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BUCH BOOKED

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

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



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

allowing the listing of the company. He said in his application that he had approached the court as the police and regulatory authorities had failed to take action on his complaint. Citing Supreme Court judgements in the past, the Special Court Judge noted: "Considering the gravity of allegations, applicable laws and settled legal precedents, this Court deems it appropriate to direct an investigation under Section 156(3) of CrPC." The ACB has been directed to register an FIR under the relevant provisions of Indian Penal Code (IPC), Prevention of Corruption Act, SEBI Act, and other applicable laws. As per the order, the Special Court will monitor the investigations. The court has asked the ACB to file a status report within 30 days. Meanwhile, the SEBI in a statement released to the media on Sunday dismissed the complaint - based on which the special court had passed the order - as the one coming from a "frivolous and habitual litigant" and said that it would challenge the order passed by the special court. "Even though these officials

were not holding their respective positions at the relevant point of time, the court allowed the application without issuing any notice or granting any opportunity to SEBI to place the facts on record," the SEBI stated in its statement. "The applicant is known to be a frivolous and habitual litigant, with previous applications being dismissed by the court, with imposition of costs in some cases. SEBI would be initiating appropriate legal steps to challenge this order and remains committed to ensuring due regulatory compliance in all matters," the statement added. It may be recalled that then SEBI chief Mudhabi Buch had come under a cloud in August last year after the Hindenburg report alleged that she and her husband Dhaval Buch "had hidden stakes in the exact same obscure offshore Bermuda and Mauritius funds, found in the same complex nested structure, used by Vinod Adani". The Hindenburg Research - which had accused the Adani group of "brazen stock market manipulation" and "accounting fraud" - had tried to connect the SEBI's inaction against the Adani group for alleged "stock market manipulation" with the investments made by Mudhabi Buch and her husband in offshore funds. Hindenburg's report had alleged that as a whole-time member of SEBI, Buch was in communication with managers of offshore funds, and wrote to India Infoline to redeem the units in the fund. **Continued on page 2**



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

Chamoli avalanche rescue death toll rises to eight

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DEHRADUN

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

possible inclement weather on Monday, officials said. Three bodies of the missing labourers were found on Sunday, district administration officials said in Gopeshwar. With this, the number of workers who lost their lives in the Mana avalanche mounted to seven. One person is still missing for whom the search is in progress, they said. Located three kilometres from Badrinath, Mana is the last village on the India-Tibet border at a height of 3,200 metres. The bodies have been brought to Jyotirmath by helicopter where the post-mortem was being done at the Community Health Centre. The deceased include Anil Kumar (21) from Rudrapur in Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar district, Ashok (28) from Fatehpur in Uttar Pradesh and Harmesh from Una in Himachal Pradesh, the officials said. The lone worker who remains missing is 43-year-old Arvind from Dehradun. **Continued on page 2**

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 YSRC regime. In a government order, Chief Secretary K Vijayanand stated that Kumar, a DGP-rank officer awaiting posting, had deviated from the travel plan approved by the government during those overseas trips. "Now, therefore, in the exercise of the powers conferred under Rule 3 (1) of the All India Service (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969, the Government of Andhra Pradesh hereby places P V Sunil Kumar, IPS, under suspension with immediate effect," said the Chief Secretary in the order. According to the top bureaucrat, Kumar repeatedly demonstrated willful disregard for established practices. His actions exhibit gross negligence, indiscipline, and grave misconduct by undertaking foreign travel without obtaining the requisite permission, he said, adding that disciplinary proceedings were being contemplated for such repeated acts of "grave misconduct." **Continued on page 2**

WEATHER

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

BSP rides on Behenji's Maya



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

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

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

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



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

On Ramazan, Israel cuts off aid to Gaza

PTI ■ TEL AVIV

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

dozens of remaining hostages in return for an Israeli pullout and a lasting ceasefire. An Israeli official said the decision to suspend aid was made in coordination with the Trump administration. There was no immediate comment from the United States. Hundreds of aid trucks have entered Gaza daily since the ceasefire began on Jan. 19, and it was unclear what the immediate impact of the aid cutoff would be. **ISRAEL SAYS THE NEW PROPOSAL IS BACKED BY THE US:** Israel said the new proposal, which it said came from US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff, called for extending the ceasefire through Ramazan and the Jewish Passover holiday, which ends on April 20. **Continued on page 2**

