout said. The two sides emphasised the "universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness" of all human rights, it added.

"Reflecting their commitment to upholding human rights, they both agreed on the need to safeguard the freedom, independence and diversity of civil society actors and organisations and other relevant stakeholders such as journalists, respecting freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly," the readout said. The two sides also delved into issues of the 'LGBTQI+' com-

munity, women empowerment and issues relating to technology and human rights. The two sides also exchanged views on the rights of migrants and business and human rights, according to the readout. "India and the EU recognised the importance of strengthening national and international human rights mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights," it said. Both sides underlined the importance of enhancing cooperation in the multilateral fora particularly at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, it said. "In this regard, they committed to closer cooperation and more regular exchanges between the Permanent Missions of India and the EU in Geneva, in order to identify further opportunities for joint action," the readout added. The two sides also discussed cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Will Didi tweak or not tweak land policy

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

With her state heavy in debt, hard up for liquidity, lacking in investment and lagging in job-creation --- thanks to her social security schemes that too is reaching a saturation point --- Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is taking this year's Bengal Global Business Summit seriously so as to draw investment proposals ahead of the next year's Assembly elections. The Chief Minister who was on Wednesday scheduled to hold a review meeting with senior bureaucrats including the State Chief Secretary and other senior officials is willing to go the extra mile to attract investment but does not however want to tweak her 'no-acquisition' land policy in order to invite business. The BGBS is scheduled to be held in the first week of February, sources said. "Investment has dried up ... though there are some coming in trickles these are not enough to create job ... on the other hand the Government has withheld appointment to more than 5 lakh sanctioned posts --- in order to pay for her populist social security schemes ... this

has shrunk the employment opportunity further ... forcing Bengal to the ranks of a 'migrant labour state' said a leading economist who was once a close confidant of the Chief Minister. With a steady decline in investment and flight of capital the State's debt burden has climbed to about Rs 6 lakh crores from Rs 1.92 lakh crore left by the Left Government after 34 years of their rule in 2011. According to a former Chief Secretary who had worked both with the Left and the TMC Governments, "Jyoti Basu had realized the importance of investment and that not all investors are the agents of imperialist forces in the closing years of his rule while Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee zealously but unsuccessfully tried to bring investment before losing power to the Trinamool Congress ... but Mamata Banerjee is not ready to understand that industries do not happen in thin air ... they need land ... and whatever investment that are coming are taking place on the lands acquired by the previous Government." The chambers of commerce

and prospective investors have repeatedly requested the Chief Minister to acquire land for them but she is reluctant to do so for the fear of losing power, the retired officer said. According to political pundits BGBS-2025 assumes significance for the Chief Minister in view of the 2026 Assembly elections. "Though she coined the words 'Bengal means business' it has hardly come true ... BGBD this year will be a golden opportunity for the Chief Minister to send a message both to the industry fraternity as well as the common voters that her government is really interested in offering an industry-friendly environment in the state ... if she wants to blunt BJP's arguments on the so-called 'Gujarat model,' said a city-based Jadavpur professor and political scientist. BGBS is a brainchild of the Chief Minister and is organized every year with much fanfare partaken by Indian industry captains like the Tatas, Ambanis, Adanis, Mirchandanis, Goenkas et al. Foreign investors to join the gala business event dangling investment proposals that hardly materialize.

"The reason is simple first you have to provide land, then streamline law and order and stop Tolabazi (extortion) and provide politics-free environment ... the Chief Minister wants investment but whether it is possible for her to ensure the three conditions is a big question mark because these would hurt the Trinamool Congress' raison d'etre ... she created a fake land movement with the help of some media captains but now she has got entangled in her own trap," said Sujan Chakrabarty a senior CPI(M) leader. "The Chief Minister wants the investors to acquire lands but where the land-holding is highly fragmented no investor will be ready to bear the trouble of interacting with individual landowners and setting up big industries... Besides she also has to revisit her no-SEZ stance because the Information Technology Enabled Services (ITeS) sector depends on SEZ," said the former Chief Secretary wondering whether her officers will be able to drive home their point to her or they will simply tow the line that she tosses at them.

India reaffirms support for Maldives' defence readiness

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Maldives on Wednesday here reaffirmed readiness to enhance bilateral relationship towards 'Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership,' during talks between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his counterpart Mohammed Ghassan Maumoon. The two ministers comprehensively reviewed various aspects of bilateral defence and security cooperation. During the talks, both sides reasserted the firm commitment to work closely in realising the joint vision for India-Maldives Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership. Rajnath Singh reaffirmed India's readiness to support the Maldives in capability enhancement for defence preparedness, including provisioning of defence platforms and assets to augment its capacities, as per its national priorities and in line with New Delhi's 'Neighborhood First' policy and the vision of SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region). Minister Maumoon appreciated India's historical role as the 'First Responder' for the Maldives, and thanked New



Delhi for assisting Male in augmenting the modern infrastructural capacities and training of defence and security personnel. On the Government of Maldives' request, India handed over defence equipment and stores to the Maldives. Minister Maumoon is on his first official visit to India. The visit is part of continued high-level engagements between the two sides. It has provided an opportunity to further deepen the bilateral defence and security ties for the mutual benefit of the two countries and the Indian Ocean Region. Maumoon is on a three-day visit to India, nearly eight months after New Delhi completed pulling out its military personnel from the Maldives following a demand by its pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu. The overall episode had significantly frayed the ties between the two nations.

India, Afghanistan discuss various issues pertaining to bilateral relations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Afghanistan on Wednesday discussed various issues pertaining to bilateral relations as well as regional developments during talks between Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Afghanistan Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai, Ministry of External Affairs(MEA)said here. Giving details, MEA statement said the Foreign Secretary underlined India's historic friendship with the Afghan people and the strong people to people contacts between the two countries. In this context, he conveyed India's readiness to respond to the urgent developmental needs of the Afghan people. The two sides evaluated the ongoing Indian humanitarian assistance programmes. The Afghan Minister appreciated and thanked the Indian leadership for continuing to engage and support the people of Afghanistan. In view of the current need for development activities, it was decided that India would consider engaging in development projects in the near future, in addition to the



ongoing humanitarian assistance programme. It may be recalled that in response to the needs of the Afghan people, India decided to extend humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. India has so far dispatched several shipments consisting of 50,000 MTs of wheat, 300 tons of medicines, 27 tons of earth quake relief aid, 40,000 litres of pesticides, 100 million polio doses, 1.5 million doses of COVID Vaccine, 11,000 units of hygiene kits for the drug de-addiction programme, 500 units of winter clothing and 1.2 tons of stationery kits. In response to the request from the Afghan side, India will

provide further material support in the first instance to the health sector and for the rehabilitation of refugees. The two sides also discussed strengthening of sports (cricket) cooperation, which is highly valued by the young generation of Afghanistan. It was also agreed to promote the use of Chabahar port for supporting trade and commercial activities, including for the purpose of humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. The Afghan side underlined its sensitivities to India's security concerns. The two sides agreed to remain in touch and continue regular contacts at various levels.

J and K legislators to attend a three-day long orientation programme

PNS ■ JAMMU

The newly elected members of the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly are all set to attend a three-day-long Orientation programme from Thursday to learn Parliamentary practices, procedures and conduct of business rules in the House. The orientation programme will be conducted at the Central Hall of J&K Legislative Assembly Complex, Jammu. The programme is being organised by J&K Legislative Assembly Secretariat in collaboration with PRIDE, Lok Sabha Secretariat. The ninety (90) Member House presently has eighty-eight (88) members, of which, fifty (50) members have been elected for the first time. In order to help the newly elected members effectively discharge their onerous responsibilities of meeting the aspirations of the people, this three-day orientation program is being held on Parliamentary Practices, Procedures and Conduct of Business in the House. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, Speaker J&K Legislative Assembly Abdul Rahim Rather,



Deputy Chief Minister are expected to attend the inaugural program. The first Legislative Assembly of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir was constituted on 8th October 2024. The orientation programme will feature discussions by eminent Parliamentarians like Dr. Sanjay Jaiswal, Chairperson, Committee on Estimates; N.K Premachandran and Dr. Satayapal Singh, former Members Lok Sabha. The subjects to be discussed and deliberated during the programme included Legislative Processes, Budgetary Process, Executive Accountability through Questions, Committee System

and Information Support to Legislators, Do's and Don'ts for an Effective Legislator and a session on NEVA. The insights gained through these lectures will provide the newly elected members with a deep understanding of the workings of the legislature and the responsibility they carry as elected representatives. The lectures will also be co-hosted by Senior Officers of the Lok Sabha Secretariat. This programme is expected to enhance the capacity of MLAs to significantly contribute to policy formulation and ensure its effective implementation for the greater good of the Union Territory.

Undertrials to be released if they have undergone half the maximum prison term

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Centre has asked all states to Censure that an undertrial prisoner arrested for an offence for which the punishment of death or life imprisonment has not been specified should be released if he or she has already undergone detention for half of the maximum prison term specified for that offence, thus reducing overcrowding in jails. In a communication to chief secretaries and directors general of prisons of all states, the ministry of home affairs said the prison authorities should approach the court concerned for release of such eligible prisoners under the provisions of the Section 479 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS). The Section 479 of the BNSS states that when a person has, during the period of investigation, inquiry or trial of an offence under any law (not being an offence for which the punishment of death or life imprisonment has been specified as one of the punishments under that law) undergone detention for a period extending up to one-half of the maximum period of imprisonment specified for that offence under that law, he shall be released by the court on bail. "In case of first-time offenders, such prisoners shall be released on bond by the court, if they have undergone detention for a period extending up to one-third of the maximum period of imprisonment for that offence. Further, Section 479 (3) of the BNSS casts a specific responsibility on the Superintendent of the Prison to make an application to the



concerned court for release of aforementioned undertrial prisoners on bail/bond," the communication said. The ministry said it had issued an advisory to the states and union territories on the issue on October 16, 2024 and had requested them to provide the benefit of the provisions of Section 479 of BNSS to all eligible prisoners and have their bail applications filed in the court accordingly. It said on the occasion of Constitution Day i.e. November 26, 2024, the home ministry had launched a special campaign under which all the states and union territories were requested... To identify eligible prisoners under the provisions of the Section 479 of BNSS and move their applications to the concerned courts for their release on bail/bond. Union Home Minister Amit Shah had also sent a letter to chief ministers of all states and Union territories in this regard. The states and Union territories had actively participated in this exercise and had furnished the details of the number of prisoners who benefitted from the provisions of Section 479 of BNSS up to November 26, 2024.

However, the ministry has conveyed to the states that it was not a one-time exercise and the states and Union territories need to take advantage of the provisions of Section 479 of BNSS and provide the benefit of the same to all eligible prisoners on a continuous basis. "The states and UTs are requested to provide details, as in the attached proforma, for the period November 27, 2024 to December 31, 2024, on urgent basis, whereafter a monthly report, even a NIL report, is to be provided to this ministry in the prescribed proforma, starting from January 1, 2025," the communication said. The home minister said the provisions of Section 479 of BNSS can go a long way in mitigating the situation of long detention faced by undertrial prisoners and can also address the issue of overcrowding in prisons. "It is, therefore, expected that all states and UTs will cooperate in the matter and will advise the concerned prison authorities for taking necessary action in the matter and to furnish the desired information to MHA in a timely manner," it said.

62 indigenously manufactured vehicles set to reach Lebanon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a boost for 'Make in India' Initiative, 62 indigenously manufactured vehicles are set to reach Lebanon for utilisation by the Indian contingent deployed in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), defence sources said on Wednesday. The fleet comprises high mobility troop carriage vehicles, utility vehicles (one tonne and 2.5 tonne), medium and light ambulances, fuel bowlers and recovery vehicles, they said. Until now, the Indian troops serving in the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon were operating the vehicles provided by the United Nations. These vehicles were sourced from other countries, a defence source said. In a significant step towards promoting indigenous capabilities and strengthening operational efficiency, 62 Indian-manufactured vehicles are now set to reach Lebanon for utilisation by the Indian contingent deployed in the UNIFIL, the source added. With the induction of these 'Made-in-India' vehicles, the Indian battalion will now rely on "robust and homegrown platforms", showcasing India's commitment to self-reliance and its growing defence manufacturing capabilities on the global stage, the source said. This development underscores India's leadership in peacekeeping missions and highlights the nation's support for indigenous innovation in defence, he added.

UGC's draft regulations 2025 direct assault on State rights, says CPI(M)

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) on Wednesday said the University Grants Commission's draft regulations 2025 contains a provision which is a "direct assault" on State rights on the question of selecting Vice-Chancellors (VCs) for State-run Universities, and demanded that it should be withdrawn. The new guidelines give the Governor, who is also the Chancellor of State Universities, the power to appoint a committee to select the vice-chancellor, the CPI(M) Politburo said in a statement, claiming that it is happening in the backdrop of governors "arbitrarily" appointing VCs in some "opposition-ruled states". "The draft UGC regulations 2025 contains a provision which is a direct assault on the rights of states on the question of selecting vice-chancellors in state-run universities," the statement said. "The guidelines give the governor-cum-chancellor the power to appoint a three-member selection committee in which the chancellor's nominee will also be the chairperson. This is happening in the backdrop of governors acting arbitrarily in appointing vice-chancellors in some opposition-ruled states," the CPI(M) said. Claiming that the State Government will have no say as to who all will be appointed in the selection committee, the



CPI(M) said, "At one stroke, the Centre through these guidelines can appoint vice-chancellors of its choice in all state-run universities through the governor-cum-chancellors." The Left party also said the draft regulations violate the Constitutional position, wherein education is a concurrent subject. "All democratic sections, including the non-BJP state governments, should unitedly oppose this dangerous provision. It should be withdrawn," they said. The draft UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment & Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025, was released on Monday. The draft guidelines, which have been placed in the public domain for feedback, aim to give flexibility to the Universities in appointing and promoting teachers and academic staff in their institutions. The draft regulations grant Governors broader control over VC appointments and allows non-academics to hold these posts.

India's defence forces planning to build integrated communication satellite grid



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India's defence forces are planning to build an integrated satellite communication grid comprising spacecraft in different orbits and data relay systems as space emerges as a new domain of warfare, a senior officer said. Addressing the DefSat Conference here, Defence Space Agency Director General Air Vice Marshal Pawan Kumar said the defence forces were also looking at collaborating with the industry to meet its requirements to get an edge over its rivals in the domain. "When you talk of communication, I think the technology that we are focusing on is integrated satellite communication grid. We don't want any service to be over dependent on a particular satellite," Kumar said in the inaugural address at the DefSat conference organised by Satcom Industry Association-India. Kumar said the defence forces were looking at a mix of constellations, either Medium

Earth Orbit (MEO)-Geostationary Orbit (GEO) or Low Earth Orbit (LEO)-MEO-GEO, and a lot of studies have happened on that. "We are also looking at tracking and data relay satellite systems primarily because it reduces demand to delivery time as far as OODA loop is concerned," he said. Kumar said the defence forces were also exploring quantum communications because of the obvious advantages of secrecy. "We are looking for space and ground-based sensors which include telescopes and radars, along with the complete network so that the commanders can make appropriate decisions, whether it is military level, operational level, or tactical level," he said. The inaugural session of the three-day conference was addressed by Lt Gen PJS Panu (ret'd); Viasat India Managing Director Gautam Sharma; Data Security Council India CEO Vinayak Godse; President SLA-India and CMD Ananth Technologies Subba Rao Pavuluri.

