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GLOBAL CONFLICTS FUEL
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FINANCE MINISTRY ASKS BANKS
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DEEPTI, POOJA
PUT INDIA WOMEN
IN COMMAND
12 SPORTS

Opposition united, yet divided

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■
NEW DELHI

After four rounds of meetings over “tea and coffee” at different cities in the last six months, the real challenge of seat sharing allocation for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls among the major stakeholders of the INDIA bloc led by the Congress has begun. Trinamool Congress, Aam Aadmi Party, Janata Dal (U) and RJD, NCP, Samajwadi Party is reported to have started “bargain” with the grand old party considered to be the chariot leader of the coalition to take on the Narendra Modi’s juggernaut in forthcoming General Elections. Against the backdrop of resentments expressed by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s JD(U), former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi tried to reach out to Nitish, but they could not converse due to prior engagements. Rahul’s response came soon after JD(U) Lok Sabha member Sunil Kumar Pintu took a swipe at the Delhi INDIA bloc meeting on Wednesday, stating, “When compared to the last meetings where good snacks were served, this time it got over with only tea, coffee, and biscuits.”



Sources said Rahul Gandhi could not speak to Nitish since he was in a meeting and, when Nitish called back, Rahul was in the middle of a party meeting. Sources told *The Pioneer* that Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge has spoken to Nitish Kumar on Friday. Sources said Nitish had an aspiration to be the prime ministerial candidate of the large Opposition grouping as it was he who first took the initiative and brought everyone together at Patna meeting in June, but in this week’s meeting Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge was given a push by TMC and AAP. Kharge has though declined on this front and said focus is to win the maximum number of seats in

the elections. JD(U) national general secretary Sanjay Kumar Jha, who had attended the meeting along with Nitish Kumar on December 19 said Nitish had stressed the need to finalise seat-sharing arrangements by January. He, however, refuted reports that the senior JD(U) leader grew “upset” over the coalition’s reluctance to name him the convener of INDIA and had skipped the post-meeting press conference to register his protest. On the other hand, Nitish had a meeting with his Deputy Chief Minister Tejaswi Yadav in Patna on Friday, where the two are believed to have discussed seat-sharing among the partners, though RJD leaders said it was regarding

the expansion of the Bihar cabinet. Rahul, however, held a meeting with NCP chief Sharad Pawar, probably on seat-sharing in Maharashtra for the Lok Sabha elections. After the joint Opposition protests at Jantar Mantar, Rahul drove with Pawar to the latter’s 6 Janpath residence. The two leaders were closeted for some time and were learned to have discussed seat-sharing among the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi partners Shiv Sena (UBT), Congress, and NCP for the Lok Sabha elections. Pawar is keen on accommodating smaller parties, such as the Left, Peasants and Workers Party, and Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, in the Opposition alliance, as they have certain pockets of strength in the State. The NCP veteran is also eager to finalise seat-sharing in Maharashtra early so that joint rallies of the coalition could be organised for campaigning in the Lok Sabha elections. Another challenge is from Punjab, where the ruling party AAP is unwilling to ally with the Congress — the party it routed in last year’s Assembly poll — to contest next year’s general election. Though the Samajwadi Party participated in the

Opposition unity during the just concluded Winter Session, it will have differences with the Congress on seat-sharing. With Bengal Congress leaders seeking 6-8 seats from the TMC in potential pre-poll alliance talks, the prospects of such collaboration are becoming increasingly uncertain. In the 2019 general elections, the TMC secured victory in 22 out of 42 seats, while the BJP, experiencing a meteoric rise, claimed 18 seats. The Congress, in contrast, managed only 2 seats, and the Left drew a blank for the first time since Independence. West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) leaders, including Adhir Chowdhury, Deepa Dasmunshi, AH Khan Chowdhury, and Shankar Malakar, have conveyed their demand for 6-8 seats to party president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi. While the TMC leadership remains tight-lipped about the PCC’s demand, a senior leader in the party indicates there is no intention of offering more than 2-3 seats to the Congress. The leader suggested that, given the current atmosphere, the Congress may struggle to retain even the two seats it won last time without TMC support.”

INDIA Bloc stages Save Democracy protest

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/PATNA/ MUMBAI/ KOLKATA



Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge talks with party leader Rahul Gandhi as CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury and NCP chief Sharad Pawar look on during a protest of INDIA bloc at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Friday
Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

The INDIA bloc staged a nationwide protest on Friday against the suspension of 146 MPs from Parliament during the recently concluded Winter session. The bloc called on people to unite to save democracy in the country, accusing the ruling BJP of stifling the voice of the opposition. The leaders also urged for the defeat of the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The protest in the national capital at Jantar Mantar was led by top Opposition leaders, including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, his party colleague Rahul Gandhi, and NCP chief Sharad Pawar. Similar protests were held by members of the INDIA alliance in Kolkata, Mumbai, Lucknow, Patna, Bengaluru, Panaji, Guwahati, Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Ranchi, and other cities

across the country. Leaders of Left parties, DMK, SP, NC, TMC, JMM, RJD, and other members of the Opposition coalition attended the protest. The BJP criticised Rahul as an immature and undemocratic leader, dismissing the INDIA bloc’s protest at Jantar Mantar. Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur emphasised

the need for MPs to speak in one voice on such sensitive matters and criticised leaders like Rahul Gandhi for levelling false allegations. Thakur said INDIA bloc parties did not participate in discussions in Parliament over people’s issues and important Bills, suggesting that they had lost their mental balance following recent Assembly polls rout.



Macron to be chief guest at Republic Day

RAHUL DUTTA ■ NEW DELHI

French President Emmanuel Macron will be the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations on January 26 here. He will be the sixth French leader to grace this prestigious occasion. Announcing this, the External Affairs Ministry said on Friday that, at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President of France Emmanuel Macron will be visiting India as the Chief Guest for the 75th Republic Day celebrations. “As Strategic Partners, India and France share a high degree of convergence on a range of regional and global issues. This year, we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the India-France Strategic Partnership. The Prime Minister was the Guest of Honour at the Bastille Day Parade held on July 14, 2023, in Paris. President Macron visited India for the G-20 Summit on September 8-9, 2023,” said the External Affairs Ministry. New Delhi’s invitation to Macron for the Republic Day celebrations comes amid a rapid upswing in ties between the two countries, including in areas of defence and security, clean energy, trade and investment, and new technologies. In July, Modi attended the Bastille Day parade, which is part of the French National Day celebrations, as the guest of honour. In the same month, the defence ministry approved the purchase of 26 Rafale (marine) jets from France, primarily for deployment on board the indigenously built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. France has already responded to India’s initial tender for buying the jets. The deal is worth over Rs 50,000 crore. The two sides are also expanding cooperation in the maritime domain, including in the Indian Ocean Region. The two strategic partners also expressed commitment to cooperate in the co-development and co-production of advanced defence technologies, including for the benefit of third countries.

