

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

allowing the listing of the company. He said in his application that he had approached the court as the police and regulatory authorities had failed to take action on his complaint.

Citing Supreme Court judgements in the past, the Special Court Judge noted: "Considering the gravity of allegations, applicable laws and settled legal precedents, this Court deems it appropriate to direct an investigation under Section 156(3) of CrPC."

The ACB has been directed to register an FIR under the relevant provisions of Indian Penal Code (IPC), Prevention of Corruption Act, SEBI Act, and other applicable laws.

As per the order, the Special Court will monitor the investigations. The court has asked the ACB to file a status report within 30 days.

Meanwhile, the SEBI in a statement released to the media on Sunday dismissed the complaint - based on which the special court had passed the order - as the one coming from a "frivolous and habitual litigant" and said that it would challenge the order passed by the special court.

"Even though these officials

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.

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India beat Kiwis to enter Champions Trophy semis

AGENCIES ■ DUBAI

Varun Chakravarthy claimed five wickets to help India defeat New Zealand by 44 runs and top Group A of the Champions Trophy. India will thus face Australia in the semi-finals while the losing team will meet South Africa.

The Black Caps' top scorer on the night was Kane Williamson, who fell for 81 runs as New Zealand chase the target of 250 in the final group stage game against India.

Earlier, New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner had won the toss and opted to bowl first at the Dubai International Stadium on Sunday.

While Matt Henry scalped five wickets, New Zealand impressed with their fielding, especially with some spectacular catching from Kane Williamson (to send home Ravindra Jadeja) and Glenn Phillips (to dismiss Virat Kohli). Shreyas Iyer and Axar Patel had salvaged India's hopes after the Men in Blue were reduced to 30/3 by the seventh over, losing Rohit Sharma (15), Shubman Gill (2) and Virat Kohli (11) cheaply.

Shreyas scored 79 off 98 while Axar chipped in with 42 before both departed with the score reading 172/5.

India have always had a subpar record against New Zealand in global tournaments with the Black Caps winning 10 times as opposed to India's 5 wins. The Rohit Sharma-led outfit will also be wary of the Kiwis subcontinent form with New Zealand having defeated Pakistan and South Africa in the Tri-Series before the Champions Trophy and then going on to win both their matches in the tournament against Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The Kiwis had also handed India their worst home series loss in recent memory when they whitewashed Rohit's men 3-0 in the Test series last year. But India will find solace in the fact that the last time these two sides met in a 50-over ICC tournament, Rohit and Co had defeated the Kiwis in the semifinals of the 2023 ODI World Cup.

New Zealand fell to India's spin ploy as the Rohit Sharma-led side ended at the top of Group A with a 44-run victory in Dubai on Sunday. India decided to drop Harshit Rana and field four spinners for their final group-stage game before the semifinals. The decision



worked wonders as India's ball tweakers spun New Zealand batters inside out to defend its 249-run target successfully.

New Zealand finished in second with four points. Kane Williamson waged a lone war as the Kiwis continued to get outdone by Indian spinners. The various renditions of the sweep shot were the escape route that New Zealand batters tried to use to avoid the threat of Indian spinners.

However, with the pitch constantly used, spinners continued to thrive, making the chase a taxing affair for the Blackcaps.

In New Zealand's pursuit of the 250-run target, Hardik Pandya drew the first blood by removing Rachin Ravindra (6), courtesy of Axar Patel's stellar catch. Will Young looked more assured but got clean bowled by mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy for 22. Despite these early blows, New Zealand reached their 50-run mark in 12.2 overs.

Daryl Mitchell was the third to fall, trapped LBW by Kuldeep Yadav for 17, leaving New Zealand tottering at 93/3. The team crossed the 100-run mark in 25.3 overs as Williamson held firm at one end.

Williamson showcased his composure, reaching a well-earned half-century in 77 balls. However, India continued to chip away at the Kiwi batting lineup, with Tom Latham being trapped pinned in front of the stumps by Ravindra Jadeja for 14. New Zealand lost Glenn Phillips and Michael Bracewell in a cluster, courtesy of Chakravarthy. With New Zealand in a dire situation and the asking rate rising with each passing over, Williamson tried to open his arms by shimmering down the ground.