Zoos battling reduced funding

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



Photo: The Pioneer

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

managing populations difficult. The committee also highlighted that lack of genetic diversity, improper tracking and poor record-keeping reduce the success of conservation breeding programmes. While some successes, such as Gaur and Indian Chevrotain, demonstrate potential for growth and recovery, they also "expose broader challenges including inconsistent record-keeping, uncoordinated transfers and inadequate husbandry practices," the committee said. Primates, Squamata (reptiles), and Perissodactyla (odd-toed ungulates) struggle with low birth rates and poor genetic diversity. Animals like the King Cobra and Western Hoolock Gibbon have specific environmental needs that are not being met, which reduces their chances of successful breeding. **Continued on page 2**

Youths into excessive social media suffer sexual ailments

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

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

toward real-life relationships. Professor Adarsh Tripathi, head of the Sexual and Marital Wellness Clinic at KGMU's psychiatry department, revealed that the outpatient department (OPD) receives 10 to 12 youngsters daily with sexual health concerns, a significant portion of whom exhibit compulsive social media consumption habits. "Most of them spend a large part of their day scrolling through reels, shorts, and explicit images. This continuous exposure conditions their brains to expect exaggerated and often unattainable forms of intimacy, making them less sensitive to real-life relationships," Prof. Tripathi explained. **Continued on page 2**

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

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

This happens only in India

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

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

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

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

Daughter of Union minister molested in Maharashtra

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In a shocking development that embarrassed the BJP-led MahaYuti government on the eve of the start of crucial budget session of the Maharashtra Legislature...

incident, chief minister 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..."

accused no longer fear the law. Many girls hesitate to come forward, but we must not remain silent. That is why I have personally filed this complaint," the Union Minister said.

Omar Abdullah holds pre-budget meeting with allies

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

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

attended the meeting to ensure smooth functioning of the house. The Congress legislature party also met separately at Residency Road party headquarters.

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.

Forty two more firearms surrendered in Manipur

PTI ■ IMPHAL

Forty-two more firearms and cartridges have been surrendered by the public in five districts of ethnic strife-torn Manipur, police said on Sunday.

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.

Frequent trips abroad land IPS officer in soup

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

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.

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."

Ganga water in Bihar unfit for human use: state pollution board

PTI ■ PATNA

The water of the Ganga river 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 2024-25.

"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 aquatic life, wildlife propagation, fisheries and irrigation," it said.

coliform is 2,500 MPN/100 ml," Shukla said. At most places, the presence of total coliform and faecal coliform in the Ganga is much higher, indicating it is not fit for bathing, he said.

Fadnavis denies rumors of rift in BJP-led Mahayuti

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Ahead of the budget session of the Maharashtra Legislature, chief minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday denied that there were any differences or the battle of one-upmanship among the ruling BJP-led MahaYuti allies.

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 reports.

Youths into excessive social media suffer sexual ailments

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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 content distorts these perceptions. "The 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 physiological," he added.

digital consumption is equally troubling for women. Many young women develop body image disorders due to the unrealistic portrayals of beauty and intimacy in online videos and photos.

dysmorphia and low self-esteem, particularly among young women who feel pressured to match these unattainable standards," she said.

consumption," he urged. Additionally, Dr. Sharma 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 negative effects."

Zoos battling reduced funding Buch booked

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"Habitat requirements and taxonomic ambiguities constrain the management of species like the Indian Wild Ass and Himalayan Salamander which have shown minimal growth despite decades of conservation efforts," the committee noted. It said that some birds and reptiles, like vultures (White-rumped 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 structured conservation efforts, with populations primarily consisting of solitary or 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 structured management. The committee said that small populations, poor demographic and genetic monitoring, improper husbandry practices, inadequate technical supervision, poor documentation, lack of animal identification, poor adherence to breeding protocols and lack of coordination between zoos are common challenges across all groups of animals.

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

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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 Sa'ar 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 truce. "We fulfilled all our 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 have "humanitarian

consequences" for the 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.

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 enter. 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. Hamas said Israel's aid 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 famine. 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 genocide. 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 off aid. 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 hostages. 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...

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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 labourers. The weather may turn bad on Monday again. The effort is to trace the missing on Sunday itself," the chief minister said. In a social media post, Dhami said he has instructed officials to expedite the ongoing operation. "The Indian Army, ITBP, NDRF, SDRF and other relief and rescue teams are working on a war footing at the site of the incident," he said. Chamoli District Magistrate Sandeep Tiwari said the search operation is expected to gain pace as the weather is clear and the GPR system from Delhi is expected to arrive here any moment to aid the efforts.

