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BUCH BOOKED

TN RAGHUNATHA MUMBAI

Special Court designated under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) has directed the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) to register an against former chairperson of Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) Madhabi Puri Buch, SEBI whole-time members and two top officials of the Bombay Exchange (BSE) for alleged stock market fraud, regulatory violations and corruption.

Apart from Mudhabi Buch 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 Sundararaman Ramamurthy. "The allegations disclose a cognizable offence,

There is prima facie evidence of regulatory lapses and collusion, requiring a fair and impartial probe. The inaction by law enforcement and SEBI judicial necessitates intervention under Section 156(3) CrPC," Special Court Judge Shashikant Eknathrao Bangar said in the order

necessitating an investigation.

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 regulations and 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 regulatory and authorities had failed to take

action on his complaint.

Court Citing Supreme judgements in the past, the Special Court Judge noted: 'Considering the gravity of allegations, applicable laws and settled legal precedents, 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 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 committed remains 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" "accounting fraud" - had tried to connect the SEBI's inaction against the Adani group for "stock alleged market with the manipulation" investments made 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 managers of offshore funds, and wrote to India Infoline to redeem the units in the fund.

Continued on page 2

India beat Kiwis to enter Champions Trophy semis

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

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 50over 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 groupstage 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

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

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 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 negligence, indiscipline, and 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."

Continued on page 2

WEATHER



27°C(-0.4) MAX MIN 14.2°C(+0.8)

BSP rides on Behenji's Maya



state presidents at the party office, in Lucknow

BISWAJEET BANERJEE LUCKNOW

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), once a dominant political force in Uttar witnessing is 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-inlaw, Ashok Siddharth, from the party.

At the same time, Mayawati elevated her brother, Anand Kumar, and senior leader Ramji Gautam, appointing them as national Addressing coordinators. party members, she made it clear that BSP would no longer operate on familybased leadership.

"As long as I am alive, there will be no successor in the party. Personal relations have

no significance when it comes to the party and the Ambedkarite movement," she asserted.

Mayawati emphasised that the party's welfare would always come before personal ties. "For me, the party and movement come first. My brother, his children, and other family members are secondary," she stated. She assured party workers that she would continue leading the BSP with full commitment and dedication until her last breath.

Justifying Akash Anand's removal, Mayawati pointed to the negative influence of his father-in-law, Ashok Siddharth, whom she accused of weakening the party by creating internal divisions. "Ashok Siddharth worked to split the party into factions across the country, including Uttar Pradesh. His actions during his son's wedding were

also concerning," she alleged. She further indicated that Akash Anand may have been influenced by his wife and inlaws, 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,"

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 Siddharth," she said.

During the review meeting, Mayawati issued instructions for future party programs and strategies. She reiterated her stand that the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are two sides of the same coin. Citing BSP's absence from the Milkipur bypoll, she questioned SP's tendency to blame BSP for its electoral losses. "Now that BSP did not contest the Milkipur bypoll, whom will the SP blame for its defeat?" she asked.

Mayawati reaffirmed her belief that only BSP, with its Ambedkarite ideology, can effectively challenge the BJP and other caste-based parties. "The people of this country must realise that the BSP alone can defeat the BIP and other parties that exploit caste politics," she declared.



As the sun sets. Palestinians sit at a large table surrounded by the rubble 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

srael 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 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.

Continued on page 2

Zoos battling reduced funding

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

While India's zoos have "notable" breeding progress endangered species under conservation programmes that started around a decade ago, a government panel says that persistent gaps in fun species management hinder their overall success.

The Central Zoo Authority (CZA), which is responsible for overseeing and guiding national-level ex efforts, conservation 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 highpriority species 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 hindered by persistent foundational and operational challenges".

"Addressing these issues will require not only enhanced funding allocation but also the 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 (meatmammals) 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 populations highlighted that lack of genetic diversity, improper tracking and poor recordkeeping reduce the success of conservation breeding programmes.

While some successes, such Gaur and Indian Chevrotain, demonstrate potential for growth and recovery, they also "expose broader challenges including inconsistent record-keeping, uncoordinated transfers and husbandry inadequate practices", the committee said.

Primates, (reptiles), and Perissodactyla (odd-toed struggle with low birth rates and poor genetic diversity. Animals like the King Cobra **H**oolock and Western Gibbon have environmental needs that are not being met, which reduces their chances of successful breeding.

Continued on page 2

Youths into excessive social media suffer sexual ailments

BISWAJEET BANERJEE LUCKNOW

onsumption 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 (KGMŬ) 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. Continued on page 2 PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

In a bizzare 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 procession of Chanchal, a bride At that time, he had given a wedding expenses. from Bhangrola village, came Brezza car in dowry along with After 15 hours, the wedding

This happens only in 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 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,

other household items but the

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

The very next day on February 26, panchayat of Bhangrola and Judaula villages was held. In this

bride.

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.

procession returned without the

To settle the matter, the groom's family mortgaged their four-kanal land in Fazilpur Badli and a twostorey house built in a 220-yard plot in Judaula village. According to the police, the groom, Mohit, is studying MBBS

is doing Junior Basic Training The bride's father is a constable in

from a private institute. Chanchal

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.

Forty two more firearms

Daughter of Union minister molested in Maharashtra

TN RAGHUNATHA MUMBAI

n a shocking development that embarrassed the BJP-led MahaYuti government on the eve of the start of crucial budget session of the Legislature, Maharashtra Union Minister of State for Sports and Youth Affairs Raksha Khadse's teenage was allegedly daughter molested by a group of youths during a fair in Muktainagar in Jalgaon district of north

Maharashtra. On a day when the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) slammed the MahaYuti government over the incident and alleged that law and order had collapsed, the Jalgaon police named seven persons in the FIR registered in the incident, arrested one persons and launched manhunt for other absconding accused. The Jalgaon police registered

an FIR only after Raksha Khadse visited the local police station and spoke to the officers about the incident. Maintaining that no one would be spared in connection with the alleged molestation

Frequent trips abroad land IPS officer in soup

From page 1

Georgia, the UAE, Sweden, the USA, and the UK were the destinations involved in these alleged unauthorised visits between 2019 and 2024, the Chief Secretary noted.

He further said although Kumar was granted permission to visit Georgia from March 1 to 4, 2024, he allegedly deviated from the approved plan and visited the UAE within those four days without permission.

Similarly, Vijayanand pointed out that Kumar visited the USA between February 1 and 28, 2023, departing from Hyderabad without obtaining prior government approval other unauthorised trips. The state was ruled by the erstwhile YSRCP government, led by Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy, between 2019 and 2024.

Devendra Fadnavis - who holds the State Home portfolio - said: "Unfortunately among the accused, some of them are workers of a certain party. Of the accused, one has been arrested.This kind of harassment is wrong; they cannot be forgiven, and strict action will be taken...no one would be spared".

Raksha Khadse is daughter of NCP (SP) MLC Eknath Khadse, a former six-time BJP MLA from Muktainagar, former minister and ex-Leader of Opposition in Legislative Assembly. Her sister-in-law Rohini Khadse is the state NCP (SP) women's wing President. Much to the discomfort of the BJP -as can be seen from Fadnavis' statement, some of the accused belong to the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena. The accused have been identified as Aniket Bhoi, Piyush More, Saham Koli, Anuj Patil, Kiran Mali, and Sachin Palvi. Incidentally, More is linked to Shinde Shiv Sena MLA Chandrakant Patil. The photos of the person with Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Khadse surfaced in social

The alleged molestation incident during a Yatra organised as part of the Maha Shivratri festivities last week. "The Sant Muktai Yatra is organized every year in Kothali on the occasion of Maha Shivratri. I was in Gujarat. My daughter called me to ask for permission to go. I gave her the okay and asked her to take a guard and two to three staff members along. After going there my daughter and her friends were followed and pushed, and their photos and videos were taken. When my staff objected, the boys were very unruly...some 40-odd people gathered...the girls were freighted and the security team retreated for their safety,"

"If such a thing happens under protection, imagine the plight of others. I have come as a mother seeking justice, not as a Union Minister and MP," Raksha Khadse said, while talking to media persons during her visit to the police

Raksha Khadse said.

'These boys have taken videos of four or five girls. Crimes against women are increasing and a across the state, and the state".

Many girls hesitate to come forward, but we must not remain silent. That is why I have personally filed this complaint," the Union Minister

In a related development, Sub-Divisional Police Officer Krushnat Pingle said that the police had registered offences against the identified accused Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhitva. Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) and Information Technology Act.

The group of girls were stalked...their photos/videos were taken on a mobile phone. We have registered an offence of molestation," Pingle said.

"One accused has been arrested, and the search for the others is ongoing. Aniket Bhoi already has two to four cases registered against him," Pingle

"The security guard of the Union Minister was present with one of the victims at the fair. A scuffle took place with him as well. His complaint has also been registered," he said. Denying that there was no delay in registering the FIR, Pingle said: "There is no pressure from any side. I have been personally present here for the last two days. These boys were part of the fair and committed this act"

Meanwhile, former senior state minister and Raksha Khadse's father Eknath Khadse said: "Criminals enjoy political from patronage politicians. I have raised the issue in the legislature several times...the state government has failed to address such incidents. In Maharashtra women had to ensure their own safety as there is no faith in the police'

"If an incident like the molestation of a Union Minister's daughter can happen in Maharashtra, how will women and girls from ordinary families get justice?," Raksha Khadse's sister-in-law Rohini Khadse asked.

Talking to media persons, Maharashtra Congress Maharashtra Harshawardhan president Sapkal said: "The fact that the daughter of a Union Minister is molested by thugs and security guards was extremely worrying. It shows that women and girls are not safe in the

Omar Abdullah holds prebudget meeting with allies

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Tammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah is all set to present the first budget of the newly elected after government after the Abrogation of Articles 370 and 35 A during the month long budget session beginning from March 3 in Jammu.

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha will be addressing the maiden meeting of the budget session on day one. Elaborate security arrangements have been made in and around the civil secretariat complex which houses the J and K Legislative Assembly.

Ahead of the session separate meetings were convened by the leaders of the legislative parties in Jammu to chalk out their floor strategy. Later, Omar Minister Chief Abdullah chaired a joint meeting of the alliance partners at his official residence in Jammu.

Congress legislative party leader G A Mir and CPI(M) MLA M Y Tarigami, also

The water of the Ganga river

I in Bihar is not fit for

bathing at most places in the

state due to the presence of a

higher value of "bacteriological

population", according to the

Bihar Economic Survey 2024-

The Bihar State Pollution

Control Board (BSPCB)

monitors the water quality of

the Ganga at 34 locations in the

state on a fortnightly basis,

According to the Economic

Survey recently tabled in the state assembly, "The water

quality of Ganga indicates the

presence of a higher value of

(total coliform and faecal

coliform). This is mainly due to

sewage/domestic waste water

from cities located on the

banks of Ganga and her

The survey cited the latest

water quality test results of the BSPCB.

discharge

population

PTI ■ PATNA

officials said.

bacteriological

tributaries."

attended the meeting to ensure smooth functioning of the house.

The Congress legislature party also met separately at Residency Road party headquarters. Interacting with the media in

Jammu Congress legislature party leader GA Mir hoped that the budget being presented by the government will address the popular public issues and will also lay the foundation for implementation of during manifesto financial year 2025-26.

He said the government has already passed a resolution for restoration of statehood in the last session held in Srinagar and so the delay is from the BJP-led central government which has made repeated promises to the people of J&K on the subject. "When the prime minister chaired the All Party Meeting of J&K leaders (in June 2021), we were all witness to his statement that reorganization be followed by delimitation, elections and

Ganga water in Bihar unfit for

human use: state pollution board

The other parameters... pH

(acidity or basicity), dissolved

oxygen and bio-chemical oxygen demand (BOD) have

been observed within the

prescribed limit in the river

and her tributaries in Bihar,

indicating that water is fit for

propagation, fisheries and

Important towns located on

the banks of the river include

wildlife

(Saran),

life,

irrigation," it said.

Buxar, Chapra

then restoration of statehood. The centre should have fulfilled its promise after the formation of the popular government in J&K but the delay is on their side," he said. Mir said the Congress has been repeatedly saying that restoration of statehood was the biggest issue during last year's assembly elections and 'INDIA alliance is committed

Asked about PDP planning to introduce bills to push for the prohibition of alcohol and regularization property rights of residents on public land, he said it is up to the house to decide on such

Emerging out of the meeting NC MLA Aijaz Jaan told reporters the Chief Minister directed the legislators to address the issues of common citizens keeping in mind their hardships. Jaan claimed that the CM also discussed the budget proposals which are likely to be public centric and figured in their party manifesto during the 2024

coliform is 2,500 MPN/100

At most places, the presence of

total coliform and faecal

coliform in the Ganga is much

higher, indicating it is not fit for

The BSPCB is taking measures

to ensure that sewage

treatment plants (STP) in the

state function properly, the

'We have directed the

authorities concerned to

ensure that construction work

on certain STPs in the state is

completed at the earliest,

ml," Shukla said.

bathing, he said.

senior official said.

Shukla said.

$F_{\text{and cartridges have been}}^{\text{orty-two more firearms}}$ surrendered by the public in five districts of ethnic strife-

PTI IMPHAL

torn Manipur, police said on Sunday. firearms surrendered in Imphal West

and East, Churachandpur, Bishnupur and Tamenglong districts on Saturday, a police officer said. Five firearms, including two

pistols, six grenades and over cartridges surrendered in Bishnupur district. country-made Seventeen

guns, nine 'pompi' (locally made mortars), cartridges were surrendered at Kaimai police station in Tamenglong district. At least 10 firearms and

cartridges were surrendered at Yaingangpokpi, Porompat, Churachandpur and Lamsang police stations, the police officer said.