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

A joint team of security forces intensified combing and search operations on Friday in the densely forested belt of Dera ki Gali in the Poonch district to flush out terrorists responsible for the gruesome attack on moving Army vehicles. The terrorists vanished from the scene without encountering significant resistance. It is suspected that the perpetrators behind the strike are hiding in the general area or have taken shelter in a safe hideout. Four soldiers were “killed in action,” and three others sustained injuries on Thursday when their vehicles were ambushed by a group of highly trained foreign

India loses more soldiers in J&K



terrorists. As of late Friday evening, the Indian Army had not released the names of the martyred soldiers. Some media outlets reported on Friday that, after targeting Army vehicles in the Dera Ki Gali area of Poonch, the terrorists mutilated the soldiers’ bodies and fled with their rifles. The Army has not issued any statement confirming this. A team from the National Investigation Agency (NIA) visited the spot on Friday before launching an investigation into the case. The Indian Army also

conducted aerial monitoring using helicopters and deployed sniffer dogs to track down the footprints of terrorists. Additional reinforcements were rushed to the spot to plug gaps and prevent the terrorists from fleeing the area. Meanwhile, security agencies detained 20 residents for questioning to identify facilitators and those sheltering ter-

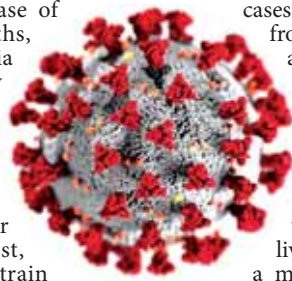
rorists behind the audacious strike. The recent surge in terrorist strikes on Army personnel in the twin border districts of Rajouri and Poonch has raised alarm bells in the security establishment. In four recent strikes, a total of 19 Army personnel were killed in action in Rajouri and Poonch since April 2023. According to a recent assessment by intelligence agencies, more than two dozen terrorists are active in the twin border districts of Rajouri and Poonch,

taking shelter inside the thickly forested area. These terrorists may be hiding in natural caves to escape aerial reconnaissance. Senior Army and police officials rushed to the spot to supervise combing operations. The General Officer Commanding (GoC), XVI Corps, Lt Gen Sandeep Jain, DGP J&K police RR Swain, and Inspector General of Police, Jammu range Anand Jain visited the area and reviewed the security situation. “Indian Army and White Knight Corps salute the bravery and supreme sacrifice of four soldiers in Surankote on Thursday while fighting the scourge of terrorism,” White Knight Corps, or XVI Corps, wrote on X.

Covid reaches NCR, Centre says no need to panic yet

ARCHNA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Amid concerns that JN.1 variant Covid has started spreading in various pockets of the country, NCR city Noida for the first time reported a positive case of after several months, officials said. As India witnessed a single day rise of 640 fresh infections with Kerala topping the tally on Friday, Dr S o u m y a Swaminathan, former WHO chief scientist, said that the new strain should not be dismissed as a “common cold” and warned saying “let us not take things lightly” this time. However, the Union Government has asked people not to panic as yet. Dr Swaminathan’s statement comes amid detection of twenty-two cases of COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1, with 21



cases being reported from Goa and another from Kerala, official sources said. Kerala has so far registered 265 fresh Covid-19 infections and one death due to the disease in the last 24 hours. The total number of active cases have climbed to 2,997 from 2,669 the day before, according to Union Health Ministry data. About the first Noida case, Gautam Buddh Nagar Chief Medical Officer Dr Sunil Sharma said that the 54-year-old male patient lives in Noida but works at a multinational company in Gurugram. “His test sample has been sent to Delhi for genome sequencing. The result is awaited,” Sharma said. District Surveillance Officer and public healthcare expert Dr Amit Kumar said the patient travelled to Nepal earlier this month and also went to work at his Gurugram office after returning.

BJP leadership holds meet on Mission 2024

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

At the head of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP’s national office bearers met on Friday to deliberate and chart out the party’s strategy for the upcoming polls. The two-day meeting was chaired by BJP chief JP Nadda and attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, BJP State presidents, incharge of different States, and organisational general secretaries of States, among others. The BJP’s national office bearers also discussed the results of the recently concluded Assembly polls in five States. Addressing the office bearers, sources said Prime Minister Narendra Modi appreciated the hard work done by workers and leading the three States to an excellent win. He mentioned that in the coming days, they have to work even harder and that not a single seat where the party contests should be taken lightly. “Each vote, each seat is valuable to maintain the momentum of growth in the nation. All should carry forward the Viksit Bharat Yatra ahead,” sources quoted Modi in the meeting. He will address the party leaders again on Saturday at the party’s national headquarters.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being welcomed by BJP national president JP Nadda upon his arrival to attend BJP’s national office-bearers’ meeting at BJP headquarters in New Delhi on Friday
PTI

Sources said that in the meeting, various morcha (wings) and State units shared details of their ongoing organisational exercises and would be given directions by senior leaders with an eye on the polls. The BJP won in three of the five States, a major boost to its campaign for the Lok Sabha polls. While outlining campaign programmes, the party is expected to give

special focus to southern States. The sources said the party discussed the strategy for Lok Sabha polls in light of efforts by INDIA alliance parties to contest the polls together. The ongoing “Viksit Bharat Sankalp Abhiyan”, a flagship Central Government programme aimed at ensuring saturation coverage of its numerous welfare schemes, the results of the recent five Assembly polls, and the party’s nationwide plans on the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee are among the issues likely to be discussed in the meeting. Earlier, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, along with his deputies Rajendra Shukla and Jagdish Devda, met the Prime Minister, followed by a few Union ministers as part of the first official visit of the new State leadership to Delhi. The CM and the Deputy CMs met Modi at his official residence at Lok Kalyan Marg and informed him “about the development works being undertaken in the state and obtained the guidance of the prime minister,” a State Government spokesperson said. The BJP returned to power in Madhya Pradesh after a landslide victory in the Assembly polls.

Delhi, NCR out of bounds for BS III petrol, BS IV diesel vehicles

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Friday ordered a ban on non-essential construction work and the use of BS III petrol and BS IV diesel four-wheelers in Delhi and NCR due to deteriorating air quality. Delhi’s overall Air Quality Index (AQI) has been steadily rising since morning, reaching 409 at 4 pm, up from 397 at 10 am. According to data from aqicn.org, the AQI peaked at 831 in Pusa, Delhi; 757 in PGDAV College

Sriniwasपुरi; 627 in Wazirpur, and 623 in Anand Vihar at 6 pm. The Commission also advises individuals with flexible working conditions to work from home, use cycles for short distances, share rides, or opt for public transport.