An Mi-17 helicopter is waiting in Dehradun to fly the GPR system to the avalanche site, he said. State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams with sniffer dogs are at the avalanche site to help in the search and rescue efforts, he said. Lt Gen Anindya Sengupta, GOC-in-C, Central Command, and Lt Gen D G Mishra, GOC, Uttar Bharat, are at the avalanche site to monitor the rescue operations. Six helicopters - three of the Indian Army Aviation Corps, two of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and a civil chopper hired by the Army - have been engaged in the operation. Army officials said the rescue operation on Saturday was mostly carried out by the Army and IAF helicopters as the approach road was blocked by snow at several points, making vehicular movement nearly impossible. The priority is to bring the rescued workers to the Army hospital in Jyotirmath and look for the four missing workers, they said. If weather permits, specialised RECCO radars, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), quadcopters and avalanche rescue dogs will be pressed into service to trace the missing workers, Lt Gen. Sengupta said. "Everything depends on the weather," he added. More than 200 personnel from the disaster management authority, ITBP, BRO, NDRF, SDRF, IAF, district administration, health department and fire brigade are engaged in the rescue operations, he said.

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 labourers. The weather may turn bad on Monday again. The effort is to trace the missing on Sunday itself," the chief minister said. In a social media post, Dhami said he has instructed officials to expedite the ongoing operation. "The Indian Army, ITBP, NDRF, SDRF and other relief and rescue teams are working on a war footing at the site of the incident," he said. Chamoli District Magistrate Sandeep Tiwari said the search operation is expected to gain pace as the weather is clear and the GPR system from Delhi is expected to arrive here any moment to aid the efforts.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

A clash of diplomacy and dignity

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

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



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

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

PICTALK



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

PTI

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

A new era for rural revival and inclusive growth

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

Under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, Rs 79,500 crore have been distributed to farmers while Rs 496 crore have also been disbursed under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana. The state's sugarcane production capacity has also increased from 72 tonnes to 85 tonnes per hectare, boosting the income levels of farmers.

The recently presented Budget will not only take the development of the state to new heights but will also transform rural India. From roads to digital infrastructure, farmers to industry, and women empowerment to a bright future for the youth, this Budget has been able to ensure that the needs of every section of society are taken care of.

With the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and schemes aimed at boosting the rural economy and infrastructure, Uttar Pradesh is rapidly moving towards fulfilling the dream of a self-reliant India. I am confident that this Budget will realise the vision of 'growth and progress' of UP and propel the state towards the exalted status of the most developed state in the country.

(The writer is Deputy Chief Minister of UP; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FINDING FUNDS FOR FREEBIES

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

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

Vinod Johri | Delhi

SEBI GETS NEW CHAIRMAN

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

Decriminalise Indian politics



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

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

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

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

US-Ukraine talks fail

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

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

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

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

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

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

DEALING WITH EXAM ANXIETY

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



SAKSHI SETHI

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

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



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

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

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Is Forest Rights Act driving deforestation?



B K SINGH

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Environmental Development Society, Hyderabad, accused the state of pressurising officials for recognition of rights to ineligible individuals resulting in large-scale deforestation leading to the scam of unprecedented proportion.

There are reports from Rampachodavaram Forests division, Rajamundry (AP) that tribal department officials are granting rights in Papikonda National Park for money. A retired IFS M Padamanaba Reddy has filed a PIL for the scam. In February 2019, just before the Lok Sabha polls, states moved the Supreme Court to review its order of eviction of rejected IFR claims and allow them to re-verify. The court accepted it, but so far the states have not concluded and continue to accept the fresh claims. What signal does it send down the line?

The Act has provided unlimited time for filing claims and deforestation and bringing the land under plough can continue. No one has any concern about the ecological security of the country. It is to be understood that all rejected claimants are in occupation of the forest land, where they have already been successful in deforesting and clearing the area. More rejected claims are encouraged, and more deforestation takes place.

The only place where the CFRs and rights to manage the forests sustainably have been granted is the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Section 3-1 (i) of FRA 2006 is relevant here, where rights can be granted to villages of Gram Sabha who have the experience of managing the area sustainably. Further the requirement of Section 4 (3) of the Act is also

essential for the grant of rights i.e. they should have the resource as on 13-12-2005 for tribal and 75 years before this date for OTFDs. Management rights have been granted in many Gram Sabhas of Gadchiroli overlooking both the provisions.

Activists are taking this example all over the country and pressing for a repeat of this. This has been frequently quoted example in articles and papers. What these authors have been hiding is the destruction of forests. Forest areas given for the sustainable management of Gram Sabhas have been devastated, degraded and fragmented.

There are patches of bamboo forests in Medha Lekha Gram Sabha where all bamboo clumps were cleared in one stroke in 2012. Forest officers were physically prevented from entering the area. Bamboo has not responded well to the clear feeling. The fresh regeneration is bushy and does not yield any usable bamboo culm. It yielded certain culms every four years when it was managed by the Forest Department.