During search operations at Sairemkhul in Imphal West district, an INSAS LMG with one magazine loaded with 20 rounds of ammunition, one

surrendered in Manipur AK-56 rifle, three SLR rifles, one SMG 9mm carbine, one .303 rifle, one DBBL gun, four grenades without detonators one Chinese hand grenade and other articles were also

> seized on Saturday. Security forces dismantled illegal bunkers at Mark Hill under Thingsat hill range in Kangpokpi district. Another three illegal bunkers were dismantled at Wakan hill range in the adjoining area in Kangpokpi and Imphal East districts on Saturday.

Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla had on February 20 urged warring groups to voluntarily surrender weapons robbed from security forces and other illegally held firearms within seven days.

During the seven-day period, more than 300 firearms were surrendered by the public, primarily in the valley districts.

Later, he extended the deadline for the surrender of looted and illegal firearms till 4 pm on March 6 following demands by people from both hill and valley areas for additional time.

Fadnavis denies rumors of rift in BJP-led Mahayuti

TN RAGHUNATHA MUMBAI

A head of the budget session of the Maharashtra Legislature, chief minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday denied that there were any differences or the battle of oneupmanship among the ruling BJP-led MahaYuti allies. Talking to media persons after

the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) boycotted a tea meeting hosted by him, Fadnavis said that there were no differences among the ruling BJP and its allies -Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and NCP (Ajit Pawar).

Fadnavis came up with the clarification in the presence of his deputy chief ministers Eknath Shinde of the Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar of the NCP. Fadnavis' statement came

should be seen in the context of a claim made by the rival Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena's chief spokesperson Sanjay Raut that Shinde had held a secret meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah during which he complained against Fadnavis and sought the chief minister's

chair but was rebuked by Shah, who reportedly asked the deputy chief minister (Shinde) to merge Shiv Sena with BJP before making any such demand.

On his part, Shinde contested Raut's claim and said that journalists should verify facts before they file their news

"This is the second session of this government (after the winter session in Nagpur). Only we (Devendra Fadnavis and I) have changed roles. But yes, Ajit Dada's role is constant...We have started many projects which were stopped by the MVA government. Ajit Dada will present the Maharashtra budget," Shinde said.

'No matter how many breaking stories you may file, but we (Mahayuti) will not break. Where is the cold war the media persons are speaking about ? There is nothing like that. In this scorching heat Maharashtra... how is a cold war possible?...things are thanda thanda cool cool," Shinde said

Youths into excessive social media suffer sexual ailments

He emphasised that under normal circumstances, individuals form natural bonds with their partners based on real-world interactions. However, excessive exposure to digitally curated and exaggerated distorts s. "The perceptions. brain becomes wired to seek heightened stimuli, leading to diminished attraction toward real-life relationships. This can manifest as psychogenic erectile dysfunction (ED), where the problem is psychological rather than hysiological," he added.

While much of the focus is on young men facing sexual dysfunction, experts stress that the impact of excessive

young women develop body image disorders due to the unrealistic portrayals of beauty and intimacy in online videos and photos.

"They start comparing themselves to influencers and digitally altered images, leading to self-doubt, anxiety, and a decline in sexual confidence," Prof. Tripathi noted. "This not only affects their mental well-being but also their ability to form healthy relationships."

Dr Anjali Sharma, a clinical psychologist added that the widespread use of filters, photo editing, and AIgenerated beauty standards has created unrealistic benchmarks. "We are seeing unrealistic cases of body

digital consumption is equally dysmorphia and low self- consumption," he urged. young women who feel pressured to match these unattainable standards," she

> FOR POLICY INTERVENTION AND **AWARENESS:** Experts at KGMU are calling for urgent regulatory measures to control early exposure to smartphones and explicit content on digital platforms. Prof. Tripathi stressed the importance of a well-defined policy to mitigate these growing concerns.

"Unrestricted access explicit content exacerbating the situation. Parents, educators, and policymakers need to step in to establish boundaries and awareness create about responsible

highlighted the role of media literacy programs in schools and colleges. "Young people need to be taught how to critically assess the content they consume. Understanding the difference between digital exaggeration and reality is crucial in preventing these

With digital consumption patterns increasingly shaping youth behavior, experts warn that unchecked exposure to explicit content could have long-term consequences on mental and sexual health. They emphasize the need for awareness, supervision, and broader societal intervention to safeguard the well-being of the

vounger generation.

negative effects."

Dighwara, Sonepur, Maner, Danapur, Patna, Fatuha, Bakhtiyarpur, Barh, Mokama, Begusarai, Khagaria, Lakhisarai, Manihari, Munger, Jamalpur, Sultanganj, Bhagalpur and Kahalgaon. Reacting to the report, D K

Shukla, Chairman of the BSPCB, told PTI that the presence of a higher value of bacteriological population in the Ganga river is a matter of concern.

Faecal coliform bacteria are found in excreta that contaminates water through untreated sewage. The higher the level, the higher is the presence of disease-causing pathogens in water. According to the CPCB standards, the permissible limit of faecal

The BSPCB is also monitoring the effluent/sewage quality generated from the industrial units as well as STP/sewerage drains. Presently,

water/effluent/sewage samples from different sources have been collected by the board," the survey said. As per the latest data of the

BSPCB related to the quality of the Ganga accessed by PTI, the level of faecal coliform measured at Kachchi Dargah-Bidupur Bridge was 3,500 MPN/100 ml, Gulabi Ghat (5.400 MPN/100 ml) and Triveni Ghat (5,400 MPN/100

Zoos battling reduced funding

From page 1

"Habitat requirements and taxonomic ambiguities constrain the management of species like the Indian Wild and Himalayan Salamander which have shown minimal growth despite decades conservation efforts," the committee noted.

It said that some birds and reptiles, like vultures (Whiterumped and Indian Vultures), have seen population growth. However, problems such as unsexed individuals and poor use of founder stock limit

genetic diversity. Certain species, like the Nicobar Pigeon and Red-crowned Roofed Turtle, have small, stable populations but need better management. 'Species like the Shaheen Falcon and Malabar Pied Hornbill have yet to see any conservation structured efforts, with populations primarily consisting of solitary rescued individuals," the committee members said.

They said that many species, such as the Indian Giant Squirrel and Indian Pangolin, are declining due to low

breeding success and poor tracking. The Himalayan Salamander has shown recent growth but only at one facility without

management.

The committee said that small populations. demographic and genetic monitoring, improper husbandry practices. inadequate technical supervision, documentation, lack of animal identification, poor adherence to breeding protocols and lack of coordination between zoos

are common challenges across

all groups of animals.

Buch booked

And that during this time she had an interest in an offshore Singapore consulting firm, Agora, and it was only two weeks after she was appointed as SEBI chairperson that she transferred the shares to her husband.

However, in her defence, Mudhabi Buch had said "all disclosures as required have already been furnished to SEBI". The SEBI code for board members mandates that they disclose their interests which may conflict with their duties, along with transactions of family members.

On Ramazan, Israel cuts off aid to Gaza

From page 1

Under that proposal, Hamas would release half the hostages on the first day and the rest when an agreement is reached on a permanent ceasefire, according to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office.

Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said Israel was prepared to negotiate over the next phase of the ceasefire but was insisting on more hostages being freed during the talks. He said Israel had received a side letter from the Biden administration saying there was no automatic transition between the phases of the

fulfilled all "We commitments (under Phase 1) until the very last day, which was yesterday," he told a press conference. "Our position is that during negotiations, hostages should be released."

Hamas warned that any attempt to delay or cancel the ceasefire agreement would "humanitarian

consequences" hostages and reiterated that the only way to free them was through implementing the existing deal, which did not specify a timeline for freeing the remaining captives. Hamas has said it is willing to

free the remaining hostages all at once in Phase 2, but only in return for the release of more Palestinian prisoners, a permanent ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli forces. An Egyptian official said

Hamas and Egypt would not accept a new proposal aimed at returning the remaining hostages without ending the war. The official noted that the agreement had called on the two sides to begin negotiations over Phase 2 in early February.

The official, who was not authorized to brief media and spoke on condition of anonymity, said mediators Hamas said Israel's aid were trying to resolve the dispute. There was no immediate comment from Qatar, which along with Egypt has served as a key mediator

the CEASEFIRE HAS BEEN MARRED BY DISPUTES

Under the first, six-week phase of the ceasefire, Hamas released 25 Israeli hostages and the bodies of eight others in exchange for the release of nearly 2,000 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Israeli forces pulled back from most of Gaza and Israel allowed a surge of humanitarian aid to

But the first phase was marred by repeated disputes, with each side accusing the other of violations. Israeli strikes killed dozens of

Palestinians who the military said had approached its forces or entered areas in violation of the truce. Hamas paraded the captives - some of whom were emaciated - before crowds in public spectacles that Israel and the United Nations said were cruel and degrading.

suspension was another violation, saying the ceasefire and aid deliveries were supposed to continue as the sides negotiated the second phase of the deal.

Israel was accused of blocking aid throughout the war Israel imposed a complete

siege on Gaza in the opening days of the war and only eased it later under US pressure. UN agencies and aid groups accused Israel of not facilitating enough aid during

15 months of war, and the Biden administration repeatedly pressed it to do more. Experts warned on several occasions that hunger was widespread in Gaza and that there was a risk of

The International Criminal Court said there was reason to believe Israel had used "starvation as a method of warfare" when it issued an arrest warrant for Netanyahu last year. The allegation is also central to South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of

Israel has denied the accusations and rejected both court actions as being biased against it. Israel says it has allowed enough aid to enter and blamed shortages on

what it said was the UN's inability to distribute it. It also accused Hamas of siphoning The war began when Hamas-

led militants stormed into southern Israel on October 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking 251 hostage. The militants are currently holding 59 hostages, 32 of whom are believed to be dead, after releasing most of the rest in two ceasefire agreements. Israel's offensive has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. It says more than half of those killed were women and children but does not specify how many of the dead were combatants. Israeli bombardment and

ground operations pounded large areas of the strip to rubble and at the height of the conflict displaced some 90 per cent of the population of 2.3 million Palestinians. The war has left most of Gaza's population dependent on international aid for food and other essentials.

Chamoli avalanche rescue death toll rises to eight

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DEHRADUN

 $D_{\text{mishap after rescue teams found the body}}^{\text{eath toll rose to eight in the avalanche}}$ of the last missing person on Sunday. Earlier in the day, the teams pulled out bodies

of three labourers from the camp site which was buried in snow after the avalanche on Friday Fifty four workers of the Border Roads

their camp in Chamoli, Uttrakhand was hit by an avalanche. Rescue teams were able to bring out 46 workers while bodies of four labourers were pulled out from the camp on Sunday. Army doctors said 46 workers, who were earlier rescued, have been brought to the military hospital in Jyotirmath, while one with a spinal cord injury was airlifted to AIIMS, Rishikesh.

Helicopters, sniffer dogs and thermal imaging

technology were being used to expedite the rescue operation due to apprehensions about possible inclement weather on Monday,

Organisation (BRO)were buried in snow after

officials said. Three bodies of the missing labourers were found on Sunday, district administration officials said in Gopeshwar. With this, the number of workers who lost their lives in the Mana avalanche mounted to seven. One person is still missing for whom the search is in labourers.

progress, they said. Located three kilometres from Badrinath, Mana is the last village on the India-Tibet border at a height of 3,200 metres. The bodies have been brought to Jyotirmath by helicopter where the post-mortem was being done at the Community Health Centre. The deceased include Anil Kumar (21) from

Rudrapur in Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar district, Ashok (28) from Fatehpur in Uttar Pradesh and Harmesh from Una in Himachal Pradesh, the officials said. The lone worker who remains missing is 43-year-old Arvind from Dehradun. The avalanche hit the BRO camp between Mana and Badrinath on Friday, burying 54 workers inside eight containers and a shed. Earlier, it was believed that the total number of trapped labourers was 55 but one of them was on unauthorised leave and had reached home safely. By Saturday evening, 50 workers trapped under the snow were pulled out and four of them had died. Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami visited the Uttarakhand State Emergency Operation Centre here to take an update on the rescue operation. "The ground penetrating radar (GPR) system is being sent to the avalanche site and the help of modern tools like thermal imaging cameras and victim locating cameras is being taken to trace the

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

STAFF REPORTER ■ **NEW DELHI**

 $T^{\text{he newly elected BJP government in Delhi will}}_{\text{coll out the Mahila Samridhi}}$ Yojana on March 8.

The BJP on Sunday said the registration process for providing ₹2,500 per month women economically weaker BIP sections by 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 will beneficiaries prepared.
"The entire process of

providing ₹2,500 to every financially poor woman will

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 government and the opposition should also 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 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 be completed in one and a 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 city.

promised to roll out the scheme for women of the

The opposition had targeted Gupta-led Rekha government

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 approving the scheme in its first Cabinet meeting, as promised by the Prime Minister. BJP President

Virendra Sachdeva, on about 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

"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

STAFF REPORTER ■ **NEW DELHI**

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 sta-

tions located at Madanpur

Khadar, Film City, Nizamuddin

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,

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

but also for tourism and

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

informed that it has done

various feasibility studies and

detailed project reports

(DPRs) for waterways, which may be referred to. IWAI is

IWAI further

purposes.

recreational

transport.

Nizamuddin and ITO.

and ITO.

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 Delhi the 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.

