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WORLD 8
DUTY CUT ON SMARTPHONE PARTS TO HIT ELECTRONICS ECOSYSTEM: GTRI



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Mid-week polls in Delhi on Feb 5

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With an announcement of the 70 assembly seats in Delhi in a single phase on February 5 and the votes will be counted on February 8 by the Election Commission (EC), the stage is set for a fierce triangular contest between the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Congress. The battle lines are drawn between Prime Minister Narendra Modi's developmental model versus the 'freebies' model touted by the AAP chief and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, who is eyeing a hat-trick, having swept the 2015 and 2020 elections with 67 and 62 seats, respectively. The AAP faces anti-incumbency, corruption allegations and an aggressive BJP in its bid to assume power for a third successive term. The Congress will be keen to regain the national Capital. Although the Congress and the AAP contested the 2024 Lok Sabha elections together as part of the INDIA bloc, they will be competing separately in the upcoming Assembly polls. Announcing the dates for the Assembly polls in Delhi, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar said "It is a single-phase election... We have deliberately kept polling on a Wednesday so more people come out to vote... like we did in Maharashtra. The entire election process will be completed by February 10." With the EC's announcement of the election schedule, the



Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar with Election Commissioners Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu during a press conference for the announcement of the schedule for the Delhi Assembly elections. Photo: Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is now in effect and will remain so until the conclusion of the polls. The last date to file nominations is January 17 and the scrutiny of nominations will be done by January 18. Candidates will be able to withdraw their nominations till January 20. Of the 70 seats in Delhi, 58 are general and 12 reserved. According to the electoral roll, Delhi has 1.55 crore voters -- 83.49 lakh men, 71.74 lakh women and 1,261 transgender persons. There are 25.89 lakh young voters, 2.08 lakh first-time voters, and 830 above the age of 100, Kumar said. More than 13,000 polling stations will be set up in Delhi, he said. Kumar has urged candidates and political party leaders to refrain from making remarks against women and involving children during poll campaigns. He was asked

EC CAUTIONS CABINET ON DELHI BUDGET PROVISIONS

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission will write to the cabinet secretary, informing that no Delhi-specific provision can be made in the Union Budget that can disturb the level-playing field, CEC Rajiv Kumar said on Tuesday. Polling for the 70-member Delhi Assembly will be held on February 5 and the votes counted on February 8. Responding to a query about the the Union Budget, scheduled days ahead of the polls, Kumar said, "We will write to the cabinet secretary that no Delhi-specific provision can be made in the Union Budget that can disturb the level-playing field."

about the recent comment made by BJP leader Ramesh Bidhuri against Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. In 2020, the elections were announced on January 6, polling was held on February 8, and votes were counted on February 11. The 70-member Assembly's term concludes on February 23, necessitating elections before that to form a new House. Except for the Lok Sabha polls last year when AAP and Congress joined hands and together got an impressive vote share of 43.1%, the two parties-despite having a similar vote bank-have always contested separately. However, while AAP's vote share, since its maiden election in 2013, was constantly on the higher side, the number of people voting for Congress decreased significantly in the last decade. **Continued on page 2**

India boosts surveillance for HMPV

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the detection of cases of human metapneumovirus (HMPV) infection in Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the Centre has advised States to step up surveillance for respiratory illnesses including ILI and SARI to tackle any exigency, and create awareness about the prevention of transmission of the pathogen which is fast spreading in China. Union Health Secretary Punya Salila Srivastava on Monday chaired a virtual meeting with states and union territories to take stock of respiratory illnesses and HMPV cases in the country and public health measures for their management, a health ministry statement said. However, the Centre has not issued any advisory yet. The Union Health Secretary said that there is no cause of concern for the public as HMPV has been present



globally since 2001, the statement said, adding that States have been asked to strengthen and review the ILI/SARI surveillance. "The States have been advised to enhance information, education and communication (IEC) and awareness among people regarding the prevention of transmission of the virus with simple measures such as washing hands often with soap and water; not touching eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands; avoiding close

contact with people exhibiting symptoms of the disease; and covering mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing," said the statement. HMPV is a globally recognised respiratory virus. It is a viral pathogen that causes respiratory infections in people of all age groups. During the meeting, it was noted that the IDSP data does not indicate any unusual rise in influenza-like illness (ILI) and severe acute respiratory illnesses (SARI) cases anywhere in the country. All the detected patients don't have any foreign travel history, suggesting that the virus is indigenous. This is also corroborated by the ICMR sentinel surveillance data, it said. Srivastava reiterated that an increase in respiratory illnesses is usually seen during the winter months and that the country is well prepared for any potential surge in such cases, the statement said. **Continued on page 2**

6.8-magnitude quake in Tibet kills 95 people with tremors felt in Nepal

PTI ■ BEIJING

A 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck near one of Tibet's holiest cities on Tuesday, killing at least 95 people and injuring 130 others with tremors also shaking buildings and forcing people to run to the streets in neighbouring Nepal. According to regional disaster relief headquarters, the quake jolted Dingri County in Xigaze, Tibet Autonomous Region in China at 9:05 am Tuesday (Beijing Time). The US Geological Service, however, put the quake's magnitude at 7.1. At least 95 people have been confirmed dead and 130 others injured as of 3 p.m. Tuesday (local time), state-run Xinhua news agency reported. Chinese President Xi Jinping has ordered all-out rescue efforts to carry out relief and rescue operations in the affected areas. Xi ordered utmost efforts to treat the injured and urged efforts to prevent secondary



Rescue workers search for survivors in the aftermath of an earthquake in Changsuo Township of Dingri in Xigaze, southwestern China's Tibet Autonomous Region. PTI

disasters, properly resettle affected residents, and handle the aftermath work effectively. Following the quake, China Earthquake Administration launched a level-II emergency service response and sent a work team to the site to assist with disaster relief efforts. **Continued on page 2**

WEATHER

AQI 296
MAX 16.2°C(-2.8)
MIN 10.5°C(+3.6)

SC orders quick appointments in CIC



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Expressing displeasure, the Supreme Court on Tuesday directed Government to immediately fill up the vacancies in the Central Information Commission and State Information Commissions. Court also made observations on posting only retired bureaucrats as Information Commissioners, while the law suggests for posting of people from different walks of life. Asking for an expeditious selection of information commissioners in the CIC, a bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kottiswar Singh told Centre, "These posts need to be filled at the earliest otherwise what is the use of having the institution, if we don't have people working?" The bench criticised the appointments being made only from a particular category of candidates in the CIC and SICs, and mulled taking a judicial note on the presence of bureaucrats, and not people from all walks of life, in these Commissions. "We can take judicial notice of fact that entire Commissions are loaded with only one category of people. Why should only bureaucrats be appointed and why not people from different walks of life are appointed. We don't want to say more but this needs to be looked into, Justice Surya Kant said. **Continued on page 2**

PWD withdraws Atishi's bungalow allotment



RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In a twist to the ongoing row over Delhi chief minister's official residence at 6, Flag Staff Road at Civil Lines, the Public Works Department (PWD) has withdrawn its offer to allot the bungalow to Chief Minister Atishi, as she did not take "physical possession" of the house despite multiple requests from the department and issuance of "authority slip" last October. Countering her claim that she was evicted from her official residence for the second time in three months, PWD's sources have said that the question of eviction doesn't arise because she never took possession of the bungalow. The PWD has now offered two choices of accommodation to Atishi -

Bungalow 2 at 8 Raj Niwas and Bungalow 115 at Ansari Road Daryaganj - and asked her to submit her choice within eight days. "A night before the announcement of the election date, the BJP-led government at the Centre has thrown me out of the chief minister's residence for the second time in two months. I was sent a letter stating that the allotment had been cancelled. The residence has been snatched from the elected chief minister of an elected government. They did the same thing three months ago, when I became chief minister. My belongings and those of my family were thrown out of the house and on the road," the chief minister said in Hindi. In a letter dated January 6, the PWD letter indicates that

Atishi has not been evicted, as she never took possession of the bungalow that was allocated to her. Secondly, her official residence at 17 AB Mathura Road remains allocated to her, and she has been offered two other bungalows to choose from. The letter from the PWD also clarified that the withdrawal of the offer for the Flag Staff Road bungalow occurred for two main reasons: Atishi failed to take possession of the property within the required one-week period, despite it being offered three months earlier. Secondly, the 'Sheesh Mahal', where the bungalow is located, is currently under investigation by the CBI, ED, and CAG, due to concerns over potential corruption related to its construction. "Besides, she was supposed

to take possession of the house within 1 week and she did not do so in 3 months. The rules clearly stipulate that," said officials adding an official residence 17 AB Mathura Road is already allotted to her and she has again been given an offer of three other lavish bungalows including bungalow number 2 at 8 Raj Niwas Road and bungalow number 115 at Ansari Road, Daryaganj. In a notice dated January 6, 2025, Delhi government's Public Works Department (PWD) said the bungalow at 6, Flag Staff Road is also not a designated house for Delhi CM as it belongs to "General Pool" as per official records. The CM has been offered allotment of Bungalow No 2 at 8 Raj Niwas Lane, Civil Lines and Bungalow No 115 Ansari Road Daryaganj from "General Pool". After former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal vacated the Civil Lines bungalow on October 4, 2024, Atishi had shifted to the house on October 6. However, she was asked to vacate the premises on October 9 by the officials of PWD, a department she heads. She vacated the bungalow the same day. Maintaining that an official "handover" of the property from Kejriwal to the department is yet to take place, PWD officials had then said the house has been sealed. **Continued on page 2**



BSF refutes claims of BGB control over border area

PTI ■ PETRAPOLE

The BSF on Tuesday said that fencing work at the border between India and Bangladesh in Malda district was going on in a peaceful manner. BSF South Bengal DIG Nilotpal Kumar Pandey said the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) had raised an objection over the matter. He said that a reply has been given to the BGB by the BSF authorities. "Everything is going on in a peaceful manner," Pandey told reporters in Petrapole in North 24 Parganas district. Asked about reports in the Bangladeshi press claiming that the BGB has taken control of the 5-km border region situated along the Kodala river in Mohespur upazilla in Jhenaidah, the BSF officer said these reports were totally baseless. **Continued on page 2**

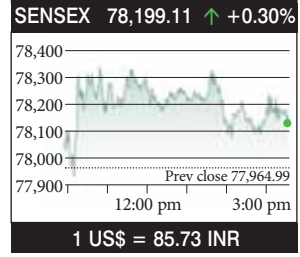
India's GDP growth to be slowest since Pandemic

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India's economic growth rate is estimated to slip to a four-year low of 6.4 per cent in 2024-25, mainly on account of poor showing by the manufacturing and services sector, according to government data released on Tuesday. The gross domestic product (GDP) rate of 6.4 per cent will be the lowest since the Covid year (2020-21) when the country witnessed a negative growth of 5.8 per cent. It was 9.7 per cent in 2021-22; 7 per cent in 2022-23; and 8.2 per cent in the last fiscal ended March 2024. The first advance estimates of National Income for 2024-25 released by the National Statistics Office (NSO) is lower than the 6.6 per cent projected by the Reserve Bank in December 2024. It is also a tad lower than the finance ministry's initial projection of 6.5-7 per cent. The advance estimates will be used in preparation for the Union Budget to be presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Lok Sabha on February 1. The manufacturing sector output is expected to decelerate to 5.3 per cent from a high of 9.9 per cent recorded in the previous fiscal, NSO



MARKETS



1 US\$ = 85.73 INR

said in the first advance estimates of National Income for 2024-25. The services sector, comprising trade, hotels, transport and communications, is estimated to expand at 5.8 per cent against 6.4 per cent in 2023-24. On the other hand, the farm sector is estimated to record a growth of 3.8 per cent in the current fiscal, up from 1.4 per cent in 2023-24. "Real GDP has been estimated to grow by 6.4 per cent in FY 2024-25 as compared to the growth rate of 8.2 per cent in Provisional Estimate (PE) of GDP for FY 2023-24," NSO said. **Continued on page 2**

'Rajasthan Maru Udaan' women's empowerment rolls out statewide

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAIPUR

An initiative for women's empowerment with a 360-degree broad-based approach that was launched in Barmer in November will now be extended to cover the entirety of Rajasthan. 'Maru Udaan' was started by Barmer collector Tina Dabi for empowering women. The initiative will be rolled out across the state on Thursday. The 'Rajasthan Maru Udaan' initiative will cover a range of activities and sessions such as on mental and physical health, skills training, personal finance management,



entrepreneurship from home, self-defence, cybercrime and driving courses. It will include training workshops for millet cookies, environment conservation, and water and waste management. Health camps in vulnerable pockets will also be held. The activities will be organised at the district and the Panchayat Samiti level. "Keeping in mind the

programme's utility and effectiveness, it will be implemented in all districts from January 9 under the name 'Rajasthan Maru Udaan', Neetu Rajeshwar, the women empowerment department commissioner, said in an order. The medical and health, industries, police, transport, agriculture and horticulture, and the education departments will participate in the programme. The expenditure for programmes and activities to be organised under 'Rajasthan Maru Udaan' can be used from the budget of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana. **Continued on page 2**

Punjab village rewards liquor, DJ-free, weddings with cash

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH/NEW DELHI

In a unique initiative which may set an example for others both in rural and urban India, a panchayat in Punjab's Bathinda district has announced an incentive of Rs 21,000 to families who won't serve liquor or play DJ music at wedding ceremonies. The decision was taken to encourage villagers not to indulge in wasteful expenditure on marriage functions and curb liquor abuse. Ballo village Sarpanch Amarjit Kaur said that it is generally seen that quarrels erupt at functions where alcohol is served and loud music is played. Moreover, the loud music also disturbs the studies of students. "We want to encourage people not to indulge in wasteful expenditure during wedding functions," she said. The sarpanch said the panchayat has



passed a resolution under which if a family does not serve liquor or play DJ music at wedding functions, it will be given Rs 21,000. Ballo village has a population of around 5,000 people. Kaur further said the panchayat has sought from the government to set up

a stadium in the village so the youth can be encouraged to take part in sports activities. "There should be a stadium in the village so that different games can be organised," said the Sarpanch. The panchayat has also proposed to set up a biogas plant in the

village. Free seeds will be given to farmers who opt for organic farming, she said. Wedding season becomes a mess for the city like national Capital Delhi where liquors, loud music, crackers have become a fashion and people are ostentatious about it. "Not only loud music and crackers but the city goes under complete mess due to choking traffic situation. Wish marriage could be held in a civilised manner but Delhi is more horrible during the weddings season. This is worse for the senior citizens and elderly people as the marriage processions (baraat) never deem fit to care about neighbourhood issue. I have been facing this every wedding season and worse during winters when Delhi air is bad. Hope RWAs and social organizations take a cue from small town like Bhatinda," said Abhay Banerjee, a resident of Khanpurin south Delhi area.

Cashless treatment for road accidents soon: Nitin Gadkari

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The government will come up with a modified scheme by March to provide cashless treatment for road accident victims nationwide, under which they will be entitled to a maximum amount of Rs 1.5 lakh per accident per person, Union minister Nitin Gadkari said on Tuesday. According to Gadkari, the scheme will be applicable to all road accidents caused by the use of motor vehicles on any category of road. The National Health Authority (NHA) shall be the implementing agency for the programme, in coordination with police, hospitals and State Health Agency etc. The programme will be implemented through an IT platform, combining the functionalities of the e-Detailed Accident Report (eDAR) application of the Ministry of Road Transport

and Highways and the Transaction Management System of NHA. "The broad contours of the pilot programme are -- victims entitled to cashless treatment up to a maximum of Rs 1.5 lakh per accident per person for a maximum period of 7 days from date of the accident," Gadkari said while addressing a press conference. The government will come up with a modified scheme by March this year. On March 14, 2024, the ministry of road transport and highways (MoRTH) had launched a pilot programme to provide cashless treatment to road accident victims. The pilot programme -- initiated in Chandigarh -- was aimed at establishing an ecosystem for providing timely medical care to the victims of road accidents, including during the golden hour. The pilot project was later

expanded to six states. The road transport and highways minister also said the government is studying labour laws to frame a policy for fixing working hours for commercial drivers, on the lines of pilots, as driver fatigue is resulting in fatal road crashes, Gadkari said, adding that India is facing a shortage of 22 lakh drivers. MoRTH organised a two-day workshop on January 6, and 7, 2025 to holistically deliberate issues, solutions and next steps to be taken to help drive transformation in India's road transport sector. During the two-day workshop, accelerating implementation of Vehicle Scrapping Policy, pan-India adoption of PUC 2.0, timelines for introduction of BS-VII norms were discussed, along with expected reduction in pollution with the norms.

Congress unveils new HQ Indra Gandhi Bhawan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Marking a historic moment in the party's rich legacy spanning over 139 years, the Indian National Congress on Tuesday announced that the new headquarters, Indra Gandhi Bhawan, located at 9A, Kotla Road, New Delhi will be inaugurated at a grand ceremony on January 15, 2025. Former Congress President Sonia Gandhi, also Chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party, will formally inaugurate the state-of-the-art facility in august presence of Mallikarjun Kharge, Congress President, and Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok

Sabha. The new AICC headquarters, named after former Prime Minister late Indra Gandhi, India's first woman Prime Minister, symbolises the Congress Party's continuing mission to uphold the vision of its stalwarts. As the party that led India's freedom movement under the leadership of luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Patel, the Congress has remained steadfast in its dedication to building a modern, democratic, and equitable India. This prestigious event will bring together a distinguished gathering of leaders from across the country. About 400 top leaders have been invited to attend the ceremony.

SC to review same-sex marriage pleas on January 5

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court will on January 9 consider the pleas seeking review of its October 2023 verdict declining legal sanction to same-sex marriage. A bench comprising Justices B R Gavai, Surya Kant, B V Nagarathna, P S Narasimha and Justice Dipankar Datta will take up about 13 petitions related to the matter in chambers. According to practice, the review pleas are considered in chambers by judges. The top court had refused to allow an open-court hearing on the review pleas. The new bench was constituted after Justice Sanjiv Khanna, the present CJ, recused from hearing the review petitions on July 10.



Chauhan urges Atishi to aid Delhi farmers

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Union Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and Rural Development Minister on Tuesday met Delhi-based farmers and urged Chief Minister Atishi to implement central government farmer welfare schemes in the national capital "Abuse me or call me Dawood, it does not make any difference to me, but implement the farmer welfare schemes of the Government of India for the farmers of Delhi, give them the benefit of the schemes," Chouhan said. When the farmers told their problems, he became emotional and said that farmers are getting troubled and crying in the capital Delhi. "I will put in all my efforts for the welfare of the farmers of Delhi. I will ensure that the farmers get their rights. The Delhi government is not

getting the benefits of the many schemes implemented for the farmers by the Central Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi," he said. Singh said that earlier also the farmers of Delhi had told him about the problems, on which he had immediately written a letter to Atishi. "I just want to say this to them with folded hands, it is not my nature to abuse anyone, but I am saying that you should reply to the letter, don't even reply, sister Atishi, but you should implement the farmer welfare schemes of the Government of India for the farmers of Delhi." He appealed to Atishi to not harm the farmers in political competition. "In Delhi, even a tractor is considered commercial, registration costs a lot of money, crops get ruined in dirty water here.

6.8-magnitude quake in Tibet kills 95 people with tremors felt in Nepal

From page 1

Xizang Autonomous Region also issued a level-II emergency response to the quake. Some 22,000 disaster relief items, including cotton tents, cotton coats, quilts and folding beds, together with special relief materials for high-altitude and frigid areas, have been dispatched by the central authorities to the quake-hit area. Over 1,500 local firefighters and rescue workers have also been dispatched to the ground. Xigaze also known as Shigaste is close to the border with India. Shigaste is considered one of the holiest cities of Tibet. It is the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, a key figure of Tibetan Buddhism whose spiritual authority is second only to the Dalai Lama. The epicentre was located in Tsoگو Township of Dingri County, which has a population of approximately 6,900 people within a 20-km radius. There are 27 villages within this area. Official data show Dingri County has a population of over 61,000 people. The epicentre is located 90 km North-East of Lobsutse in the Khumbu Himalayan range of North-East Nepal. The quake struck at a depth of 10 km, according to a report issued by the China Earthquake Networks Centre, state-run Xinhua reported. In his message, President Xi said it is essential to strengthen earthquake monitoring and early

warning, promptly allocate emergency rescue supplies, expedite the repair of damaged infrastructure, ensure that the basic needs of residents are met, and guarantee a safe and warm winter for all. China refers to Tibet as Xizang, part of the Himalayan region. The Tibetan plateau is known to be prone to heavy earthquakes as it sits right over the place where the tectonic Eurasian and Indian plates meet, often colliding with huge force. Shigaste also suffered significant damage in the massive 8.1-magnitude quake that devastated Nepal in 2015. Eighteen people were killed and 55 injured in the Shigaste region when a massive 8.1-magnitude quake hit Nepal and the wider Himalayan in 2015. Meanwhile, in Nepal, the strong earthquake forced people to run out of their houses. It was felt in K a v r e p a l a n c h w o k , Sindhupalanchok Dhading and Solukhumbu districts as well. Many people came out of their houses due to panic in Kathmandu. People witnessed buildings, trees and electric wires on the streets shaking for some time. However, a Nepal Police spokesperson says that so far they have not received any information regarding any human casualty. An official at Shankhuwasabha District Administrative Office said a two-storey building made of stone was damaged in

Kimathanka Rural Municipality of the district due to the earthquake. As the epicentre lies in Tibet, stronger tremors were felt by people living in Northern Nepal, Nepal Police spokesperson Bishwo Adhikari said. At least half a dozen tremors with magnitude ranging from 4 to 5 were also recorded within a time span of an hour around 7 am, according to the USGS report. The tremor was strong enough to terrorise people in Nepal, who recalled the 2015 great earthquake that killed 9,000 people. Several places in Bihar were also jolted by a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that struck near the Tibet-Nepal border on Tuesday morning. The quake with its epicentre 93 km northeast of Lobuche, near the Nepal-Tibet border, occurred at 6.35 am. The earthquake, centred at a depth of 10 kilometres, caused tremors in Bihar and several parts of north India. According to the Bihar Disaster Management Department, tremors were felt in Patna, Madhubani, Sheohar, Munger, Samastipur, Muzaffarpur, Katihar, Darbhanga, West Champaran, East Champaran and several other districts along the India-Nepal border. The tremors triggered panic among people in Patna with citizens rushing out of their residences as a precautionary measure. People in Katihar, Purnea, Sheohar, Darbhanga and Samastipur also came out on the streets when the quake took place.