Unfavourable meteorological conditions, including fog and haze with low wind speed, are major contributors to the sudden spike in Delhi’s daily average AQI, as stated in the CAQM’s order. Under Stage III, restrictions are imposed on the operation of BS III petrol



and BS IV diesel four wheelers in Delhi, Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, and Gautam Budh Nagar. GRAP 3 restrictions are activated when the AQI reaches 400 or higher. “In view of the current air quality trend and to prevent further deterioration, the Sub-Committee on Friday has decided to reinstate all actions under Stage III of GRAP ‘Severe’ Air Quality (AQI ranging between 401-450), effective immediately in the entire NCR. This supplements the existing measures under Stage I and

Stage II of GRAP already in force in NCR. Various agencies and Pollution Control Boards have been instructed to ensure strict implementation of Stage-III actions, in addition to those under Stage-I and Stage-II,” the CAQM stated. The CAQM emphasised an eight-point action plan under Stage III of GRAP, applicable immediately throughout the NCR. This plan outlines steps to be taken by different agencies and Pollution Control Boards of NCR and DPCC.

Sinha urges Munda to provide relief to farmers suffering from drought



AVINASH ANJAN : HAZARIBAG

Hazaribag MP cum Co-Chairman Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance Jayant Sinha has met Union Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda and has urged him to provide relief to the farmers suffering from drought. Sinha said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, our farmer brothers and sisters are continuously progressing

and developing.

"As you know, my parliamentary constituency Hazaribagh is a development-oriented area of Jharkhand, which is rapidly moving towards all-round progress. A large part of the two districts of my parliamentary constituency, Hazaribagh and Ramgarh, are rural economy areas, where the livelihood of 70 per cent of the population depends on agriculture. While on one hand the farmers of my area are getting the bene-

fits of various welfare schemes of the Modi government, on the other hand the farmers of some areas are facing natural consequences due to scanty rainfall," he said. "According to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), 6 blocks of Hazaribagh district are severely affected and 9 blocks affected by moderate drought in 2023. In this regard, a report has been sent to the state by the district administration for appropriate action and

relief. According to this report, all these blocks have been included in Trigger 2. However, the actual situation is much more serious than this. During recent visits to the area, thousands of farmers and agricultural institutions have told me about the problems they are facing due to deficient rainfall. Keeping in mind the demands of thousands of farmers, I humbly request you to send a team from the Center to get the area inspect-

ed once so that the farming brothers and sisters can get the necessary relief," he added.

Jayant Sinha said that it is extremely sad and worrying that the Jharkhand government has not taken necessary steps to provide relief to the farmers in the state. According to Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) data, about 210 blocks of Jharkhand were in the grip of drought this year, out of which 9 blocks had severe

drought, less than 60% rainfall was recorded in these blocks. Despite drought in more than 200 blocks of Jharkhand, the Jharkhand government did not claim drought relief from the Central Government in respect of the loss in Kharif crop. Jayant Sinha has urged Chief Minister Hemant Soren to take immediate action on this serious matter and provide relief to our farmers by coordinating with the Central Government.

SCS celebrates Annual Sports cum Prize Distribution Day

PNS : RANCHI

Surendranath Centenary School celebrated its Annual Sports Cum Prize Distribution amidst great mirth, verve and camaraderie at Birsa Munda Athletic Stadium, Khelgaon, Ranchi on Friday. Chief Guest Commandant JAP 10, D.K. Singh, graced the occasion and special guests Major Praveen Budhwani, Abhay Kumar Singh (Principal, APS) and Sandip Jha (renowned architect) marked their presence to motivate the students on this occasion.

Principal, Samita Sinha extended a floral and formal welcome to the guests and dignitaries followed by the lighting of the flambeau by the Sports Captain and releasing of balloons, to mark the commencement of the event. The Chief Guest was accompanied by the Principal for the inspection of the spectacular parade by NCC cadets and the four



Houses. The march past was a magnificent display of synchronization, discipline and team work. The School Magazine "Expressions" was also released on this auspicious occasion. Madam Principal then presented the Annual Report of the school which enumerated the notable achievements of the year 2022-23. A field display based on the theme "INDRADHANUSH" involving mass student participation splattered on the field a riot of hues and vibrance. The dis-

plays included Vintage Toons where children of Nursery and KG performed as different cartoon characters. Red Fire Crackers by classes I & II and Orange Tigers by III - V were enthralling. Where Hari Neeli Tidiyaan by the students of classes VI to VIII brought energy and enthusiasm to all, Hawa Hawaii by IX - XII girls and Joshali Yuva by the boys of IX - XII stole the show. The highlight of the day was the Yoga and Karate presentation by the students of III to



V. They mesmerized the audience with their energetic performance. The proud parents could be seen filled with happiness to see their children performing. The displays made way for the highly awaited Track events like Pick and Run, My Favourite Fruit, Balance Race, Three Legged Race, Skipping Race, Crab Race etc. It also included 100 m, 400 m Race, 4X100 m relay race, 3X50m medley race. Children participated with commendable vigour and enthusiasm. The Chief

Guest as well as alumni of the school awarded the medals and certificates to the winners of the various sports events. The Co-curricular Trophy and Sports Trophy were raised by Leopard and Jaguar House, respectively.

In the subsequent Prize Distribution, the winners of various academic, co-curricular and sports events were given medals, trophies and certificates. The special prizes for "Excellence in Academics" were also awarded to the students

Candidates interviewed for vacant posts of KGBVs in Bokaro

R SHARMA : BOKARO

In order to ensure quality education availability in the district, candidates were interviewed on Thursday for the vacant posts of accountant cum computer operator including various language and physical teachers in the different Kasturba Gandhi Girls Residential Schools (KGBV) of the district. It is worth mentioning here that DC Kuldeep Chaudhary, DDC Kirtishree G, AMC Chas Saurav Kumar Bhuvania, DEO Jagannath Lohra, DES Noor Alam Khan, District Sports Officer Hemlata etc. took the interview in the office room of the Collectorate under the vigil monitoring of DC Bokaro so that future of nation gets proper guidance under the hand of talented task force.