Plans afoot to start cruise

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

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 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 uninterruped power supply in summer, directs Sood power supply for all residents across Delhi is a key agenda

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) Department

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 highestever 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 ensuring

that during this important meeting, several directives were issued to ensure smooth and regular power supply in Delhi during the summer season.

stakeholders were begin instructed immediate implementation of the Summer Action Plan -2025. He emphasized that uninterrupted

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 that further stated 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

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.

service in Yamuna: NCRPB With the BJP government in Delhi focusing on the rejuvenation of the Yamuna,

Cleaning work underway at the Yamuna river

also doing some consultation with Delhi government. Notably, the plan to develop

Yamuna in Delhi as a for passenger waterway movement and tourism has so far been unsuccessful because of the water quality and necessary depth 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 Corporation (DTTDC) issued a request for quotation (RFQ) on Friday for engaging a suitable operator to run two solar or electric batterypowered cruises on the identified river stretch. Under the plan, a six-km stretch of the Yamuna is to be developed from the Wazirabad 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 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 DIB, 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

The selected operator will initially provide two electricsolar hybrid boats to operate the ferry services. The boats would require having a seating capacity of 20-30 passengers speed of fi knots. The boats would also be equipped with inboard biotoilets, 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 wellbeing of all passengers, crew members, and other river users. The boats should be airconditioned, 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 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



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 tne 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

He emphasised the city vision government's strengthening health care by providing quality medicines and better facilities, and introducing key structural "In the first phase, we will

launch initiatives such as

receive primary and secondary daycare, along with data enhance collection healthcare services," he said. Singh also claimed that 90 per cent of the AAP government's mohalla clinics flagship 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 aligning with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the party's national president JP Nadda.

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.

hospitals will receive higher 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 investigation 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

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 secSTAFF REPORTER ■

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 Section (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 allotted land on were 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

Identified

these

Private

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 treatment **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 online Aadhaarbased/biometric tracking of patients is yet to implemented, indicating nonseriousness of the Department to ensure proper follow-up and fool develop mechanism to rule out financial malpractices. Very few people benefited from the schemes run by Delhi Arogya Kosh (DAK) due to lack of Hospitals (IPHs) was not awareness about the schemes. provided by DGHS. Audit 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 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

also observed Audit 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 Aadhaarbased/biometric tracking of under health sector etc.

CAG report exposes gaps in Delhi's healthcare 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. mechanism was in place to check this before making payment.

Major audit findings include shortage of staff in various institutions, healthcare 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 health infrastructure projects, deficiencies

implementation of central and state sponsored schemes

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-l Ravindra Singh Yadav and Zone-ll 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 policing strengthening 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 Bhau, 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 gangsters and associates to track illegal activities and connections.

Government to go tough on drug traffickers: Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said the Modi government is unsparing in punishing drug traffickers who drag the youth into the dark abyss of addiction for the greed of money.

In a social media post, Shah said under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government pledges to continue combating the drug menace with ruthless and meticulous investigations to build a "drug-free Bharat". He said, as a result of a foolproof investigation with a "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" strategy, 29 drug traffickers have convicted by courts in 12 different cases across India. This success is a testament to the "bottom to top" and "top to bottom" approach adopted by the government, an official



Union Home Minister Amit Shah

release said. In pursuit of Ahmedabad in 2019, where Modi government's zerotolerance policy against drugs, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) has achieved this significant success, it said. The details of 12 cases include the seizure of 23.859 kg of charas at the Sabarmati Railway Station in Gujarat's

three people were arrested and sentenced to 14 years in jail. In July 2022, the NCB in Madhya Pradesh's Mandsaur intercepted two vehicles in Shahdol and seized 123.080 kg of ganja. Four people were arrested in the case and sentenced to 12 years rigorous of imprisonment with a fine of Rs 2 lakh each.

In the Chandigarh Zone last year, a parcel containing two hockey sticks packed with 438 grams of opium was intercepted at DHL Express, Ludhiana, by the officers of the NCB.

Two arrested accused in the case were sentenced to three years of imprisonment by a Punjab court for their role in attempting to transport the opium to Canada. In another case, the NCB

arrested one person at the Chandigarh Railway Station in 2021 for possession of 390 grams of charas. The accused was formally

arrested, and of completion investigation, a special court sentenced him to six months

In June, 2021, the NCB intercepted a Zimbabwean woman on her arrival at the

Cochin International Airport The examination of her luggage led to the recovery and seizure of 2.910 kg of heroin. She was subsequently arrested and a court in Ernakulam sentenced her to 11 years in jail.

In January 2018, the NCB seized 450 grams of charas, leading to the arrest of one person in Dehradun, who was later sentenced to one year in

In 2021, the NCB seized 1.950 kg of charas from the possession of two accused who were later arrested. A court in January 2025 sentenced the accused to 10 years in jail.

In February 2021, the NCB seized 681.8 kg of ganja in the Ranga Reddy district of Telangana. Eight accused were arrested and charged with drug trafficking. A local court sentenced them to 10 years in

India's policies needs comprehensive framework says Principal Secretary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■

Any policy making in the Government setup must account for uncertainty, with a focus on a comprehensive framework and an outcomeoriented constructive mindset, said PK Mishra, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, in an interaction during a recent Business Standard Manthan Summit in the national Capital.

Addressing a wide array of issues, Mishra said that the Government had been successful in tackling the turmoil ranging from Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia conflict and West Asia crisis with a focus on being 'Atmanirbhar' (self-reliant). He attributed this to the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi focussed on readiness to address the challenges posed by being resilient and by introducing reforms to tackle the emergent issues. Mishra further elaborated how the Indian economy

faced several challenges like geopolitical tensions, disruptions in global supply chains, and energy transition. In the event of Covid-19 pandemic when the whole world, including India, appeared to be in turmoil, India could navigate the challenges effectively and successfully.

"It took several measures on economic reforms in addition to providing some stimulus The packages. momentum was restored," he

He also highlighted the Government's initiative of Production Linked Initiative demographic advantage of India among others. In the context of the ongoing protectionism and breakdown of the Washington Consensus, Mishra explained how our policy stance in our economic engagement with

(PLI) Schemes and leveraging

of consumption base and

the world has been consistent. Citing examples of recent FTAs with Australia, UAE and EFTA, he referred to the ongoing negotiations with the UK and the EU. This approach will help us mitigating the emerging challenges, he added. Principal Secretary to the

Prime Minister impressed upon the need to tackle uncertainty with a new approach where not only risk assessment but also building an 'anti-fragile system' should be our objective.

NHRC to organise human rights program for global south nations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in collaboration with Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is organising a six-day Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Executive Capacity Building Programme on human rights for senior-level functionaries of the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) of Global South here from March 3-8, NHRC said here on Sunday

Forty seven participants from the NHRIs of 14 countries of Global South are likely to attend it.

Madagascar, are Uganda, Samoa, Timor Leste, DR Congo, Togo, Mali, Tanzania, Nigeria, Egypt, Mauritius, Burundi, Turkmenistan, Qatar.

This customised programme has been developed in accordance to the need of NHRIs of participating feedback countries and provided earlier. Eminent with domain knowledge and expertise in building capacity imparting training, will be the

resource persons. The programme will be inaugurated by Chairperson of **Justice**

Ramasubramanian Monday. The programme aims to provide insights into various dimensions of human international

and share perspectives, NHRC, India's experience over the past three decades to enhance awareness among participants of various NHRIs. It seeks to strengthen South-South cooperation, enhance collaboration and networking, and improve human rights protection mechanisms through comprehensive capacity building and experience

sharing.

expected outcome includes developing a better understanding of international dimensions of human rights, a deeper understanding of NHRC, India's work in the of human rights protection, and its best practices, which can be adopted by the other NHRIs, improved networking among fostering collaborations

partnerships at regional and international levels capability enhanced contribute towards protection and promotion of human rights. The participants will engage in lectures and interactive sessions by eminent persons and practitioners in the field, cultural immersion and field visits.

The initiative is a part of NHRC's ongoing outreach understanding and appreciation of various aspects of human rights and help in building capacity among 40 per cent people have no access to education in mother tongue: UNESCO

 $F_{\text{population does not have}}^{\text{orty per cent of the global}}$ access to education in a language they speak or understand, according to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring (GEM)

Despite countries' growing understanding of the role of home language, policy uptake remains limited. Implementation challenges limited teacher include capacity to use home languages, unavailability of materials in home languages and community opposition, it said.

In some low- and middleincome countries, this figure rises to 90 per cent. More than a quarter of a billion learners are affected, GEM officials said, recommending nations to implement multilingual education policies and practices with the goal of creating educational systems

The team, which has come up with a report titled "Languages matter: Global guidance on multilingual education", noted that as migration increases, diversity linguistic becoming a global reality and

classrooms with learners from diverse language backgrounds are more common. Over 31 million displaced youth are facing language barriers in education. The report was compiled on the 25th anniversary of International Mother Language celebrating a quarter-century of dedicated efforts to preserve and promote the use of mother tongues.

The report comes at a time when India is in the process of implementing National Education Policy that advocates multilingual education. The three-language policy school education has drawn opposition from some states.

"Today 40 per cent of people globally lack access to education in the language they speak and understand fluently. In some low- and middleincome countries, this figure rises to 90 per cent. More than a quarter of a billion learners are affected," a senior GEM

team member told PTI. "The first thing to note is that over the course of this decade, which has been marked by the pervasive influence technology in young people's lives but also by the impact of COVID-19, learning levels have dropped sharply in both reading and mathematics. But the next thing to note is that the impact has been linguistic reasons," the official

the team, the gap between the two groups increased on average between 2010 and 2022, from 12 to 18 percentage

points in reading and from 10 to 15 percentage points in mathematics. This suggests that learners who do not speak the language of instruction at home, whether for historical reasons or due to migration and displacement, are at a bigger risk of leaning loss. face diverse Countries

linguistic challenges in education, stemming from historical contemporary factors. In the first category, often as a legacy of colonialism, languages have been imposed on local populations that prevented their use for instruction and created educational disparities. "At the same time, large linguistic diversity in some countries presents challenges for education systems, as resources for implementing multilingual education programmes tend to be limited," the report said. In the second category,

languages to classrooms in richer countries, enriching linguistic diversity but also challenges posing instruction and assessment. "These countries often

grapple with issues such as language acquisition support for immigrant students, developing inclusive that curricula reflect and diversity, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their linguistic background. The context each country faces means the policy solutions required are different," it added. GEM has The team

recommended educational language policies should prioritise contextapproaches specific language transition must be backed curriculum adjustments and supported by teaching and learning adapted for that materials grade. "In countries with

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

policies and supporting school

leaders to foster inclusion in

schools are also among the

recommendations.

AAP brings back Bhaben Choudhury as Assam chief

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

committee in its meeting on Saturday unanimously chose Choudhury for the position. Choudhury was the chief of AAP Assam prior to Dhanowar taking charge as state president in September Immediately after assuming

Choudhury office, condemned the "increasing political violence, suppression of democratic protests and

the deliberate defamation claimed that the government Choudhury said. campaigns against opposition leaders and their families".

"rising public discontent", he fear among the masses,"

has failed to address critical issues like skyrocketing prices, communal remarks, environmental destruction due to deforestation and the

He also alleged that the BJP government is using fear tactics ahead of the 2026 assembly elections to deter public dissent.

He also criticised the oneman Justice (retd) Biplah Kumar Sharma Commission

NGT summons Uttarakhand officials over illegal felling of 176 trees

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

The National Green Tribunal(NGT)has asked the member secretary of the Uttarakhand Pollution Control Board (UKPCB) and

The NGT was hearing a unauthorised felling of trees

during the development of a residential colony by private persons in the district's Chandpur village. In its order dated February 24, a bench of judicial

member, Justice Arun Kumar Tyagi and expert member, A Senthil Vel said that according to a report submitted by a joint committee that was set up earlier, 176 trees were felled illegally and environmental

The committee comprised the district magistrate, the Dehradun regional office of the Union Ministry of Environment Forest and

UKPCB. Taking note of the report, the tribunal sought a response from

and others. "We also consider the

personal appearance of the principal conservator of

'Accordingly, they are

NIT Rourkela develops low-cost solar panel technology

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE **NEW DELH**

Researchers at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela have patented a low-cost technology developed by them to extract maximum power from solar panels under changing weather conditions, according to officials.

quickly to changes in sunlight and temperature, allowing the system to consistently operate at peak efficiency and avoid any power fluctuations, they Supported by the Department

The innovation also responds

of Science and Technology (DST) under the Clean Energy Research Initiative (CERI), the research team has been granted a patent "Method And System For Voltage Sensor-based Maximum Power Point Tracking For Photovoltaic System"

Susovon According to Samanta, Associate Professor, Electrical Engineering, NIT Rourkela, Solar panels produce

electricity from sunlight, but

the amount of power they generate changes throughout the day due to shifts in temperature and the intensity of sunlight.

To ensure they always produce the most energy possible, solar systems use a technique called Maximum Power Point Tracking (MPPT). This is a smart system that

helps solar panels produce the most electricity possible by adjusting voltage and current based on sunlight and temperature changes. It consists of a microcontroller that runs the MPPT algorithm, sensors to measure voltage and current, and a DC-DC converter that regulates power flow. "The system continuously monitors the solar panel's output and makes minor adjustments to keep it operating at peak efficiency, ensuring minimal energy waste. Traditional MPPT methods can waste energy and respond slowly when weather conditions change. They also require expensive current sensors, making them less affordable for low-cost solar setups," Samanta said.

"To overcome these limitations, we have developed a voltage sensor-based MPPT method that eliminates the need for current sensors, reducing system complexity and cost. Our approach uses a simple voltage sensor or a resistor divider circuit to track the Maximum Power Point (MPP) accurately more while maintaining stable and efficient steady-state operation, leading to improved tracking efficiency and better PV harvesting," he added.

Samanta explained that their method prevents small power fluctuations that techniques struggle with, ensuring stable and efficient

power extraction. It also responds quickly to changes in sunlight and temperature, allowing the system to consistently operate at peak efficiency. Additionally, by using only a voltage sensor or a simple resistor divider circuit, it reduces system complexity and cost. Its adaptable design enables integration into various solar power setups, making it a versatile solution for a wide range of application," he said. The researchers claimed that the innovation has broad applications in the renewable energy sector, including eliminating the need for costly current sensors, reduces costs and makes it a good fit for affordable and small-scale solar projects.