India targets five million tons of green hydrogen by 2030: PM Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said as part of National Green Hydrogen Mission, the country is aiming to produce 5 million tons of green hydrogen by 2030.

After virtually laying the foundation stone and launching projects worth over Rs 2 lakh crore here, Modi said two green hydrogen hubs will be set up in the country out of which one will come up here.

"The country launched the National Green Hydrogen Mission in 2023. Our aim is to make 5 million metric tons of green hydrogen production (annually) by 2030. As a first step, two green hydrogen hubs will be set up, out of which one is in Visakhapatnam," he said. He further said as part of "Swarandhra Pradesh", by 2047, Andhra Pradesh is aiming to become approximately a USD 2.5 trillion economy and the Center will work with the southern state in realizing that vision. Describing the state as a "land



of possibilities and opportunities", Modi said the time has come for it to become a centre of new futuristic technologies. Earlier, the PM virtually laid the foundation stone and launched a number of projects, including a green hydrogen hub in Anakapalli. Among others he laid the

foundation stone for a railway zone here and dedicated to the nation various projects in the rail and road sectors. The green hydrogen hub coming up in Anakapalli district, near here, is a joint green energy ecosystem initiative between NTPC Green Energy Ltd and the New & Renewable Energy Development Corporation of

Andhra Pradesh (NREDCAP). Modi virtually laid the foundation stone for Krishnapatnam industrial hub, a Rs 1,518 crore project coming up on a 2,500-acre land parcel in the first phase. It is expected to generate employment opportunities for 50,000 people. Foundation stone was also

laid for a Rs 1,877 crore bulk drug park in Nakkapalli. Entailing an investment of Rs 11,542 crore, the drug park coming up on 2,002 acres of land is expected to provide jobs for 54,000 people.

AP Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan were also present at the event. Earlier, the three leaders took out a grand road show upon Modi's arrival in this city. People gathered in large numbers, showered flowers on the leaders as they travelled atop an open vehicle, waving back at the public. The entire stretch was decked up with the party flags of TDP, BJP, and Janasena.

Starting from Sampath Vinayak temple in the port city, the roadshow reached Andhra University's engineering college ground, where a public meeting has been scheduled. This was Modi's first visit to the state after he assumed the office of the Prime Minister for the third consecutive term in 2024. The NDA alliance in Andhra Pradesh consisting of TDP, BJP and Janasena played a key role in forming the union government.

INDIA alliance cracks as Akhilesh Yadav declares support for AAP in Delhi elections

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav has openly declared his support for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the upcoming Delhi assembly elections, signaling a significant crack in the opposition's INDIA alliance.

Speaking to reporters here Yadav stated, "I will support AAP in Delhi and share the stage with them. I will not support Congress. In Delhi, only AAP can defeat the BJP. The Samajwadi Party will support whoever can defeat the BJP."

This announcement highlights growing discord within the INDIA bloc, a coalition of opposition parties formed to challenge the BJP's dominance in the national political landscape. Yadav's statement underscores the alliance's weakening solidarity, especially as regional ambitions and electoral dynamics come into play.

Yadav's endorsement of AAP is a direct snub to the Congress, which is also a key constituent of the INDIA alliance. The AAP and Congress have been at loggerheads in Delhi, with Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's party emerging as the dominant opposition to the BJP in the national capital.



The Congress, on the other hand, has struggled to regain its foothold in the region after being ousted by AAP in 2013. The INDIA alliance, formed with much fanfare to present a united front against the BJP in the 2024 general elections, now faces a critical test of its unity. Akhilesh Yadav's declaration raises questions about the alliance's ability to maintain cohesion in state elections, where regional priorities often take precedence over national strategies.

"By aligning with AAP, Yadav has chosen to prioritize regional equations over alliance commitments. This move could potentially embolden other regional players to take similar positions, further fracturing the opposition coalition," Political analyst Rajesh Narain Bajpayee said. Congress leaders have so far

refrained from commenting on Yadav's statement, but party insiders indicate growing frustration with the lack of coordination among alliance partners. "This is not the time for regional parties to prioritize their own interests. The larger goal of defeating the BJP should guide our decisions," a senior Congress leader said on condition of anonymity. Bajpayee said: "Akhilesh Yadav's announcement has not only disrupted the INDIA alliance but also exposed the fragile nature of coalitions formed out of political expediency. As Delhi gears up for a high-stakes election, the fallout from this development will be closely watched. It remains to be seen whether the INDIA bloc can overcome its internal contradictions or if the cracks will widen, giving the BJP an upper hand in the battle for 2024."

Body of one miner recovered in Assam coal mine rescue operation



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ GUWAHATI

The body of one of the nine workers trapped inside a coal mine in Assam's Dima Hasao district was recovered by army divers on Wednesday on the third day of the rescue operations, officials said. The chances of the survival of the eight others appear grim, though a team of navy, army, NDRF and SDRF personnel intensified their efforts to rescue the trapped miners, they said.

The labourers were on Monday trapped inside the Assam Coal Quarry situated in the 3 Kilo area of Umrangso, after a sudden gush of water flooded the site. The rescue teams are taking turns to enter the mine, as the operations are underway round-the-clock, the officials said.

The divers located the body of the worker inside the mine early in the morning and its identity was yet to be ascertained, they said. A diver claimed that the body was spotted about 85 feet below the surface, and that the visibility was poor inside with

water all around. "21 Para divers have just recovered a lifeless body from the bottom of the well. Our thoughts and prayers are with the grieving family," Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma posted on X.

"Meanwhile, SDRF dewatering pumps have departed from Umrangshu for the location. Additionally, the ONGC dewatering pump has been loaded onto an MI-17 helicopter at Kumbhigram, awaiting weather clearance for deployment," he said in another post. Sarma said the rescue operations were continuing in full swing, with divers of the army and NDRF having already entered the well. The navy personnel are at the site, making final preparations to dive in after them, he said. The CM had on Tuesday said the mine "appears to be illegal", and that the police have arrested one person in connection with the incident. Sarma also said he had spoken to Coal Minister G Kishan Reddy, who assured him that a team from Coal India will join the rescue operations from Wednesday.

CM Yogi Adityanath flags off UP team for 28th Yuva Utsav-2025

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday flagged off the Uttar Pradesh team participating in the 28th Yuva Utsav-2025 and emphasised the importance of dialogue as a vital skill for success in public life.

28th Yuva Utsav-2025 is scheduled for January 10-12 at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.

Addressing youths, he said, "Effective communication is essential for any politician to succeed. Without mastering this art, one cannot excel in leadership roles." He called for replacing traditional student unions with youth parliaments



in universities and colleges, fostering leadership qualities and compassion for society. The chief minister stressed that individuals in any field - politics, administration, law

enforcement, agriculture, or entrepreneurship - must embody nationalism, love for the motherland and compassion for the people to ensure meaningful progress.

Highlighting the significance of January 12, the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, he said the day has a symbolic connection to youth and India's cultural and spiritual heritage. He said, "With Swami Vivekananda as an inspiration, Yuva Utsav celebrates the power of youth and allows participants to explore and learn about the nation's diversity." "The festival, held annually in Delhi with inspiration from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will feature programmes where youth can engage with leaders, including the prime minister and the defence minister, fostering invaluable moments of dialogue and learning," he added.



Uttar Pradesh Minister for Industrial Development, Export Promotion, NRI, and Investment Promotion, Nand Gopal Gupta 'Nandi' met Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal in New Delhi to invite him for the Prayagraj Mahakumbh scheduled for January 13, 2025 to February 26, 2025.

UP govt will reclaim every inch of land taken under pretext of Waqf: CM Yogi Adityanath

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday said the state government will reclaim every inch of land that has been taken under the pretext of waqf. Speaking at the 'Maha Kumbh Mahasammelan' organised by a private news channel here, he claimed that the belief system of Sanatan Dharma represents the world's oldest culture, standing above comparison with any religion or sect.

"I inherit a legacy that spans thousands of years, with its cultural and spiritual events equally ancient. The tradition of Sanatan is higher than the sky and beyond comparison," Adityanath, according to an official statement, said.



Taking a strong stance on the Waqf Board, he said, "It is hard to tell whether it is a Waqf Board or a board of land mafias." He said his government has amended the Waqf Act and is actively investigating all "occupied" land. "We will reclaim every inch of land that has been taken

under the pretext of Waqf and it will be used to build housing, educational institutions and hospitals for the poor," he affirmed. Highlighting the ancient heritage of Sanatan Dharma, Yogi asserted that the tradition of Kumbh far predates the Waqf institution. "The stature of Sanatan

Dharma is higher than the sky and its depth deeper than the ocean. It cannot be compared to any sect or religion," he said.

Chief Minister Adityanath strongly criticised the Samajwadi Party (SP) and its leaders, alleging that they failed to uphold the principles of (socialist leader) Dr Ram Manohar Lohia. He reminded that Dr Lohia had once said, "If you want to understand India, study the traditions of Ram, Krishna and Shiva. Those who claim to follow the ideals of Lohia never truly understood his words."

Addressing the dispute over religious sites in Sambhal, the chief minister pointed out that the Puranas mention Sambhal as the birthplace of Kalki, the tenth incarnation of

Lord Shri Hari Vishnu. He condemned attempts to encroach religious sites by damaging them, stating, "Our government took decisive action based on the court's order and sent a clear message to the rioters."

Highlighting the development of Ayodhya, he said, "We have transformed Ayodhya into a centre of development and heritage. Those who once opposed Ayodhya's progress have no moral authority to visit the city now."

"On religious conversion and 'ghar wapsi', he said, "If someone genuinely wishes to return to their original faith from the heart, they should be welcomed. This reflects a conscious respect for religion and tradition."

Discussing national and

Hindu unity, Adityanath emphasised that Sanatan Dharma has always held the highest position, asserting that Hindu unity and national unity go hand in hand.

"History bears witness that division has always led to weakness, unity has made us invincible. That is why I have always maintained 'Batenge to katenge, ek rahenge nekar rahenge' (Divide we fall, united we thrive)," he said. Criticising the opposition, Yogi accused certain groups of attempting to divide the society along caste and religious lines, calling them forces conspiring to weaken the nation.

He asserted that the people of the country have grown more aware and are no longer susceptible to such divisive tactics.

Bizarre Babas of Maha Kumbh: Stories of devotion, discipline and unique practices

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Maha Kumbh, the world's largest spiritual gathering, is set to take place from January 13 to February 26, bringing together saints, sages, and Sanyasis from every corner of India - and even beyond. Among the throngs of devotees, a select group of ascetics stands out, not just for their spiritual fervor but for their unconventional and awe-inspiring practices, each carrying a message of devotion, discipline, and social welfare. From a Baba who has not bathed in decades to another who starts his day with a bath using 51 pots of Ganga water, their practices defy ordinary logic. Some Babas express their devotion through silence, believing that speaking wastes energy meant for world welfare. Others make bold statements through sheer endurance-like a saint who wears a 45-kg



crown of 2.5 lakh Rudraksha beads, or a Sadhu who walked 750 kilometers from Nepal to Prayagraj,

undeterred by challenges, to take part in this sacred event. Welcome to the world of Bizarre Babas, where

spirituality meets the extraordinary! The Baba Who Hasn't Bathed for 32 Years

Gangapuri Maharaj, who has not taken a bath for 32 years, has become the center of attraction at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj. Known as Chhotu Baba, he hails from Assam's Kamakhya Peeth.

Gangapuri Maharaj has refrained from bathing for over three decades, citing an unfulfilled wish. "I do not take a bath because my wish has not been fulfilled in the last 32 years. I will not bathe," he explained.

Rudraksha Baba: The 45-kg Crown of Devotion Geetanand Giri Maharaj, famously known as Rudraksha Baba, has drawn fascination at the Kumbh Mela with his extraordinary penance. Every day, he meditates for 12 hours wearing a 45-kg crown of Rudraksha beads. Initially pledging to wear 1.25 lakh Rudraksha beads, offerings from devotees have increased

the count to 2.25 lakh.

A Naga Sanyasi from Shri Shambhu Panchdashnam Awahan Akhara, Geetanand Giri hails from Kot Kapura, Punjab. Leaving home at just two and a half years old, he embraced a life of spiritual dedication. In 2019, Baba vowed at the Triveni Sangam to wear the Rudraksha crown for 12 years. Six years into his journey, his resolve remains steadfast.

Anaaj Wale Baba: The Saint Who Grows Crops on His Head Amarjeet, known as Anaaj Wale Baba, stands out for promoting environmental awareness by growing crops like barley, wheat, and millet on his head. A resident of Sonbhadra, he has dedicated 14 years to this unique penance.

Baba views his practice as a form of Hatha Yoga, blending spirituality with ecological advocacy. "This is Hatha Yoga, and only a saint can

endure this," he stated. On Mauni Amavasya, he plans to harvest the grains and distribute them as prasad to devotees, symbolizing prosperity and blessings.

Mahakal Giri Baba: The One-Handed Tapasvi For nine years, Mahakal Giri Baba from Jodhpur, Rajasthan, has kept his left hand raised as an act of penance. His deformed, rigid arm symbolizes unwavering dedication to world peace and the preservation of Sanatan Dharma. "I took sanyas at the age of seven and am now 30," he shared.

Naga Swami Bhagirathi Giri: The One-Legged Yogi Bhagirathi Giri of the Atal Akhara has practiced Khadeshwari tapasya by standing on one leg for three years. Using a swing for support, he sleeps and meditates while maintaining his vow. "I will continue until atrocities against women and terrorism cease," he declared.

Naga Baba Pramod Giri: The 51-Pot Ritual of Devotion

Naga Baba Pramod Giri of Rajasthan performs a daily ritual involving a bath with Ganga water from 51 earthen pots. Each day, additional pots are added, culminating in 108 pots on the final day of the ritual. Baba's unwavering commitment spans nine years, showcasing his dedication to spiritual practices.