India's GDP growth to be slowest since Pandemic

From page 1

Nominal GDP has witnessed a growth rate of 9.7 per cent in 2024-25 over the growth rate of 9.6 per cent in 2023-24. According to the data, nominal GDP (GDP at current prices) is estimated to attain a level of Rs 324.11 lakh crore in the year 2024-25 against Rs 295.36 lakh crore in 2023-24, showing a growth rate of 9.7 per cent. The size of the economy, as per the current estimates, is USD 3.8 trillion (@ Rs 85.7/USD) during 2024-25. Further, the nominal Gross Value Added

(GVA) is estimated to attain a level of Rs 292.64 lakh crore in 2024-25 against Rs 267.62 lakh crore in 2023-24, showing a growth rate of 9.3 per cent. Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) at constant prices has witnessed a growth rate of 7.3 per cent during 2024-25 over the growth rate of 4 per cent in the previous financial year. Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GFCE) at Constant Prices has rebounded to a growth rate of 4.1 per cent compared to the growth rate of 2.5 per cent in the previous fiscal.

SC orders quick appointments in CIC

From page 1

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for petitioner Anjali Bhardwaj and others, said in 2019 the apex court issued seminal directions for filling of posts in the CIC and SICs but states delayed the selection process and virtually killed the Right to Information Act. While urging the court to summon the secretaries concerned or seek responses, Bhushan submitted the vacancies caused immense hardship to the people using the platform, and the failure of the state governments to appoint people defeated the very purpose of the Act. The top court, Bhushan said, issued directions for appointment of people from different fields. The bench directed the Centre to file a status report on the selection process that started in August, 2024, for such posts and explain the timeline of its completion. The Joint Secretary at Department of Personnel and Training was

asked to file an affidavit, indicating when the names of 161 candidates, who applied for the post of information commissioners, would be processed. The bench further asked the Centre to disclose the names of candidates, who applied for the post and the criteria for short-listing them in two weeks. The top court made a serious note of Jharkhand, which did not appoint Information Commissioners despite its repetitive directions on the ground there was no leader of opposition in Vidhan Sabha. The bench said the advertisements for appointment of Information Commissioners in the Jharkhand SIC was issued in June, 2024, but there was no headway. It directed the largest opposition party in Jharkhand Vidhan Sabha to nominate one of its elected members to the selection committee for the limited purpose of choosing the information commissioners and appointments could start thereafter.

BSF refutes claims of BGB control over border area

From page 1

He said the area is located opposite to Ranaghat in West Bengal's Nadia district. "There is no change in the status quo there," Pandey said. "The status quo is there as it was earlier and there is complete peace," he said.

'Rajasthan Maru Udaan' women's...

From page 1

Financial assistance can also be taken by onboarding CSR partners. As part of 'Maru Udaan' in Barmer, 12 block- and one district-level dialogue was organised across all panchayat headquarters. "More than 3,000 women participated. The programme began on November 12 and the final block-level dialogue took place on November 28, with the district-level event

concluding on November 29 at Barmer's town hall," said Dabi. She said the programme's long-term goal was to create a chain system for women's empowerment. "Women who participate in the sessions will be trained and motivated to educate others about health, financial management and skill development, becoming 'brand ambassadors' for the initiative," she said. The initiative was designed to promote women's health,

education, self-employment, self-defence, and confidence. The block-level programmes focused on maximising women participation to foster empowerment, she said. Instead of large groups, small groups of 55-60 women were formed for the sessions to encourage open discussion. "This approach allowed women to freely express their issues and concerns, which were then addressed by the experts," Dabi said.

India boosts surveillance for HMPV

From page 1

Former chief scientist with the WHO, Soumya Swaminathan said on X platform that the virus "is nothing to panic about. It's a known virus that causes respiratory infections, mostly mild. Rather than jump at detection of every pathogen, we should all take normal precautions when we have a cold: wear a mask, wash hands, avoid crowds, consult

a doctor if there are severe symptoms." No deaths reported in India so far, she added. HMPV is one of the many respiratory viruses that can cause infections in people of all ages, particularly during the winter and early spring months. The virus infection is usually a mild and self-limiting condition and most patients recover on their own. The meeting convened by the

Union Health Secretary was attended by Health Research Department Secretary Dr Rajiv Bahl, Director General of Health Services Dr Atul Goel, experts from National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme, (IDSP), Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR), National Institute of Virology (NIV) and State Surveillance Units of IDSP, said the statement.

Mid-week polls in Delhi on Feb 5

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With its surprise performance in 2013, when it got 29% of the total votes polled and won 28 of the 70 seats, AAP dug into Congress' vote bank, pushing the grand old party to third position with 24.5% votes and just eight seats. In subsequent assembly polls in 2015 and 2020, Congress' vote share further fell to 9.7% and 4.3%, respectively, while AAP won a massive mandate with 54.6% and 53.6% vote share. The BJP has been able to improve its assembly election vote share during the decade of the AAP's rise in Delhi. It got 33.1% vote share in 2013, 32.2% in 2015 and 38.5% in 2020. However, its number of seats drastically went down from 31 in 2015 to 3 in 2015 and 8 in 2020. In the last three Lok Sabha polls, it has made a clean sweep in Delhi, bagging vote share higher than that of the AAP and Congress combined. BJP is always considered a party of the middle and upper-middle-class people, with the trading community as its staunch supporters, Congress in Delhi-till the 2008 assembly polls when it formed gov't in the city for the last time-was known for representing the poor, the Dalit, and the Muslim community. The high-stakes Assembly

election will feature a fierce contest between former MP Parvesh Verma, son of the late Chief Minister Sahib Singh Verma, Former MP Sandeep Dikshit from Congress and AAP leader and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for the New Delhi seat. Similarly, former MP Ramesh Bidhuri of BJP and Congress's Alka Lamba will face off against Chief Minister Atishi from Kalkaji. The Assembly elections are being seen as a prestige battle for all camps. The BJP is making all-out attempts to come back to power in Delhi after over 25 years focussing on its slogan "Parivartan (change) and a targeted campaign against the Arvind Kejriwal-led AAP over corruption allegations, relying on Prime Minister Narendra Modi as its face yet again. Meanwhile, the BJP, boosted by its clean sweep in the Delhi Lok Sabha polls and thumping victories in Haryana and Maharashtra, has coined the word 'AAPda' (disaster) to launch a blistering attack against the ruling party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi at 'Parivartan Rally' in Rohini last week made the party's intentions clear giving the call "Aapda (AAP) nahi sahenge, badal kar rahenge" (won't tolerate the disaster (AAP), will bring change").

The BJP has an uphill task against the AAP which has a strong support base in the slums, unauthorised colonies, minority-dominated areas, lower middle class localities. It has so far failed to come up with announcements to tackle AAP's promises like honorarium to women and priests, Prime Minister Modi has, however, assured that public welfare schemes of the current government will continue. The AAP, battling a wave of corruption allegations, is pushing hard for a third term, focusing on the announcement of welfare schemes - enhancing the monthly grant to non-tax paying women to Rs 2,100 if voted back to power; healthcare coverage for all Delhi voters over the age of 60 in government as well as some private hospitals. Similarly, it has also taken recourse to "soft Hindutva" to nullify the BJP's "Chunavi Hindu" charge by promising Rs 18,000 monthly compensation to temple priests and gurdwara granthis. Many in AAP have acknowledged that the February 2025 polls are the party's "toughest yet." Kejriwal, who stepped down as Chief Minister after he was granted bail in a corruption case, is leading the party's campaign. It also relies on the

immense popularity of the free water, free 200 units of power per month, and free bus rides for women schemes. Campaigns like 'Revdi Par Charcha' ensure these benefits remain in public focus, showcasing AAP's consistent voter outreach. Insiders say anti-incumbency looms large, with AAP completing more than a decade in power. Many voters might feel the need for change, which could affect the party's chances. Corruption allegations and arrests of key leaders, including Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, have tarnished the party's clean image. Leadership transitions and internal rifts, including departure of key figures like Kailash Gahlot, signal instability that could weaken its campaign. The 'Sheesh Mahal' controversy has dented Kejriwal's image, with the BJP using it to fuel its campaign against AAP. The Congress, unrepresented in the Delhi assembly since 2015, is desperately trying to gain a foothold in the February 5 elections. To counter AAP's Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojna of a monthly assistance of Rs 2,100 post elections, the Congress has announced 'Pyaari Didi Yojana' where it promised a monthly financial assistance of Rs 2,500 to

women if voted to power. In this election, all the senior leadership of the state unit have been fielded - Sheila Dikshit's son Sandeep Dikshit, Delhi Congress chief Devender Yadav, All India Mahila Congress president Alka Lamba, and former Delhi minister Haroon Yusuf. After two consecutive election losses, the party's lower cadres may be short on motivation, which could hinder its campaign efforts. If Congress fails to make any significant gains in this election, it could face the real possibility of being wiped out from the Delhi political landscape. Strong presence of AAP and BJP, along with their well-established support bases, poses a major threat to Congress' chances of regaining power. The Congress has fielded former Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit's son and two time MP Sandeep Dikshit from New Delhi Seat against Kejriwal. BJP has given ticket to former MP Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma, son of former Chief Minister Sahib Singh Verma. It has also fielded Alka Lamba against Atishi from Kalkaji. So far, the Delhi Congress has announced 48 candidates for the upcoming elections, with its first list released on December 12 last year and the second on December 24.

PWD withdraws Atishi's Bungalow allotment

From page 1

The officials had also said that inventory of the bungalow was not complete and while Atishi was in possession of the keys for the bungalow, she did not have the official allotment letter. The PWD officially allotted the house to Atishi on October 11. She accepted the offer on October 14. The 'authority slip' was issued by the PWD on October 16 with validity up to October 23, 2024 - during this period, Atishi had to shift to the bungalow. The Chief Minister never took physical possession of the property despite multiple communications, the PWD said in letter while mentioning also reasons behind cancellation of allotment. "The department's decision to withdraw the offer was influenced by several factors: the ongoing investigations requiring periodic access to the property, the fact that the bungalow is not a designated Chief Minister's residence but belongs to the General Pool category, and the provision that allotment is automatically cancelled if physical occupation isn't taken within five working days of the Habitability Certificate's issuance," the PWD. "However, the Chief Minister, Delhi, did not take physical possession of the bungalow, but only took technical possession on October 23, through her representative

that she will write a letter to the prime minister asking him to leave the 'Rajmahal' and come and live at 131, North Avenue (AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh's residence). Will the prime minister come and live in this residence? "The BJP threw me out of the chief minister's residence three months ago. But I kept working for the people of Delhi without stopping," Atishi said. Hitting back, BJP IT department head Amit Malviya said there are "no takers for her lies". "The allotment of 'Sheesh Mahal' has been withdrawn, as we learn, for two key reasons: first her failure to take possession and second CBI/ED investigation," he said in a post on X. In another post on X, the BJP leader also posted a purported letter of withdrawal issued by the Public Works Department (PWD) Secretariat on Monday and said, "Delhi Chief Minister Atishi Marlena is lying. She was allotted Sheesh Mahal on October 11, 2024." "She hasn't still occupied it because she doesn't want to offend Arvind Kejriwal," he added. Reacting to the issue, AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal said in a post on X, "Within three months, BJP again expelled Chief Minister Atishi from the CM's residence. These people are showing their frustration by abusing Atishi and throwing her out of the house."

Aswathi Muralidharan PS (personal secretary)... On the same day, an email was issued to the CM, with the request to arrange to conduct a joint visit with PWD engineers to the bungalow, as has been the normal practice for taking possession of allotted houses. On October 26, a reminder email was issued... no response had been received," PWD said in the letter. It added that on December 18, the department received a communication from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) that they want to inspect the bungalow and suggest renovation/repairs required, if any. As per the letter, a joint inspection was carried out on December 24 and the bungalow was found in a "very good and habitable condition". "...though the representative of CM orally suggested some minor repair works, no formal communication was made from the CMO..." said the letter, adding that all the 14 suggestions given orally the CM's representative were "attended" to. The CM, however, is yet to move into the house, it further said. "...As per provisions... if the allottee failed to take physical occupation of the house within five working days from the date of issue of 'Habitability Certificate', the allotment shall be cancelled automatically," the letter added. Addressing media, Atishi said

Kejriwal launches AAP's campaign song for Delhi's Assembly polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday released the party's campaign song for the Delhi Assembly polls, aiming to strike a chord with voters, as it bids for a third consecutive term in office. The song solely highlights the work he has accomplished and the guarantees he has made. "Phir Layenge Kejriwal" -- the 3:29-minute song -- highlights AAP's achievements during its tenure and emphasises continuity in governance. The video was the part of AAP's phir layenge Kejriwal (will again bring Kejriwal) campaign for the upcoming Assembly polls. Kejriwal said after releasing the song, "We celebrate our elections like festivals, and people wait for our song; now it's out, and people can dance to it." The AAP supremo said the song was dedicated to everyone and urged for it to be shared

widely. "Dance to it, play it at weddings, birthdays and celebrations." He also took a jab at the BJP, referring to it as a "gali-galauj (abuse)" party, and said, "I know even BJP leaders will like our song, they can secretly dance to it in their rooms." The song highlights the AAP government's core achievements, including free electricity, clean water, health care, and education. It aims to strike a chord with every section of society, including women, youngsters, children, and autorickshaw drivers, and counters misinformation against Kejriwal's administration, the party said in statement. The party has not disclosed who sang the song. AAP launched its first campaign song in 2015, followed by another in 2020. With "Phir Layenge Kejriwal", the party hopes to rally support for a



Arvind Kejriwal (left) and other party leaders sitting on a stage during the launch of the campaign song for the assembly elections.

reflects the sentiments of every common citizen in Delhi. Over the last 10 years, Arvind Kejriwal has cared for Delhi's two crore people like a family. That's why Delhiites will bring him back." Delhi minister Gopal Rai noted that the song would add momentum to AAP's campaign, promising more improvements such as 24x7 free electricity, better schools and hospitals, and free transport for women. Senior leaders Atishi, Manish Sisodia, Saurabh Bharadwaj, Rai and Sanjay Singh, among others, were present at the release. Meanwhile, the BJP launched a poster featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi with folded hands with a background of India Gate with '8 February ko Delhi me aarhi hai Bhajpa' (BJP is coming to Delhi on February 8). Sharing the poster on X from the official handle of Delhi BJP,

the party said, "On February 8, Delhi will get a double engine government, the development of the capital will gain speed and Delhiites will get the gift of public welfare schemes of the Center." The party also shared a video which starts from the dialogue of Ranveer Singh in Singham Again stating 'Everybody knows who is coming? You don't know?' and transitions to the video showing clips of PM Modi, asserting that BJP will form a government in Delhi after February 8, when the counting is scheduled. Sharing the video, the party shared its slogan 'Delhi me hogya hai ailaan, 8 February ko Delhi me Bhajpa sarkar' (The announcement has been made in Delhi, BJP government will be formed in Delhi on 8 February). Congress, who is also looking to revive itself in the upcoming

poll, shared a poster featuring Delhi Congress chief Devendra Yadav along with the photos of senior party leaders including Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge among others, stating 'Ho gaya hai chunavi ran ka agaz, Delhi me is bar Congress sarkar' (The election battle has begun, Congress government in Delhi this time). Sharing the poster on X, the party said, "Aapke vote se Delhi me fir se Khushali laye, 5 February ko hath ka button dabaye (Bring prosperity back to Delhi with your one vote, Press the hand button on February 5th)". With the release of the campaign song, AAP has intensified efforts to retain its footing in the national capital. The party has already announced candidates for all 70 constituencies.

Announcement of Delhi's election schedule escalates political tensions

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The announcement of the Delhi Assembly elections schedule on Tuesday has escalated political tensions in the national capital, with key constituencies such as New Delhi, Kalkaji and Jangpura at the centre of the high-stakes battle. The voters of the city are set to cast their votes on February 5 and the results will be declared on February 8. The battle lines are drawn among the three major contenders --- AAP, BJP and Congress --- with heavyweight candidates from these political parties locking horns in fierce contests in the high-profile constituencies. The New Delhi constituency remains the epicentre of political tensions, as AAP supremo and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal seeks re-election from the seat that he has represented for more than a decade. Kejriwal faces a formidable challenge from the sons of two former Delhi chief ministers.



Arvind Kejriwal (right) interacting with a crowd of supporters during a campaign event.

Political parties assert their claim to throne

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Political parties including the BJP, AAP and Congress welcomed the announcement of Delhi assembly elections and asserted their claim to the throne with the AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal terming the elections as a battle between 'politics of work' and 'politics of hurling abuses'. Welcoming the announcement, the former Chief Minister rallied AAP's volunteers, calling them the party's greatest strength and urging them to rise with determination to defeat the opposition's machinery. "The election schedule has been announced. All volunteers should gear up with full strength and enthusiasm to take the field. Even their massive machinery fails in the face of your passion. You are our greatest strength. This election will be a contest between the politics of work and the politics of hurling abuses. The



A group of people gathered for a political event, possibly a campaign launch or a public meeting.

party is developing the country and other states. They will elect a BJP chief minister on February 8." New Delhi BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj called elections 'a festival of democracy', and requested the people of Delhi, especially the youth, to come out in large numbers and vote for change. "Now it is time to build a progressive Delhi, a healthy Delhi, a Delhi that is going to become a world-class city with proper infrastructure. For that, what is required is a BJP double-engine government model in Delhi," she stated. Chandni Chowk BJP MP Praveen Khandelwal welcomed the Election Commission's announcement of the Delhi Assembly election dates, highlighting that choosing Wednesday as the polling day is a thoughtful decision. He stated that this move will ensure maximum voter participation as it falls on a working day rather than a weekend.

LG approves regularisation of 150 un-aided schools in unauthorised areas

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a big relief to thousands of students of the Capital's unauthorised colonies, Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena has approved regularisation of 150 un-aided schools in non-conforming areas. According to a statement issued by Raj Niwas, these schools, where the access of roads is six metres or above, lie in areas such as Narela, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Colony, Najafgarh, Sangam Vihar, Asola, Nathupura, Deoli, Badarpur, Shyam Vihar, Bhagat Vihar, Mundka, etc. -- all unauthorised colonies. "The issue of regularisation of these schools had come up prominently in LG's 'Samvaad@RajNiwas' with principals/teachers of private schools on December 20, 2024. Saxena had then promised that he will look into the matter and very soon get it sorted," the



Vinai Kumar Saxena, Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, speaking at a press conference.

statement said. These schools, where thousands of students mostly belonging to economically weaker sections, study have been awaiting regularisation since as long as 2008 and facing harassment from Directorate of Education, MCD and DDA, it said. The LG, while approving the regularisation of these schools, has instructed that the same be done in confirmation with the provisions of applicable building bye-laws, statutory requirement for fire safety, structural safety/stability, etc., it stated. Saxena had earlier convened a meeting on this matter with the Chief Secretary along with officials of Education Department, MCD and DDA, wherein the hardship being faced by these schools and their students was discussed, the statement said. It was brought to notice that

Motorcycle taxi driver apprehended for killing wife over suspicion of infidelity

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A motorcycle taxi driver of Aola, Uber and Rapido, who killed his 26-year-old wife over suspicion of infidelity and hid her body inside a bed box at his house in Delhi, had also planned to chop her body into pieces and kill her friend who he believed she was in a relationship with. According to the police on Tuesday, the husband has been identified as 28-year-old Dhanraj alias Lulu and the wife was identified as Deepa Chauhan, who was working in a private company and bearing the household expenses. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Dwarka) Ankit Singh said, "However, Dhanraj was arrested before he could execute the plan." Police recovered a woman's decomposed body from a house in the Janakpuri area on Friday last week whose mouth



A crime scene with yellow tape and a sign that says 'CRIME SCENE - DO NOT CROSS'.

decomposition. He also planned to chop the body into pieces and dispose them. Dhanraj watched several videos online to learn the procedure, DCP said, adding that he had also asked his friends to help him dispose of the body, but they refused. "On January 3, the accused went to Agra in Uttar Pradesh and he again returned to Delhi and thereafter went to Jaipur. On January 4, the accused again returned to Delhi and went to Amritsar. On January 5, he was returning from Amritsar, Punjab to execute the murder of his wife's friend. However, the accused was apprehended by the team of Anti Narcotics Cell of Dwarka district and he ultimately confessed about the crime," Singh added. He said that three mobile phones including the mobile phone of the deceased were recovered from the accused's possession.