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."

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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

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

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 Milkpur bypoll, she questioned SP's tendency to blame BSP for its electoral losses. "Now that BSP did not contest the Milkpur 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

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 "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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

BJP to roll out registration for Mahila Samridhi Yojana on March 8

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The newly elected BJP government in Delhi will roll out the Mahila Samridhi Yojana on March 8. The BJP on Sunday said the registration process for providing ₹2,500 per month to women from economically weaker sections by the BJP government in Delhi will begin on March 8.

In its Delhi Assembly election manifesto, the BJP promised to provide ₹2,500 per month to women from economically weaker sections under the Mahila Samridhi Yojana, once it came to power in Delhi. BJP MP Manoj Tiwari on Sunday said a list of beneficiaries will be prepared.

"The entire process of providing ₹2,500 to every financially poor woman will be completed in one and a

half months. To whom will we give the money if we do not have the categories formed? The registration will begin on March 8 and it will take a month's time to finish the work. He also said that important decisions are being taken by the BJP government and the opposition should cooperate accordingly," he said, on the sideline of a felicitation event organised for newly elected Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and all the ministers at the party's headquarters.

The program was organised by the Delhi Pradesh Purvanchal Morcha to acknowledge the significant role of Purvanchal residents in the elections and to celebrate the formation of the BJP government in Delhi after 27 years.

The BJP had promised to provide ₹2,500 for poor women under the Mahila Samridhi Yojana, before



Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta with Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva and other leaders at a felicitation ceremony by Delhi Purvanchal Morcha in New Delhi on Sunday

March 8, if voted in power. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his rallies, had promised to roll out the scheme for women of the city. The opposition had targeted the Rekha Gupta-led government for not

announcing implementation of the scheme in its first cabinet meeting which took place on the day of oath ceremony.

The opposition AAP has criticised the BJP government for not approving the scheme in its first Cabinet meeting, as promised by the Prime Minister.

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva, on asking about the implementation of the scheme under which ₹2,500 per month is to be given to eligible women in the city on Saturday, had said that things will become clear soon.

"March 8 is women's day and I feel that every day in India should be celebrated as women's day. Newly formed BJP government in Delhi is ready to work for every section and let the date of March 8 come, things will become clear

soon," the Delhi BJP Chief had said.

The AAP leaders on Sunday alleged that the BJP is betraying public trust by failing to implement the scheme in its first cabinet meeting and instead using the assembly session to target Arvind Kejriwal. Calling out Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, AAP has demanded a clear answer: Will the money be deposited, or will this, too, be another 'jumla'?

AAP MLA Kuldeep Kumar raised concerns over the BJP government's failure to implement its election promise of providing ₹2,500 per month to women in Delhi.

He reminded that during the Delhi Assembly elections, PM Narendra Modi had assured women that if the BJP formed the government, they would receive ₹2,500 every month as part of Modi's Guarantee.

The AAP MLA pointed out that the PM had specifically stated that this scheme would be approved in the very first cabinet meeting of the BJP government. Trusting this guarantee, Delhi's voters supported the BJP, leading to the formation of its government.

AAP chief spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar, in a statement, reminded the BJP of its promises made to the people before coming to power.

"Before the elections, BJP had promised that every woman in Delhi would receive ₹2,500 in their accounts by March 8. BJP had also assured that LPG cylinders would be provided at ₹500, and every household would receive a free cylinder on Holi and Diwali. CM Rekha Gupta should start working on fulfilling these promises," she said.

Ensure uninterrupted power supply in summer, directs Sood

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As the summer is approaching, Delhi's Power Minister Ashish Sood, held a crucial meeting on Sunday at the Delhi Secretariat with senior officials of the Power Department and power companies operating in the national Capital and asked to implement the Summer Action Plan - 2025 with immediate effect. The Power Department and all stakeholders were instructed to take immediate and effective measures to ensure uninterrupted power supply as the summer season approaches.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) predicted that India is likely to witness above-normal maximum temperatures in most parts between March and May. The IMD declares a heat wave when the maximum is over 40°C in the plains, and also the temperature is 4.5 degrees Celsius or more above normal. Summer Action Plan



Delhi Minister Ashish Sood addresses a press conference

is important because Delhi's peak power demand reached the all-time high of 8,302 MW in May last year as the city had logged its highest-ever temperature.