"The developed innovation can be used in solar-powered IoT devices such as weather sensors and remote communication towers, where maintaining reliable energy output is crucial. Affordable consumer solar products like home lighting systems and portable solar chargers, where cost and are efficiency considerations and use in microgrid and off-grid energy solutions, providing a stable and reliable power source in remote or rural areas, are among other possible benefits

of the innovation," Samanta

issues tax notice to Ekana stadium PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

The Lucknow Municipal ■ Corporation has issued a ₹28.42 Crore property tax notice to the Bharat Ratna Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee International Cricket Stadium, also known as Ekana stadium, officials said on Sunday.

The notice comes ahead of Women's Premier League matches scheduled this month and the Indian Premier League matches in April, raising concerns over their smooth conduct.

The stadium administration has termed the notice "unjust" and plans to meet Chief Minister Adityanath to seek relief. According to a statement from Additional Municipal Pankai Commissioner Srivastava, Zone 4 of the municipal corporation issued the notice on Saturday.

moored buoys and drifting

for

climate research and action.

monitoring across global

oceans is essential to predict

India's weather and climate,

but no single country can do

Take this example

buovs

The amount includes ₹5.45 Crore in tax due since December 1, 2020, and an outstanding balance of ₹22.97 Crore, the statement said, adding, the decision has been taken as per legal provisions and will be strictly enforced.

Srivastava clarified that only the sports grounds and stadiums of governmentaided or recognised nonaided educational institutions are exempt from property tax. Since Ekana stadium does

not fall under this category, it is liable to pay the tax. "Ekana stadium hosts IPL professional matches, sports events and cultural programmes with ticket sales. Therefore, the property tax assessment is justified. Currently, only property tax is being levied, and there is no action on water or sewerage charges," Srivastava added. He said the stadium

administration previously objected to the tax assessment, but those objections were deemed baseless. Ekana stadium Director Uday Sinha called the

notice "against the rules."
"We will soon meet the Chief Minister and seek justice," he told PTI. Sinha questioned the rationale behind imposing a ₹28 Crore tax liability

arguing that the Lucknow Municipal Corporation's provide rules exemption for all types of stadiums. He also pointed out that the notice does not mention a deadline for

hope that the issue would resolved affecting IPL matches. Ekana stadium is the home ground for IPL team Lucknow Super Giants and is scheduled to host seven IPL matches this season.

payment and expressed

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Scientists and policymakers have voiced concern over the layoffs at the US climate agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAÂ), saying any reduction in observation data could affect monsoon forecasts and cyclone tracking in India.

Hundreds of weather forecasters and other federal NOAA employees probationary status were fired last week

included These meteorologists who crucial local forecasts in the national weather service offices. "We are worried.

NOAA observations, there will be implications on weather forecasts.

When ocean observations reduce, there is less data to assimilate. Hence predictability will reduce," M Ravichandran, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences,

Climate scientist at the Indian Institute for Tropical Meteorology Roxy Mathew Koll termed the NOAA layoffs as a global crisis that could impact climate science.

NOAA provides data and models that support this weather-climate monitoring,

reduces forecasting and disaster preparedness worldwide. 'For India, the monsoon

forecasts, cyclone tracking, and climate projections rely on NOAA's models," Koll, who is also among the authors of reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said. He said the NOAA layoffs

were not just a US issue, but a blow to climate science and action worldwide. "Half of the Indian Ocean's observational network is backed by National Oceanic and Atmospheric

backbone,

for

Without

early

floods,

Administration.

warnings

heatwaves, and storms will weaken, putting millions at risk," Koll said. Another meteorologist said

he has been receiving emails from his interlocutors at NOAA informing them about the layoffs and inability to continue work as before. "This is more than a budget

cut. It is a direct threat to climate resilience, research, preparedness worldwide. The world cannot afford to lose NOAA," Koll, a Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar awardee, said.

India has deployed a number of argo floats, it alone," Koll said.

disproportionate on learners who are disadvantaged due to According to the analysis by

immigration brings new

"The BJP government is systematically killing democracy by silencing opposition voices. No matter how much suppression they impose, the people of Assam will give them a befitting reply in 2026," he said in a statement. Highlighting the chaotic environment to instill

recurring floods in Assam. The frustration among the common people is growing

report on the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) scam, calling it a politically motivated document.

Lucknow Municipal Corporation

the state's principal chief conservator of forests to appear before it in a matter regarding illegal felling of 176 trees in Udham Singh Nagar district.

petition

compensation had to be recovered for it.

Climate Change, and the

Uttarakhand chief secretary

member secretary, UKPCB forests (PCCF) before this tribunal physically or through videoconferencing on the next date of hearing to be essential for assisting this tribunal in just and proper adjudication of questions involved in the case.

directed to remain present before this tribunal with the relevant record," the green body said. The NGT posted the matter for further hearing on April 7.

observations for various **PTI** ■ BHUBANESWAR weather forecasting models. While most of the instruments deployed by the

The Odisha government will I provide preparatory pilot

training to 50 tribal students, Ministry of Earth Sciences are in the Indian Ocean, mostly women, to make them NOAA also has deployed ready for the professional course, an official said on Sunday. similar instruments in the Indian Ocean as well as in The Commerce and Transport Department of the Odisha other seas across the world. "Collaboration is key to science — and particularly

government has recently issued a tender to hire a professional agency to provide the training. As per the tender document, the government, through the selected private agency, will identify at least 300 tribal students, from whom 50 will be shortlisted through proper

The selected 50 students, mostly women, will receive coaching, covering all selection parameters of airline cadet assessment, Bhubaneswar for eight weeks, the official said. The coaching is aimed at

preparing the candidates to

screening to impart the

preparatory training.

Odisha to provide training to 50 tribal

students for professional courses

clear the cadet pilot assessment and also make them ready for basic foundation programme syllabus set by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) and give an overview of the flying training course, he said.

No place for anti-social elements in Punjab: Mann | BJP targets Mamata after ECI

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday asserted that gang-sters, smugglers, criminals and other anti-social elements have no place in the state and will soon be wiped out.

Addressing a gathering here during the passing out parade of 2,490 cops, Mann said this pious land produced saints, seers, martyrs, legendary players and generals.

The chief minister, however, said that smugglers, gangsters and other criminals have unfortunately made this state their abode under the alleged patronisation of the previous governments

Mann said the state government has now started a "crusade" to weed out these antinational elements, adding they will be behind the bars soon. The chief minister said Puniab is at a historic juncture as his government has launched a decisive war against drugs in



Mann said the state government has adopted a zero tolerance policy against drugs and Punjab will be made completely drug free with active support and cooperation of the

The supply line of drugs is being snapped, drug peddlers are being put behind bars and the properties of the drug smugglers are being confiscated or razed, he added.

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

investigation, science and tech-

nology to further overcome major challenges faced by the

Congratulating the new cops, he said it is a momentous occasion for them as they have become an integral part of the Punjab Police family.

The chief minister exhorted them to discharge their duty with utmost dedication, hard work and commitment, thereby contributing immensely in the progress of the state and prosperity of its people.

Mann called upon the newly inducted cops to play a proactive role in wiping out the menace of drugs from the He said Punjab is fighting the

nation's war against drugs and the police have always acted as a barrier for checking its sup-The chief minister said the

time has now come when the cops should uphold the glorious tradition of the Punjab Police for weeding out the scourge of drugs from the

More than 10,000 youngsters have been appointed in the police force since 2022, he

Mann said the state govern-ment has also decided to recruit 10,000 new police personnel for which necessary clearance will be given by the Cabinet soon.

The chief minister said that a dedicated 'Sadak Surakhya Force' (road safety force) had been set up to ensure enhanced security and save precious lives on the roads. He said since its launch in

February last year, the state has witnessed a 48.10 per cent reduction in casualties due to accidents. The force has been deployed all along 4,200 kms of the highways, prone to traffic accidents, Mann said, adding they act as a deterrent for traffic violations in addition to patential.

in addition to patrolling. The chief minister said even Union Minister Nitin Gadkari had hailed this initiative of the state government

clarifies voter ID duplication

SAUGAR SENGUPTA KOLKATA

he BJP mounted fresh attack I on Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, after the Election Commission of India (ECI) on Sunday came out with clarifications regarding duplica-tion of Voters' ID card numbers, saying duplication did not necessarily mean fake ID cards. The Commission said that dupli-

cation of Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers might have taken place because decentralised, manual mechanism was followed before the voters' database was shifted to a digital platform adding the Commission would take steps to rectify things. In a statement referring to social media reports the poll panel said "it is clarified that while EPIC numbers of some of the electors may be identical, the other details including demographic details, Assembly Constituency and polling booth are different for the electors with the same EPIC

number. Irrespective of the EPIC number, any elector can cast a vote only at their designated polling station in their respective Constituency in their State or UT where they are enrolled in the electoral roll and nowhere else." Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had earlier launched a scathing attack on the BJP Government for manipulating the ECI and influencing the Chief Election Commissioners in inserting fake names in the electoral rolls to influence the elections. She cites EPIC cards showing how the numbers of two cards were same whereas their holders were different.

"There are several people who are complaining that duplicate names from

Haryana or UP are appearing in their EPIC card numbers," Banerjee said adding this was a ploy to rig elections.

They did this in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi. The leaders there could not catch the trick of inserting the names of fake voters. But we have been able to catch their trick and we have directed the officials from the DMs and BDOs to the party workers and local leaders to start scrutinising the electoral rolls and catch the fake voters so that the BIP cannot bring in voters from Bihar, UP and Haryana to vote in Bengal," Banerjee said announcing a committee led by senior party leaders to start door-to-door scrutiny of the electoral rolls.

Meanwhile apparently taking a cue from the ECI clarifications BJP leader Amit Malviya attacked Mamata Banerjee for allegedly preparing excuses before an impending defeat in the next year's Assembly elections.

It is a pity that the Bengal Chief Minister is resorting to misinformation to lay the groundwork for her imminent defeat in 2026 and weaken votersconfidence in the electoral system," Malviya said.

Haryana civic polls held, BJP exudes confidence

PTI CHANDIGARH

Over 35 per cent of the more than 51 lakh eligible voters for civic elections in Haryana cast their votes till 4 pm on Sunday, officials said.

Voting is being held to elect mayors and ward members in seven municipal corporations -Gurugram, Manesar, Faridabad, Hisar, Rohtak, Karnal, and Yamunanagar

Bypolls for the Mayor's post in Ambala and Sonipat are also being held.

The voting, which began at 8 am, will conclude at 6 pm. Elections are also being held to elect presidents and ward mem-

bers of four municipal councils Ambala Sadar, Pataudi Jatoli Mandi, Thanesar, and Sirsa. A bypoll is being held for the post of president in the Sohna

Municipal Council. Voting is also taking place for the election of presidents and ward members in 21 municipal committees. Bypolls for the president's post in the municipal committees of Assandh (Karnal district) and Ismailabad (Kurukshetra district) are also being conducted.

At 4 pm, the turnout was recorded at 35 per cent. Ahead of the polls, Haryana

Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini exuded confidence that

The Sahitya Academy (National Academy of

Letters) has amended its

process of selection of best

books by bringing in readers as

juries. With effect from 2025.

annual literary awards would

follow the format of Padma

Awards. Readers can recom-

mend books of their choice to

An Academy insider said that

this was to liberate the selection

process from the shackles of a

cartel which has made the

institution a milch cow since it

was established in 1954. Over

the Academy by online.

the BJP would win the elections and had said work would be done three times faster after the formation of a triple-engine

government. The Congress has appealed to voters to elect its candidates with a full majority. The grand old party, out of office in Haryana for more than 10 years, is looking to turn around its electoral fortunes in the civic polls.

Union minister Manohar Lal Khattar was among the early voters, casting his vote at a booth in Karnal.

'Voting is our democratic right and it is also our duty to exercise our franchise," he told reporters, exuding confidence that the BJP would win the

Union minister of state Krishan Pal Gurjar cast his vote at a booth in Faridabad. Haryana Minister Anil Vij,

who cast his vote in Ambala Cantt, said, "All voters should participate in the greatest festival of democracy. A tripleengine government will be formed in Harvana.

governs both at the Centre and in Haryana and, if the party also governs the urban local bodies, development will accelerate," he

Sunderlal Yadav, the BJP's may-

ing stock in the country.

When K Sreenivasa Rao, secre-

tary, Academy secretary, on

Saturday waxed eloquence on

KP Ramanunni, the Malayalam

writer who authored God's

Own Book, the audience at

Kozhikode were seen gaffaw-

"Rao was unaware of the fact

that the book is full of obscene

and if there was anything con-

spicuous by absence from

Ramanunni's work, it was lit-

erature," K Anandan Pillai,

founder-editor of Sahitya Vimarsam, a widely respected



oters flaunt inked fingers after casting votes in Sonipat

oral candidate for Manesar, where municipal elections are being held for the first time, cast his vote at a booth in the Manesar area.

Gurugram district's Farukh

Nagar recorded nearly 60 per cent polling till 4 pm. In Gurugram, the turnout was around 30 per cent while it was over 55 percent in Manesar. In Ambala district, the turnout was nearly 24 per cent in Ambala, 41 per cent in Ambala Sadar and 59 per cent in Barara. In Faridabad, the turnout at 4 pm was around 32 per cent. "People are aware that the BJP

> recorded a turnout of 74 per cent while Hisar registered 43 per cent. In Taoru of Nuh district, 68 per

Narnaund in Hisar district

Sahitya Academy Award for the

best Malayalam novel despite it

being termed by eminent crit-

ics like Prof Ravi Shankar Nair

as the worst piece of literature

they have read in their career.