DU-St Stephen's admission row: No resolution even months after university formed committee

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Nearly three months after Delhi University constituted a committee to address the long-standing policy implementation disputes with St. Stephen's college, no meeting has taken place between the two sides, delaying efforts to resolve allegations of the college disregarding university rules, a committee member said on Tuesday. In August last year, St. Stephen's rejected the applications of 12 'single girl child' students seeking admission to its undergraduate programmes beyond its declared seat capacity. DU had previously asked all its colleges to admit students beyond its seat limit for optimal filling of seats. The parents of the affected students challenged the matter in the Supreme Court, and after



The entrance gate of St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi.

the efforts to resolve the concerns regarding university rules. "The university has not issued any formal directive to convene the meeting, so there has not been any progress on this front. Without an official order, it is difficult to initiate the process," a committee member said. "Given the approaching elections, it seems unlikely that a meeting will take place anytime soon," another member added. St. Stephen's principal John Varghese said the college has not even been informed about the committee's formation. "We have not received so far any note or email or communication by the university regarding a meeting or proposed meeting to address the admissions-related concerns," he said. "We came to know through media reports that such a committee had been set up but were neither appraised

about it nor were we approached by the university on the matter," Varghese added. The Delhi University has once again announced that a single seat would be reserved for single girl child in each postgraduate programme for the 2025-26 session, which is pending approval from the highest decision-making body of the university -- the Executive Council. When asked if St. Stephen's will implement this reservation in its post-graduate programmes if it gets a green nod, Varghese did not respond. St. Stephen's College operates under its own 'Supreme Council,' which is composed of members from the Church of North India. The council is chaired by the Bishop of the Diocese of Delhi and is responsible for making decisions on matters concerning the religious character of the college.

MERI goes for global collaborations, start-ups

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The MERI Group of Institutions, Janakpuri, organized a press conference at the Press Club today. Senior representatives from the institution provided an overview of the MERI Center for International Studies (CIS), the MERI Start-Up Hub, and the academic programs offered across its colleges. Opening the event, Prof. Lalit Aggarwal, Vice President of the MERI Group, emphasized the institution's legacy of over three decades in education. "MERI Group of Institutions has been a significant player in providing quality education, offering UGC-recognized courses affiliated with IP University, Delhi, and MDU, Rohtak," he said. Discussing the MERI Center for International Studies (CIS), Prof. Aggarwal explained its mission to establish cultural and intellectual connections with nations worldwide. "CIS fosters mutual exchange of



A group of people sitting at a table during a press conference, likely the MERI Group of Institutions.

modern education and cultural heritage, enabling students to understand and engage with global perspectives," Prof added. Prof. Aggarwal highlighted the MERI Start-Up Hub's focus on equipping students with entrepreneurial skills, saying our aim is to empower students to become self-reliant and create employment opportunities for others. By integrating research and innovation, the

hub nurtures new ideas, enabling students to operate on a global platform, he added. Prof. (Dr.) Ramakant Dwivedi, Head of CIS, elaborated on its unique positioning, stating such Centres have traditionally been part of government institutions, but MERI Group has pioneered this initiative to encourage discussions on global geopolitical issues and enhance students' awareness of international affairs.

Home Minister Amit Shah launches Bharatpol portal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday said it was time Indian investigation agencies use modern technology and techniques to nab fugitives as he launched the 'Bharatpol' portal to facilitate faster international assistance for agencies. Speaking at the launch of 'Bharatpol' at the Bharat Mandapam here, the minister underlined that the real-time interface was the most important feature of the portal developed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). It will allow central and state agencies to easily connect with the Interpol and speed up their investigations, he said. "It is time that we use modern technology and techniques to nab and bring to justice the fugitives who absconded from India after committing a crime," Shah said. "We have to



keep an eye on global challenges and update our internal systems. Bharatpol is a step in that direction," he said. He said the new portal will allow central and state probe agencies to share and obtain information on their cases from the 195 member nations of the Interpol. The three new criminal laws brought by the Modi government last year will ensure that trials against fugitives and absconders are

SC to examine issues over age bar for surrogate mothers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday agreed to examine on February 11 issues over the age bar for surrogate mothers and others under the laws. A bench comprising Justices B V Nagarathna and Satish Chandra Sharma, which heard about 15 petitions challenging certain provisions of the Surrogacy Regulation Act and the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act, 2021, asked the Centre to file its written submissions in the case. Additional solicitor general Aishwarya Bhati, representing the Centre, said she would file the written submissions and the government would abide by the apex court's directions. The court underscored the need to pass an interim order in the case. The 2021 surrogacy laws set age limits for intended parents and surrogate mothers. According to the law, the intended mother must be between 23 and 50 years of age, and the intended father must



be between 26 and 55 years of age. Further, the surrogate mother must be married and between 25 and 35 years of age, having a biological child, and only act as a surrogate once in her lifetime. The laws also provide conditions to regulate surrogacy. The top court had outlined the importance of safeguarding the interests of surrogate moth-

ers, observing the need for a robust system to prevent exploitation, especially given commercial surrogacy was prohibited in India. "There can be a database, so that the same lady is not exploited. A system must be there. Nobody is saying it's a bad idea, but at the same time, it can be badly used," the bench had said. The court also discussed alternative

mechanisms for compensating surrogate mothers and suggested a designated authority, instead of intending couples, for disbursing payments. "You don't have to pay directly to the lady. The department pays. You will have to deposit," the bench proposed. Bhati said the laws currently permitted only altruistic surrogacy, in line with the objective of ban-

ning commercial surrogacy, and assured the court of the government's willingness to consider suggestions. While altruistic surrogacy was commendable, the lack of adequate compensation mechanisms for surrogate mothers posed significant challenges, petitioners said. One of the petitioners said the existing provisions only covered medical expenses and insurance and was inadequate. Dr Arun Muthuvel, a Chennai-based infertility specialist, is the lead petitioner and has challenged the constitutional validity of the twin laws. His plea said the laws were "discriminatory, exclusionary, and arbitrary in nature" which denied agency and autonomy in the discourse on reproductive justice, providing a state-sanctioned notion of the ideal family and restricting reproductive rights. Other petitions raised similar concerns, such as the exclusion of unmarried women from the ambit of the surrogacy law and the restriction on oocyte donations under the ART Act.

CEC defends recent amendment to election rules restricting CCTV footage of polling booths from public inspection

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar on Tuesday defended the recent amendment to election rules restricting CCTV footage of polling booths from public inspection, saying it is meant to protect voters' privacy and prevent use of data for creating fake narratives. Based on Election Commission's recommendation, the government had last month tweaked an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera footage of polling stations to prevent misuse. In his first remarks on tweak of Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, Kumar said only sharing of CCTV footage from inside and outside polling booths have been restricted. Addressing a press conference here to announce the schedule for Delhi Assembly polls, he

said such data or footage was banned for public inspection through EC's instructions in 2024. He said certain other documents which are allowed under Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules will continue to be available. Some documents which are already restricted from sharing are forms filled by poll officials about the name of the voter and the identity shown by them before voting. Kumar said rules were amended to "protect the identity of the voters as well as their profiling". He said if the footage is made public, the identity of those who voted and those who did not, would be revealed and was violative of privacy norms. If footage of 10.5 lakh polling stations where suppose polling takes place for 10 hours is given out, it would mean data of one crore hours. "A person will need 3,600 years to go through the recordings if watched for eight hours daily," he said.



"Why does he want it? Let us ask this question from the person who wants it," Kumar said. He said the poll authority has examples to prove that the data would be used for machine learning and using AI to create narratives. The CEC said even fact checkers would not be able to find out whether the AI-generated videos of polling stations are fake or genuine. He said things which are to be restricted are yet to be defined

or prescribed in the rules. The Union law ministry had amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection. According to Rule 93, all "papers" related to elections shall be open to public inspection. The amendment inserts "as specified in these rules" after "papers". The law ministry and EC officials separately explained that

a court case was the "trigger" behind the amendment. While documents such as nomination forms, appointment of election agents, results and election account statements are mentioned in the Conduct of Election Rules, electronic documents such as CCTV camera footage, webcasting footage and video recording of candidates during the Model Code of Conduct period are not covered. "CCTV coverage, webcasting of polling stations are not carried out under Conduct of Election Rules but are the result of steps taken by the EC to ensure a level playing field," a former EC official explained. An EC functionary said, "There have been instances where such electronic records were sought, citing the rules. The amendment ensures that only papers mentioned in the rules are available for public inspection and any other document which has no reference in the rules is not

allowed for public inspection." Candidates already have access to all documents and papers, and nothing has been amended in the rules in this regard, the functionary added. The Punjab and Haryana High Court, in the recent Mahmood Pracha vs EC case, had directed sharing all documents related to the Haryana Assembly elections, including treating CCTV camera footage as permissible under Rule 93(2), with Pracha. The rule mentioned election papers. The election papers and documents do not specifically refer to electronic records, the EC functionaries said. In order to remove this ambiguity, the rule has been amended to safeguard the misuse of CCTV camera footage of polling stations, another EC official explained. A law ministry official said all election papers and documents were otherwise available for public inspection.

Difficult to define 'freebie': CEC

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

It is very difficult to define what a "freebie" is and the Election Commission's "hands are tied" on the issue as it is subjudice, CEC Rajiv Kumar said on Tuesday. He also said it was "high time" that "accepted and legal answers" were found. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kumar was addressing a press conference to announce the schedule for the assembly polls in Delhi. Asked about political parties announcing freebies during election campaigns, he said the matter was subjudice and referred to a court judgment that had held freebies were not "disallowed". "What is freebie for me may be an entitlement for someone else... It is very difficult to define what a freebie is," Kumar said.



"Our proforma is on our website, this is high time it is accepted and legal answers are found but our hands are tied at the moment because the matter is subjudice," he added. Kumar further said that while such announcements were made, people should also be aware of the state's fiscal health. "It is necessary to see what is the fiscal health of a state... What is the debt-to-GDP ratio? How much will you borrow on that promise? How much is the financial cost of this promise?" he said.

All political parties urged to maintain decorum during elections, EC to ensure free and fair polls

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar on Tuesday urged political parties to maintain decorum during elections and said the Election Commission would conduct checks to ensure free and fair polls. Kumar was addressing a press conference to announce the schedule for the assembly polls in Delhi, further announced that India will soon create a new record of one billion-plus voters. "We will check everyone for ensuring money-free elections. During recent polls, there was a hue and cry that some helicopters were checked. People even come down to threatening polling officers but we control ourselves because it

disturbs the level playing field," Kumar said. "The star campaigners and those in political campaigns are duty-bound to ensure that etiquette is followed... We will be very harsh. Star campaigners should not act in a way that discourages common voters," he said. District magistrates and returning officers will ensure fair play and a level playing field for every candidate, he added. "We will also request the political parties not to create undue pressure on the officials," Kumar said and added that the parties could ask for any explanation in writing. Assembly polls in Delhi will be held on February 5 and the votes counted on February 8, Kumar announced on Tuesday. Bypolls to two assembly constituencies -- Milkipur in Uttar

Pradesh and Erode in Tamil Nadu -- will also be held on the same date. New Delhi, Jan 6 (PTI) Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar on Tuesday dismissed allegations of manipulation in electoral roll, saying no deletion can occur without thorough documentation, field verification, and giving the concerned individual an opportunity to be heard. Kumar emphasised that the process for additions and deletions is transparent, rigorous, and immune to arbitrary changes. Speaking at a press conference to announce the schedule for Delhi Assembly polls, the chief election commissioner (CEC) said, "Every step of the electoral roll process is rooted in transparency and accountability. Deletion of names is not possible without adhering to strict protocols, and every party has the right to raise objections at various stages." Kumar also



detailed the comprehensive process governing the maintenance of electoral roll. For additions, names are

included only after thorough foot-and-field verification by booth-level officers (BLOs), he said. "Regular meetings are held with the representatives of political parties, who have the right to appoint booth-level agents (BLAs). Weekly lists of claims and objections are shared, and both draft and final rolls are published on the Election Commission's website. Polling station rationalisation is also carried out with the consultation of all the stakeholders," the CEC said. On deletions, Kumar clarified that they are processed only through Form 7 or Form B, following strict guidelines. "Mandatory field verification is conducted by the BLOs, and in cases where deletions exceed 2 per cent of a polling station's

voter list, cross-verification is done. Deletions due to death require a certified death certificate, and a seven-day window is provided for objections after notices are published online. Also, the affected voters are given the opportunity for a personal hearing before their names are removed," he said. "No deletion can occur without thorough documentation, field verification, and giving the concerned individual an opportunity to be heard," Kumar reiterated. The CEC also pointed out that claims and objections are not only reviewed, but also shared with all the political parties and made accessible online to ensure transparency. Criticising the tendency to question the integrity of the electoral process only during

elections, the CEC argued that allegations of mass deletions are misleading without evidence and undermine public trust in the system. "Where every vote matters, raising doubts about deletion of thousands of names without evidence is misleading. The processes we follow leave no room for manipulation," he stated. The CEC's comments came in the backdrop of recent allegations made by Delhi Chief Minister Atishi, who claimed the voter list in the New Delhi Assembly constituency had been tampered with to influence the upcoming elections. Atishi also called for an immediate inquiry into the matter, alleging large-scale deletions to manipulate the electoral outcome.

Tourism fuel Goa's growth, revenue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PANAJI

As one of India's premier tourist destinations, famed for its pristine beaches and lush natural landscapes, Goa's tourism industry continues to flourish and attract both domestic and international tourists this season as well. A notable increase in passenger arrivals during Christmas and New Year's weekend, coupled with remarkable revenue growth in 2024, underscores the vital role of tourism in driving Goa's economic success.



In a little more than a week (Dec 20-31) 2025, Dabolim International Airport bustled with activity, handling 1.20 lakh passengers arriving from 683 domestic flights, and 4,700 passengers coming from 27 international flights underscoring Goa's enduring appeal as a tourist spot. It saw almost 27 percent increase in domestic passenger arrival in comparison to 2023. It's a indication that Goa is still favourite destination for the majority. Even in terms of revenues, the state has collected a windfall that can be attributed to the growing tourism-related activities. Goa reported a significant rise in its revenue collection for December 2024 with an increase of ₹75.51 crores over the previous year. The total revenue of Goa from April to December reached Rs 4,614.77 crore, with an increase of Rs 365.43 crore, reported in the same period in 2023. Tourism contributes a major share of revenue, with substantial contributions com-

ing from the GST and VAT collected on purchases and services availed by visitors. Reiterating that 2024's tourist season was exceptional, Goa's Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte, asserted that the state continued to be the first choice of high-end travelers. We are delighted that this festive season we had an unprecedented number of tourists. It has been and will remain our endeavor to elevate tourism in Goa, ensuring safety and a thoroughly rejuvenating experience for all who come to visit. We know that there are challenges ahead, but we are wholeheartedly working in the direction where every stay is enjoyable, and visitors go back with memories for a life-

time." For a majority of Goans, tourism generates livelihood. From hotels and homestays to taxi services and sellers of local crafts and souvenirs, the tourism industry plays a pivotal role in sustaining families while driving the state's economy. With the launch of the "Regenerative Tourism Initiative" ecosystem restoration and community empowerment have received a boost, bolstering Goa's position as a model for sustainable and thriving tourism. With these initiatives and its timeless charm, Goa's tourism sector not only fuels its economy but also sets a benchmark for responsible travel.

ITBP deployed six new battalions to enhance operational capability along LAC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indo-Tibetan Border Police has brought "forward" 33 of its earmarked 56 border posts along the India-China LAC and deployed six new battalions as part of its plan to enhance operational capabilities along the icy front. Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) Director General (DG) Rahul Rasgotra said this during the force's 63rd Raising Day parade on Tuesday in Odisha's Khordha district. The about-90,000-personnel strong, mountain warfare-trained paramilitary marks its annual raising day on October 24 but the ceremonial event kept getting delayed for over two months due to a variety of reasons, a senior officer told PTI. The DG said the force prepared a "forwardisation plan" and, as part of this, a total of 56 ITBP border posts along the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC) were being brought "closer" to the front. Of the 56 border posts, 33 had already been brought closer to



the border, he said. The ITBP chief also said the government sanctioned seven new battalions for border guarding tasks sometime ago. Of these, six have been deployed along the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh while one is being based along the front in Sikkim. Rasgotra also said the force's technology-based surveillance capabilities were reviewed and, after some "shortcomings" were found, it was decided that

these deficiencies would be removed under the forthcoming modernisation plan. The DG said the ITBP would also use the countrywide fibre network for ensuring "secure" operational communications and soon send a proposal to the Union home ministry for upgrading its weaponry. Speaking about the operations of the border force in Maoist violence-affected areas, the DG said some forward bases would soon be created in the most dif-

icult jungle areas of Abujhmad in Chhattisgarh. Union Home Minister Amit Shah has declared that India would be rid of Left Wing Extremism (LWE) by March 2026. Rasgotra thanked the Union government and the home ministry for showing its concern to improve "basic" infrastructure facilities for the force at the LAC. "Funds of Rs 2,500 crore have been made available this year for creating basic infrastructure for the ITBP. Last year, Rs 1,000 crore worth of funds were spent for construction work at forward posts and battalions etc.," the DG said. Raised in the aftermath of the 1962 Chinese aggression, the ITBP is primarily tasked with guarding the 3,488-kilometre-long LAC with China, apart from rendering a variety of duties in the internal security domain. Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai officiated as the chief guest at the event.

Naxalite attack: Chhattisgarh mourns loss of nine lives in Bijapur blast

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DANTEWADA

Impassioned scenes of grief were witnessed as wreaths were laid on Tuesday at the mortal remains of eight police personnel and a civilian driver killed in a blast carried out by Naxalites in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district. Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai, other senior state leaders and the inconsolable family members of the deceased paid homage at the wreath-laying ceremony here, amid chants of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' and 'Vande Mataram'. The family members of the deceased, including women and children, were seen crying as women security personnel tried to console them. Chief Minister Sai, Deputy CM Vijay Sharma and Director General of Police Ashok Juneja lent their shoulders to the mortal remains of jawans as they were shifted to vehicles to transport them to the native places of the deceased. In their biggest strike on security forces in Chhattisgarh in two years, Naxalites on Monday blew up the security personnel's vehicle using a 60-70 kg improvised explosive



device (IED) near Ambeli village under Kutru police station area in Bijapur district. Eight security personnel, four each from the state police's District Reserve Guard (DRG) and Bastar Fighters units, travelling in the SUV and the vehicle's driver died on the spot, located around 70 km from Bijapur district headquarters. "Naxalites have become frustrated due to

which they have committed such a cowardly act. I pay my tribute to the martyred jawans and the civilian driver. The sacrifices of our jawans will not go in vain. They sacrificed their lives to establish peace in Chhattisgarh and in the country. We will, indeed, be successful in establishing peace," Sai added. Juneja and CRPF DG Vitul Kumar visited the site in Bijapur district

where eight security personnel and a civilian driver were killed. Inspector General of Police (Bastar Range) Sundarraj P and senior CRPF officials accompanied Director General Kumar, as per officials. A day after the incident in Bijapur, security forces on Tuesday recovered a 10 kg improvised explosive device (IED) planted by Maoists in

Chhattisgarh's Sukma district, police said. A team of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and district police found the explosive device near Belpochcha village on the Kanta-Golapalli road, an official said. He said during a de-mining exercise on the route, security personnel spotted the IED planted beneath the road and averted a major mishap.

Odisha prepares for Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebration, expects 5,000 global delegates

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BHUBANESWAR

In its bid to make the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) event memorable for the guests visiting Odisha, the state government on Tuesday appealed to the residents of Bhubaneswar to decorate their houses as they do during Diwali celebration. The state government in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs is hosting the PBD in Bhubaneswar, to be attended by around 5,000 delegates from around the world. The guests will come from around 50 countries, sources said. The administration has made arrangements like holding cultural events and keeping the state museum open till 9 pm. It even appealed to the residents of the state capital to decorate their houses as they do during Diwali. Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi has also urged people to welcome the NRIs on this occasion and show them due respect. "Let us all together make this success and strive to ensure that the NRIs have the best experience of their lives in Odisha," Majhi said. Stating that Indians from all over the world are coming to Odisha, the chief minister said PBD is a great opportunity to showcase the rich art, culture



and heritage of the state to the world. He said the twin cities of Bhubaneswar and Cuttack have been cleaned and sanitised to provide a beautiful and harmonious experience to the guests. Housing and Urban Development Minister Krishna Chandra Mohapatra appealed to the people of Bhubaneswar to decorate their houses by illuminating their houses and drawing 'Rangoli'. Shops and malls are also requested to decorate their establishments with lights and flower pots, the minister said. The Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation and Bhubaneswar Development Authority have decorated the entire city with colourful paint on the walls and bridges across the state capital. Culture Minister Suryabanshi Suraj said the State Museum in Bhubaneswar will remain open till 9 pm every day for three days during the PBD convention beginning on Wednesday. The State Museum generally remains open till 5.30 pm every day. Suraj said a number of programmes will be held during the event. He said that as part of the Odisha government's effort to highlight the state's rich culture, the department has organised three dance festivals from Tuesday evening which will continue till January 11 coinciding with the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. Stating that the classical dance and music are integral part of Odisha's culture and heritage, the minister said the Rajarani Music Festival, Mukteswar Odissi Dance Festival and International Odissi Dance Festival are being organised. The government has also organised a flower show and a bird festival at Chilika.