To be able to cater to the rising power demand, BSES discoms are employing strategic power planning and advanced technologies. The Power Minister stated

that during this important meeting, several directives were issued to ensure smooth and regular power supply in Delhi during the summer season. The stakeholders were instructed to begin immediate implementation of the Summer Action Plan - 2025. He emphasized that ensuring uninterrupted

power supply for all residents across Delhi is a key agenda of the Delhi government. Sood also mentioned the vision of developing a model colony in Delhi where overhead power cables are not hanging and all wires are properly organised. He further stated that discussions were held with officials regarding removing any unauthorised cables or wires of other companies from electricity poles to reduce the load on the poles and eliminate tangled wiring. Additionally, the Power Minister instructed officials to ensure that if any power grid fails in any part of Delhi, repairs must be completed within a maximum of five minutes to prevent any disruption in electricity supply to residents. He also said that review meetings of the Power Department will be held every 15 days to assess the progress on decisions taken in previous meetings and ensure their implementation.

After the election results, the BJP and AAP were at loggerhead over power cuts in the nation capital. The AAP leaders had attacked the BJP claiming that dozens of outages were reported everyday from different areas of the city and the people have now started buying inverters. The BJP, however, had said that there is no power outage anywhere in Delhi and the only issue is that the acting power discoms have colluded with the AAP dispensation in a way that unnecessary delays are being caused in fixing breakdowns here and there.

Reiterating the vision of a 'Viksit Delhi' (Developed Delhi), the Minister stated that the Delhi government, under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the leadership of Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, is working in action mode to ensure that no citizen in Delhi faces power issues during the summer season.

Plans afoot to start cruise service in Yamuna: NCRPB

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With the BJP government in Delhi focusing on the rejuvenation of the Yamuna, plans are afoot to start a cruise service in the river, between Sonia Vihar and Jagatpur, the NCR Planning Board (NCRPB) has proposed a Yamuna Water Taxi Project with tentative stations located at Madanpur Khadar, Film City, Nizamuddin and ITO.



Cleaning work underway at the Yamuna river

The issue was discussed at length at the meeting of transport secretaries from NCR states on February 14, during the meeting of the NCRPB where the Inland Waterways Authority of India (Iwai) submitted that to begin with 20-25 passenger boats may be considered for inland water transport in Yamuna. At the meeting, the NCRPB briefed through the PPT on locations for multi-model integration with water transportation network in Delhi and shared proposals including Yamuna Water Taxi project stations and proposed tentative station locations at Madanpur Khadar, Film City, Nizamuddin and ITO.

At the meeting, chief engineer, Iwai informed that one meter to 1.2 meter water-level is required for water transport and the Yamuna river front in Delhi should not only be developed for water transport but also for tourism and recreational purposes. According to minutes of the meeting, Chief Engineer of Iwai stated that before carrying out feasibility, a hydrography survey and traffic study need to be carried out. In the beginning 20 to 25 passenger boats may be considered for inland water transport. Iwai further informed that it has done various feasibility studies and detailed project reports (DPRs) for waterways, which may be referred to. Iwai is

also doing some consultation with Delhi government. Notably, the plan to develop Yamuna in Delhi as a waterway for passenger movement and tourism has so far been unsuccessful because of the water quality and necessary depth for navigation.

At the meeting, the NCR Planning Board has asked the Iwai to share the details of works, feasibility studies and the DPRs with it. The Board has also asked the Iwai to prepare the proposal for Yamuna in two weeks and it will consider funding the project.

Just weeks before Delhi assembly polls, the port, waterway and shipping ministry had announced the setting up of two jetties on river Yamuna in Delhi, which has been included in the list of national waterways. Meanwhile, the Delhi Tourism and Transport Development Corporation (DTTDC) issued a request for quotation (RFQ) on Friday for engaging a suitable operator to run two solar or electric battery-powered cruises on the identified river stretch. Under the plan, a six-km stretch of the Yamuna is to be developed from the Vazirabad barrage (Sonia Vihar) to Jagatpur (Shani temple) for tourists. This will boost river-cruise tourism as it will be an environment-friendly and sustainable water-transport project with coordinated efforts of the Inland Waterways Authority of India (Iwai), Delhi Development Authority (DDA), Delhi Jal Board (DJB), DTTDC and the irrigation and flood control department, the proposal document said.

