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INSIDE



MONEY 10
WAVE GROUP, AGRISTO TO
INVEST ₹750 CRORE IN UP

CHANDIGARH, MONDAY MARCH 3, 2025; PAGES 12 ₹2

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BUCH BOOKED

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A Special Court designated under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) has directed the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) to register an FIR against former chairperson of Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) Madhabi Puri Buch, three SEBI whole-time members and two top officials of the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) for alleged stock market fraud, regulatory violations and corruption. Apart from Mudhabi Buch and three whole-time members Ashwani Bhatia, Ananth Narayan G and Kamlesh Chandra Varshney, the two top BSE officials against whom the special PMLA court has ordered the registration of an FIR are: BSE's Chairman Pramod Agarwal and its CEO Sundaraman Ramamurthy. "The allegations disclose a cognizable offence, necessitating an investigation. There is prima facie evidence of regulatory lapses and collusion, requiring a fair and impartial probe. The inaction by law enforcement and SEBI necessitates judicial intervention under Section 156(3) CrPC," Special Court Judge Shashikant Eknathrao Bangar said in the order passed on Saturday. The Special ACB court passed an order directing the ACB, Mumbai, to register an FIR based on an application filed by a media person Sapan Shrivastava, who had sought an investigations under section 156(3) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) into the offences allegedly



committed by Buch and Mudhabi Buch and others, involving large-scale financial fraud, regulatory violations and corruption. The allegations pertain to the fraudulent listing of a company on the stock exchange with the active connivance of regulatory authorities, particularly the SEBI, without compliance under the SEBI Act, 1992 and rules and regulations thereunder. The complainant claimed that the SEBI officials failed in their statutory duty, facilitated market manipulation, and enabled corporate fraud by allowing the listing of a company that did not meet the prescribed norms. Among other things, the complainant had alleged that he and his family had invested in shares of Cals Refineries Ltd on December 13, 1994, which was listed at BSE India, and that he had suffered huge losses. He alleged that SEBI and BSE neglected the crimes of the firm, listed it against the law, and failed to protect the interests of investors. Shrivastava alleged that the SEBI officials had facilitated market manipulation and enabled corporate fraud by

were not holding their respective positions at the relevant point of time, the court allowed the application without issuing any notice or granting any opportunity to SEBI to place the facts on record," the SEBI stated in its statement. "The applicant is known to be a frivolous and habitual litigant, with previous applications being dismissed by the court, with imposition of costs in some cases. SEBI would be initiating appropriate legal steps to challenge this order and remains committed to ensuring due regulatory compliance in all matters," the statement added. It may be recalled that then SEBI chief Mudhabi Buch had come under a cloud in August last year after the Hindenburg report alleged that she and her husband Dhaval Buch "had hidden stakes in the exact same obscure offshore Bermuda and Mauritius funds, found in the same complex nested structure, used by Vinod Adani". The Hindenburg Research — which had accused the Adani group of "brazen stock market manipulation" and "accounting fraud" — had tried to connect the SEBI's inaction against the Adani group for alleged "stock market manipulation" with the investments made by Mudhabi Buch and her husband in offshore funds. Hindenburg's report had alleged that as a whole-time member of SEBI, Buch was in communication with managers of offshore funds, and wrote to India Infoline to redeem the units in the fund. "Even though these officials



Rescue operation underway after an avalanche hit the Border Roads Organisation camp between Mana and Badrinath on Friday, in Chamoli district. PTI

Chamoli avalanche rescue death toll rises to eight

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DEHRADUN

Death toll rose to eight in the avalanche mishap after rescue teams found the body of the last missing person on Sunday. Earlier in the day, the teams pulled out bodies of three labourers from the camp site which was buried in snow after the avalanche on Friday last. Fifty four workers of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) were buried in snow after their camp in Chamoli, Uttarakhand was hit by an avalanche. Rescue teams were able to bring out 46 workers while bodies of four labourers were pulled out from the camp on Sunday. Army doctors said 46 workers, who were earlier rescued, have been brought to the military hospital in Jyotirmath, while one with a spinal cord injury was airlifted to AIIMS, Rishikesh. Helicopters, sniffer dogs and thermal imaging technology were being used to expedite the rescue operation due to apprehensions about

possible inclement weather on Monday, officials said. Three bodies of the missing labourers were found on Sunday, district administration officials said in Gopeshwar. With this, the number of workers who lost their lives in the Mana avalanche mounted to seven. One person is still missing for whom the search is in progress, they said. Located three kilometres from Badrinath, Mana is the last village on the India-Tibet border at a height of 3,200 metres. The bodies have been brought to Jyotirmath by helicopter where the post-mortem was being done at the Community Health Centre. The deceased include Anil Kumar (21) from Rudrapur in Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar district, Ashok (28) from Fatehpur in Uttar Pradesh and Harmesh from Una in Himachal Pradesh, the officials said. The lone worker who remains missing is 43-year-old Arvind from Dehradun.

Frequent trips abroad land IPS officer in soup

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Andhra Pradesh government on Sunday suspended senior IPS officer PV Sunil Kumar for allegedly making repeated foreign visits without prior permission during the previous YSRCP regime. In a government order, Chief Secretary K Vijayanand stated that Kumar, a DGP-rank officer awaiting posting, had deviated from the travel plan approved by the government during those overseas trips. "Now, therefore, in the exercise of the powers conferred under Rule 3 (1) of the All India Service (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969, the Government of Andhra Pradesh hereby places P V Sunil Kumar, IPS, under suspension with immediate effect," said the Chief Secretary in the order. According to the top bureaucrat, Kumar repeatedly demonstrated willful disregard for established practices. His actions exhibit gross negligence, indiscipline, and grave misconduct by undertaking foreign travel without obtaining the requisite permission, he said, adding that disciplinary proceedings were being contemplated for such repeated acts of "grave misconduct."

WEATHER

AQI 125
MAX 27°C(-0.4)
MIN 14.2°C(+0.8)

BSP rides on Behenji's Maya



BSP supremo Mayawati during a meeting with party's senior office bearers and state presidents at the party office, in Lucknow. PTI

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), once a dominant political force in Uttar Pradesh, is witnessing internal turmoil. In a major decision on Sunday, BSP supremo Mayawati removed her nephew, Akash Anand, from all party positions. This comes just days after she expelled Akash's father-in-law, Ashok Siddharth, from the party. At the same time, Mayawati elevated her brother, Anand Kumar, and senior leader Ramji Gautam, appointing them as national coordinators. Addressing party members, she made it clear that BSP would no longer operate on family-based leadership. "As long as I am alive, there will be no successor in the party. Personal relations have

no significance when it comes to the party and the Ambedkarite movement," she asserted. Mayawati emphasised that the party's welfare would always come before personal ties. "For me, the party and movement come first. My brother, his children, and other family members are secondary," she stated. She assured party workers that she would continue leading the BSP with full commitment and dedication until her last breath. Justifying Akash Anand's removal, Mayawati pointed to the negative influence of his father-in-law, Ashok Siddharth, whom she accused of weakening the party by creating internal divisions. "Ashok Siddharth worked to split the party into factions across the country, including Uttar Pradesh. His actions during his son's wedding were

also concerning," she alleged. She further indicated that Akash Anand may have been influenced by his wife and in-laws, which posed a potential risk to BSP's future. "After expelling Ashok Siddharth, we have to seriously evaluate the extent of his daughter's influence on Akash. The signs so far are not positive," she said. In a related decision, Mayawati revealed that her brother Anand Kumar has resolved to marry his children into non-political families. "This step has been taken to prevent any future damage to the party, as was the case with Ashok Siddharth," she said. During the review meeting, Mayawati issued key instructions for future party programs and strategies. She reiterated her stand that the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are two sides of the same coin. Citing BSP's absence from the Milkipur bypoll, she questioned SP's tendency to blame BSP for its electoral losses. "Now that BSP did not contest the Milkipur bypoll, whom will the SP blame for its defeat?" she asked. Mayawati reaffirmed her belief that only BSP, with its Ambedkarite ideology, can effectively challenge the BJP and other caste-based parties. "The people of this country must realise that the BSP alone can defeat the BJP and other parties that exploit caste politics," she declared.



As the sun sets, Palestinians sit at a large table surrounded by the rubble of destroyed homes and buildings as they gather for iftar, the fast-breaking meal, on the first day of Ramazan in Rafah, southern Gaza strip. PTI

On Ramazan, Israel cuts off aid to Gaza

PTI ■ TEL AVIV

Israel stopped the entry of all goods and supplies into the Gaza Strip on Sunday and warned of "additional consequences" if Hamas doesn't accept a new proposal to extend a fragile ceasefire. Hamas accused Israel of trying to derail the existing ceasefire agreement and said its decision to cut off aid was a "cheap extortion, a war crime and a blatant attack" on the truce, which took hold in January after more than a year of negotiations. Both sides stopped short of saying the ceasefire had ended. First phase of the ceasefire, which included a surge in humanitarian assistance, expired on Saturday. The two sides have yet to negotiate the second phase, in which Hamas was to release

dozens of remaining hostages in return for an Israeli pullout and a lasting ceasefire. An Israeli official said the decision to suspend aid was made in coordination with the Trump administration. There was no immediate comment from the United States. Hundreds of aid trucks have entered Gaza daily since the ceasefire began on Jan. 19, and it was unclear what the immediate impact of the aid cutoff would be. ISRAEL SAYS THE NEW PROPOSAL IS BACKED BY THE US: Israel said the new proposal, which it said came from US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff, called for extending the ceasefire through Ramazan and the Jewish Passover holiday, which ends on April 20.

Zoos battling reduced funding

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

While India's zoos have made "notable" progress in breeding endangered species under conservation programmes that started around a decade ago, a government panel says that persistent gaps in execution, funding and species management hinder their overall success. The Central Zoo Authority (CZA), which is responsible for overseeing and guiding national-level ex situ conservation efforts, constituted a committee in 2023 to review and evaluate the state of conservation breeding programmes in zoos across the country. In 2007, the CZA selected 74 species for breeding in 43 zoos. By 2014, 26 high-priority species were shortlisted and breeding programmes began for 23. According to the report of the committee submitted to the CZA recently, while India's zoos have made "notable progress in housing and breeding several endangered species, the overall effectiveness of conservation breeding programmes is hindered by persistent foundational and operational challenges." "Addressing these issues will require not only enhanced funding allocation but also the of comprehensive frameworks, adoption of standardised protocols, and



Photo: The Pioneer

improvements in genetic and demographic management practices," it said. The committee said that ₹10.81 Crore was allocated for conservation breeding between 2006 and 2011 and ₹18.13 Crore between 2011 and 2021. Over time, with the decrease in the CZA's funding, zoos now receive limited financial support, mainly for maintenance. "This reduction in financial assistance has had cascading effects on the implementation and sustainability of these programmes," the report said. According to the report, Artiodactyla (even-toed ungulates), Carnivora (meat-eating mammals) and Galliformes (game birds) are among the most targeted groups. However, many of their breeding programmes have either not started or are poorly managed. The report said errors in species identification, such as with the Alpine Musk Deer and Himalayan Serow, make

managing populations difficult. The committee also highlighted that lack of genetic diversity, improper tracking and poor record-keeping reduce the success of conservation breeding programmes. While some successes, such as Gaur and Indian Chevrotain, demonstrate potential for growth and recovery, they also "expose broader challenges including inconsistent record-keeping, uncoordinated transfers and inadequate husbandry practices," the committee said. Primates, Squamata (reptiles), and Perissodactyla (odd-toed ungulates) struggle with low birth rates and poor genetic diversity. Animals like the King Cobra and Western Hoolock Gibbon have specific environmental needs that are not being met, which reduces their chances of successful breeding.

Youths into excessive social media suffer sexual ailments

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Consumption of explicit content on social media—via photos, short videos, and reels—is significantly contributing to sexual health problems among youngsters according to experts at King George's Medical University (KGMU) in Lucknow. The university's psychiatry department has observed a concerning trend, with nearly 90 per cent of patients aged 16 to 25 seeking treatment for sexual health issues identified as heavy social media users. Experts at KGMU attribute this rise to excessive exposure to unrealistic digital content, which is altering brain responses and diminishing sensitivity

toward real-life relationships. Professor Adarsh Tripathi, head of the Sexual and Marital Wellness Clinic at KGMU's psychiatry department, revealed that the outpatient department (OPD) receives 10 to 12 youngsters daily with sexual health concerns, a significant portion of whom exhibit compulsive social media consumption habits. "Most of them spend a large part of their day scrolling through reels, shorts, and explicit images. This continuous exposure conditions their brains to expect exaggerated and often unattainable forms of intimacy, making them less sensitive to real-life relationships," Prof. Tripathi explained.

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

In a bizarre incident, a wedding was cancelled by the bride's family after a groom, and his family here in Gurugram allegedly demanded luxury and ₹73 Lakh as dowry on the wedding day. The groom had asked for a Fortuner car and ₹73 Lakh. According to the bride's family, the groom made the demand on the wedding day during a ritual, and when they refused, the groom had reportedly warned that the wedding would not take place if his demands were not met. The wedding was scheduled for February 25 at a marriage palace in Gurugram's Bhangrola village. According to the groom's family, on February 25, the wedding procession of Chanchal, a bride from Bhangrola village, came

This happens only in India

from the groom Mohit's Judaula village. At around 2 o'clock in the night, when the rituals were being performed at the door of the marriage palace, the groom's family demanded ₹1 Crore and a Fortuner in dowry. At that time the groom's uncle had even warned that he would not commit marriage if his demands were not met. The bride initially thought he was joking, but later, the groom's side was adamant about his demands. According to the bride's father Sevaram, he had sent the marriage invitation 'Lagan' for his daughter on February 23. At that time, he had given a Brezza car in dowry along with

other household items but the bride's family was shocked by the sudden demand of the groom's side on the wedding day. The girl's family tried to convince the groom's side for a long time, but they were not listened to. The village sarpanch also folded his hands in front of them but they did not pay heed and were adamant on their demands. After several hours of prayer, the bride's side broke the marriage, and they stopped the groom's side in the marriage palace itself. They demanded the return of the Brezza car and the money given in the dowry. The bride side had spent more than ₹70 Lakh on wedding expenses. After 15 hours, the wedding

procession returned without the bride. The very next day on February 26, a panchayat of Bhangrola and Judaula villages was held. In this meeting, it was decided that the groom's side would return ₹73 Lakh to the bride's family. Since the groom's side did not have the money, they had to agree on a plot and a house. This amount was given by Manoj Yadav, a resident of Sadharana village after an agreement. To settle the matter, the groom's family mortgaged their four-kanal land in Fazilpur Badli and a two-storey house built in a 220-yard plot in Judaula village. According to the police, the groom, Mohit, is studying MBBS

from a private institute. Chanchal is doing Junior Basic Training (JBT). The bride's father is a constable in Delhi Police and is retired from the Indian Army. "We had received information on February 25 night that an altercation had occurred between the groom's and the bride's family in Bhangrola village during a wedding. The police team reached the spot to sort out the matter. A written agreement has been reached between the two parties and the matter was resolved at their level. No official complaint was made out in this regard," Inspector Virender, station house officer (SHO) of the Kherki Daula Police Station, said.

CM Sukhu in Delhi ahead of Monday's Cabinet Meeting

PNS ■ SHIMLA

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu embarked on a strategic journey on Sunday, leaving Shimla for Delhi following an intensive round of discussions with Rajani Patil, the newly-appointed Congress in-charge for the hill state. The unexpected Delhi visit on Sunday has sparked speculations of a potential Cabinet expansion as political insiders closely watch every move ahead of Monday's crucial Cabinet meeting in Shimla.

The state's political pulse quickened as Rajani Patil, who recently toured Himachal to gather valuable feedback from party leaders, MLAs, Ministers, and even candidates from the 2022 Assembly elections, returned to Delhi with Chief Minister Sukhu. Patil's consultations have been instrumental in shaping the blueprint for forming a new party executive, with her insights poised to influence major decisions once submitted to the party high

command. While her organizational discussions in Shimla underscored the importance of inclusive leadership, the focus now shifts to the State Government's imminent agenda.

Scheduled at 2 pm at the state secretariat in Shimla, the Cabinet meeting is set to be a watershed moment. With government departments having finalized their agendas, key issues such as the approval of the Governor's address for the upcoming budget session starting March 10 are on the docket.

Among the most pressing matters is a proposed hike in bus fares — a recommendation from the HRTC Board of Directors aimed at mitigating financial losses and rejuvenating the struggling transport corporation. The proposal includes not only a revision of the minimum fare but also a 15 percent increase for long-distance travel beyond a defined threshold. Lawmakers are expected to engage in robust debates as they weigh the socio-

economic impact of these changes.

Beyond transport, the Cabinet is also slated to deliberate on educational reforms. Plans to rationalize schools and colleges, along with a restructuring of the education directorates, indicate a broader vision to streamline and modernize Himachal Pradesh's education system. These measures, if approved, promise to bolster the state's human capital and ensure that the young generation is well-equipped to drive future progress.

Political analysts suggested that Sukhu's Delhi visit, though brief, carried significant weight. The move is being seen as a prelude to possible realignments within the state's political framework — a maneuver aimed at reinforcing governance and addressing contemporary challenges head-on. With both state and party leadership converging on issues of financial stability, transportation, and education, Himachal Pradesh appears poised for transformative changes.

Temple Funds Untouchable: Himachal Govt Denies Misuse Allegations

PNS ■ MANDI

Himachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Mukesh Agnihotri made a firm declaration in Mandi on Sunday clarifying that the State Government will not appropriate temple funds for any of its schemes.

Agnihotri, speaking to journalists during his visit as the chief guest for the Madhya Jaleb procession at the Shivratri festival, emphasized that the Language and Culture Department — overseeing temple affairs under his jurisdiction — remains committed to protecting sacred resources. "Temple funds will never be diverted for government activities," he stated, addressing concerns that have recently surfaced in political circles.

Agnihotri also shed light on the past usage of temple funds, noting that they were only used for exceptional circumstances such as contributions to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund and disaster relief efforts. He made it clear that any financial assistance from temples or trusts to help the

needy is entirely voluntary and subject to legal provisions, with decisions made independently by the temples themselves.

In a pointed remark, the Deputy Chief Minister accused BJP leaders of circulating false propaganda about the use of temple funds. "Such misinformation will not benefit anyone," he asserted, adding that the opposition's narrative, including objections raised by figures like Jai Ram Thakur regarding participation in the Kumbh Mela, is baseless.

"We are as religious as they are, and our actions reflect our commitment to safeguarding our heritage," Agnihotri said, dismissing the objections as politically motivated.

Highlighting the financial realities, he noted that although 36 temples in Himachal are under government control, only four or five are financially robust. "The combined temple deposits amount to around Rs 500 crore, which is insignificant compared to our state's Rs 55,000 crore budget. Instead of taking money from temples, our government provides financial assistance to ensure their upkeep," he explained, reinforcing the government's respectful approach towards religious institutions.

joined the ride, ensuring that all participants strictly adhered to safety norms and speed limits. Following the rally, Agnihotri urged motorists to "drive with awareness, not excitement," emphasizing the importance of abiding by traffic rules, avoiding intoxicated driving, maintaining vehicle fitness, and using seat belts, helmets, and low beams at night.

27 Years of Dedication: Jai Ram Thakur's Nostalgic FB Post Captivates Netizens



is not solely mine; it belongs to the tireless efforts of party workers and the unyielding trust of the people," Thakur emphasized.

Closing his emotional post, he pledged that every moment of his life would continue to be dedicated to the service and welfare of the citizens. His message, laden with gratitude and

ship. His recollections include the pivotal moment of his first electoral victory from the Chachiot Assembly constituency in 1998, a win that by a margin of 5,779 votes set the stage for an unbroken streak of electoral success.

Thakur's post also chronicled his ascent within the ranks of the BJP — from being a young worker, raising slogans on the streets, to assuming significant roles at the district level, and eventually heading the state unit. His journey, he noted, was bolstered by the support and guidance of key national figures, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Even after transitioning to the opposition, his unwavering commitment to the people remained the cornerstone of his political life.

A record-breaking achievement highlighted in his narrative was his unparalleled ability to win six consecutive elections, with his latest victory marked by the largest margin in the state's history. "This success

promise, has already garnered thousands of likes, shares, and heartfelt comments, rekindling discussions about his enduring legacy. Supporters and political analysts alike hailed his reflection as a moving reminder of his deep connection with the people and a reaffirmation of his stature as a true mass leader in Himachal Pradesh.

Mandi Deputy Commissioner Apoorv Devgan

DIRECTORATE OF PUNJAB STATE LOTTERIES									
DRAW TIME: 06:00 PM ONWARDS					DRAW DATE: 02/03/2025				
RESULT OF PUNJAB STATE DEAR 10 IRON SUNDAY WEEKLY LOTTERY									
MRP Rs 10/- Per Ticket									
1st Prize Amount (10)Rs.10,000/-, Common to all series (On last 4 digits)									
(Seller Prize Amount Rs.500/-, Total Prize Amount Rs.10500/- each)					2447				
2nd Prize Amount (10)Rs.2000/-, Common to all series (On last 4 digits)									
(Seller Prize Amount Rs.200/-, Total Prize Amount Rs.2200/- each)					1660				
3rd Prize Amount (100)Rs.500/-, Common to all series (On last 4 digits)									
(Seller Prize Amount Rs.50/-, Total Prize Amount Rs.550/- each)					8416 8563 9514				
1104	1451	219	6023	6089	7896	8270			
4th Prize Amount (100)Rs.200/-, Common to all series (On last 4 digits)									
(Seller Prize Amount Rs.20/-, Total Prize Amount Rs.220/- each)					0585 1014 2395 4603 4951 5503 5519 7870 9783 9799				
5th Prize Amount (2000)Rs.100/-, Common to all series (On last 4 digits)									
(Seller Prize Amount Rs.10/-, Total Prize Amount Rs.110/- each)					0014 0067 0068 0081 0128 0294 0481 0643 0646 0706 0723 0852 0984 1076 1101 1134 1159 1192 1200 1213 1218 1243 1264 1345 1478 1504 1505 1511 1517 1631 1670 1690 1706 1758 1772 1835 1957 1985 1996 2053 2142 2145 2164 2171 2196 2345 2407 2434 2440 2442 2718 2754 2785 2929 2951 3058 3084 3124 3130 3156 3208 3287 3358 3415 3432 3437 3440 3467 3569 3755 3774 3842 3903 3910 3916 3936 3937 3993 4027 4034 4274 4301 4333 4392 4399 4403 4525 4528 4670 4684 4690 4706 4722 4721 4723 4865 4900 4973 5006 5081 5117 5139 5330 5389 5445 5474 5479 5504 5533 5574 5609 5716 5838 5919 5922 5924 6059 6066 6080 6095 6136 6204 6419 6491 6540 6558 6588 6638 6762 6767 6804 6839 6840 6905 6945 6965 6969 6976 6978 6994 6995 7094 7111 7163 7180 7198 7205 7225 7365 7450 7532 7548 7639 7650 7664 7673 7785 7837 7861 7908 7974 8013 8023 8045 8054 8118 8155 8289 8425 8432 8408 8536 8766 8769 8811 8875 9033 9054 9086 9143 9176 9253 9280 9299 9304 9384 9385 9400 9406 9420 9484 9524 9526 9627 9726 9785 9873				

VOICE WITHIN / VIJAY SINGAL

To Inspire Without Being Judgemental



VIJAY SINGAL

Chapter three of the Bhagavad Gita deals with karma yoga. Different aspects of action and inaction have been described here in this chapter. It has been stressed that action is superior to inaction. Further, it has been stated that one can attain spiritual enlightenment by performing his work in an unattached manner.

In shlokas from 3.25 to 3.29 of this chapter, Sri Krishna has explained how one can inspire others to do their work in a better way, without being critical of their attitude towards work. In this regard, Krishna has described the basics of the soul, the material nature and the works. It has been stated that all actions are performed

by gunas, the modes of material nature ; and the soul gets attached to them. It has further been stated that whereas materialistically inclined persons perform actions with attachment to works and their results, the spiritually enlightened beings work without attachment. Krishna has urged those who work without attachment to not look down upon those who work with attachment. Instead, the spiritually enlightened persons should inspire the materialistically inclined people to work selflessly, by themselves working for the welfare of all without any selfish motive.

In these shlokas, Sri Krishna has analysed the role of the senses, the ego and the self etc. in the performance of works. It has been made clear that all kinds of activities are carried out, not by the soul, but by the three modes of material nature. However, the individual soul (the self), deluded by ego, falsely identifies with the mind-body complex ; and considers itself to be the doer of those actions. Hence, one gets attached to the actions and their consequences. As he considers himself alone to be responsible for the favourable or unfavourable results, he experiences the accompanying plea-

sure and pains. Such people are called ignorant because they do not know the whole truth about the self, the ego, the modes, the works and their results. A spiritually enlightened person, on the other hand, knows the true character of the self (his essential nature), the modes and the works. He understands that it is only the modes (in the form of the senses, mind and the intelligence etc.) that move among the modes (in the form of the objects of perception) ; and he as the self is distinct from the modes and their works. He, therefore, does not get attached to the actions and their results. He works in all possible manner, without suffering their evil effects. Such people are called spiritually wise.