'We can use this book to throw

at stray dogs which are aplen-

ty all over Kerala. Or else we

can put this book as an obsta-

cle underneath the truck to

ensure that the vehicle does not

run amuck," wrote Professor

Despite the observations by

Prof Nair, author Ramanunni

laughed all the way to the

Nair in his literary column.

cent of voters exercised their franchise. The turnout was 40 per cent in Rohtak and more than 22 per cent in Sonipat. Gurugram

Commissioner cum District Election Officer Ajay Kumar said 1,109 booths had been set up, including for Gurugram, Manesar and Pataudi.

The start of polling was delayed by an hour in a booth of the Gurugram Municipal Corporation's Ward No 5 due to a snag in the EVM, sources

Gurugram Commissioner Vikas Kumar Arora said more than 4,500 security personnel had been deployed to ensure smooth polling.

Sahitya Academy opts for Padma style nomination

Gurugram's five areas see 40.6 per cent voter turnout

PARVESH SHARMA

Voting in Gurugram's five municipal areas - municipal corporation, Gurugram, municipal corporation, Manesar, and municipal councils of Sohna, Pataudi, and Farrukhnagar towns recorded 40.6 per cent till 5.55 pm on Sunday.

As per the Election Commission (EC) schedule, the voting will take place from 8 am to 6 pm, with results scheduled for declaration on March 12.

The BJP, which won 48 seats in recent held Harvana assembly polls, has this time set a target to get a full majority in Gurugram district MC elec-

According to the data released by the District Election Office, the highest voting percentage of 72.2 per cent was recorded in the Farrukhnagar Municipal Committee. The lowest turnout was 29.9 per cent in the Sohna

Municipal Council.

Municipal Corporation
Gurugram (MCG) recorded
37.2 per cent and Manesar Municipal Corporation recorded 62.8 per cent voting. Pataudi Jatauli Mandi recorded 63.3 per

The number of registered vot-



Similarly, the votes will be cast for the post of councillor and chairman in 22 wards in Municipal Council Pataudi Jatauli Mandi.

In which over 22,000 men and 20,721 women will cast their votes. In the by-election for the post of chairman in Sohna Municipal Council, 26,596 men and 23,551 women and six transgenders will cast their

At the same time, in Municipal

wards of the MMC area.

throughout the State.

votes in 21 wards.

Committee Farrukhnagar, 7,683 men 6,961 women and one transgender will choose their government body for the post of councillor and chair-

Congress workers too organised rallies demanding immediate arrest of the students who were involved in heckling the Minister and some univer sity professors who had assembled to take part in a meeting of West Bengal College and University Professors'

'We believe in democracy and peace but if the CPI(M)-backed students think that if they can get away after doing anything. Even manhandling professors and heckling a minister then our boys are ready, and we can take control of JU in a minute,

another TMC leader and State

versions Contradictory emanated from both sides as the Minister said he was ready

to talk to the agitating students bonnet and windscreen" of the Minister's SUV which was

KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA

s the Maha Kumbh festiv-Aities in Prayagraj captivated the nation, Ayodhya experienced an unexpected spiritual wave of its own. The sacred city witnessed an unprecedented influx of devotees, setting a new benchmark in religious tourism

Over a span of 45 days, from Makar Sankranti Mahashivratri, estimated 10 to 12 Lakh devotees arrived daily, transforming Ayodhya into a hub of spiritual fervor. For the first time in history, the

Shri Ram Lalla temple extended its darshan hours until 1 am to accommodate the ceaseless stream of pilgrims.

Visitors lauded the Yogi government's developmental initiatives and crowd manage ment strategies, which ensured a seamless pilgrimage experi-

Anil Mishra, a member of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, revealed that more than 1.25 crore devotees visited the temple during this period, with AIpowered tracking and door metal detectors recording the footfall. Devotional offerings also saw a surge, with daily donations averaging around ₹15 lakh.



Devotees take a dip in Saryu river in Ayodhya

The unprecedented rush provided a significant boost to the local economy, driving demand for prasad, flowers, and other religious offerings. Hotels, restaurants, and home stays, particularly those near the temple, remained fully booked, underscoring the success of government-backed employment schemes for local

residents. To manage the massive crowds, authorities arranged shelter for 25,000 people and

ensured adequate provisions for sanitation, drinking water, and waste management. Traffic diversions and holding

zones at city entry points

helped streamline the influx of

pilgrims. Divisional Commissioner Gaurav Dayal highlighted that tight security arrangements allowed for an orderly darshan experience, setting the stage for even better preparations ahead of the upcoming Ram Navami celebrations.

book of this genre was "Moustache", a novel by S Hareesh.

"Though the book has no literature other than pornographic description, Hareesh made millions as royalty despite literature getting buried thousands of fathom beneath the surface of earth. Cash through controversies seems to be the catchword of these modern a widely respected journal of literary criticism novels," said

"These books are purchased secretly by voracious readers to

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN KOCHI the last four decades, Academy journal of literary criticism. Bank with the award money awards have become a laugh. The book had bagged the and royalty amount. Another stance. Even pornographic political ideology, caste and written with ulterior motive. books have some substance in them but not the works of Ramanunni or Hareesh," said T G Mohan Das. He has reasons to get annoyed as Hareesh has claimed in the work that Hindu women go to temples to display their physique.

Despite these obscenities, these books manage to win national prizes thanks to the fact that the authors know the right people at the right places. "It is an open secret that the Sahitya Akademy awards are presented by jury consisting of writers with vested interests. The win-

community. There are persons who have been eternal members of the juries," said Pillai. Tamil Nadu is no exception. "Despite the DMK's opposition to anything associated with Hindi instances of lobbying for

ers in Gurugram district is

over 11.7 Lakh. These voters

will exercise their franchise at

1,109 booths in five municipal

areas including Gurugram,

Manesar, Pataudi, Sohna and

Farrukhnagar in Gurugram

The elections are being held in

33 municipal bodies eight

municipal corporations, 21

municipalities and four munic-

District Election Officer Ajay

Kumar said that the votes

would be cast for the post of

Mayor of the MCG and coun-

cillor in 35 wards of the MCG

Likewise, the votes would be cast for the post of Mayor of the MMC and councillor in 20

ipal councils.

Akademy awards are galore. Only the chosen few get these honors," said Professor Josephine Jayashanti, a novelist of repute who is blunt in her opinion.

She says that Perumal Murugan's "One Part Woman", a novel based on an alleged tradition in Tamil Nadu's lishers. It was written with the sole objective of tarnishing the Tiruchengode residents and portrayed them in poor light," said Jayashanti. Anandan Pillai feels that the inclusion of general public in the selection process is likely to bring down the discrepancies.

"When it was published in

2010, it turned out to be a

damp squib. But when it was

translated into English, there

was a major controversy as

desired by the author and pub-

"But the jury is out and one has to wait and watch," said Pillai.

How Prayagraj learnt to live with Kumbh stampedes Over 1.25 Crore pilgrims visit Ayodhya in 45 days

PTI PRAYAGRAJ

My uncle had saved his sister by pulling her out of the river waters by her hair as she slipped below amid the commotion, says city-based advocate Niranjan Lal recalling the 1954 Kumbh Mela stampede stories he had heard from his aunt who survived it.

This was the first Kumbh in Allahabad after Independence, and the tragic incident took place on February 3 on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya. According to official estimates, several hundred had died in the stampede.

Seventy-one years later, a stampede took place on January 29, again on Mauni Amavasya day as a massive crowd sought to enter into the Triveni Sangam waters for the 'Amrit Snan'. Lal, 67, and his wife were camp-

ing in a Swiss cottage in Sector 6 of Mahakukbh Nagar, when they got a call from their son at home late night, cautioning them not to go to the Sangam due to the stampede 'We didn't step out from the

camp until the sun came out, and at around 11 am, we went to Dashashwamedh Ghat on Ganga, located near Sector 6. There were huge crowds in the mela area, in the streets and at the ghat. We were aware of the tragedy that had unfolded a few hours ago, and therefore we were alert, and being a local resident knew what to $\bar{\text{do}}$ in case the crowd became unmanageable, Lal said.

"But, we didn't go back feeling fearful. My wife continued to camp until the 'kalpwas' period was over, continuing the multigeneration tradition of our fam-" he said. Lal belongs to an old family of

Allahabad (renamed Prayagraj in 2018), many of whose members have performed 'kalpwas' and bathing rituals at all Kumbh held here post melas Independence.

His wife, Saloni Niranjan kept the family tradition, and observed the rituals at Maha Kumbh this year, after her mother-in-law's death in 2019. We were married in 1988, and

few months later, the 1989 Kumbh Mela happened. And, I and my wife have been part of all successive Kumbh also since then. But, the 1954 tragedy is something my uncle and 'bua' (aunt) used to talk about. She told me how she was saved by my father's elder brother while she was drowning during the incident," Lal reminisced, adding, his 'bua' who was born in 1920s and also used to observe rituals, died

in 1986. Lal's father, Govind Prasad, a government officer was at the family camp in the mela area when the disaster took place. The incident of the 1954 stampede was then described as a national tragedy".

Akshat Lal, 32, son of Niranjan Lal, says he used to hear stories about the old Kumbh Melas from his grandmother and aunt, whose mother was rescued during the 1954 stampede.

The scale of the tragedy was such that the entire country was shaken. Every other old family in Allahabad either has a personal story attached to it, or they know someone having some link with the tragedy," he told PTI.

The young scholar, who even wrote a 100-odd-page book "Kumbh: A Divine Show at Allahabad" in 2013, has researched extensively on the

Another stampede took place at Allahabad Junction (now Prayagraj Junction) during the 2013 Kumbh Mela in which scores of people died. After the 1954 stampede, an inquiry committee was set up

and it made a slew of recommendations for better crowd manage ment and ensuring the safety of pilgrims. If one looks at the Maha Kumbh 2025, a VVIP culture was promoted during it, and aggressive marketing and '144 years' hype

was used to draw people to the

mela. The authorities were some-

how complacent and some so-

called celebrities were telling on social media that arrangements were 'great' and people should flock to Sangam, which were a factor for overcrowding and eventually a stampede," he alleged.

The Uttar Pradesh government had, however, maintained that ample arrangements were made and the theme itself was 'Bhavya Divya Surakshit Maha Kumbh' PTI spoke to many other residents of the city who either witnessed January 29 stampede or its aftermath or knew someone who was present there in the mela.

Renu Devi, a domestic help, said, she saw piles of footwear and bags at the ghats and also many floating in the river the day the stampede took place.

"I saw people being taken away in ambulances, it was panic all over," she said.

For people like Devi, however, faith overpowers fear, as she said, "I took holy dip for five times during this Kumbh, mostly after the stampede'

Maha Kumbh, the spectacle that takes place once in 12 years, was held this year from January 13 (Paush Purnima) to February 26 (Mahashivratri) and saw grand processions of Naga Sadhus and three 'Amrit Snans'.

The mega religious gathering drew a record over 66 crore pilgrims during this period.

SFI calls academic strike post chaos in JU

SAUGAR SENGUPTA KOLKATA

An eerie calm prevailed the Jadavpur University (JU) campus a day after Left students' unions including the Students' Federation of India held violent protests inside the campus and allegedly heckled Bengal Education Minister Bratya Basu - demanding early elections to students' bodies

Students' union elections have not been held in the State for the past seven-eight years. As a group of Left students held protest rallies inside the camous and outside the Jadavpur Police Station local Trinamool

University Professors' Association - backed by the

minister Arup Biswas said. The students had on Saturday noon gheroaed Minister Basu and were asking a statement from him regarding a deadline by which the college and university students' elections would be held in the State.

and in fact received a deputa-tion from the Students' Federation of India (SFI) the protesters said Basu would not listen to them and his car tried to speed away without caring for the students who were standing in front of his vehicle. The driver of the vehicle said that he sped away to save the minister as "the students were pounding fist blows on the

partly damaged. Two students were injured in the incident as the car sped

While the rear wheel of the vehicle rolled over the leg of a student another of his colleague Indranuj Roy whose left eye got seriously injured. He was presently undergoing treatment in a private medical college and hospital adjacent to the University.

As the news of Roy getting injured by the Minister's vehicle the students went on a rampage and ransacked TMC academic employees' union office Meanwhile, even as the SFI had called for an academic strike throughout the State on Monday, alleged TMC workers went on rampage mounting attacks on CPI(M) party offices at various places, sources said "A CPI(M) party office was ransacked at Dinhata in North Bengal while another was ransacked and its furniture broken at Durgapur," CPI(M) leader

Mayukh said adding similar attacks had also taken place in Hooghly, Burdwan and Howrah.

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-PAPER WITH PASSION-

A clash of diplomacy and dignity

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

n 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 longestablished 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.



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

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

he Budget presented by the BJP's doubleengine 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 selfreliance, 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 benefitted 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 "Lakhpati Didi," helping them become self-reliant. Uttar Pradesh is also the first state in the country to guarantee concrete houses to

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. nectivity and highway Providing further impetus to the cause, a provision of Rs 4,882 crore has been made in for the widening and conthe Budget for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Rural). Also, an amount of Rs 1,200 crore has been proposed under the Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana



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 econo-

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 conexpansion. Under this, Rs 200 crore has been provided struction 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** 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 levels of farmers. Vivekananda

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

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 devel oped state in the country.

(The writer is Deputy Chief Minister of UP; views

THE EDITOR

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

t the recently concluded 71st Annual Conference of the Indian Association of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Sciences, Dr Harinder Singh Director 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 anesthetised, 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 unaf-

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 wholebody cooling (hypothermia) to preserve organ function. At the conference, the technique received an enthusiastic response from 1,700 national and international expert

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

cases that might otherwise

seem hopeless. Dr Bedi confirmed that he plans to patent the technique and publish his findings so that it can be adopted worldwide to benefit similar cases. In conclusion, Dr Harinder Singh Bedi's innovative "Cooling Turban" technique represents a significant advancement in brain-protective strategies during cardiovascular and thoracic surgeries. By focusing cooling efforts solely on the brain, this breakthrough minimises the risks associated with wholebody hypothermia and opens new avenues for treating oxygen deprivation during

With successful application in 48 cases and enthusiastic endorsement from leading experts, this pioneering approach underscores the ingenuity of Indian medical innovation. Dr Bedi's commitment to patenting and sharing his findings promises to influence global surgical practices, ultimately saving countless lives and setting a new standard in patient care with excellence.