Walking 750 km for Faith: Vishnu Giri Maharaj's Journey to Maha Kumbh Vishnu Giri Maharaj, a saint from Nepal's Niranjani Akhara, walked 750 kilometers over nine months to reach Prayagraj. Facing hardships and narrowly escaping accidents, he remained determined to fulfill his vow. Upon arrival, he described his holy dip in the Sangam as rejuvenating, reflecting the spirit of resolve that defines the Maha



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Brace up for battle royal

With polling scheduled for February 5, Delhi is poised for a fiercely contested three-way battle

As the Election Commission officially announced the schedule for Delhi's upcoming assembly elections, the stage is set for what promises to be a hard-fought, three-cornered contest. Polling for the 70 assembly seats in Delhi will take place on February 5, with the results to be declared on February 8. This election is poised to be a high-stakes battle between the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, each bringing its own strategies, narratives and issues to the forefront. Under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal, AAP is looking to secure a third consecutive term in Delhi. The party, which has enjoyed overwhelming success in the last two elections, is fiercely campaigning for a 'hat-trick.' Kejriwal, whose party has transformed the political landscape of Delhi since its formation in 2012, is betting on his track record of governance and what he calls the 'politics of work.' AAP's focus remains on welfare programmes such as free electricity, water and healthcare, while the party claims its tenure has been marked by development and transparency. With the slogan "Phir layenge Kejriwal," AAP has launched a campaign centred around a positive vision for the future, contrasting its achievements with the BJP's focus on divisive politics. However, AAP's victory is far from assured. Despite its dominance in the previous two elections, the party now faces mounting challenges. AAP has been dogged by corruption allegations, a point of attack that the BJP has effectively capitalised on. For the BJP, this election is a do-or-die contest. The party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has mounted an aggressive campaign aimed at ousting Kejriwal and the AAP from power. The BJP's central theme revolves around anti-incumbency, accusing AAP of corruption and failing to address the capital's development needs. Prime Minister Modi, at the forefront of the BJP's attack, has called the AAP government an 'AAP-da' (disaster) and criticised its inability to offer a vision for Delhi's growth. Modi's rhetoric positions the BJP as the party of national progress, while framing Kejriwal's leadership as an obstacle to Delhi's future. The BJP's strategy is twofold: discredit the AAP's governance while appealing to voters' desire for change. The Congress, once the dominant force in Delhi, is now a distant third. After losing power in the capital in 2013, the party has been trying to rebuild its political base, which has been severely eroded by both AAP and BJP. However, this time the party is determined to make its presence felt in the elections. Given the deepening polarisation, high stakes and aggressive strategies on all sides, the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections are shaping up to be a politically charged, hard-fought, and closely contested battle. Voters will have to choose between a legacy of governance under AAP, a vision for change from the BJP, and the prospect of stability from the Congress, making this election one of the most bitterly fought yet interesting to the core.



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PICTALK



A man and children perform for alms at Sagar Island on a foggy winter morning, in South 24 Parganas

Donald Trump's H-1B dilemma

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares for his second term, the debate over H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers is heating up



KALYANI SHANKAR

As the US President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office on January 20, he faces a unique challenge. The issue of immigration and the H-1B visa has become a contentious point among the two key groups. He is trying to satisfy the conflicting interests of the billionaire tech community, who heavily fund his campaigns, and his 'America First' base.

Trump's recent favourable statements on H-1B visas for foreign skilled workers have sparked renewed discussions on the future of this critical programme. The New York Post quoted Trump, "I've always liked the visas, I have always been in favour of the visas."

That's why we have them." He added: "I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B visas. I have used it many times. It's a great program."

Trump admitted, Trump has backed Elon Musk and his other wealthy funders from Silicon Valley (South Africa-born Musk had an H1B visa himself). While tech leaders want a liberal H-1B visa regime, 'America First' hardliners wish for stricter restrictions on immigration at all levels.

In his first term, Trump prioritised protecting American citizens' interests, which had significant implications on the H-1B visas. 'America First' advocates argue that H-1B visas take jobs away from American workers. The looming question is, will the Trump's second term may prioritise American workers' jobs, or it could revert to the traditional Republican belief that immigration primarily benefits employers. Debates arose over H-1B visas following Trump's appointment of India-born Sriram Krishnan as his advisor on artificial intelligence. It caused divisions within Trump's team—opponents of the H-1B visa claim that the immigrants take away American jobs. The intriguing question is whether a second Trump term will prioritise jobs for American workers or revert to the traditional Republican stance that immigration is pri-



marily beneficial for employers. Influential supporters like Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy argue that H-1B visas are crucial for addressing the US engineers shortage. Musk, who built his empire, and Vivek Ramaswamy have strongly supported the program. Musk expressed his readiness to go to war over it. They highlight a significant skills gap in the US labour market, particularly in STEM fields.

What is an H-1B visa, and why is there such controversy surrounding it? Would India suffer if H-1B visas were eliminated? The visa system for skilled workers from other countries was introduced in 1990 by President Bush to work legally in the US. The visa is for three years. Applicants must have a job lined up with a US-based sponsoring company or institution. Since 2004, the United States has limited the number of new H-1B visas to 85,000 yearly.

This cap includes 20,000 visas for international students with advanced degrees from US universities. In the fiscal year 2023, the US approved just over 386,000 H-1B applications. For the fiscal year 2024, there were 758,994 eligible registrations, an increase from 474,421 in 2023. Most approved applicants work in



MAJOR US COMPANIES, INCLUDING TECH GIANTS LIKE AMAZON AND GOOGLE, ARE SIGNIFICANTLY SCALING BACK THEIR SPONSORSHIP OF H-1B VISAS. INDIAN IT FIRMS, INCLUDING INFOSYS AND TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES (TCS), ALSO RECORDED SUBSTANTIAL REDUCTIONS

science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The issue is more than just an economic concern; new developments in artificial intelligence and advanced computing technology make it vital for US defence and national security. India receives approximately 72 per cent of H-1B visas, while Chinese citizens account for around 12 per cent.

Eliminating country-specific caps could increase job opportunities for Indians in the United States. It is a significant concern for many prospective applicants. Major employers in the tech industry, including Indian companies like Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro, represent 35 per cent of the top 10 beneficiaries of H-1B visas. Beginning with FY 2025, USCIS changed from an employer-based to a beneficiary-centric registration system, following the agency's 'serious concerns' noted after the FY 2024 registration period. Amazon, the largest H-1B sponsor, saw a steep decline in approvals, dropping from over 11,000 in 2023 to just above 9,000 in 2024. Major US companies, including tech giants like Amazon and Google, are significantly scaling back their sponsorship of H-1B visas. Indian IT firms, including Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS),

also recorded substantial reductions. Not everyone wants to get rid of the visa system.

According to the American Enterprise Institute and the Partnership for a New American Economy, increasing the H-1B visa cap could generate 1.3 million new jobs. It would contribute approximately \$158 billion to the US GDP by 2045. H-1B visa holders often add to the workforce instead of taking jobs from US workers. Trump's recent statement about H-1B visas has given hope to many visa seekers, especially Indians. He stated that the US needs skilled and intelligent people and promised more job opportunities. It provides a positive outlook for H-1B visas. H-1B visa holders often complement, rather than compete with, US workers. Now many H-1B visa seekers are hopeful after Trump has sided with Musk. He claimed that there was a need for skilled and intelligent workers. His promise of unprecedented job opportunities offers a positive outlook for those seeking H-1B visas. The Indian government closely monitors any backlash against Indian H-1B visa holders in the US.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SUPERSTAR CULTURE HURTS TEAM INDIA

Madam — No kudos is enough for Harbhajan Singh for boldly opposing the 'superstar culture' revolving around the 'holy cows' of Indian cricket. Irfan Pathan has also done the same and also questioned the place of Virat Kohli in the team. Not only has Kohli aggregated merely 190 runs in his nine innings in the just-concluded Indo-Australia Test series, but he has averaged less than 30 over the last five years! Yet Kohli gets not only allowed to dominate in the team; a deluge of silly excuses gets bizarrely served on the lines of 'Form Temporary Class Permanent,' 'A century just an innings away,' and 'Stop criticising; runs will come!'

And to render a damn lie to 'ultimate truth' through constant repetition, some former stars have started shouting, "Kohli has still 4-5 years of glorious cricket in him!" But if one is not any 'superstar,' we get Wriddhiman Saha! So even after saving India from an imminent defeat in the Kanpur Test against New Zealand, that too by overcoming the unbearable pain of a stiff neck, Saha (then reigning as the world's best wicketkeeper) was clearly conveyed publicly, even when the Test was still on, that he is not in the team's 'scheme of things!' So in this biased, prejudiced setup, it is highly natural that this 'gallant show' of failures is sure to go on unless the 'superstar' culture is made to see its immediate end!

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

JUSTIN TRUDEAU QUITS

Madam — The editorial 'Trudeau steps down' (Jan 8) highlights the domestic political reasons, economic failure and discontent in his own Liberal party for his resignation. In fact, Justin Trudeau scripted his own exit. His diplomatic blunders are also potential reasons for his resignation. He unnecessarily antagonised India for gaining Sikh support in elections without realising that the Khalistani movement is a secessionist and a hostile agitation that has the least support in India. He admittedly had no proof of the involvement of

Cashless treatment for road accident victims



As per the report titled "National Strategy for Prevention of Unintentional Injury," there were 430,504 deaths from unintentional injuries and 170,924 deaths due to intentional injuries in India. Despite efforts to improve road safety, India continues to grapple with a high number of fatalities due to road traffic injuries. It is unfortunate. The government of India, in line with its commitment to reduce fatalities, launched a pilot programme in Chandigarh in March 2024 to provide cashless treatment to the victims of road accidents caused by the use of motor vehi-

cles. The aim of this scheme was to establish an ecosystem for providing timely medical care to the victims of road accidents, including during the golden hour.

As per the scheme, the victims will be entitled to cashless treatment up to a maximum of 1.5 lakh rupees per accident per person for a maximum of 7 days from the date of the accident. It is applicable to all road accidents caused by the use of a motor vehicle on any category of road. Claims raised by hospitals for providing treatment to be remembered from the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund. The pilot programme was later expanded to six states. The scheme is going to be implemented nationwide from March 2025, as announced by Nitin Gadkari, Central Minister for Road Transport. It is really a welcome move. Certainly, lives of more accident victims will be saved.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

Indian agencies, yet he continued to blame India for the Nijjar murder case and promote and protect the extremist Pannu. His open support for Khalistani extremist elements eroded his credibility worldwide, as the Indian diaspora, including Sikh brethren, are peacefully living on all the continents, and only a few in Canada support Khalistan.

Trudeau gambled in vain. India observed utmost diplomatic restraint against Trudeau's anti-India statements on Khalistani extremists. It is true that no extremist or terrorist group dares to surge without government support, as it needs media, judiciary, police, and diplomatic support and funding for its secessionist, hatred, divisive, and violent activities. Canada provided all these facilities to the Khalistani extremists. Now the Trudeau tenure is over, the Khalistani extremists may not have a favourable time in Canada, and all false allegations against India in the Nijjar murder case will meet a logical end, and hardcore elements like Pannu will not be supported by the state. The Trudeau exit should be a lesson to

those foreign leaders who are inciting and supporting anti-national organisations in India.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

SALARY INCREMENTS DELAYED

Madam — Economic instability and the tendency of customers to reduce expenses have compelled major IT companies to postpone salary increments. This step by reputed firms like Infosys and LTI Mindtree is an effort to maintain financial balance, but its long-term impact could be severe. A blow to employees' morale may lead to a decline in their creativity and efficiency. Additionally, measures like layoffs and reduction in workdays could create insecurity among the workforce. It is essential for companies to take balanced decisions that ensure financial stability while considering the human aspect, paving the way for holistic growth.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Influencer marketing is making a big impact on India's small towns

Influencer marketing, once seen as an urban phenomenon, is now making waves in India's small towns and rural areas

Influencer marketing is no longer just a big-city thing in India. It has taken even the country's small towns and rural areas. The sole reason behind this shift is the recent surge in regional content creators, who connect deeply with local audiences by speaking their language, both literally and culturally.

The rise in regional content A regional revolution is on the cards for India's digital landscape. The share of regional language consumption on OTT platforms alone is estimated to go beyond 50-50 per cent by 2025, leaving Hindi content behind. This is to say, India's appetite for content in native languages is growing aggressively, laying down a strong foundation for regional influencers to thrive.

Brands tapping into 'Bharat' Brands seem to acknowledge this shift and have begun increasingly collaborating with regional influencers to penetrate non-metro markets. There's no argument over how crucial influencer marketing has become for



brands, with 75 per cent of brands considering it a part of their marketing strategy. Partnering with local creators gives an edge to brands in delivering messages that resonate with regional audiences and build engagement and trust.

Enter micro & nano influencers Brands are going big on micro and nano influencers, given their unmatched effectiveness in these markets. Their content is more relatable and trustworthy to local audiences. Notably, 47 per cent of brands prefer collaborating with micro and nano influencers for cost-effective campaigns and better engagement.

Economic opportunities for regional creators The creator economy is ris-

ing rapidly. The market size is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 22 per cent from 2023 to 2030.

This growth rate is proof of the plethora of opportunities that lie for regional creators, enabling them to monetise their content while contributing to the local economy. Despite the promising growth, challenges remain. Many creators in smaller towns may need more access to high-quality production resources or brand partnerships.

However, as the digital infrastructure improves and brands continue to recognise the value of regional influencers, these hurdles are likely to go away. The rise of regional content creators is reshaping India's influencer

marketing ecosystem.

By tapping into local languages and cultures, these influencers are not only taking brand messages to their target audience but also democratising content creation across the nation.

The rise of regional content creators is transforming India's influencer marketing landscape. By connecting with local audiences in their native languages and cultures, these influencers are expanding the reach of brands to non-metro markets. As regional content consumption grows, brands are increasingly partnering with micro and nano influencers to achieve cost-effective, relatable, and trustworthy engagement.

The growing creator economy offers significant economic opportunities, despite challenges like limited access to production resources. As digital infrastructure improves, regional influencers will continue to thrive, reshaping content creation and broadening its reach across the nation.

(The writer is Founder and CEO iCubesWire; views expressed are personal)



SAHIL CHOPRA



FIRST COLUMN

STOP BLAMING, START AIMING

Blame is an easy escape when life doesn't go as planned, but it's also a barrier to personal growth



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Every man is the architect of his own life; hence one can easily say that we all try to make our lives just the way we want them to be, however, when something goes wrong, we immediately start looking out for someone or something to blame instead of changing ourselves to better the situation. It's a fact that we all spend too much of our time and energy in finding people to blame for all the problems in our life. But why do we need to blame someone?

Because we want to redeem ourselves of the guilt of doing something wrong by justifying it, therefore internally we pass on the responsibility of our behaviour to a person, situation or an external factor. Doesn't that sound very normal? Well!!! It may be to the majority of us, but while playing this game of blaming, we forget that as per the Law of Karma, the one who changes himself first is the one who gets the gift of happiness. Hence if we are seekers of peace and happiness, then we have to change ourselves and not wait for others to do so. Blaming others happens due to a lack of vision to recognise and accept our faults and laziness in making amendments.



Gradually it becomes a habit of lethargy in a royal disguise. Usually, we blame others for our misery because we feel that things could have been better if the other person behaved properly with us, but we fail to understand the very fact that every action has an opposite and equal reaction, hence instead of looking at self, we always struggle to set the opposite person right.

When we are unable to find someone to blame, we end up blaming the situation. However, while doing so, we forget the fact that all the situations in our life are our creations, hence according to Karma Philosophy whatever we are experiencing currently is the result of an action, word or thought manifested sometime earlier. And now when it is time for us to repay, we should readily do it with courage & settle our karmic account to experience a burden-free state of mind. Right?