The management of Medha Lekha Gram Sabha has not been sustainable and the area has not yielded culms in 2016, 2020 and 2024. Taking a cue from Madha Lekha, other Gram Sabhas have also started clear felling and over-exploitation of the resource. Further, the revenue realised from the sale proceeds has not been ploughed back for fresh regeneration activities and the management has become completely unsustainable.

(The writer is Retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of Forest Force, Karnataka; views are personal)

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

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

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



SAMEER MATHUR

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

methods but rather integrating them with modern digital solutions. This approach is proving transformative across key sectors such as banking, commerce, agriculture, healthcare, and public services.

Driving Financial Inclusion For years, traditional banking models have struggled to serve India's vast rural expanses. High operational costs, challenging geography, and low financial literacy have hampered efforts to bring modern financial services to remote communities.

While FinTech has broadened access through digital banking, a fully digital approach can alienate those who lack familiarity with smartphones or online transactions. The phygital model addresses these gaps by merging digital conve-

nience with physical touchpoints.

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

This integration allows people to withdraw cash, pay bills, and transfer money within their



locality, bypassing the need to travel long distances to bank branches and operating beyond standard banking hours. The result is a significant leap forward in achieving comprehensive financial inclusion.

Reinvigorating Rural Commerce

E-commerce has revolutionised urban shopping by altering customer habits and payment methods, but rural

consumers still rely heavily on cash transactions. A completely digital model often fails to resonate with these communities. Instead, the phygital model has emerged as an effective alternative by combining the reach of online platforms with the trust of local, physical commerce. Local kirana stores are increasingly functioning as pick-up points for online orders, ensuring that digital transactions are accessible even to those without digital payment capabilities.

Assisted commerce kiosks further support rural shoppers by helping them browse products, place orders, and make payments—often in cash—thereby bridging the gap between digital platforms and traditional retail.

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

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

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

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer says Britain, France and Ukraine have agreed to work on a ceasefire plan to present to the United States. Starmer says the plan emerged after talks among the four countries' leaders following Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Oval Office blowout with US President Donald Trump. The prime minister told the BBC he believes the US president wants a durable peace in Ukraine. He repeated his assertion that American security guarantees will be needed to make it stick. Starmer is hosting a summit of European leaders in London on Sunday to discuss Ukraine. It was supposed to cap a week of whirlwind diplomacy advancing the prospect of peace in Ukraine. But a summit of European leaders on Sunday has been overshadowed by the extraordinary scolding by US President Donald Trump of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House on Friday for being ungrateful for US support. The London meeting has now taken on greater importance in defending the war-torn ally and shoring up the continent's defenses. "There's a real problem for European leaders to pick up the pieces and try and move forward," Peter Ricketts, the former British national security adviser, told BBC radio on Saturday. "It's going to be a damage limitation exercise. It's going to have to be an exercise in where



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

do we go from here?" The meeting at Lancaster House, a 200-year-old elegant mansion near Buckingham Palace, follows a charm offensive last week to engage with Trump at the White House to put Ukraine at the centre of negotiations and tilt his allegiances toward Europe. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is hosting the leaders of more than a dozen countries and other officials, said he is determined to find an end to Russia's war on Ukraine. "We have an opportunity to come together to ensure a just and lasting peace in Ukraine that secures their sovereignty and security," Starmer said in advance. "Now is the time for us to unite in order to guarantee the best outcome for

Ukraine, protect European security, and secure our collective future." The summit will also include leaders from France, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Canada, Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic and Romania. The Turkish foreign minister, NATO secretary-general and the presidents of the European Commission and European Council will also attend. Zelenskyy received broad support from leaders across Europe after the White House fiasco, which was exceptional for featuring an attack on an ally — and because it was broadcast on live television. Starmer embraced Zelenskyy when he arrived Saturday for a private meeting — a day before

a get-together had been scheduled before the summit. "As you heard from the cheers on the street outside, you have full backing across the United Kingdom," Starmer said. "We stand with you, with Ukraine, for as long as it may take." Europe has been uneasy since Trump initiated direct peace talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had been isolated by most Western leaders since invading Ukraine three years ago. The scramble to remain relevant and protect European interests as their once stalwart ally appeared to be cozying up to Putin was even more troubling when Trump called Zelenskyy a dictator and falsely said Ukraine started the war. Meetings in recent days had provided some hope — until Zelenskyy's visit to the White House. Visits to the Oval Office by French President Emmanuel Macron, who had declared his visit a "turning point," and Starmer were seen as steps in the right direction. The meetings were cordial and Trump even took a gentler tone toward Ukraine though he would not commit to providing US security guarantees and maintained Europe would need to provide peacekeeping troops. Within 12 hours of Starmer's return from Washington, the talk of peace seemed to collapse as Vice President JD Vance berated Zelenskyy for challenging Trump's assertions that Russian President Vladimir Putin could be trusted. "Starmer did an impressive job of asserting Europe's agency in the war on Ukraine and conveying to President Trump that Europe is willing and able