(*The author is a columnist*; views are personal)

FINDING FUNDS FOR FREEBIES

Madam — Apropos 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-



t 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

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 invest-

ment with market evangelism. Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur 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

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 Śelvaraj | Tirunelveli

US-UKRAINE TALKS FAIL

or more by a court of law.

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

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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FIRST COLUMN

DEALING WITH EXAM ANXIETY

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



xaminations 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 iso-

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 selfawareness, 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?



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

he law has been enacted to confer rights over the use of for-est 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

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,

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. PATCHES OF BAMB00 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

Environmental Development Society, Hyderabad, accused the state of pressurising officials for recognition of rights to ineligible individuals resulting in largescale deforestation leading to the scam of unprecedented propor-There are reports from

Rampachodavaram Forests division, Rajamundri (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

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

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 frag-

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. Bampoo 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 overexploitation 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;

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

ith 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 deepseated 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



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, health-care, 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 conve-

nience with physical touch-

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 inperson 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 tionised urban shopping by altering customer habits 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 inclu-

Reinvigorating Rural Commerce E-commerce has revolu-

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 capabili-

Assisted commerce kiosks fur-

ther 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 payment methods, but rural

consumers still rely heavily on **Transforming Agriculture** cash transactions. A com-Agriculture remains the backpletely digital model often bone of India's rural economy, fails to resonate with these providing livelihoods for more communities. Instead, the phythan 42 per cent of the popugital model has emerged as an effective alternative by combining the reach of online platforms with the trust of lation and contributing around 18.2 per cent to the nation's GDP. However, farmers have long contended with issues local, physical commerce. 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 mid-dlemen. 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

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

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

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

make it stick.

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 sup-

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 lim-



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

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 itation exercise. It's going to us to unite in order to guaranhave to be an exercise in where tee the best outcome for private meeting — a day before that Europe is willing and able

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. Zelenskyv received broad sup-

port 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 Zelenskyv

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 trou-bling when Trump called Zelenskyy a dictator and falsely said Ukraine started the

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 ID 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 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

"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

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 legit

imate 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 Iunar lander Blue Ghost aces moon touchdown

AP ■ CAPE CANAVERAL (US)

Aprivate lunar lander carry-ing a drill, vacuum and other experiments for NASA touched down on the moon Sunday, the latest in a string of companies looking to kickstart 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)

'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,

moonwalkers, who got it caked providing extra stability, according to the company. all over their spacesuits and Launched in mid-January from equipment.

Florida, the lander carried 10 On its way to the moon, Blue Ghost beamed back exquisite pictures of the home planet. experiments to the moon for NASA. The space agency paid The lander continued to stun USD 101 million for the delivery, plus USD 44 million for the once in orbit around the moon. with detailed shots of the science and tech on board. It's the third mission under moon's gray pockmarked surface. At the same time, an on-NASA's commercial lunar delivery programme, intended board receiver tracked and to ignite a lunar economy of acquired signals from the US GPS and European Galileo competing private businesses

while scouting around before

astronauts show up later this

Firefly's Ray Allensworth said

including boulders to land

safely. Allensworth said the

team continued to analyse the

data to figure out the lander's

exact position, but all indica-

tions suggest it landed within

the 328-foot (100-metre) target

The demos should get two

weeks of run time, before lunar

daytime ends and the lander

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

zone in Mare Crisium.

shuts down.

decade.

The landing set the stage for the lander skipped over hazards a fresh crush of visitors angling for a piece of lunar

future explorers.

constellations, an encouraging

step forward in navigation for

business. Another lander — a tall and skinny 15-footer (4 metres tall) built and operated by Houstonbased 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

 $I^{
m ran's}$ 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

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 worsen-

ing 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

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 econom-

Osmani also cited recent geopolitical events as factors that undermined public vert 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

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

AP ■ SEOUL

AUS 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.

is expected to infuriate North Korea, which views tempo rary deployments of such powerful ÛS military assets as major security threats. 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.

The deployment of the carrier

Pope gets visit from Vatican secretary of state

stable Pope Francis had a A stable Pope Francis nad 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 ople 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

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

he were well enough But many signs indicated he was recovering and improving. "The night was quiet, the pope is still resting," the Vatican

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

There were no details of what was discussed, but the mere visit suggested Francis' condi-

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

would signal his body was still fighting an infection.

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

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

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

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

of danger. He was eating and drinking and continued his respiratory physiotherapy, and spent 20 minutes in his private chapel down the hall on Saturday, the Vatican said. The pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has lung disease and was admitted to Gemelli on Feb. 14 after a bout of bronchitis worsened and turned into a complex pneumonia in both lungs.

Prayers continued to pour in: Francis' hospitalization has come as the Vatican is marking its Holy Year, drawing pilgrims to Rome from all over. They are walking through the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica and also making pilgrimages to the hilltop 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 hos-

Syrians begin fasting during Ramazan without Assad family

ome 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 wartorn country.

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

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

ilv dynasty

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 Sunday. Bashar Assad's secular government in early December ending the 54-year Assad fam-

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

gious 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

far promised to respect reli-

Ramazan of victory and liberation," said interim Minister of Religious Affairs Hussam Haj-Hussein in a televised state-

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

In many parts of the region, the holy month this year is bittersweet. Lebanese this year mark Ramadan 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 Ramadan 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 deter-

mine the start of the month.

US court rules head of watchdog agency must keep his job

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

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

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

Jackson rejected the Trump administration's claims that the special counsel's removal protections are unconstitutional because they prevent the president from rightfully installing

his preferred agency head.

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

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

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

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

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

counsel has a "unique status and mission," which requires independence from the president to ensure he can carry out his responsibilities. The office investigates whistleblower claims of reprisal, can pursue disciplinary action against employees who punish whistleblowers and provides a channel for employees to disclose government wrongdoing. "If I don't have independence, if I can be removed for no good reason, federal employees are going to have no good reason to come to me," Dellinger told reporters outside Washington's federal courthouse after a recent hear-

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

ers. Dellinger's firing came as Trump administration employees have touted their support on social media for his policies even though the Hatch Act is meant to restrict political advocacy while on duty. The Justice Department employed sweeping language in urging the Supreme Court last month to allow the termination of the head of an obscure federal agency with limited power. Acting Solicitor General Sarah Harris wrote in court papers that the lower court had crossed "a constitutional red line" by blocking Dellinger's firing and stopping Trump "from shaping the agenda of an executivebranch agency in the new administration's critical first

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

Yawning wealth gap widening inequalities in China: Report

PTI ■ BEIJING

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

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

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

China's per capita disposable income was stated to be 41,314 yuan (over USD 41,314) last year, up 5.3 per cent from 2023, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported, citing the report. Analysts have warned that Beijing needs to work harder to narrow the wealth gap in soci-

ignite a private sector-led economic recovery, the Post reported on Sunday. The country is grappling with weak consumption and a languishing property sector, where

ety more broadly as it tries to

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

assets.

the rich park most of their

dle and lower-middle classes, it

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

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

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

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

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

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

ond stint in power.
Trump said he planned to slap new 10 per cent tariffs on goods from China, escalating

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

addiction in the US.

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

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

Prez Trump signs order designating **English as official** language of US **PTI** ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump has signed an executive order designation utive order designating English as the offi-

cial language of the United States. The order allows government agencies and organizations that receive federal funding to choose whether to continue to offer documents and services in language other than English.

It rescinds a mandate from former President Bill Clinton that required the government and organizations that received federal funding to provide language assistance to non-English

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

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

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

For decades, lawmakers in Congress have introduced legislation to designate English as the offinot succeeded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Nathan Phillips, a 58-year-old ecologist from Newton, Massachusetts, who was protesting in Boston on Saturday. "We can impose direct economic damage on Tesla by showing celled contracts and shut down sections of the government, including the US Agency for International Development.

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

'Protests will not deter President Trump and Elon Musk from delivering on the promise to establish DOĞE and make our federal government more efficient and more accountable to the hardworking American taxpayers across the country," said White House spokesperson Harrison Fields.

Tesla did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

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

Federal prosecutors charged a woman in connection with a string of vandalism against a Colorado Tesla dealership, which included Molotov cocktails being thrown at vehicles and the words "Nazi cars" spray painted on the building. Saturday's demonstration in Boston

had a festive atmosphere, with a brass band playing music as protesters carried signs and chanted. Several of the signs mocked Musk and DOGE, with one reading: "Stop Elon and his despicable Muskrats.' This government led by

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

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



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

Imran Khan seeks global help for democracy, regional stability

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

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

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

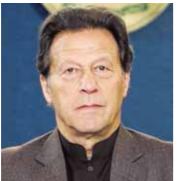
Khan reflected on the 'political turmoil' in Pakistan and his ongoing fight for democracy. He expressed deep concern over the alleged erosion of democracy in the country, describing the current period as one of the most challenging in the nation's his-

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

democratic principles. He claimed his struggle was not personal but addressed the broader

reaching consequences, not only for the country but also for regional and global stability.

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



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-

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

been reduced to a tool of political persecution.

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

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

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

they were doing until they received instructions from Khan. "When Imran ordered 'no more talks', the PTI committee was com-

pletely caught off guard," he said. Asked if the PTI wanted to continue negotiations despite Imran's instructions, he responded in the affirmative. 'I remember (PTI Chairman) Gohar Ali Khan went to see Imran, and when he returned, there were still

three or four days left before the dead-

line to meet their demands. Still, they

said no more talks.

Officials concerned about militant attack in Karachi

PTI ■ KARACHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

raising concern over surveillance diagnose his illness, before later dying in Kampala.

Child dies of Ebola in Uganda,

A⁴-year-old child became the second person to die of The successful treatment of Ebola in Uganda, the World eight patients who had been Health Organisation has said, contacts of that man, including in a setback for health officials some of his relatives, had left local health officials anticipatwho had hoped for a quick end to the outbreak that began at ing the end of the outbreak. But they are still investigating its The child had been hospisource.

PTI KAMPALA

the end of January

menting on the case

The death undermines

Ugandan officials' assertions of

an outbreak under control after

eight Ebola patients were dis-

charged earlier in February.

The first victim was a male nurse who died the day before

the outbreak was declared on

Jan 30. He had sought treat-

ment at multiple facilities in

Kampala and in eastern

Uganda, where he also visited

a traditional healer in trying to

Tracing contacts is key to stemming the spread of Ebola, and talised at the main referral facility in Kampala, the capital of the East African country, and there are no approved vaccines died Tuesday, the WHO office for the Sudan strain of Ebola that's infecting people in in Uganda said in a brief statement on Saturday. The state-Uganda. Over 20,000 travellers are ment said WHO and others are

screened daily for Ebola at working to strengthen surveillance and contact tracing. There were no other details Uganda's different border cross ing points, according to WHO, about the death and local which supports the work. health officials were not com-

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

told The Associated Press on

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



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

PD(1606)C I, Rinku Tiwari W/o Pranav

Kumar Raju R/o G- 118 Sector Delta 2, Greater Noida, Gautam Buddh Nagar have changed my name from Rinku to Rinku Tiwari for all future purposes.

PD(1607)C

Government fails to find right candidate for BPCL top job

After Hindustan Corporation Limited (HPCL), government headhunter struggled to find a suitable candidate for the top job at Bharat Petroleum, as most applicants were narrow specialists lacking multidisciplinary experience needed to run a large organisation.

Enterprise The Public Selection Board (PESB) last month interviewed a dozen candidates including BPCL Vetsa director (finance) Ramakrishna Gupta and its director (refineries) S Khanna but found none suitable for the job of chairman and managing

(BPCL), according to a PESB order.

It advised the administrative ministry "to choose an In June last year, PESB appropriate course of interviewed further action for selection including the search cum selection committee, according to the order.

Incumbent G Krishnakumar superannuates as chairman and managing director of BPCL on April 30 this year. BPCL is the fourth company in the oil sector where PESB couldn't find a suitable candidate since 2021.

PESB in May 2023 did not make any recommendation for the top post at Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and the task was then entrusted to a search cum selection

That panel picked Arvindar Singh Sahney who was appointed chairman of IOC in November 2024.

eight candidates, including director on HPCL board and managing director of Indraprastha Gas Ltd, for the post of chairman and managing director at HPCL but rejected them all.

HPCL top position has been lying vacant since August 31, 2024, when Pushp Kumar Joshi superannuated Previously in June 2021, PESB reached a similar conclusion while looking for a candidate for the top job at Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC).

A year later, a search-cumselection committee picked

chairman former managing director of BPCL, for that job.

board-level Most appointments at public sector companies are done basis recommendations of the PESB but the government headhunter struggling to find suitable candidates for top jobs that fell vacant since 2021 in the oil sector. Search-cumselection committee route has been resorted to as such a panel has flexibility of not just considering candidates who have applied for the job but anyone - from public and private sector - who it deems fit to do the job.

Sources said that the core of the problem is these

companies are not creating leaders with wide exposure. Most of the candidates who appeared for interviews for HPCL and BPCL had spent all their professional careers in just one stream such as only refineries, or LPG sales. "I wouldn't call them one trick ponies but they are all narrow specialists. When PESB looks at candidates, it than his core competence. essentially is looking for someone who has had multidisciplinary exposure and is capable of leading an organisation whose job is not limited to one discipline BPCL which also gave its of refining oil or selling

LPG," a top official said. While IOC, BPCL and HPCL refine crude oil into fuels like petrol and diesel, make petrochemicals, and retail fuels, ONGC produces

crude oil and gas. In the past, IOC and BPCL nurtured leaders by giving multidisciplinary them exposure.