DC Kuldeep Choudhary and other officials took detailed information from the female candidates involved in the interview regarding their



educational, training and work experience. Whereas, DEO - DSE asked questions related to related subjects. A total of 35 candidates took part in the interview. It is noteworthy that recently, applications were invited from the candidates by post for selection on temporary and short-term contract basis against 15 vacant posts in 08 Kasturba Gandhi Girls Residential Schools (KGBV) running in the dis-

trict. After scrutiny of applications, a total of 95 candidates were called for the interview, out of which 81 candidates appeared for the interview. During verification of educational certificates/qualification, 46 candidates were not completing the eligibility criteria hence their applications were cancelled. The remaining 35 candidates appeared in the interview, while 14 candidates remained absent.

CBSE Regional Level Science Exhibition held at DPS Ranchi



PNS : RANCHI

CBSE Regional Level Science Exhibition, organized by the Central Board of Secondary Education, unfolded with grandeur at Delhi Public School, Ranchi. This 2-days Exhibition to be conducted on the 22nd and 23rd of December 2023, promises to be a captivating showcase of scientific innovation and creativity. Teams from 41 schools across the CBSE Patna Region (Jharkhand State only) participated in this exhibition. The Chief Guest of the event was Manish Tyagi (Under Secretary), CBSE.

The programme commenced with a welcome song and dance. The ambience was charged with excitement as participants, mentors, and guests gathered for an intel-

lectually stimulating experience. The exhibition featured in 02 categories, one for students from Classes VI to VIII and the other for Classes IX to XI, delving into diverse themes that reflect the breadth and depth of their scientific curiosity. The five themes for the exhibition—Health, LIFE (Lifestyle for Environment), Agriculture, Communication and Transport, and Computational Thinking—offer a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of the scientific endeavors awaiting exploration.

For the 41 participating schools, the stakes are high, as only 10 will emerge victorious and secure a coveted spot in the National Level of the exhibition, scheduled to take place in Delhi. These winning

schools will be announced on Day 2 of exhibition after showcasing their exceptional prowess in addressing the event's themes and meeting the stringent assessment criteria. The results will be declared on 23rd December 2023.

Chief Guest, Manish Tyagi underscored the significance of cultivating a scientific mind-set from an early age, recognizing the commendable efforts of the young scientists. Emphasizing the crucial role of creativity and independent thinking in academic pursuits, the Chief Guest applauded the dedication of the students to excellence. He particularly commended the high quality of the exhibits presented, highlighting the students' impressive achievements. The Chief Guest's address resonated with the audience, conveying a message of encouragement and inspiration for the budding scientists.

Dr. Ram Singh Prasad, DPS Ranchi and CBSE City Coordinator, Ranchi Zone, said, "The exhibition is an excellent example of active learning, a cornerstone for successful learning that grooms children to be future-ready learners for life." He highlighted the significance of these academic activities in engaging students and teachers, instilling curiosity, and bringing out the best in them.

BTPS' 500 MW power generation registers improvement

SURESH NIKHAR : BERMIO

Power generation of a 500 MW unit at the DVC Bokaro Thermal Power station (BTPS)-A has registered a significant improvement during the last one month. On the generation front, DVC, Bokaro Thermal has recorded power generation of 473 MW here on Friday. However, the total energy generation of DVC BTPS "A" during the month of December 22, is around 10.865 MU, while declared capacity is about 471.25 and PLF got 90.54 percent and Aux power consumption 5.508, said CE & PH Anand Mohan.

According to DVC sources, the total valley generation of DVC recorded on Monday evening is 5580 MW, while Bokaro thermal power plant-A recorded 473 MW out of 500 MW. Chandrapura Thermal Power Station (CTPS), Unit number-7 got 234 MW, Unit number-VIII recorded 219 MW, while MTPS generated Unit no-I-176MW, Unit no-II, 174MW, Unit number-III, 176 MW Unit no-4 having 170MW, Unit no-5 got 212 MW, while Unit no-6 generating 207 MW, Unit no-7 having got 483 MW and Unit number- VIII registered 483 MW.

However, DST, Power station (DTPS) of DVC reordered generation of Unit no-I, 489 MW, and Unit no-2 registered



Photo of CE & PH Anand Mohan Prasad of BTPS

491MW. Koderma Thermal power Station (KTPS) recorded today Unit number-1 is 486 MW out of 500MW while RTPS is now producing of its Unit no-I is 559MW and Unit no-2 registered 504 MW.

All two hydel DVC including Maithon and Panchayat are generating 19 MW and 23 MW of its unit no 3 & 1. The daily station PLF is much higher than the previous best.

The improvement largely depends on the guidance of DVC chairman, Chief engineer and project head Anand Mohan Prasad of BTPS and other engineers of the power plant.

DVC is India's first multi-purpose river project that formally came into being on July 7, 1948 just after independence by an Act of the constituent Assembly. It came up as India's first project to develop infrastructure for the socioeconomic progress of the region.

Alumni Meet at XITE College cultivates nostalgia and camaraderie

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a poignant reunion, XITE College played host to its cherished alumni, transforming the campus into a hub of fond memories and shared experiences during a heart-warming Alumni Meet. The meticulously coordinated event, spearheaded by Naval Narayan Choudhary and Seema Herenj, received expert supervision from Dr. Fr. Mukti Clarence, SJ, reflecting the commitment of XITE to nurturing enduring connections within its community. Ashish Singh, Head of Branding & Communication, provided robust backend support to ensure the success of the gathering.

The Alumni Meet unfolded as a celebration of camaraderie, allowing former students to rekindle old bonds and create new ones. The event served as a platform for laughter, nostalgia, and the



exchange of experiences, creating a vibrant atmosphere charged with the spirit of unity.

Graduates from various batches came together, sharing their journeys post-XITE and celebrating each other's achievements. The occasion was marked by heartfelt interactions that underscored the profound impact XITE has had on the lives and careers of its alumni.

Updates on diverse career paths, personal milestones, and professional achievements highlighted the versatility and success of XITE graduates in different fields. The meet not only reinforced

the sense of community but also provided a space for continued collaboration and support among alumni.

The tradition of hosting Alumni Meets at XITE exemplifies the college's unwavering commitment to fostering lifelong connections. The event is a testament to the enduring legacy of Xavierian excellence, with alumni carrying the spirit of their alma mater into the broader world. As graduates revisit their alma mater, the bonds forged within the XITE community continue to thrive, creating a rich tapestry of shared memories and ongoing connections.