Teen girl dies after 33 hour rescue from 540 foot borewell in Kutch

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BHUJ/GUJARAT

An 18-year-old girl who fell into a 540-foot-deep borewell and was rescued after more than 33 hours in Gujarat's Kutch district was declared dead at a hospital here on Tuesday, officials said. The girl fell into the borewell at Kanderai village in Bhuj taluka around 6.30 am on Monday and was stuck at a depth of 490 feet, prompting the administration to launch a multi-agency rescue operation. According to officials, the borewell had a diameter of one foot, and the fact that she was grown up and stuck deep into it made the rescue efforts difficult. The teenager was brought out at around 4 pm. "Unfortunately, the girl could not survive and was declared dead by doctors at GK General Hospital in Bhuj," said AB Jadav, assistant collector and SDM, Bhuj. The official said the teen was brought out using a "hook technique", wherein L and J-shaped hooks were lowered into the borewell, fitted on two sides and pressure was applied from below to pull her up. An official from the state water supply and sewerage board said the girl was rescued using a makeshift contraption. "We prepared a makeshift contraption with the help of local drillers. Multiple agencies were involved in the rescue operation," he said. Teams of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and Border Security Force (BSF) were involved in the rescue operation along with the fire department personnel of the Bhuj municipality, local emergency response team, police and officials of the local administration.

Congress divided over Pradip Bhattacharya's remarks on Mamata Banerjee's expulsion

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Bengal Congress is vertically divided over veteran party leader Pradip Bhattacharya's remarks that expelling the then State Youth Congress president and present Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee from the party was a big blunder for which the party was still suffering. While senior party leader and former State president Adhir Chowdhury refused comment on Banerjee's expulsion saying it Bhattacharya would be the best person to explain his own views, another senior leader close to present State president Subhankar Sarkar however conceded that Bhattacharya was "two hundred percent correct in his reading of the circumstances." But a third Congress leader a former minister linked Bhattacharya's statements with his "itch to get a Rajya Sabha nomination which in any case he won't because Mamata Banerjee needs boot lickers and not politicians." Bhattacharya a former Rajya Sabha MP who is known for his good chemistry



with the Chief Minister earlier said that "Mamata Banerjee's expulsion from the party was a big mistake the after effects which is still being felt the Congress is still paying for its mistake." Banerjee was expelled from the party in January 1997 when AICC leader Somen Mitra was the party's State president. "He was expelled during the time of Sitaram Kesari ... he was the national president ... I still remember the day when Somen Mitra called me and told me that Kesari was asking him to expel Mamata, Bhattacharya said quoting Mitra who informed Bhattacharya that he was under intense pressure

from the central leadership. "Keshari told Somen Mitra that she should be expelled" because Delhi had already done that, Bhattacharya said adding how he had advised the Pradesh Congress president to desist from expelling her. "I told him not to do it ... 'whatever you do but don't do it' ... I had told Somen Mitra ... but finally she was expelled and the party is still paying the price of that step," it should not have taken because Banerjee raised a new outfit on January 1, 1998 and rest was history. "It is for everyone to see how the Congress has a sharp decline in Bengal since that time," Bhattacharya said.

Akhilesh alleges BJP role in Sambhal violence, calls it a government plot

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav on Tuesday unleashed a sharp critique of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), accusing the ruling party of engineering the recent violence in Sambhal as part of a "government conspiracy." The incident, which claimed five lives, was not a communal riot but a "pre-planned act" allegedly executed with the involvement of local administration, Yadav charged. Speaking at a press conference, Yadav alleged that the BJP was stoking unrest and targeting innocent citizens in Sambhal. "When an SP delegation tried to visit Sambhal, they were blocked by authorities. What is the government hiding?" he asked. According to him, the violence was deliberately orchestrated to disturb communal harmony in Uttar Pradesh. The SP leader also condemned a controversial survey conducted at the Shahi Jama Masjid, a



Mughal-era mosque, calling it a ploy to implicate innocent people. "The Places of Worship Act, 1991, prohibits such surveys. What urgency drove this? It was a calculated act that led to violence," he asserted. Leader of Opposition Mata Prasad Pandey bolstered Yadav's claims while presenting a report on the incident. He alleged that the mosque survey team included BJP members and accused the police of using excessive force. "Instead of resorting to tear gas, they fired bullets, escalating tensions and disrupting peace," Pandey

said. The violence broke out on November 24 when a team from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) arrived at the Shahi Jama Masjid. The SP chief also targeted Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath over allegations of cow slaughter. "A BJP MLA claims 50,000 cows are being slaughtered. If that's true, what is the so-called Sanatani CM doing? And if the MLA is wrong, why hasn't the government responded?" he questioned. Highlighting administrative lapses, Yadav pointed to the demolition of an ASI-protected building in Agra. "The structure was brought down by someone with connections to officials, all for business expansion. This is a glaring example of negligence," he said. Wrapping up, Yadav appealed for accountability and urged religious leaders to demand transparency from the government. "I request saints and sages attending the Kumbh to question those in power. Many of them are involved in activities they should not be, impacting governance and society," he concluded.

Shattering records and coconuts: 68 year old folk artist achieves unbelievable feat

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

A unique kind of world record was created in Kakkadu Maha Ganapathi Temple at Kunnankulam last week by Karakura Ramachandran Nair (68), a traditional folk artist. Nair broke more than 36,000 coconuts single-handedly by throwing them with force in front of the presiding deity of the temple, Vettakkoru Makan. It was a long event on 4 January performed without any kind of interruption or break. Vettakkoru Makan is a tribal God born out of the relation between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi during their sojourn to India to gift Arjuna, the famous



Paasupathastra. Since both Lord Shiva and his consort were in the form of Kirata (hunters), the child was known as Vettakkoru Makan (son of hunters) and is worshipped by the tribes dwelling in the forest. The child was mischievous and found pleasure in tormenting the Devas and Asuras alike. Both the groups approached

Lord Mahavishnu seeking his solace. Lord Vishnu with a churika (sword-cum-dagger) appeared in front of Vettakkoru Makan who pleaded with the former to part with the special weapon. The Lord said that he was willing to hand over the weapon to him provided he behaved in a responsible manner and the child prodigy agreed to do so. In order to propitiate the good will of the child, the tribals started a ritual whereby they would break coconuts numbering 12,000 or more in front of him and this is performed without any break. "The ritual of breaking of 36,000 coconuts commenced around 8 PM and went up to

the wee hours of Sunday watched by thousands of devotees. There was no break of any kind during the entire process," Nair told The Pioneer. In Malabar region of Kerala, Vettakkoru Makan is worshipped by all sections of people irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Nair also disclosed that Saturday's event is likely to figure in the Guinness Book of World Records. "This is a ritual performed to make the deity calm, cool and happy. Many devotees have disclosed to us about the changes that happened in their lives following the breaking of coconut ritual," said Nair. He is helped in the ritual by a group of youngsters who

ensure that coconuts reach the podium and Nair could complete the process without any hitch. There should not be any kind of interruption during the ritual lest the deity gets annoyed and becomes furious. "This is an integrated form of ritual in which the mind, body and health all work in synchronization with the person. I rate this as a ritual art with aesthetic sense because the breaking of coconuts is accompanied by folk songs in praise of the deity and the machine-like functioning of the body matching with the non-stop playing percussion instruments," said Dr M G Gireesh, a physio-therapist turned Indologist.

Eight coaching institute officials booked for cheating JEE aspirants



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ THANE

Police on Tuesday said they have registered a criminal case against eight officials of a coaching institute for allegedly cheating students preparing for Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) of more than Rs 3 crore in Thane city. Assistant Police Inspector (API) Sandeep Chavan of the Thane Nagar police station said the case was registered on Monday after some of the students filed a complaint against the institute which has branches in different parts of the country. The institute collected a sum of Rs 3,20,00,000 from the JEE students since January 2024 and abruptly closed shop and classes, and misused the collected fees, he said, quoting the complaint. JEE is a national-level entrance examination conducted for admission to various engineering colleges. The institute collected the fees in different bank accounts from the victims. The accused named in the FIR threatened the students when they approached them for a refund and to seek reasons for not holding classes, said Chavan.

Mahakumbh website opens a digital window into India's spiritual legacy

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Mahakumbh 2025, a monumental celebration of spirituality and culture, has garnered unprecedented global attention even before its commencement. The event's official website, <https://kumbh.gov.in/>, has emerged as the primary source of information for millions, connecting devotees worldwide to the essence of this grand festival. Since its launch on October 6, 2024, by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the website has recorded over 33 lakh visitors from 183 countries and 6,200 cities as of January 4, reflecting its universal appeal. "Through this website, devotees can seamlessly access



details about the Mahakumbh, including its traditions, spiritual significance, major attractions, and travel options," said Sripati Tripathi, a member of the Government's PR team monitoring the website. "We have designed it

significance of the Kumbh. It explains the historical and cultural essence of the event, making it easier for devotees to immerse themselves in the spiritual journey. Key bathing dates such as Makar Sankranti, Mauni Amavasya, and Basant Panchami are highlighted, drawing special interest as they are expected to attract the largest crowds. Additionally, the website provides extensive travel and accommodation details. Visitors can explore transportation options, hotel availability, and eco-friendly tent city accommodations, catering to various budgets and preferences. The portal also outlines important guidelines for devotees, ensuring a safe and fulfilling experience. A media gallery

showcases visuals and videos of past Kumbh celebrations, offering a glimpse into the grandeur of the event. Furthermore, the website features regular updates about Prayagraj's infrastructure and tourist-friendly developments, underlining the city's transformation into a global pilgrimage hub. For international visitors, the website serves as an invaluable resource for understanding the essence of India's Sanatan heritage. Emily Johnson, a yoga enthusiast from the United States, shared, "The website made it easy for me to understand the traditions and plan my trip. It's fascinating how modern technology is preserving ancient practices." For Indian devotees like Rajesh Kumar, a

businessman from Varanasi, the portal has simplified the experience. "It has everything I need, from key dates to booking accommodations. It is all in one place," he remarked. Website analytics reveal that India leads in user traffic, followed by countries like the United States, Britain, Canada, and Germany. The surge in interest underscores Prayagraj's growing global appeal as a pilgrimage destination. Visitors are actively engaging with the content, exploring the event's spiritual significance while learning about the logistical aspects. A closer look at data highlights how users interact with the website. A significant portion of visitors are accessing travel

and accommodation details, while others focus on key bathing dates, spiritual content, and visuals of past events. The increasing traffic demonstrates the success of the Uttar Pradesh government's vision of making Mahakumbh 2025 a "Digital Mahakumbh," blending ancient tradition with modern technology. "The Mahakumbh 2025 website is not just a portal but a gateway to a profound spiritual journey. By making the event accessible to millions across the globe, it ensures that the legacy of the Kumbh resonates far beyond India's borders, uniting humanity in a shared celebration of spirituality and culture," Shishir Singh, Government spokesman said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Trudeau steps down

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau resigns ahead of the upcoming elections

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's announcement of his resignation on January 6, 2025, marks a significant turning point in Canadian politics. Trudeau, who has served as Prime Minister since October 2015, made the decision amidst mounting pressure from his own party and growing challenges to his leadership. Trudeau's decision to step down comes against a backdrop of increasing discontent within the ruling Liberal Party. During his announcement outside Rideau Cottage in Ottawa, Trudeau acknowledged the internal discord that had hindered his leadership. In a strategic move, Trudeau met with Governor General Mary Simon to secure the prorogation of Parliament until March 24, effectively delaying the possibility of a no-confidence vote that was anticipated in the session scheduled to begin on January 27. This decision provides the Liberal Party with a window to elect a new leader and stabilise its position ahead of potential political upheaval. Trudeau's resignation reflects a culmination of political and personal challenges. The Liberal Party's diminishing unity became a significant obstacle for Trudeau's leadership. Discontent among MPs and party members had been growing, fueled by concerns over policy decisions, governance style, and declining public support.



After nearly a decade in office, Trudeau's administration faced criticism over issues such as economic management, healthcare and Canada's climate policy. These challenges eroded his public approval, making him a less viable candidate for the next election. By stepping down before the next election, Trudeau's resignation allows the Liberal Party to rejuvenate its leadership and present a fresh face to voters, potentially mitigating electoral risks. Trudeau's departure will have significant political and national implications. The resignation sets the stage for a competitive leadership race within the Liberal Party. The choice of the next leader will be critical in determining the party's future direction and its ability to retain power. Trudeau's resignation reshapes Canada's political dynamics. The opposition, particularly the Conservative Party, is likely to leverage this transition period to challenge the Liberals' governance record and push for early elections. Trudeau's tenure, marked by landmark achievements such as legalising cannabis, advancing gender equality, and climate initiatives, will now be evaluated in the context of his departure. His legacy will hinge on whether the Liberal Party can sustain these accomplishments under new leadership. Justin Trudeau's resignation underscores the complexities of long-term political leadership in a rapidly evolving landscape. While his decision to step down reflects personal and political pragmatism, it also signals a pivotal moment for Canadian democracy. The coming months will determine how effectively the Liberal Party navigates this transition and whether Canada's political institutions can maintain stability amid change. Trudeau's departure opens the door to new opportunities and challenges for Canada's political future.

trouderisks. Trudeau's departure will have significant political and national implications. The resignation sets the stage for a competitive leadership race within the Liberal Party. The choice of the next leader will be critical in determining the party's future direction and its ability to retain power. Trudeau's resignation reshapes Canada's political dynamics. The opposition, particularly the Conservative Party, is likely to leverage this transition period to challenge the Liberals' governance record and push for early elections. Trudeau's tenure, marked by landmark achievements such as legalising cannabis, advancing gender equality, and climate initiatives, will now be evaluated in the context of his departure. His legacy will hinge on whether the Liberal Party can sustain these accomplishments under new leadership. Justin Trudeau's resignation underscores the complexities of long-term political leadership in a rapidly evolving landscape. While his decision to step down reflects personal and political pragmatism, it also signals a pivotal moment for Canadian democracy. The coming months will determine how effectively the Liberal Party navigates this transition and whether Canada's political institutions can maintain stability amid change. Trudeau's departure opens the door to new opportunities and challenges for Canada's political future.

PICTALK



Farmers plant paddy saplings in a field, in Nadia

PTI

India's Gorkha Brigade: A legacy at crossroads

The iconic Gorkha Brigade faces an uncertain future with the freeze on Nepal domiciled Gorkha recruitment under the Agnipath scheme



ASHOK K MEHTA

The press and media are flooded with stories about Nepal Domiciled Gorkha soldiers and their imperiled future in the Indian Army under the Agnipath scheme. With the last NDG in India's Gorkha Brigade likely to retire around 2045-50, it is possible two Gorkha soldiers could confront each other in Doklam, or elsewhere along the LAC should NDGs start joining the PLA. Traditionally, they have joined the British Army since the early 19th century, later the Singapore Police and Brunei Army and still later, the French Foreign Legion and the Russian Army (around 15,000 according to Al Jazeera news). Soldiering is in their blood with the first choice always and every time, the British Army has pampered as well as exploited them. On 10 November 2024, Kathmandu Post carried a front-page picture of impeccably smart Gorkhas at an attestation parade in the UK.

Three brothers in a Nepali family could still be in British, Indian and Nepalese armies in that order of preference. But Britain does not recruit Indian Domiciled Gorkhas. NDGs ceased joining the Indian Army for 5 years rendering hopelessly bleak the future of the Gorkha Brigade and a strategic glue that binds India and Nepal. Last year, in November and December, Indian and Nepalese Army Chiefs who became honorary Generals in each other's army spent a week in the other's country and were made much of. Last week, 1/11 Gorkha Rifles commanded by Col JP Singh went for joint training with the Sri Sri Jung battalion of the Nepal Army at Saljhandi near the border town of Butawal. (With PLA Nepal Army does only platoon-level joint training restricted to Kathmandu Valley). No weapons are carried by either contingent as the host country provides them. No two sovereign armies and their Chiefs have such unique rapport. Despite the shared history, geography and historic links between the two countries and their armies, recruitment of NDGs has been frozen since India took the unilateral decision in June 2022 to change



the terms of engagement that Kathmandu says violated Treaty arrangements. Curiously both countries have remained silent at the political and military levels. India's seniormost officer, Chief of Defence Staff, Gen Anil Chauhan from 11 Gorkha Rifles has been approached by several Gorkha veterans to try to break the stalemate but he is loath to approach PM/RM/NSA saying that the government 'has taken a political decision'. QED It is his responsibility to raise the decision-making process to the next level as other Army Chiefs in the past have done in the national interest. During the economic blockade in 2015, Gen Dalbir Singh was able to persuade PM Narendra Modi and FM Sushma Swaraj that prolonging the blockade would adversely affect the livelihood of Indian Army Gorkha ex-servicemen and families of serving soldiers in Nepal which in turn would impact bilateral relations. The blockade was ended but bilateral ties were seriously disturbed. After King Gyanendra conducted the Palace coup in 2004, India decided to stop the supply of lethal armaments to the Nepal Army which was fighting the Maoists. Then Army Chief, Gen JJ Singh, recommended against it. In a slanging match between MoD and EAM, Prime

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DESPITE THE SHARED HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORIC LINKS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES AND THEIR ARMIES, RECRUITMENT OF NDGS HAS BEEN FROZEN SINCE INDIA TOOK THE UNILATERAL DECISION IN JUNE 2022 TO CHANGE THE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT THAT KATHMANDU SAYS VIOLATED TREATY ARRANGEMENTS

Minister Manmohan Singh upheld the embargo. On the other hand, Siachen, Army Chiefs had prevailed in convincing Singh not to budge over any withdrawal from or concessions on Siachen. In 1986, during the Gorkhaland movement in North Bengal, as a senior Gorkha officer who had been deployed there, I was invited to a meeting by Principal Secretary to PM, Sarla Grewal along with Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen Rawat for discussion on the violence and our response. In the higher direction of war in 1971, PM Indira Gandhi consulted Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw at every stage for planning and conduct of battle. In 1975, then Army Chief, Gen Gopal Bewoor, 11 Gorkha Rifles convinced Mrs Gandhi of the negative impact of stopping the recruitment of NDGs. So this is not the first time that the absurd idea of ending NDG recruitment has come up. But this time government decided on NDGs that CDS accepted. Lt Gen Sanjeev Chauhan is the senior officer and President Gorkha Brigade which meets annually in February in a unique assembly of seven Gorkha regiments to discuss professional matters. On recruitment of NDGs, they too are stuck at the Army Chief/CDS level. Two years ago, I wrote a letter

on strategic loss accruing from altered rules of NDG recruitment to the PM, PK Mishra. No acknowledgement nor reply was received. Service Chiefs in the past have been willing and able to advise political authority on military matters. The consultative process has stopped with this government. On December 15, 2024, while inaugurating India's World magazine, Foreign Minister Jaishankar conspicuously omitted to mention national security or the military component of international relations as part of India's foreign policy vision. Answering a question last year on why no NDG recruitment he said foreign policy is determined by India's national interest and not that of any other country, implying Nepal. India's national interests in terms of defence and security are entwined with those of Nepal with whom New Delhi claims a special relationship which Kathmandu mildly reaffirms. It was Modi who said in Nepal's Parliament in 2014 that India has fought no war where Nepalese blood was not shed. India-Nepal relations are written in blood.

(The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka, and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. The views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AUSTRALIA WINS B-G TROPHY

Madam — Australia deserves to be the winner of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy by their immaculate performance under the brilliance of Pat Cummins. While India was beaten thoroughly 3-1, the little hope in the Sydney test was vanquished when the ace Jasprit Bumrah got injured at the inappropriate time. All the credit goes to Bumrah and the world-class bowler claimed the man of the series despite India losing heavily, indicating that he's the supreme bowler from both sides. World stalwarts rated him high with huge respect for him and he has been shortlisted for the ICC men's cricketer of the year award for the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy, which has seen him walking tall among geniuses among world cricketers.