Sri Krishna has, thus, recognised two kinds of people - spiritually ignorant (the agyanis) and spiritually wise (gyanis). He has cautioned that the wise who know the whole truth about the soul, the modes and their works should not unsettle the intelligence of those who do not understand such higher truths. The wise should not disrupt the minds of the ignorant people, by criticising their attitude towards work. Instead, they should work without attachment, for the better-

ment of the world ; with the same zeal with which the ignorant work for the fulfilment of their desires. In this manner, they can inspire them to work without attachment.

The theme of the above shlokas (from 3.25 to 3.29) is the idea of acceptance of and due regard for those who are perceived to be spiritually less evolved. Sri Krishna has thus advised that the wise, instead of creating any discord in the minds of the ignorant, should themselves work in such a manner that sets an example for them to follow. A wise person understands that the soul is not the doer of work. He is, therefore, not attached to the results. His actions are not impelled by desire. But such an enlightened person, who works without attachment, should never try to impose his knowledge upon those who work with attachment to the results i.e. whose actions are impelled by desire. If the principle of non-doership of works by the soul, and also the advisability of working without selfish desire, is forced upon the spiritually ignorant people, they can get confused and mix up the ideal of unattached action with the suggestion of non-performance of action. If the faith of the peo-

ple in the performance of attached work is broken, without gaining understanding of the higher principle of unattached work ; they can then be attracted towards non-action. In that situation, they would not be able to achieve either material growth or spiritual enlightenment.

Working for the fulfilment of one's desires is much better than evading the work, on the pretext of spiritual pursuits or some other pretext. Krishna has, therefore, advised that the spiritually enlightened beings should not be contemptuous of those who work for the fulfilment of their desires. They should accept them as they are, and help them in gradual attainment of spiritual wisdom, by themselves performing their own work in an enlightened manner.

Krishna thus exhorts all to do their karma (the work expected of them) - the agyanis for shining in the world, and the gyanis for excelling in their spiritual pursuits as well as for setting an example for others to follow. The gyanis must not distract the agyanis from their path of doing their righteous works, even though they may be doing it with attachment to the results of those works.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Ms. Shahaj W/O Sh. Kadir Ahmed R/o H.No. 63, Gate No. 4, Ward No. 28, Kharak Mangoli, Old Panchkula has submitted necessary documents to this office for general transfer of Flat No. 248A, SF, HBC, Sector-3-4/4A, Pnjro, Kalka in the name of Ms. Anita W/O Sh. Om Parkash R/O Flat No. 248A, SF, HBC, Sector-3-4/4A, Pnjro, Kalka. In case anybody has any objection for the transfer of the said flat, he should file objection to the undersigned within 30 days from the issue of this notice.

Estate manager
Housing board Haryana Panchkula.

PUBLIC NOTICE

It is for the information of General public that Smt. Anita W/O Sh. Vinod R/O H.No.29, Sector-14, Rohtak (Hr.)-124501 has applied for transfer of her Flat No. 203/F/FF/B/L in Housing Board Colony, Sector-15, Bahadurgarh District Jhajjar in favour of Smt. Bhani Devi W/O Sh. Dayanand, R/O House No. 274, Vill-Khugai, Distt Jhajjar, (Hr.)-124104. Any person regarding transfer of this flat has any objection he/she should file objection with documentary proof in writing, in person, to this office within 15 days from the date of publication of this notice. If no objection is received from any person within stipulated period, the Permission for transfer of flat will be granted in favour of Smt. Bhani Devi W/O Sh. Dayanand, R/O House No. 274, Vill-Khugai, Distt Jhajjar, (Hr.)-124104 on the basis of documents submitted as per policy of the Board. No claim/objection shall be entertained that in this regard.

Estate Manager, Housing Board Haryana, Sector 7, Bahadurgarh

PUBLIC NOTICE

I, Kuldeep Kumar, son of Mukharaj Kulwant, resident of Ward No. 11, Guhla, Tehsil Guhla, District Kailash, hereby declare that my father, Mukharaj, passed away on 06-05-2000, and my mother, Tara Devi, passed away 20 years ago. After the death of my father, the following are the legal heirs: Ranjeet Kumar (son), Kuldeep Kumar (son), Rita Rani (daughter), Geeta Rani alias Kamna Vohra (daughter), Sita Rani alias Meena Kumari (daughter) (Deceased), Parminder Shah (son of Sita Rani), Suman Lata (daughter of Sita Rani), Chandler Mohan (Deceased). Apart from the above-mentioned legal heirs, there are no other legal heirs. If any person has any objection to the above-mentioned details, they may submit their application along with the relevant documents to the concerned authority within 15 days from the date of this publication. No claims will be entertained after this period.

I, Gurpreet Kaur W/O Paramvir Singh R/o # 2 Kang City Haveli Chotti, Tehsil & District Rupnagar declare that the Sale Deed bearing document No. 2274 dated 24.2.2016 registered in the office of Sub Registrar Rupnagar from Baldev Raj S/O Asa Ram R/O Village Chotti Haveli (Ropar) in favour of Darshan Singh S/O Karam Chand R/O # 161 Sun Enclave Rupnagar. The Original Sale has been lost at Ropar on dated 01.01.2025. I had got registered LR No. 573996/2025 dated 28.02.2025 in PSOC Rupnagar. If anyone finds it, please contact this number 6239234944.

I No 20004699W Nk Ashwani kumar is father of Miss VE-DIKA presently residing at Vill Malkana PO Paral Teh. Indora Distt. Kangra State. HP have changed name of my Daughter from VEDIKA to VEDIKA CHOUDHARY vide Affidavit dated (01-03-2025) before Executive Magistrate Indora

I, avtar singh retired Indian Army son of Mehnga singh resident ghurell road, tapra district barnala that my name is Avtar singh registered in my army pension card number 7009613CGM AA(VEH). which is wrong. My correct name is Avtar singh. please correct my name as avtar singh in my army pension card.

I, Radhika D/O Sh. Shiv Poojan R/O Amarpur Colony, Lalru Mandi, Tehsil Dera Bassi District SAS Nagar declare that my metric (10th) Marksheet and Passing Certificate bearing Roll No. is 7512277. Passed in March 2022 from CISCE BOARD has been lost. If anybody found please contact on above address

I, Ashwini Yallappa Pujar Wife of Name Yallappa L Pujar residing at Village Narasapur, Post Office Narasapur, Tehsil Badami, Distt Bagalkot, State Karnataka 587155 have changed my name from Ashwini Kshatri to Ashwini Yallappa Pujar Vide Affidavit Dated 01/03/2025 before at Notary Ferozpur.

I, Ramesh Chander Nafria S/O Hazari Lal, H. No. 13, Ward No. 19 R/O VPO. Tosham, Teh Tosham and Distt Bhiwani, declare that Ramesh, Ramesh Kumar, Ramesh Chand, Ramesh Chander, Ramesh Chander Nafria S/O late Hazari Lal are all my names. In future I should be known and identified as Ramesh Chander Nafria.

I, Satnam Singh @ Surinder Singh S/O Bishan Singh R/O Vill. Sikanderpur, Po. Alawalpur, Distt. Jalandhar have changed my name to Satnam Singh. Also known as Satnam Singh is my single name.

I, Rajesh Kumar S/O Pawan Kumar R/O H.No. 248, Sodral Road, Dada Colony, Industrial Area, Jalandhar-144004, Punjab have changed my name from Rajesh Kumar to Rajesh Kumar Mittal. (Surname as Mittal)

I, Sello W/O Sital Banger R/O Village Palnau, Tehsil Phailaur, Distt. Jalandhar, Punjab have changed the spelling of my name from Sello to Shiho.

I, Baljinder Singh S/O Lehmer Singh R/O Vill. Manawali, Po. Chachoki, Tehsil Phagwara, Distt. Kapurthala Punjab have changed my name from Baljinder Singh to Baljinder Singh Sarkaria.

I, Navjot Kaur W/O Preet Randhawa R/O Village Kot Karar Khan, Po. Patter Kalan, Distt. Kapurthala have changed my name from Navjot Kaur to Jot Randhawa.

I, Harsh Kumar S/O Shashi Kumar Lekhi R/O H.No.80-B, New Subhash Nagar Maqsudana, Jalandhar have changed the name of my minor son from Paras to Paras Kumar Lekhi.

I, hithero Known as Sukhdev S/O Mohan Lal R/O VPO. Naugajja, Distt. Jalandhar-144301, Punjab have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as Sukhdev Kumar.

I, Satvinder D/O Makhan Singh R/O House No. 1546, Hari Singh Colony Noorwala, District Panipat, have changed My Given name Satvinder and Surname Kaur.

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Punjab War Against Drugs

No Place For You on Sacred Land of Punjab: CM To Gangsters, Smugglers, Criminals

Presides over passing out parade of 2490 cops at Jahan Khela

PNS ■ JAHAN KHELA (HOSHIARPUR)

Punjab's sacred soil will no longer harbour the seeds of criminality, declared Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday, while addressing the passing out parade of 2,490 new cops at the renowned Jahan Khela campus.

"Gangsters, smugglers, criminals and other anti-social elements have no place on the sacred land of Punjab and they will soon be wiped out from the state.

Issuing a stern warning to gangsters, smugglers, criminals and anti-social elements, Mann said: "No place for you on the sacred land of Punjab... They will soon be wiped out from the state." In his impassioned address, he outlined a decisive crusade against drugs, asserting that the State Government is determined to eradicate narcotics and criminal networks once and for all.

With a zero tolerance policy, Punjab is poised to dismantle drug supply lines, imprison peddlers, and confiscate the assets of those who have long tarnished its heritage.

Highlighting the gravity of the situation, the Chief Minister recalled Punjab's illustrious past, where saints, seers, martyrs, legendary players, and generals once set the gold standard of valour and righteousness. He lamented that previous administrations allowed criminal elements to embed themselves within the state. Now, however, a new era is dawning. "Our government has launched a full-scale crusade to weed out these anti-national forces," Mann declared. "Being a border state, a number of forces inimical to State have been chalking out nefarious designs to disturb hard earned peace of state but the Punjab Police has always foiled such attempts... To further overcome major challenges faced by the state, it is imperative that the Police force is updated as per advanced

Punjab Police Continues Massive Crackdown, Demolitions: 510 Raids, 43 More Arrests

Punjab's relentless "Yudh Nashian Virudh" campaign reached a fever pitch on its second day as Punjab Police launched a coordinated assault across all 28 districts. Over 510 targeted raids resulted in the arrest of 43 drug smugglers and the registration of 27 FIRs, marking a decisive blow in the state's battle against narcotics. During these operations, authorities seized 776 grams of heroin, 14 kg of opium, 38 kg of poppy husk, and 2,615 units of various intoxicant tablets and injections, along with recovering Rs 4.6 lakh in drug money.

In a forceful extension of this offensive, the campaign also saw the razing of illegal structures in Phillaur's Khanpur and Mandi villages — edifices erected by notorious traffickers that have long supported the drug trade. This dual-pronged strike, combining aggressive raids with the demolition of criminal hide-outs, underscored the government's commitment to dismantling the entire drug network that has plagued the state.

The operation is part of a comprehensive strategy outlined by the Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, who has vowed to transform Punjab into a drug-free state within three months. The government's resolve is further reinforced by a three-pronged approach — Enforcement, De-addiction, and Prevention (EDP). To ensure success, a specialized five-member Cabinet Sub-Committee, led by Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema, has been established to monitor every aspect of the crackdown.

As the battle intensifies, police officials liken the campaign to a full-scale war, with strategic maneuvers, coordinated raids, and targeted demolitions aimed at dismantling deeply entrenched criminal networks. Senior officers stressed that such measures are crucial not only for seizing contraband but also for sending a resounding message to those who thrive on impunity.

With the latest arrests, the total number of smugglers apprehended in just two days reached 333, storming 1,022 locations. Over 300 police teams, including 2,000 personnel, were deployed under the supervision of 101 senior officers, conducting targeted raids and checking 619 suspicious individuals.

Special DGP (Law and Order) Arpit Shukla assured that the state police will continue these intensive operations until every trace of the drug trade is eliminated. Beyond law enforcement, the Punjab Police is also focusing

on prevention and awareness, organizing 510 awareness programs, seminars, and public meetings — designed to mobilize community support against narcotics — in all police districts. These efforts aim to educate people on the detrimental effects of drug abuse and encourage community participation in the fight against narcotics.

The demolition of the structures in Phillaur stood as a striking testament to the government's unwavering determination. Local authorities and residents in the affected villages have welcomed these decisive actions.

Jalandhar Rural Police, in coordination with local administration, demolished unauthorized structures built on encroached panchayat land in Khanpur and Mandi villages of Phillaur. The land, which was illegally occupied by two known drug smugglers, was reclaimed and restored to the village panchayat after following legal procedures.

Jalandhar Rural Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Harkamal Preet Singh Khakh said: "The demolition was conducted at the request of the Block Development and Panchayat Officer (BDPO) Phillaur. The action targeted Jasvir Singh alias Sheera of Khanpur and Bholi, wife of

Rampal alias Rama, of Mandi, both of whom have long histories of drug trafficking." Official records show that Bholi has multiple cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, including a 1.190 kg smack recovery in 2005, a two-kg poppy husk seizure in 2015, and another major drug haul in 2022. Jasvir alias Sheera has also been booked in multiple cases, including one involving commercial quantities of charas and intoxicant injections.

The police, along with revenue and panchayat officials, ensured a smooth demolition process with adequate security deployment. Authorities confirmed that the occupied land rightfully belongs to the gram panchayat, and its reclamation marked a significant step in cutting off resources for drug traffickers.

Local residents, led by village sarpanch Paramjit Kaur, expressed relief and optimism, noting that such stringent actions bolster community safety and signal an unyielding commitment to eradicating the drug menace. Local community leaders have hailed these decisive actions as a turning point in the ongoing struggle against narcotics, boosting morale and instilling hope for a safer, drug-free future.

Talking to reporters, DSP Rajneesh Kumar said, "The SIT has been formed. Her phone has been recovered. We are taking the help of cyber and FSL (Forensic Science Laboratory)." DSP further said that the victim, who was pursuing an LLB, used to live alone in the State, while her family was in Delhi. The post-

CM HANDS OVER CHEQUES OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE WORTH RS 1 CRORE (EACH) TO FAMILY OF FIVE COPS

Hoshiarpur: Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday personally handed over cheques worth Rs one crore each to the families of five brave cops who made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. The financial assistance was presented to the bereaved families of ASI (LR) Balwinder Singh, ASI (LR) Naseeb Chand, ASI (LR) Amil Kumar, Head Constable Manjinder Singh, and Constable Inderjit Singh, whose selfless service and unwavering commitment have become a beacon of courage for the state.

Mann, during the passing out parade at Jahan Khela, reiterated the State Government's steadfast commitment to safeguarding the interests of its police force. "It is our duty to support the families of our fallen heroes," Mann declared, emphasizing that this initiative reflects Punjab's deep respect for the sacrifices made by its law enforcement personnel.

The assistance aims not only to provide financial security but also to inspire the youth to serve the nation with honour and dedication.

to public welfare. At the same time, the Chief Minister warned the fissiparous forces

that their evil designs to create communal strife would be nipped in the bud.

SIT formed to probe Cong worker Himani Narwal's murder in Haryana

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Haryana Police on Sunday formed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) led by Sampla Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Rajnish Kumar to probe the incident where 29-year-old Congress worker Himani Narwal's body was found stuffed in a suitcase near the bus stand in Sampla town, about 25 km from the Rohtak district headquarters on Saturday.

The Congress has demanded a probe into the death of Himani, who was associated with party MP Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra.

Meanwhile, Himani's family has refused to receive her body for cremation until the killer is apprehended. "We will not cremate Himani's body until the murderer is arrested. Pursuing LLB from a local college, she was living alone at Vijay Nagar in Rohtak city. Himani had been an active member of the Congress for several years and also participated in Bharat Jodo Yatra led by Rahul Gandhi," said Jatni, Himani's younger brother.

Jatni also revealed that their elder brother, Kuldeep, was also murdered in Rohtak in 2011 and later their father also died. Now he and his mother live in Delhi. Savita, Himani's mother, said her daughter's growing popularity in the Congress party could have been a reason behind her murder.

Talking to reporters, DSP Rajneesh Kumar said, "The SIT has been formed. Her phone has been recovered. We are taking the help of cyber and FSL (Forensic Science Laboratory)." DSP further said that the victim, who was pursuing an LLB, used to live alone in the State, while her family was in Delhi. The post-

mortem has been done but her family members were not present at the mortuary to take the report or to take the body for cremation.

"The body was found in the bag. Later, she was identified as Himani Narwal. We called her family to the spot. We are investigating various angles and will solve the matter as early as possible," Kumar said. A police investigating officer said, "Scientific evidence is being examined and an autopsy is being conducted."

Accused could be from Cong or to be her friends: Victim's mother

This murder incident has sparked a political storm with the victim's family raising doubt about the involvement of a Congress colleague and the BJP slamming the grand old party for some of its members' criminal track record.

The victim's mother Savita blamed the election and the party for her death. She claimed that Himani had made many enemies due to her quick rise in the Congress after she joined Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra. "I request Hooda sahab to help us get justice," she said, adding that her killers could be from the party or known to her.

Savita said that Himani left her home to catch a bus to Delhi on February 27 evening but later told her that she would be busy with an event of "Deepender Hooda Sahab". But it seems Himani was killed before attending the event, she said. After 4 pm on Thursday there was no communication with her, said Savita. Himani's mother said she got a call from the police on Friday afternoon informing her about the murder.

"The election and the party took my daughter's life. Because of this, she made some enemies. They (the accused) could

be from the party, could be her friends as well. On February 28, she was at home," the victim's mother said. "She was going with Rahul Gandhi and was close to the Hooda family, this is why people were having problems, they were jealous," she added.

Responding to the crime, Senior Congress leader and former Haryana Chief Minister Bhopinder Hooda demanded an investigation. "The news of the barbaric murder of active Congress worker Himani Narwal in Rohtak is extremely sad and shocking. I pay my tribute to the departed soul and express my deepest condolences to the family members," Hooda wrote on X.

"The murder of a girl in this manner and finding her body in a suitcase is extremely sad and shocking. This in itself is a blot on the law and order situation of the state. There should be a high-level impartial investigation of this murder and the government should provide justice to the victim's family as soon as possible and provide the harshest punishment to the culprits," Hooda added.

Congress MP Deepender Hooda said that the disgusting murder of a woman has shaken everybody's conscience. "There should be justice for the affected family. We know that last year, Haryana was declared the most unsafe state in the social progress index released by the Government of India. In the NCRB report, Haryana is also the number one in crime against women and murder. The government is away from ground realities. The government should act." Haryana Minister Anil Vij called Himani's murder and her family's allegations a serious matter. "I am sure the culprits will be punished soon," he said.

Triple engine Govt in Hry will ensure development at faster pace: CM Saini

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Stating that the urban local bodies have an important role in providing basic facilities to the common people, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Sunday said that the State Government is effectively fulfilling its responsibility in implementing public welfare schemes. The Centre and State governments are moving forward keeping in focus the "Vision 2047" of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said, while talking to reporters before attending a function in

Faridabad.

The Chief Minister said that people are already being provided facilities by the double engine government at the Centre and the State. "Now, after the formation of a government in urban local bodies, the triple engine government will take the development work forward at a faster pace. When the results of the civic elections will come on March 12, BJP candidates will win by a huge margin at all seats," he added.

He said that the State Government fulfilled all its promises made in the election

manifesto of 2014 and 2019, and "21 promises were made in the manifesto prepared for the civic elections and all these promises will also be fulfilled in the coming days."

During the tenure of Prime Minister Modi, there have been major changes in the country and India is progressing at a fast pace. The Prime Minister has pledged to make the country developed by 2047 and this resolution will be fulfilled with the cooperation of the public, the Chief Minister added.

India's rich tradition and culture will become identity of 'Viksit Bharat'

Saini, addressing the inauguration ceremony of the newly-constructed Vishwa Shanti Kendra by Ahimsa Vishva Bharti Sanstha in another event at Gurugram, said that India is showing the path of peace to the whole world today. Be it international diplomacy, environmental protection or resolve to fight a global pandemic, India has always worked for the welfare of humanity, he said, adding that this tradition and culture of India will be the identity of 'Viksit Bharat'.

About 47 pc voter turnout in Haryana MC polls, Counting on Mar 12

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

About 47 per cent of over 51 lakh eligible voters cast their vote in the civic body elections in Haryana on Sunday. With the beginning of polling at 8 am, voters in large numbers were seen standing in a queue to cast their votes at various polling stations in the poll board civic bodies of the State. Haryana State Election Commissioner Dhanpat Singh said that elections to various Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Municipalities of the state were conducted peacefully. At some places, people were seen standing in queue even after the deadline of 6 pm, who were given time to vote.

The counting of votes will start at 8 am on March 12 and results will also be declared on the same day. There is no news of any violence or untoward incident from anywhere, he added.

The State Election Commissioner further said that voting was held for the posts of Mayor and Ward Members in Municipal Corporations Manesar, Gurugram, Faridabad, Hisar, Rohtak, Karnal and Yamunanagar. Along with this, voting was held for the by-election for the post of Mayor in Municipal Corporations Ambala and Sonapat. The voting was also held for the posts of pradhan (president) and ward members in Municipal Councils Ambala Sadar, Pataudi-Jatauli Mandi, Thanesar and Sirsa and for the by-election for the post of pradhan (president) in Municipal Council Sohna.

The extensive arrangements were made by the Commission to conduct the urban local body elections in a peaceful, fair, and transparent manner. General, police and expenditure observers were appointed in the electoral process. Along with this, duty magistrates, supervisors, presiding officers, polling officers were appointed in all the concerned bodies. Adequate police force was deployed for security and additional police force was deployed at sensitive and highly sensitive polling stations. A control room was also set up in the Nirvachan Sadan to monitor the proper electoral process. There were a total of 51,06,134 voters in all these institutions.

Moreover, in the by-election for the Mayor, less enthusiasm was seen among the voters in Ambala Municipal Corporation and Sonapat Municipal Corporation. Similarly, the voting percentage was very low in two metropolitan cities adjacent to Delhi; Municipal Corporation, Faridabad and Municipal Corporation, Gurugram. A snag was encountered in an EVM machine at a polling booth in Ward 5 of Gurugram Municipal Corporation, which delayed the voting process by one hour. A new machine was brought in after which the voting process began smoothly. A drunken man came to cast his vote at a polling booth in the Saray Alarwadi area of Gurugram. The polling staff allowed him to cast his vote but he started creating a ruckus thereafter, insisting on casting his vote again. The drama persisted for 10-15 minutes. The polling staff had to call the

In Punjab, Municipal Councils of Tarn Taran, Dera Baba Nanak, Talwara witnesses 54.06%, 73.50%, 61.31 % voting

Chandigarh: The general elections to Punjab's three Municipal Councils of Tarn Taran (in Tarn Taran district), Dera Baba Nanak (Gurdaspur district) and Talwara (Hoshiarpur district) were conducted on Sunday in a peaceful manner. Tarn Taran witnessed 54.06 percent voter turnout, while Dera Baba Nanak recorded 73.50 percent, and Talwara registered 61.31 percent turnout, as reported by respective District Election Officers, said an official spokesperson of the Punjab State Election Commission. Spokesperson informed that a re-poll for Ward No 3 of Tarn Taran Municipal Council has been ordered to be held on March 4, 2025 from 7 am to 4 pm followed by counting of votes on the same day. In this regard, Deputy Commissioner-cum-DEO, Tarn Taran has been directed to make all the necessary arrangements.

police to usher him out of the booth.

After casting the votes in Ambala, Haryana Minister Anil Vij said: "This is the biggest festival of democracy. We should all participate in this. Step out and spend a little time celebrating this festival."

At 19.4 percent, Sonapat district was trailing in voter turnout at 3.30 pm, according to data released by the state election officials; while 31.2 percent of the electorate have cast their vote for the municipal elections to five civic bodies in Gurugram district till 3 pm. By 2:30 pm, Fatehabad witnessed a massive 67.1 per cent turnout, followed by Mahendragarh at 61.1 per cent, Palwal at 57.5 per cent and Kaithal at 56.5 per cent.

An EVM was replaced in sensitive booth number-8 at government school in Beri town here for Beri Municipal Committee polls after someone applied ink on it while casting his or her vote. Later DC Pradeep Dahiya also inspected the booth and takes stock of the

situation. A considerable number of personnel has been deployed there due to the booth being sensitive.