Expulsion of 146 MPs is playing with the Constitution: Bhagat

VINOD PRASAD: LOHARDAGA:

A one-day protest was held in front of the Collectorate on Friday by India Grand Alliance Lohardaga against the Central Government. In which mainly all the party leaders and workers of India Grand Alliance constituent parties were present. Mainly Congress' Lok Sabha in-charge Sukhdev Bhagat said that the Government of India has played with the Constitution by expelling 146 MPs from the Parliament. Congress District President Sukher Bhagat said that currently undeclared emergency is in force in the country. Those who raise their voice against Adani and Ambani, the Central Government is trying to crush their voice. JMM District President Mozammil Ahmed said that the BJP government at the Center is running the British rule.

DLSA Palamu gives away blankets among roofless poor

PNS : DALTONGANJ

Secretary of the DLSA Palamu Arpit Srivastav distributed 75 blankets among the poor and destitutes in Daltonganj on Thursday night. The CWC too joined this blanket distribution.

JHALSA has directed the DLSA to coordinate with the district administration for blanket distribution.

Arpit Srivastav said he had to arrange blankets for distribution among the poor from the social welfare department.

Secretary DLSA said he inspected the Ashray Grih in Daltonganj and was disappointed to see many beds there with blankets without any sleeper there. He said the destitutes, homeless vagabonds and roofless are suggested to spend their nights at Ashray Grih but in vain. He said that they come here in this Ashray Grih they would see then how good and warm this Ashray Grih is for them in the winter nights. Medinagar municipal corporation city commissioner Md Jawed Hussain said "Our team goes out every night to identify sleepers in the open to come over to this Ashray Grih but many just don't budge an inch. They are ready to face the cruelties of winter but refuse to have warm winter night sleep." Hussain said it's their mind set to be there where they are. Their behavioural attitude to their own comfort or pain is decided by them.



Secretary DLSA Arpit Srivastav at night in Daltonganj during blankets for poor programme. PNS

DC reviews infrastructure construction at MGM College and Hospital

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a proactive move to ensure the timely completion of infrastructure construction at MGM College and Hospital, Deputy Commissioner Manjunath Bhajantri conducted a comprehensive review meeting at his office. The meeting, attended by key officials including SDO Dhalbhum Piyush Sinha, Civil Surgeon Dr. Juhjar Majhi, MGM Superintendent, Deputy Engineer of Building Construction and Building Corporation, focused on assessing the progress of the ongoing construction work.

During the meeting, Bhajantri expressed a clear commitment to the completion of the construction work within the stipulated time frame. The review included a thorough examination of the current condition of buildings within the college and hospital premises. To ensure effective monitoring, it was decided to establish a committee comprising administrative



officers, civil surgeon, superintendent, and other representatives from MGM College and Hospital, as well as engineers from the building construction and building corporation.

The ongoing construction encompasses the development of a state-of-the-art 500-bed hospital within the MGM College campus, coupled with the replacement of old structures in the MGM Hospital campus. The Deputy Commissioner emphasized the critical role of MGM in catering to the

health needs of the three districts in the Kolhan division. Recognizing the importance of strengthening healthcare services, the state government is dedicated to the construction of a cutting-edge hospital. The Deputy Commissioner stressed the necessity of completing the construction work within the stipulated time to provide enhanced medical facilities to a large population.

The formation of a monitoring committee underscores the administration's

commitment to ensuring the seamless progress of the project. As the construction work advances phase by phase, the collaborative efforts of the officials involved aim to elevate MGM College and Hospital into a beacon of advanced healthcare for the region.

The former CM Raghubar Das had laid the foundation stone of the hospital in 2019. The new MGM Hospital building, equipped with modern amenities and state-of-the-art medical facilities, aims to provide comprehensive healthcare services to the residents of Jharkhand. It will play a crucial role in addressing the healthcare needs of the region and reducing the burden on existing healthcare institutions.

The new 500-bed MGM Hospital, whose construction is progressing rapidly, is expected to become a vital healthcare facility for the people of Jharkhand, catering to their medical needs and ensuring better healthcare outcomes.

Christmas fervour at Loyola School

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR:

The campus of Loyola School, Bistipur, resonated with the spirit of love, generosity, and goodness as Christmas celebrations unfolded with great joy and festivity on Friday. The senior section students orchestrated a meaningful and merry musical extravaganza that not only entertained but also delivered a powerful message of Christmas. The festivities kicked off with a warm welcome address, setting the tone for an evening of joyous celebration. The Nativity Scene, a quintessential part of Christmas, came to life with a beautifully crafted manger serving as the backdrop. The enactment depicted the profound events surrounding the birth of Christ, complemented by the choir's melodious rendition of Christmas carols. The seamless integration of a vibrant dance performance added an extra layer of continuity and exuberance to the overall presentation.

Fr. Rector, in his Christmas message, congratulated the students for their brilliant performance while emphasizing the importance of embracing values such as sharing and caring. He urged the students to follow the path of brotherhood and humanity during the festive season. Drawing parallels to the significance of the Christmas star, Fr. Rector emphasized that the star leads us to God. The Principal, Fr. Vinod Fernandes, delivered a heartfelt vote of thanks, expressing gratitude to all involved in making the celebration a grand success.



CM gifts schemes over Rs 531.07 Cr in Dhanbad

Distributes assets worth Rs 418.21 Crore among 3,76,497 beneficiaries

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Minister Hemant Soren inaugurated and laid the foundation stone of 206 schemes worth Rs 531 crore 7 lakh 35 thousand 565 in Dhanbad on Friday. In this, the foundation stone of 135 schemes worth Rs 122 crore 68 lakh 6 thousand 264 was laid, while the inauguration of 71 schemes worth Rs 408 crore 39 lakh 29 thousand 301 was completed. At the same time, assets worth Rs 418 crore 21 lakh 55 thousand 242 were distributed among 3 lakh 76 thousand 497 beneficiaries of various schemes.

Addressing the program "Your Plan - Your Government - Your Door" organized at Moditola village in Baliapur block of Dhanbad district on Friday, the CM said, "This is the government of the tribals, indigenous people and the people of Jharkhand. This government is not running from Ranchi-Delhi but from villages and mohalla-tola. A mega campaign is going on to deliver welfare schemes to every person's doorstep giving people their rights with full respect. Today there will not be any house where one or the other scheme of the government

has not reached. Our government is working to empower the last person of the society by connecting them with schemes."

The CM said that the program "Aapki Yojana-Aapke Sarkar-Aapke Dwar" was organized for the first time in the year 2021. During this period approximately 30 lakh applications were received. At the same time, in this program organized for the second time in 2022, about 50 lakh people had applied in the camps regarding their problems. This program is running for the third time from November 24 this year. The way people's enthusiasm is being seen in these camps clearly shows that people have a lot of expectations from the government. He said that for two decades after the formation of a separate state, the problems of the people could not be solved properly. But, our government is solving the problems of the people by reaching their homes and doors. This trend will continue every year and during this time the government will also come to you with many new schemes. Our endeavour is to make every family happy and prosperous by joining the government schemes.