IOC had a route called the department of business development where refinery, finance marketing person could get exposure to streams other

This created tall leaders like Subir Raha, Prashanto Baneriee and several others after them, another official explained. Similar was the case with

officials multidisciplinary created Sarthak exposure and stalwarts like Behuria, B Ashok among others

'Take the instance of Arun

Kumar Singh. At BPCL, he worked across refinery, retail, LPG, pipelines and supply chain before heading Bharat PetroResources Ltd, the firm's wholly owned subsidiary for upstream business. It's only after that he was appointed BPCL chairman. And after getting experience of leading a large company he was appointed chairman of ONGC," the official said.

BPCL created such leaders but unfortunately that is not happening now, he added. IOC's Sahney spent three decades in refinery operations, technical

services, and health, safety,

and environment (HSE). He was an executive director in the business development division, handling

multidisciplinary exposure. Another official said the situation at HPCL is the most grim as potential candidates have spent all of their professional careers in just one or two disciplines. "While it is easy to blame PESB and the petroleum ministry, I think the oil companies have to share the blame of not creating a leadership pipeline and nurturing talent," the first

In case the search cum selection committee is not presented with enough inhouse talent, the possibility an outsider being appointed at HPCL or BPCL is not ruled out, sources

official said.

FPIs withdraw ₹34,574 Crore from equities in Februrary

 $F_{\text{pulled out }}^{\text{oreign investors have}} \xrightarrow{\text{have}}$ from the Indian equity markets in February pushing total outflows to ₹1.12 Lakh Crore in the first two months of 2025 amid rising global trade tensions and concerns over corporate earnings growth.

"Elevated valuations of Indian equities, alongside concerns about corporate earnings growth, have led to sustained outflow of FPIs, Bhowar, Senior Director - Listed Investments, Waterfield Advisors, said. According to the data with

the depositories, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) offloaded shares worth ₹34,574 Crore from Indian equities in February.

This came following a net outflow of ₹78,027 Crore in the entire January.

With these, the total outflow by FPIs has reached ₹1,12,601 Crore in 2025 so far, data with the depositories showed. The massive selling by FPIs

has resulted in the BSE's benchmark Sensex falling over six per cent year-to-date. The recent market sell-off has been influenced by rising United States (US) bond yields, a strengthening US dollar, and global economic uncertainties, leading to a shift in investor focus towards US assets, Bhowar

According to him, the earnings reports for the third quarter of fiscal year 2025 have been modest, indicating an atmosphere of uncertainty. issue further compounded by falling commodity prices and reduced consumer spending, which adversely impact corporate profits diminish the appeal of Indian equities to foreign investors, he added.

"FPIs are focused on selling in India because valuations in India are high and moving money to Chinese stocks where valuations are much

"But in the process, they are selling in the best performing valuations," Chief Vijavakumar Investment Strategist, Geojit

Financial Services, said. An important paradox in FPIs selling is that they are selling heavily in financial services, the sector which is doing well and the valuations are attractive.

Additionally, they withdrew money from the debt market. They pulled out ₹8,932 Crore from debt general limit and ₹2,666 Crore from debt voluntary retention route.

The overall trend indicates a cautious approach by foreign investors, who scaled back investments in Indian equities significantly in 2024, with net inflows of just ₹427 Crore. This contrasts sharply with

the extraordinary ₹1.71 Lakh Crore net inflows in 2023 driven by optimism over India's strong economic fundamentals. In comparison, 2022 saw a net outflow of ₹ 1.21 Lakh

Crore amid aggressive rate hikes by global central banks.

Wave Group and Belgium's Agristo NV will invest around ₹750

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Crore to expand their potato processing plant in Uttar Pradesh to make premium french fries, amid rising global demand for processed

In 2019, Wave Group firm Masa Global Food Private Limited and Agristo's subsidiary firm IMSTO NV, Belgium had formed a 50:50 joint venture firm to establish a potato processing plant at Bijnor to make dehydrated potato flakes.

The name of the joint venture firm is Agristo Masa Private Limited. The plant started operations in 2022 with an annual capacity of 7,500 tonnes.

In an interview with PTI. Wave Group Chairman Manpreet Singh Chadha noted that there is an immense growth potential in Indian food processing

He also stressed on the need to boost crop yields and processing capacity for augmenting farmers income. "We are setting up a new

production line for export quality french fries at Bijnor," Chadha said. He said the total investment

Wave Group, Agristo to invest ₹750 Crore in UP

on this expansion will be around ₹750 Crore, which will be financed through equity and debt.

The joint venture had

invested around ₹300 Crore on setting up the existing plant, taking the total investment commitment to more than ₹1,000 Crore. Chadha said the new production line with 80,000 tonnes per annum capacity will become operational in the next two years and cater to both domestic and global

The JV is into business to business (B2B) segment

markets.

"Our aim is to empower the farmers and diversify their cash crop beyond sugarcane. We have helped these farmers to double the potatoes output with the help of new technologies. Their income has increased by 50 per cent over the last three-four years, Chadha.

Princess Astrid of the Kingdom of Belgium, hectare.
Finance Minister of Uttar The Bijnor plant caters to

Pradesh Suresh Kumar both domestic and export Khanna and Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh Manoj attended Singh groundbreaking ceremony for the expansion of the production facility.

Wave Group already has two sugar manufacturing plants in Bijnor area and has been procuring sugarcane from farmers.

The potato processing plant set up by the joint venture helped in firm has enhancing farmers income of this region, Chadha said. We are helping farmers in accessing good quality seeds for potato production. We also procuring all potatoes from farmers at a very remunerative price, Chadha said.

Around 2,500 farmers are expected to benefit from this expansion.

This is in addition to the 500 farmers in the region who been provided sustainable livelihood opportunities through the plant's interventions.
The productivity of potato

has gone up from 17 tonnes per hectare to 32 tonnes per

with markets, America, Middle East, South East Asia and Japan being destinations the key overseas. Filip Wallays, Co-CEO of Agristo, said, "The Bijnor

plant is a testament of how results can be achieved when vision and technical expertise are combined. Partnering with Masa Global Food has allowed us to contribute in meaningful manner to the rapidly evolving Indian agriculture and processing sectors ensure development of all stakeholders.'

To ensure the holistic development of farmers and the overall development of the region's agricultural landscape, the JV firm Agristo Masa has hired agronomists from Belgium and The Netherlands.

The joint venture firm is also assisting farmers in this region in mechanisation.

Wave Group is into real estate, sugar and food processing businesses. It has real estate projects in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

NCL aims for 139 MT production target in FY25

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Coal India arm Northern Coalfields Ltd (NCL) expects to achieve the production target of 139 Million Tonnes (MT) for the current fiscal.

In a statement, NCL said that till February the subsidiary produced 128.13 MT and "we are hopeful that we will also achieve our annual target". The company's dispatch was 125.78 MT in the April-

February period of the current fiscal. NCL's dispatch target for the current fiscal is 139 MT. The company known for its highly mechanised mines and critical role in ensuring the country's energy security, said that it has launched the first aid training programme for homemakers on a large scale. By extending awareness about first aid beyond the workplace and into the homes of its

workforce, NCL is fostering a primary-care-conscious

Radico Khaitan expects ₹500 Crore sales in FY26: MD

PTI NEW DELHI

Incouraged by the ongoing expects sales of ₹500 Crore from its luxury brands, including single malt 'Rampur' and Jaisalmer Indian Craft Gin, in the next fiscal, its Managing Director Abhishek Khaitan

The company expects an eightnine per cent volume growth, and value growth of around "12-15 per cent", Khaitan said, adding "this year has been a good year for us, and hopefully next year should be much

For the next fiscal, he said, "We expect the same thing, our premium PNA category (Prestige and above) should grow more than 15 per cent and we should be close to overall double-digit growth."

Radico Khaitan's luxury portfolio consists of Rampur Indian Single Malt, Jaisalmer Indian Craft Gin, Sangam World Malt and Spirit of Victory 1999 Pure Malt. "For the first time in Q3

(December quarter) we achieved a turnover of ₹100 Crore (from premium) and for the nine months of fiscal year 2024, we have achieved ₹250 Crore (turnover). We are very confident that for fiscal year 2026, Radico Khaitan should achieve ₹500 Crore of turnover, just for the luxury segment only," said Khaitan.

Moreover, to expand its presence in the fast-growing alcobev segment, Radico Khaitan plans to add two more brands next fiscal. "So in the first half, we are

planning to come out with two more brands in the luxury space. So we have been working for the last couple of years on that, and hopefully in the first half, we will see their entry into the Indian markets,'

Khaitan said. Radico Khaitan, which also owns other premium brands in the PNA category, including Royal Ranthambore, Dazzle Vodka, and Morpheus Blue, is experiencing high double-digit growth and expects momentum to continue.

Tailwinds from growing per

capita income and young demographics, such as India adding 20 Million new people Encouraged by the ongoing adding 20 million in the to the drinking age bracket alcoholic beverage (alcobev) every year, will help the momentum.

Khaitan is also unfazed about the government's decision to slash import duty on bourbon whiskey to 50 per cent and said it is very "minuscule" in size in the Indian liquor market and "that would not have so much pressure on the local companies".

However, over the ongoing talks for the UK-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA), he said the current duty of 150 per cent on Scotch whisky should be reduced in a gradual manner. It will allow the Indian brands to create space for themselves in the premium

"Our single malts are now outperforming the foreign single malts also, it is priced higher," he said, adding duty cut on import of bulk whisky (non-branded) from Scotland the Indian liquor companies, including Radico Khaitan will help them reduce

Besides, Radico Khaitan (earlier known as Rampur Distillery Company) expects to continue its growth from Defense Ministry Canteen Stores Department (CSD), where it is one of the largest providers of branded IMFL to the armed forces.

We are the market leaders there (at CSD). We would be having a close to 26 to 27 per cent and we feel the demand for the Indian products is very high. People are proud to consume the Indian brand," he

In the single malt and premium end, Radico Khaitan competes with Harvana-based Piccadilly Distilleries, Amrut and Paul John, among other brands.

In fiscal year 2024, Radico Khaitan's gross revenue from operations was at ₹15,483.9 Crore and had sold 45.6 million cases, in which PNA category's volume was 11.26 Million cases (of nine bottles each). Its Prestige and Above category brands grew by 20.3 per cent year-on-year in volume terms.

Excelsoft Technologies files for IPO with SEBI | US tariff, FIIs key drivers for markets PTI NEW DELHI

Excelsoft Technologies a vertical

software-as-a-service (SaaS) company focused on the learning and assessment market, has filed draft papers with capital markets Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to raise ₹700 Crore through an initial public offering (IPO). The proposed IPO of the

Karnataka-based company is a combination of a fresh issue of shares valued ₹210 Crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of shares worth ₹490 Crore by the promoters -Pedanta Technologies and Sudhanva, Dhananjaya according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP). The company may consider mobilising up to ₹270 Crore in pre-IPO round.

"If the pre-IPO placement is undertaken, then the amount raised from the pre-IPO placement will be reduced from the fresh offer size or the Offer for Sale portion," the company said in the draft papers filed on The company has proposed

to utilise the proceeds of the fresh issue towards purchase of land and construction of a new building and for upgradation and external electrical systems of its existing facility in Mysore, funding upgradation of the company's IT infrastructure purposes.

With over two decades of Excelsoft experience, provides technology-based solutions across diverse learning and assessment segments through longcontracts clients worldwide.

As on December 31, 2024, it caters to 71 clients spread across 17 countries, including the US, UK, India, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Canada. Some of its prominent

Pearson clients are Education, Inc, AQA Colleges of Education, Excellence, No. NxGen Asia D, Pearson Professional Assessments Ltd, Sedtech for Technology Education and Learning Ascend Learning Brigham Young

University-Training Qualifications UK, Surala Net Co Ltd, Excel Public School and The Chartered Quality Institute. On the financial front, Excelsoft reported a revenue from operations at ₹198.3 Crore in fiscal year 24, with ₹12.75 Crore.

As per the draft papers, there are no companies or peers in India that have business composition and segment contribution similar to it. According to an Arizton report, the global SaaS market has seen rapid growth, with vertical SaaS emerging as a dominant trend that promises trend tha specialised, promises industrytailored solutions. This shift has positioned vertical SaaS to grow at an even faster pace than general SaaS, with estimates suggesting that vertical SaaS could account for nearly 50 per cent of the SaaS market by 2030.

Anand Rathi Advisors is the book running lead manager to the issue. The equity shares of the company are proposed to be listed on BSE

PTI NEW DELHI

week, analysts said.

Equity markets will take cues from the United States (US) tariff related developments, global trends and trading activity of foreign investors this

Markets may face volatile sentiment continue to remain weak due to escalating trade tariff concerns and foreign fund outflows, experts noted. In February alone, the NSE Nifty tanked 1,383.7 points or 5.88 per cent. The BSE Sensex lost 4,302.47 points or 5.55 per cent last month.