It's unfortunate that Captain Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli were the great disappointment and the ultimate reasons for Team India losing the rhythm for the Titanic sink at the end. Though the young Jaiswal has been spectacular and K L Rahul did some good work, Pant played a cameo in a few innings that wasn't good enough for the team to pull back when the rest of the batters failed miserably at the end. Aussies Scott Boland's splendid variation and bounce would make Kohli remember Scott Boland more than Anushka in his dreams in this series by dismissing Virat 4 times out of Boland's 5 innings by having faced 68 balls for a mere 28 runs. Boland came into the side during the middle of the series and was the only breather for the Indian team. Anyhow, the series has not only the test for players but also for the head coach too. Gambhir needs to study a few management lessons. Hope the team India would make a comeback in the upcoming fixtures of T20 against England and in the following months to prove their worth to serve a few Badusa to ICC Chief Jay Shah to bring back sweeter moments for the fans too in the future.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

Create safe online environment for kids



The digital age has revolutionised childhood, with social media becoming an integral part of how young people connect and communicate. Yet, this evolution brings significant risks that demand urgent action. In this backdrop, India's draft rules under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act mandating consent of parents/guardians for minors to open social media accounts are a commendable step in safeguard-

ing children. The proposed rules make social media companies accountable for verifying parental consent through robust measures, empowering the guardians to guide their wards' online interactions.

To refine these rules, additional measures like AI-driven age verification, digital literacy workshops and transparent complaint mechanisms are essential. Regular audits, stakeholder feedback and alignment with global standards will further enhance the framework. By adopting these rules, India contributes to a global effort to create a safer online environment for children. In a world where digital engagement is unavoidable, prioritising the safety and wellbeing of the youngest users is not merely a responsibility but also an ethical imperative. Building collaboration among parents, educators and social media platforms is crucial for lasting change.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

EDUCATION SYSTEM NEEDS REFORM

Madam—This refers to the article on turning Canada's crisis into India's opportunity. This looks to be an incongruent aspiration. Because Indian industries are already expressing their difficulties in getting recruitable skilled workers. This crisis is further confirmed by the latest programme to train 10 lakh youth as apprentices. 500 industries are listed out to engage in this programme in which both the trainees and the engaged industries are incentivised. The fact is the participants are already educated diploma or degree holders.

The education system is yet to be tuned in such a manner as to make those completing education employable with appropriate skills and enough knowledge. It would be more appropriate to correct our systems before aiming at utilising others' crises into our opportunities. Having put education in the hands of the private players, the quality of education suffers the most. Except producing degree holders, simply by utilising the talent of overheating and reproducing no

scope for creativity is offered. In the name of introducing new educational system subjects like astrology is being introduced. The education system urgently needs a total revamping to make it meaningful.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

BIDHURI SPARKS CONTROVERSY

Madam —BJP candidate Ramesh Bidhuri's statement, "We will make all the roads in Kalkaji like Priyanka Gandhi's cheeks," is not just an insult but also a reflection of his mentality. If such remarks can be made by a prominent senior party candidate, what can we expect from an ordinary citizen? The BJP should take strict action against Ramesh Bidhuri, as such a derogatory statement by a party member not only tarnishes his reputation but also damages the party's image. He should issue a public apology for this remark.

Priya Thakur | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Digital shield: Safeguarding children from the digital trap

The Indian government has proposed the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 to fortify children's online safety through robust data protection measures

The digital revolution has profoundly transformed how we live, learn, and connect. While this transformation offers immense opportunities for growth and development, it also poses significant risks, especially for vulnerable populations such as children. The digital world is fraught with challenges, from exposure to inappropriate content to exploitation through targeted advertising. Recognising the urgent need for robust protections, the Indian government has introduced the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023.

These rules, still in draft form, have the potential to safeguard children from falling into digital traps by establishing a comprehensive framework for responsible data handling. A cornerstone of the draft rules is the requirement for verifiable parental consent before processing children's data. This mandate ensures that entities cannot collect or use data about minors without explicit authorisation from their parents or legal guardians. For



example, creating an account on a social media platform or an online gaming service requires parents to verify their identity and approve the data processing activities. This provision is vital in reducing the risks posed by predatory targeting, identity theft, and unauthorised data collection. By putting parents in control, the rules prevent businesses from exploiting children's data for financial gain. This safeguard is particularly important in protecting children from behavioural profiling, which can have long-term implications on their psychological development and privacy. Educational institutions play a critical role in a child's growth, but they, too, rely heavily on data collection. The draft rules explicitly

address this by restricting data processing in schools and allied institutions to activities that are essential for educational purposes or the safety of students. For instance, tracking attendance, monitoring behaviour, and ensuring the security of transportation services are permissible, but excessive or irrelevant data collection is prohibited. These safeguards ensure that children's data is not misused or repurposed without clear justification.

The digital world can be a double-edged sword. While it offers educational resources and entertainment, it also exposes children to inappropriate or harmful content. The draft rules mandate that data fiduciaries implement measures to ensure that children cannot access content that negatively affects their well-being. This includes filtering out materials related to violence, explicit content, and other age-inappropriate material.

Such provisions are critical in protecting the mental and emotional health of children, who are particularly susceptible to the influence of harmful digital stimuli. Moreover,

they underscore the importance of collaboration between regulators and technology companies to create a safer online environment. Consent managers play a pivotal role in the new framework. As intermediaries, they enable data principals—in this case, parents or guardians—to give, manage, review, and withdraw consent for data processing activities. These managers must ensure that the process is transparent and user-friendly, empowering parents to monitor how their children's data is being utilised.

The draft rules also require consent managers to maintain detailed records of consent given, denied, or withdrawn, enhancing accountability across the board. While the draft rules represent a significant leap forward, their successful implementation hinges on overcoming several challenges. This calls for innovative solutions, such as integrating verified digital IDs like Aadhaar with consent management systems.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN



FIRST COLUMN TEN MEANINGFUL RESOLUTIONS FOR 2025

It is time to focus on resolutions that align with our aspirations



SHAINY SHARMA

The dawn of a new year provides a blank canvas to rewrite your story, redefine your priorities, and reimagine the future. In 2025, seize this opportunity by setting resolutions that not only align with your aspirations but also enhance your quality of life. This year calls for more than just ambitious declarations – it demands realistic, sustainable changes that can truly transform our lives. Here are ten meaningful resolutions worth keeping making 2025 your best year yet.

1. Digital Wellness Revolution: The first and foremost is to break free from screen addiction by implementing a “sunset hour” for devices. Keeping aside one hour before bedtime for offline activities like reading or meditation will definitely help in improving both sleep quality as well as mental health.

2. Financial Intelligence Upgrade: Financial stability is a key component of a stress-free life. Start by evaluating your spending habits and creating a realistic budget by dedicating at least 30 minutes weekly to learning about investments and financial planning. By aiming to save consistently and work towards reducing debt, setting financial goals can provide clarity and motivation.



3. Sustainable Living Practices: As global awareness of environmental challenges grows, adopting sustainable habits is more important than ever. By transforming your environmental impact through practical steps such as switching to reusable products, adopting a plant-based meal day, and calculating your monthly carbon footprint to identify areas for improvement.

4. De-clutter your space: A cluttered environment often mirrors a cluttered mind. Take time in 2025 to organize and declutter your living and working spaces. Try working towards donating or recycling items that are no longer in need and creating systems to maintain the same.

5. Relationship Enrichment: Human connections are the bedrock of happiness and fulfillment. This year, try making a conscious effort to nurture your relationships with family, friends, and colleagues.

6. Physical Health Revolution: Developing regular physical activity is the cornerstone of good health. In 2025, move a daily habit. Whether it's strength training, yoga, swimming, or brisk walking, find an activity you enjoy and stick to it. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week to improve cardiovascular health, strengthen muscles, and boost mental well-being.

7. Mental Fitness Focus: A positive mindset can transform your experiences. In 2025, focus on the good in every situation, practice self-compassion, and surround yourself with uplifting individuals. Integrate daily mental health practices such as five minutes of mindfulness, gratitude journaling, or therapeutic creativity. Positivity fuels resilience and empowers you to overcome challenges with grace.

8. Knowledge Expansion: Read one book monthly on subjects outside your comfort zone. This broadens perspectives and keeps your mind agile in our rapidly changing world.

9. Community Engagement: Helping others fosters a sense of purpose and connection. Find a cause you care about and dedicate time or resources to it. Community service not only helps others but also provides networking opportunities and personal fulfillment. Volunteering not only benefits those in need but also enriches your own life with meaning and fulfillment.

10. Creative Expression: Dedicate time weekly to any form of creativity – writing, painting, music, or crafts. Creative outlets reduce stress and enhance problem-solving skills. As we embrace 2025, let's move beyond traditional resolution-setting and focus on creating meaningful, lasting changes that enhance both our personal growth and our impact on the world around us.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Farmers shunning use of nano-urea despite promotion



UTTAM GUPTA

Despite a strong push from the government and ambitious targets for production and adoption, the fiscal year 2023-24 witnessed a sharp 43 per cent drop in nano-urea sales

Last year, around this time, the Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilisers Mansukh Mandaviya had said “Consumption of urea this fiscal (read: FY 2023-24) is likely to be 8 percent less than in FY 2022-23 due to the use of its liquid nano variant. Because of this and higher domestic production, import of urea, the soil nutrient that accounts for 70 percent of the fertilizer subsidy bill, declined more than a fifth on year in 2023. Further spread of nano urea consumption and the start of a new large urea plant (Talcher in Odisha) by September 2023 would lead to elimination of imports in two-three years”.

Nano-urea is urea in the form of a nanoparticle containing nitrogen particles of 20-50 nanometres (nm) in size. It provides nitrogen or ‘N’ to plants in liquid form as an alternative to conventional urea which is mostly supplied as prill (it is a small diameter, spherical white solid). The minister’s statement pointed towards the commitment of the government to promote the use of nano-urea so that imports of conventional urea are brought down to eliminating it.

However, according to data from the Fertiliser Association of India (FAI) – an umbrella body of the fertilizer industry – the sales of Nano urea plummeted by nearly 43 per cent during FY 2023-24 (this happened after growing by a significant 62 per cent during FY 2022-23). Meanwhile, the total production of Nano urea during FY 2023-24 was 81 per cent less than in the previous FY.

The manufacturers knew that there wouldn't be much demand for it; so they reduced the output even as its production capacity rose by 59 per cent. Why did the sales of Nano-urea decrease? But, before that, we need to understand why the government is so keen to promote its use.

The beauty of nano-urea lies in its ultra-small size and high surface area (10,000 times over 1 mm urea prill), which enable easy absorption by plant leaves. These particles enter the plant through cuticular pores, or stomata, and then penetrate the cell membranes through endocytosis. Once inside the cell, these release nutrients slowly and ensure full absorption by eliminating waste that normally happens with conventional means. The innovator namely Nano Biotechnology Research Centre (NBRC) of the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) claims its efficiency (a measure of how much of the ‘N’ supplied from it is absorbed by the plant) is over 80 per cent against around 40 per cent for the conventional stuff.

The use of nano-urea also results in higher crop yield by 3-16 per cent when compared to traditional urea. Moreover, unlike the latter which raises environmental concerns including nitrate leaching, global warming, ozone layer depletion, and groundwater pollution, the former causes less soil, water and air pollution. According to a study, two foliar sprays of nano-urea curtailed nitrogen load by 25 per cent, besides reducing the greenhouse gas (GHG) emission from 164.2 to 416.5 kg CO₂-eq ha⁻¹ under different crops.



FOR A COUNTRY THAT DEPENDS HEAVILY ON IMPORTS AND EVEN INCURS HUGE SUBSIDIES, WHY WOULD THE GOVERNMENT ALLOW EXPORTS? THE INDUSTRY, HOWEVER, CONCEDES THAT THERE WAS UNSOLD INVENTORY WITH DEALERS AND THAT MIGHT HAVE IMPACTED SALES DURING 2023-24

A more startling claim made by IFFCO/NBRC is that a 500-ml bottle of nano-urea is equivalent to a 45-kg bag of conventional urea.

The latter contains 46 percent N nutrient, or 20 kg (45x0.46). In contrast, the former contains 4 per cent N, or 20 grams (500x.04). The equivalence between the two means that urea in nano-form with a mere 20 grams can achieve what conventional urea does with 20 kg – a gap of 1000 times in efficiency. It is this monumental difference in efficiency that also enables the manufacturer to deliver a 500-ml bottle of nano-urea to farmers for Rs 240 without any subsidy support.

In contrast, the cost of supplying equivalent conventional urea in a 45 kg bag, is over eleven times at around Rs 2650 (while, this figure is for imported urea, even for urea produced domestically, the cost is substantially higher and varies from unit to unit), the Government has to give a subsidy of Rs 2410 to make available to the farmer at the same price of Rs 240. There being 22.22 bags in a ton of urea (1000/45), the subsidy on the import of a ton of conventional urea comes to Rs 53,550 (2410x22.22).

If we were to replace one million tons of imported urea with nano-urea which doesn't require any subsidy support, the government would save Rs 53,550 million or Rs 5355 crore. Mandaviya had kept a target of producing about 55 million bottles of nano-urea during FY 2023-24 which replaces 2.5 million tons of conventional urea. This would yield savings of around Rs 13,400 crore

in subsidy.

Around 600 cubic metres of natural gas (NG) is needed to produce a ton of conventional urea. For generating the same effect through the nano-urea – given the efficiency difference of 1000 times, the requirement of NG would be a mere 0.6 cubic meters (600/1000). This would lead to huge savings in the import of gas (currently, India imports one-third of its requirement for domestic urea production). Drastic reduction in load on infrastructure will be a bonus. Imagine the impact of handling, moving, storing and delivering a 500 - ml bottle of nano-urea vis-à-vis a bag of conventional urea containing 45,000 grams of the material.

The use of nano-urea thus offers unprecedented possibilities in terms of not just a substantial reduction in fertilizer subsidy but also trimming excess consumption of urea thereby reducing the imbalance in fertilizer use improving soil health, and helping achieve the environment-related goals. Additional benefits will accrue by way of savings in foreign exchange outgo, and a reduction in the current account deficit.

What explains the setback during FY 2023-24? Reportedly, the industry's argument that the fall in production and sales was due to ‘the launch of new products such as Nano urea plus, with a higher concentration of nitrogen and reduction in sales of earlier variants of Nano urea that had lower nitrogen concentration’ is untenable. This is because whatever the level of ‘N’ concentration, fundamentally

the product remains ‘Nano-urea’. Another explanation is that ‘the drop in sales could be because fact that farmers had bought large quantities of Nano urea in the previous years’ doesn't cut ice. Farmers generally are not prone to stocking fertilizer material as the majority of them just don't have the wherewithal to hold stocks.

A third possibility that lower domestic sales could be due to the export of nano-urea doesn't make sense. For a country that depends heavily on imports and even incurs huge subsidies, why would the government allow exports? The industry, however, concedes that there was unsold inventory with dealers and that might have impacted sales during 2023-24. This shows that even during 2022-23, farmers didn't lift nano-urea to the extent revealed by the sales figures of that year. One can't escape inferring that nano-urea could be losing charm amongst farmers.

If it is due to factors like their being unable to cope with the rigours of the new technology (spraying it on leaves is more challenging than prill urea) or shortage of skilled labour etc, those can be overcome. But, if it is due to tall claims regarding efficiency or yield going haywire, it is a matter of concern. For instance, a study released by Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) in January 2024 says that the ‘use of nano-urea led to decrease in the yield of wheat and rice by 21.6 per cent 13 percent respectively.’

(The writer is a policy analyst; views expressed are personal)

Prashant Kishor's Jansuraj: A new political force or BJP's strategic move in Bihar?

As the 2025 assembly elections approach, the big question remains: Can Kishor truly reshape Bihar's political future, or is his role simply to disrupt opposition unity?

Prashant Kishor, a name synonymous with political strategy, has made his debut in Bihar politics with the launch of his party, Jansuraj. Drawing an analogy to a potter, Kishor likens his work to shaping the best clay into something meaningful, declaring, “We are bringing forward the best people of society. My role is to make this party win. I am in the role of a sutradhar (narrator); I have announced after the formation of the party that I will not run it. The party people will run the party.”



RAJESH KUMAR SINGH

This declaration, however, has done little to quell speculations about his aspirations. Rumors abound that Kishor is vying for the post of Chief Minister, a claim he repeatedly denies. “I am not contest-

ing the elections,” he insists. “I do not feel like contesting, but if the party decides that only I can secure a seat, then it will be a collective decision. I am not bigger than the party.” Despite his assertions, Kishor's entry into Bihar politics has stirred discussions about the impact of Jansuraj on the state's political landscape, particularly in the context of the 2025 assembly elections. Questions loom: will his party

weaken the NDA or the INDIA alliance? Political analysts suggest that Kishor, with his background as a strategist for both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, could be a disruptive force. Some even speculate that he might be a BJP-backed “pawn,” designed to fragment opposition votes, a claim fueled by his apparent inability to align with the Congress or RJD leadership.

Kishor's criticisms of Nitish Kumar's governance have been particularly sharp. He has lambasted Kumar's leadership style, though his past affiliations with the BJP have also fueled skepticism. Adding to the intrigue, JDU leaders have dismissed Kishor's efforts as insignificant.



JDU, meanwhile, continues to champion causes like the nationwide caste census and the “One Nation, One Election” policy. It also plans to hold a workers' meeting in Nalanda on January 20, 2025, to gauge its position before the elections. JDU's reliance on caste-based politics, particularly its focus on Mahadalits, underscores its strategy for retaining relevance. Recognizing the centrality of caste and community dynamics in Bihar politics, Kishor has crafted his approach accordingly. His first major move was targeting the Muslim and backward caste vote banks, which collectively account for 53.8 per cent of the electorate. To solidify his position, he announced plans

to field more candidates from Muslim and extremely backward communities in the upcoming elections. The appointment of a Dalit as Jansuraj's first working president further underscored this strategy.

This decision, however, drew criticism, with some perceiving it as an overt counter to JDU's Mahadalit card. Kishor's emphasis on Dalit representation, though a significant gesture, was met with resistance from sections of the political spectrum. Before launching Jansuraj, Kishor spent two years traveling across Bihar, conducting a padayatra and engaging in public dialogues in villages and towns. His campaign drew heavily from the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, echoing a narrative of grassroots empowerment. However, his advocacy for ending Bihar's liquor prohibition—a policy closely associated with Nitish Kumar's governance—has sparked controversy. Critics argue that this stance contradicts Gandhian principles and exposes Kishor to allegations of opportunism.

Despite the criticisms, Kishor's efforts signal a genuine attempt to address Bihar's long-standing issues. Bihar has long grappled with challenges like unemployment, poor infrastructure, and rising crime. Kishor positions Jansuraj as a platform to tackle these problems, but whether he can deliver remains to be seen.

Kishor's focus on marginalised communities, grassroots dialogue, and inclusive leadership sets a distinct tone. However, his political credibility and ability to translate ideas into action will be closely scrutinized. As the assembly elections approach, the political battlefield in Bihar is becoming increasingly dynamic. JDU's focus on its traditional voter

base and initiatives like the caste census may clash directly with Jansuraj's appeal to similar demographics. Meanwhile, speculation about Kishor's BJP connections and his critique of Nitish Kumar suggest that his presence will influence alliances and electoral strategies across the board.

Prashant Kishor's entry into Bihar politics marks a significant shift. By forming Jansuraj, he has sought to disrupt the status quo and present a new alternative. However, whether he can truly emerge as a transformative leader or will merely fragment votes remains the critical question.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

South Korean agency receives new warrant to detain impeached President Yoon

PTI ■ SEOUL

South Korea's anti-corruption agency said it received a new court warrant on Tuesday to detain impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol after its previous attempt was blocked by the presidential security service last week. The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which plans to question the embattled president on rebellion allegations over his short-lived martial law decree on Dec. 3, didn't immediately confirm how long the warrant would remain valid. The agency's chief prosecutor, Oh Dong-woon, refused to answer when asked by lawmakers when the warrant would expire, saying such information is sensitive as the agency and

police contemplate ways to execute it. Detention warrants typically last seven days but can be extended to around 10 days. Oh didn't say when investigators planned to make their next attempt to detain Yoon. The Seoul Western District Court last week had initially issued a warrant to detain Yoon and a separate warrant to search his residence after he repeatedly defied authorities by refusing to appear for questioning. About 150 anti-corruption agency investigators and police officers attempted to detain Yoon on Friday but retreated from his residence in Seoul after a tense standoff with the presidential security service that lasted more than five hours. The investigators did not

make another attempt to detain Yoon and the previous court warrants expired after a week on Monday. If investigators manage to detain Yoon, they will likely ask a court for permission to make a formal arrest. Otherwise, he will be released after 48 hours. The anti-corruption agency and police have pledged to make a more forceful effort to detain Yoon, which could be a complicated process as long as he remains in his official residence. The anti-corruption agency is leading a joint investigation with the police and military into Yoon's brief power grab, which included declaring martial law and dispatching troops to surround the National Assembly. Lawmakers who managed to get past the block-

ade voted to lift martial law hours later. Yoon's presidential powers were suspended after the opposition-dominated Assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion. The Constitutional Court has started deliberations on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reinstate him. Members of the presidential security staff were seen installing barbed wire near the gate and along the hills leading up to the presidential compound over the weekend. Oh confirmed to lawmakers that the agency was debating with police on whether to arrest members of the presidential security staff if they forcefully obstruct efforts to detain Yoon. Police have said they are considering "all avail-

able options" to bring Yoon into custody and haven't publicly ruled out the possibility of deploying SWAT teams, although it's unclear whether investigators would risk escalating a confrontation with presidential security forces, who are also armed. Park Jong-joon, chief of the presidential security service, has hit back against criticism that it has become Yoon's private army, saying it has legal obligations to protect the incumbent president. He and his deputy have so far defied summonses by police, who planned to question them over the suspected obstruction of official duty following Friday's events. In a parliament hearing Tuesday, Oh criticized the country's acting leader,

Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, for instructing police to oblige with the presidential security service's request to deploy personnel to Yoon's residence to beef up security ahead of Friday's detention attempt. The police did not carry out Choi's instruction, and Oh said the agency was reviewing whether Choi's actions constituted an obstruction of official duty. The agency has repeatedly called for Choi to instruct the presidential security service to comply with the execution of the detention warrant against Yoon. Choi hasn't commented. Yoon's lawyers argued the detention and search warrants against the president cannot be enforced at his residence due to a law that protects locations potentially

linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — which would be Yoon. They also argue the anti-corruption office lacks the legal authority to investigate rebellion charges and delegate police to detain Yoon. Yoon's lawyers on Monday filed complaints with public prosecutors against Oh and six other anti-corruption and police officers over Friday's detention attempt, which they claim was illegal. The lawyers also filed complaints against the country's acting national police chief, the acting defense minister and two Seoul police officials for ignoring the presidential security service's request to provide additional forces to block Yoon's detention attempt.