The CM said that this is the



Chief Minister Hemant Soren addresses a gathering during the "Aapki Yojana - Aapki Sarkar - Aapke Dwar" programme at Modidih village of Baghmara Panchayat located in Baliapur block of Dhanbad district, on Friday. PNS

20th camp under the program "Aapki Yojana-Aapki Sarkar Aapke Dwar" in which I myself am participating. By coming to these camps, I am trying to see what the progress of the government schemes is and how people are getting benefits from it. Our effort is to ensure that the government's schemes come to fruition in reality, so that the poor, the needy and the deprived can benefit from it.

The CM said that the work of opening an Aviation Training Center in Dumka is

in the final stages. With its commencement, the young men and women here will get training as commercial pilots, ground engineers and air hostesses. This step of the government will pave the way for the youth of Jharkhand to progress in the field of aviation. He said that if the Central Government gives permission to the airstrip in Baliapur in Dhanbad district, then the State Government will move forward in the direction of developing it.

Soren said that booklets



Chief Minister Hemant Soren distributes assets among beneficiaries during the "Aapki Yojana - Aapki Sarkar - Aapke Dwar" programme at Modidih village of Baghmara Panchayat located in Baliapur block of Dhanbad district, on Friday. Ministers Satyanand Bhokta, Banna Gupta, MLA Mathura Prasad Mahato and Purnima Neeraj Singh, Secretary to the Chief Minister Vinay Kumar Choubey are also seen in the picture. PNS

related to the government's welfare schemes will be given to students in all libraries and schools. So that, they can tell their family members and guardians about what schemes are being run by the government for them. This will be beneficial in that people will not be deprived of the schemes due to lack of information and will be able to connect with the scheme of their need.

The CM said that today is the machine age. Machines

are increasingly replacing humans in factories. In such a situation, it is very important for the youth to be skilled, otherwise they will be left far behind. The government is well aware of this. For this reason, now we are giving skill development training to the youth at the block level so that they are able to maintain their place in this era of competition.

The CM said that during the Corona period, it was revealed that lakhs of labor-

ers of Jharkhand go to other states and foreign countries for employment. We came to know about the problems they have to face here when we brought them back during the Corona period. Now these labourers do not have to go out for work, the government has also made plans for this. Now efforts are being made to provide them employment through various schemes in their villages and homes. Not only this, the government has

also made a plan for the welfare and safety of the workers. You must take advantage of these schemes by registering yourself on the Labour Department portal.

The CM said that Jharkhand is not a backward and poor state. But, during the last 20 years it was left to lag behind. No one showed commitment to take the state forward on the path of development. Our government is moving towards liberating this state from the tag of poverty and backwardness. Jharkhand will become 25 years old in the year 2025. In such a situation, we will make the state so powerful in the next two years that we will not need to lend a hand to anyone. Jharkhand state will become so capable that it will decide its own path of development and will be counted among the leading states of the country.

On this occasion, Minister Satyanand Bhokta, Minister Banna Gupta, MLA Mathura Prasad Mahato and Purnima Neeraj Singh, Secretary to the Chief Minister Vinay Kumar Choubey and District Deputy Commissioner and Senior Superintendent of Police and other officials were present.

INDI Alliance stages protest against expulsion of MPs

PNS : RANCHI

Regarding the lapse in security of the Parliament, all the constituent parties of the Indian alliance including the Congress today started an angry protest march starting from the local Shaheed Chowk and reached the Raj Bhavan, where all the leaders of the opposition parties including the Congress were present.

Addressing the angry protest march in front of Raj Bhavan, State Congress Committee President Rajesh Thakur said that the purpose of this angry protest march is to draw public attention to the dangerous situation facing our democracy. He said that the question is why the youth protested in the Parliament, they took this step in protest against unemployment. Same is the condition of other youth of the country. Because it came to power by promising



to provide employment to 02 crore youth every year, the Modi government is not able to provide employment to them.

He said that it is the first incident in the history of independent India when 146 opposition MPs were suspended. This is a stain on democracy and a national dis-

grace to the country. He said that the Modi government has put aside both the dignity of Parliament and the dignity of democracy. A conspiracy is being hatched to make Parliament an arena for the ruling party. Modi government has put the Constitution, democracy and Parliament in danger. The ruling party is

silent on the security lapses of Parliament and action is being taken against the opposition MPs. He said that the Modi government does not want the House to function. In a democracy, there should be questions on issues related to the public. We all opposition leaders and workers are standing together, this is a fight between hatred and love. The more hatred they spread, the more love the alliance will spread.

Finance Minister Dr. Rameshwar Oraon said that the Prime Minister and the Home Minister should give a statement in the House on the lapses in Parliament security. This is the process of democracy. He said that not giving a statement is an insult to the House.

State Congress Working President Bandhu Tirkey said that BJP does not want multi-party democracy in the country. He said that the question

is how the security lapse took place in the Parliament.

Agriculture Minister Badal said how the youth reached the Parliament and why action is not being taken against those on whose recommendation they reached the Parliament. This clearly shows the intentions and policies of BJP.

On this occasion, State Vice President Anadi Brahm, MLA Shilpi Neha Tirkey, State General Secretary cum Media Incharge Rakesh Sinha, Organization General Secretary Amulya Neeraj Khalkho, Ravindra Singh, Sanjay Lal Paswan, Keshav Mahato Kamlesh, Vinay Sinha Deepu, Surendra Singh, Amarendra Singh, Kamal Thakur. Dr. Rakesh Kiran Mahato, Rama Khalkho, Gunjan Singh, Nelly Nathan, Kedar Paswan, Rajesh Sinha Sinni, Pinky Singh, Niranjana Paswan, Chanchal Chatterjee, were present.

Maoists blow up railway tracks, disrupt Howrah-Mumbai route

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a brazen act of sabotage, ultras of the banned CPI (Maoist) targeted and blew up a section of third line railway tracks between Manoharpur and Goikera, under West Singhbhum in the wee hours of Friday. The incident, unfolding within the jurisdiction of the Goikera police station, has resulted in severe disruptions to train services on the crucial Howrah-Mumbai route.

According to West Singhbhum Superintendent of Police, Ashutosh Sekhar, the destructive act occurred during the intervening night of Thursday and Friday. The blast occurred between Goikera and Posoita railway stations, approximately 112 km from the city.