Union Minister and former Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar cast his vote at a booth in Prem Nagar and urged people to actively participate in the democratic process. He also took to social media platform X to appeal to voters, sharing a message: "My vote is for a prosperous Karnal. Today, I exercised my voting right in Karnal for the local body elections. I appeal to all of you to actively participate in this festival of democracy and cast your vote."

Furthermore, the State Election Commissioner Singh said that voting will be held in the Municipal Corporation Panipat on March 9. The counting of votes for the elections of Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Municipalities and the elections for Panipat Municipal Corporation will be done simultaneously on March 12 and the election results will also be declared on the same day.

Punjab Govt Launches Psychometric Tests to Empower Class X Girls

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

In a bold step towards empowering young women for a brighter future, Punjab Government has rolled out an innovative initiative to conduct psychometric tests for Class X girl students in the state's government schools. With a robust allocation of over Rs 6.56 crore by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), the program is set to benefit 93,819 students by March 31, 2025.

Punjab School Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains on Sunday detailed the project, emphasizing its role in helping students discover their innate strengths and aptitudes. "This initiative is designed to provide our young women with clear insights into their mental abilities, interests, and personality traits to guide them towards making informed career choices," Bains stated.

The psychometric tests aim to bridge the gap between government and private schooling, as private institutions often offer career counseling that government schools typically lack. By offering these tests, the state hopes to empower students to make informed career choices and select streams that align with their true potential, he said.

To ensure smooth implementation, district-level committees have been formed under the leadership of District Education Officers (Secondary) across Punjab. These committees will closely monitor the testing process, ensuring that every eligible student receives the opportunity to benefit from this program.

The initiative comes at a crucial time when many stu-

dents face uncertainty after their 10th board exams, often relying on peer recommendations rather than professional guidance. This decision significantly impacts their choice of stream in 11th grade, he said.

Highlighting the significance of the move, the Minister said: "With this initiative, we aim to provide our government

school students with opportunities on par with their private school counterparts." This strategic intervention is expected not only to enhance students' confidence but also to raise the overall standards of education in government schools, paving the way for a more informed and empowered generation.

Protest Erupts as FIR Filed Against Pastor Sparks Controversy

PNS ■ JALANDHAR/CHANDIGARH

A fierce protest broke out along the highway near Tajpur in Jalandhar on Sunday, as members of the Christian community decried an FIR filed against Pastor Bajinder Singh in Kapurthala. The demonstrators, gathered near Lamba Tajpur, accused authorities of orchestrating a conspiracy to malign the pastor's reputation.

On Saturday, Kapurthala Police registered an FIR against Pastor Bajinder Singh following a complaint by a woman who had once been an active member of the Church of Glory and Wisdom in Tajpur. According to the complaint, which was filed under IPC Sections 354A (sexual harassment), 354D (stalking), and 506 (criminal intimidation), the pastor allegedly initiated inappropriate communication by taking her phone number after 2017. The complaint stated that from 2022, the pastor started isolating her every Sunday in a church cabin and touching her inappropriately. The allegations have ignited a firestorm within the community.

At the protest, church

leader Avtar Singh vociferously condemned the FIR, declaring it "a baseless conspiracy." "A wrong FIR has been filed in Kapurthala against pastor Bajinder Singh. The charges are entirely fabricated with no supporting evidence," Avtar Singh asserted. He further highlighted his disappointment over the unresolved arrest of individuals from an older case: last December, an FIR lodged with Jalandhar Rural Police named Chandigarh residents Vijay and Chandan for misusing the pastor's photographs and spreading defamatory remarks. "Their continued freedom only deepens our anger," he added.

Supporters chanted slogans demanding that the police take immediate action against those responsible for fabricating the charges. Protesters also stressed that the complainant, who had been a regular at the church until three years ago, now plays no active role in the community — casting further doubt on her allegations.

In a recent media interaction, Pastor Bajinder Singh defended himself, dismissing the charges as "completely baseless." He claimed, "If there were any truth to these allegations, there would be evidence.

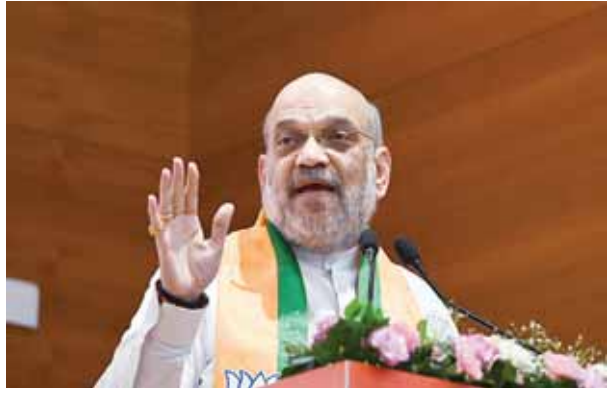
Minister says AAP Govt's Transformative Tax Reforms Boost Revenue

Chandigarh: Punjab Finance, Excise and Taxation Minister Harpal Singh Cheema on Sunday claimed that the AAP-led Punjab Government's unwavering commitment to transformative reforms has yielded remarkable improvements in the state's tax revenue. Quoting official figures, he said that net collection from GST, Excise, VAT, CST, and PSDT from April to February this fiscal year grew by 12.10 percent compared to 2023-24, with net GST collections in February surging by an impressive 28.01 percent. Cheema revealed that the total net tax collection reached Rs 38,272.66 crore — a significant increase of Rs 4,131.30 crore from the Rs 34,141.36 crore recorded last fiscal year. "Our focused initiatives have broadened the GST base and enhanced compliance among taxpayers," he asserted. The Minister highlighted that the net GST collection for February 2025 soared to Rs 2,313.69 crore — a rise of Rs 506.26 crore from Rs 1,807.43 crore in February 2024. Similarly, Excise revenue saw a healthy boost, with February's collections reaching Rs 686.47 crore, up by Rs 30.47 crore from last year's Rs 656 crore.

Government to go tough on drug traffickers: Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said the Modi government is unsparing in punishing drug traffickers who drag the youth into the dark abyss of addiction for the greed of money. In a social media post, Shah said under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government pledges to continue combating the drug menace with ruthless and meticulous investigations to build a "drug-free Bharat". He said, as a result of a foolproof investigation with a "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" strategy, 29 drug traffickers have been convicted by courts in 12 different cases across India. This success is a testament to the "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" approach adopted by the government, an official



Union Home Minister Amit Shah

Pioneer photo

release said. In pursuit of Modi government's zero-tolerance policy against drugs, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) has achieved this significant success, it said. The details of 12 cases include the seizure of 23.859 kg of charas at the Sabarmati Railway Station in Gujarat's

Ahmedabad in 2019, where three people were arrested and sentenced to 14 years in jail. In July 2022, the NCB in Madhya Pradesh's Mandasaur intercepted two vehicles in Shahdol and seized 123.080 kg of ganja. Four people were arrested in the case and sentenced to 12 years rigorous

of imprisonment with a fine of Rs 2 lakh each. In the Chandigarh Zone last year, a parcel containing two hockey sticks packed with 438 grams of opium was intercepted at DHL Express, Ludhiana, by the officers of the NCB. Two arrested accused in the case were sentenced to three years of imprisonment by a Punjab court for their role in attempting to transport the opium to Canada. In another case, the NCB arrested one person at the Chandigarh Railway Station in 2021 for possession of 390 grams of charas. The accused was formally arrested, and upon completion of the investigation, a special court sentenced him to six months in jail. In June, 2021, the NCB intercepted a Zimbabwean woman on her arrival at the

Cochin International Airport. The examination of her luggage led to the recovery and seizure of 2.910 kg of heroin. She was subsequently arrested and a court in Ernakulam sentenced her to 11 years in jail. In January 2018, the NCB seized 450 grams of charas, leading to the arrest of one person in Dehradun, who was later sentenced to one year in jail. In 2021, the NCB seized 1.950 kg of charas from the possession of two accused who were later arrested. A court in January 2025 sentenced the accused to 10 years in jail. In February 2021, the NCB seized 681.8 kg of ganja in the Ranga Reddy district of Telangana. Eight accused were arrested and charged with drug trafficking. A local court sentenced them to 10 years in prison.

India's policies needs comprehensive framework says Principal Secretary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Any policy making in the Government setup must account for uncertainty, with a focus on a comprehensive framework and an outcome-oriented constructive mindset, said PK Mishra, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, in an interaction during a recent Business Standard Manthan Summit in the national Capital. Addressing a wide array of issues, Mishra said that the Government had been successful in tackling the turmoil ranging from Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia conflict and West Asia crisis with a focus on being 'Atmanirbhar' (self-reliant). He attributed this to the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister Narendra

Modi focussed on readiness to address the challenges posed by being resilient and by introducing reforms to tackle the emergent issues. Mishra further elaborated how the Indian economy faced several challenges like geopolitical tensions, disruptions in global supply chains, and energy transition. In the event of Covid-19 pandemic when the whole world, including India, appeared to be in turmoil, India could navigate the challenges effectively and successfully. "It took several measures on economic reforms in addition to providing some stimulus packages. The growth momentum was restored," he said. He also highlighted the Government's initiative of Production Linked Initiative

(PLI) Schemes and leveraging of consumption base and demographic advantage of India among others. In the context of the ongoing protectionism and breakdown of the Washington Consensus, Mishra explained how our policy stance in our economic engagement with the world has been consistent. Citing examples of recent FTAs with Australia, UAE and EFTA, he referred to the ongoing negotiations with the UK and the EU. This approach will help us mitigating the emerging challenges, he added. Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister impressed upon the need to tackle uncertainty with a new approach where not only risk assessment but also building an 'anti-fragile system' should be our objective.

NHRC to organise human rights program for global south nations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in collaboration with Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is organising a six-day Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Executive Capacity Building Programme on human rights for senior-level functionaries of the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) of Global South here from March 3-8, NHRC said here on Sunday. Forty seven participants from the NHRIs of 14 countries of Global South are likely to attend it. These are Madagascar, Uganda, Samoa, Timor Leste, DR Congo, Togo, Mali, Nigeria, Egypt, Tanzania, Mauritius, Burundi, Turkmenistan, Qatar. This customised programme has been developed in accordance to the need of NHRIs of participating countries and feedback provided earlier. Eminent persons with domain knowledge and expertise in capacity building and imparting training, will be the resource persons. The programme will be inaugurated by Chairperson of NHRC, Justice V Ramasubramanian on Monday. The programme aims to provide insights into various dimensions of human rights, international

perspectives, and share NHRC, India's experience over the past three decades to enhance awareness among participants of various NHRIs. It seeks to strengthen South-South cooperation, enhance collaboration and networking, and improve human rights protection mechanisms through comprehensive capacity building and experience sharing. The expected outcome includes developing a better understanding of international dimensions of human rights, a deeper understanding of NHRC, India's work in the field of human rights protection, and its best practices, which can be adopted by the other NHRIs, improved networking among NHRIs, fostering collaborations and partnerships at regional and international levels and enhanced capability to contribute towards the protection and promotion of human rights. The participants will engage in lectures and interactive sessions by eminent persons and practitioners in the field, cultural immersion and field visits. The initiative is a part of NHRC's ongoing outreach efforts to enhance understanding and appreciation of various aspects of human rights and help in building capacity among senior functionaries of NHRIs.

40 per cent people have no access to education in mother tongue: UNESCO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Forty per cent of the global population does not have access to education in a language they speak or understand, according to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring (GEM) team. Despite countries' growing understanding of the role of home language, policy uptake remains limited. Implementation challenges include limited teacher capacity to use home languages, unavailability of materials in home languages and community opposition, it said. In some low- and middle-income countries, this figure rises to 90 per cent. More than a quarter of a billion learners are affected, GEM officials said, recommending nations to implement multilingual education policies and practices with the goal of creating educational systems

that benefit all learners. The team, which has come up with a report titled "Languages matter: Global guidance on multilingual education", noted that as migration increases, linguistic diversity is becoming a global reality and classrooms with learners from diverse language backgrounds are more common. Over 31 million displaced youth are facing language barriers in education. The report was compiled on the 25th anniversary of International Mother Language Day, celebrating a quarter-century of dedicated efforts to preserve and promote the use of mother tongues. The report comes at a time when India is in the process of implementing the new National Education Policy (NEP) that advocates multilingual education. The three-language policy in school education has drawn opposition from some states.

"Today 40 per cent of people globally lack access to education in the language they speak and understand fluently. In some low- and middle-income countries, this figure rises to 90 per cent. More than a quarter of a billion learners are affected," a senior GEM team member told PTI. "The first thing to note is that over the course of this decade, which has been marked by the pervasive influence of technology in young people's lives but also by the impact of COVID-19, learning levels have dropped sharply in both reading and mathematics. But the next thing to note is that the impact has been disproportionate on learners who are disadvantaged due to linguistic reasons," the official added. According to the analysis by the team, the gap between the two groups increased on average between 2010 and 2022, from 12 to 18 percentage

points in reading and from 10 to 15 percentage points in mathematics. This suggests that learners who do not speak the language of instruction at home, whether for historical reasons or due to migration and displacement, are at a bigger risk of learning loss. "Countries face diverse linguistic challenges in education, stemming from both historical and contemporary factors. In the first category, often as a legacy of colonialism, languages have been imposed on local populations that prevented their use for instruction and created educational disparities. "At the same time, large linguistic diversity in some countries presents challenges for education systems, as resources for implementing multilingual education programmes tend to be limited," the report said. In the second category, immigration brings new

languages to classrooms in richer countries, enriching linguistic diversity but also posing challenges in instruction and assessment. "These countries often grapple with issues such as language acquisition support for immigrant students, developing inclusive curricula that reflect diversity, and ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their linguistic background. The context each country faces means the policy solutions required are different," it added. The GEM team has recommended that educational language policies should prioritise context-specific approaches and language transition must be backed by curriculum adjustments and supported by teaching and learning materials adapted for that grade. "In countries with

significant immigrant populations, policies should support the development and implementation of effective bridging language programmes, qualified teachers, and support inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse linguistic needs of all," it said. "In multilingual contexts, training should ensure proficiency in both home and second languages; teacher deployment could match the teacher's language fluency with the language of instruction of the target school; early childhood educators should be trained on culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy," it added. Planning for strong support systems outside of schools to ensure the success of new multilingual education policies and supporting school leaders to foster inclusion in schools are also among the recommendations.

AAP brings back Bhaben Choudhury as Assam chief

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

The Aam Aadmi Party on Sunday said the party has appointed its national joint secretary Bhaban Choudhury as the acting state president of the Assam unit, five months after replacing him from the post. As the party's permanent president Manoj Dhanowar is not active due to "personal reasons", the executive

committee in its meeting on Saturday unanimously chose Choudhury for the position. Choudhury was the chief of AAP Assam prior to Dhanowar taking charge as state president in September last year. Immediately after assuming office, Choudhury condemned the "increasing political violence, suppression of democratic protests and

the deliberate defamation campaigns against opposition leaders and their families". "The BJP government is systematically killing democracy by silencing opposition voices. No matter how much suppression they impose, the people of Assam will give them a befitting reply in 2026," he said in a statement. Highlighting the "rising public discontent", he

claimed that the government has failed to address critical issues like skyrocketing prices, communal remarks, environmental destruction due to deforestation and the recurring floods in Assam. "The frustration among the common people is growing every day and in response, the BJP is intentionally creating a chaotic environment to instill fear among the masses,"

Choudhury said. He also alleged that the BJP government is using fear tactics ahead of the 2026 assembly elections to deter public dissent. He also criticised the one-man Justice (retd) Biplab Kumar Sharma Commission report on the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) scam, calling it a politically motivated document.

NGT summons Uttarakhand officials over illegal felling of 176 trees

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has asked the member secretary of the Uttarakhand Pollution Control Board (UKPCB) and the state's principal chief conservator of forests to appear before it in a matter regarding illegal felling of 176 trees in Udham Singh Nagar district. The NGT was hearing a petition on the unauthorised felling of trees during the development of a residential colony by private persons in the district's Chandpur village. In its order dated February 24, a bench of judicial member, Justice Arun Kumar Tyagi and expert member, A Senthil Vel said that according to a report submitted by a joint committee that was set up earlier, 176 trees were felled illegally and environmental compensation had to be recovered for it. The committee comprised the district magistrate, the Dehradun regional office of the Union Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change, and the UKPCB. Taking note of the report, the tribunal sought a response from the Uttarakhand chief secretary and others. "We also consider the personal appearance of the member secretary, UKPCB and principal chief conservator of forests (PCCF) before this tribunal physically or through video-conferencing on the next date of hearing to be essential for assisting this tribunal in just and proper adjudication of the questions involved in the case. "Accordingly, they are directed to remain present before this tribunal with the relevant record," the green body said. The NGT posted the matter for further hearing on April 7.

NIT Rourkela develops low-cost solar panel technology

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Researchers at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela have patented a low-cost technology developed by them to extract maximum power from solar panels under changing weather conditions, according to officials. The innovation also responds quickly to changes in sunlight and temperature, allowing the system to consistently operate at peak efficiency and avoid any power fluctuations, they said. Supported by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) under the Clean Energy Research Initiative (CERI), the research team has been granted a patent "Method And System For Voltage Sensor-based Maximum Power Point Tracking For Photovoltaic System". According to Susovon Samanta, Associate Professor, Electrical Engineering, NIT Rourkela, Solar panels produce electricity from sunlight, but

the amount of power they generate changes throughout the day due to shifts in temperature and the intensity of sunlight. To ensure they always produce the most energy possible, solar systems use a technique called Maximum Power Point Tracking (MPPT). This is a smart system that helps solar panels produce the most electricity possible by adjusting voltage and current based on sunlight and temperature changes. It consists of a microcontroller that runs the MPPT algorithm, sensors to measure voltage and current, and a DC-DC converter that regulates power flow. "The system continuously monitors the solar panel's output and makes minor adjustments to keep it operating at peak efficiency, ensuring minimal energy waste. Traditional MPPT methods can waste energy and respond slowly when weather conditions change. They also require expensive current sensors, making them less

affordable for low-cost solar setups," Samanta said. "To overcome these limitations, we have developed a voltage sensor-based MPPT method that eliminates the need for current sensors, reducing system complexity and cost. Our approach uses a simple voltage sensor or a resistor divider circuit to track the Maximum Power Point (MPP) more accurately while maintaining stable and efficient steady-state operation, leading to improved tracking efficiency and better PV energy harvesting," he added. Samanta explained that their method prevents small power fluctuations that older techniques struggle with, ensuring stable and efficient power extraction. "It also responds quickly to changes in sunlight and temperature, allowing the system to consistently operate at peak efficiency. Additionally, by using only a voltage sensor or a simple resistor divider circuit, it reduces system complexity and cost. Its

adaptable design enables integration into various solar power setups, making it a versatile solution for a wide range of application," he said. The researchers claimed that the innovation has broad applications in the renewable energy sector, including eliminating the need for costly current sensors, reduces costs and makes it a good fit for affordable and small-scale solar projects. "The developed innovation can be used in solar-powered IoT devices such as weather sensors and remote communication towers, where maintaining reliable energy output is crucial. Affordable consumer solar products like home lighting systems and portable solar chargers, where cost and efficiency are key considerations and use in microgrid and off-grid energy solutions, providing a stable and reliable power source in remote or rural areas, are among other possible benefits of the innovation," Samanta said.

Lucknow Municipal Corporation issues tax notice to Ekana stadium

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

The Lucknow Municipal Corporation has issued a ₹28.42 Crore property tax notice to the Bharat Ratna Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee International Cricket Stadium, also known as Ekana stadium, officials said on Sunday. The notice comes ahead of the Women's Premier League matches scheduled this month and the Indian Premier League matches in April, raising concerns over their smooth conduct. The stadium administration has termed the notice "unjust" and plans to meet Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to seek relief. According to a statement from Additional Municipal Commissioner Pankaj Srivastava, Zone 4 of the municipal corporation issued the notice on Saturday.

The amount includes ₹5.45 Crore in tax due since December 1, 2020, and an outstanding balance of ₹22.97 Crore, the statement said, adding, the decision has been taken as per legal provisions and will be strictly enforced. Srivastava clarified that only the sports grounds and stadiums of government-aided or recognised non-aided educational institutions are exempt from property tax. Since Ekana stadium does not fall under this category, it is liable to pay the tax. "Ekana stadium hosts IPL matches, professional sports events and cultural programmes with ticket sales. Therefore, the property tax assessment is justified. Currently, only property tax is being levied, and there is no action on water or sewerage charges," Srivastava added. He said the stadium

administration had previously objected to the tax assessment, but those objections were deemed baseless. Ekana stadium Director Uday Sinha called the notice "against the rules." "We will soon meet the Chief Minister and seek justice," he told PTI. Sinha questioned the rationale behind imposing a ₹28 Crore tax liability, arguing that the Lucknow Municipal Corporation's rules provide tax exemption for all types of stadiums. He also pointed out that the notice does not mention a deadline for payment and expressed hope that the issue would be resolved without affecting IPL matches. Ekana stadium is the home ground for IPL team Lucknow Super Giants and is scheduled to host seven IPL matches this season.

NOAA layoffs will impact forecasts, cyclone tracking in India: Experts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Scientists and policymakers have voiced concern over the layoffs at the US climate agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), saying any reduction in observation data could affect monsoon forecasts and cyclone tracking in India. Hundreds of weather forecasters and other federal NOAA employees on probationary status were fired last week. These included meteorologists who do crucial local forecasts in the national weather service offices. "We are worried.

If NOAA reduces observations, there will be implications on weather forecasts. When ocean observations reduce, there is less data to assimilate. Hence predictability will reduce," M Ravichandran, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences, told PTI. Climate scientist at the Indian Institute for Tropical Meteorology Roxy Mathew Koll termed the NOAA layoffs as a global crisis that could impact climate science. NOAA provides data and models that support weather-climate monitoring,

forecasting and disaster preparedness worldwide. "For India, the monsoon forecasts, cyclone tracking, and climate projections rely on NOAA's models," Koll, who is also among the authors of reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said. He said the NOAA layoffs were not just a US issue, but a blow to climate science and action worldwide. "Half of the Indian Ocean's observational network is backed by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Without this backbone, early warnings for floods,

heatwaves, and storms will weaken, putting millions at risk," Koll said. Another meteorologist said he has been receiving emails from his interlocutors at NOAA informing them about the layoffs and inability to continue work as before. "This is more than a budget cut. It is a direct threat to climate resilience, research, and preparedness worldwide. The world cannot afford to lose NOAA," Koll, a Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar awardee, said. India has deployed a number of argo floats,

moored buoys and drifting buoys for ocean observations for various weather forecasting models. While most of the instruments deployed by the Ministry of Earth Sciences are in the Indian Ocean, NOAA also has deployed similar instruments in the Indian Ocean as well as in other seas across the world. "Collaboration is key to science — and particularly climate research and action. Take this example — monitoring across global oceans is essential to predict India's weather and climate, but no single country can do it alone," Koll said.

Odisha to provide training to 50 tribal students for professional courses

PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha government will provide preparatory pilot training to 50 tribal students, mostly women, to make them ready for the professional course, an official said on Sunday. The Commerce and Transport Department of the Odisha government has recently issued a tender to hire a professional agency to provide the training. As per the tender document, the government, through the selected private agency, will identify at least 300 tribal students, from whom 50 will be shortlisted through proper

screening to impart the preparatory training. The selected 50 students, mostly women, will receive coaching, covering all selection parameters of airline cadet pilot assessment, in Bhubaneswar for eight weeks, the official said. The coaching is aimed at preparing the candidates to clear the cadet pilot assessment and also make them ready for the basic foundation programme syllabus set by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) and give an overview of the flying training course, he said.

No place for anti-social elements in Punjab: Mann

PTI ■ HOSHIARPUR

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday asserted that gangsters, smugglers, criminals and other anti-social elements have no place in the state and will soon be wiped out. Addressing a gathering here during the passing out parade of 2,490 cops, Mann said this pious land produced saints, seers, martyrs, legendary players and generals. The chief minister, however, said that smugglers, gangsters and other criminals have unfortunately made this state their abode under the alleged patronisation of the previous governments. Mann said the state government has now started a "crusade" to weed out these anti-social elements, adding they will be behind the bars soon. The chief minister said Punjab is at a historic juncture as his government has launched a decisive war against drugs in the state.



Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann attends passing out parade in Hoshiarpur PTI

Mann said the state government has adopted a zero tolerance policy against drugs and Punjab will be made completely drug free with active support and cooperation of the public. The supply line of drugs is being snapped, drug peddlers are being put behind bars and the properties of the drug smugglers are being confiscat-

ed or razed, he added. The chief minister said that inimical forces have been chalking out nefarious designs to disturb the hard earned peace in the border state, adding the Punjab Police has always foiled such attempts. Mann said it is imperative the police force is updated as per requirements in the field of investigation, science and tech-

nology to further overcome major challenges faced by the state. Congratulating the new cops, he said it is a momentous occasion for them as they have become an integral part of the Punjab Police family. The chief minister exhorted them to discharge their duty with utmost dedication, hard work and commitment, thereby contributing immensely in the progress of the state and prosperity of its people. Mann called upon the newly inducted cops to play a proactive role in wiping out the menace of drugs from the state. He said Punjab is fighting the nation's war against drugs and the police have always acted as a barrier for checking its supply. The chief minister said the time has now come when the cops should uphold the glorious tradition of the Punjab Police for weeding out the scourge of drugs from the state.

More than 10,000 youngsters have been appointed in the police force since 2022, he added. Mann said the state government has also decided to recruit 10,000 new police personnel for which necessary clearance will be given by the Cabinet soon. The chief minister said that a dedicated 'Sadak Surakhya Force' (road safety force) had been set up to ensure enhanced security and save precious lives on the roads. He said since its launch in February last year, the state has witnessed a 48.10 per cent reduction in casualties due to accidents. The force has been deployed all along 4,200 kms of the high-ways, prone to traffic accidents, Mann said, adding they act as a deterrent for traffic violations in addition to patrolling. The chief minister said even Union Minister Nitin Gadkari had hailed this initiative of the state government in Parliament.

BJP targets Mamata after ECI clarifies voter ID duplication

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The BJP mounted fresh attack on Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, after the Election Commission of India (ECI) on Sunday came out with clarifications regarding duplication of Voters' ID card numbers, saying duplication did not necessarily mean fake ID cards. The Commission said that duplication of Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers might have taken place because decentralised, manual mechanism was followed before the voters' database was shifted to a digital platform adding the Commission would take steps to rectify things. In a statement referring to social media reports the poll panel said "it is clarified that while EPIC numbers of some of the electors may be identical, the other details including demographic details, Assembly Constituency and polling booth are different for the electors with the same EPIC

number. Irrespective of the EPIC number, any elector can cast a vote only at their designated polling station in their respective Constituency in their State or UT where they are enrolled in the electoral roll and nowhere else." Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had earlier launched a scathing attack on the BJP Government for manipulating the ECI and influencing the Chief Election Commissioners in inserting fake names in the electoral rolls to influence the elections. She cites EPIC cards showing how the numbers of two cards were same whereas their holders were different. "There are several people who are complaining that duplicate names from Haryana or UP are appearing in their EPIC card numbers," Banerjee said adding this was a ploy to rig elections. "They did this in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi. The leaders there

could not catch the trick of inserting the names of fake voters. But we have been able to catch their trick and we have directed the officials from the DMs and BDOs to the party workers and local leaders to start scrutinising the electoral rolls and catch the fake voters so that the BJP cannot bring in voters from Bihar, UP and Haryana to vote in Bengal," Banerjee said announcing a committee led by senior party leaders to start door-to-door scrutiny of the electoral rolls. Meanwhile apparently taking a cue from the ECI clarifications BJP leader Amit Malviya attacked Mamata Banerjee for allegedly preparing excuses before an impending defeat in the next year's Assembly elections. "It is a pity that the Bengal Chief Minister is resorting to misinformation to lay the groundwork for her imminent defeat in 2026 and weaken votersconfidence in the electoral system," Malviya said.

Haryana civic polls held, BJP exudes confidence

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Over 35 per cent of the more than 51 lakh eligible voters for civic elections in Haryana cast their votes till 4 pm on Sunday, officials said. Voting is being held to elect mayors and ward members in seven municipal corporations - Gurugram, Manesar, Faridabad, Hisar, Rohtak, Karnal, and Yamunanagar. Bypolls for the Mayor's post in Ambala and Sonapat are also being held. The voting, which began at 8 am, will conclude at 6 pm. Elections are also being held to elect presidents and ward members of four municipal councils - Ambala Sadar, Pataudi Jatoli Mandi, Thanesar, and Sirsa. A bypoll is being held for the post of president in the Sohna Municipal Council. Voting is also taking place for the election of presidents and ward members in 21 municipal committees. Bypolls for the president's post in the municipal committees of Assandh (Karnal district) and Ismailabad (Kurukshetra district) are also being conducted. At 4 pm, the turnout was recorded at 35 per cent. Ahead of the polls, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini exuded confidence that

the BJP would win the elections and had said work would be done three times faster after the formation of a triple-engine government. The Congress has appealed to voters to elect its candidates with a full majority. The grand old party, out of office in Haryana for more than 10 years, is looking to turn around its electoral fortunes in the civic polls. Union minister Manohar Lal Khattar was among the early voters, casting his vote at a booth in Karnal. "Voting is our democratic right and it is also our duty to exercise our franchise," he told reporters, exuding confidence that the BJP would win the polls. Union minister of state Krishan Pal Gurjar cast his vote at a booth in Faridabad. Haryana Minister Anil Vij, who cast his vote in Ambala Cantt, said, "All voters should participate in the greatest festival of democracy. A triple-engine government will be formed in Haryana." "People are aware that the BJP governs both at the Centre and in Haryana and, if the party also governs the urban local bodies, development will accelerate," he added. Sunderlal Yadav, the BJP's may-



Voters flaunt inked fingers after casting votes in Sonapat PTI

oral candidate for Manesar, where municipal elections are being held for the first time, cast his vote at a booth in the Manesar area. Gurugram district's Farukh Nagar recorded nearly 60 per cent polling till 4 pm. In Gurugram, the turnout was around 30 per cent while it was over 55 per cent in Manesar. In Ambala district, the turnout was nearly 24 per cent in Ambala, 41 per cent in Ambala Sadar and 59 per cent in Barara. In Faridabad, the turnout at 4 pm was around 32 per cent. Narnaund in Hisar district recorded a turnout of 74 per cent while Hisar registered 43 per cent. In Taoru of Nuh district, 68 per

cent of voters exercised their franchise. The turnout was 40 per cent in Rohtak and more than 22 per cent in Sonapat. Gurugram Deputy Commissioner cum District Election Officer Ajay Kumar said 1,109 booths had been set up, including for Gurugram, Manesar and Pataudi. The start of polling was delayed by an hour in a booth of the Gurugram Municipal Corporation's Ward No 5 due to a snag in the EVM, sources said. Gurugram Police Commissioner Vikas Kumar Arora said more than 4,500 security personnel had been deployed to ensure smooth polling.

Gurugram's five areas see 40.6 per cent voter turnout

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

Voting in Gurugram's five municipal areas - municipal corporation, Gurugram, municipal corporation, Manesar, and municipal councils of Sohna, Pataudi, and Farrukhnagar towns recorded 40.6 per cent till 5.55 pm on Sunday. As per the Election Commission (EC) schedule, the voting will take place from 8 am to 6 pm, with results scheduled for declaration on March 12. The BJP, which won 48 seats in recent held Haryana assembly polls, has this time set a target to get a full majority in Gurugram district MC elections. According to the data released by the District Election Office, the highest voting percentage of 72.2 per cent was recorded in the Farrukhnagar Municipal Committee. The lowest turnout was 29.9 per cent in the Sohna Municipal Council. Municipal Corporation Gurugram (MCG) recorded 37.2 per cent and Manesar Municipal Corporation recorded 62.8 per cent voting. Pataudi Jatauli Mandi recorded 63.3 per cent. The number of registered vot-



Pioneer Photo

ers in Gurugram district is over 11.7 Lakh. These voters will exercise their franchise at 1,109 booths in five municipal areas including Gurugram, Manesar, Pataudi, Sohna and Farrukhnagar in Gurugram district. The elections are being held in 33 municipal bodies eight municipal corporations, 21 municipalities and four municipal councils. District Election Officer Ajay Kumar said that the votes would be cast for the post of Mayor of the MCG and councillor in 35 wards of the MCG area. Likewise, the votes would be cast for the post of Mayor of the MMC and councillor in 20

wards of the MMC area. Similarly, the votes will be cast for the post of councillor and chairman in 22 wards in Municipal Council Pataudi Jatauli Mandi. In which over 22,000 men and 20,721 women will cast their votes. In the by-election for the post of chairman in Sohna Municipal Council, 26,596 men and 23,551 women and six transgender will cast their votes in 21 wards. At the same time, in Municipal Committee Farrukhnagar, 7,683 men 6,961 women and one transgender will choose their government body for the post of councillor and chairman in 16 wards.

SFI calls academic strike post chaos in JU

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

An eerie calm prevailed inside the Jadavpur University (JU) campus a day after Left students' unions including the Students' Federation of India held violent protests inside the campus and allegedly heckled Bengal Education Minister Bratya Basu - demanding early elections to students' bodies throughout the State. Students' union elections have not been held in the State for the past seven-eight years. As a group of Left students held protest rallies inside the campus and outside the Jadavpur Police Station local Trinamool Congress workers too organised rallies demanding immediate arrest of the students who were involved in heckling the Minister and some university professors who had assembled to take part in a meeting of West Bengal College and University Professors' Association - backed by the TMC. "We believe in democracy and peace but if the CPI(M)-backed students think that if they can get away after doing anything. Even manhandling professors and heckling a minister then our boys are ready, and we can take control of JU in a minute," another TMC leader and State minister Arup Biswas said. The students had on Saturday noon gheraoed Minister Basu and were asking a statement from him regarding a deadline by which the college and university students' elections would be held in the State. Contradictory versions emanated from both sides as the Minister said he was ready to talk to the agitating students and in fact received a deputa-tion from the Students' Federation of India (SFI) the protesters said Basu would not listen to them and his car tried to speed away without caring for the students who were standing in front of his vehicle. The driver of the vehicle said that he sped away to save the minister as "the students were pounding fist blows on the bonnet and windshield" of the Minister's SUV which was partly damaged. Two students were injured in the incident as the car sped away. While the rear wheel of the vehicle rolled over the leg of a student another of his colleague Indranuj Roy whose left eye got seriously injured. He was presently undergoing treatment in a private medical college and hospital adjacent to the University. As the news of Roy getting injured by the Minister's vehicle the students went on a rampage and ransacked TMC academic employees' union office. Meanwhile, even as the SFI had called for an academic strike throughout the State on Monday, alleged TMC workers went on rampage mounting attacks on CPI(M) party offices at various places, sources said. "A CPI(M) party office was ransacked at Dinhaty in North Bengal while another was ransacked and its furniture broken at Durgapur," CPI(M) leader Mayukh said adding similar attacks had also taken place in Hooghly, Burdwan and Howrah.

Sahitya Academy opts for Padma style nomination

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The Sahitya Academy (National Academy of Letters) has amended its process of selection of best books by bringing in readers as juries. With effect from 2025, annual literary awards would follow the format of Padma Awards. Readers can recommend books of their choice to the Academy by online. An Academy insider said that this was to liberate the selection process from the shackles of a cartel which has made the institution a milch cow since it was established in 1954. Over

the last four decades, Academy awards have become a laughing stock in the country. When K Sreenivasa Rao, secretary, Academy secretary, on Saturday waxed eloquence on KP Ramanunni, the Malayalam writer who authored God's Own Book, the audience at Kozhikode were seen gawwaring. "Rao was unaware of the fact that the book is full of obscene and if there was anything conspicuous by absence from Ramanunni's work, it was literature," K Anandan Pillai, founder-editor of Sahitya Vimarsam, a widely respected

journal of literary criticism. The book had bagged the Sahitya Academy Award for the best Malayalam novel despite it being termed by eminent critics like Prof Ravi Shankar Nair as the worst piece of literature they have read in their career. "We can use this book to throw at stray dogs which are aplenty all over Kerala. Or else we can put this book as an obstacle underneath the truck to ensure that the vehicle does not run amuck," wrote Professor Nair in his literary column. Despite the observations by Prof Nair, author Ramanunni laughed all the way to the

Bank with the award money and royalty amount. Another book of this genre was "Moustache", a novel by S Hareesh. "Though the book has no literature other than pornographic description, Hareesh made millions as royalty despite literature getting buried thousands of fathom beneath the surface of earth. Cash through controversies seems to be the catchword of these modern a widely respected journal of literary criticism novels," said Pillai. "These books are purchased secretly by voracious readers to

know the contents and substance. Even pornographic books have some substance in them but not the works of Ramanunni or Hareesh," said T G Mohan Das. He has reasons to get annoyed as Hareesh has claimed in the work that Hindu women go to temples to display their physique. Despite these obscenities, these books manage to win national prizes thanks to the fact that the authors know the right people at the right places. "It is an open secret that the Sahitya Akademy awards are presented by jury consisting of writers with vested interests. The win-

ners are selected based on their political ideology, caste and community. There are persons who have been eternal members of the juries," said Pillai. Tamil Nadu is no exception. "Despite the DMK's opposition to anything associated with Hindi instances of lobbying for Akademy awards are galore. Only the chosen few get these honors," said Professor Josephine Jayashanti, a novelist of repute who is blunt in her opinion. She says that Perumal Murugan's "One Part Woman", a novel based on an alleged tradition in Tamil Nadu's

Thiruchengode village, was written with ulterior motive. "When it was published in 2010, it turned out to be a damp squib. But when it was translated into English, there was a major controversy as desired by the author and publishers. It was written with the sole objective of tarnishing the Tiruchengode residents and portrayed them in poor light," said Jayashanti. Anandan Pillai feels that the inclusion of general public in the selection process is likely to bring down the discrepancies. "But the jury is out and one has to wait and watch," said Pillai.

Over 1.25 Crore pilgrims visit Ayodhya in 45 days

KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA ■ AYODHYA

As the Maha Kumbh festivities in Prayagraj captivated the nation, Ayodhya experienced an unexpected spiritual wave of its own. The sacred city witnessed an unprecedented influx of devotees, setting a new benchmark in religious tourism. Over a span of 45 days, from Makar Sankranti to Mahashivratri, estimated 10 to 12 Lakh devotees arrived daily, transforming Ayodhya into a hub of spiritual fervor. For the first time in history, the Shri Ram Lalla temple extended its darshan hours until 1 am to accommodate the ceaseless stream of pilgrims. Visitors lauded the Yogi government's developmental initiatives and crowd management strategies, which ensured a seamless pilgrimage experience. Anil Mishra, a member of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, revealed that more than 1.25 crore devotees visited the temple during this period, with AI-powered tracking and door metal detectors recording the footfall. Devotional offerings also saw a surge, with daily donations averaging around ₹15 lakh.



Devotees take a dip in Sarayu river in Ayodhya PTI

The unprecedented rush provided a significant boost to the local economy, driving demand for prasads, flowers, and other religious offerings. Hotels, restaurants, and home stays, particularly those near the temple, remained fully booked, underscoring the success of government-backed employment schemes for local residents. To manage the massive crowds, authorities arranged shelter for 25,000 people and

ensured adequate provisions for sanitation, drinking water, and waste management. Traffic diversions and holding zones at city entry points helped streamline the influx of pilgrims. Divisional Commissioner Gaurav Dayal highlighted that tight security arrangements allowed for an orderly darshan experience, setting the stage for even better preparations ahead of the upcoming Ram Navami celebrations.

How Prayagraj learnt to live with Kumbh stampedes

PTI ■ PRAYAGRAJ

My uncle had saved his sister by pulling her out of the river waters by her hair as she slipped below amid the commotion, says city-based advocate Niranjan Lal recalling the 1954 Kumbh Mela stampede stories he had heard from his aunt who survived it. This was the first Kumbh in Allahabad (renamed Prayagraj in 2018), many of whose members have performed 'kalpas' and bathing rituals at all Kumbh melas held here post independence. His wife, Saloni Niranjan kept the family tradition, and observed the rituals at Maha Kumbh this year, after her mother-in-law's death in 2019. "We were married in 1988, and few months later, the 1989 Kumbh Mela happened. And, I and my wife have been part of all successive Kumbh also since then. But, the 1954 tragedy is something my uncle and 'bua' (aunt) used to talk about. She told me how she was saved by my father's elder brother while she was drowning during the incident," Lal reminisced, adding, his 'bua' who was born in 1920s and also used to observe rituals, died in 1986. Lal's father, Govind Prasad, a government officer was at the family camp in the mela area when

the disaster took place. The incident of the 1954 stampede was then described as a 'national tragedy'. Akshat Lal, 32, son of Niranjan Lal, says he used to hear stories about the old Kumbh Melas from his grandmother and aunt, whose mother was rescued during the 1954 stampede. "The scale of the tragedy was such that the entire country was shaken. Every other old family in Allahabad either has a personal story attached to it, or they know someone having some link with the tragedy," he told PTI. The young scholar, who even wrote a 100-odd-page book "Kumbh: A Divine Show at Allahabad" in 2013, has researched extensively on the subject. Another stampede took place at Allahabad Junction (now Prayagraj Junction) during the 2013 Kumbh Mela in which scores of people died. After the 1954 stampede, an inquiry committee was set up and it made a slew of recommendations for better crowd management and ensuring the safety of pilgrims. "If one looks at the Maha Kumbh 2025, a VVIP culture was promoted during it, and aggressive marketing and '144 years' hype was used to draw people to the mela. The authorities were somehow complacent and some so-

called celebrities were telling on social media that arrangements were 'great' and people should flock to Sangam, which were a factor for overcrowding and eventually a stampede," he alleged. The Uttar Pradesh government had, however, maintained that ample arrangements were made, and the theme itself was 'Bhavaya Divya Surakshit Maha Kumbh'. PTI spoke to many other residents of the city who either witnessed January 29 stampede or its aftermath or knew someone who was present there in the mela. Renu Devi, a domestic help, said, she saw piles of footwear and bags at the ghats and also many floating in the river the day the stampede took place. "I saw people being taken away in ambulances, it was panic all over," she said. For people like Devi, however, faith overpowers fear, as she said, "I took holy dip for five times during this Kumbh, mostly after the stampede." Maha Kumbh, the spectacle that takes place once in 12 years, was held this year from January 13 (Paush Purnima) to February 26 (Mahashivratri) and saw grand processions of Naga Sadhus and three 'Amrit Snans'. The mega religious gathering drew a record over 66 crore pilgrims during this period.

While the rear wheel of the vehicle rolled over the leg of a student another of his colleague Indranuj Roy whose left eye got seriously injured. He was presently undergoing treatment in a private medical college and hospital adjacent to the University. As the news of Roy getting injured by the Minister's vehicle the students went on a rampage and ransacked TMC academic employees' union office. Meanwhile, even as the SFI had called for an academic strike throughout the State on Monday, alleged TMC workers went on rampage mounting attacks on CPI(M) party offices at various places, sources said. "A CPI(M) party office was ransacked at Dinhaty in North Bengal while another was ransacked and its furniture broken at Durgapur," CPI(M) leader Mayukh said adding similar attacks had also taken place in Hooghly, Burdwan and Howrah.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

A clash of diplomacy and dignity

A dramatic Oval Office face-off between Trump and Zelensky, marked by sharp exchanges, underscores global political instability

In a high-stakes meeting that captured global attention, President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky clashed in a dramatic showdown at the White House. What began as cordial greetings quickly spiraled into an explosive exchange, leaving Zelensky visibly humiliated on the world stage—even as his defiant stance earned him renewed backing from European leaders. The encounter marked the first in-person meeting between Trump and Zelensky since Trump's return to power in January. Early on, smiles and handshakes gave way to heated words as US Vice President JD Vance pushed for a diplomatic resolution to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Vance's remarks underscored a fundamental point: the need for serious diplomacy to end the war, while also implicitly contrasting Trump's previous approach with that of past administrations. However, as the dialogue unfolded, Zelensky's pointed references to the long history of inaction—citing the annexation of Crimea and subsequent military struggles—sparked



a vehement rebuttal. In a sequence of rapid-fire exchanges, Trump dismissed Zelensky's critiques and reminded him of the overwhelming military support provided by the United States, arguing that without this aid, Ukraine's resistance could have crumbled in days. Despite the abrasive tone and what many saw as a public humiliation, Zelensky's resistance during the meeting resonated far beyond the confines of the Oval Office. While Trump's unconventional style and bombastic rhetoric further alienated many European policymakers, Zelensky's defiant posture emerged as a symbol of unwavering national resolve. European leaders, long critical of Trump's erratic diplomacy, viewed

the exchange as evidence that Ukraine needed to assert its own dignity in the face of American grandstanding. Moreover, Trump's harsh social media post demanding Zelensky "come back when he is ready for peace"—served not only as a dramatic moment of political theatre but also as a catalyst for European unity in support of Ukraine. Zelensky's refusal to be cowed sends a powerful message to both his domestic audience and international supporters. The Zelensky US visit might strengthen Ukraine's negotiating position and ensure a more coordinated effort to counter Russian advances. Trump's return to a more unpredictable form of diplomacy has underscored deep-seated divisions within the international community. His blunt dismissals and confrontational tactics risk undermining the credibility of traditional US diplomatic channels, potentially destabilising long-established alliances. In contrast, Europe's reaction suggests a pivot towards a more measured, collective response that prioritises multilateral engagement over unilateral posturing. This divergence could reshape how global conflicts are addressed in the future, signaling a shift away from "big talk" and towards pragmatic, alliance-based strategies. The Oval Office showdown will likely be remembered as a defining moment in the ongoing Ukraine war and in the evolution of American foreign policy.

PICTALK



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

PTI

Breakthrough 'Bedi cooling turban' a glimmer of hope for brain stroke

This innovative device selectively cools the brain—bypassing the complications of whole-body hypothermia—and comes in handy in the treatment of brain stroke

At the recently concluded 71st Annual Conference of the Indian Association of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Sciences, Dr Harinder Singh Bedi, Director of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Sciences at Park Grecian Hospital in Mohali, presented a groundbreaking technique designed to protect the brain from oxygen deprivation during surgery. Nicknamed the "Bedi Cooling Turban," this innovative method is a trailblazer in more ways than one.

It is well known that lowering the temperature of an injured organ can help reduce damage. However, the brain presents a unique challenge because whole-body cooling introduces its own set of complications, and in brain surgery, only the brain needs to be cooled. Even a brief period of oxygen deprivation can result in devastating consequences, such as a massive stroke.

Dr Bedi conceived the idea during intensive brainstorming sessions and set out to cool only the brain. Drawing on his vast experience, he designed a unique cooling



turban made of plastic tubes arranged in a coil. Once the patient is anaesthetised, the device is placed around the head and cold, sterile water is pumped through the coils using a specialised machine, cooling the brain while leaving the rest of the body unaffected.

To date, this device has been successfully used in 48 cases to repair blockages in brain arteries, preserving brain function throughout.

Dr Bedi refined his surgical skills in advanced cardiovascular techniques at Escorts Heart Institute and St Vincent

Hospital in Sydney, where he managed cases using whole-body cooling (hypothermia) to preserve organ function. At the conference, the technique received an enthusiastic response from 1,700 national and international expert delegates.

Dr Rajneesh Malhotra, Cardiac Director at Max Hospitals, expressed particular enthusiasm, suggesting that the technique be applied to more clinical cases to further safeguard patients' brain function. He noted that innovations like this empower Indian surgeons to tackle

A new era for rural revival and inclusive growth

With a sharp focus on strengthening infrastructure and boosting holistic rural development, the UP budget underscores a visionary and inclusive agenda

The Budget presented by the BJP's double-engine government in Uttar Pradesh will go a long way in strengthening infrastructure and further boosting the holistic development of rural areas. The state government's mammoth budget of Rs 8,08,736 crore for the all-round development of the state reflects the inclusive and visionary approach of the government, taking full care of the poor, disadvantaged, youth, women empowerment and Annadatas. This budget is 9.8 per cent higher than last year's, indicating the government's pro-development agenda. Under the Prime Minister's vision of a developed India, special emphasis has been placed on rural areas.

The mainstay of the economy of the state is the rural sector and the government has been continuously working towards ensuring that the benefits of the schemes reach the deprived sections of the society. Believing in the credo of self-reliance, the government has been focusing on fortifying the development arcs of villages to make them self-reliant as they will play an important role in creating a strong Uttar Pradesh. While over 96 lakh rural families have benefited under the State Rural Livelihood Mission (UPSRLM), on the other hand, financial transactions worth Rs 31,103 crore have been facilitated through 39,556 Banking Correspondent Sakhis. Until now, more than two lakh women have become "Lakshmi Didi," helping them become self-reliant. Uttar Pradesh is also the first state in the country to guarantee concrete houses to the poor.

Fulfilling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas," the state government has already constructed more than 3.6 million houses in resolution. Providing further impetus to the cause, a provision of Rs 4,882 crore has been made in the Budget for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Rural). Also, an amount of Rs 1,200 crore has been proposed under the Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana



(Rural). While the Prime Minister's empathetic leadership has ensured a roof over the heads of the poor, the state's economy has also been flourishing.