Trump renews offer of making Canada 51st state of US

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Hours after the resignation of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, US President-elect Donald Trump on Monday renewed his offer of making Canada the 51st state of the United States. Trudeau, 53, announced to resign Monday as he was forced by his ruling Liberal Party amidst his growing unpopularity. General elections are scheduled this year. The Canadian prime minister said that he would stay on as prime minister till the party elected a new leader. Trump, 78, who never had a good relationship with Trudeau after his November 5 electoral victory in Mar-a-Lago. Thereafter, he has been mentioning this on his social media posts several times. "Many people in Canada LOVE being the 51st State. The United States can no longer suffer the massive Trade Deficits and Subsidies that Canada needs to stay afloat. Justin Trudeau knew this, and resigned," Trump said on Truth Social. "If Canada merged with the US, there would be no Tariffs, taxes would go way down, and they would be TOTALLY SECURE from the threat of the Russian and Chinese Ships that are constantly surrounding them. Together, what a great Nation it would be!!!" said the president-elect after the resignation of Trudeau on Monday. There has not been much reaction to Trump's proposal from the Canadian side. Trump has threatened to impose 25 per cent tariffs on Canadian imports if Toronto is not able to stop the flow of illicit drugs and illegal migrants from its southern border with the US. In some of the posts, Trump even mocked Trudeau as "Governor of the Great State of Canada."

Biden 'doing everything possible' to make transition difficult: Trump

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President-elect Donald Trump has accused Joe Biden of making the presidential transition difficult, citing recent executive orders on climate and other official acts being taken by him in his last weeks as president. Trump, 78, is slated to be sworn in as the 47th President of the United States on January 20. He replaces Biden as the new occupant of the White House, the official residence of the US President. "Biden is doing everything possible to make the TRANSITION as difficult as possible, from Lawfare such as has never been seen before, to costly and ridiculous Executive Orders on the Green New Scam and other money wasting Hoaxes," Trump said in a post on Truth Social. "Fear not, these 'Orders' will all be terminated shortly, and we will become a Nation of

Common Sense and Strength. MAGA!!!" said the president-elect. Trump issued the statement shortly before Congress certified his victory in the Electoral College — and after Biden, 82, banned drilling for oil and natural gas off most of America's coastline, with the total area covered by the order greater than the land of Alaska and Texas combined. Biden announced earlier Monday he would block new drilling off the entire East Coast, as well as California, Oregon and Washington state, and block some drilling off Alaska's coast in portions of the Northern Bering Sea and in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. Biden made the move just two weeks before Trump, who has promised to promote domestic energy production, is sworn in. Trump vowed to undo Biden's recent executive orders, though it's unclear if he would be able

to reverse the decision to block oil drilling, considering he was blocked in 2019 when he tried to reinstate drilling in areas blocked off by former President Barack Obama. Despite Trump's assertion that Biden's White House has not been helpful during the transition, his incoming chief of staff Susie Wiles has said otherwise. She told in an interview published Monday the White House has been helpful during the transition process. "White House chief of staff Jeff Zients has been very helpful. He has made great suggestions, helped make sure we stay on time with required functions, helped us navigate the labyrinth that is the Executive Office of the President, and been very professional," she said. "He introduced me to the former chief of staff club" and even hosted a dinner (for Wiles and the former chiefs) at his beautiful home," Wiles added.

Trump Jr arrives in Greenland

PTI ■ NUUK (GREENLAND)

The eldest son of US President-elect Donald Trump arrived in Greenland on Tuesday for a private visit that has heightened speculation that the incoming US administration could seek to take control of the Danish territory. The Danish state broadcaster reported that Donald Trump Jr's plane landed in Nuuk, the capital of the vast and icy territory. Greenland's government said Trump Jr's visit would take place "as a private individual" and not as an official visit and that Greenlandic representatives would not meet with him. Míninguak Kleist, permanent secretary for the Greenland foreign affairs department, said that authorities were informed that Trump Jr would stay for about 4 to 5 hours.



Camels walk through snow during El Museo del Barrio's 47th annual Three Kings Day parade on Monday, in New York. AP/PTI

China shuts down Mt Everest scenic area after quake

PTI ■ BEIJING

China has closed for tourists the scenic areas of its side of Mt Everest, also known as Mount Qomolangma, following a 6.8-magnitude earthquake that jolted Dingri County in the Tibet Autonomous Region on Tuesday. Dingri is home to the base camp of the world's highest peak. According to local authorities, the staff and tourists were in safe condition after the quake, which hit the region at 9:05 am Tuesday (Beijing Time). The hotel buildings and surrounding areas in the scenic area have remained intact, state-run Xinhua news agency reported, citing the Dingri Culture and Tourism Bureau. However, the Qomolangma Station for Atmospheric and Environmental Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, located in Dingri, is experiencing a power outage. Despite this, the facilities have remained in good condition. Located at the China-Nepal border, Mount Qomolangma reaches an altitude of more than 8,840 metres, with its northern section located in Tibet referred to as Xizang by China.

Singapore passes law to protect scam victims

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Singapore on Tuesday passed a new law providing the police with powers to order banks to restrict the banking transactions of potential scam victims. The Protection from Scams Bill comes as scams remain a "grave concern" in Singapore, said Minister of State for Home Affairs and Social and Family Development Sun Xueling as she tabled the Bill for a second reading in Parliament. "This Bill, passed unanimously, allows the police to act decisively and close a gap in our arsenal against scammers," Channel News Asia quoted the minister as saying in the House. The Bill will allow specified officers, including those from the police and Commercial Affairs Department, to issue restriction orders to banks if there is reasonable belief that account holders will be making transfers to scammers. These restriction orders will suspend money transfers, the use of ATM facilities and all credit facilities, although individuals will still be provided access to their monies for daily living expenses. "The intent is to buy the police more time to engage and convince the individual that he is being scammed, including through enlisting the help of his family members," Sun

told the House. She added that the restriction orders would involve the seven Domestic Systemically Important Banks (DSIBs) — DBS, OCBC, UOB, Citibank, HSBC, Maybank and Standard Chartered Bank — which account for the vast majority of consumer bank accounts in Singapore. The orders can also be issued to non-DSIB banks if there is reason to believe that victims will make transfers to scammers. Sun said the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is "mindful of the need to strike a balance between protecting an individual from further harm and not unduly inconveniencing him". Several safeguards are in place, such as requiring restriction orders be issued only "as a last resort if all other efforts to convince the individual have failed". Individuals can also appeal to the Commissioner of Police against the restriction orders - a process that MHA will ensure is expeditious, Sun added. The Bill will limit the duration of a restriction order to "a maximum of 30 days at the outset". Each order may be extended up to five times if the officer deems it necessary. After five extensions, the restriction order "must lapse... even if the victim is still at risk of transferring more money to the scammer," said Sun.

Planned trip to Kyiv by Trump's Ukraine envoy unlikely

PTI ■ KYIV

An upcoming trip to Kyiv by US President-elect Donald Trump's special envoy for Ukraine and Russia has been cancelled but will be rescheduled, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said Tuesday. The planned meetings between Keith Kellogg, a highly decorated retired three-star general who has long been Trump's top adviser on defence issues, and Ukrainian officials are "extremely important," Sybiha told reporters in the Ukrainian capital. "I am confident that this meeting will take place in its own time," he said during a news conference with his visiting Icelandic counterpart. "We are in contact to clearly define the timeline for its organisation and to ensure that the meeting is as meaningful as possible." Trump's arrival in the White House on January 20 injects another measure of uncertainty into how the almost 3-year-old war might unfold and whether it can end in the foreseeable future. Ukraine, up against a larger enemy, Russia, relies on Western — and especially US — military backing to keep fighting. But Trump has criticised the billions of dollars the Biden administration has spent on Ukraine. He has also said he could end the war in 24 hours, though he hasn't elaborated on how he might do that. Ukrainian officials are eager to sway Trump on sticking with Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has praised Trump's "strength" and said the American president's "unpredictability" could work in Ukraine's favour. Ukrainians have expressed hope tinged with pragmatism about Trump's election victory last November. The war is draining the resources of both sides, though military analysts say the conflict is less sustainable for smaller Ukraine, and the war's recent trajectory has not been in its favour.

Seattle police officer who fatally struck Jaahnavi Kandula sacked

PTI ■ SEATTLE / NEW YORK

In a significant development, a Seattle police officer who killed Indian student Jaahnavi Kandula in January 2023 when the patrol vehicle he was driving struck her, has been fired from the police department, officials said. Kandula, 23, from Andhra Pradesh, was struck by a police vehicle driven by Officer Kevin Dave when she was crossing a street in Seattle on January 23, 2023. He was driving 74 mph (more than 119 km/h) on the way to a report of a drug overdose call. Kandula was thrown 100 feet when she was struck by the speeding police patrol vehicle. According to a report in The Seattle Times on Monday, Interim Seattle Police Chief Sue Rahr said that she had fired Dave from the Seattle Police Department. The report, citing an email sent by Rahr to employees, said she fired Dave on Monday after the Seattle Office of Police Accountability found he had violated four department policies. "I believe the officer did not intend to hurt anyone that night and that he was trying to get to a possible overdose vic-



tim as quickly as possible," Rahr said. "However, I cannot accept the tragic consequences of his dangerous driving. His positive intent does not mitigate the poor decision that caused the loss of human life and brought discredit to the Seattle Police Department," according to the Seattle Times report. It added that the policies Dave failed to follow "include using emergency lights for an emergency response and being responsible for safely operating a patrol vehicle," according to the copy of Rahr's email. The development comes months after another Seattle police officer Daniel Auderer was fired following his insensitive comments and laughter after Kandula's death. The Consul General of India in Seattle had been working consistently with authorities and law enforcement officials to ensure justice in the case, with Auderer's firing and now the action against Dave bringing a sense of closure and justice for Kandula's family. The Consulate had been in regular touch with Kandula's family representatives and had said that it would continue to extend all possible support in ensuring justice for Jaahnavi and her family. In a February 2024 post on X, the Indian Consulate in Seattle said that "On the recently released investigation report of the King County Prosecution Attorney on the unfortunate death of Jaahnavi Kandula, Consulate has been in regular touch with the designated family representatives and will continue to extend all possible support in ensuring justice for Kandula and her family. "We have also raised the matter strongly with local authorities, including Seattle Police for appropriate redress. The case has now been referred to the Seattle City Attorney's office for review. We await completion of Seattle Police's administrative investigation and will continue to monitor progress on the case." Rahr was appointed as interim chief in May 2024 and in July last year, she had announced Auderer's firing. However, decision about Dave's action came in only now.

Jimmy Carter to be honoured in Washington, city where he remained outsider

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Nearly 44 years after Jimmy Carter left the nation's capital in humbling defeat, the 39th president returns to Washington for three days of state funeral rites starting on Tuesday. Carter's remains, which have been lying in repose at the Carter Presidential Centre since Saturday, will leave the Atlanta campus Tuesday morning, accompanied by his children and extended family. Special Air Mission 39 will depart Dobbins Air Reserve Base north of Atlanta and arrive at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland, with a motorcade into Washington and the Capitol, where members of Congress will pay their respects at an afternoon service. Carter, who died December 29 at the age of 100, will then lie in state Tuesday night and again Wednesday. He then receives a state

funeral Thursday at Washington National Cathedral. President Joe Biden will deliver a eulogy. There will be the familiar rituals that follow a president's death — the Air Force ride back to the Beltway, a military honour guard carrying a flag-draped casket up the Capitol steps, the Lincoln catafalque in the Rotunda. There also will be symbolism unique to Carter: His hearse will stop at the US Navy Memorial, where his remains will be transferred to a horse-drawn caisson for rest of his trip to the Capitol. The location nods to Carter's place as the lone US Naval Academy graduate to become commander in chief. All of the pomp will carry some irony for the Democrat who went from his family peanut warehouse to the Governor's Mansion and eventually the White House. Carter won the presidency as the smiling Baptist and technocratic engineer

who promised to change the ways of Washington — and eschewed many of those unwritten rules ways when he got there. "Jimmy Carter was always an outsider," said biographer Jonathan Alter, explaining how Carter capitalised on the fallout of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal that toppled Richard Nixon. "The country was thirsting for moral renewal and for Carter, as this genuinely religious figure, to come in and clean things up." From 1977 to 1981, Carter was the city's highest-ranking resident. But he never mastered it. "He could be prickly and a not very appealing personality" in a town that thrives on relationships, Alter said, describing a president who struggled with schmoozing lawmakers and reporters. The gatekeepers of Washington society never embraced Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, either, not quite

knowing what to make of the small-town Southerners who carried their own luggage and bought their clothes off the rack. Carter sold what had been the presidential yacht, a perk his predecessors had used to wine and dine Capitol power players. Early in Carter's presidency, Washington Post society columnist

Sally Quinn tagged the Carters and their West Wing as "an alien tribe," incapable of "playing the game." An elite Georgetown hostess herself, Quinn nodded to Washington's "frivolity" but nonetheless mocked "the Carter people" as "not, in fact, comfortable in limousines, yachts, or in elegant salons, in black tie" or with "place cards, servants, six courses, different forks, three wines... and after-dinner mingling." He endured a rocky four years that left him without enough friends in the town's power circles and, ultimately, across an electorate that delivered nearly 500 Electoral College votes to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. Long after leaving office, Carter still bemoaned a political cartoon published around his inauguration that depicted his family approaching the White House with his mother, "Miss Lillian," chewing on a hayseed. Carter often flouted the ceremoni-

al trappings that have been on display in Georgia and will continue in Washington. As president, he wanted to keep the Marine Band from playing "Hail to the Chief," thinking it elevated the president too much. His advisers convinced him to accept it as part of the job. And the song played Saturday as he arrived at his presidential centre after a motorcade through his hometown of Plains and past his boyhood farm. He also never used his full name, James Earl Carter Jr, even taking the oath of office. His full name was printed on memorial cards given to all mourners who paid their respects in Atlanta. He once addressed the nation from the White House residence wearing a cardigan, now on display at his museum and library. His remains now at rest in a wooden casket being carried and guarded by military pallbearers in their impeccable dress

uniforms. "He was a simple man in so many ways," said Brad Webb, an Army veteran who came to honour the former president at his library, which is on the same campus as The Carter Centre, where the former president and first lady based their decades of advocacy for democracy, public health and human rights in the developing world. "He was also a complicated man, who took his defeat and did so much good in the world," said Webb, who voted for Republican Gerald Ford in 1976 and Reagan in 1980. "And, looking back, some of the things in his presidency — the inflation, the Iran hostages, the energy crisis — were really things that no president can actually control. We get to look back with some perspective and understand that he was an excellent former president but also had a presidency we can appreciate more than we did as it was happening."



Saudi Arabia presses Florida man to give up US citizenship over critical tweets

SAUDI ARABIA HAS FORCED A Florida retiree to try to renounce his American citizenship after jailing him over social media posts critical of the kingdom's crown prince, according to the man's son.

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First bird flu death reported in US

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In this photo released by Russian Orthodox Church Press Service, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill (left) and Russian President Vladimir Putin speak after the Christmas service in the Christ The Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, on Tuesday. AP/PTI

Over 22,000 bureaucrats in Pakistan possess dual nationality: Report

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France marks 10 years since deadly Charlie Hebdo attacks

A DECADE AFTER GUNMEN stormed the offices of satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in a deadly assault that shook France to its core, the nation is pausing Tuesday to honour the victims and grapple with the evolving challenges of free expression and terrorism.

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Indonesia, Japan agree to resume stalled talks

INDONESIA'S GOVERNMENT SAID IT agreed with Japan on Tuesday to resume talks on the joint development of naval vessels that have stalled in recent years.

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COMPREHENSIVE ANNUAL MAINTENANCE CONTRACT OF IPIS E-Tender No. SNT-42-LMG-2024-25

Public Notice This is to inform the general public that Mrs. Muneish is the owner of Property Bearing No. 11/6867, old No. 1353, land area measuring 40 Sq Yds.

Public Notice This is to inform the general public that Mrs. Suresh Chand Rastogi is the GHA Holder of Property Bearing No. 1/1010/A-2, land area measuring 50 Sq Yds.

Public Notice This is to inform the general public that Mrs. Urmila Agarwal is the GHA Holder of Property Bearing No. 1/1010/A-2, land area measuring 50 Sq Yds.

DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL-1, DELHI 4th Floor, Jeevan Tara Building, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001

PUNJAB NATIONAL BANK Vs. RAJESH KUMAR TRIPATHI AND ORS. ...Applicant ...Defendants To

Public Notice This is to inform the general public that Mrs. Suresh Chand Rastogi is the GHA Holder of Property Bearing No. 1/1010/A-2, land area measuring 50 Sq Yds.

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Public Notice Notice is hereby given to the public at large that Mrs. Pooja had acquired Built-Up Property bearing Plot No. 52, area 60 sq. yds., Kharsa No. 66/8, situated at Village Hastal Delhi.

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PROVISION OF DIFFERENT TYPE OF BONDS IN ALIPURDUAR DIVISION Tender Notice No.: AP-EL-TRD-12-24-25

DRM/Elect. (TRD), Alipurduar Jn. NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

Public Notice M/s Signaturglobal (India) Limited has been granted Environmental Clearance for Group Housing Colony project located at revenue estate of Village-Fazilpur Jharsa, Sector-71, Gurugram Manesar Urban Complex, Haryana vide letter No. SEACH/HR/2024/107 dated 03.01.2025.

PROVISION OF DIFFERENT TYPE OF BONDS E-Tender Notice No. AP-EL-TRD-15-24-25

PROVISION OF DIFFERENT TYPE OF BONDS E-Tender Notice No.: AP-EL-TRD-14-24-25

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Public Notice My Client Mrs. Kamlesh Yadav owner of a Single Storey Residential House area measuring 246 sq. yds i.e. 205.68 sq. mtrs. out of Kharsa no. 386, situated at Village Chotpur Pargana & Tehsil Dadrji District Gautam Budh Nagar U.P. through Registered Gift Deed Dated 02.01.2025 executed by Mr. Murna Lal Yadav Vign. No. 53 at SRI-NODA U.P.

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Public Notice It is to inform the public at large that Mr. Yogesh Wahi who is purchasing the Property No.58 (New No.17-B), measuring 50.78 Sq. Yds., on Plot Nos.19 & 21, Kharsa No.287 & 288, Village Ghondli, East Azad Nagar, Gali No.12, Hillaqa Shahdara, Delhi-110051 from Mrs. Pramila Joshi who became owner vide Relinquishment Deed dated 25.10.2011 (Document No.17943) executed by Mr. Virender Joshi and same to be financed & mortgaged by Aditya Birla Housing Finance Ltd. The (1) SMC in the name of Legal heirs of Late Mr. Bhardwaj Joshi & (2) SMC in the name of Legal heirs of Late Mr. Pushpendar Kumar Joshi are not available. If any Person having any type of claim/right/interest over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 10days from today, failing which it shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrances, hence. Lucem Legal LLP B-208, Second Floor, Opp. SBI Bank Sector 2, Noida, UP-201301>Contact:9120-4269379

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Duty cut on smartphone parts to hit electronics ecosystem: GTRI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Any reduction in the customs duty on smartphone parts in the forthcoming budget will harm India's developing component ecosystem, discourage investment, increase imports, and make local firms uncompetitive, potentially resulting in job losses, think tank GTRI said on Tuesday.

India's smartphone industry is a 'Make in India' success story, with 2023-24 production reaching USD 49.2 billion and exports at USD 15.6 billion, making smartphones the fourth-largest export after diesel, aviation fuel, and polished diamonds.

However, a few industry groups are pushing for further import tariff cuts on smartphone components in the Union Budget for FY26. The Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) warns that this could harm India's growing local manufacturing ecosystem and long-term ambitions in electronics.

"Instead of cutting tariffs, GTRI recommends setting up component hubs near ports to reduce import delays and warehousing costs. This

approach, used by countries like Vietnam and China, would support local manufacturing and reduce import dependency," the think tank's founder Ajay Srivastava said.