The explosion has caused significant damage to the railway infrastructure, leading to the suspension of train services along the busy Howrah-Mumbai corridor. Authorities are currently assessing the extent of the damage, and restoration efforts are expected to be challenging given the remote location of the incident. The West Singhbhum SP emphasised the need for swift and coordinated efforts to repair the damaged tracks and restore normalcy to the affected railway route. Security forces and railway officials are actively engaged in addressing the aftermath of the incident.



The disrupted transportation services have inconvenienced passengers and disrupted the flow of goods between Howrah and Mumbai. Authorities are advising commuters to stay informed about the status of train services and make alternative travel arrangements until the tracks are repaired and deemed safe for use.

The incident highlights the ongoing challenges posed by extremist groups in certain regions, underscoring the need for heightened security measures and vigilance to ensure the safety of critical infrastructure and the general public. Law enforcement agencies are expected to intensify efforts to apprehend those responsible for the attack and to prevent further acts of violence.

Meanwhile, in a concerted effort, the Railway Protection Force (RPF), in collaboration with the Government Railway Police and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), has initiated a large-scale operation

to apprehend Maoists. However, as of now, there are no reports of any arrests of suspected Naxalites.

Insider sources suggest that the anticipation of Maoists targeting railway lines during their bandh was well-known. Railways are considered particularly vulnerable, deemed as the softest of soft targets. The strategic targeting of railway infrastructure aligns with the Maoists' objective of gaining widespread publicity, as the disruption of such a critical transportation network draws attention to their cause. The calculated nature of their actions underscores the challenge faced by authorities in preventing these attacks and highlights the need for heightened security measures to safeguard vital infrastructure and maintain public safety. As the operation unfolds, authorities remain vigilant, aiming to curtail any potential threats posed by the Maoist insurgents and safeguard the integrity of railway services.

PIONEERING PROGRESS

International Conference on Opencast Mining & Sustainability begins on a high note

Coal Experts from around the globe brainstorm on sustainable mining



PNS : RANCHI

Northern Coalfields Limited, a flagship subsidiary of Coal India Limited kickstarted the 6th Edition of the two-day International Conference on Opencast Mining Technology & Sustainability (ICOMS) at NCL HQ on Friday. The Chairman of Coal India PM Prasad Inaugurated the Conference by Video Conferencing. While addressing the inaugural session, Prasad praised NCL for being the only subsidiary of Coal India which is continuously clocking the year-on-year growth in terms of Coal Production, Dispatch, and Overburden Removal for the past 6 years.

He underscored the importance of the ICOMS paves the path for expert research papers, and exhibitions and proves to be a fruitful platform that helps in resolving the social, environmental & operational challenges of opencast mining. Additionally, Prasad appreciated the innovative initiatives of the company including FMC Projects, other steps towards environmental sustainability & Project DigiCoal.

During the presidential address, CMD NCL Bhola Singh said that departmental production is the cornerstone

of NCL. He also focused on the sustainable mining practices in NCL. Singh appreciated the OB to Sand & other innovative initiatives of the Company inclusively conserving the natural resources. He also stressed upon the continuous adoption of new technology and stated that quality coal supply to the consumers is the prime concern of NCL.

He also described sustainable initiatives like solar power plants towards NET Zero and Overburden Removal as a need of the hour for the company's futuristic growth.

Additionally, Singh also outlined Miniratna's plan of Mining in the Main Basin Area to contribute to the Nation's Energy Independence. While praising the mechanical fleet of NCL, he exhorted on the adoption of new technology and methodology to minimize the cost of production.

A grand Mining Machinery Exhibition has been organized on the sideline of the conference in which more than 50 Multinational Companies, Startups, and MSMEs are participating and showcasing their products and services particularly used in HEMMs, Mine operation, mine Safety, productivity, and digitization.

During the inaugural session of ICOMS-2023, a sou-

venir was also released. Participants from 50 big multinational companies are participating in this conference. Also, more than 60 research papers are being presented at the conference, which includes 4 International papers.

The main topics being covered in the 6th International Conference being held on 22 & 23rd December are Atmanirbhar Bharat and Amrit Kaal Yatra, Production and Productivity in Opencast Mines, Equipment Infrastructure and Power Supply Management, Demand Supply Scenario and Outlook, Business Diversification, Technological Change in Mining Sector, Business Development, New Initiatives and Innovations. Emphasis is being also laid on digitalization, artificial intelligence, security, land acquisition, rehabilitation, environment, and social development in mining.

NCL is the highest volume (coal production and Overburden combined) handling company in the Nation. The company produces over 131 Million Tonnes of coal and handles over 460 Million Cubic Meters of Overburden from 10 Opencast mines located in MP and UP states. The company boasts of having the best open-cast mines in terms of mechanization and infrastructure.

The company has already surpassed 100 Million Tonnes of Coal production and Dispatch in FY 2023-24 against the fiscal target of 135 Million Tonnes. The company has crossed its Annual Capex Target of ? 2150 Crore and has spent Rs 2443.72 Crore till November month.

State to have more welfare schemes for poor

PNS : RANCHI

The JMM/Congress alliance government will launch several welfare schemes with an aim to reach out to the poor. The government presently runs several welfare schemes which have become popular among the people and are changing their livelihood. Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Friday said that at present several welfare schemes are being run by the government and in future many more schemes will be launched.

Soren said, "In coming days the government will launch several welfare schemes and its number will be so high that it cant be counted on finger tips."

Chief Minister Hemant Soren launched Rs 15000 crore 'Abua Awas Yojna' on the occasion of the 77th Independence Day to build homes for the needy in the next two years.

Hoisting the national flag at the Morabadi Ground here, Soren had said the government is constantly striving to build a strong state and making attempts to fulfil the promises made by it.

Abua Housing Scheme, a state-supported initiative aimed at providing three-room accommodations to eligible beneficiaries. Under the Abua Awas Yojana, houses are to be constructed in a minimum area of 31 square meters, including a clean kitchen. The scheme prioritizes the registration of houses in the name of women in the family. Apart from these various other welfare schemes are run by the government. In 2019, the former Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Mr. Raghubar Das, launched the Mukhyamantri Sukanya Yojana under the Women Child Development and Social Security Department of the

state to stop child marriage in Jharkhand and save daughter, educate daughter.

However, on August 24, 2022, the state cabinet approved a proposal to change the name of the scheme to Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana. Under this revised scheme, girls will receive financial assistance of Rs 2,500 for enrollment in class 8, Rs 2,500 for enrollment in class 9, Rs 5,000 for enrollment in class 10, Rs 5,000 for enrollment in class 11, and Rs 5,000 for enrollment in class 12. Additionally, upon reaching the age of 18-19, the girl child will receive a lump sum grant of ?20,000.