The DTTDC will engage the operator for the cruise services that will start and finish at Sonia Vihar, with a total round trip of seven to eight kilometres. The project will be implemented by the Iwai and the DDA, in association with the DJB, and the irrigation and flood control department will provide floating jetties and a navigational aids shore facility with charging infrastructure for the cruises, the document said.

The selected operator will initially provide two electric-solar hybrid boats to operate the ferry services. The boats would require having a seating capacity of 20-30 passengers and a speed of five to seven knots. The boats would also be equipped with inboard bio-toilets, an announcement system and safety jackets. The boats must feature inboard bio-toilets (zero discharge), an announcement system, and safety jackets for passengers. The operator will be expected to offer a cruise service that is both safe and reliable, prioritising the well-being of all passengers, crew members, and other river users. The boats should be air-conditioned, leased or owned, and no older than two years.

Healthcare system to undergo major overhaul: Pankaj Singh

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi's healthcare system is set to undergo a major overhaul, with the city government planning a slew of reforms, including a pilot project to improve hospital infrastructure and management, Health Minister Pankaj Kumar Singh has said.

A few pilot projects will be launched soon to improve healthcare services, including polyclinics that will offer primary and secondary daycare while also collecting patient data, he told PTI in an interview.

The government will address the manpower shortage by facilitating the recruitment of doctors and healthcare professionals. Under the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, Delhi government hospitals will receive higher



Delhi Health Minister Pankaj Kumar Singh

quality medicines to ensure effective treatment, Singh said. In its first Cabinet meeting, the city's new BJP government approved the scheme that Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said had been blocked by the previous AAP dispensation. The Cabinet also approved healthcare coverage of Rs 10 lakh for each beneficiary of the

scheme, with the Centre and the Delhi government contributing Rs 5 lakh each. Singh told PTI that Delhi's healthcare infrastructure would gradually improve during the next six months. "In the first phase, we will focus on essential reforms. We will introduce major projects in the second phase."

He emphasised the city government's vision of strengthening health care by providing quality medicines and better facilities, and introducing key structural reforms.

"In the first phase, we will launch initiatives such as polyclinics where people will receive primary and secondary daycare, along with data collection to enhance healthcare services," he said. Singh also claimed that 90 per cent of the AAP government's flagship mohalla clinics operated in rented properties and many were non-functional or located in unsuitable areas. The new government, he said, planned to address these shortcomings by launching projects to establish structured healthcare services. Several major government hospitals have been identified

for reforms to improve their conditions, Singh said. "As a doctor myself, I understand the challenges faced by medical professionals. I will ensure that doctors receive the necessary facilities to serve patients better."

He reiterated that health care was a top priority for the BJP, aligning with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the party's national president JP Nadra. Reforms will be implemented in phases to improve Delhi's healthcare infrastructure, he added.

"The government envisions a healthier life for the people of Delhi. We will personally oversee management and then launch major projects in each sector to make healthcare services more efficient, transparent and accessible to all citizens," Singh said.

AAP leaders diverting people's attention from corruption: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Lambasting the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Sunday said the AAP and their MLAs are staging protests to divert the people's attention from their corruption. Sachdeva stated that the BJP had pledged during the assembly elections to present the CAG report in the very first session of the assembly, and now that the report has been revealed, AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal is completely missing, while his MLAs - who are now unemployed - are misleading the public through false protests.

He added that even today, the public wants answers from them on why the excise policy was withdrawn and why commissions were increased. The Delhi BJP President expressed regret that instead of providing public services, the government was busy indulging in corruption. He alleged that the excise policy was deliberately changed to benefit three brands - Mahadev, Indo Spirit, and Brindco. Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia played this game. An investi-

gation will take place, and the guilty will not be spared. "It is the government's responsibility to provide services to the people, but the Aam Aadmi Party acted more as an enemy of Delhi than as public servants. During the COVID-19 crisis, we all saw the dire state of Delhi's hospitals. Moreover, the CAG report reveals that out of the 10,000 new beds announced in 2016-17, only 1,357 beds were actually added. The Kejriwal government, which boasts of world-class healthcare, should answer whether patients were sleeping on hospital floors when there were no beds available. Now that the truth is out, I am confident that under the leadership of Rekha Gupta ji, we will fulfill all our commitments," he added.