Highlighting six key risks of reducing tariffs, he said any reduction would harm India's developing component ecosystem, discourage investment, and hurt the goal of self-reliance; and would not help pushing exports as current export schemes already allow duty-free imports for manufacturing exports.

He added that the country's success in smartphone manufacturing stems from policies promoting local production through tariffs, incentives, and phased programmes and cutting tariffs could weaken this framework.

"Lower tariffs could encourage unsustainable assembly-based operations, as seen in past policy failures. Besides, the mid- and low-end segments depend on local components and provide employment. Duty cuts would make local firms uncompetitive, resulting in job losses," he added.

He also said that the



electronics imports have risen significantly, and further tariff cuts would worsen this trend, increasing India's reliance on foreign suppliers. Tariffs were already reduced from 15 per cent to 10 per cent last year.

Explaining further, the GTRI said that out of USD 49.2 billion worth of production of smartphones last fiscal, premium phones account for about 20 per cent of production, mid-range 30 per

cent, and low-end 50 per cent. "Local components are used in 70 per cent of low-end phones, 50 per cent of mid-range phones, and only 5-30 per cent of premium phones. The rising use of local parts is driven by India's production of key components for mid- and low-end phones like printed circuit boards (PCBs), display modules, camera modules, battery packs, smart phone chargers and adapters, wiring harnesses,

microphones and speakers, SIM card holders, and USB connectors," it said.

However, the ecosystem is still developing and needs protection, and reducing import tariffs would allow duty-free imports, making it harder for local firms to compete and would force them to shut down, it said.

"This would discourage further investment in local manufacturing and undo the progress made under the Phased Manufacturing Programme (PMP). It would harm not just the smartphone industry but the entire electronics sector, jeopardizing India's goal of becoming self-reliant in electronics production," it said.

It added that the mid-range and low-end smartphone segments, which heavily rely on locally produced components, provide significant employment opportunities.

"If import duties are reduced, local firms will struggle to compete with duty-free imports, leading to job losses. In contrast, countries like South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have focused on developing specialised local ecosystems for high-value

components, which has helped them sustain their electronics industries and create long-term jobs," it said.

On imports, the GTRI said that India's electronics component imports are rising. It rose from USD 15.8 billion in FY19 to USD 34.4 billion in FY24.

Cutting tariffs further will increase this dependence on foreign suppliers, making India vulnerable to global supply chain disruption.

(Multi Modal International Cargo Hub and Airport at Nagpur), cancelling the award of contract to GMR Airports, had said the impugned judgment was based on sound reasoning and true analysis of facts and did not warrant interference.

"We are of the considered opinion that the findings recorded by the High Court allowing the writ petition are in accordance with law. Those findings do not suffer from any illegality, warranting interference by this court in exercise of the power under Article 136 of the Constitution. All these appeals are hereby dismissed," a bench of Justices Vineet Saran, since retired, and J K Maheshwari had said on May 9, 2022.

Rupee falls seven paise against USD



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee fell 5 paise to settle at 85.73 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, as higher crude oil prices and outflow of foreign funds continued to weigh on the local unit.

Forex traders said the rupee pared some of its intraday losses as the American currency retreated from its elevated levels. Moreover, the recovery in the domestic equity market also aided sentiments.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.77, touched the day's peak of 85.65 and hit an intraday low of 85.80 against the greenback. The unit settled at 85.73 (provisional) against

the dollar, registering a fall of 5 paise from its previous close.

On Monday, the rupee settled 11 paise higher at 85.68 against the dollar. During intraday, the unit had hit the lowest-ever level of 85.84 against the American currency.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on FII outflows and underlying strength in the US dollar amid expectations of no rate cut by Fed in January. However, any extended recovery in the domestic markets may support rupee at lower levels.

"Traders may take cues from ISM services PMI, trade balance and JOLTS jobs data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 85.50 to Rs 85.90," Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.30 per cent lower at 107.92, amid disappointing US services PMI and factory orders data, while President-elect Donald Trump dismissed rumours over stringent trade tariffs.



Microsoft to invest USD three billion in India: Nadella

PTI ■ BENGALURU

IT major Microsoft will invest USD 3 billion in India for the expansion of cloud and AI infrastructure in the country, the company's chairman and CEO Satya Nadella said on Tuesday.

There is a fantastic momentum in India where people are pushing for a multi-agent kind of

deployment. "I am really really excited to announce the single largest expansion we have ever done in India by putting USD 3 billion additional dollars to expand our Azure capacity," Nadella said.

He said that the company is doing a lot of regional expansions in India. Nadella said that Microsoft's mission to empower every person and organisation in

India drives the company. "To that end it is about being able to ensure that the human capital of this country is able to continue to scale, take advantage of immense opportunity and potential the technology has. That's why we are very excited to announce today our commitment, which we have always had, to train 10 million people around AI skills by 2030," Nadella said.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Automobile retail sales grew 9 per cent year on year in 2024 riding on the back of robust demand for two-wheelers and passenger vehicles amid challenging business environment, dealers' body FADA said on Tuesday.

Overall vehicle registrations stood at 2,61,07,679 units last year as compared to 2,39,28,293 units in the 2023 calendar year, recording a growth of 9 per cent.

"Despite multiple headwinds in CY24, including heatwaves, elections at both central and state levels and uneven monsoon, the auto retail industry remained resilient," the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations (FADA) President C S Vigneshwar said in a statement.

In the two-wheeler segment, improved supply, fresh models and strong rural demand propelled growth, though finance constraints and rising EV competition continued to pose challenges, he noted.



The passenger vehicle (PV) segment benefited from robust network expansion and product launches, albeit with margin pressures due to higher inventory, thus leading to a discount war towards the second half, Vigneshwar stated.

Commercial vehicle segment performance was subdued amid election-driven uncertainty and reduced infrastructure spending, he noted.

PV sales stood at 40,73,843

units last year, up 5 per cent compared to 38,73,381 units in 2023.

Two-wheeler sales rose 11 per cent year on year to 1,89,12,959 units in 2024 as against 1,70,72,932 units in 2023.

Three-wheeler registrations rose 11 per cent year on year to 12,21,909 units as against 11,05,942 units in 2023.

Tractor sales witnessed a 3 per cent year on year growth at 8,94,112 units while commercial vehicle sales

remained flat at 10,04,856 units in 2024.

On business outlook, FADA noted that in the two-wheeler segment, rising rural incomes, fresh model introductions and an eventual plateau in EV disruption could revitalise growth after years of sluggish demand.

The CV sector is looking for the momentum from infrastructure investments, stable credit availability and government incentives -- factors that could spark a healthy uptick in fleet renewals and expansions, it said.

Meanwhile, PV dealers anticipate strong consumer pull from new SUV launches and feature-rich EVs amid maturing ecosystem, FADA noted.

However, price-sensitive buyers and interest rate fluctuations remain watch points, it added.

"Overall, FADA remains optimistic that market recovery, coupled with strategic OEM support and policy-level clarity, will enable the automotive retail industry to end CY25 on a

robust note," it said.

In December 2024, automobile retail sales declined 12 per cent year on year to 17,56,419 units.

Two-wheeler registrations fell 18 per cent to 11,97,742 units as compared to 14,54,353 units in December 2023.

PV retail sales also dipped 2 per cent to 2,93,465 units last month as compared to 2,99,351 units in December 2023.

PV retails declined primarily due to high inventory levels following the festive season and aggressive discounting aimed at clearing stock, FADA noted.

Poor market sentiment, limited new model launches and intense price competition among co-dealers further impacted sales, it added.

Overall, despite certain headwinds, automotive dealers remain hopeful that steady product availability, strategic marketing and supportive government measures will sustain momentum in the near term, it added.

Government notifies procedure for export of certified organic products

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has laid out a procedure for export of certified organic products, requiring mandatory certification under the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) for such shipments, according to a public notice.

The Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) in a public notice said that a product will be allowed to be

exported as "organic product" only when accompanied by a Transaction Certificate (TC) issued by a certification body accredited by the National Accreditation Body for such items under the NPOP of the Department of Commerce.

India has fixed a target of USD 2 billion exports for organic food products by 2030.

It added that exports of these goods shall only be certified as such if produced, processed, packed and labelled as per the



standards laid down in the NPOP.

"Procedure for export of certified organic products has been notified," it added.

The revised edition of the NPOP will come into force with effect from 180 days from January 5.

The commerce ministry's arm APEDA (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority) has revised the NPOP's regulations to make it

more farmer-friendly and help India push exports of organic food products.

The National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) provides standards for organic production and procedure for accreditation of certification bodies.

The standards and procedures have been formulated in harmony with other international standards regulating the import and export of organic products.

During April-November this fiscal, these exports rose by about 40 per cent to USD 456 million. It was USD 495 million in 2023-24.

To promote Indian organic goods in the global markets, he said, APEDA is facilitating the participation of a number of companies in 'BioFach', which is the largest organic food trade fair in Nuremberg, Germany. The four-day fair will start from February 11.

Tata Elxsi and CSIR-NAL partner for air mobility



PTI ■ MUMBAI

Global design and technology services provider Tata Elxsi has inked an initial pact with CSIR-National Aerospace Laboratories (CSIR-NAL) for a strategic partnership in advanced air mobility amid a rapidly evolving market for unmanned aerial vehicles and urban air mobility globally, a statement said on Tuesday.

The partnership combines NAL's deep aeronautical expertise and Tata Elxsi's technological capabilities in electrification, AI/ML, sensor fusion, and certification processes to support global and Indian markets, it stated.

This partnership will

accelerate product development cycles for these sectors by providing access to advanced testing infrastructure, methodologies, and expertise, Tata Elxsi said.

The two partners, as per the statement, will jointly focus on technologies such as aerodynamic design, autonomous systems, and secure communications to address the unique needs of both manned and unmanned air mobility systems.

"We believe the future of aerospace innovation lies in technologies like UAVs and UAM. This strategic partnership with NAL combines our strengths to push the boundaries of

innovation and accelerate the development of next-generation air mobility solutions for our customers globally," said Manoj Raghavan, MD & CEO at Tata Elxsi.

Stating that India presents significant opportunities through initiatives like Make-in-India, indigenisation, and the growing demand for advanced air mobility solutions, Tata Elxsi said the partnership will contribute to building a robust ecosystem of precision manufacturing, component suppliers, and tool vendors.

This ecosystem aims to bring together key stakeholders to foster innovation, enhance scalability, and address the unique requirements of advanced air mobility systems, the company said.

"CSIR-NAL's deep expertise in aerospace research and testing, along with Tata Elxsi's advanced technology and design expertise, will help us develop innovative, scalable, and sustainable solutions that will shape the future of urban transportation," said Abhay A.

Lectrix delivers over one lakh meals on electric vehicles in just eight hours

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Lectrix delivered 114,985 meals in just 8 hours using a fleet of Lectrix electric vehicles, including their latest scooter model, NDuro. This groundbreaking initiative, titled "1 Lakh Meals on Lectrix Wheels," was not just about numbers-it was a testament to the power of sustainable action to solve pressing global challenges.

In collaboration with social purpose organizations including Navodyam (an SDMC Trust initiative), the Robin Hood Army, and The Akshay Patra Foundation, Lectrix showcased how technology and sustainability can work together to solve real-world social problems.

This event earned a prestigious place in the Asia Book of Records and India Book of Records for the highest number of meals delivered via electric vehicles in 8 hours.

From 10 AM to 6 PM, the



capital city witnessed an extraordinary operation powered by Lectrix's vehicles. Speaking about the initiative, Pritesh Talwar, President of EV Business, Lectrix, said, "At Lectrix, we believe innovation should not only drive progress but also serve humanity and the planet. This initiative was about more than breaking records; it was about demonstrating how green technology can create meaningful change. By delivering over 1 Lakh meals using electric vehicles, we

proved that sustainability isn't just a goal-it's the future. We tested how, in the future, we could roll out EVs in a pandemic or emergency scenario and reach more than a lakh people in just a few hours in a sustainable way. We invite the world to join us in embracing this vision for a greener and more equitable tomorrow."

The operation began at Akshay Patra's four kitchens, where thousands of meals were prepared and dispatched to 11 strategically identified hubs across Delhi.

Market benchmarks rebound after a two-day decline

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded on Tuesday after a sharp decline in the previous two sessions, driven by intense buying in blue-chip stocks like Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank and L&T amid a firm trend in global markets.

However, a decline in IT stocks ahead of the earnings season and a weak rupee against the greenback restricted the market rally, traders said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex climbed 234.12 points or 0.30 per cent to settle at 78,199.11. During the day, it jumped 487.75 points or 0.62 per cent to 78,452.74.

The NSE Nifty gained 91.85 points or 0.39 per cent to 23,707.90.

From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Tata Motors, Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank, Asian Paints, Nestle India, UltraTech Cement, Larsen & Toubro and Adani Ports were

among the biggest gainers.

In contrast, Zomato, HCL Tech, Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Infosys were among the losers.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai settled in positive territory while Hong Kong ended lower.

European markets were trading with gains in mid-session deals. US markets ended mostly higher on Monday.

The rupee fell 5 paise to settle at 85.73 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,575.06 crore on Monday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.12 per cent to USD 76.21 a barrel.

AC Milan 3-2 win over Inter Milan in Italian Super Cup final

AP ■ RIYADH

It took exactly one week on the job for Sergio Conceicao to earn his first trophy as AC Milan's coach — with two comeback wins no less. Milan came back from two goals down to beat city rival Inter Milan 3-2 and win the Italian Super Cup on Monday. Rafael Leao came off the bench and played a part in all three of Milan's goals from Theo Hernandez, Christian Pulisic and Tammy Abraham. Conceicao was hired to replace the fired Paulo Fonseca last Monday and also led the Rossoneri to a comeback win over Juventus in the semifinals. So what changed with Conceicao? "We played with confidence, courage and hunger," Abraham said. "We're a

strong team." Added Pulisic, "He told us we need to have more hunger and that that's more important than tactics." After the semifinals, Conceicao was asked if he embraced his players. "I'm not so nice and I'm not someone who hugs," he said. "I'm not here to make friends, I'm here to win." But after the final, Conceicao was seen dancing with his players and smoking a cigar in the changing room. It was Milan's first trophy since winning Serie A in 2022; and eighth Super Cup title but first since 2016. Lautaro Martinez and Mehdi Taremi put Inter ahead with goals on either side of halftime. Leao then earned a foul that resulted in a free kick which Hernandez curled in around Inter's wall. Then Pulisic finished off a counterattack by shooting



through Augusto's legs on a play that began with Leao. For the third goal, Leao provided a through ball for Pulisic, who crossed to Abraham, who tapped into an empty net in stoppage time. The final was moments away from going to a penalty shootout, since there was not going to be any extra time according to the competition rules. "It's also our fault that Fonseca was fired," said Hernandez, who like Leao often clashed with Fonseca. "We didn't have much time to work together (with Conceicao) but it's gone well in that short span." It was the fifth time in the last seven years that the competition was played in Saudi Arabia, and the second year of an expanded four-team format. A throw-in led to Inter's opener as Taremi fed the ball inside the area to Lautaro, who cut back before shooting through Hernandez's legs on Inter's only real chance of the half. Taremi, who was playing in place of the injured Marcus Thuram, finished off a counterattack right after the break. Milan plays its first Serie A match under Conceicao against Cagliari on Saturday. The Rossoneri are in eighth place with only seven wins in 17 matches but will return to league action with much more confidence. Inter lost for only the third time this season across all competitions, and for the second time to Milan, which won the Serie A derby 2-1 in September. The Nerazzurri's other loss was to Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League. "Inter stopped playing when it was 2-0," Lautaro said. "You pay for that in games like these.

Djokovic says he still feels 'trauma' when he travels to Australia because of his deportation

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Novak Djokovic said he still feels "a bit of trauma" when he travels to Australia, stemming from his deportation in 2022 because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19. "The last couple of times that I landed in Australia, to go through passport control and immigration, I had a bit of trauma from three years ago," Djokovic said in an interview with Melbourne's Herald Sun newspaper published Monday, ahead of the Australian Open. "And some traces still stay there when I'm passing passport control, just checking out if someone from immigration zone is approaching." Djokovic, who has won 10 of his 24 Grand Slam championships at Melbourne Park, continued: "The person checking my passport — are they going to take me, detain me again or let me go? I must



admit I have that feeling." Back in 2022, Djokovic sought, and initially obtained, an exemption that would allow him into the Australian Open — and the country — even though there were strict rules requiring shots to protect against the coronavirus. But after his flight landed, his visa was canceled and he was sent to an immigration hotel. A judge later reinstated the visa and ordered Djokovic's

release, ruling he wasn't given enough time to speak to his lawyers. Australia's immigration minister then took away the visa again, based on "public interest." Djokovic's appeal of that ruling was denied by a three-judge panel, and he was deported. He faced a possible three-year ban from the country as someone whose visa was revoked, but Australia had a change of government, its pandemic border rules

changed and a new immigration minister granted Djokovic a visa in 2023 — when he went on to claim the trophy. "I don't hold any resentment, to be honest," Djokovic told the Herald Sun about the saga. "I don't hold a grudge." The Australian Open begins Sunday (Saturday EST), and Djokovic will be pursuing his 11th trophy in Melbourne to add to his men's record and an unprecedented 25th major singles title overall. A year ago, Djokovic lost in the semifinals to eventual champion Jannik Sinner. "I just hope to, before I retire, get at least one more title there," said the 37-year-old Djokovic, whose only triumph at a tournament in 2024 was his singles gold medal for Serbia at the Paris Olympics in August. Djokovic opened 2025 at the Brisbane International last week, losing in the quarterfinals to Reilly Opelka.

Cameron Norrie accidentally hits spectator with thrown racquet at Auckland ATP event

AP ■ AUCKLAND

British tennis star Cameron Norrie apologized and avoided disqualification when a racquet he tossed in the air struck a spectator at the ATP Tour tournament in Auckland on Tuesday. Auckland-born Norrie was facing match point against Facundo Diaz Acosta of Argentina when he lightly tossed his racquet into the air. The racquet struck a woman in a court-side box who was unhurt. Norrie received a warning from the chair umpire and went on to lose 6-2, 6-3 in the first round of the tournament. He reached the final in Auckland in 2023. "I wasn't meaning to do that but it's still not ideal to be doing that and I've never done something like that," Norrie said. (The spectator) "was laughing and I just said so sorry, I didn't mean to do



that.' And she said yeah, I'm completely OK." "That was not a big deal. But as we saw with some other players, you can easily be defaulted if it catches them in the wrong spot or they're not looking or something. "I was not meaning to do that and it is completely not me to do something like that. I apologized very quickly and I want to apologize in general. I'm not happy with how I behaved." Novak Djokovic was

disqualified from the 2020 US Open after accidentally hitting a line judge with a ball and at the 2023 French Open Miyu Kato and Aldila Sutjiadi were defaulted from the women's doubles after a ball hit by Kato struck a ball girl. Also in 2023, Australian tennis player Marc Polmans was defaulted from the final round of qualifying at the Shanghai Masters after hitting a ball into the face of the chair umpire.

Malaysia Open: Treesa-Gayatri pair makes pre-quarters

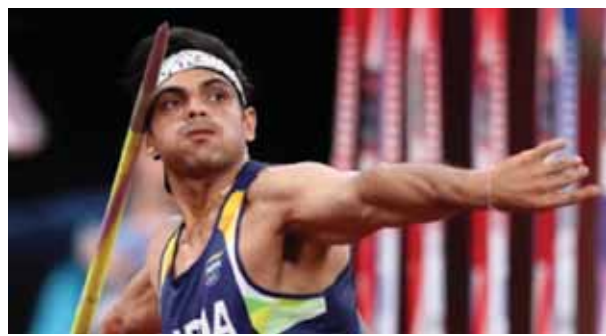
PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

India's women's doubles duo of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand easily overcame the challenge from O r n n i c h a Jongsathapornpan and Sukitta Suwachi, beating the Thai pair in straight games in the opening round of the Malaysia Super 1000 tournament here on Tuesday. The Indian pair, seeded sixth here, won 21-10, 21-10 in just 30 minutes to secure a place in the round of 16. On a high following their success in the Syed Modi International Super 300 tournament in Lucknow, Treesa and Gayatri faced little challenge from the unseeded Thai pair taking a 17-8 lead in no time. The second game saw the Thai pair go neck-and-neck till 8-all before Treesa and Gayatri ran away with the game and the match.

India to host top javelin competition with Neeraj and best in world competing later this year

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Olympic gold and silver medalist Neeraj Chopra will headline a star-studded global javelin competition which India will host most likely in September, the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) announced on Tuesday. This event is in addition to a slew of competitions India has expressed its interest to host, including the marquee 2029 World Championships. AFI president Adille Sumariwalla confirmed that India has expressed interest to host the 2029 World Championships, as well as the 2027 World Relays. The AFI has already submitted its expression of interest to host the 2028 World Junior Championships when the international body chief Sebastian Coe visited the country in November last. "There will be a top javelin competition in India in which the top-10 javelin throwers in the world will compete. This will be an invitation tournament to be held later



this year," Sumariwalla, whose 12-year tenure as AFI chief ended on Tuesday, said on the first day of the AFI Annual General Meeting (AGM). "Neeraj Chopra will be there. He is part of the team that is organising the event, along with JSW, a foreign firm and the AFI are together creating this competition. This is being done as there is so much interest in javelin with August 7 -- when Chopra won the Tokyo Olympics gold -- being observed as National Javelin Day." Sumariwalla later told PTI that the event is most likely to be held in September.