When the above two factors i.e. blaming someone or something don't work, the despaired human soul goes to the extent of blaming the Almighty because he feels that since everything in the world happens by the will of the Supreme, his plight is also an outcome of God's desire. Quite funny, isn't it? But we all indulge in such pastime activity daily. Remember! We all are actors who fall under the law of karma & perform actions to derive fruit out of it. Almighty never gets a share out of it.

As our teacher & guide, HE can teach, and make us understand, but HE cannot appear in the exam for us. Hence, we have to take all the tests of life by ourselves with full confidence. For a spiritual aspirant, unpleasant situations are examinations of life that are necessary to elevate one's spiritual stage & help in leaping forward in self-progress. Hence, we must not miss the opportunity to snap the web that we have all created with rationalization. Whether we fail or pass in these examinations doesn't matter much, what counts is the courage & vigour with which we face these examinations. For spiritual evolution, the habit of blaming is one of the major obstacles simply because the first rule of spirituality is observing one's self and not the others.

Hence it is very important to take responsibility for the experiences we undergo & make a conscious effort to do the right and be honest and accountable to ourselves because deceiving ourselves will only take us further away from spiritual liberation. So!! Stop blaming and start aiming because when you blame others, you give up your power to change.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

India's forests: Gains, gaps and the way forward



B K SINGH

The report underscores the need for robust monitoring, effective execution of plantation drives and third-party certification of carbon stock to meet India's climate commitments



Forest Survey of India has been releasing biannual reports on the status of Indian forests. The last report was released on December 31, 2021, and the current report which was due in December 2023, has been released after a year's delay. The highlight of the report is that total forest cover has been increased from 7,15,187 square km (2021 assessment) to 7,15,343 square km (current assessment), which is now 21.76 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. Also, the tree cover, which comprises trees along the linear infrastructures and also in agricultural fields up to one hectare is increased by 1289 square km, which is 3.41 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. The net increase of forest cover and tree cover is 1445 square km in two years period till 2023.

The increase in forest cover is a meager 156 square km. Among the states that have gained maximum increase in forest cover are Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. A maximum decrease in forest cover has been noticed in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Ladakh and Nagaland. Recorded Forest / Green Wash areas (RFA/GW) are the forests in control of the forest department. While Mizoram, Odisha, Karnataka, West Bengal and Jharkhand have added in RFA/GW areas and the forest cover has increased, Tripura, Telangana, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat have lost. It indicates that states are losing their recorded forests. Villages on the fringes of the forests have been burning tree growth and occupying forest land with the support of local leaders and to claim it under the Forest Rights Act, of 2006. Improper implementation of the Forest Rights Act, of 2006 can be attributed to the reason for the loss of forests for agriculture. All the states have been taking up ambitious plantation programmes to increase forest cover and tree cover. The degraded forest areas are being planted regularly.

Taking a conservative estimate, a minimum of 18,000 square km area is being planted annually in the country; should



THE NET INCREASE OF FOREST COVER AND TREE COVER IS 1445 SQUARE KM IN TWO YEARS PERIOD TILL 2023. THE INCREASE IN FOREST COVER IS A MEAGER 156 SQUARE KM. AMONG THE STATES THAT HAVE GAINED MAXIMUM INCREASE IN FOREST COVER ARE UTTAR PRADESH, RAJASTHAN, CHHATTISGARH AND ODISHA

it not be reflected in this report? How can we justify a 7 square km increase in two years in RFA? It only indicates that deforestation and degradation are taking place at the same pace, we are planting the areas. Such an important report should contain an assessment of the success of plantations across the states. Forest cover outside RFA has increased in Gujarat, Bihar, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, while it has been lost in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Loss of cover outside RFA is on account of the failure of the administration of the Revenue department of the state. States should put greater vigil on such forests.

These are the carbon sinks and in the era of a warming world, we cannot afford to plunder tree growth even outside RFA. The bright spot in the report is the success of the agroforestry programme. Most states have lost forest cover, but have gained in tree cover. This means that tree planting programmes on private lands/community lands have been largely successful. Trees on government lands can be cut and destroyed, but the same cannot be done on private lands. In this period of two years, very dense forests increased by 3465.12 square km, while moderately dense forests and open forests have decreased by 1043.23 square km and 2480.11 square km respectively. Forest departments' efforts in taking up plantations in open and degraded areas appear to have shown some success. A large chunk of open and degraded areas has been re-stocked, which has pushed it into the very dense forest category.

But a simple arithmetic indicates that 58 square km of forests have been lost. Most probably, several small plots taken from forests on the fringes of the villages must

have been encroached on for agriculture and eventually community members had an intention to claim rights over it. Decadal changes in forest cover in Western Ghats eco-sensitive areas have also been brought out in the report. It is found that 58.22 square km of cover is lost in ten years. How can we forget the 30th July tragedy that struck Wayanad, Kerala? Nearly 500 humans were buried under landslide debris when they were asleep.

It also damaged roads, bridges, buildings and human houses. Landslides in portions of Karnataka and Maharashtra across the Western Ghats have disrupted lives and livelihoods. Losing 58 square km in ten years means losing nearly 6 square km annually. We need to mend our ways and cannot afford to lose any tree growth in such eco-sensitive areas. Mangroves in the country along the coastline protect against tsunamis, cyclones and Sea surges of any kind. The report indicates that out of 4991 square km of mangroves 7.5 square km is lost in two years. While Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra together have added 25 square km of mangroves, Gujarat has lost 36 square km. On the western coast Gujarat is the most vulnerable state against frequent and destructive cyclones, how can it afford to lose such a big chunk of mangrove forests?

Other coastal states are reportedly expanding their mangroves by taking up large-scale planting, but the report does not show any increase. There has to be an enquiry as to why mangrove plantation programs are failing. Another highlight of the report is that the growing stock of carbon in the forests is 7285 Mt, and comparing it with the 2021 report there is an increase of 81.5 Mt in two years. Thus our forests are adding 40.75 Mt of carbon annually,

which is like 149 Mt of CO2 equivalent annually. Comparing it with the report of 2005, the growth in forests has created a carbon sink of 2.29 billion tons of CO2 equivalent compared to the 2005 level. To contain the average global rise in temperature within 1.50 Celsius, we have committed in our nationally determined contribution to achieve a carbon sink of 2.5 to 3.0 billion tons of CO2 equivalent by 2030 in response to the Paris Climate Accord of 2015. We are on course to achieve the target well before 2030. I suppose we need a third-party assessment for carbon stock in our forests. Carbon credit has been quite a contentious issue and in several annual climate conferences, UNFCCC has failed to find a resolution. However, for the first time at Baku CoP 29, a resolution has been achieved. It has allowed countries to trade carbon credits - certified reductions of carbon emissions at prices determined as a consequence of emission caps imposed.

It has also been agreed that the operations of the carbon market would be supervised by the UN body. Strict UN control is needed, as a project proponent in the developed nation can pay for an afforestation project to absorb 1000 tons of CO2 in a developing nation where trees fail to put in desired growth and are unable to sequester the entire quantity of carbon credited. Therefore, the carbon sink created by us through our interventions in forest growth needs certification from the UN body. The report in future should take into account the plantation programs each state is implementing and measure the change in the cover concerning the success/ failure of plantations.

(The writer is retired Principal chief conservator of forests, head of Forest Force, Karnataka. Views expressed are personal)

Mahakumbh 2025: A spiritual confluence of faith, wisdom and Sahaj Smriti Yog

The Mahakumbh invites millions to experience a celestial confluence of rivers, spirituality and wisdom

The Mahakumbh at Prayagraj, commencing on January 13, 2025, promises a celestial confluence of rivers, minds, and spirituality. This ancient gathering is a tribute to India's cultural and spiritual heritage, drawing millions of pilgrims and seekers worldwide. This year, the Mahakumbh assumes greater significance as it hosts a 'Samagami' (gathering) of seers and spiritual leaders to discuss Guru Nand Kishore's book, Sahaj Smriti Yog (An Impactful Form of Yoga and Meditation) and his teachings on Sanatan Dharma, spirituality and meditation.



B K JHA

Sahaj Smriti Yog, founded by Guru Nand Kishore of the Darpan Foundation, transcends being a meditation technique; it is a journey to self-realisation. It guides individuals to transition from clear thinking to transcending thought, unveiling inner peace and clarity. Gurujee emphasises that rediscovering one's true self involves uncovering innate purity and harmony. In Sahaj Smriti Yog, Gurujee delves into the alignment of

this practice with the eternal principles of Sanatan Dharma, which sees truth as timeless and unchanging. The Mahakumbh's spiritual energy provides an ideal setting for this exploration. Guru Nand Kishore's interpretation of Sanatan Dharma underscores timeless wisdom, essential for spiritual pursuits. He highlights Guru Parampara (the lineage of spiritual masters) as vital for spiritual evolution, stating, "Sanatan Dharma offers solutions before problems arise—a clarity achievable through meditation or Samadhi." This wisdom, he explains, allowed ancient seers to provide fearless counsel to rulers.

Central to Sahaj Smriti Yog is the Guru's role as a mirror reflecting the seeker's inner

self. Guru Nand Kishore asserts that true Gurus cannot self-proclaim; they are identified by seekers who trust their guidance. He warns against false spiritual leaders, emphasising that genuine Gurus help dissolve ego, a prerequisite for enlightenment. Trust, he stresses, forms the foundation of the Guru-disciple relationship—a value modern society must urgently rediscover.

The philosophy of Sahaj Smriti Yog is rooted in simplicity and universality, making it accessible to all. Unlike practices advocating detachment, it encourages embracing life's responsibilities fully. Transformation arises not by escaping reality but by engaging with it deeply and meaningfully. This approach fosters



spiritual growth while remaining grounded in daily life. The practice is built on three principles: understanding, experiencing, and feeling. Understanding cultivates self-awareness through intelligence and emotions. Experiencing transforms life's events into opportunities for growth. Feeling connects prac-

tioners with ultimate reality, transcending superficial existence to access profound essence.

What sets Sahaj Smriti Yog apart is its non-coercive nature. It doesn't demand rigorous discipline or thought suppression but gently guides the mind to a state of deep peace and harmony. Practitioners effortlessly rediscover inner stillness and clarity.

Guru Nand Kishore's vision extends to societal harmony. The Darpan Foundation and its ashram in Noorundumalai, Tamil Nadu, embody this philosophy. The ashram is a sanctuary for exploring Sahaj Smriti Yog principles, emphasising sustainability and holistic living. Gurujee advocates conscious choices, such as

supporting locally sourced food, to nourish both individuals and the planet.

The Mahakumbh provides an unparalleled platform for spiritual exchange. The 'Samagami' on Sahaj Smriti Yog will explore trust, humility, and spiritual growth.

Guru Nand Kishore's teachings offer a roadmap for resolving global conflicts by fostering trust and reducing ego-driven blindness. He believes peace begins with personal transformation, replacing arrogance with clarity and humility.

As humanity faces division and mistrust, Gurujee's Sahaj Smriti Yog serves as a beacon of hope, offering paths to personal enlightenment and collective harmony. The Mahakumbh amplifies this

message, inviting individuals from all walks of life on a transformative journey.

Through the lens of Sahaj Smriti Yog, the Mahakumbh celebrates eternal spirituality, where ancient wisdom meets contemporary relevance. It calls humanity to embrace simplicity, sustainability, and spiritual clarity. As millions gather at Prayagraj to witness the confluence of rivers, Sahaj Smriti Yog reminds us that true peace begins within. Gurujee's words, 'Clarity gives you power,' encapsulate the transformative potential of this timeless practice. Let Mahakumbh 2025 be a milestone in redefining spirituality for a harmonious world.

(The writer is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal)

'All hell will break out if hostages in Gaza are not freed': Trump warns Hamas

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President-elect Donald Trump has warned that "all hell will break out in the Middle East" if the hostages being held by Hamas are not released by Inauguration Day. Trump did not elaborate on what actions he might take if the captives are not released by the time he takes office. Officials say about 100 hostages, including some Americans, who were seized on October 7, 2023, remain captive in Gaza, though they believe many of them may have died in captivity. "All hell will break out. If those hostages aren't back, I don't want to hurt your negotiation, if they're not back by the time I get into office, all hell will break out in the Middle East," Trump told reporters at a news conference in Mar-a-Lago, Florida.

Trump will be sworn in on January 20 as the 47th President of the United States. He was responding to a question on the status of negotiations with Hamas on the release of American hostages. His Special Envoy to the Middle East Steven Charles Witkoff, who has just returned from the region, told reporters that they are on the verge of it. "I believe we've been on the verge of it. I don't want to discuss sort of what's delayed it, no point in being negative in any way. But I think it's the president, his stature, what he's said he expects, the red lines he's put out there, that's driving this negotiation," Witkoff said. Noting that they are making a lot of progress, he said: "I don't want to say too much because I think they're doing a really good job back in Doha. I'm leaving tomorrow to go back to Doha. But I think that we've had

some really great progress and I'm really hopeful that by the inauguration we'll have some good things to announce on behalf of the president." Negotiations between Hamas and Israel are ongoing in Qatar, with Hamas this week naming 34 hostages in Gaza — including two dual US citizens — it would be willing to release in a ceasefire deal, the National Public Radio reported. Trump, in response to a question, warned Hamas to release all the hostages by January 20. "It will not be good for Hamas and it will not be good frankly for anyone. All hell will break out. I don't have to say anymore, but that's what it is. They should have given them back a long time ago — they should have never taken them. There should have never been the attack of October 7th. People forget that, but there was and many people were killed," he said.



The flag-draped casket of former President Jimmy Carter lies in state during a ceremony in the Capitol on Tuesday in Washington. Carter died on Dec. 29 at the age of 100. AP/PTI

Jimmy Carter eulogised by Kamala Harris, congressional leaders

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Nearly 44 years after Jimmy Carter left the nation's capital in humbling defeat, the 39th president returned to Washington for three days of state funeral rites starting Tuesday. Carter's remains, which had been lying in repose at the Carter Presidential Centre since Saturday, left the Atlanta campus Tuesday morning, accompanied by his children and extended family. Special Air Mission 39 departed Dobbins Air Reserve Base north of Atlanta and arrived at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland. A motorcade carried the casket into Washington for a final journey to the Capitol, where members of Congress will pay their respects. In Georgia, eight military pallbearers held Carter's casket as cannons fired on the tarmac nearby. They carried it to a vehicle that lifted it to the passenger compartment of

the aircraft, the iconic blue and white Boeing 747 variant that is known as Air Force One when the sitting president is on board. Carter never travelled as president on the jet, which first flew as Air Force One in 1990 with President George HW Bush. The scene repeated outside Washington. The former president's casket was removed from the plane, cannons fired and a military band played. A hearse emblazoned with the seal of the president joined a motorcade that steered toward Washington. A bipartisan delegation of members of Congress were led into the Capitol Rotunda by Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, Democrats who represent Carter's home state. Vice President Kamala Harris, members of President Joe Biden's cabinet and three of the nine US Supreme Court justices — John Roberts, Brett Kavanaugh and Elena Kagan — also were present. The US Army Band Brass

Quintet played as people awaited the casket. The room fell silent as three knocks on the rotunda door marked Carter's arrival. The casket was placed in the middle of the room on the Lincoln catafalque, a platform built in 1865 to hold slain president Abraham Lincoln's casket in the same place. Harris, Senate Majority Leader John Thune and House Speaker Mike Johnson delivered eulogies celebrating Carter's faith, military service and devotion to service, including his hands-on contributions to building homes for those in need through Habitat for Humanity. "Jimmy Carter was that all too rare example of a gifted man who also walks with humility, modesty and grace," Harris said, recalling his unpretentious approach to campaigning. He slept in the homes of his supporters to "share a meal with them at their table and listen to what was on their minds," she said.