to take a leading role in implementing any credible peace deal," said Rachel Ellehuus, director-general of Royal United Services Institute, a defence and security think tank. "Unfortunately, Friday's White House meeting was a major step backward." Ukraine can no longer count on military or political support from the US after Trump declared himself neutral in negotiations, Ellehuus said. She said Europe needs to step in and could release some 200 billion euros (USD 207 billion) in seized Russian assets to help fund that effort. "The immediate goal of the meetings in London must be to keep Ukraine in the fight so it can negotiate from a maximum position of strength," she said. Starmer pledged this week to boost military spending to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product by 2027. Other European nations may follow suit. Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said Saturday that Europe faces a historic test and has to care for itself. He said European countries have to increase their arms spending to reach at least 3 per cent of GDP. "If we don't increase our effort fast enough and let the aggressor dictate its conditions we won't end up well," he said. Macron, who said it was legitimate for the US to shift its focus to dealing with China and Asia, also called for more defense spending as he called for unity among his neighbors. "We should have woken up earlier," Macron said. "I've been saying for years that we need a more sovereign, more united, more independent Europe."

Private lunar lander Blue Ghost aces moon touchdown

PTI ■ CAPE CANAVERAL (US)

A private lunar lander carrying a drill, vacuum and other experiments for NASA touched down on the moon Sunday, the latest in a string of companies looking to kick-start business on Earth's celestial neighbour ahead of astronaut missions. Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost lander descended from lunar orbit on autopilot, aiming for the slopes of an ancient volcanic dome in an impact basin on the moon's northeastern edge of the near side. Confirmation of successful touchdown came from the company's Mission Control outside Austin, Texas, following the action some 225,000 miles (360,000 kilometers) away. "You all stuck the landing. We're on the moon," Firefly's Will Coogan, chief engineer for the lander, reported. An upright and stable landing makes Firefly — a startup founded a decade ago — the first private outfit to put a spacecraft on the moon without crashing or falling over. Even companies have faltered, with only five claiming success: Russia, the US, China, India and Japan. A half hour after landing, Blue Ghost started to send back pictures from the surface, the first one a selfie somewhat obscured by the sun's glare. The second shot included the home planet, a blue dot glimmering in the blackness of space. Two other companies' landers are hot on Blue Ghost's heels, with the next one expected to join it on the moon later this week. Blue Ghost — named after a rare US species of fireflies — had its size and shape going for it. The squat four-legged lander stands 6-foot-6 (2 metres) tall and 11 feet (3.5 metres) wide,



providing extra stability, according to the company. Launched in mid-January from Florida, the lander carried 10 experiments to the moon for NASA. The space agency paid USD 101 million for the delivery, plus USD 44 million for the science and tech on board. It's the third mission under NASA's commercial lunar delivery programme, intended to ignite a lunar economy of competing private businesses while scouting around before astronauts show up later this decade. Firefly's Ray Allensworth said the lander skipped over hazards including boulders to land safely. Allensworth said the team continued to analyse the data to figure out the lander's exact position, but all indications suggest it landed within the 328-foot (100-metre) target zone in Mare Crisium. The demos should get two weeks of run time, before lunar daytime ends and the lander shuts down. It carried a vacuum to suck up moon dirt for analysis and a drill to measure temperature as deep as 10 feet (3 metres) below the surface. Also on board: a device for eliminating abrasive lunar dust — a scourge for NASA's long-ago Apollo

moonwalkers, who got it caked all over their spacesuits and equipment. On its way to the moon, Blue Ghost beamed back exquisite pictures of the home planet. The lander continued to stun once in orbit around the moon, with detailed shots of the moon's gray pockmarked surface. At the same time, an on-board receiver tracked and acquired signals from the US GPS and European Galileo constellations, an encouraging step forward in navigation for future explorers. The landing set the stage for a fresh crush of visitors angling for a piece of lunar business. Another lander — a tall and skinny 15-footer (4 metres tall) built and operated by Houston-based Intuitive Machines — is due to land on the moon Thursday. It's aiming for the bottom of the moon, just 100 miles (160 kilometers) from the south pole. That's closer to the pole than the company got last year with its first lander, which broke a leg and tipped over. Despite the tumble, Intuitive Machines' lander put the US back on the moon for the first time since NASA astronauts closed out the Apollo programme in 1972.