The government's efforts have ensured the economic growth rate of the state has been recorded at 11.6 per cent, which is higher than the national GDP growth of 9.6 per cent. Once considered a "BIMARU" state, the estimated gross domestic product (GSDP) of the state has now risen to Rs 27.51 lakh crore, doubling from 2017-18. In line with this momentum, Uttar Pradesh's economy is expected to reach Rs 30 lakh crore in the next fiscal, which will significantly contribute towards making the state a \$1 trillion economy.

Along with the ramping up of infrastructure, Uttar Pradesh is now witnessing a revolution in the transportation sector.

The North-South Corridor Plan will be implemented keeping in view road connectivity and highway expansion. Under this, Rs 200 crore has been provided for the widening and construction of roads. A budget of Rs 2,900 crore has been proposed for the widening of roads. Also, a provision of Rs 1,450 crore has been made



THE STATE GOVERNMENT HAS ALREADY CONSTRUCTED MORE THAN 3.6 MILLION HOUSES IN RESOLUTION. PROVIDING FURTHER IMPETUS TO THE CAUSE, A PROVISION OF RS 4,882 CRORE HAS BEEN MADE IN THE BUDGET FOR THE PRADHAN MANTRI AWAS YOJANA (RURAL)

for the construction of bridges and railway overbridges to ease traffic congestion. The incredible growth has taken into account the need to further bolster youth empowerment and job creation. A budget of Rs 1,000 crore has been allocated under the Chief Minister's Youth Entrepreneur Development Scheme. Under the Swami Vivekananda Yuva Sashaktikaran Yojana, 49.86 lakh smartphones/tablets have been distributed to promote smart education. Free coaching is also being provided to the youth through the Abhyudaya Yojana. Renewable energy and artificial intelligence have been given special emphasis to ensure that youngsters do not fall behind. While the Artificial Intelligence City will be set up in Lucknow, plans are underway to set up a 500 MW solar power plant which will entail a cost of Rs 2,500 crore. Prime Minister Narendra Modi places special emphasis on ensuring the wellbeing of farmers and wants to ensure they do not fall behind in these changing times. In line with this, Annadatas have been placed at the top of the priority list in the mission of achieving the goal of "Viksit Bharat".

Under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, Rs 79,500 crore have been distributed to farmers while Rs 496 crore have also been disbursed under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana. The state's sugarcane production capacity has also increased from 72 tonnes to 85 tonnes per hectare, boosting the income levels of farmers. The recently presented Budget will not only take the development of the state to new heights but will also transform rural India. From roads to digital infrastructure, farmers to industry, and women empowerment to a bright future for the youth, this Budget has been able to ensure that the needs of every section of society are taken care of. With the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and schemes aimed at boosting the rural economy and infrastructure, Uttar Pradesh is rapidly moving towards fulfilling the dream of a self-reliant India. I am confident that this Budget will realise the vision of 'growth and progress' of UP and propel the state towards the exalted status of the most developed state in the country. (The writer is Deputy Chief Minister of UP; views are personal)



KESHAV PRASAD MAURYA

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FINDING FUNDS FOR FREEBIES

Madam — Aprosop of the article 'Finding money for freebies: BJP faces an uphill task' (March 1), the statistical analysis and approach towards the funding of freebies is very realistic and compels the new BJP government to salvage the economy of the Capital. It is really challenging to mobilise the whopping revenue expenditure of Rs 20,100 crores on the promised direct cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month to women, Rs 3150 crores on cash assistance to the pregnant women, Rs 2500 crores on LPG cylinder subsidy, and Rs 30000 crores on education. Central funding of Rs 55000 crore is imperative. These figures are staggering and more than half the revenue expenditure budget of the Delhi state government. Many of the beneficiaries may not be deserving and needy of the freebies, but it can't be debated now and one section of people is providing resources for the others. Since it is a double-engine government, the central funding is a certainty.

However, the other state governments will expect the same level of funding from the Union government. However, the local municipal corporations must be asked for self-reliance and mobilise their own resources. There should be separate autonomous development authorities for Dwarka, Rohini and East Delhi. Earlier arrangements of separate MCDs for North, South and East Delhi were doing well and should be restored. The Delhi government should raise circle rates and stamp duties for properties as the market values have risen phenomenally. Liquor shops should be under government control without any licenses to private vendors and more taxes should be imposed on liquor consumption. New mandis, commercial, and industrial complexes should be constructed for raising additional resources.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

SEBI GETS NEW CHAIRMAN

Madam — Tuhin Kanta Pandey, the former Finance and Revenue Secretary, was appointed as the new chairman of the SEBI. The new appointment is crucial as the for-

Decriminalise Indian politics



It is with reference to the editorial "Lawbreakers as Lawmakers." It is time to eradicate the influence of criminality in Indian politics. The rising number of elected representatives with criminal backgrounds in Parliament and State Assemblies is a matter of deep concern to all law-abiding and right-minded citizens. The increasing trend is dangerous and has steadily been eating into the vitals of democratic polity along with the growing corruption of a humongous

nature. Good governance gets seriously undermined when, for instance, criminals, gangsters, or mafia dons become the political bosses of bureaucrats and subvert the system to serve their interests. In 2005 the Supreme Court ruled that a sitting MP or MLA will be disqualified from contesting the election if convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for two years or more by a court of law.

The growing dependence of political parties on criminals for muscle power and electability must be stopped. It is high time all political parties came together and developed a consensus on keeping criminals—some with serious charges including kidnapping, rape, murder, grave corruption and crime against women—out of the system.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

US-Ukraine talks fail

Madam — The abrupt failure of US-Ukraine talks underscores a troubling low in American diplomacy. Trump's insistence on securing indefinite rights to Ukraine's rare minerals in exchange for past aid—while rejecting Zelensky's request for security guarantees—was a blatant betrayal of trust. The talks' undiplomatic nature, with raised voices, Trump walking out and Zelensky skipping lunch, further damaged relations.

This shift signals that US commitments are now transactional, undermining credibility and emboldening adversaries like Russia. Such treatment of a war-torn ally weakens global trust in the US, proving that administration changes do not necessarily maintain the nation's moral or strategic responsibilities or commitments. The fallout from this episode will have lasting consequences on international alliances and geopolitical stability.

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

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Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur



FIRST COLUMN

DEALING WITH EXAM ANXIETY

Embracing positive thinking, smart study habits and relaxation can make exams a breeze



SAKSHI SETHI

Examinations are integral to the educational system and are designed to assess students' knowledge, understanding and skills. However, for many students, exams are a source of significant anxiety, leading to stress, reduced performance, and even physical or emotional distress. Overcoming exam anxiety requires a combination of psychological strategies, effective study techniques, and a supportive environment. By adopting a proactive approach, students can transform their exam experiences from overwhelming to manageable.

There is no denying that exam anxiety is real, but so is one's resilience. The anxiety can stem from various factors, including fear of failure, high expectations from parents or teachers, past negative experiences, or inadequate preparation. Symptoms of exam anxiety range from nervousness, restlessness and even difficulty concentrating to physical manifestations such as headaches, nausea and rapid heartbeat. Recognising these symptoms is the first step in overcoming exam-related stress. Dealing with exam stress can be a heavy load and can often make an individual feel lonely. A crucial aspect of managing exam anxiety is cultivating a positive attitude toward examinations. Students need to view exams as opportunities to demonstrate their learning rather than threats to their self-worth. A growth mindset can improve only through effort and practice and can significantly reduce anxiety. Use of positive affirmations such as "I am prepared" or "I can handle this challenge" can boost confidence. Additionally, normalising mistakes and failures as part of the learning process can help students overcome the fear of underperformance. One of the primary reasons for exam anxiety is inadequate preparation. Implementing effective study strategies can enhance confidence and performance. Creating a well-structured study schedule can help prevent last-minute cramming and ensure thorough coverage of subjects. Active



learning techniques, such as summarisation, mind mapping and teaching concepts to peers can also help retain information better. Practicing with past exam papers and taking mock tests can familiarise students with the exam pattern, reducing uncertainty and nervousness. Relaxation techniques can significantly reduce exam-related stress and improve focus. Deep breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help calm the mind before and during exams. Engaging selves in physical activities such as yoga, stretching, or even a short walk can release tension and improve concentration. Ensuring adequate sleep, maintaining a balanced diet, and staying hydrated contribute to overall wellbeing, making students more resilient to stress. A supportive environment at home and school plays a vital role in alleviating exam anxiety. In today's competitive environment, it becomes important for parents to encourage their children rather than pressurise them with unrealistic expectations. Study groups and discussions with peers can provide moral support and motivation, making exam preparation a less isolating experience.

What plays the most vital role is on the day of the exam, where students, by following simple yet effective strategies, can stay calm and focused. Following strategies such as arriving early, taking deep breaths, and engaging in light stretching before entering the examination hall can help reduce nervousness. Managing time effectively by allocating specific minutes to each question can help prevent panic. If anxiety arises during the exam, taking a few moments to pause, taking deep breaths, and refocusing can help prevent stress from escalating. Exam anxiety is a common challenge faced by students, but it can be effectively managed through self-awareness, positive thinking, strategic preparation, relaxation techniques, and a supportive environment. Ultimately, overcoming exam anxiety is not just about securing good grades but also about developing resilience and lifelong learning skills.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Is Forest Rights Act driving deforestation?



B K SINGH

Despite its noble intent to secure the livelihoods of tribals, the Forest Rights Act has inadvertently opened the door to rampant deforestation and widespread encroachment

The law has been enacted to confer rights over the use of forest lands by individual tribal or forest dwellers under their occupation on the prescribed cutoff date. Besides the individual rights, there is also provision for community rights over certain forests for benefits of collection of usufructs like beedi leaves, minor forest produces, grazing, fishing etc. and rights can also be conferred to the communities for sustainable management of forest resources.

But the rights can be granted only when they are in actual possession of the forest land or have been enjoying the usufructs or sustainably managing the forest resources on or before 13-12-2005 for tribal and three generations (75 years) before this date for other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDs). Despite opposition from foresters, conservationists and environmentalists the law was enacted by the UPA government supported by left parties in 2005. This was followed by notifying the rules and the implementation from January 1, 2008.

Dipak Sarmah who succeeded me as the head of Karnataka Forest Department on my superannuation has observed on page 154 of his book titled, 'Forests Of Karnataka - Why And How Of Where They Are', "Most of the benefits that had accrued in the forests since the 1980s by way of forest consolidation due to implementation of Forest (Conservation) Act appear to have been nullified as a result of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. The ominous signs of fragmentation and loss of forests are already discernible in a number of states as evident from the biennial India State of Forest Reports published by the Forest Survey of India, Dehradun.

A clearer picture will emerge in about a decade or so, by which time we would come to realise the true impact of the Forest Rights Act on our forests. But it may be then too late to retrieve the losses. Foresters alone cannot prevent the unauthorised removal of trees and the destruction of forests. Villagers set fire to burn the wood and grab the land. Forests are perpetually subjected to encroachments with the support of local leaders. Even if police presence is ensured and the community's resistance is bulldozed while removing encroachments, the problem resurfaces and lands are again grabbed. Political leaders question the removal of cultivation when land is devoid of tree growth. Fresh plantations are damaged and the forest area is re-encroached. Practically all encroachments till 25th October 1980, when the Forest (Conservation) Act came into operation were already regularised by the Union Government.

The Act was operational from 2008 with the new cutoff date of 13-12-2005. It was only the vote bank; the OTFDs were brought in to benefit from the legislation though their encroachments till 25th October 1980 were regularised. It can be understood that OTFDs cannot have more than a generation-old encroachment on the new cutoff date, yet a floodgate of forest destruction was opened for them. Without having any consideration for the ecological security of the country, OTFDs went on a rampage, cleared the fresh tree growth, occupied lands and claimed rights. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the nodal agency for implementation took up several reviews to monitor the progress of the



FOREST AREAS GIVEN FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF GRAM SABHAS HAVE BEEN DEVASTATED, DEGRADED AND FRAGMENTED. THERE ARE PATCHES OF BAMBOO FORESTS IN MEDHA LEKHA GRAM SABHA WHERE ALL BAMBOO CLUMPS WERE CLEARED IN ONE STROKE IN 2012

states, further diluting the provisions in 2012 to ignore the only scientific evidence of satellite imagery interpretation among the evidence to be relied on in support of the claim. The claims of the tribal community, who had only to prove the occupation as of December 2005 were easily acceptable initially, but that too is now two decades old. Left-leaning forces and NGOs fought for claim cases of individual forest rights (IFR), community forest rights (CFR) and rights to manage the forest resources sustainably. This has accelerated the deforestation. IFRs have already been granted to 2.2 million tribal and OTFDs, covering nearly 5 million ha of forest land. Several activists have written articles in newspapers and magazines showing a satisfactory performance over the grant of IFRs and suggesting the states focus their attention on CFRs and grant of forest rights for sustainable management to avail the provisions that have been neglected by the states so far. The estimates of the activists suggest that 30 million hectare forest lands comprising more than 40 per cent of the total forest area can be granted for CFRs and sustainable management. They further argue that if this is done, it has the potential to secure the rights and livelihood of 200 million people including 90 million tribal. Local press in Hyderabad has recently brought out that seven lakh acres of forests have been occupied in 2022-23 and claims over four lakh acres for tribal were approved in Telangana before the 2023 Assembly election. State machineries have accepted the claims overlooking the reports of the concerned divisional forest officer. J Ramesh, Nature Friends

Environmental Development Society, Hyderabad, accused the state of pressuring officials for recognition of rights to ineligible individuals resulting in large-scale deforestation leading to the scam of unprecedented proportion. There are reports from Rampachodavaram Forests division, Rajamundry (AP) that tribal department officials are granting rights in Papikonda National Park for money. A retired IFS M Padamanaba Reddy has filed a PIL for the scam. In February 2019, just before the Lok Sabha polls, states moved the Supreme Court to review its order of eviction of rejected IFR claims and allow them to re-verify. The court accepted it, but so far the states have not concluded and continue to accept the fresh claims. What signal does it send down the line? The Act has provided unlimited time for filing claims and deforestation and bringing the land under plough can continue. No one has any concern about the ecological security of the country. It is to be understood that all rejected claimants are in occupation of the forest land, where they have already been successful in deforesting and clearing the area. More rejected claims are encouraged, and more deforestation takes place. The only place where the CFRs and rights to manage the forests sustainably have been granted is the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Section 3-1 (i) of FRA 2006 is relevant here, where rights can be granted to villages of Gram Sabha who have the experience of managing the area sustainably. Further the requirement of Section 4 (3) of the Act is also

essential for the grant of rights i.e. they should have the resource as on 13-12-2005 for tribal and 75 years before this date for OTFDs. Management rights have been granted in many Gram Sabhas of Gadchiroli overlooking both the provisions. Activists are taking this example all over the country and pressing for a repeat of this. This has been frequently quoted example in articles and papers. What these authors have been hiding is the destruction of forests. Forest areas given for the sustainable management of Gram Sabhas have been devastated, degraded and fragmented. There are patches of bamboo forests in Medha Lekha Gram Sabha where all bamboo clumps were cleared in one stroke in 2012. Forest officers were physically prevented from entering the area. Bamboo has not responded well to the clear feeling. The fresh regeneration is bushy and does not yield any usable bamboo culm. It yielded certain culms every four years when it was managed by the Forest Department. The management of Medha Lekha Gram Sabha has not been sustainable and the area has not yielded culms in 2016, 2020 and 2024. Taking a cue from Madha Lekha, other Gram Sabhas have also started clear felling and over-exploitation of the resource. Further, the revenue realised from the sale proceeds has not been ploughed back for fresh regeneration activities and the management has become completely unsustainable. *(The writer is Retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of Forest Force, Karnataka; views are personal)*

The integral role of phygital in shaping India's rural economy

The emerging phygital model—merging the tangible strengths of traditional systems with the efficiency of digital innovation—is redefining growth

With over 1.4 billion inhabitants, India's economic landscape has evolved dramatically in recent years. Yet, while urban centres boom, the nation's rural heartland—home to around 908.8 million people as of 2022—continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's potential. Although initiatives like Digital India have ushered the country into a digital era with 806 million active internet users by February 2025, technology alone cannot resolve deep-seated infrastructural challenges. This is where the phygital model—a fusion of physical and digital elements—steps in to bridge the divide and ensure balanced growth. **A New Era: The Phygital Approach**



SAMEER MATHUR

Phygital combines the tangible benefits of traditional systems with the efficiency of digital technology, creating a hybrid framework that enhances accessibility, empowers local businesses, and fosters inclusive growth. In rural regions, where infrastructural deficits and resource limitations persist, phygital strategies are not about replacing established

methods but rather integrating them with modern digital solutions. This approach is proving transformative across key sectors such as banking, commerce, agriculture, healthcare, and public services. **Driving Financial Inclusion** For years, traditional banking models have struggled to serve India's vast rural expanses. High operational costs, challenging geography, and low financial literacy have hampered efforts to bring modern financial services to remote communities. While FinTech has broadened access through digital banking, a fully digital approach can alienate those who lack familiarity with smartphones or online transactions. The phygital model addresses these gaps by merging digital convenience with physical touchpoints.

Systems like Aadhaar-enabled Payment Systems (AePS), micro-ATMs, and local banking correspondents empower rural residents to conduct transactions, access credit, and secure subsidies without the need for continuous internet connectivity. In many villages, Customer Service Points (CSPs) provide essential in-person support, guiding users as they gradually transition to digital financial solutions. Furthermore, partnerships between FinTech companies and local kirana stores or post offices have effectively transformed these outlets into mini banking hubs. This integration allows people to withdraw cash, pay bills, and transfer money within their



locality, bypassing the need to travel long distances to bank branches and operating beyond standard banking hours. The result is a significant leap forward in achieving comprehensive financial inclusion. **Reinvigorating Rural Commerce** E-commerce has revolutionised urban shopping by altering customer habits and payment methods, but rural

consumers still rely heavily on cash transactions. A completely digital model often fails to resonate with these communities. Instead, the phygital model has emerged as an effective alternative by combining the reach of online platforms with the trust of local, physical commerce. Local kirana stores are increasingly functioning as pick-up points for online orders, ensuring that digital transactions are accessible even to those without digital payment capabilities. Assisted commerce kiosks further support rural shoppers by helping them browse products, place orders, and make payments—often in cash—thereby bridging the gap between digital platforms and traditional retail.

Transforming Agriculture Agriculture remains the backbone of India's rural economy, providing livelihoods for more than 42 per cent of the population and contributing around 18.2 per cent to the nation's GDP. However, farmers have long contended with issues such as limited market access, dependence on intermediaries, and unpredictable weather. Phygital solutions are beginning to address these challenges by integrating digital tools with conventional agricultural practices. Platforms like eNAM enable farmers to compare prices and market their produce directly, thus reducing reliance on middlemen. At the same time, traditional mandi networks continue to play an essential role in the trading process.

By ensuring that digital marketplaces and physical trading hubs operate in tandem, the phygital approach provides farmers with a more balanced and effective route to market. **Enhancing Essential Services** Beyond commerce and agriculture, phygital innovations are making significant strides in healthcare and public service delivery. Rural communities have traditionally faced barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Now, telemedicine kiosks supported by trained health workers enable remote consultations with specialists, while mobile health units equipped with diagnostic tools bring medical care directly to remote areas. *(The writer is Managing Director and Founder of Roinet Solution; views are personal)*

UK, France, Ukraine agree to work on ceasefire plan for war in Ukraine

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer says Britain, France and Ukraine have agreed to work on a ceasefire plan to present to the United States.

Starmer says the plan emerged after talks among the four countries' leaders following Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Oval Office blowout with US President Donald Trump.

The prime minister told the BBC he believes the US president wants a durable peace in Ukraine. He repeated his assertion that American security guarantees will be needed to make it stick.

Starmer is hosting a summit of European leaders in London on Sunday to discuss Ukraine. It was supposed to cap a week of whirlwind diplomacy advancing the prospect of peace in Ukraine.

But a summit of European leaders on Sunday has been overshadowed by the extraordinary scolding by US President Donald Trump of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House on Friday for being ungrateful for US support.

The London meeting has now taken on greater importance in defending the war-torn ally and shoring up the continent's defenses.

"There's a real problem for European leaders to pick up the pieces and try and move forward," Peter Ricketts, the former British national security adviser, told BBC radio on Saturday.

"It's going to be a damage limitation exercise. It's going to have to be an exercise in where



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer (right) greets French President Emmanuel Macron as he arrives for a summit on Ukraine at Lancaster House in London, on Sunday. AP/PTI

do we go from here?"

The meeting at Lancaster House, a 200-year-old elegant mansion near Buckingham Palace, follows a charm offensive last week to engage with Trump at the White House to put Ukraine at the centre of negotiations and tilt his allegiances toward Europe.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is hosting the leaders of more than a dozen countries and other officials, said he is determined to find an end to Russia's war on Ukraine.

"We have an opportunity to come together to ensure a just and lasting peace in Ukraine that secures their sovereignty and security," Starmer said in advance. "Now is the time for us to unite in order to guarantee the best outcome for

Ukraine, protect European security, and secure our collective future."

The summit will also include leaders from France, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Canada, Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic and Romania. The Turkish foreign minister, NATO secretary-general and the presidents of the European Commission and European Council will also attend.

Zelenskyy received broad support from leaders across Europe after the White House fiasco, which was exceptional for featuring an attack on an ally — and because it was broadcast on live television.

Starmer embraced Zelenskyy when he arrived Saturday for a private meeting — a day before

a get-together had been scheduled before the summit.

"As you heard from the cheers on the street outside, you have full backing across the United Kingdom," Starmer said. "We stand with you, with Ukraine, for as long as it may take."

Europe has been uneasy since Trump initiated direct peace talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had been isolated by most Western leaders since invading Ukraine three years ago.

The scramble to remain relevant and protect European interests as their once stalwart ally appeared to be cozying up to Putin was even more troubling when Trump called Zelenskyy a dictator and falsely said Ukraine started the war.

Meetings in recent days had provided some hope — until Zelenskyy's visit to the White House.

Visits to the Oval Office by French President Emmanuel Macron, who had declared his visit a "turning point," and Starmer were seen as steps in the right direction. The meetings were cordial and Trump even took a gentler tone toward Ukraine though he would not commit to providing US security guarantees and maintained Europe would need to provide peacekeeping troops.

Within 12 hours of Starmer's return from Washington, the talk of peace seemed to collapse as Vice President JD Vance berated Zelenskyy for challenging Trump's assertions that Russian President Vladimir Putin could be trusted.

"Starmer did an impressive job of asserting Europe's agency in the war on Ukraine and conveying to President Trump that Europe is willing and able

to take a leading role in implementing any credible peace deal," said Rachel Ellehuus, director-general of Royal United Services Institute, a defence and security think tank.

"Unfortunately, Friday's White House meeting was a major step backward."

Ukraine can no longer count on military or political support from the US after Trump declared himself neutral in negotiations, Ellehuus said. She said Europe needs to step in and could release some 200 billion euros (USD 207 billion) in seized Russian assets to help fund that effort.

"The immediate goal of the meetings in London must be to keep Ukraine in the fight so it can negotiate from a maximum position of strength," she said. Starmer pledged this week to boost military spending to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product by 2027. Other European nations may follow suit.

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said Saturday that Europe faces a historic test and has to care for itself. He said European countries have to increase their arms spending to reach at least 3 per cent of GDP.

"If we don't increase our effort fast enough and let the aggressor dictate its conditions we won't end up well," he said.

Macron, who said it was legitimate for the US to shift its focus to dealing with China and Asia, also called for more defense spending as he called for unity among his neighbors. "We should have woken up earlier," Macron said. "I've been saying for years that we need a more sovereign, more united, more independent Europe."

Private lunar lander Blue Ghost aces moon touchdown

PTI ■ CAPE CANAVERAL (US)

A private lunar lander carrying a drill, vacuum and other experiments for NASA touched down on the moon Sunday, the latest in a string of companies looking to kick-start business on Earth's celestial neighbour ahead of astronaut missions.

Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost lander descended from lunar orbit on autopilot, aiming for the slopes of an ancient volcanic dome in an impact basin on the moon's northeastern edge of the near side.

Confirmation of successful touchdown came from the company's Mission Control outside Austin, Texas, following the action some 225,000 miles (360,000 kilometers) away.

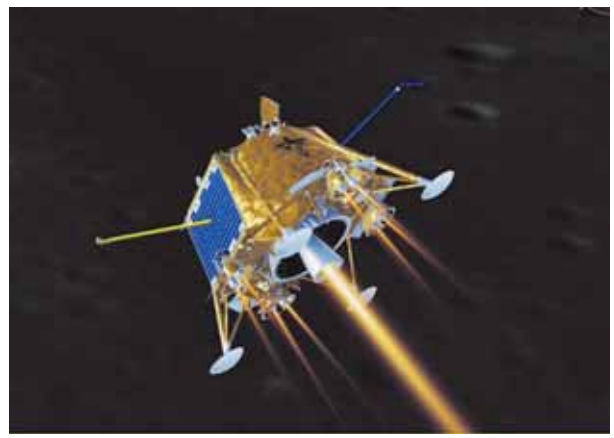
"You all stuck the landing. We're on the moon," Firefly's Will Coogan, chief engineer for the lander, reported.