Just before the start of the AGM, 2002 Asian Games shot put gold medalist Bahadur Singh Sagoo was elected unopposed as the new AFI chief. Talking about the big global events India is hoping to host in the next four years, Sumariwalla said, "Bids are open at the moment for (2028) World Junior Championships, 2029 World Championships, World Relays (2027) and India is going to bid for all of them. We have put in our expression of interest and so the process has started." "We might also do a World Half Marathon," he said.

Over 300 athletes to participate in Boccia nationals

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Over 300 athletes from across the country will participate in the 9th Boccia Sub-Junior, Junior and Senior National Championship, scheduled to be held at the Andhra Pradesh MedTech Zone in Visakhapatnam from January 8 to 14. The championship, held annually, provides a platform for athletes with cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and other locomotor disabilities to demonstrate their skills, resilience, and determination. The primary goal of the championship is to prepare athletes for events such as the Paralympic Games and to amplify awareness about the capabilities of differently-abled individuals, said Boccia Sports Federation of India (BSFI) chairman Ashok Bedi. "The event highlights India's dedication to fostering inclusivity in sports and creating opportunities for athletes with disabilities to excel. It represents a significant step in India's journey as a developing nation



toward fostering equality in sports," Bedi said. Boccia, a precision ball game, has been recognised as a Paralympic sport since 1984. Played individually, in pairs, or in teams, the sport requires strategic thinking, precision, teamwork, and discipline. India is making significant strides in creating platforms for differently-abled athletes to shine on the national and international stage, and Boccia has become a symbol of empowerment, providing opportunities to athletes to represent the country in global competitions like the Paralympics. "The sport is not just a game but a movement that inspires hope, resilience, and equal opportunity for all," Bedi said.

China's most successful club folds under weight of debts

AP ■ GUANGZHOU

Guangzhou FC, the most successful soccer club in Chinese history, disbanded on Monday due to crippling debts. The club, formerly known as Guangzhou Evergrande, has been unable to meet the Chinese Football Association's financial entry requirements needed to compete in the 2025 domestic season. "Due to heavy financial burdens resulted from previous seasons, the club could not pay off all the debt by the deadline," Guangzhou said in a statement. "We express our sincere apology to all the supporters from across the community and we appreciate the understanding and forgiveness of all the fans very much." After being taken over by property developer Evergrande in 2010, the club started the spending spree in China that made headlines around the world. Helped by players such as Brazilian international



Paulinho and elite coaches such as Marcello Lippi of Italy and Brazil's Luiz Felipe Scolari, Guangzhou won eight Chinese Super League titles from 2011 to 2019. The team triumphed also won the Asian Champions League in 2013 and 2015. Other clubs followed with world-famous stars such as Carlos Tevez, Nicolas Anelka, Oscar, Didier Drogba and others heading to China. In 2021 however, Evergrande reported debts of over \$300 billion and, as key players left the club due to financial issues, it was relegated to China's

second tier in 2022. On the same day, Chinese Super League club Cangzhou Mighty Lions also announced its disbandment, as did third tier club Hunan Billows. "Only by setting sights on the long term, keeping the financial operation in a healthy status and investing in youth with patience should clubs build a robust future," the Chinese Football Association said in a statement, adding that 49 teams had been deemed financially ready to compete in the top three tiers of the league system in 2025.

Former Aston Villa forward Vassilev on US roster ahead of friendlies against Venezuela, Costa Rica

AP ■ CHICAGO

Former Aston Villa forward Indiana Vassilev was picked Monday for a U.S. Training camp ahead of friendlies against Venezuela and Costa Rica and is among 10 players who could make their national team debuts. The Vassilev made his first Aston Villa appearance on Jan. 4, 2020, against Fulham in the FA Cup and his Premier League debut 14 days later against Brighton. At 18 years, 11 months, 2 days, he became the second-youngest American to appear in the Premier League behind Jonathan Spector, who was 18 years, 5 months, 27 days in 2004. Walker Zimmerman and Jesús Ferreira, who haven't played

for the U.S. Since 2023, also are on coach Mauricio Pochettino's 24-man roster along with goalkeeper Zack Steffen, who last appeared for the national team in March 2022. Other veterans include 37-year-old defender Tim Ream, who captained the Americans in Pochettino's first four games, along with defenders Miles Robinson and Shaq Moore. No Europe-based players are on the roster for the games against Venezuela on Jan. 18 at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and Costa Rica four days later at Orlando. The matches are not on FIFA international fixture dates. Europe-based players will return for the CONCACAF Nations League semifinal match against Panama on

March 20. Born in Savannah, Georgia, to parents of Bulgarian heritage, Vassilev played at the IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, and signed with Aston Villa in 2018. He played for the U.S. Alongside Josh Sargent and Tim Weah at the 2017 Under-17 World Cup. Vassilev made four Premier League appearances for Aston Villa in 2019-20 but didn't appear with Villa's first team after that season. He spent time on loan with third-tier club Burton Albion and fourth-tier club Cheltenham Town, then was loaned to MLS's Inter Miami in July 2021 and was acquired by St. Louis after the 2022 season. Zimmerman, 31, hasn't played for the national team



since the CONCACAF Nations League final against Canada on June 18, 2023,

and Ferreira, 24, since the CONCACAF Gold Cup semifinal match against

Panama on July 12, 2023. The 29-year-old Steffen was a surprise cut from the 2022 World Cup roster by coach Gregg Berhalter and hasn't played for the U.S. Since the World Cup qualifiers in March 2022. He returned to the roster after Pochettino replaced Berhalter but Matt Turner started all four matches in October and November. Twenty-three players are from MLS and the roster includes Matko Miljevic, a 23-year-old midfielder who is among the players who could make debuts. Miljevic, who spent last year with Argentine club Newell's Old Boys, appeared with the U.S. Under-20 team in 2020 and also is eligible to play for Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

When Miljevic was with Montreal, MLS announced on Sept. 18, 2023, that his contract was terminated "for engaging in conduct detrimental to the league and violating his standard player agreement." MLS did not announce any details. In addition to Vassilev and Miljevic, defender George Campbell, midfielders Max Arfsten and Emeke Eneli, and forwards Patrick Agyemang and Brian Gutiérrez will be attending their first U.S. National team camp. Three others who have attended prior camps could make debuts: goalkeepers Drake Callender and Matt Freese, and forward Caden Clark. The roster: Goalkeepers: Drake

Callender (Miami), Matt Freese (New York City), Patrick Schulte (Columbus), Zack Steffen (Colorado) Defenders: Max Arfsten (Columbus), George Campbell (Montreal), DeJuan Jones (Columbus), Shaq Moore (Dallas), Jalen Neal (Montreal), Tim Ream (Charlotte), Miles Robinson (Cincinnati), John Tolkin (New York Red Bulls), Walker Zimmerman (Nashville) Midfielders: Benjamin Cremaschi (Miami), Emeke Eneli (Salt Lake), Diego Luna (Salt Lake), Jack McGlynn (Philadelphia) Forwards: Patrick Agyemang (Charlotte), Caden Clark (Montreal), Jesús Ferreira (Dallas), Brian Gutiérrez (Chicago), Matko Miljevic (no club), Indiana Vassilev.

Rohit and Kohli's Test future depends on selectors: Gavaskar

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma's Test future is now in the hands of selectors, said former India captain Sunil Gavaskar while advocating an honest deep-dive into the team's downward spiral in the last six months. In an interview to PTI, Gavaskar spoke about India's recent debacles, including the home whitewash by New Zealand, the way forward and the responsibility on the Ajit Agarkar-led national selection committee to give a fair chance to those waiting in the wings. Asked about the raging debate surrounding the future of struggling stars Rohit and Kohli, Gavaskar said, "How long they continue is really up to the selectors." "Now that India has failed to qualify for the WTC (World Test Championship) final, it would be pertinent to reflect on the reasons that (why it) happened," he added.

This is the first time since the WTC's inception that India could not make the finals following a 1-3 loss to Australia in the Border-Gavaskar series that concluded on Sunday. That defeat also meant that the coveted BGT was surrendered to Australia for the first time in a decade. The primary reason for the debacle was the batting unit's failure to fire with Rohit and Kohli proving to be the weakest link. Kohli scored 190 runs in nine innings including an unbeaten century, while Rohit's tally was a dismal 31 from five completed knocks. Gavaskar didn't mince words while pointing out the repeated failures of the team's batters, who failed to cross the 200 mark six out of nine times during the series. "It is clear that in the last six months, the batting failed and that was the main reason that we lost matches that we should have won," the former captain stated. "So, if changes are required for the new cycle of the WTC which



starts in mid-June in England, then hopefully the selectors will take into account who would still be there for the final in 2027 and choose accordingly," Gavaskar put things perspective. Time for next crop to step up The 75-year-old former India captain did not take names but said there are some good performers coming up in the domestic circuit and the onus is now on the selectors to give them a fair chance. "Unless they are given a chance how will we know if those doing well in Ranji Trophy will do well at the international level? Here's where good selections come in," he said. Gavaskar also complimented the selection committee for unearthing a talent like Nitish Kumar Reddy, who was one of India's three centurions in the just-concluded tour, others being Yashasvi Jaiswal and Kohli. "Compliments to Ajit Agarkar and his team for seeing the potential in Nitish Kumar Reddy and picking

him for the Test squad too," he said of the player, who also enjoys strong backing of head coach Gautam Gambhir. On the bowling front, Gavaskar said India has enough talent that needs to be given the requisite opportunities to ensure that a generational star like Jasprit Bumrah is not overburdened. Once again, he refrained from taking names of the potential candidates, who would shape the bowling attack going forward. "India has got loads of promising pacers who are waiting for an opportunity. Yes, Bumrah should not be overburdened and if others step up then we can have an attack that can win matches in any conditions," he said. "Be honest" The culture of putting stars at a pedestal has been an oft-stated problem in Indian cricket. But Gavaskar said it is not very difficult to stay grounded even with that if one is capable of taking an honest look at performances.



Whitewash at home bigger failure than BGT loss: Yuvraj

PTI ■ DUBAI

World Cup-winning former all-rounder Yuvraj Singh has said that being whitewashed at home by New Zealand was a bigger low for Team India than the loss of Border-Gavaskar Trophy but refused to join the chorus of criticism against embattled veterans Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli. India have endured a difficult last few months in the five-day format, going down 0-3 to an under-strength New Zealand at home, which was a first in the team's Test history. This was followed by a 1-3 drubbing by Australia in the away edition of the Border-Gavaskar series. Both the debacles have been largely attributed to the team's batting frailties, especially those of Rohit and Kohli. "According to me, losing (to) New Zealand is more hurting (sic). Because they are losing 3-0 at home. You know, that is not acceptable. This (losing BGT) is still acceptable because you have won two times in Australia. And this time you lost," Yuvraj told "PTI Videos" in an interview here. "Australia has been a dominant side for the last so many years, that is my thought," the 43-year-old hero of India's 2011 World Cup triumph said. While Kohli managed at least a hundred during the series despite continuing to be dismissed whenever he was

baited outside the off stump, Rohit was worse with a tally of just 31 runs and had to drop himself from the final Test. But Yuvraj said it is unfair to lambast the duo given their past achievements. "We are talking about our greats, Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, we are saying very bad things about them," he said. "...People forget what they have achieved in the past. They are one of the greatest cricketers of this time. Okay, they lost, they did not play good cricket. They are getting hurt more than us," he added. Hopeful that India would bounce back strongly, Yuvraj said he has full faith in not just Rohit and Kohli but also new head coach Gautam Gambhir, who was his former teammate as well. "I feel that Gautam Gambhir as a coach, Ajit Agarkar as a selector, Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah, they are the best minds in cricket right now," he asserted. "And they have to decide what's the way for Indian cricket in future," he said. The big-hitting former batter also lauded Rohit for dropping himself from the Sydney Test, saying it was a selfless act. "I think it is a big thing. I have never seen in the past that the captain's form is not going well and he himself has gone out. And this is Rohit Sharma's greatness that he has kept the team ahead of himself," Yuvraj said.

We know how to beat Aussies: Rabada

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Fiercely South African pacer Kagiso Rabada, no stranger to beating Australia, believes the prospect of facing them in the World Test Championship final at Lord's in June has already sparked anticipation and motivation in his side. Reigning champions Australia secured their spot in the WTC final with a six-wicket victory over India in the fifth and final Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Sydney, clinching the series 3-1. South Africa were the first team to qualify after defeating Pakistan by 10 wickets in the Boxing Day Test. "It's actually quite some distance away, but a big occasion like the World Test Championship final gets you up for it," Rabada said on SuperSport after taking a six-wicket haul in his side's 10-wicket, second-Test demolition of Pakistan that completed a 2-0 sweep. Up against defending champions Australia, the Proteas will start as underdogs but Rabada,



who twice played a big part in winning series against Australia in 2016-17 and 2017-18, is confident of pulling off an upset. "South Africa versus Australia has always been an intense rivalry, because we play cricket quite similar. We play hard -- and they're going to come hard at us, and we know that. But we also know how to beat them," he said. About the significance of Test cricket, Rabada said: "One hundred per cent, Test cricket is still alive. It's our best format that we've been playing right now.

"When you look at South African cricket and all our legends, they've all been great Test cricketers. The world's best players are Test cricketers, and this series against Pakistan has been a wonderful advertisement for Test cricket, especially in South Africa." The Proteas don't have any Test assignment in the build-up to the WTC Final at Lord's from June 11-16 and coach Shukri Conrad has said they're looking at the possibility of a one-off match against either Ireland or Afghanistan. "We're going to try and get a

Test match, possibly in the UK, against Ireland or Afghanistan, whoever is free. And if unsuccessful, we'll obviously go out a couple of days earlier, and make sure we camp there really well, probably in Canterbury," said Conrad. The coach was also all praise for his skipper Temba Bavuma for playing a key role in South Africa's resurgence. "He's played unbelievably well this summer, and full marks to him," Conrad said. "I think any captain who wants to lead from the front, they want to lead through performance as well, and that's what Temba's done exceptionally well. "He's not lost a game as captain of South Africa (winning eight out of nine Tests). Leading from the front, turning out the performances he's had, he's probably in the form of his life. "I haven't seen him play any better, and that obviously gives you a lot of confidence when you're captaining as well. I wouldn't want anyone else to be captaining us."



England urged to boycott Champions Trophy game against Afghanistan by UK politicians

AP ■ LONDON

England should refuse to play the Champions Trophy cricket match against Afghanistan next month according to a letter signed by more than 160 U.K. Politicians. The politicians want the England and Wales Cricket Board to take a stand against the Taliban regime's assault on women's rights and boycott the men's one-day international against Afghanistan in Lahore, Pakistan, on Feb. 26. Female participation in sport has effectively been outlawed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, a move that puts the Afghanistan Cricket Board in contravention of International Cricket Council rules. Because Afghanistan's men are still allowed to compete by the ICC, a strongly worded letter has emerged from the U.K. Parliament pleading for the ECB to make its own moral objection. Penned by Labour MP Tonia Antoniazzi and signed by a cross-party group from the House of Commons and House of Lords including Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn, it raises the "insidious dystopia" unfolding in Afghanistan. The statement, addressed to ECB chief executive Richard Gould, concludes: "We strongly urge the England men's team players and officials to speak out against the horrific treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

"We also urge the ECB to consider a boycott of the upcoming match against Afghanistan... To send a clear signal that such grotesque abuses will not be tolerated. "We must stand against sex apartheid and we implore the ECB to deliver a firm message of solidarity and hope to Afghan women and girls that their suffering has not been overlooked." Gould issued a swift response, reaffirming ECB principles while suggesting it favoured a uniform approach from all member nations rather than acting alone. "The ECB strongly condemns the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime," he said. "The ICC constitution mandates that all member nations are committed to the growth and development of women's cricket. In line with this commitment, the ECB has maintained its position of not scheduling any bilateral cricket matches against Afghanistan. "A coordinated, ICC-wide approach would be significantly more impactful than unilateral actions by individual members. "We understand the concerns raised by those who believe that a boycott of men's cricket could inadvertently support the Taliban's efforts to suppress freedoms and isolate Afghan society. It's crucial to recognise the importance of cricket as a source of hope and positivity for many Afghans, including those displaced from the country."

Don't feel I was in race for opener's slot in Border-Gavaskar Tests: Renshaw

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Australian Test batter Matt Renshaw said on Tuesday that he had no idea if he was in the race to replace retired opener David Warner in the recently-concluded Border-Gavaskar series against India, which the hosts won 3-1. Several names, including Cameron Bancroft, Marcus Harris, Nathan McSweeney, Sam Konstas and Renshaw, were discussed by Cricket Australia as potential options for opening the innings. McSweeney and Konstas made it to the playing XI, with the former playing the first three Tests and the latter getting included in the last two. Renshaw felt he figured way down in the Australian selection pecking order for the opener's slot. "I probably wouldn't say that



I got caught up in the opener race. I don't think I was in it at all," Renshaw told SEN Radio. "I'm probably further away than a few of the boys (to be selected) but most of my Tests have been in Asia so I've got a fair bit of experience there if called upon," added Renshaw, who

would be fancying his chances as Australia select the squad for the Test series against Sri Lanka later this month. Renshaw said he just wants to enjoy his cricket without bothering too much about selection issues. "It's been me trying to play my cricket the way I want to

and I've really enjoyed it. (I'm) feeling really good about my cricket and how my batting is going and obviously there's aspirations there but I'm really enjoying my cricket right now." Renshaw, 28, who has played 14 Tests, said opening the batting was a specialist's job and not everyone is cut out for the role. "Opening is a specialist position, it's one of the toughest jobs in world sport," said Renshaw who last played a Test in February 2023 in the tour of India. "If Steve Smith goes up the top and doesn't have the experience he would like, you can tell it's pretty difficult. I feel like I could bat anywhere if that opportunity came but I'll keep opening for Queensland because it brings me the most satisfaction when you succeed."

Shastri, Ponting question Shami's injury management, say his inclusion could have boosted India

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Questioning Mohammed Shami's injury management, former greats Ravi Shastri and Ricky Ponting said the veteran pacer could have tilted the series in India's favour had he been added to the squad in the second half of the five-match Border-Gavaskar series. India's decade-long stranglehold on the Border-Gavaskar Trophy ended after they went down by six wickets in Sydney to lose the series 1-3. The pacer, after recovering from an ankle injury, returned to action for his home state Bengal and

impressed in all the three formats -- Ranji Trophy, Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 and Vijay Hazare one-dayers --, raising hopes of a late inclusion. But he was officially ruled out before the fourth Test in Melbourne with the BCCI medical team citing a knee swelling, though both Ponting and Shastri believe a trip to Australia and a return late in the series could have been pushed. "To be honest, I was very surprised with the communication going on in the media as to what exactly happened to Mohammed Shami," the former Indian head coach stated in The ICC Review.

"Where is he when it comes to recovery? He's been sitting in the NCA for I don't know how long. Why can't proper communication come out on where he stands? A player of his ability, I would have brought him to Australia. "Absolutely, there's no question about that (Shami could have tilted the series in Melbourne or Sydney)," Shastri added. The 62-year-old further said it would have been beneficial if Shami had, at least, travelled with the group in Australia. "I would have kept him part of the team and made sure that his rehabilitation was done with the team," said Shastri.



"And then if we thought by the third Test match that no, this guy can't play the rest of the series, I would let him go. But I would have brought him

with the team, kept him, monitored him with the best of the physios and best of the advice even from international physios who are

in Australia and seeing how he went. But I would have kept him in the mix." Shastri believes the fast bowler could have provided adequate help to Jasprit Bumrah, who too struggled with fitness at the end of the series and could not bowl in the second innings of the Sydney Test. "It got so tight at 1-1 going into Melbourne," he said. "You just needed that experience and support. For all you know, he might have raised the bar as well. And it would have been the two guys there (Bumrah and Shami). "Pat Cummins couldn't have done it on his own, Scotty Boland had to

step in. So you needed a bowler of his experience. You know, as hard as Mohammed Siraj tried, you needed Shami's experience there." Echoing Shastri's views, Australian World Cup-winning captain Ponting said: "I was really surprised when he wasn't flown out even halfway through the series, two Test matches in." "India's make-up obviously had Nitish Reddy there. So you had another seam bowling all-rounder anyway. "So, if Shami, even if he wasn't fully fit, if he had to bowl fewer overs in a day, you had a backup seam bowling option to help him out and I think he could have been the

difference. "When you asked me (in an earlier The ICC Review) at the start about what I thought the result would be, I said 3-1 Australia because Shami wasn't there. That was the first thing I said. That's how important I felt he was to India. "If Shami, Bumrah and Siraj were in their starting team, I think things could have been completely different here in Australia." Shami is currently playing in the domestic one-dayers for the Vijay Hazare Trophy and it remains to be seen if he's included for the England home series ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy in February.

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