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

PTI ■ TEHRAN

Iran's parliament on Sunday impeached the country's economy minister and voted to remove him from office, amid growing concerns over the crashing rial and accusations of mismanagement. Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf announced that 182 out of 273 lawmakers voted to dismiss Abdolnasser Hemmati, just six months after President Masoud Pezeshkian's government took office. Pezeshkian, who defended Hemmati, emphasised that the government is locked in a tough battle with the West. He called for greater unity and cooperation from Parliament to face these challenges. The decision comes amid rising tensions over Iran's nuclear program and worsening relations with the West. Iran's economy has been severely affected by international sanctions, especially after the US withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal. In 2015, the rial was worth 32,000 to the dollar, but by the time Pezeshkian took office in July, it had plummeted to 584,000 to the dollar. Recently, it dropped even further, with exchange shops in Tehran trad-



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

ing 930,000 rials for each dollar. During the impeachment proceedings, Mohammad Qasim Osmani, a lawmaker supporting Hemmati, argued that rising inflation and exchange rates were not the fault of the current government or Parliament. He pointed to the budget deficit left by the previous administration, which he said contributed to the economic instability. Osmani also cited recent geopolitical events as factors that undermined public confidence, causing many people to convert their savings into foreign currency, which in turn further devalued the rial. Hemmati acknowledged the tough economic climate during his five months in office, including a 10% reduction in inflation. However, he acknowledged that inflation remained high, standing at 35%. He assured lawmakers that his team was working hard to address the issue, but warned that the process would take time. This latest development is another chapter in Iran's ongoing political and economic struggles as the country continues to navigate a complex relationship with the international community.



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

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

PTI ■ SEOUL

A US aircraft carrier arrived in South Korea on Sunday in a show of force, days after North Korea test-launched cruise missiles to demonstrate its counterattack capabilities. The arrival of the USS Carl Vinson and its strike group at the South Korean port of Busan was meant to display a solid US-South Korean military alliance in the face of persistent North Korean threats, and boost interoperability of the allies' combined assets, the South Korean navy said in a statement. It said it was the first US aircraft carrier to travel to South Korea since June. The deployment of the carrier is expected to infuriate North Korea, which views temporary deployments of such powerful US military assets as a major security threat. North Korea has responded to some of the past deployments of US aircraft carriers, long-range bombers and nuclear-powered submarines with missile tests. Since his Jan. 20 inauguration, President Donald Trump has said he will reach out to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un again to revive diplomacy.

Pope gets visit from Vatican secretary of state

PTI ■ ROME

A stable Pope Francis had a visit Sunday from the Vatican secretary of state as he continued his recovery from double pneumonia, the Vatican said, but again skipped his weekly noon blessing to avoid even a brief public appearance from the hospital. Instead, the Vatican distributed a message from the pope in which he thanked his doctors for their care and well-wishers for their prayers, and prayed again for peace in Ukraine and elsewhere. "From here, war appears even more absurd," Francis said in the message, which he drafted in recent days from the Gemelli hospital, the Vatican said. Francis said he was living his hospitalization as an experience of profound solidarity with people who are sick and suffering everywhere. "I feel in my heart the blessing that is hidden within frailty, because it is precisely in these moments that we learn even more to trust in the Lord," Francis said in the text. "At the same time, I thank God for giving me the opportunity to share in body and spirit the condition of so many sick and suffering people." Signs point to a recovery: It marked the third weekend in a row that Francis has cancelled



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

the Sunday appointment delivering the Angelus prayer in person. He could have done so from his 10th floor hospital suite at the Gemelli hospital if he were well enough. But many signs indicated he was recovering and improving. "The night was quiet, the pope is still resting," the Vatican said in its Sunday update. Cardinal Pietro Parolin and his chief of staff, Archbishop Edgar Pena Parra, called on the pope Sunday morning, their second visit since Francis' February 14 hospitalisation, according to the Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni. There were no details of what was discussed, but the mere visit suggested Francis' condition was stabilizing. "The night was quiet, the pope is still resting," the Vatican said in its Sunday early update. He had no fever or signs of elevated white blood cells, which

would signal his body was still fighting an infection. Doctors on Saturday reported that Francis was in stable condition, with no mention of him being critical. Their upbeat assessment came a day after a respiratory crisis that resulted in him being put on noninvasive mechanical ventilation. But the 88-year-old pope had a "good response" in his gas exchange levels even during the "long periods" he was off the ventilator mask Saturday and only using high-flow supplemental oxygen, the Vatican said. The fact that Francis was able to use just high-flow oxygen for long periods, without any significant effect on the levels of oxygen in his blood, was a sign his respiratory function was improving. Doctors were cautious however and kept his prognosis as guarded, meaning he wasn't out