An upright and stable landing makes Firefly — a startup founded a decade ago — the first private outfit to put a spacecraft on the moon without crashing or falling over. Even countries have faltered, with only five claiming success: Russia, the US, China, India and Japan.

A half hour after landing, Blue Ghost started to send back pictures from the surface, the first one a selfie somewhat obscured by the sun's glare. The second shot included the home planet, a blue dot glimmering in the blackness of space.

Two other companies' landers are hot on Blue Ghost's heels, with the next one expected to join it on the moon later this week.

Blue Ghost — named after a rare US species of fireflies — had its size and shape going for it. The squat four-legged lander stands 6-foot-6 (2 metres) tall and 11 feet (3.5 metres) wide,



providing extra stability, according to the company. Launched in mid-January from Florida, the lander carried 10 experiments to the moon for NASA. The space agency paid USD 101 million for the delivery, plus USD 44 million for the science and tech on board.

It's the third mission under NASA's commercial lunar delivery programme, intended to ignite a lunar economy of competing private businesses while scouting around before astronauts show up later this decade.

Firefly's Ray Allensworth said the lander skipped over hazards including boulders to land safely. Allensworth said the team continued to analyse the data to figure out the lander's exact position, but all indications suggest it landed within the 328-foot (100-metre) target zone in Mare Crisium.

The demos should get two weeks of run time, before lunar daytime ends and the lander shuts down.

It carried a vacuum to suck up moon dirt for analysis and a drill to measure temperature as deep as 10 feet (3 metres) below the surface. Also on board: a device for eliminating abrasive lunar dust — a scourge for NASA's long-ago Apollo

moonwalkers, who got it caked all over their spacesuits and equipment.

On its way to the moon, Blue Ghost beamed back exquisite pictures of the home planet. The lander continued to stun once in orbit around the moon, with detailed shots of the moon's gray pockmarked surface. At the same time, an onboard receiver tracked and acquired signals from the US GPS and European Galileo constellations, an encouraging step forward in navigation for future explorers.

The landing set the stage for a fresh crush of visitors angling for a piece of lunar business.

Another lander — a tall and skinny 15-footer (4 metres tall) built and operated by Houston-based Intuitive Machines — is due to land on the moon Thursday. It's aiming for the bottom of the moon, just 100 miles (160 kilometers) from the south pole. That's closer to the pole than the company got last year with its first lander, which broke a leg and tipped over.

Despite the tumble, Intuitive Machines' lander put the US back on the moon for the first time since NASA astronauts closed out the Apollo programme in 1972.

Iran's parliament fires minister of economy over plummeting rial, mismanagement

PTI ■ TEHRAN

Iran's parliament on Sunday impeached the country's economy minister and voted to remove him from office, amid growing concerns over the crashing rial and accusations of mismanagement.

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf announced that 182 out of 273 lawmakers voted to dismiss Abdolnasser Hemmati, just six months after President Masoud Pezeshkian's government took office.

Pezeshkian, who defended Hemmati, emphasised that the government is locked in a tough battle with the West. He called for greater unity and cooperation from Parliament to face these challenges.

The decision comes amid rising tensions over Iran's nuclear program and worsening relations with the West.

Iran's economy has been severely affected by international sanctions, especially after the US withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal. In 2015, the rial was worth 32,000 to the dollar, but by the time Pezeshkian took office in July, it had plummeted to 584,000 to the dollar. Recently, it dropped even further, with exchange shops in Tehran trad-



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian speaks during an open session of parliament for impeachment of his Finance Minister Abdolnasser Hemmati, in Tehran, Iran, on Sunday. AP/PTI

ing 930,000 rials for each dollar.

During the impeachment proceedings, Mohammad Qasim Osmani, a lawmaker supporting Hemmati, argued that rising inflation and exchange rates were not the fault of the current government or Parliament. He pointed to the budget deficit left by the previous administration, which he said contributed to the economic instability.

Osmani also cited recent geopolitical events as factors that undermined public confidence, causing many people to convert their savings into foreign currency, which in turn further devalued the rial.

Hemmati acknowledged the tough economic climate during his five months in office, including a 10% reduction in inflation. However, he acknowledged that inflation remained high, standing at 35%. He assured lawmakers that his team was working hard to address the issue, but warned that the process would take time.

This latest development is another chapter in Iran's ongoing political and economic struggles as the country continues to navigate a complex relationship with the international community.



As the sun sets, Palestinians sit at a large table surrounded by the rubble of destroyed homes and buildings as they gather for iftar, the fast-breaking meal, on the first day of Ramadan in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip. PTI

US moves naval fleet to S Korea following missile tests by North

PTI ■ SEOUL

A US aircraft carrier arrived in South Korea on Sunday in a show of force, days after North Korea test-launched cruise missiles to demonstrate its counterattack capabilities.

The arrival of the USS Carl Vinson and its strike group at the South Korean port of Busan was meant to display a solid US-South Korean military alliance in the face of persistent North Korean threats, and boost interoperability of the allies' combined assets, the South Korean navy said in a statement. It said it was the first US aircraft carrier to travel to South Korea since June.

The deployment of the carrier is expected to infuriate North Korea, which views temporary deployments of such powerful US military assets as a major security threat. North Korea has responded to some of the past deployments of US aircraft carriers, long-range bombers and nuclear-powered submarines with missile tests.

Since his Jan. 20 inauguration, President Donald Trump has said he will reach out to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un again to revive diplomacy.

Pope gets visit from Vatican secretary of state

PTI ■ ROME

A stable Pope Francis had a visit Sunday from the Vatican secretary of state as he continued his recovery from double pneumonia, the Vatican said, but again skipped his weekly noon blessing to avoid even a brief public appearance from the hospital.

Instead, the Vatican distributed a message from the pope in which he thanked his doctors for their care and well-wishers for their prayers, and prayed again for peace in Ukraine and elsewhere.

"From here, war appears even more absurd," Francis said in the message, which he drafted in recent days from the Gemelli hospital, the Vatican said.

Francis said he was living his hospitalization as an experience of profound solidarity with people who are sick and suffering everywhere.

"I feel in my heart the blessing that is hidden within frailty, because it is precisely in these moments that we learn even more to trust in the Lord," Francis said in the text.

"At the same time, I thank God for giving me the opportunity to share in body and spirit the condition of so many sick and suffering people."

Signs point to a recovery: It marked the third weekend in a row that Francis has cancelled



A nun prays at the Vatican at the time when Pope Francis would usually bestow his blessing in Rome. AP/PTI

the Sunday appointment delivering the Angelus prayer in person. He could have done so from his 10th floor hospital suite at the Gemelli hospital if he were well enough.

But many signs indicated he was recovering and improving. "The night was quiet, the pope is still resting," the Vatican said in its Sunday update.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin and his chief of staff, Archbishop Edgar Pena Parra, called on the pope Sunday morning, their second visit since Francis' February 14 hospitalisation, according to the Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni.

There were no details of what was discussed, but the mere visit suggested Francis' condition was stabilizing.

"The night was quiet, the pope is still resting," the Vatican said in its Sunday early update. He had no fever or signs of elevated white blood cells, which

would signal his body was still fighting an infection.

Doctors on Saturday reported that Francis was in stable condition, with no mention of him being critical. Their upbeat assessment came a day after a respiratory crisis that resulted in him being put on noninvasive mechanical ventilation.

But the 88-year-old pope had a "good response" in his gas exchange levels even during the "long periods" he was off the ventilator mask Saturday and only using high-flow supplemental oxygen, the Vatican said.

The fact that Francis was able to use just high-flow oxygen for long periods, without any significant effect on the levels of oxygen in his blood, was a sign his respiratory function was improving.

Doctors were cautious however and kept his prognosis as guarded, meaning he wasn't out

of danger. He was eating and drinking and continued his respiratory physiotherapy, and spent 20 minutes in his private chapel down the hall on Saturday, the Vatican said.

The pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has lung disease and was admitted to Gemelli on Feb. 14 after a bout of bronchitis worsened and turned into a complex pneumonia in both lungs.

Prayers continued to pour in: Francis' hospitalization has come as the Vatican is marking its Holy Year, drawing pilgrims to Rome from all over. They are walking through the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica and also making pilgrimages to the hill-top Umbrian town of Assisi, to pray at the home of Francis' namesake, St. Francis.

"Every day we're praying for the pope," said the Rev. Jacinto Bento, a priest visiting Assisi on Saturday with a group of 30 Jubilee pilgrims from the Azores Islands. "We're very sad for his situation."

In an odd coincidence, Francis was supposed to have presided Saturday over a Holy Year audience in the Vatican's auditorium for the staff of the Gemelli hospital and other health care workers. They came as planned and completed the pilgrimage, while Francis continued his recovery at the hospital.

Syrians begin fasting during Ramazan without Assad family

PTI ■ DAMASCUS

Some restaurants and coffee shops in Syria were closed during the day on Saturday while others opened as usual as observant Muslims began fasting during the holy month of Ramazan, the first since the fall of Assad family rule in the war-torn country.

Syria's interim Ministry of Religious Endowments reportedly called for all restaurants, coffee shops and street food stands be closed during the day and that people must not eat or drink in public or face punishment. Those who violate the rule could get up to three months in jail.

However, it did not appear that any official order had been issued by the government to that effect.

Associated Press journalists who toured Damascus on Saturday said some coffee shops were opened but had their windows closed to that people can't see who is inside.

Insurgents led by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, overthrew President Bashar Assad's secular government in early December ending the 54-year Assad family dynasty.

Since then, Syria's new Islamist

government under former insurgent leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, has been in control and many fear that the country could turn into an Islamic state, although al-Sharaa has so far promised to respect religious minorities.

Under Assad's rule during the Muslim holy month of Ramazan, when observant Muslims abstain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset, people were allowed to eat in public. This year, many people are abstaining from eating in public fearing reprisals.

"Ramazan this year comes with a new flavour. This is the Ramazan of victory and liberation," said interim Minister of Religious Affairs Hussam Haj-Hussein in a televised statement.

Most countries around the world, including Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Kuwait began observing Ramazan on Saturday, while a few other countries such as Malaysia and Japan, as well as some Shiite Muslims, will begin the fast on Sunday.

In many parts of the region, the holy month this year is bitter-sweet. Lebanese this year mark Ramazan after the 14-month Israel-Hezbollah war ended

with a US-brokered ceasefire that went into effect in late November.

In the Gaza Strip, a fragile ceasefire deal, which has paused over 15 months of war between Israel and Hamas, nears the end of its first phase, and many Palestinians ate their first iftar in the middle of the rubble where their houses used to be.

"This year, after the fall of the regime, there are many confirmations regarding the prohibition of publicly breaking the fast, with violators facing imprisonment," said Damascus resident Munir Abdallah.

"This is something new, good and respectable, meaning that the rituals of Ramazan should be fully observed in all their aspects."

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; the month cycles through the seasons. The start of the month traditionally depends on the sighting of the crescent moon. The actual start date may vary among Muslim communities due to declarations by multiple Islamic authorities around the globe on whether the crescent has been sighted or different methodologies used to determine the start of the month.

US court rules head of watchdog agency must keep his job

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The head of a federal watchdog agency must remain in his job, a judge in Washington ruled on Saturday, saying President Donald Trump's bid to remove the special counsel was unlawful.

US District Judge Amy Berman Jackson sided with Hampton Dellinger, who leads the Office of Special Counsel, in a legal battle over the president's authority to oust the head of the independent agency that's legally headed back to the US Supreme Court.

Dellinger sued Trump last month after he was fired, even though the law says special counsels can be removed by the president "only for inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office," Jackson, who was nominated to the bench by Democratic president Barack Obama, quickly reinstated Dellinger in the job while he

pursued his case. Jackson rejected the Trump administration's claims that the special counsel's removal protections are unconstitutional because they prevent the president from rightfully installing his preferred agency head.

The judge said allowing the president to remove the special counsel at will would have a chilling effect on his crucial duties, which include guarding the federal workforce from illegal personnel actions, such as retaliation for whistleblowing.

"The Special Counsel is supposed to withstand the winds of political change and help ensure that no government servant of either party becomes the subject of prohibited employment practices or faces reprisals for calling out wrongdoing — by holdovers from a previous administration or by officials of the new one," Jackson wrote in her decision.

The Justice Department quickly filed court papers indicating it will challenge the ruling to Washington's federal appeals court. The case has already gone up once to the Supreme Court, which previously temporarily allowed Dellinger to remain in his job.

The ruling comes as Dellinger is challenging the removal of probationary workers who were fired as part of the Trump administration's massive overhaul of the government. A federal board on Tuesday halted the terminations of several probationary workers after Dellinger said their firings may have been unlawful.

"I'm glad and grateful to see the court confirm the importance and legality of the job protections Congress afforded my position," Dellinger said in a statement on Saturday. "My efforts to protect federal employees generally, and whistleblowers in particular,

from unlawful treatment will continue."

The judge said the special counsel has a "unique status and mission," which requires independence from the president to ensure he can carry out his responsibilities. The office investigates whistleblower claims of reprisal, can pursue disciplinary action against employees who punish whistleblowers and provides a channel for employees to disclose government wrongdoing.

"If I don't have independence, if I can be removed for no good reason, federal employees are going to have no good reason to come to me," Dellinger told reporters outside Washington's federal courthouse after a recent hearing.

The Office of Special Counsel is also responsible for enforcing the Hatch Act, which restricts the partisan political activities of government work-

ers. Dellinger's firing came as Trump administration employees have touted their support on social media for his policies even though the Hatch Act is meant to restrict political advocacy while on duty.

The Justice Department employed sweeping language in urging the Supreme Court last month to allow the termination of the head of an obscure federal agency with limited power. Acting Solicitor General Sarah Harris wrote in court papers that the lower court had crossed "a constitutional red line" by blocking Dellinger's firing and stopping Trump "from shaping the agenda of an executive-branch agency in the new administration's critical first days."

Dellinger was appointed by Democratic President Joe Biden and confirmed by the Senate to a five-year term in 2024.

Yawning wealth gap widening inequalities in China: Report

PTI ■ BEIJING

China's wealthiest individuals continue to grow richer, widening economic inequalities in the country despite the ruling Communist Party's efforts to control private businesses and implement policies aimed at boosting people's incomes, a report here said.

The combined wealth of the 5.12 million families in China with over six million yuan (USD 824,000) in assets was stated to be about 150 trillion yuan (over USD seven trillion) in 2024, according to a report published by the Hurun Research Institute.

Of this, the wealthiest 130,000 families accounted for 58 per cent in 2024, which is up from 56 per cent a year earlier, the report said.

China's per capita disposable income was stated to be 41,314 yuan (over USD 41,314) last year, up 5.3 per cent from 2023, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported, citing the report.

Analysts have warned that Beijing needs to work harder to narrow the wealth gap in society more broadly as it tries to ignite a private sector-led economic recovery, the Post reported on Sunday.

The country is grappling with weak consumption and a languishing property sector, where the rich park most of their assets.

Much of the economic strain is being felt by those in the mid-

dle and lower-middle classes, it said.

As a result, the overall consumption essential to halt the economic slowdown grew by just 3.5 per cent last year, a rate that was slower than the 5 per cent rise in GDP, suggesting that the income and wealth gaps were holding back spending. The growing inequality was reflected in the national Gini coefficient, which was 0.467 in 2022 when the National Bureau of Statistics last updated the number.

A Gini coefficient of 0 reflects perfect income and wealth equality, while 1 reflects maximal inequality, where a single individual has all the income while all others have none.

The yawning wealth gap was also apparent in data from Shenzhen-based China Merchants Bank (CMB), one of the country's biggest domestic wealth management-focused lenders.

CMB said that about 2.3 per cent of its accounts held roughly 81 per cent of the total private banking assets at the institution in 2023, representing a highly unequal distribution, the Post reported.

The Hurun report is published ahead of the upcoming annual Parliament session of the National People's Congress (NPC), which begins its two-week-long session from March 5, during which several legislations to boost the country's economy were expected to be approved.

The NPC would meet along with the advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), to deliberate on the state of the economy and the country's strategic challenges arising out of US President Donald Trump starting a second stint in power.

Trump said he planned to slap new 10 per cent tariffs on goods from China, escalating trade fights with Beijing.

Already, Chinese goods were hit by 10 per cent tariffs by Trump earlier this month. During his election campaign, he threatened to slap 60 per cent tariffs on Chinese goods to address US concerns over fentanyl, a potent opioid drug blamed for widespread drug addiction in the US.

In a bid to boost the sagging economy, Chinese President Xi Jinping on Feb 17 held a rare meeting with the country's top corporate leaders, including e-commerce giant Alibaba founder Jack Ma, and urged them to unleash their talents to shore up sagging business confidence in the country to reverse the economic slowdown.

Xi's meeting with leaders of the top corporate houses came amid a severe ebb in private sector morale prompted by a volatile mix of economic issues, including heightened geopolitical tensions with the US and harsh regulatory crackdowns on some of the country's business firms.

Prez Trump signs order designating English as official language of US

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump has signed an executive order designating English as the official language of the United States.

The order allows government agencies and organizations that receive federal funding to choose whether to continue to offer documents and services in language other than English. It rescinds a mandate from former President Bill Clinton that required the government and organizations that received federal funding to provide language assistance to non-English speakers.

"Establishing English as the official language will not only streamline communication but also reinforce shared national values, and create a more cohesive and efficient society," according to the order signed by Trump on Saturday.

"In welcoming new Americans, a policy of encouraging the learning and adoption of our national language will make the United States a shared home and empower new citizens to achieve the American dream," the order also states. "Speaking English not only opens doors economically, but it helps newcomers engage in their communities, participate in national traditions, and give back to our society."

More than 30 states have already passed laws designating English as their official language, according to US English, a group that advocates for making English the official language in the United States.

For decades, lawmakers in Congress have introduced legislation to designate English as the official language of the US, but those efforts have not succeeded.

Within hours of Trump's inauguration last month, the new administration took down the Spanish language version of the official White House website.

Hispanic advocacy groups and others expressed confusion and frustration at the change. The White House said at the time it was committed to bringing the Spanish language version of the website back online. As of Saturday, it was still not restored.

The White House did not immediately respond to a message about whether that would happen. Trump shut down the Spanish version of the website during his first term. It was restored when President Joe Biden was inaugurated in 2021.

Anti-DOGE protests at Tesla stores target Elon Musk's bottom line

PTI ■ BOSTON

Demonstrators gathered outside Tesla stores across the US Saturday to protest the automaker's billionaire CEO, Elon Musk, and his push to slash government spending on behalf of President Donald Trump.

The demonstrations are part of a growing backlash in North America and Europe to Musk's disruptive role

up at showrooms everywhere and boycotting Tesla and telling everyone else to get out, sell your stocks, sell your Teslas."

Musk is taking direction from Trump to slash federal spending and sharply reduce the workforce, arguing that Trump's victory gave the president and him a mandate to restructure the US government. DOGE officials have swiftly gained access to sensitive databases, direct-

ment more efficient and more accountable to the hardworking American taxpayers across the country," said White House spokesperson Harrison Fields.

Tesla did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

More than 50 demonstrations were listed Saturday on the website Tesla Takedown, with more planned later in March from coast to coast in the United States along with England, Spain and Portugal. News reports showed demonstrations in recent days in US cities including Tucson, Arizona; St. Louis; New York City; Dayton, Ohio; Charlotte; and Palo Alto, California. Some Tesla owners have also reported their vehicles vandalized with spray painted swastikas amid what Jewish groups and observers fear is a rise in anti-semitism.



Demonstrators are arrested by NYPD officers during a protest against Elon Musk and Tesla outside of a Tesla showroom in New York. PTI

in Washington. Critics of Trump and Musk hope to discourage and stigmatise purchases of Tesla, the electric car company that is the world's most valuable automaker. Liberal groups for weeks have organized anti-Tesla protests in hopes of galvanizing opposition to Musk's Department of Government Efficiency and energising Democrats still demoralized by Trump's November victory.

"We can get back at Elon," said Nathan Phillips, a 58-year-old ecologist from Newton, Massachusetts, who was protesting in Boston on Saturday. "We can impose direct economic damage on Tesla by showing

ed thousands of federal job cuts, cancelled contracts and shut down sections of the government, including the US Agency for International Development.

Musk's critics say his actions defy Congress's power to control the US budget and present a host of ways for him to enrich himself. Musk leads several other companies, notably SpaceX, which conducts launches for NASA and the intelligence community, and the social media platform X.

"Protests will not deter President Trump and Elon Musk from delivering on the promise to establish DOGE and make our federal gov-

Federal prosecutors charged a woman in connection with a string of vandalism against a Colorado Tesla dealership, which included Molotov cocktails being thrown at vehicles and the words "Nazi cars" spray painted on the building. Saturday's demonstration in Boston had a festive atmosphere, with a brass band playing music as protesters carried signs and chanted. Several of the signs mocked Musk and DOGE, with one reading: "Stop Elon and his despicable Musk rats."

"This government led by Trump and Musk, it's gone completely off the rails and we are here to stop that," said Carina Campovasso, a retired federal worker. "And I hope they listen." About 300 demonstrators protested at a Tesla dealership in New York City on Saturday. Police said nine people were taken into custody but did not elaborate on the charges they faced.

Tesla's share price has fallen by nearly a third since Trump took office, though it's still higher than it was a year ago. Musk's current net worth is an estimated \$359 billion, according to Forbes, which calculated his 2024 net worth as \$195 billion.



A man rides a Penny-farthing bicycle down the Mall towards Buckingham Palace in London on Sunday. AP/PTI

Imran Khan seeks global help for democracy, regional stability

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has appealed to the international community, particularly the United States, to reaffirm its commitment to democracy, human rights, and regional stability. Dawn reported that in an article published in Time magazine in his name, the incarcerated politician congratulated US President Donald Trump on his "political comeback".

He also expressed the hope that the US would work with Pakistan to foster economic partnerships, promote stability, and prevent conditions that lead to conflict and extremism.

It remains unclear if the article was indeed penned by Khan, and how it was delivered to the magazine.

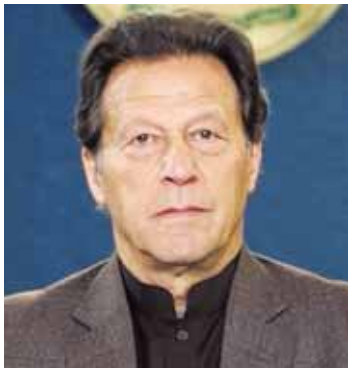
Khan reflected on the "political turmoil" in Pakistan and his ongoing fight for democracy. He expressed deep concern over the alleged erosion of democracy in the country, describing the current period as one of the most challenging in the nation's history.

He underscored that his imprisonment and the charges brought against him were politically motivated attempts to stifle his advocacy for democratic principles.

He claimed his struggle was not personal but addressed the broader

issue of democracy, which had far-reaching consequences, not only for the country but also for regional and global stability.

Given Pakistan's strategic importance, Khan emphasised that the international community must recognise the urgency of addressing the crisis.



On the issue of terrorism, Khan criticised the government for diverting resources from crucial counterterrorism efforts to pursue a political vendetta against Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI).

Regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which have seen an uptick in terrorist activity, were neglected in favour of "military campaigns against political opponents".

The judiciary, Khan alleged, had been reduced to a tool of political persecution.

Speaking on the DawnNews TV show 'Doosra Rukh' on Saturday, Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Chairman Irfan Siddiqui said the PTI was "impossible to predict".

The party was suggesting alliances while simultaneously calling for civil disobedience, sending letters and publishing "explosive" articles in Time magazine, the PML-N senator said.

While discussing the talks with the PTI, Senator Siddiqui said it was impossible to present options during the talks as they did not assess them at any forum; rather, their decisions came straight from Khan.

He said the PTI did not know what they were doing until they received instructions from Khan.

"When Imran ordered 'no more talks', the PTI committee was completely caught off guard," he said.

Asked if the PTI wanted to continue negotiations despite Imran's instructions, he responded in the affirmative. "I remember (PTI Chairman) Gohar Ali Khan went to see Imran, and when he returned, there were still three or four days left before the deadline to meet their demands. Still, they said no more talks."

Officials concerned about militant attack in Karachi

PTI ■ KARACHI

A hand grenade attack on a police station in Karachi has left senior officials concerned whether insurgent groups from Balochistan or the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have become active in Pakistan's biggest city. Despite the ongoing terror attacks carried out by the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) or the TTP in other parts of Pakistan, Karachi has largely remained peaceful in recent times.