The US Naval Academy Glee Club performed the patriotic hymn "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" before bipartisan congressional leaders and Harris, accompanied by her husband Doug Emhoff, placed wreaths beside the casket. Members of Carter's family, including some of his grandchildren, wiped tears. Carter, who died December 29 at the age of 100, will lie in state Tuesday night and again Wednesday. He receives a state funeral Thursday at Washington National Cathedral. Biden will deliver a eulogy. There are the familiar rituals that follow a president's death — the Air Force ride back to the Beltway, a military honor guard carrying a flag-draped casket up the Capitol steps, the Lincoln catafalque in the rotunda. There also will be symbolism unique to Carter. As he was carried from his presidential centre, a military band played hymns — "Amazing Grace"

and "Blessed Assurance" for the outspoken Baptist evangelical who called himself a "born-again Christian" when he sought and won the presidency in 1976. In Washington, his hearse stopped at the US Navy Memorial, where his remains were transferred to a horse-drawn caisson for the rest of his trip to the Capitol. The location nods to Carter's place as the lone US Naval Academy graduate to become commander in chief. All of the pomp carries some irony for the Democrat who went from his family peanut warehouse to the Governor's Mansion and eventually the White House. Carter won the presidency as the smiling Southerner and technocratic engineer who promised to change the ways of Washington — and eschewed many of those unwritten rules when he got there. From 1977 to 1981, Carter was Washington's highest-ranking resident. But he never mastered it.

Trump doesn't rule out using military to get Panama Canal, Greenland

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President-elect Donald Trump on Tuesday did not rule out the use of the military to bring Panama Canal and Greenland under American control, which he argued is of great economic and strategic significance to the United States. "I'm not going to commit to that. Now it might be that you'll have to do something," Trump told reporters at Mar-a-Lago in Florida. He was asked if he would use the military to gain control of both the Panama Canal and Greenland. "Look, the Panama Canal is vital to our country, it's being operated by China, China. And we gave the Panama Canal to Panama, we didn't give it to China," Trump said. Giving the Panama Canal to Panama in just one dollar by the former president Jimmy Carter, he argued, was a very

big mistake. "Giving the Panama Canal to Panama was a very big mistake. We lost 38,000 people. It cost us the equivalent of USD 1 trillion, maybe more than that, probably the most expensive structure, if we call it a structure, which I guess you can ever build. Giving that away was a horrible thing," he said. Trump said the US needs Greenland for national security purposes. "I've been told that for a long time, long before I even ran. I mean people have been talking about it for a long time. You have approximately 45,000 people there. People really don't even know if Denmark has any legal right to it, but if they do, they should give it up because we need it for national security," Trump asserted. "That's for the free world. I'm talking about protecting the free world. You don't even need binoculars, you look out-

side, you have China ships all over the place. You have Russian ships all over the place. We're not letting that happen. We're not letting it happen. If Denmark wants to get to a conclusion — but nobody knows if they even have any right title or interest," he said. "The people are going to probably vote for independence or to come into the United States. But if they do that, then I would tariff Denmark at a very high level," he said. Trump said he has not drawn up a plan for acquisition of Greenland yet. Hawaii was the last territorial acquisition of the United States. It was admitted as the 50th State on August 21, 1959. Alaska, the largest US State, was admitted as the 49th State on January 3, 1959. On New Year's eve, Greenland's Prime Minister Mute Egede has expressed his desire to obtain independence from Denmark.

Tents arrive for survivors of quake that killed 126 in freezing Tibet

PTI ■ BEIJING

Rescuers in the freezing, high-altitude Tibet region in western China searched a second day for any remaining victims of a deadly earthquake that struck near a holy city for Tibetan Buddhists, before shifting their focus to resettling the survivors. More tents, quilts, stoves and other relief items were being delivered Wednesday to people whose homes were uninhabitable or unsafe. Temperatures fall well below freezing overnight in an

area with an average altitude of about 13,800 feet. In video aired by state broadcaster CCTV, workers could be seen erecting rows of tents with metal frames and stakes after nightfall Tuesday. Meant as temporary shelter, they were lined with quilted padding to keep out the cold. The workers distributed packaged food items to the shelter occupants, donning blue winter jackets over their orange uniforms. The confirmed death toll stood at 126 with another 188 injured

as of Tuesday evening, and no further updates were issued during the day on Wednesday. Hong Li, the director of Tibet's Emergency Management Department, told a late afternoon news conference that the work had shifted from search and rescue to resettlement and reconstruction. The earthquake struck an outlying county in the city of Shigatse, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, the second-highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism. It was not immedi-

ately known whether he was in his Tashi Lhunpo Monastery at the time or how much damage Tibet's second largest city sustained. The epicenter was about 25 kilometers from the main part of the city, which is called Xigaze in Chinese and sprawls across a high altitude plain. More than 500 aftershocks were recorded after the earthquake, which the US Geological Survey said measured magnitude 7.1. China's earthquake center recorded a magnitude of 6.8. The quake

was also about 75 kilometers from Mount Everest at the border with Nepal, where the shaking sent people running out of their homes in the capital. A candlelight vigil was planned on Wednesday night in Dharamsala, India, home to the Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's highest figure, and a large Tibetan population. An announcement on the Dalai Lama's website said he would lead a prayer ceremony in memory of the victims on Thursday. The Dalai Lama is

viewed by the Chinese government as bent on making Tibet independent of China. Asked about the prayer ceremony, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said, "We are very clear about the separatist nature and political schemes of the Dalai Lama and remain highly vigilant." Guo expressed confidence that the people in the earthquake zone will be able to rebuild under "the strong leadership" of China's ruling Communist Party.

New Okhla Industrial Development Authority
 Administrative Building, Sector-6, Noida, G.B. Nagar (U.P.)
 Website: www.noidaauthorityonline.in

E-TENDER NOTICE

E-Tenders are invited from firms/contractors registered with for the following jobs against which bids can be uploaded and same shall be opened / downloaded as per schedule mentioned. The details and conditions of all tenders are available on Noida Authority's official website: www.noidaauthorityonline.in & <https://etender.up.nic.in>. Please ensure to see these websites for any changes/ amendments & corrigendum etc.

Sl. No.	Job no/Work name	Amount (Rs. in Lacs)
1.	03/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o Green belt & RSP along with Express Highways 15.00 to 20.00 Km RHS Service Road, 02 year maintenance.	99.07
2.	17/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o RSP and Green belt along with Express Highway 10.00 Km to 15.00 Km RHS Service Road, two year maintenance.	98.73
3.	25/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o Green belt & RSP, 02 Year maintenance along Express Highway 15.00 Km to 20.00 Km Service Road & Green Belt LHS.	83.23
4.	28/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o Park & RSP Sector-110 Central Verge & Both Side 02 Year maintenance.	61.02
5.	36/D(H)/DD(H)-II/2024-25, M/o Park (Annual maintenance of footpath, boundary wall, grill, gate and other civil work in different parks of sector-21 and 25) Noida.	46.17
6.	51/D(H)/DD(H)-II/2024-24, M/o RSP (Vertical Garden) in sector-14, Shahdara Drain Bridge both side and sector-59, 61, 62 and sector-63 metro pillars with two year maintenance, Noida.	91.46
7.	68/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o Green belt & RSP, 02 year maintenance Express Highway 5.00 to 10.00 Km Service Road & Green Belt LHS.	79.37
8.	73/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o Park in front of metro station in sector-137 DOG park with Two year maintenance.	30.64

Which can be uploaded by date **15.01.2025 upto 5.00 PM**. Pre-qualification shall be opened/ downloaded on date **16.01.2025 at 11.00 AM**.

Sl. No.	Job no/Work name	Amount (Rs. in Lacs)
1.	48/D(H)/DD(H)-II/2024-25, M/o Park/Wetland (Beautification of Foot over bridge and other civil maintenance work in wetland park sector-54), Noida	60.26
2.	50/D(H)/DD(H)-II/2024-25, M/o Park/Green Belt (civil maintenance work in YRF Under Horticulture Division-I area for One Year) Noida.	74.91
3.	69/D(H)/DD(H)-II/2024-25, M/o Park (Annual M/o Boundary wall footpath, gate, grill, toilet and painting work at Children Park, shivalik Park and green belt in front of Shivalik park sector-33A) Noida.	53.72
4.	71/D(H)/DD(H)-II/2024-25, M/o Park/Green Belt (civil maintenance work in Sector-44 Under Horticulture Division-I area for One Year) Noida.	63.04
5.	78/D(H)/DD(H)-III/2024-25, M/o RSP (Beautification and construction of roundabout situated in sector-153) Noida in Victorian style canopy, dome and sculpture with raised platform and bollard lighting etc.	93.50

Which can be uploaded by date **22.01.2025 upto 5.00 PM**. Pre-qualification shall be opened/ downloaded on date **23.01.2025 at 11.00 AM**. Director (Hort.), Noida

CLEAN, GREEN, SAFE & SECURE NOIDA

CAN FIN HOMES LTD
 CIN : L85110KA1987PLC008699, Above Canara Bank Building, First Floor, Plot No C-3, Sector - 1, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, Pin Code : 201301, E-mail : noida@canfinhomes.com, Ph No : 0120 - 2970164/65/67, 7625079126

DEMAND NOTICE

Under Section 13 (2) of the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002 (SARFAESI ACT) read with Rule 3(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rule, 2002 (Rules)

Whereas the undersigned being the Authorised Officer of Can Fin Homes Ltd., under SARFAESI Act and in exercise of powers conferred under Section 13(12) read with Rule 3, issued Demand Notice under Section 13(2) of the said Act, calling upon the Borrowers/guarantors listed hereunder (hereinafter referred to as the "said Borrowers"), to repay the amounts mentioned in the Notice, within 60 days from the date of receipt of Notice, as per details given below. The said Notices have been returned undelivered by the postal authorities / have not been duly acknowledged by the borrowers. Hence the Company by way of abundant caution is effecting this publication of the demand notice (as per the provisions of Rule 3 (1)). The undersigned has, therefore, caused these Notices to be pasted on the premises of the last known addresses of the said Borrowers, as per the said Act. As security for due repayment of the loan, the following assets have been mortgaged to the Company by the respective parties as detailed below.

Sr. No.	Name of Borrowers/ Guarantors with address	Date of N.P.A	Amount claimed as per Demand Notice	Schedule Of The Mortgaged Property
1	1. Mrs. Seema Singh W/o Jasveer Singh Rana Address 1 - House No. 276, I Block, Govindpuram Ghaziabad 201002 Address 2 - House No. 138, Narayanpur Vaska, Dhaulana, Distt Hapur-245301 Address 3 - Flat No. S-3, Second Floor, Without Roof Right, Build On Plot No. - 109,110, Khasra No. 572, Vishnu Enclave, Hadbast Village - Dasna, Pargana - Dasna, Tehsil - Ghaziabad, District - Ghaziabad 201013 Address 4 - Chw Forge Pvt Ltd, Near Hapur Road Flyover Malliwara, Nehru Nagar, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh 2010012. Mr. Jasveer Singh Rana S/o Mahender Singh Address 1 - House No. 276, I Block, Govindpuram Ghaziabad 201002 Address 2 - House No. 138, Narayanpur Vaska, Dhaulana, Distt Hapur-245301 Address 3 - Flat No. S-3, Second Floor, Without Roof Right, Build On Plot No. - 109,110, Khasra No. 572, Vishnu Enclave, Hadbast Village - Dasna, Pargana - Dasna, Tehsil - Ghaziabad, District - Ghaziabad 201013	29-12-2024	Rs. 17,08,781/- (Rupees Seventeen Lakh Eight Thousand Seven Hundred Eighty One Only) As On 02.01.2025	Flat No. S-3, Second Floor, Without Roof Right, Build On Plot No. - 109,110, Khasra No. 572, Vishnu Enclave, Hadbast Village - Dasna, Pargana - Dasna, Tehsil - Ghaziabad, District - Ghaziabad/Boundaries Of Plot No. 109: East: Plot No. 110 West : Plot No. 108 North: Digar Malik Land South: 20 Ft Wide Road/Boundaries Of Plot No.110: East: Plot No. 111 West : Plot No. 109 North: Digar Malik Land South: 20 Ft Wide Road
2	1. Mrs. Rakhi W/o Ombir Address 1 - Plot A-1/215, Entire Ground Floor, DLF Dilshad Ext - II, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh 201005 Address 2 - D - 255, Old Seemapuri, East Delhi - 110095 Address 3 - Bank Of India, Ram Vihar, Delhi 110092 2. Mr. Ombir S/o Lakhmi Address 1 - Plot A-1/215, Entire Ground Floor, DLF Dilshad Ext - II, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh 201005 Address 2 - M.c.d. Sahadara Zone, Near Shyam Lal College, Shahdara, New Delhi, 110032	29-12-2024	Rs. 14,19,333/- (Rupees Fourteen Lakh Nineteen Thousand Three Hundred Thirty Three Only) As On 02.01.2025	Residential Entire Ground Floor, Build On Plot No. A-1/215, Dlf Dilshad Ex. Second Hadbast Village - Brahmapur Urf Bhopura, Pargana - Loni, Tehsil And District - Ghaziabad Boundaries:East: 25 Ft Wide Road West: Plot Digar North: Plot.No.A-1/216 South: Plot.No.A-1/214

Payable with further interest & contractual rates as agreed from the date mentioned above till dated payment.

You are hereby called upon to pay the above said amount with contracted rate of interest thereon within 60 days from the date of publication of this notice, failing which the undersigned will be constrained to initiate action under SARFAESI Act to enforce the aforesaid security. Further, the attention of borrowers/guarantors is invited to provisions of Section 13 (8) of the Act, in respect of time available to them to redeem the secured assets

Date: 08-01-2025 Place: Noida Sd/- Authorized Officer Can Fin Homes Ltd

Second wind-whipped wildfire burning out of control in LA

PTI ■ LOS ANGELES

A fast-moving wildfire broke out Tuesday in the inland foothills northeast of Los Angeles hours after another blaze tore through the city's Pacific Palisades neighbourhood along the coast, destroying many homes and prompting evacuation orders for tens of thousands. The Eaton fire in Altadena started near a nature preserve just before 6:30 p.m. The flames spread so rapidly that staff at a senior care centre had to push dozens of residents in wheelchairs and hospital beds down the street to a parking lot where they waited in their bedclothes for ambulances and other vehicles to take them to safety. To the west, the Pacific Palisades fire that started Tuesday morning burned out of control into the night. The Los Angeles Fire Department put out a plea for off-duty firefighters to help fight the flames that were being pushed by winds topping 60 mph (97 kph) in some places and creating chaotic scenes as residents fled. It was too windy for firefighting aircraft to fly, hampering the fight. The Pacific Palisades fire swept through a Los Angeles hillside dotted with celebrity residences Tuesday, burning homes and prompting evacuation orders. In the frantic haste to get to safety, roadways were clogged and scores of people abandoned their vehicles and fled on foot, some toting suitcases.