The BJP president said a report on the Mohalla Clinics will also be released soon, and the entire truth will come out. These clinics were opened in their own homes for profit, and they even collected the rent themselves. The report clearly shows that there were neither proper doctors nor adequate medicines in these clinics. Patients were attended to in just 30 seconds.

CAG report exposes gaps in Delhi's healthcare

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The recent audit report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) on Delhi's health infrastructures has revealed that there was no monitoring of identified private hospitals by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) to ensure free treatment of Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) patients. The report highlighted that there were cases of denial of free treatment coupled with poor complaint redressal mechanism. This report contains the results of the performance audit of 'Public Health Infrastructure and Management of Health Services' in Delhi covering the period 2016-17 to 2021-22. The CAG will be discussed in the Delhi Assembly on Monday and after that the report will be sent to Public Accounts Committee for further scrutiny. "All private hospitals which were allotted land on concessional rates were to provide 25 per cent of their OPD facilities and reserve 10 per cent IPD beds for free treatment of patients from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). Information about the total OPD patients treated by these Identified Private Hospitals (IPHs) was not provided by DGHS. Audit

noted that 19 out of 47 Government Hospitals (GHs) in Delhi had not established referral centres to refer EWS patients to Identified Private Hospitals (IPH) even after a delay of 15 years (June 2022)," according to the report. Two major initiatives instituted by the Delhi government are free treatment for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and Delhi Arogya Kosh (DAK).

"19 government hospitals have not created special reference centres even after a delay of more than 15 years since pronouncement of judgement in this regard. 28 government hospitals referred only 43,951 patients whereas total 13.89 crore patients have taken treatment in Delhi government hospitals," it said. Even after the Lieutenant Governor's directions, system of online Aadhaar-based/biometric tracking of patients is yet to be implemented, indicating non-seriousness of the Department to ensure proper follow-up and develop a fool proof mechanism to rule out financial malpractices. Very few people benefited from the schemes run by Delhi Arogya Kosh (DAK) due to lack of awareness about the schemes. The report pointed out that

there was a waiting period up to three and eight months respectively for various diagnostic tests and surgeries in LNH even though facilities for referring these cases to private empanelled hospitals was available under DAK scheme. Submission of certificate regarding, no payment made by the patient for the test/surgery was not ensured compulsorily by DAK before making reimbursements to the private hospitals/diagnostic centres. No mechanism was evolved by DAK for obtaining information regarding coverage of patients under any government/private medical insurance scheme before making payment to the hospitals concerned. There was lack of coordination between DAK and various health care agencies in Delhi for smooth implementation of DAK schemes. Audit also observed shortcoming in functioning of Delhi Arogya Kosh (DAK) constituted (September 2011) to provide financial assistance to poor patients. It did not maintain scheme-wise details of beneficiaries did not regularly seek details of unspent amount lying with government hospitals and also did not implement online Aadhaar-based/biometric tracking of

patients to ensure proper follow-up and to prevent malpractices. Free surgery scheme of DAK provides for sending eligible patients from Delhi Government Hospitals to empanelled hospitals when the allotted date for a specified surgery is beyond one month or specified surgery is not performed in Government Hospital. DAK did not carry out any assessment to verify the effectiveness of the scheme for sending eligible patients to private hospitals to reduce waiting period for surgeries. One of the conditions of reimbursement of bill of Medico-legal victims is that the victim is not covered in any insurance scheme. No mechanism was in place to check this before making payment. Major audit findings include shortage of staff in various healthcare institutions, deficiencies in patient care such as non-availability of drugs and equipment in hospitals, delay in distribution of medicines, long waiting time for diagnostic services and surgeries etc., delay in completion of health infrastructure projects, deficiencies in implementation of central and state sponsored schemes under health sector etc.