of danger. He was eating and drinking and continued his respiratory physiotherapy, and spent 20 minutes in his private chapel down the hall on Saturday, the Vatican said. The pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has lung disease and was admitted to Gemelli on Feb. 14 after a bout of bronchitis worsened and turned into a complex pneumonia in both lungs. Prayers continued to pour in: Francis' hospitalization has come as the Vatican is marking its Holy Year, drawing pilgrims to Rome from all over. They are walking through the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica and also making pilgrimages to the hill-top Umbrian town of Assisi, to pray at the home of Francis' namesake, St. Francis. "Every day we're praying for the pope," said the Rev. Jacinto Bento, a priest visiting Assisi on Saturday with a group of 30 Jubilee pilgrims from the Azores Islands. "We're very sad for his situation." In an odd coincidence, Francis was supposed to have presided Saturday over a Holy Year audience in the Vatican's auditorium for the staff of the Gemelli hospital and other health care workers. They came as planned and completed the pilgrimage, while Francis continued his recovery at the hospital.

Syrians begin fasting during Ramazan without Assad family

PTI ■ DAMASCUS

Some restaurants and coffee shops in Syria were closed during the day on Saturday while others opened as usual as observant Muslims began fasting during the holy month of Ramazan, the first since the fall of Assad family rule in the war-torn country. Syria's interim Ministry of Religious Endowments reportedly called for all restaurants, coffee shops and street food stands be closed during the day and that people must not eat or drink in public or face punishment. Those who violate the rule could get up to three months in jail. However, it did not appear that any official order had been issued by the government to that effect. Associated Press journalists who toured Damascus on Saturday said some coffee shops were opened but had their windows closed to that people can't see who is inside. Insurgents led by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, overthrew President Bashar Assad's secular government in early December ending the 54-year Assad family dynasty. Since then, Syria's new Islamist

government under former insurgent leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, has been in control and many fear that the country could turn into an Islamic state, although al-Sharaa has so far promised to respect religious minorities. Under Assad's rule during the Muslim holy month of Ramazan, when observant Muslims abstain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset, people were allowed to eat in public. This year, many people are abstaining from eating in public fearing reprisals. "Ramazan this year comes with a new flavour. This is the Ramazan of victory and liberation," said interim Minister of Religious Affairs Hussam Haj-Hussein in a televised statement. Most countries around the world, including Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Kuwait began observing Ramazan on Saturday, while a few other countries such as Malaysia and Japan, as well as some Shiite Muslims, will begin the fast on Sunday. In many parts of the region, the holy month this year is bitter-sweet. Lebanese this year mark Ramazan after the 14-month Israel-Hezbollah war ended

with a US-brokered ceasefire that went into effect in late November. In the Gaza Strip, a fragile ceasefire deal, which has paused over 15 months of war between Israel and Hamas, nears the end of its first phase, and many Palestinians ate their first iftar in the middle of the rubble where their houses used to be. "This year, after the fall of the regime, there are many confirmations regarding the prohibition of publicly breaking the fast, with violators facing imprisonment," said Damascus resident Munir Abdallah. "This is something new, good and respectable, meaning that the rituals of Ramazan should be fully observed in all their aspects." Ramazan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; the month cycles through the seasons. The start of the month traditionally depends on the sighting of the crescent moon. The actual start date may vary among Muslim communities due to declarations by multiple Islamic authorities around the globe on whether the crescent has been sighted or different methodologies used to determine the start of the month.

US court rules head of watchdog agency must keep his job

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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.

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.

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.

Prez Trump signs order designating English as official language of US

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump has signed an executive order designating English as the official language of the United States. The order allows government agencies and organizations that receive federal funding to choose whether to continue to offer documents and services in language other than English.

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.

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

PTI ■ BOSTON

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

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

erment 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.



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

in Washington. Critics of Trump and Musk hope to discourage and stigmatise purchases of Tesla, the electric car company that is the world's most valuable automaker. 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.

ed thousands of federal job cuts, cancelled contracts and shut down sections of the government, including the US Agency for International Development. Musk's critics say his actions defy Congress's power to control the US budget and present a host of ways for him to enrich himself. Musk leads several other companies, notably SpaceX, which conducts launches for NASA and the intelligence community, and the social media platform X.

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

Imran Khan seeks global help for democracy, regional stability

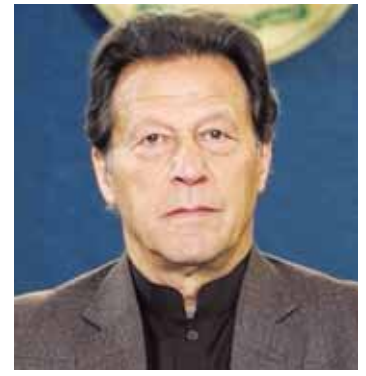
PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

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

issue of democracy, which had far-reaching consequences, not only for the country but also for regional and global stability. Given Pakistan's strategic importance, Khan emphasised that the international community must recognise the urgency of addressing the crisis.