The traffic jam on Palisades Drive prevented emergency vehicles from getting through and a bulldozer was brought in to push the abandoned cars to the side and create a path, according to the LA Fire Department. California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was in Southern California to attend the naming of a national monument by President Joe Biden, made a detour to the canyon to see "firsthand the impact of these swirling winds and the embers," and he said he found "not a few — many structures already destroyed." Officials did not give an exact number of structures damaged or destroyed in the Pacific Palisades wildfire, but they said about 30,000 residents were under evacuation orders and more than 13,000 structures were under threat. And the worst could be yet to come. The blaze began around

10:30 a.m., shortly after the start of a Santa Ana windstorm that the National Weather Service warned could be "life threatening" and the strongest to hit Southern California in more than a decade. The exact cause of the fire was unknown and no injuries had been reported, officials said. Only about 25 miles (about 40 kilometers) northeast in Altadena, the Eaton fire was burning. The winds were expected to increase overnight and continue for days, producing isolated gusts that could top 100 mph (160 kph) in mountains and foothills — including in areas that haven't seen substantial rain in months. "By no stretch of the imagination are we out of the woods," Newsom warned residents, saying the worst of the winds are expected between 10 p.m. Tuesday and 5 a.m. Wednesday. He declared a state of emergency on Tuesday.

GDP growth likely to be 6.3 per cent in FY25, says SBI report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The GDP growth is expected to be about 6.3 per cent in the current fiscal year, a tad lower than the government's estimates of 6.4 per cent, owing to several factors such as weak demand, SBI research report said on Wednesday.

According to the first advance estimates (FAE) of National Income for 2024-25 released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), released on Tuesday, India's economic growth rate is estimated to slip to a four-year low of 6.4 per cent in 2024-25, because of poor showing by the manufacturing and subdued investments.

Historically, the difference between the estimates of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the NSO is always in the range of 20-30 bps and hence the 6.4 per cent estimate for the 2024-25 fiscal year is along expected and reasonable lines, the SBI's research report 'Ecowrap' said.

"We, however, believe that



GDP (gross domestic product) growth for FY25 could be around 6.3 per cent, with downward bias," it said.

The report authored by Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Adviser, State Bank of India (SBI), also said as per capita nominal GDP is expected to increase significantly in the current fiscal ending March 2025, by Rs 35,000 more than 2022-23, despite a slowdown in real GDP growth and nominal GDP growth remaining almost stagnant.

The FAE of the GDP in general shows a slowdown in aggregate demand in 2024-25, it said.

The heads that have positively contributed include government consumption with a growth of 8.5 per cent in nominal terms (4.1 per cent in real terms). Exports have also held the fort with positive growth of 8 per cent (5.9 per cent in real terms).

The worrying aspect of the demand is marked slowdown in gross capital formation, SBI's study said, adding that

the capital formation nominal growth declined 270 bps to 7.2 per cent.

"...Overall picture is that demand remains weak and sequential slowdown in FY25 at 6.4 per cent is an outer limit while the actual growth is definitely below the estimated figure," it said.

The report further said that the fiscal deficit at the end of November 2024 stood at Rs 8.5 lakh crore, or 52.5 per cent of the Budget Estimates (BE). However, taking into account the revised GDP figures, if tax receipts grew by the BE, government expenditure lowered due to low CAPEX then fiscal deficit will be 4.9 per cent of the GDP in 2024-25, SBI's research said.

While, if government sticks to the fiscal deficit of Rs 16.1 lakh crore, then with the revised GDP numbers, the deficit as per cent of GDP would be at 5 per cent in 2024-25, the report said.

In the Union Budget, the government projected to bring down the fiscal deficit to 4.9 per cent of the GDP in the current financial year.

Budget should focus on tax simplification, reduction in personal I-T: EY

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Budget is expected to focus on boosting private capex, tax simplification and reduction in personal income tax, particularly for the lower-income groups, to stimulate demand, EY India said.

The Union Budget for 2025-26 is scheduled to be presented in Parliament on February 1.

EY India, in its Budget expectation note, said with over Rs 31 lakh crore stuck in income tax disputes as of 2023-24, there is an urgent need to clear Commissioner of Income Tax (Appeals) backlog and bolster alternate dispute resolution mechanisms like advance pricing agreements and safe harbours.

"While a full comprehensive review of the direct tax code may take time, we might see some initial steps towards its implementation in this Budget. I also hope for a reduction in personal income tax, particularly for the lower-income groups, to provide relief and stimulate demand," said Sameer Gupta, National Tax Leader, EY India.

EY said the expectations from Budget are focused on a set of strategic reforms that can



propel the economy forward. With an emphasis on fiscal consolidation, tax system simplification, and investment-driven growth, the Budget is expected to lay a solid foundation for sustained economic development.

EY anticipates significant reforms to simplify the tax system and improve taxpayer services, reduce litigation, and enhance tax compliance.

The government is already working on simplifying the Income Tax laws. It should follow a consultative approach and invite public comments on the draft proposals, EY said.

"Key areas of focus are likely to include enhancing public spending, reducing the fiscal

deficit, incentivising private sector investment, and introducing targeted tax reforms that foster business innovation," EY said.

In the last Budget, government had rationalised the capital gains structure in terms of holding period of assets and tax rates. The government may further address some of the unintended anomalies to make the rationalisation of capital gains more complete, EY said.

For instance, the holding period for capital assets, such as business undertakings in slump sales may be reduced from 36 months to 24 months and unlisted shares in IPO offer for sale (OFS) from 2 years to 1 year, aligning them

with listed securities.

Gupta further said for businesses, particularly SMEs, reducing the complexity of tax compliance is critical.

To achieve sustainable growth in FY26, the government must prioritise reducing the fiscal deficit to 4.5 per cent of GDP in FY26 while reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio, which stands at 54.4 per cent, well above the fiscal responsibility and budget management (FRBM) target of 40 per cent.

A medium-term real GDP growth target of 6.5 per cent or higher will require boosting the aggregate investment rate (GFCF) measured at constant prices to 34 per cent.

This can be achieved by increasing the government's capital expenditure, improving capital efficiency and encouraging states to enhance their investment spending.

To stimulate private sector investment, a progressive reduction in interest rates should be considered. Additionally, targeted employment schemes should be fast-tracked to uplift urban demand and support economic momentum in FY26, EY said.

Govt revises gold import data from April; cuts Nov figures by USD 5 Billion to USD 9.84 Billion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The government has revised gold import data, bringing down numbers for November by USD 5 billion to USD 9.84 billion, possibly to rectify double accounting of inbound shipments.

According to revised data of the commerce ministry arm Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCIIS), gold import numbers have been slashed since April 2024, revealing excess imports of about USD 11.7 billion during the first eight months of 2024-25.

The revision was prompted by an unusual surge in imports of the precious metal in November 2024, leading to record import of USD 69.95 billion and the highest ever trade deficit of USD 37.84 billion.

Noticing the jump, the commerce ministry started examining if there were any calculation or accounting mistakes in the compilation of the gold imports data.

Kolkata-based DGCIIS is an organisation for the collection, compilation and dissemination of India's trade statistics and commercial information.

The revised data published on the DGCIIS website showed a difference of about USD 11.7 billion for April-November 2024-25.

The cumulative gold import during April-November 2024-25 worked out to be USD 37.38 billion as against the earlier estimates of USD 49.08 billion.

According to the revised DGCIIS data, the inbound shipments in April, May, June, July, August, September and October 2024 were USD 2.95



billion (as against earlier estimate of USD 3.11 billion), USD 2.91 billion (USD 3.33 billion), USD 2.47 billion (USD 3.06 billion), USD 2.57 billion (USD 3.13 billion), USD 8.64 billion (USD 10.06 billion), USD 3.3 billion (USD 4.39 billion), and USD 4.67 billion (USD 7.12 billion), respectively.

After the revision, the trade deficit -- difference between imports and exports -- for November is expected to be revised downwards to USD 32.84 billion. Similarly, there will be a revision in imports as well as trade deficit numbers for the last eight months of the current fiscal year.

During April-November 2023-24, gold imports stood at USD 32.92 billion.

A query sent to the commerce ministry on the issue remained unanswered.

Prices of the yellow metal have increased 17 per cent so far this fiscal year to Rs 80,000 per 10 gm in the national capital.

In the Budget, the government slashed the duty from 15 per cent to 6 per cent.

India's gold imports, which have a bearing on the country's current account deficit (CAD), surged 30 per cent to USD 45.54 billion in 2023-24. India imports the largest

amount of gold from Switzerland, which has about 40 per cent share, followed by the UAE (over 16 per cent), and South Africa (about 10 per cent).

The precious metal accounts for over 5 per cent of the country's total imports.

India is the world's second-biggest gold consumer after China. The imports mainly take care of the demand by the jewellery industry. Gems and jewellery exports last month declined 25.32 per cent year-on-year to USD 17.43 billion.

The country's CAD widened marginally to USD 9.7 billion, or 1.1 per cent of the GDP, in April-June 2024 against USD 8.9 billion, or 1 per cent, in the year-ago period.

A current account deficit occurs when the value of goods and services imported and other payments exceed the value of export of goods and services and other receipts by a country in a particular period.

Commenting on the revision, economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) Founder Ajay Srivastava said the DGCIIS on January 8, "quietly revised without any explanation" India's gold import figures for November 2024 by a significant USD 5 billion.

India must speed up hybrid technology adoption in pulses, oilseeds to reduce imports: P K Mishra

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
India needs to accelerate adoption of hybrid technology in pulses and oilseeds to address production deficits, while acknowledging the challenges faced by farmers in implementing these advanced farm practices, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister P K Mishra said on Wednesday.

Mishra highlighted that despite showing promising results, hybrid varieties, particularly in crops like pigeon pea ('toor dal'), have not achieved widespread adoption among farmers.

"These two crops need our attention much more than what we did so far," he said while inaugurating the national symposium organised by Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS) here.

While some hybrid mustard seeds are available in the market, their performance compared to open-pollinated varieties requires further investigation, he said.

Addressing the limitation of annual seed purchases - a requirement for hybrid crops - Mishra mentioned ongoing global research efforts to develop technologies allowing farmers to save and reuse hybrid seeds. "This will help saving on the cost of seeds."

Highlighting challenges faced in adoption of hybrid seeds, Mishra said India's pioneering work in hybrid technology, which revolutionized crops like maize and cotton, faces uneven adoption across different crops despite its proven potential to boost productivity and climate resilience.



The country's early achievements in hybrid technology, starting with the first cotton hybrid in 1970, demonstrated significant success in cross-pollinated crops. However, adoption rates remain surprisingly low in key staples like rice, where hybrid varieties cover only 8 per cent of the total cultivated area despite 35 years of technology introduction.

"Hybrid technology has shown remarkable superiority in many cross-pollinated, low-volume and high-value field and horticultural crops," he said. "However, in field crops except maize, pearl millet and cotton, hybrids have not occupied larger areas."

India's vegetable production success story underscores hybrid technology's potential, reaching 213 million tonne in 2022-23 with an average productivity of 19 tonne per hectare. The official attributed this achievement largely to hybrid variety adoption.

The country's hybrid rice programme, launched in 1989 with the support of UNDP and FAO following China's success, has yielded several varieties from public sector

institutions. However, he said hybrid rice varieties must significantly outperform pure line varieties under optimal conditions to drive wider adoption.

ICAR's hybrid development programmes have shown particular strength in 'bajra', sorghum, and maize. "The concept of single cross hybrids in maize has revolutionized maize productivity."

Public sector institutions have successfully released hybrids in various crops including rice, pigeon pea, mustard, tomato, and cauliflower. However, experts emphasize the need to understand farmers' reluctance to adopt hybrid varieties in certain crops.

"Unless the hybrids successfully compete with best pure line varieties at optimum management conditions and higher profits, area expansion will not happen," the official added, highlighting the need for focused research to improve hybrid yield potential.

Research priorities now include developing hybrids that offer clear advantages in productivity, nutrition, and

stress resistance while remaining economically viable for farmers.

The government has introduced guidelines for gene editing technology, which could potentially accelerate crop improvement. These advanced tools, including marker-assisted selection, are expected to enhance breeding precision and expedite hybrid development with targeted traits.

Mishra emphasized the need for robust public-private partnerships (PPP) to overcome implementation challenges. Key areas requiring attention include strengthening intellectual property rights, protecting plant varieties, and developing efficient seed production systems.

Despite inherent complexities in hybrid breeding programmes, including inbreeding depression and infrastructure requirements, Mishra expressed optimism about recent advancements in genomics and biotechnology offering solutions to these challenges.

The focus remains on making scientific research relevant to farmers' needs while working towards reducing India's dependence on pulse imports, the official added.

TAAS Chairman R S Paroda called for a clear policy on genetically-modified crops and incentives like tax exemption for seed industry.

ICAR Director General Himanshu Pathak, Federation of Seed Industry of India Chairman Ajai Rana, ICRISAT Director General Stanford Blade were among others present at the three-day event ending January 10.

Cybersecurity firm Rubrik announces its expansion plans in India

PNS ■ BENGALURU
Cybersecurity firm Rubrik announced its expansion plans in India with the opening of a new office space in Bengaluru.

The new facility, which intends to replace the operations of the company's existing two offices in the city over a period of time, is expected to open by mid of 2025.

"The new facility will combine product development, product management, customer support, and global recovery operations under one roof," a company statement said.

Company co-founder and CEO Bipul Sinha also announced plans to hire talent from India for the expansion.

"By investing in top engineering talent, we believe we will continue to create innovative solutions that enhance Rubrik's portfolio and support our global growth," he added.

"India is in the midst of a massive digital transformation, and we believe there is a huge opportunity for Rubrik to help secure its digital future. There is a large pool of talent here.

India is an economy with an extremely fast growth rate. Outside the US, India is one of the largest locations for the company in terms of headcount," he said, adding that the company expects to invest "hundreds of million dollars" in the country.

Rupee plunges 13 paise to settle at new record low of 85.87 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee extended its slide for the second straight session and declined 13 paise to hit a fresh record low of 85.87 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday amid higher crude oil prices and stronger American currency.

Lacklustre sentiment in domestic equity markets and sustained outflow of foreign funds also played spoilsport even as investors stayed cautious over lower economic growth projection by the government, forex analysts said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.82 and touched the lowest-ever level of 85.89 against the greenback during intra-day. The unit settled at 85.87 (provisional) against the dollar, 13 paise lower than its previous close.

On Tuesday, the rupee settled with a loss of 6 paise at 85.74 against the dollar.



Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.35 per cent higher at 108.76.