Delhi Police to intensify crackdown on criminals

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police is planning to intensify efforts to combat organised crime and crackdown on gangsters operating from jails the country and abroad. A high-level meeting of senior officers of the Delhi Police took place on Saturday at the police headquarters in New Delhi to lay out elaborate security measures for the national capital, a day after the Union Home Minister Amit Shah reviewed the law and order situation, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, Delhi Home Minister Ashish Sood and Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan attended the meeting.

According to police sources, Senior Commissioner Police Law and Order Zone-I Ravindra Singh Yadav and Zone-II Madhup Tiwari briefed Joint CPs and DCPs regarding the measures to be taken. The discussions were on several issues including crackdown on illegal immigrants, preventing street crimes, women security and steps against gangsters. The review focused on strengthening policing strategies to address the

evolving crime landscape in the national capital. According to sources, at the Saturday's meeting, it was decided that a list of emerging criminals will be prepared and measures to dismantle their networks taken. "Strict surveillance will be maintained on jailed gangsters, such as Kaushal Chaudhary and Neeraj Bawana. Others operating from foreign locations, including Anmol Bishnoi, Arsh Dala, Goldy Brar, Himanshu Bhu, Lucky Patial, Jagga Dhurkot, Virendra Charan, Amardeep Bishnoi, Noni Rana, Mahender Saharan, Rahul, Mahender Meghwanshi and Naveen Boxer, will also be closely monitored," said a source. A senior police officer said that juveniles in direct or indirect contact with these gangsters and have a criminal record will also come under scrutiny. He said the police are preparing a list of juveniles involved in heinous crimes and will recommend their trial as adults in court. Additionally, the authorities will keep a close watch on social media profiles of gangsters and their associates to track illegal activities and connections.



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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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mer head was entangled in so many controversies due to her own financial favours along with her husband's investment-related vested interest.

The Buch couple controversy was highlighted by Hindenburg Research, which accused the couple of misusing their governance power for self-interest. Her harsh and unprofessional approach to handling the SEBI key staff, mishandling of her regulatory position, and controversial connections with the Adani grouping make SEBI a body not so trustworthy. Despite all her flaws, it was shocking that she held her position for the entire duration of three years. The new appointment of Tuhin Kanta, an Odisha cadre IAS officer, brings a ray of hope for the security market regulation body. We hope that Tuhin will secure public confidence once again and he will improve the SEBI free from all materialistic controversies. SEBI deserves fairness and transparency so that security market investors gain confidence in the working of the market and grow their investment with market evangelism.

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

AP ■ 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

AP ■ 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 on-board 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

AP ■ 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. AP/PTI

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

AP ■ 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

AP ■ 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

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

AP ■ 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 to 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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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



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

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.

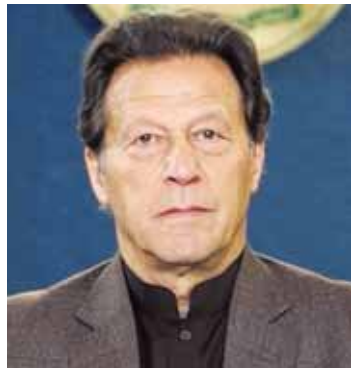
ed thousands of federal job cuts, cancelled contracts and shut down sections of the government, including the US Agency for International Development.

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.

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



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).

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".

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.

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.

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 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.



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

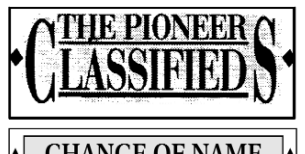
Child dies of Ebola in Uganda, raising concern over surveillance

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.

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.

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.



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 asnas. 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 tsp 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.



PURN-PAVANMUKTASANA
 Another wonderful and effective way to burn belly fat is to perform *pavanmuktasana*, as the name suggests yes you thought that right, it not only promotes belly fat loss but helps in gastric issues in the system. Simply lie down on your back bring both your knees to your chest and place your arms around your legs like you are giving a hug, keep breathing and duck your nose in between your knees. Hold this position for 20-30 seconds and right before releasing the stretch, you may rock like a child back and forth and side to side. It will give a good massage to your spine and previously mentioned in earlier articles, a healthy spine healthy life. People with knee problems must do it under supervision.

- 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.



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



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.



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.