The judiciary, Khan alleged, had been reduced to a tool of political persecution. Speaking on the DawnNews TV show 'Doosra Rukh' on Saturday, Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Chairman Irfan Siddiqui said the PTI was "impossible to predict".

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



On the issue of terrorism, Khan criticised the government for diverting resources from crucial counterterrorism efforts to pursue a political vendetta against Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which have seen an uptick in terrorist activity, were neglected in favour of "military campaigns against political opponents".

Officials concerned about militant attack in Karachi

PTI ■ KARACHI

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

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.

As a result, the overall consumption essential to halt the economic slowdown grew by just 3.5 per cent last year, a rate that was slower than the 5 per cent rise in GDP, suggesting that the income and wealth gaps were holding back spending. The growing inequality was reflected in the national Gini coefficient, which was 0.467 in 2022 when the National Bureau of Statistics last updated the number. A Gini coefficient of 0 reflects perfect income and wealth equality, while 1 reflects maximal inequality, where a single individual has all the income while all others have none. The yawning wealth gap was also apparent in data from Shenzhen-based China Merchants Bank (CMB), one of the country's biggest domestic wealth management-focused lenders.

The NPC would meet along with the advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), to deliberate on the state of the economy and the country's strategic challenges arising out of US President Donald Trump starting a second stint in power. Trump said he planned to slap new 10 per cent tariffs on goods from China, escalating trade fights with Beijing. Already, Chinese goods were hit by 10 per cent tariffs by Trump earlier this month. During his election campaign, he threatened to slap 60 per cent tariffs on Chinese goods to address US concerns over fentanyl, a potent opioid drug blamed for widespread drug addiction in the US.



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

Child dies of Ebola in Uganda, raising concern over surveillance

PTI ■ KAMPALA

A 4-year-old child became the second person to die of Ebola in Uganda, the World Health Organisation has said, in a setback for health officials who had hoped for a quick end to the outbreak that began at the end of January. The child had been hospitalised at the main referral facility in Kampala, the capital of the East African country, and died Tuesday, the WHO office in Uganda said in a brief statement on Saturday. The statement said WHO and others are working to strengthen surveillance and contact tracing.

diagnose his illness, before later dying in Kampala. The successful treatment of eight patients who had been contacts of that man, including some of his relatives, had left local health officials anticipating the end of the outbreak. But they are still investigating its source. Tracing contacts is key to stemming the spread of Ebola, and there are no approved vaccines for the Sudan strain of Ebola that's infecting people in Uganda. Over 20,000 travellers are screened daily for Ebola at Uganda's different border crossing points, according to WHO, which supports the work. The WHO has given Uganda at least USD 3 million to support its Ebola response, but there have been concerns about adequate funding in the wake of the US administration's decision to terminate 60% of USAID's foreign aid contracts. Dithan Kiragga, executive director of the Baylor College of Medicine Children's Foundation, a non-governmental group that supports Ebola surveillance in Uganda, told The Associated Press on Friday that his group had stopped its work supporting local health authorities in screening travelling passengers after the termination of its contract with USAID.

Advertisement for 'THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS' with a 'CHANGE OF NAME' section listing individuals like Anil Kumar S/o Shri Ram and Rinku Tiwari.



YOGASANAS FOR BELLY FAT LOSS



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

Tasty Recipe Using Pistachio



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

Pick Me Up Pista Bomb By Chef Sanjeev Kapoor

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



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

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

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



Chocolate Pistachio Kunafa Cake By Chef Shivesh Bhatia

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

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

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

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

BY YASH GUPTA

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

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



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

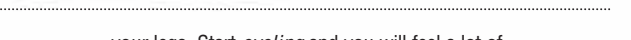


NAUKASANA
Also known as the boat pose/posture. Looks very tough but with practice the core muscles function well and get those 3D abs. All you have to do is lie down on your back and lift your arms, feet, and eyes in the same line. At least 6 inches off from the ground, hold the position for at least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



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

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



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

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



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

Move Your Body, Lift Your Mind

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

But how this happens?
High levels of cortisol- a

primary hormone that body release in response to stress; can lead to increased anxiety and negatively impact your overall mental well-being. Engaging in regular exercise helps lower cortisol levels, making it easier to manage stress and maintain a balanced mood.
When you engage in physical activity, your body releases endorphins, those feel-good hormones that help reduce stress while increasing happiness and relaxation. They help relieve pain, relax, and lift mood. Exercise also promotes the production of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters that play a key role in



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

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

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

— By Dr Parul Malhotra



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

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

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