The 10-year US bond yields also remained elevated at 4.67 per cent amid expectations of delayed interest rate cuts by the Federal Reserve.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, climbed 0.90 per cent to USD 77.74 per barrel in futures trade.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex skid 50.62 points, or 0.06 per cent, to settle at 78,148.49 points, while the Nifty fell 18.95 points, or 0.08 per cent, to 23,688.95 points.

Expect RBI to cut interest rates next month; Budget must focus on job creation: CII president

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Industry body CII expects the RBI to cut the benchmark interest rates next month to support sagging growth, its President Sanjiv Puri said on Wednesday and stressed the need to boost job creation through targeted interventions for labour-intensive sectors in the upcoming Budget.

In an interview with PTI, Puri flagged "sticky" food inflation, highlighting the need to build agricultural resilience and de-linking it from the interest rates under the inflation targeting framework, arguing that it is on account of climate change and not really influenced by the monetary policy.

Puri is also the Chairman and Managing Director of ITC.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is slated to present the Budget in Parliament on February 1.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) chief also expressed optimism that much-needed labour reforms will be taken up by the BJP-led NDA government in the third term, stressing that it would benefit the economy and create more jobs.

Puri also raised the issue of dumping excess stock by China globally, including India, and urged the government to look



at an "accelerated way of implementing minimum import price and anti-dumping duty" for specified sectors like steel, paperboard, chemicals and polymers.

Responding to a question on the potential impact on India after the Donald Trump-led administration assumes office in the US this month, the CII President said we should focus on the areas where there is opportunity and where we can really play on our strengths.

"...Now, what Trump will do, etc. What the US will do? I think at this point of time, it would be very speculative when it happens, that we will address," Puri said.

He informed that public spending is picking up and consumption should also gain momentum, pointing out that CII expects a rate cut by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

"In fact, we are also suggesting that in the inflation targeting framework, I think food inflation should be de-linked from interest rates, from the monetary policy. Food inflation is on account of climate change and not really influenced by monetary policy," Puri said.

CII recommends setting up some kind of an institutional mechanism to look at labour reforms across a number of sectors, he added.

Puri called for introducing targeted interventions in labour-intensive sectors like apparel, footwear, furniture, tourism and real estate, asserting that tourism could benefit from "infrastructure status" whereas garments can benefit from a Production Linked Incentive (PLI) 2.0 scheme.

CII, in its Budget suggestions for 2025-26, has recommended lowering the excise duty on fuel to boost consumption, especially at the lower income level, arguing that fuel prices significantly drive inflation.

The Budget could also consider reducing marginal tax rates for personal income up to Rs 20 lakh per annum.

INBRIEF

HINDUSTAN ZINC UPLIFTS OVER 1,700 STUDENTS THROUGH SHIKSHA SAMBAL WINTER CAMP

UDAIPUR: Hindustan Zinc Limited (NSE: HINDZINC), India's largest and the world's second-largest integrated zinc producer, successfully concluded its education focussed Shiksha Sambal winter camp, supporting nearly 1,700 students from underprivileged rural hinterland.

BSES AND AIIMS UNITE FOR ECO FRIENDLY MOBILITY'S'24

BSES and AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) have joined hands for promoting eco friendly mobility. In a landmark initiative to promote green mobility and better accessibility within the sprawling 213-acre AIIMS campus, BSES is providing 27 zero-pollution electric buses to the premier health facility under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program for the hospital's Free in-Campus Shuttle Service.

PROTECTING OUR BIRDS, PROTECTING OUR FUTURE

AMRITSAR: Webinar on "National Bird Day 2025" with "Theme Protecting Our Birds, Protecting Our Future" was organized by Department of Botanical and Environmental Sciences, Guru Nanak Dev University to create awareness regarding bird diversity and related issues.

Isak strikes again as Newcastle beats Arsenal 2-0 in League Cup semifinal

PTI ■ LONDON

Newcastle moved a step closer to a first major domestic trophy since 1955 with a 2-0 victory over Arsenal in the first leg of the English League Cup semifinals. Goals from Alexander Isak and Anthony Gordon at the Emirates Stadium put Newcastle within reach of the final at Wembley Stadium in March. The second leg is at St James' Park on Feb. 5. "It's a great result. It's only the first half. If we don't go through then this has no meaning, but we can't hide from the fact that this is a massive win," Isak said. It was Newcastle's first win at the Emirates since 2010 and Arsenal's first home defeat since April.

Isak struck in the 37th minute to continue his outstanding scoring run with his 14th goal in 15 games. The Sweden international was involved in Newcastle's second in the 51st, when his shot was saved by Arsenal goalkeeper David Raya and the rebound was converted by Gordon. Despite being bought by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund in 2021, Newcastle hasn't won a major domestic trophy since lifting the FA Cup almost 70 years ago. But it is close to second League Cup final in three years after losing to Manchester United in 2023. Newcastle is also pushing for a return to the Champions League after missing out last season — sitting fifth in the Premier League standings and one point outside of the



qualifying places for European club soccer's elite tournament. Victory against Arsenal was a seventh straight win in all competitions for Eddie Howe's team, which has been inspired by Isak's brilliant goal-scoring form. He fired in off the underside of the crossbar from close range after a long free kick was played into his path by Jacob Murphy. It was Isak's seventh goal in his last five games. Despite in-stadium referee announcements being trialed for the match, an apparent push in the buildup to his goal did not result in referee Craig Pawson reviewing the sideline monitor. It was Isak's sharpness that led to Newcastle's second. His effort from inside the box six minutes into the

second half was parried by Raya, but Gordon was the quickest to react at the far post to fire home. Arsenal was unbeaten in 13 games in all competitions and is second in the Premier League standings. It had the chance to take the lead when Gabriel Martinelli burst through in the 29th and fired against the post. Kai Havertz wasted a golden opportunity to pull a goal back when his attempted header from directly in front of goal came off his shoulder and went wide. "We rode our luck a little bit at times, but (I'm) really pleased with the result," Howe said. Tottenham plays Liverpool in the other semifinal, with the first leg being staged at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on Wednesday.



Women's Hockey India League will provide financial stability to junior players: Savita Punia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hoping to continue playing until the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, India's seasoned goalkeeper Savita Punia feels the introduction of Women's Hockey India League will provide financial stability, especially to junior players and attract more youngsters to the sport. The inaugural edition of the league will be held from January 12-26. "Every player wants financial stability, can buy good equipments, make their family stress free, help their family when they need. We are in the national team for long and whenever we win medals the government gives us awards and rewards," Savita told PTI during an interview. "But when a junior player gets such a good amount, she doesn't have to take that financial tension. She just needs to play and we as seniors only tell them this. But you can't deviate from your goal, the sport. First priority is preference whether it's hockey or any sport," she said. "Parents can now at least relax that there is future in hockey, we can involve our wards in hockey," the former India captain added. The veteran of nearly 300 internationals is 34 now but she has no plans to retire and wants to continue until the end of the LA Games in 2028, provided she remains fit and enjoys playing the game. "Definitely (I want to play in 2028), but being a girl I always felt that there will be pressure from my parents, but I always feel proud that my parents always respected my

decisions. "After I got married, I must have done something good that I got so supportive in-laws and husband who always backed my dream. I am blessed in that sense," Savita said. Savita, who has three Asian Games medals including one silver and two bronze under her belt besides a Commonwealth Games gold, was a member of the Indian team that finished a creditable fourth in the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. "The focus is on 2026 World Cup and Asian Games and both the families told me if you want to play LA Olympics we are there for you. I don't have any hesitation about telling my age or anything, my goal is if I am fit and enjoy hockey, I will continue playing. "I started to enjoy playing hockey from the last five-seven years," she said. Savita will be representing Soorma Hockey Club in the upcoming women's HIL starting in Ranchi, in which she will lead the team alongside current national team skipper Salima Tete. Savita said the first-ever HIL will be a game changer for women's hockey not only in India but across the world. "It will be beneficial for all of us. We senior players have played with international stars and have that experience but for young players who are new into the system it is a big platform. "If you simply talk about our team Soorma, there are good international players from Holland, Germany, Belgium, England. We get to learn from their training regime and intensity and discuss among

ourselves. "When we look at their attitude and energy on the ground, we realise that we also have to do like them. The mindset is changing and it is a very good platform for young players. "They share their process of training with us and we do the same and it is beneficial for both. The league will inspire the youth to take up hockey after watching the intense matches. It's a big opportunity for junior players," she added. By her own admission, Savita doesn't miss the national team captaincy as she feels she already has immense responsibility as a senior player. "I always take responsibility being a senior goalkeeper or senior player. "When I was made the captain, definitely there was pressure on me but I took it in my stride. I never felt extra pressure. I always respected the decision of the coaches. As a goalkeeper I had my own responsibilities," she said. She was full of praise for new women's hockey team coach Harendra Singh, under whose guidance India defended the Asian Champions Trophy title in Rajgir, Bihar recently. "A new coach needs time to deliver and understand the system. Every coach wants to teach the best and when Harendra sir came, there was not much difficulty because he coached us in 2017 as well," she said. "In Pro League he took 24 players and tried everyone, he tried a few players in new positions. He told us not to take tension about results, 'I will look into it, you just play your hockey.'"

France coach Didier Deschamps says he will leave after 2026 World Cup

PTI ■ PARIS

Didier Deschamps announced Wednesday that he won't continue as France coach after the next World Cup, bringing an end to an era in which he became the nation's most successful manager over more than a decade. The 56-year-old Deschamps said in an interview with broadcaster TF1 that he will leave when his contract expires in the summer of 2026. "I've been here since 2012, I'm scheduled to be here until 2026, the next World Cup, but that's where it's going to end because it has to end at some point," Deschamps said in excerpts of the interview to be aired later Wednesday. "I did my time, with the same desire and the same passion to keep the France team at the highest level, but 2026 is all very well." Deschamps started in his role as a successor to Laurent Blanc. After a period marred by the 2010 World Cup debacle — where the players went on strike in protest against then-coach Raymond Domenech — and off-the-pitch controversies, Deschamps led France to victory at the 2018 World Cup, also reaching the final in 2022 and at the 2016 European Championship. At the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, France lost an epic title match to Argentina. "I'm not here for the records," said Deschamps, who also won the 2021



Nations League with France. "The most important thing is that the France team remains at the top as it has been for many years." Deschamps is one of only three people in soccer history to have won the World Cup as both a player and a coach, along with Mario Zagallo (Brazil) and Franz Beckenbauer (West Germany). He has the highest number of wins (105) of any France coach, ahead of Michel Hidalgo and Domenech (tied on 41). Deschamps found himself in a difficult position after the Euros last year, where France lost 2-1 to Spain in the semifinals without impressing. France was widely criticized for its pragmatic and dull style of play at Euro 2024, with Randal Kolo Muani's header against Spain the team's first and only goal from open play by a France player all tournament.

But he has kept the confidence of French federation president Philippe Diallo. "He's still just as motivated and ready to wear the colors of the French team," Diallo told L'Equipe newspaper, adding that he did not believe Deschamps is tired of the job. "Didier Deschamps' career has been exceptional, marked by the most prestigious titles," he said. "At the Euros, it was another semifinal in a major tournament. He was not affected by fatigue or criticism. After the competition, I asked him the question. His clear answer was that he was fully committed and energized to continue his mission. And that's exactly what he's doing, as we finished top of our group for the Nations League. He is still the greatest coach the French team has ever had."

As a player, Deschamps captained France to victory at the 1998 World Cup and 2000 European Championship. He also won the Champions League with Marseille in 1993 and Juventus in 1996. Before taking charge of France's national team, he coached Monaco to the 2003-04 Champions League final and guided Juventus back to Serie A. Deschamps also achieved success at Marseille, winning the Ligue 1 title in 2010. Europe will send 16 teams to the first 48-team World Cup, being co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico in the summer of 2026. Deschamps did not elaborate on his future beyond the tournament. "There is a life afterwards," he said. "I don't know what it will be." His planned departure will leave plenty of time for Diallo to find the right successor to Deschamps, with former France great Zinedine Zidane the overwhelming favorite if he is still interested in the job. Zidane, who helped to lead Les Bleus as a player to their first World Cup title in 1998 and starred again when they won the European Championship in 2000, scored in two World Cup finals and was on the losing side once when he headbutted Italy's Marco Materazzi in the 2006 final on his final match as a player. As a coach, Zidane led Real Madrid to three consecutive Champions League titles.

BFI adopts World Boxing's new weight classes

PTI ■ BAREILLY

The Boxing Federation of India (BFI) is conducting the men's national championships here in 10 weight categories, in line with the classification introduced by the breakaway World Boxing. The ongoing event is being held under World Boxing's Technical and Competition Rules, which has 10 instead of the 13 weight categories that feature in the suspended International Boxing Association's (IBA) roster. The new weight classes are 50kg (Flyweight), 55kg (Bantamweight), 60kg (Lightweight), 65kg (Welterweight), 70kg (Light Middleweight), 75kg (Middleweight), 80kg (Light Heavyweight), 85kg (Cruiserweight), 90kg (Heavyweight) and +90kg (Super Heavyweight). Out of these, six categories -- 55kg, 60kg, 65, 70kg, 80kg, and 90kg -- are marked as potential Olympics weight categories.



The new categories for women are 48kg (Light Flyweight) is the first division followed by 51kg (Flyweight), 54kg (Bantamweight), 57kg (Featherweight), 60kg (Lightweight), 65kg (Welterweight), 70kg (Light Middleweight), 75kg (Light Heavyweight), 80kg (Light Heavyweight), +81kg (Heavyweight). World Boxing is a breakaway international body aiming to secure recognition from the

International Olympic Committee and ensure that boxing remains on the Olympic roster. Formed in April last year after the International Boxing Association was stripped of its status, WB has managed to pull in requisite 60 members and the IOC is expected to take a call on its recognition early next year. India joined WB a few weeks ago. Govind Sahani kicks off Nationals with win

Meanwhile, Strandja Memorial silver-medallist Govind Sahani started his Nationals campaign with a commanding win over Mohammad Aarif of Jammu and Kashmir on the opening day on Tuesday. Devendra Solanki of Rajasthan kicked off the tournament in style, defeating Donald Winston Janumala in the flyweight (47-50kg) category on Tuesday. In the bantamweight (50-55kg) division, Badal of Himachal Pradesh emerged victorious against Mizoram's Lalhruiatluanga. The lightweight category saw Goa's Nitesh Chawan outclass Kerala's Mohamed Athif with a dominant 5-0 win, while Arunachal's Ito Ado secured a hard-fought victory over Himanshu Singh. Bhanu Prakash defeated Ashish in the welterweight (60-65kg) category, while the (70-75kg) weight class featured impressive wins by Nikhil Dubey and Arshpreet Singh Bhatti.