On Friday evening, unidentified men on two motorcycles hurled at least three hand grenades at the Preedy police station in Saddar town, injuring four policemen and damaging the outer building.

Deputy Inspector General (DIG) South Syed Asad Raza said the people who hurled the grenades had still not been identified as they sped away on their bikes in the narrow lanes after the attack. "The injured policemen were moved to a hospital where their condition is out of danger," he said.

Bomb Disposal Squad experts said three grenades were detonated in the attack.

Reza said in the past the criminal gangs in Lyari used hand grenades to attack police stations and mobile vans. Reza said the attack alerted police and security personnel as there had been very few such cases in Karachi.

The official said they had intelligence reports saying the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have recently made videos in Karachi, and some of the suspected militants were also apprehended in the city.

Child dies of Ebola in Uganda, raising concern over surveillance

PTI ■ KAMPALA

A 4-year-old child became the second person to die of Ebola in Uganda, the World Health Organisation has said, in a setback for health officials who had hoped for a quick end to the outbreak that began at the end of January.

The child had been hospitalised at the main referral facility in Kampala, the capital of the East African country, and died Tuesday, the WHO office in Uganda said in a brief statement on Saturday. The statement said WHO and others are working to strengthen surveillance and contact tracing.

There were no other details about the death and local health officials were not commenting on the case.

The death undermines Ugandan officials' assertions of an outbreak under control after eight Ebola patients were discharged earlier in February. The first victim was a male nurse who died the day before the outbreak was declared on Jan 30. He had sought treatment at multiple facilities in Kampala and in eastern Uganda, where he also visited a traditional healer in trying to

diagnose his illness, before later dying in Kampala.

The successful treatment of eight patients who had been contacts of that man, including some of his relatives, had left local health officials anticipating the end of the outbreak. But they are still investigating its source.

Tracing contacts is key to stemming the spread of Ebola, and there are no approved vaccines for the Sudan strain of Ebola that's infecting people in Uganda.

Over 20,000 travellers are screened daily for Ebola at Uganda's different border crossing points, according to WHO, which supports the work.

The WHO has given Uganda at least USD 3 million to support its Ebola response, but there have been concerns about adequate funding in the wake of the US administration's decision to terminate 60% of USAID's foreign aid contracts. Dithan Kiragga, executive director of the Baylor College of Medicine Children's Foundation, a non-governmental group that supports Ebola surveillance in Uganda, told The Associated Press on

Friday that his group had stopped its work supporting local health authorities in screening travelling passengers after the termination of its contract with USAID.



CHANGE OF NAME

I, Anil Kumar S/o Shri Ram Avadh R/o A-1175, Indira Marg Mandawali Fazalpur Delhi-110092 declare that I have Changed my name from Anil Kumar Singh to Anil Kumar for all future Purposes.

PD(1606)C
I, Rinku Tiwari W/o Pranav Kumar Raju R/o G- 118 Sector Delta 2, Greater Noida, Gautam Buddh Nagar have changed my name from Rinku to Rinku Tiwari for all future purposes.
PD(1607)C

Government fails to find right candidate for BPCL top job

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
After Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), the government headhunter struggled to find a suitable candidate for the top job at Bharat Petroleum, as most applicants were narrow specialists lacking multidisciplinary experience needed to run a large organisation. The Public Enterprise Selection Board (PESB) last month interviewed a dozen candidates including BPCL director (finance) Vetsa Ramakrishna Gupta and its director (refineries) S Khanna but found none suitable for the job of chairman and managing director of Bharat

Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), according to a PESB order. It advised the administrative ministry "to choose an appropriate course of further action for selection including the search cum selection committee," according to the order. Incumbent G Krishnakumar superannuates as chairman and managing director of BPCL on April 30 this year. BPCL is the fourth company in the oil sector where PESB couldn't find a suitable candidate since 2021. PESB in May 2023 did not make any recommendation for the top post at Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and the task was then entrusted to a search cum selection committee.

That panel picked Arvind Singh Sahney who was appointed chairman of IOC in November 2024. In June last year, PESB interviewed eight candidates, including a director on HPCL board and managing director of Indraprastha Gas Ltd, for the post of chairman and managing director at HPCL but rejected them all. HPCL top position has been lying vacant since August 31, 2024, when Pushp Kumar Joshi superannuated. Previously in June 2021, PESB reached a similar conclusion while looking for a candidate for the top job at Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC). A year later, a search-cum-selection committee picked

Arun Kumar Singh, the former chairman and managing director of BPCL, for that job. Most board-level appointments at public sector companies are done on the basis of recommendations of the PESB but the government headhunter has been struggling to find suitable candidates for top jobs that fell vacant since 2021 in the oil sector. Search-cum-selection committee route has been resorted to as such a panel has flexibility of not just considering candidates who have applied for the job but anyone - from public and private sector - who it deems fit to do the job. Sources said that the core of the problem is these

companies are not creating leaders with wide exposure. Most of the candidates who appeared for interviews for HPCL and BPCL had spent all their professional careers in just one stream such as only refineries, or LPG sales. "I wouldn't call them one trick ponies but they are all narrow specialists. When PESB looks at candidates, it essentially is looking for someone who has had multidisciplinary exposure and is capable of leading an organisation whose job is not limited to one discipline of refining oil or selling LPG," a top official said. While IOC, BPCL and HPCL refine crude oil into fuels like petrol and diesel, make petrochemicals, and retail fuels, ONGC produces

crude oil and gas. In the past, IOC and BPCL nurtured leaders by giving them multidisciplinary exposure. IOC had a route called the department of business development where a refinery, finance or marketing person could get exposure to streams other than his core competence. This created tall leaders like Subir Raha, Prashanto Banerjee and several others after them, another official explained. Similar was the case with BPCL which also gave its officials multidisciplinary exposure and created stalwarts like Sarthak Behuria, B Ashok among others. "Take the instance of Arun

Kumar Singh. At BPCL, he worked across refinery, retail, LPG, pipelines and supply chain before heading Bharat PetroResources Ltd, the firm's wholly owned subsidiary for upstream business. It's only after that he was appointed BPCL chairman. And after getting experience of leading a large company he was appointed chairman of ONGC," the official said. BPCL created such leaders but unfortunately that is not happening now, he added. IOC's Sahney spent three decades in refinery operations, technical services, and health, safety, and environment (HSE). He was an executive director in the business development division, handling the

petrochemicals business. This gave him multidisciplinary exposure. Another official said the situation at HPCL is the most grim as potential candidates have spent all of their professional careers in just one or two disciplines. "While it is easy to blame PESB and the petroleum ministry, I think the oil companies have to share the blame of not creating a leadership pipeline and nurturing talent," the first official said. In case the search cum selection committee is not presented with enough in-house talent, the possibility of an outsider being appointed at HPCL or BPCL is not ruled out, sources added.

FPIs withdraw ₹34,574 Crore from equities in February

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Foreign investors have pulled out ₹34,574 Crore from the Indian equity markets in February pushing total outflows to ₹1.12 Lakh Crore in the first two months of 2025 amid rising global trade tensions and concerns over corporate earnings growth. "Elevated valuations of Indian equities, alongside concerns about corporate earnings growth, have led to a sustained outflow of FPIs," Vipul Bhowar, Senior Director - Listed Investments, Waterfield Advisors, said. According to the data with the depositories, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) offloaded shares worth ₹34,574 Crore from Indian equities in February. This came following a net outflow of ₹78,027 Crore in the entire January. With these, the total outflow by FPIs has reached ₹1,12,601 Crore in 2025 so far, data with the depositories showed. The massive selling by FPIs

has resulted in the BSE's benchmark Sensex falling over six per cent year-to-date. The recent market sell-off has been influenced by rising United States (US) bond yields, a strengthening US dollar, and global economic uncertainties, leading to a shift in investor focus towards US assets, Bhowar said. According to him, the earnings reports for the third quarter of fiscal year 2025 have been modest, indicating an atmosphere of uncertainty. This issue is further compounded by falling commodity prices and reduced consumer spending, which adversely impact corporate profits and diminish the appeal of Indian equities to foreign investors, he added. "FPIs are focused on selling in India because valuations in India are high and moving money to Chinese stocks where valuations are much lower. "But in the process, they are selling in the best performing

sector with attractive valuations," V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. An important paradox in FPIs selling is that they are selling heavily in financial services, the sector which is doing well and the valuations are attractive. Additionally, they withdrew money from the debt market. They pulled out ₹8,932 Crore from debt general limit and ₹2,666 Crore from debt voluntary retention route. The overall trend indicates a cautious approach by foreign investors, who scaled back investments in Indian equities significantly in 2024, with net inflows of just ₹427 Crore. This contrasts sharply with the extraordinary ₹1.71 Lakh Crore net inflows in 2023, driven by optimism over India's strong economic fundamentals. In comparison, 2022 saw a net outflow of ₹1.21 Lakh Crore amid aggressive rate hikes by global central banks.

Wave Group, Agristo to invest ₹750 Crore in UP

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Wave Group and Belgium's Agristo NV will invest around ₹750 Crore to expand their potato processing plant in Uttar Pradesh to make premium french fries, amid rising global demand for processed food. In 2019, Wave Group firm Masa Global Food Private Limited and Agristo's subsidiary firm IMSTO NV, Belgium had formed a 50:50 joint venture firm to establish a potato processing plant at Bijnor to make dehydrated potato flakes. The name of the joint venture firm is Agristo Masa Private Limited. The plant started operations in 2022 with an annual capacity of 7,500 tonnes. In an interview with PTI, Wave Group Chairman Manpreet Singh Chadha noted that there is an immense growth potential in Indian food processing sector. He also stressed on the need to boost crop yields and processing capacity for augmenting farmers income. "We are setting up a new

production line for export quality french fries at Bijnor," Chadha said. He said the total investment on this expansion will be around ₹750 Crore, which will be financed through equity and debt. The joint venture had invested around ₹300 Crore on setting up the existing plant, taking the total investment commitment to more than ₹1,000 Crore. Chadha said the new production line with 80,000 tonnes per annum capacity will become operational in the next two years and cater to both domestic and global markets. The JV is into business to business (B2B) segment only. "Our aim is to empower the farmers and diversify their cash crop beyond sugarcane. We have helped these farmers to double the potatoes output with the help of new technologies. Their income has increased by 50 per cent over the last three-four years," said Chadha. Princess Astrid of the Kingdom of Belgium, Finance Minister of Uttar

Pradesh Suresh Kumar Khanna and Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh Manoj Singh attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the expansion of the potato processing plant. Wave Group already has two sugar manufacturing plants in Bijnor area and has been procuring sugarcane from farmers. The potato processing plant set up by the joint venture firm has helped in enhancing farmers income of this region, Chadha said. "We are helping farmers in accessing good quality seeds for potato production. We are also procuring all potatoes from farmers at a very remunerative price," Chadha said. Around 2,500 farmers are expected to benefit from this expansion. This is in addition to the 500 farmers in the region who have been provided sustainable livelihood opportunities through the plant's interventions. The productivity of potato has gone up from 17 tonnes per hectare to 32 tonnes per hectare. The Bijnor plant caters to

both domestic and export markets, with North America, Middle East, South East Asia and Japan being the key destinations overseas. Filip Wallays, Co-CEO of Agristo, said, "The Bijnor plant is a testament of how results can be achieved when vision and technical expertise are combined. Partnering with Masa Global Food has allowed us to contribute in a meaningful manner to the rapidly evolving Indian agriculture and food processing sectors and ensure development of all stakeholders." To ensure the holistic development of farmers and the overall development of the region's agricultural landscape, the JV firm Agristo Masa has hired agronomists from Belgium and The Netherlands. The joint venture firm is also assisting farmers in this region in farm mechanisation. Wave Group is into real estate, sugar and food processing businesses. It has real estate projects in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

NCL aims for 139 MT production target in FY25

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Coal India arm Northern Coalfields Ltd (NCL) expects to achieve the production target of 139 Million Tonnes (MT) for the current fiscal. In a statement, NCL said that till February the subsidiary produced 128.13 MT and "we are hopeful that we will also achieve our annual target". The company's dispatch was 125.78 MT in the April-February period of the current fiscal. NCL's dispatch target for the current fiscal is 139 MT. The company known for its highly mechanised mines and critical role in ensuring the country's energy security, said that it has launched the first aid training programme for homemakers on a large scale. By extending awareness about first aid beyond the workplace and into the homes of its workforce, NCL is fostering a primary-care-conscious community.

Radico Khaitan expects ₹500 Crore sales in FY26: MD

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Encouraged by the ongoing premiumisation in the alcoholic beverage (alcobev) segment, Radico Khaitan expects sales of ₹500 Crore from its luxury brands, including single malt 'Rampur' and Jaisalmer Indian Craft Gin, in the next fiscal, its Managing Director Abhishek Khaitan said. The company expects an eight-nine per cent volume growth, and value growth of around "12-15 per cent", Khaitan said, adding "this year has been a good year for us, and hopefully next year should be much better." For the next fiscal, he said, "We expect the same thing, our premium PNA category (Prestige and above) should grow more than 15 per cent and we should be close to overall double-digit growth." Radico Khaitan's luxury portfolio consists of Rampur Indian Single Malt, Jaisalmer Indian Craft Gin, Sangam World Malt and Spirit of Victory 1999 Pure Malt. "For the first time in Q3 (December quarter) we achieved a turnover of ₹100 Crore (from premium) and for the nine months of fiscal year 2024, we have achieved ₹250 Crore (turnover). We are very confident that for fiscal year 2026, Radico Khaitan should achieve ₹500 Crore of turnover, just for the luxury segment only," said Khaitan. Moreover, to expand its presence in the fast-growing luxury alcobev segment, Radico Khaitan plans to add two more brands next fiscal. "So in the first half, we are planning to come out with two more brands in the luxury space. So we have been working for the last couple of years on that, and hopefully in the first half, we will see their entry into the Indian markets," Khaitan said. Radico Khaitan, which also owns other premium brands in the PNA category, including Royal Ranthambore, Dazzle Vodka, and Morphous Blue, is experiencing high double-digit growth and expects the momentum to continue. Tailwinds from growing per

capita income and young demographics, such as India adding 20 Million new people to the drinking age bracket every year, will help the company maintain its momentum. Khaitan is also unfazed about the government's decision to slash import duty on bourbon whiskey to 50 per cent and said it is very "minuscule" in size in the Indian liquor market and "that would not have so much pressure on the local companies". However, over the ongoing talks for the UK-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA), he said the current duty of 150 per cent on Scotch whisky should be reduced in a gradual manner. It will allow the Indian brands to create space for themselves in the premium segment. "Our single malts are now outperforming the foreign single malts also, it is priced higher," he said, adding duty cut on import of bulk whisky (non-branded) from Scotland by the Indian liquor companies, including Radico Khaitan will help them reduce costs. Besides, Radico Khaitan (earlier known as Rampur Distillery Company) expects to continue its growth from Defense Ministry Canteen Stores Department (CSD), where it is one of the largest providers of branded IMFL to the armed forces. "We are the market leaders there (at CSD). We would be having a close to 26 to 27 per cent and we feel the demand for the Indian products is very high. People are proud to consume the Indian brand," he added. In the single malt and premium end, Radico Khaitan competes with Haryana-based Piccadilly Distilleries, Amrut and Paul John, among other brands. In fiscal year 2024, Radico Khaitan's gross revenue from operations was at ₹15,483.9 Crore and had sold 45.6 million cases, in which PNA category's volume was 11.26 Million cases (of nine bottles each). Its Prestige and Above category brands grew by 20.3 per cent year-on-year in volume terms.

Excelsoft Technologies files for IPO with SEBI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Excelsoft Technologies Limited, a vertical software-as-a-service (SaaS) company focused on the learning and assessment market, has filed draft papers with capital markets regulator, Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to raise ₹700 Crore through an initial public offering (IPO). The proposed IPO of the Karnataka-based company is a combination of a fresh issue of shares valued ₹210 Crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of shares worth ₹490 Crore by the promoters - Pedanta Technologies and Dhananjaya Sudhanva, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP). The company may consider mobilising up to ₹270 Crore in pre-IPO round. "If the pre-IPO placement is undertaken, then the amount raised from the pre-IPO placement will be reduced from the fresh offer size or the Offer for Sale portion," the company said in the draft papers filed on Friday. The company has proposed

to utilise the proceeds of the fresh issue towards purchase of land and construction of a new building and for upgradation and external electrical systems of its existing facility in Mysore, funding upgradation of the company's IT infrastructure and for general corporate purposes. With over two decades of experience, Excelsoft provides technology-based solutions across diverse learning and assessment segments through long-term contracts with enterprise clients worldwide. As on December 31, 2024, it caters to 71 clients spread across 17 countries, including the US, UK, India, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Canada. Some of its prominent clients are Pearson Education, Inc, AQA Education, Colleges of Excellence, NxGen Asia PTE LTD, Pearson Professional Assessments Ltd, Sedtech for Technology Education and Learning WLL, Ascend Learning LLC, Brigham Young

University-IDAHO, Training Qualifications UK, Surala Net Co Ltd, Excel Public School and The Chartered Quality Institute. On the financial front, Excelsoft reported a revenue from operations at ₹198.3 Crore in fiscal year 24, with a profit after tax (PAT) of ₹12.75 Crore. As per the draft papers, there are no listed companies or peers in India that have business composition and segment contribution similar to it. According to an Arizton report, the global SaaS market has seen rapid growth, with vertical SaaS emerging as a dominant trend that promises specialised, industry-tailored solutions. This shift has positioned vertical SaaS to grow at an even faster pace than general SaaS, with estimates suggesting that vertical SaaS could account for nearly 50 per cent of the SaaS market by 2030. Anand Rathi Advisors is the book running lead manager to the issue. The equity shares of the company are proposed to be listed on BSE and NSE.

US tariff, FII's key drivers for markets

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Equity markets will take cues from the United States (US) tariff related developments, global trends and trading activity of foreign investors this week, analysts said. Markets may face volatile trends going ahead as investor sentiment continue to remain weak due to escalating trade tariff concerns and foreign fund outflows, experts noted. In February alone, the NSE Nifty tanked 1,383.7 points or 5.88 per cent. The BSE Sensex lost 4,302.47 points or 5.55 per cent last month. From its record peak of 85,978.25 hit on September 27 last year, the BSE benchmark index is down 12,780.15 points or 14.86 per cent. The Nifty dropped 4,152.65 points or 15.80 per cent from its lifetime high of 26,277.35 hit on September 27, 2024. "Investors will be closely watching key events, including the tariff policy, and jobless claims. In the near term, market conditions are expected to remain weak, with a gradual recovery anticipated as earnings improve from Q1 fiscal year 2026 and global trade policy uncertainties

subside," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. From macroeconomic space, announcement of HSBC manufacturing and services PMI data during the week would also be tracked by investors. "We expect market to continue to trade with weakness due to weak global sentiments and lack of domestic triggers," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. The Indian economy grew by 6.2 per cent in the December quarter, recovering sequentially from seven-quarter lows, but the expansion came in lower than last year and at a time when it faces growing headwinds from the threat of a US tariff war. The 6.2 per cent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) was higher than a revised reading of 5.6 per cent expansion in the July-September 2024 period, according to data released by the Statistics Ministry on Friday. It was, however, lower than the RBI's estimate of 6.8 per cent for the period. Last week, the BSE benchmark slumped 2,112.96 points or

2.80 per cent, and the Nifty tanked 671.2 points or 2.94 per cent. "Uncertainty often weighs more than the actual event, and the market is currently grappling with concerns over potential trade wars. Additionally, persistent FII (Foreign Institutional Investors) selling continues to add pressure," Ajit Mishra - SVP, research, Religare Broking Limited, said. Gross GST collections rose by 9.1 per cent to about Rs 1.84 Lakh Crore in February, boosted by domestic consumption and indicating potential economic revival. As per the official data released on Saturday, on a gross basis, mop up from Central GST stood at ₹35,204 Crore, State GST at ₹43,704 Crore, Integrated GST at ₹90,870 Crore and compensation cess of ₹13,868 Crore. Satish Chandra Aluri, analyst, Lemonn Markets Desk, said, "We are close to the signs of market capitulation with Friday's losses and might see a relief rally this week from oversold conditions but overall market is expected to be volatile with downward bias in the near term."

Wages drag as employment rises: Virmani

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Niti Aayog member Arvind Virmani has said that while employment is increasing in India, real wages for regular jobs have not kept pace with inflation over the past seven years. "If we look at the wage data in PLFS, the real salary of casual workers has increased during the seven years and their condition has improved during this period. The figures confirm this. "But a bigger issue is in the case of regular salaried jobs. In this category, real wages have not increased in line with inflation in seven years," the economist said. "As far as my assessment is concerned, the main reason for wages not increasing as per inflation is the lack of skills. We are not hiring skilled jobs. I have seen the data of many countries. Based on that, I would say that we need to work on this (skill). It is in a

very weak state. The central government is taking steps. States also need to work in this direction, work needs to be done at the district level because jobs will be created there." "This is important because when skills increase, productivity increases and real wages increase. This happens in India as well as in the world. Skill development is needed not only for those who are already working but also for the new people who are coming in," the Niti Aayog member said. "According to the analysis we have done, skill development is needed at every level of education. Many children drop out of school midway, they need to be given skills accordingly. It is not that everyone needs skills only to become an AI (artificial intelligence) or electronic engineer. We also have to think about those children

who drop out of school midway," Virmani said. The major problem is the lack of quality education and skills. Skills need to be improved at every level - lower, middle and higher. We need skills for all kinds of jobs, he added. "For a developed India, there is a need for improvement everywhere. We should see the opportunity and use it. We need to take advantage of the opportunities that we have at the level of global demographics. For this, improving the quality of education along with teaching and training is important. Attention needs to be paid here. So that we can reach a higher income level. Similarly, there is a supply chain, which needs to be worked upon," the member said. "Job and skill are two sides of the same coin. If you have skill then it becomes easier to get a job. This needs to be understood."

increasing". As per the PLFS Annual Report 2023-24 (July-June), the worker-population ratio in terms of persons of all ages increased to 43.7 per cent in 2023-24 from 34.7 per cent in 2017-18. "If we look at the wage data in PLFS, the real salary of casual workers has increased during the seven years and their condition has improved during this period. The figures confirm this. "But a bigger issue is in the case of regular salaried jobs. In this category, real wages have not increased in line with inflation in seven years," the economist said. "As far as my assessment is concerned, the main reason for wages not increasing as per inflation is the lack of skills. We are not hiring skilled jobs. I have seen the data of many countries. Based on that, I would say that we need to work on this (skill). It is in a

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Mcap of eight valued firms plummet by ₹3 Lakh Crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued firms eroded by ₹3,09,244.57 Crore in a holiday-shortened last week, with Tata Consultancy Services taking the biggest hit, in line with bearish trend in equities. Last week, the BSE benchmark gauge Sensex tanked 2,112.96 points or 2.80 per cent, and the NSE Nifty tumbled 671.2 points or 2.94 per cent. In February alone, the Nifty dropped 1,383.7 points or 5.88 per cent. The Sensex lost 4,302.47 points or 5.55 per cent. The market valuation of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) plunged ₹1,09,211.97 Crore to ₹12,60,505.51 Crore, the most among the top-10 firms. With the sharp decline in its market valuation TCS slipped to the third rank in the top-10 most

valued firms chart from the previous second place. HDFC Bank overtook TCS to become the second most valuable firm. The valuation of Infosys tanked ₹52,697.93 Crore to ₹7,01,002.22 Crore. Bharti Airtel's market valuation eroded by ₹39,230.1 Crore to ₹8,94,993.67 Crore and that of Reliance Industries dropped ₹38,025.97 Crore to ₹1,62,343.45 Crore. State Bank of India's (SBI) valuation diminished by ₹29,718.99 Crore to ₹6,14,236.97 Crore. The market capitalisation (mcap) of ICICI Bank slumped ₹20,775.78 Crore to ₹8,49,803.90 Crore. Hindustan Unilever's mcap declined by ₹11,700.97 Crore to ₹5,14,983.41 Crore. The valuation of ITC dipped ₹7,882.86 Crore to ₹4,93,867.57 Crore.



YOGASANAS FOR BELLY FAT LOSS



SURYA NAMAKSARA:
A series of 12 asanas combined to form a perfect combination we call *sun salutation*. It is also known as the mother of all asanas. It starts with namaste and stretching the abdomen and then stretching the hamstrings bending forward and so on! The sequence we all know it, if you don't and are completely new to it, just google it. It will burn the fat faster resulting in a smooth and toned belly shape that every person desires when roaming beachside. There is and never be another substitute for *Surya Namaskar*. It helps in overall blood circulation in the body and stretching abdomen muscles resulting in good appetite and reduced bowel problems.