From its record peak of 85,978.25 hit on September 27 last year, the BSE benchmark index is down 12,780.15 points or 14.86 per cent. The Nifty dropped 4,152.65 points or 15.80 per cent from its lifetime high of 26,277.35 hit on September 27, 2024. "Investors will be closely

watching key events, including the tariff policy, and jobless claims. In the near term, market conditions are expected to remain weak, with a gradual recovery anticipated earnings improve from Q1 fiscal year 2026 and global trade policy uncertainties

subside," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From macroeconomic space, announcement of HSBC manufacturing and services PMI data during the week would also be tracked by investors.

to trade with weakness due to weak global sentiments and lack of domestic triggers," Siddhartha Khemka, Head Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

The Indian economy grew by 6.2 per cent in the December quarter, recovering sequentially from seven-quarter lows, but the expansion came in lower than last year and at a time when it faces growing headwinds from the threat of a US tariff war. The 6.2 per cent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) was higher than a revised reading of 5.6 per cent expansion in the July-September 2024 period, according to data released by the Statistics Ministry on Friday. It was, however, lower than the RBI's estimate of 6.8

per cent for the period. Last week, the BSE benchmark slumped 2,112.96 points or

2.80 per cent, and the Nifty tanked 671.2 points or 2.94 per

"Uncertainty often weighs more than the actual event, and the market is currently grappling with concerns over potential trade Additionally, persistent FII

Investors) selling continues to add pressure," Ajit Mishra -SVP, research, Religare Broking Limited, said. Gross GST collections rose by 9.1 per cent to about Rs 1.84 Lakh Crore in February,

boosted

by consumption and indicating potential economic revival. As per the official data released on Saturday, on a gross basis, mop up from Central GST stood at ₹35,204 Crore, State GST at ₹43,704 Crore, Integrated GST at ₹90,870

domestic

Crore and compensation cess of ₹13,868 Crore. Satish Chandra Aluri, analyst, Lemonn Markets Desk, said "We are close to the signs of market capitulation with Friday's losses and might see a relief rally this week from oversold conditions but overall market is expected to be volatile with downward bias in

the near term.

Mcap of eight valued firms Wages drag as employment rises: Virmani

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Niti Aayog member Arvind Virmani has said that employment is increasing in India, real wages for regular jobs have not kept pace with inflation over the oast seven years.

India has an opportunity in terms of global population, and there is a need to take advantage of it. For this, improving the quality of teaching and training is important, he noted. In an interview with PTI-

Bhasha, he said, "According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, the workerpopulation ratio has been clearly increasing in the last seven years. This means that the number of jobs is increasing more than the population growth. There are fluctuations in this too but the trend shows that jobs are increasing. Therefore, it is wrong to say that jobs are not

increasing".

As per the PLFS Annual Report 2023-24 (July-June), the worker-population ratio in terms of persons of all ages increased to 43.7 per cent in 2023-24 from 34.7 per cent in2017-18.

"If we look at the wage data in PLFS, the real salary of casual workers has increased during the seven years and their condition has improved during this period. The figures confirm this.

"But a bigger issue is in the case of regular salaried jobs. In this category, real wages have not increased in line with inflation in seven years," the economist said.

"As far as my assessment is concerned, the main reason for wages not increasing as per inflation is the lack of skills. We are not hiring skilled jobs. I have seen the data of many

countries. Based on that, I

would say that we need to

work on this (skill). It is in a

very weak state. The central government is taking steps. States also need to work in this direction, work needs to be done at the district level because jobs will be created there.'

This is important because skills increase, productivity increases and real wages increase. This happens in India as well as in the world. Skill development is needed not only for those who are already working but also for the new people who are coming in," the Niti Aayog member said.

"According to the analysis we have done, skill development is needed at every level of education. Many children drop out of school midway, they need to be given skills accordingly. It is not that member said. everyone needs skills only to become an AI (artificial intelligence) or electronic engineer. We also have to

who drop out of school midway," Virmani said.

The major problem is the lack of quality education and skills. Skills need to be improved at every level - lower, middle and higher. We need skills for all kinds of jobs, he added. "For a developed India, there is

a need for improvement everywhere. We should see the opportunity and use it. We need to take advantage of the opportunities that we have at the level of global demographics. For this, improving the quality of education along with teaching and training is important. Attention needs to be paid here. So that we can reach a higher income level. Similarly, there is a supply chain, which needs to be worked upon," the

Job and skill are two sides of the same coin. If you have skill then it becomes easier to get a job. This needs to be understood." think about those children

plummet by ₹3 Lakh Crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued firms eroded by ₹3,09,244.57 Crore in a holidayshortened last week, with Tata Consultancy Services taking the biggest hit, in line with bearish trend in equities. Last week, the BSE benchmark gauge Sensex tanked 2,112.96 points or 2.80 per cent, and the NSE Nifty tumbled 671.2 points or 2.94 per cent.

In February alone, the Nifty dropped 1,383.7 points or 5.88 per cent. The Sensex lost 4,302.47 points or 5.55 per cent. The market valuation of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) plunged ₹1,09,211.97 Crore to ₹12,60,505.51 Crore, the most among the top-10 firms. With the sharp decline in its market valuation TCS slipped to the third rank in the top-10 most valued firms chart from the previous second place. HDFC Bank overtook TCS to become the second most valuable firm. The valuation of Infosys tanked ₹52,697,93 Crore ₹7,01,002.22 Crore.

Bharti Airtel's market valuation

eroded by ₹39,230.1 Crore to

₹8,94,993.67 Crore and that of Reliance Industries dropped ₹38.025.97 Crore to ₹ 16.23.343.45 Crore. State Bank of India's (SBI) valuation diminished by ₹29,718.99 Crore to ₹6,14,236.97 Crore.

The market capitalisation (mcap) of ICICI Bank slumped Crore ₹8,49,803.90 Crore. Hindustan Unilever's mcap declined by ₹11,700.97 Crore to

₹5,14,983.41 Crore. The valuation of ITC dipped

₹7,882.86 Crore to ₹4,93,867.57



Tasty Recipe Using **Pistachio**

n 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 Romb.

INGREDIENTS

• 1 cup American Pistachios; • 1/4 cup brown sugar; • 1 cup rolled oats, toasted; • 1 cup puffed amaranth (rajgira); • 1/4 cup honey; • 1/4 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
- Heat a non-stick pan. Add brown sugar and 2 thsps 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 hall



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.

- 1 tbsp butter; 1 cup kunafa dough; 2 cups pistachios; 1 tbsp oil; • 3 tbsp 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.

Move Your Body, Lift Your Mind **Move Your Body, Lift Your Mind** primary hormone that body release in response In an era where stress, anxiety, and depression to stress; can lead to increased anxiety and negatively impact your overall mental well-being. are becoming increasingly common, the role of physical activity in promoting mental well-Engaging in regular exercise helps lower corbeing has never been more crucial. While tisol levels, making it easier to manage stress most people may associate exercise with and maintain a balanced mood. physical health, its impact on mental well-When you engage in physical activity, your

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

Work on yourself because you have to leave

Work on yourself because this is how

a legacy behind

you win the mind.

body releases endorphins, those feel-good hormones that help reduce stress while increashappiness and relaxation. They help relieve pain, relax, and lift

mood. Exercise also promotes the production of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters that play a key

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

Regular exercise increases blood flow to the

class, gym or yoga sessions introduce you

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 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

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



Vidarbha wins third Ranji Trophy title

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

matches giving them 40 points.

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

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

Overall, Vidarbha won nine of the 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The veteran Nair, who had joined Vidarbha for this season, not only led their charge in the Vijay Hazare Trophy with five tons but also finished as the fourth highest rungetter in the Ranji Trophy, making 263 runs in pine matches at 53.03 863 runs in nine matches at 53.93 with four tons and two fifties. In the final, Nair struck 86 and 135.

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

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

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

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

World No. 2 Jeeno Thitikul

fought hard to chase Ko down,

Jeeno fired a 70, finishing at nine under, tied for second

with Japan's Ayaka Furue, who carded a closing 68. The Thai

star made an early push with

two birdies in the first four

holes to trail Ko by a stroke at

9-under but couldn't maintain

Charley Hull, just one shot

the pressure.

but her charge fell just short.



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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Olympic nternational Committee **▲** president's post contender Sebastian Coe feels India's bid to host the 2036 Olympic Games is a "strong case" but competition will be tough with several other countries throwing their hats in the

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

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

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

an exclusive interview.
Poland, Indonesia, South
Africa, Qatar, Hungary, Turkey, Mexico and Egypt are among other countries which have expressed a desire to

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

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

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

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

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

"So it is by no means the end of the story. And even the legacy from bidding is an extremely strong legacy." More than 100 members of

the IOC will vote on March

20 in the Greek resort of

Costa Navarino, where the 144th IOC Session will be held from March 18 to 21. Besides Coe, the other six candidates are Prince Feisal Al Hussein of Jordan, David Lappartient of France, Johan Eliasch of Sweden, Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr of Spain, Kirsty Coventry of Zimbabwe and Morinari Watanabe of Japan.

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

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

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

and silver respectively in

Praggnanandhaa scores second victory in Prague Masters

PTI ■ PRAGUE

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

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

Anish Giri of Netherlands played out his fourth draw in as many games with Gurel Ediz of Turkey, while Czech GM Nguyen Thai Dai Van also drew with Quang Leim Le of Vietnam in the other two games of the 10-player round-robin tournament. With Praggnanadhaa and

Aravindh in front, Shankland, Keymer, Giri and Le share the third spot a full point behind and it looks like the race for the title will be between the two Indians only with five rounds still to come. Almost a month back

Kevmer had beaten Praggnanandhaa in the Tata Steel Masters and the Indian

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

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

on time and wasted some moves moving his rook back Indian obviously understood it better and used his pieces well to win a couple of pawns. The rest was easy and it was all over in 44 moves. Aravindh faced the Sicilian defense and Shankland

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

The next round will see the two leaders pitted against other Praggnanadhaa will play with white.

matter much.

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

Lydia Ko wins Singapore LPGA **PTI** ■ SINGAPORE Asia's major to my major collection," the New Zealander

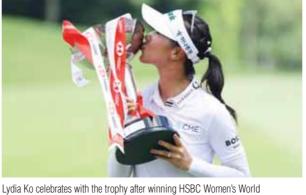
Lydia Ko finally conquered the LPGA's HSBC Women's World Championship, clinching her first title at her 11th attempt with a dominant four-stroke win over Ayaka Furue and Jeeno Thitikul in Funday's final round Sunday's final round. The 2024 Olympic gold

medalist and Women's British Open champion overcame a middling start before finding her rhythm with a birdie on the par-5 sixth Ko added back-to-back birdies

on Nos. 7 and 8, seizing control of the leaderboard from then Despite dropping two bogeys

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

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



Championship 2025 at Sentosa Golf Club in Singapore

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

"I started off really steady, and

you know, didn't really put myself in trouble that much. I think that was going to be the key for today? Ko's previous best finish here

was a lone second place in "It's exciting to finally add the year.

behind Ko entering the final round, saw her title hopes fade after a frustrating 74, settling for a share of fourth at seven

under alongside Im Jin Hee, who fired the day's best round of 67, and Gaby Lopez (70). The Singapore tournament is the second of three events on the LPGA's first Asian swing of

iv Richards praises Kohli, calls him 'legendary'

PTI MUMBAI

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

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

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

interaction. "This is why I put him in the category of being great and legendary... Not all the time that you get players who can come back when they're down. His fighting spirit, energy and passion to do well make him stand out." Richards said if he was still playing, he would love to have Kohli's energy on the field. "His energy reflects his

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

Asked about batters he admires, the former West Indies captain said Kohli reminds him of himself. "A lot of batsmen... Before you

had people like Sachin



Tendulkar, who has retired," he said.

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

"I appreciate seeing guys who,



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

Richards said given his fitness and hunger, Kohli can go on to play ODIs for a long time. "I'll tell you something. Just the way he is and the way how fit he is and the way he still believes, very passionate about the game. You never know. He could still play when he's 50," he said. "You never know. But it's just

magnificent to see. Sometimes

we see guys go on and maybe they come to an age and sometimes you look and you say, 'wow, he doesn't look as good as in the past." But he just scored 100 just recently against Pakistan in

Dubai so that says that, and this has just happened. This suggests that he's still very much at the very best, in the best of form," he added. Richards, however, declined to

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

some very good player," he said.

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

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

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

Real Betis defeats Real Madrid 2-1 in Spanish league

PTI BARCELONA

 $R^{\text{eal Madrid stumbled in the}}_{\text{three-way}} \ \text{race for the}$ Spanish league title as Isco Alarcón guided Real Betis to a 2-1 comeback win over the

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

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

Madrid's loss left it level on points with Barcelona, which hosts Real Sociedad on Sunday. Atletico Madrid moved two points clear of them both at the top of the table after substitute Julián Álvarez scored to secure a 1-0 win over Athletic Bilbao. Kylian Mbappé was back starting for Madrid after missing one game because of a problem with a tooth. Coach Carlo Ancelotti substituted him with 15 minutes left, saying that his dental issue had impeded him from training properly and that his star striker "was not 100

per cent."
"We weren't able to keep our

away from us," Ancelotti said. 'This is a hard blow, and we have to react. Today we didn't play well. Madrid had led the league but

is now struggling with just one victory its last five rounds, a poor run that includes a defeat at modest Espanyol. Next for Madrid: Tuesday's

Champions League round-of-16 game against Atletico. Isco torments old team Isco left Madrid three years ago,

having helped it win five Champions League titles before he lost his starting job and then struggled to get off the bench. But Madrid might wish it had him back after the 32-year-old initiative and the result got midfielder was the most



decisive player on the field at the Benito Villamarin. Isco, however, shared the credit for the win with his teammates.

"Madrid has the best players

and a million different ways it can hurt you, so if it weren't for the hard work of the entire team we wouldn't have been able to do this," Isco said, before adding that he was still "grateful" for his time at

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

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

"I haven't played for Spain in six, seven years, so of course I would like to." Madrid has good start and little

Madrid started strong and

looked ready to romp when Mbappé played Ferland Mendy through and the left back squared the ball for Brahim to

But Isco delivered a swerving corner kick for Cardoso, who was unmarked at the penalty spot to thump a header through the arms of Thibaut Courtois. Shortly after, as rain poured down, Courtois had to make a wonder save to palm another Cardoso header over the bar in first-half injury time.

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

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

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

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

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