Bhambri makes quarters in Auckland

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a mixed bag for India on the ATP Tour on Wednesday, Yuki Bhambri and his French partner Albano Olivetti advanced to quarterfinals of the ASB Classic in Auckland but N Sriram Balaji exited the Adelaide International with pre-quarterfinal defeat alongside Miguel Reyes-Varela. Bhambri and Olivetti edged past the pair of Sander Arends and Luke Johnson 6-4 6-4 in the round of 16, winning in 71 minutes. They will next take on the winners of the match between Julian Cash/Llyod Glasspool and Ajeet Rai/Kiranpal Pannu. Balaji and his Mexican partner made a tremendous start by taking the first set from Harri Heliövaara and Henry Patten but eventually lost 6-3 3-6 13-11 to the fourth seeds in a gruelling contest that lasted one hour and 23 minutes.

Anju Bobby George named chairperson of AFI's athletes commission

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Long-jump great Anju Bobby George was on Wednesday named chairperson of the Athletics Federation of India's nine-strong athletes commission that features six women with javelin throw star Neeraj Chopra being its most prominent male member. The other women in the new panel are runner Jyotirmoyee Sikdar, discus thrower Krishna Poonia, hurdler MD Valsamma, steeplechaser Sudha Singh and runner Sunita Rani. George, a 2003 world championships bronze-winner, is also a senior vice president in the AFI. All of them are retired and their induction is a noteworthy milestone in the AFI's quest for

gender parity in its set-up. The previous commission featured four women. The commission was unveiled on Wednesday after the elections held in October last year. Two-time Olympic medal-winning Neeraj Chopra is one of the four nominated members after consultations by the AFI's executive council. The other two male members of the commission are 3000m steeplechaser Avinash Sable and newly-elected AFI president Bahadur Singh Sagoo, a shot put gold medal winner at 2002 Asian Games. Sagoo was the chairman of the previous commission. Outgoing AFI treasurer Madhu Kant Pathak, who was the returning officer for the elections, said the polls were held after



following due process. "Election notification was issued and other rules and regulations

were followed. Five members were elected. "Later, after consultation with the

executive council, four members including Neeraj and Sable were added as Athletes Commission member. Both Neeraj and Sable initially said that they will not be able to give much time as they are active athletes but they accepted," said Pathak. Sumariwalla made ex-officio member. Outgoing AFI President Adille Sumariwalla will continue to be a part of the executive council as an ex-officio member as he is a part of the World Athletics Council. The 67-year-old Sumariwalla, who served as AFI president for three consecutive terms from 2012, is currently an executive board member of World Athletics -- the international governing body of the sport. "We amended the AFI

constitution last year to the effect that any person who is in the World Athletics council will be an ex-officio member of the AFI executive council," AFI Planning Commission Chairman Lalit Bhanot announced on the concluding day of the Annual General Body Meeting here. On Tuesday, Sumariwalla had insisted that he is not going anywhere and will be around to guide the new office-bearers of the AFI and act as the body's spokesperson too. On Wednesday, Sagoo announced that Sumariwalla will also be the chairman of the committee which will liaise with the government as well as international bodies. In addition, he will be a member of the Ethics Commission of the AFI.

Domestic schedule In another decision, Indian athletics' first major national senior championships of the season -- the Federation Cup -- will be held in Kozhikode, Kerala, from April 21-24. Haryana's Panchkula was to host the event but expressed its inability to do so as it had conducted the National Inter-State Championships in June last year. This year's National Inter-State Senior Championships will be held from August 20 to 24 in Chennai, as proposed in the tentative calendar. National Open Championships, earlier proposed to be held in Pune or Bengaluru, will now be staged in Ranchi from September 27 to 30.

Bumrah continues to remain No. 1 in Test rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah continued to reign supreme at the top of the bowlers' chart with a career-best rating of 908 in the latest ICC Test Rankings, released on Wednesday. Bumrah, who made history ahead of the fifth and final Test against Australia by recording the highest-ever ICC Rankings rating for an Indian bowler at 907 points, improved that tally by one point after taking two wickets in the first innings at the SCG. However, a back spasm ruled him out of bowling in the second innings, restricting his role to just batting. Left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja, who climbed a spot to be joint-ninth, is the other Indian giving Bumrah company in the top-10. He shares the ninth spot with Australian pacer Scott Boland, who has made a remarkable leap of 29 places to break into the top 10. Boland's stellar performance in the Sydney Test, where he



claimed a 10-wicket haul (4/31 and 6/45), proved too much for the Indian batters on a lively pitch. His efforts were instrumental in Australia's triumph, ending a decade-long wait to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Australia skipper Pat Cummins also made gains in the rankings, climbing to number two after picking up five wickets in the final match. South Africa's Kagiso Rabada rose a spot to occupy the third place while injured Josh Hazlewood moved down two places to be fourth. Rishabh Pant's blistering 33-ball 61 in the second innings earned him a three-spot rise in the batting rankings, moving him to number nine while India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal retained his fourth spot. South Africa captain Temba Bavuma extended his rich vein of form, scoring a vital century in the first innings to climb three spots to number six, also achieving a career-best rating of 769.



Sam Konstas regrets stand-off with Jasprit

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Australia's teenage batting sensation Sam Konstas regrets his involvement in the stand-off with Jasprit Bumrah during the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, admitting he was only trying to waste time but ultimately, the Indian pace spearhead had the "last laugh". Konstas made an impact in the final two Tests of the series with his audacious strokeplay, but also found himself at the center of a couple of fiery exchanges with Indian stars Bumrah and Virat Kohli. One such incident occurred on the opening day of the fifth Test, when Konstas had a heated run-in with Bumrah. "I love being in the contest and always try to put my best foot forward," Konstas told CODE Sports. Near the end of the day's play, Bumrah, looking to get in one more over, was met with resistance from the Australian players, who were trying to waste time. This led to a fiery exchange of words between Konstas and the Indian pacer. Two deliveries later, Bumrah, who was leading the side in the absence of an off-colour Rohit Sharma, took the wicket of Usman Khawaja off the last ball. After dismissing Khawaja, Bumrah walked in Konstas' direction and stared him down. Reflecting on the incident,

Konstas admitted, "I feel like it's probably a good learning for me. I was trying to waste a little bit of time there so they didn't get another over. But he (Bumrah) had the last laugh. "Obviously he is world class and he took, what, 32 wickets in the series." Konstas seems to have learned his lesson about not provoking the peerless pacer. "If that happened again, maybe I wouldn't have said anything," he said. The teenager was also involved in an on-field exchange with Kohli, who shoulder-charged Konstas, followed by a heated verbal exchange between the two. However, Konstas revealed that despite the incident, he later went to speak with his childhood hero Kohli. "I had a little chat after the game telling him that I idolise him, and it's obviously a huge honour playing against him," Konstas said. "When I did verse him, I was like, 'wow, Virat Kohli is batting'. He just had that presence about him, all the Indian crowd getting amongst it. Chanting his name. It was quite surreal". Konstas added that "He was very down to earth. A lovely person and just wishing me all the best saying hopefully I go well on the tour of Sri Lanka he said if I'm in. "My whole family loves Virat. I've idolised him from a young age and he's a legend of the game."



Prasidh Krishna, Devdutt, Washington available for Vijay Hazare knockouts

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Karnataka's Prasidh Krishna, Devdutt Padikkal and Tamil Nadu all-rounder Washington Sundar will be available for the Vijay Hazare Trophy knockout matches, starting in Vadodara from Thursday, after featuring in the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy series against Australia. However, KL Rahul, who played all the five Test matches against the Aussies, has requested for a break and will skip the Hazare knockouts. Rahul's availability for the second phase of the Ranji Trophy, beginning on January 23, will be decided at a later date. India head coach Gautam Gambhir had recently expressed his desire to see frontline Indian players making themselves available for the remainder of the premier domestic red-ball tournament. Washington, though, could link up with Tamil Nadu only if the team progresses to the semifinals of the Vijay Hazare Trophy. He played three matches and made 114 runs with a fifty but bowled just 37 overs across those Tests as pacers were preferred because of the conditions. The off-spinner took just three wickets. Prasidh will be high on confidence after making a good impression in the fifth

Test at Sydney, where the pacer grabbed six Australian wickets — 3/42 in the first innings and 3/65 in the second essay. Devdutt played just one Test match at Perth, primarily because skipper Rohit Sharma stayed back in India to welcome his second baby. The left-hander made a zero and 25 in India's 295-run win at Perth but was not selected for any of the other four Test matches. The 24-year-old was in terrific form prior to leaving for Australia for the India A tour, smashing four First-Class hundreds across Duleep Trophy and in the first leg of the Ranji Trophy. Both Prasidh and Devdutt are scheduled to join the Karnataka squad on January 10, a day ahead of their quarterfinal match against Baroda at Vadodara. Nitish Kumar Reddy too will fly out of Australia on Wednesday but he will not be seen in action immediately as Andhra has not progressed to the knockout stage. However, Nitish, who impressed everyone with his gutsy batting Down Under including a hundred at Melbourne, is likely to play in the second phase of the Ranji Trophy. He has played only one match this season before travelling to Australia.

Virat Kohli is always super motivated, he will know what to do: Faf du Plessis

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Virat Kohli will be "super motivated" to put a struggling phase behind him and the premier India batter is capable of returning to his run-making ways, said former South African captain Faf du Plessis here on Wednesday. Kohli had a torrid time in Australia during the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy, amassing a mere 190 runs at an average of 23.75 across five Tests despite starting off with an unbeaten hundred in the first Test at Perth. Du Plessis backed Kohli, his one-time teammate at Royal Challengers Bangalore, to come back stronger from the struggles, and said retirement is a "very personal" choice. "That is very, very personal. No one can speak to you about when that time is (up) as a player, you'll know," du Plessis told PTI on the sidelines of the SA20 Season 3's Captain's Day. "I know someone like him is super super motivated, he's gone through it all before, so he knows exactly what to do,"



said Du Plessis. The 40-year-old then went back to the day when he felt his time was up as a Test cricketer. "It is different for every player. Every player needs to answer that question. I remember when that time was for me," he said. "I just knew that certainly from the Test cricket perspective for me. I didn't have that same hunger and drive anymore and I felt that that stage certainly for me was a good time to let new guys come in and also step into the

T20 world. "I wanted to do that at the stage where I still felt like I was on top of my game," he added. Du Plessis was not pleased with ICC reportedly exploring the possibility of a two-tier Test system. "No, I think we need the game to be healthy," Du Plessis said. "We saw over the last few years the value that was put on Test cricket by Australia, England and India making sure that there were 4-5 Test series. "When you look at the other teams, there are two Test

BGT: SCG track deemed 'satisfactory', other pitches rated 'very good' by ICC

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Four out of five pitches used in the recent Border-Gavaskar Test series between India and Australia have been rated 'very good' by the ICC, which found the track for the fifth and final game in Sydney to be 'satisfactory'. The marquee five-match series ended 3-1 in favour of the hosts, who regained the Border Gavaskar Trophy after a decade and also qualified for the World Test Championship final in June against South Africa. "The pitches at Perth Stadium, Adelaide Oval, Gabba and Melbourne Cricket Ground — the venues for the first four Tests — were rated as 'very good,'" the ICC said in a statement.

"Meanwhile, the surface for the final Test in Sydney received a 'satisfactory', the second-highest rating on ICC's scale," it added. The traditionally batting-friendly pitch at the Sydney Cricket Ground favoured bowlers this time. Batters from both the teams struggled for the majority of the Test which ended in two and half days. "We encourage pitches that bring out the unique characteristics of that venue and this has long been a feature of Australian cricket," Cricket Australia's Head of Cricket Operations Peter Roach said in a media release while reacting to the ICC's ratings. "We don't look to prepare wickets that favour the home



side or suit our situation in a series. What we seek is a good contest between bat and ball and pitches that are likely to produce a result. "Weather obviously plays a

significant part in preparation and we know that even our most skilled curators are challenged at times by adverse weather," he added.

The Sydney track had a green top with variable bounce on offer and as many as 26 wickets fell on the first two days while four Indians and as many Australians were dismissed on day three as bowlers largely dominated the proceedings. "The SCG has been striving to bring out their unique characteristics of early pace and bounce before the pitch wears and spins," Roach said. "This year was a step in the right direction to achieving this which provided an exciting finish to the Border Gavaskar Trophy series and bodes well for the Ashes summer in 2025-26," he added. There was some debate around the SCG track after a few former players, including

Indian great Sunil Gavaskar, called it "not ideal." However, India head coach Gautam Gambhir had termed it as "spicy" but overall good for Test cricket. "The series also emphasised the benefits of playing first-class cricket at major venues," Roach said. "It allows our curators to become more familiar with the different challenges that go into preparing wickets in different weather conditions, and also allows players to enter the Test team familiar with the conditions they will confront," he added. In 2023, the ICC revamped its pitch rating system, reducing it from six categories to four — very good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory and unfit.

Shastri wants Rohit and Kohli to play domestic cricket; Ponting proposes time off for Kohli

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former India head coach Ravi Shastri wants the struggling Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli to get back to playing Ranji Trophy and feels the Test future of the two superstars is dependent on the hunger to maintain their excellence in the game. The repeated failures of the star Indian duo in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy contributed to the visitors' series loss. India head coach Gautam Gambhir underlined the importance of domestic cricket following the loss and Shastri too feels Rohit and Kohli should return to playing Ranji Trophy even though the next series is in June.

"If there's a gap for them, they should go back and play some domestic cricket and see how it is. Because when you play Test match cricket for that length of time, it's important to play domestic cricket for two reasons," Shastri said during a conversation alongside Australian great Ricky Ponting on ICC Review. "One you are abreast with the current generation (and) you can contribute to that younger generation with your experience. And more importantly, you get to play spin more than you will ever play. "If you see, India's record in India on turning tracks is not the greatest. If you have quality spinners in the opposition,



they can trouble you. And they have troubled India," he added. Asked specifically on their Test future, Shastri added: "I would leave that on them and would be closely tracking how they

fare in the upcoming games (ODIs against England, Champions Trophy). "The hunger and desire as well is very important. One is 36 the other is 38 they would know

how hungry they are. They will walk away if they think they have had enough," added Shastri. Kohli will be better served by a break: Ponting. Former Australian captain Ponting has no shame in admitting that he carried on playing at the highest level longer than he should have. Back in 2022, Kohli had taken a month off from the game and that worked well for him. Ponting feels time has come for Kohli to get away from the game following his constant troubles outside the off-stump over the course of the five Test series Down Under. "...The challenge is, and I can see it with Virat now, you can see how much he wants it. He's

trying so hard that actually makes batting harder. The harder you try sometimes with batting, the less success you're going to have," said the multiple World Cup winner. "I started thinking more about not getting out rather than scoring runs and that might sound strange but that's what it was. I was trying to be so perfect set the right example play exactly the way my team needed me all the time but when I was playing my best I didn't think about any of that. "I just walked out and thought about scoring runs. I can just see a little bit of that with Virat now. Even the way that he's getting out you can see he doesn't want to be playing at those balls he's trying not to do

it but he's there's some mental block there that's making him feel for that one outside the off stump." A break can only help the Indian legend, said Ponting. "He had a mental break (in the past) where he stepped away for a while and then came back and find the love for the game

again. So right now it just seems like that real love of the game for him is not there because he's making it too hard to enjoy. "So if he wants to continue playing Test match cricket, he might just need to have a little spell for a while, find the love for the game again."

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