Tasty Recipe Using Pistachio



On the occasion of *World Pistachio Day*, Chefs have shared with *The Pioneer* delicious recipe that you can make using pistachios on behalf of *American Pistachio Growers*. *Pick Me Up Pista Bomb* is a recipe by *Chef Sanjeev Kapoor*, *Chocolate Pistachio Kunafa Cake* is by *Chef Shivesh Bhatia*. You can have a taste of all these dishes by preping the recipes:

Pick Me Up Pista Bomb By Chef Sanjeev Kapoor

On behalf of *American Pistachio Growers*, *Chef Sanjeev Kapoor* shares the recipe for *Pick Me Up Pista Bomb*.



INGREDIENTS
● 1 cup American Pistachios; ● ¼ cup brown sugar; ● 1 cup rolled oats, toasted; ● 1 cup puffed amaranth (rajgira); ● ¼ cup honey; ● ¼ tsp cinnamon powder

METHOD
● Dry roast American Pistachios for 3-4 minutes on medium heat. Switch the heat off and allow to cool slightly.
● Put the roasted pistachios in a food processor jar and process to a coarse mixture.
● Heat a non-stick pan. Add brown sugar and 2 tbsps water and cook till the sugar melts.
● Add rolled oats, puffed amaranth, and

coarsely processed pistachios. Add honey and cinnamon powder and mix till well combined. Transfer on to a plate and allow to cool slightly.
● Take small portions of the mixture with greased hands and roll each portion into a ball.
● Serve.



Chocolate Pistachio Kunafa Cake By Chef Shivesh Bhatia

On behalf of *American Pistachio Growers*, *Chef Shivesh Bhatia* shares the recipe for *Chocolate Pistachio Kunafa Cake*.

INGREDIENTS-
● 1 tbsp butter; ● 1 cup kunafa dough; ● 2 cups pistachios; 1 tbsp oil; ● 3 tbsps icing sugar; ● For assembly; ● 2 layers of chocolate sponge; ● Chocolate glaze

METHOD-
● Set a non-stick pan on medium heat and add butter to it.
● Once the butter has melted, add the kunafa dough and roast till it becomes golden brown. Set it aside.
● To make the pistachio paste, add California pistachios in a blender jar along

with oil and icing sugar.
● Pulse the entire mixture at regular intervals of about 1 minute until the pistachios start releasing some oil and turn into a paste.
● Combine this pistachio paste with the roasted kunafa to make the filling for the cake.
● To assemble the cake, place a layer of chocolate sponge on a stand or turn table.
● Spread the pistachio kunafa filling generously over the cake layer and sandwich it with another chocolate sponge.
● Now tightly wrap an acetate sheet around the assembled cake. Pour the chocolate glaze over the cake and pull the acetate sheet up to let the glaze drip down from all sides.

BY YASH GUPTA

Obesity is the most common problem among the elderly as well as the youth, the people and their lifestyle are forcing them to walk and have poor posture, which results in low confidence and prone to diseases. Due to sitting all day in front of a computer and workstations, it is obvious the belly from the button will say hello before you can speak. So, if you think there is a remedy that will burn the fat without you moving an inch, everyone would do it. It's better to choose your hard, either regret or discipline. Here we will look at the top 5 yoga asanas to reduce belly fat quickly. The flatter the stomach the more fabulous the life. Health is the new currency of the era. Make sure you own it and keep the wealth as long you live.

The author is an Art of Living faculty, meditation & mind coach, professional yoga trainer.



- Work on yourself, because it is the only thing that will stay,
- Work on yourself because it is the only thing you are working on at the end of the day.
- Work on yourself because you have to leave a legacy behind
- Work on yourself because this is how you win the mind.

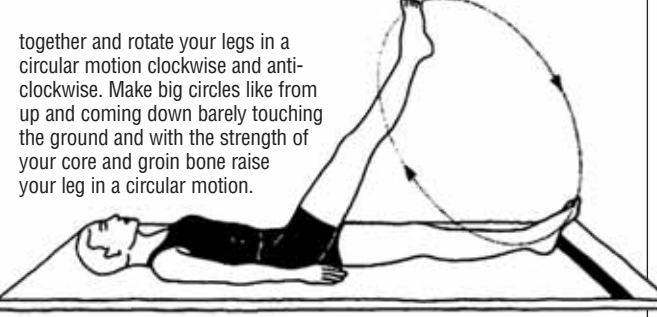


NAUKASANA
Also known as the boat pose/posture. Looks very tough but with practice the core muscles function well and get those 3D abs. All you have to do is lie down on your back and lift your arms, feet, and eyes in the same line. At least 6 inches off from the ground, hold the position for at least 30 seconds, and later you can progress the number of times and for a longer duration. It promotes burning belly fat and building stabilized core muscles. Advisable to do an empty stomach and women on periods must avoid the asana. Make sure to continue breathing while holding onto the posture and relax in Shavasana very slowly.



PADA CHAKRASANA

One's favourite exercise for belly fat loss is *leg rotation*. It is indeed the most effective way to build a strong core. It works on every single muscle major and minor, from the torso to the hips.
Every muscle group is involved, working on the inner thighs and hip abductors. Just as above simply lie down with the same hand placement you have to do is keep your feet



together and rotate your legs in a circular motion clockwise and anti-clockwise. Make big circles like from up and coming down barely touching the ground and with the strength of your core and groin bone raise your leg in a circular motion.

PADA SANCHALANASANA

Let me simplify, cycling. You don't have to go for cycling outside. Just relax and lie down on your back place your palms on the ground for support (personal recommendation to put both your palms in a diamond shape under your lower back, gives you comfort) and lift



your legs. Start *cycling* and you will feel a lot of muscles saying "hello" and "save me" and if you are not used to this exercise "let's stop for now". Don't worry, until to trick your mind you will never achieve the rewards if keep listening to your mind. Do it for 15-20 seconds clockwise and 15-20 seconds anti-clockwise 2-3 times each. Works magic, but there is always a price to pay.

TAKE CARE OF:
When performing Pada Sanchalanasana keep in mind to maintain proper alignment of your spine, core muscles & leg movements with your breath to avoid strain on lower back.

Move Your Body, Lift Your Mind

Move Your Body, Lift Your Mind
In an era where stress, anxiety, and depression are becoming increasingly common, the role of physical activity in promoting mental well-being has never been more crucial. While most people may associate exercise with physical health, its impact on mental well-being is also quite significant- from managing stress, boosting one's mood and enhancing the overall well-being. Studies indicate that who exercises regularly have improved mental health, healthier cognitive functions, and enhanced emotional well-being.

But how this happens?
High levels of cortisol- a

primary hormone that body release in response to stress; can lead to increased anxiety and negatively impact your overall mental well-being. Engaging in regular exercise helps lower cortisol levels, making it easier to manage stress and maintain a balanced mood.

When you engage in physical activity, your body releases endorphins, those feel-good hormones that help reduce stress while increasing happiness and relaxation. They help relieve pain, relax, and lift mood. Exercise also promotes the production of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters that play a key role in



regulating mood and preventing mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Cognitive Benefits of Physical Activity
Not only emotional well-being but exercise is also beneficial for better cognitive function. Regular physical activity has been linked to improved memory, concentration, and problem-solving skills as it reduces stress and anxiety.
Regular exercise increases blood flow to the

brain, which enhances cognitive abilities and reduces the risk of neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease. Studies suggest that even moderate activities like walking or yoga can significantly enhance brain function and mental clarity.

— By Dr Parul Malhotra



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

Physical activity is undoubtedly beneficial for your body and brain. But have you heard of social and emotional benefits of it? Ever wondered how exercising gives you opportunities for social connections. Let's see- joining a dance class, gym or yoga sessions introduce you

to meet like-minded people. Exercising with them builds a sense of community, offering emotional support and motivation. If you are lucky enough, you might find people who through their positive energy inspire you to become better versions of yourselves.

Vidarbha wins third Ranji Trophy title

PTI ■ NAGPUR

A magnificent run in domestic cricket this season culminated in a third Ranji Trophy title for Vidarbha, who emerged champions on the basis of their first-innings lead in the summit clash, which ended in a draw at their home ground on Sunday.

The fate of the contest was all but sealed on the third evening when Vidarbha edged ahead with a slender lead of 37 runs in the first innings, having dismissed a doughty Kerala for 342 after putting on 379 runs batting first.

Kerala, the first-time finalists, fought hard but Vidarbha were rewarded for their incredible hard work and discipline throughout a season in which they not only clinched the Ranji Trophy but also ended as the runner-up in the 50-overs Vijay Hazare Trophy.

It is for the third time that Vidarbha have won the Ranji Trophy title, having done so earlier with their two consecutive wins in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 seasons.

Vidarbha's win now also makes them one of the strongest outfits in the Indian domestic cricket, for they had also finished as the runner-up in the Ranji Trophy last season.

The team under the captaincy of Akshay Wadkar and head coach Usman Ghani produced dominant performances throughout the Ranji Trophy season which was, for the first time in its 90-year history, split into two halves.

Vidarbha emerged as the best team across all the four groups in the league stage with six wins in seven



Vidarbha players pose with the trophy after winning Ranji Trophy final cricket match against Kerala in Nagpur on Sunday

matches giving them 40 points. Unlike Kerala who also had luck on their side in the knockouts when they beat Jammu and Kashmir (quarterfinal) and Gujarat (semifinal) by barest of margins and progressed on basis of first-innings leads, Vidarbha grabbed outright wins.

Vidarbha crushed Tamil Nadu, last year's semifinalists, by 198 runs in the quarterfinal and went on to pummel defending champions Mumbai by 80 runs in the semifinal.

Overall, Vidarbha won nine of the 10

matches they played in the Ranji Trophy this season, which reflects the dominance of the team in India's premier domestic competition.

On Sunday, Vidarbha did what they had planned — to bat, bat and bat — and reached 375 for nine with Karun Nair making 135 (295 balls, 10x4s, 2x6s), Danish Malewar scoring 73 and Darshan Nalkande chipping in with a 51 not out.

Vidarbha resumed the final day's play with the contest completely in their control, having an overnight lead of 286 runs.

Even though Nair could only add three more runs to his overnight tally, Vidarbha batted for long enough — close to the tea break — taking their overall lead to 412 runs, far beyond the reach of Sachin Baby's side.

The triumph was achieved on the back of all-round performances, which had two of Vidarbha's youngest players taking charge of their team's showings on the field.

The 22-year-old left-arm spinner Harsh Dubey created the record for most wickets in a Ranji Trophy season with 69 dismissals, going past

the previous record of 68 wickets which belonged to Bihar's Ashutosh Aman. Dubey also implemented the batting tips given by legendary Indian player Ravichandran Ashwin to make 476 runs in 10 matches with five fifties, perhaps to show early signs of another spin-bowling all-rounder in making for India.

The 24-year-old Yash Rathod, a bespectacled left-handed batter, amassed 960 runs at 53.33 in 10 matches with five centuries and three fifties to top the charts for batters, which had plenty of his teammates as well.

The veteran Nair, who had joined Vidarbha for this season, not only led their charge in the Vijay Hazare Trophy with five tons but also finished as the fourth highest run-getter in the Ranji Trophy, making 863 runs in nine matches at 53.93 with four tons and two fifties. In the final, Nair struck 86 and 135.

The 21-year-old Malewar, who struck 153 and 73 in the final, finished fifth with 783 runs at 52.20 with two tons and six fifties.

Nair and Malewar were the architects of Vidarbha's win in the final, for they forged partnerships of 215 and 183 runs in the two innings to steer their team out of troubled waters in both the innings.

Skipper Wadkar was not too far behind, at seventh position with 722 runs in 10 matches at 45.12 with two tons and as many fifties.

Wadkar told the broadcaster after the match, "Everyone worked hard throughout, and we're all very happy. Last year, we lost the final. So we prepared during the monsoon itself. Every individual worked on himself."



India has 'strong case' in 2036 Olympics bid: Coe

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

International Olympic Committee (IOC) President's post contender Sebastian Coe feels India's bid to host the 2036 Olympic Games is a "strong case" but competition will be tough with several other countries throwing their hats in the ring.

India has already submitted a 'Letter of Intent' to host the 2036 Olympics and Paralympic Games to the IOC's Future Host Commission, taking the first concrete step in an ambitious plan after months of informal dialogue with the global sport's apex body.

"Well, you won't be surprised given my background to say that I'm obviously very happy that India is committed to global sport and particularly the Olympic movement. I'm very happy to hear that.

"And look, it will be very competitive. It won't be the only bidder, but the case that it (India) can make is a very strong case," Coe told PTI in an exclusive interview.

Poland, Indonesia, South Africa, Qatar, Hungary, Turkey, Mexico and Egypt are among other countries which have expressed a desire to host the 2036 Olympics.

The 2036 Games host nation will not be known before 2026. But it is certain that the host will be chosen during the presidency of the winner of the March 20 election of the new IOC chief.

Coe, whose maternal grandfather is an Indian from Punjab, is considered the frontrunner among the seven candidates contesting for elections to succeed Thomas Bach as IOC president.

The 68-year-old Coe, a double Olympic 1500m gold medalist, also advised India to not end its ambition to organise the Olympics if it does not get the 2036 Games hosting rights.

"Plenty of cities have bid and lost and come back. Interestingly, when London won in 2005 (for the 2012 edition), it defeated Paris. We all have just been to the Paris Olympic Games (in 2024)," said the Briton, who is currently heading World Athletics.

"Rio was one of the cities that didn't make it past the initial evaluation for the 2012 bid. And they had the Games immediately after Britain in 2016.

"So it is by no means the end of the story. And even the legacy from bidding is an extremely strong legacy." More than 100 members of the IOC will vote on March 20 in the Greek resort of Costa Navarino, where the 144th IOC Session will be held from March 18 to 21.

Besides Coe, the other six candidates are Prince Feisal Al Hussein of Jordan, David Lappartient of France, Johan Eliasch of Sweden, Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr of Spain, Kirsty Coventry of Zimbabwe and Morinari Watanabe of Japan.

Coe said South Asia, of which India is the major country, has the potential to help grow the Olympic movement further by bringing more young people to sport.

"I have witnessed in the last few years the growing importance of South Asia in athletics, and athletics is the centrepiece of Olympic movement.

"If you and I 10 years ago said to each other that the men's Olympic javelin title would be being fought between athletes from Pakistan and India, I think we both would have smiled at each other and moved on," he said referring to Arshad Nadeem and Neeraj Chopra winning gold and silver respectively in Paris.



Praggnanandhaa scores second victory in Prague Masters

PTI ■ PRAGUE

Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa scored his second victory on the trot, outwitting Vincent Keymer of Germany to join compatriot Aravindh Chithambaram at the top on three points after the end of the fourth round of the Prague Masters here.

Aravindh survived some initial hiccups before signing peace with Sam Shankland of the United States, while top seed Wei Yi of China finally found his form at the expense of local star David Navara.

Aravindh faced the Sicilian defense and Shankland equalised quite easily. An exchange spree led to a very slight advantage for Shankland but the endgame was always closer to a draw. The players eventually arrived at a theoretically drawn rook and pawns endgame where an extra pawn for Shankland did not matter much.

The next round will see the two leaders pitted against each other and Praggnanandhaa will play with white.

In the challengers' section, Divya Deshmukh played out a draw with Ma Qun of China and took her tally to 1.5 points from four games.

avenged his defeat fighting from what looked like a shaky French defense with black.

Keymer was caught off guard in the middlegame. Praggnanandhaa went for the trade of queens and got his counter attack rolling.

Keymer, meanwhile, ran low on time and wasted some moves moving his rook back and forth to just draw. The Indian obviously understood it better and used his pieces well to win a couple of pawns. The rest was easy and it was all over in 44 moves.

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Lydia Ko wins Singapore LPGA

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

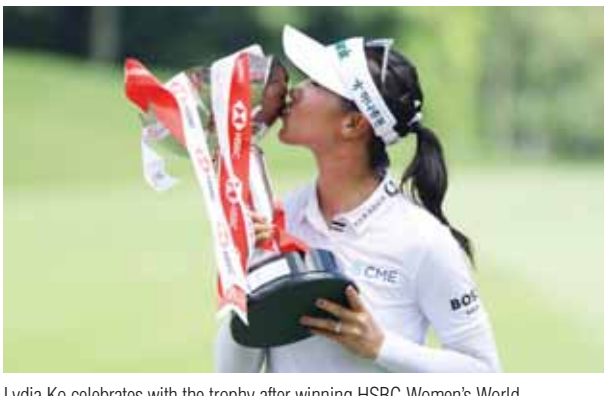
Lydia Ko finally conquered the LPGA's HSBC Women's World Championship, clinching her first title at her 11th attempt with a dominant four-stroke win over Ayaka Furue and Jeeno Thitikul in Sunday's final round.

The 2024 Olympic gold medalist and Women's British Open champion overcame a middling start before finding her rhythm with a birdie on the par-5 sixth.

Ko added back-to-back birdies on Nos. 7 and 8, seizing control of the leaderboard from then on.

Despite dropping two bogeys after the turn, the world No. 3 closed with a solid 69, sealing a 13-under-par 275 total at Sentosa Golf Club.

"I dreamt last night that I won but then I woke up, and I was



Lydia Ko celebrates with the trophy after winning HSBC Women's World Championship 2025 at Sentosa Golf Club in Singapore

like, dang, it's not real yet," said Ko, who secured her 23rd LPGA title and her first victory since the Kroger Queen City Championship last September.

"But I just wanted to focus on my game."

"I started off really steady, and

you know, didn't really put myself in trouble that much. I think that was going to be the key for today."

Ko's previous best finish here was a lone second place in 2015.

"It's exciting to finally add

Asia's major to my major collection," the New Zealander said.

World No. 2 Jeeno Thitikul fought hard to chase Ko down, but her charge fell just short.

Jeeno fired a 70, finishing at nine under, tied for second with Japan's Ayaka Furue, who carded a closing 68. The Thai star made an early push with two birdies in the first four holes to trail Ko by a stroke at 9-under but couldn't maintain the pressure.

Charley Hull, just one shot behind Ko entering the final round, saw her title hopes fade after a frustrating 74, settling for a share of fourth at seven under alongside Im Jin Hee, who fired the day's best round of 67, and Gaby Lopez (70).

The Singapore tournament is the LPGA's first Asian swing of the year.

Viv Richards praises Kohli, calls him 'legendary' player

PTI ■ MUMBAI

West Indies legend Sir Vivian Richards on Sunday said Virat Kohli's fighting spirit, energy, and passion put him in the category of cricket's "great" and "legendary" players.

Richards, a long-time admirer of Kohli's indomitable spirit and passion for the game, also hailed the India batter for silencing critics through performances on the field.

"Well, I think he answers all of us, really. Before the World Cup for the ODIs, where he wasn't doing that well and then he came back in magnificent form, so, that is true testament to the character that we are speaking about," said Richards, a governing council member for the International Master League, during a virtual

interaction. "This is why I put him in the category of being great and legendary... Not all the time that you get players who can come back when they're down. His fighting spirit, energy and passion to do well make him stand out."

Richards said if he was still playing, he would love to have Kohli's energy on the field.

"His energy reflects his passion. He goes to show you that his involvement in the game all the time. There's a passion for that. There's not a moment that goes on that field that Virat Kohli doesn't miss. He's just magnificent in that way," he added.

Kohli reminds me of myself

Asked about batters he admires, the former West Indies captain said Kohli reminds him of himself.

"A lot of batsmen... Before you had people like Sachin



Tendulkar, who has retired," he said.

"But presently, Virat Kohli. He reminds me of myself. He who dares, win. He believes in himself, 120 per cent confident at all times and whenever it needs to be aggressive, and confront opponents, you need guys like that."

"I appreciate seeing guys who,



especially when you're a captain, you defend your team and defend the people who you are representing so Virat Kohli, the modern day guy, I love," he added.

Richards said given his fitness and hunger, Kohli can go on to play ODIs for a long time.

"I'll tell you something. Just the way he is and the way how fit he is and the way he still

believes, very passionate about the game. You never know. He could still play when he's 50," he said.

"You never know. But it's just magnificent to see. Sometimes we see guys go on and maybe they come to an age and sometimes you look and you say, 'wow, he doesn't look as good as in the past'."

"But he just scored 100 just recently against Pakistan in Dubai so that says that, and this has just happened. This suggests that he's still very much at the very best, in the best of form," he added.

Richards, however, declined to compare Kohli with Tendulkar. "I do not believe in that. We should be quite thankful that the periods that everyone would have passed through, that the folks who saw these guys then benefited from the fact that they saw

some very good player," he said.

"I will never make comparisons. They all did their time, they worked for their countries. And we should appreciate that time because it's not just us alone who would be giving the answer, but all the folks, the fans who would be watching would pay tribute to that.

Backing Rohit

Richards said India should be positive with the form of their skipper Rohit Sharma, who has blown hot and cold with his form.

"You have got to give him all the opportunity. He would have failed in the past. I just believe that let's wait and see when we get to the semifinals and hopefully when you get to the semifinals, you're hoping to get to the finals," he said.

Real Betis defeats Real Madrid 2-1 in Spanish league

PTI ■ BARCELONA

Real Madrid stumbled in the three-way race for the Spanish league title as Isco Alarcón guided Real Betis to a 2-1 comeback win over the defending champion.

The former Madrid player delivered a corner kick that was headed in by fellow midfielder Johnny Cardoso in the 34th minute on Saturday, cancelling out Ibrahim Diaz's opener for Madrid.

Isco then put Betis ahead from the penalty spot in the 54th after he passed to Jesús Rodríguez and Madrid defender Antonio Rudiger knocked the Betis forward down in the area.

Madrid's loss left it level on points with Barcelona, which hosts Real Sociedad on Sunday. Atletico Madrid moved two points clear of them both at the top of the table after substitute Julián Álvarez scored to secure

a 1-0 win over Athletic Bilbao. Kylian Mbappé was back starting for Madrid after missing one game because of a problem with a tooth. Coach Carlo Ancelotti substituted him with 15 minutes left, saying that his dental issue had impeded him from training properly and that his star striker "was not 100 per cent."

"We weren't able to keep our initiative and the result got away from us," Ancelotti said.

"This is a hard blow, and we have to react. Today we didn't play well."

Madrid had led the league but is now struggling with just one victory in its last five rounds, a poor run that includes a defeat at modest Espanyol.

Next for Madrid: Tuesday's Champions League round-of-16 game against Atletico.

Isco torments old team

Isco left Madrid three years ago, having helped it win five Champions League titles before



he lost his starting job and then struggled to get off the bench. But Madrid might wish it had him back after the 32-year-old midfielder was the most decisive player on the field at

the Benito Villamarín. Isco, however, shared the credit for the win with his teammates. "Madrid has the best players and a million different ways it can hurt you, so if it weren't for

the hard work of the entire team we wouldn't have been able to do this," Isco said, before adding that he was still "grateful" for his time at Madrid.

The playmaker also showed he has not been slowed down by a leg injury that likely cost him a spot on Spain's European Championship side last summer. He returned to the field in December and is playing like he'd never been away.

"It is a dream of any player to play for his national team," Isco said after the win.

"I haven't played for Spain in six, seven years, so of course I would like to."

Madrid has good start and little else

Madrid started strong and looked ready to romp when Mbappé played Ferland Mendy through and the left back squared the ball for Ibrahim to score.

But Isco delivered a swerving corner kick for Cardoso, who was unmarked at the penalty spot to thump a header through the arms of Thibaut Courtois. Shortly after, as rain poured

down, Courtois had to make a wonder save to palm another Cardoso header over the bar in first-half injury time.

Coach Manuel Pellegrini had to be satisfied with his team's defending as the hosts frustrated any thoughts of a Madrid rally after Isco put them ahead from the spot.

"We went for the win and generated more scoring chances than they did," Pellegrini, a former Madrid coach, said.

"They played better in the first 15 minutes and deserved their goal, but from there on it was our match."

Madrid was without Jude Bellingham, who was serving the second of a two-game suspension for cursing at a referee. Dani Ceballos was out with a leg injury, and Federico Valverde was recovering from an unspecified knock. Sixth-placed Betis likewise had several players on the injury list,

including midfielders William Carvalho and Marc Roca. Atletico takes advantage

Álvarez scored from a pass by Marcos Llorente in the 66th after both came off the bench to help break through Athletic's defense.

It was the Argentine's 21st goal in all competitions since joining from Manchester City in the summer, with 10 coming in the league.

Fourth-placed Athletic came close to an equalizer with three efforts off the woodwork, including two by Iñaki Williams.

It was Athletic's first loss in league since October 6, ending an unbeaten run of 16 games.

Lukebakio rescues point for Sevilla

Dodi Lukebakio continued to provide a bright spot in Sevilla's otherwise drab season by scoring his 11th league goal in the 81st minute to secure a 1-1 draw with Rayo Vallecano.