The main objective of the renamed scheme, Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana, is to prevent child marriages in Jharkhand and promote girls' education.

Appointments to about 38,000 posts in various categories were on the anvil while ensuring that the local citizens get its benefits. In order to speed up the process of recruitment in the state, the requisition has been sent to the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission for the recruitment. Advertisement has been published for the recruitment of 36,000 posts and the process of appointment will be completed soon.

The Mukhyamantri Rozgar Srijan Yojana is being implemented to provide loans at cheap and subsidised rates to tribal, dalit, backward, minority and differently-abled youth of the state for self-employment, for starting their business.

Similarly, a universal pension scheme has been started in the state and Rs 1400 crore was given to 35 lakh beneficiaries as pension till July 2023. Also there are several schemes in the education front too.

National Mathematics Day at SBPS

The students of Sarala Birla Public School, Ranchi observed National Mathematics Day to mark the birth anniversary of Srinivas Ramanujan. They participated in a series of activities. A special assembly was conducted to commemorate the day. Inter-house quiz and sudoku competitions were also conducted. A short biography depicting the achievements and contributions of Srinivasa Ramanujan was also shown to the students. School Head Personnel & Admin., Dr. Pradip Varma, appreciated the efforts of the school for observing such special events. Principal, Paramjit Kaur, necessitated the importance of acknowledging the contributions of great Indian scholars like Srinivasa Ramanujan who have made such noteworthy contributions in the field of Mathematics. She also read out a letter from Srinivas Ramanujan to G.H. Hardy in the assembly.



BJP MP demands to blacklist Trikut Ropeway company

3 people were killed and several injured in Trikut ropeway incident on April 10, 2022

PNS : RANCHI

Jharkhand former BJP state president cum Rajya Sabha member Deepak Prakash has written a letter to the state Chief Minister Hemant Soren with a demand to blacklist Damodar Ropeway and Infrastructure Limited, a Kolkata company which runs the ropeway in Trikut, Deoghar and to impose a fine of Rs 9 crore on it.

Prakash through his letter has stated that the expert committee formed to investigate the accident that occurred on April 10, 2022, due to the negligence of the company and the death of three people and injuries to many people in accident, has issued a notice to the ropeway operator. The expert committee has blamed the company for its negligence for the incident.

Prakash has reminded the Chief Minister in his letter that the Jharkhand Government had also informed the High Court based on a PIL that it would take punitive action against the company. State Tourism Minister Hafizul Hassan had



also talked about imposing a fine of Rs 9 crore on the company in the Assembly. But no action has been taken by the Jharkhand government till now.

Damodar Ropeway and Infrastructure Limited, Kolkata company has a bad history in other states also, hence Jharkhand government should blacklist it and recover a fine of Rs 9 crore from Damodar Ropeway.

Prakash has further written that the ropeway is closed after the Trikut ropeway accident. There is an 80 percent decline in the number of tourists coming here. This has also affected the economy of the area. Also, shopkeepers are facing a lot of problems. Many people employed here lost their jobs and many families went out to earn.

Dhankar justifies suspension of MPs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

After an acrimonious end to the Winter Session over suspension of several MPs from Opposition benches, Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar is learnt to have reached out to top Opposition leaders — Mallikarjun Kharge and Sharad Pawar — by writing letters where the chairman has justified the suspension of members from the Upper House by terming it “unavoidable” due to their “extreme degree of misconduct” and he had “risen to the occasion” when the temple of democracy was “sacrilegied”. In a letter to Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, the Rajya Sabha Chairman said rendering the House dysfunctional by making a demand to the Chair that cannot be acceded is unfortunate and against public interest. Dhankhar wrote to Kharge



stating that the Congress leader's refusal to meet him during the Winter session of Parliament was not in sync with parliamentary practices and has also sought an interaction with him, sources said on Friday. This comes a day after the Rajya Sabha was adjourned sine die on Thursday, a day ahead of schedule. In another letter to NCP supremo Sharad Pawar, Dhankhar also voiced his anguish over the “widespread perception of ‘politicisation’” of the issue of security breach in Parliament on December 13 instead of dis-



play of “collective concern” on the incident. “When temple of democracy is sacrilegied, surely, you'd agree as concerned senior Parliamentarian, that the Chairman has risen to the occasion,” he said. Pawar had written to the Rajya Sabha Chairman seeking his intervention on the issue of suspension of members from the House for displaying placards and raising slogans demanding Home Minister Amit Shah's statement on the security breach in Parliament when two protesters jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber and set off smoke canisters.

Winds of change blowing strongly in India's favour: IAF chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

IAF chief V R Chaudhari on Friday said the world is at a pivotal juncture and winds of change are blowing strongly in India's favour adding India's rise in the Global South marks a “pivotal point” in international affairs. Making these assertions at a seminar on “India and Global South: Challenges and Opportunities,” organized by Centre for Air Power, he emphasised India's proactive role in raising the concerns of the countries of Global South. “Rooted in a rich historical tapestry, the country's emergence from colonial shadows to a prominent global player brings forth a myriad of challenges and opportunities,” IAF chief said. “Understanding the complex dynamics at play is crucial in navigating a future shaped by interconnectedness,” he said. “As we navigate these uncharted skies, air power being a key component of national power, would undoubtedly play a pivotal role and also serve as a symbol of national strength, a tool



for peace and collaboration,” he added. Chaudhari said the IAF may easily act as a catalyst for progress, fostering strategic partnerships and contributing to the collective advancement of the Global South. “Our air power engagements with the countries of the Global South have resonated across the board and allowed us to exchange best practices, improve interoperability

and build trust,” he said. The IAF chief noted that these engagements are crucial for tackling shared security challenges and ensuring regional stability. “We have increased the footprint of training and cooperation with these nations,” he said. On the global geopolitical developments, the Chief of Air Staff said the landscape of international relations is con-

stantly shifting and traditional power structures are increasingly being challenged by new players. “The threat of global conflict looms large, fuelled by ideological divisions, resource scarcity and climate change. This has created interconnected challenges like economic disparity and resource exploitation,” he said. The IAF chief observed that “black swan” events like COVID-19, and conflicts being witnessed across the world have aggravated the situation. Chaudhari spoke on the relevance of air power and the need for IAF to act as a catalyst for progress, fostering strategic partnerships and contributing to the collective advancement of the Global South. IAF's increased footprint during regular training engagements with partner nations has resulted in sharing of best practices in operations and maintenance. He also mentioned the role played by Indian Military Advisory Teams and courses offered through Indian Technical and Economic

Cooperation programme, which had paved the way for increased cooperation by conducting training for more than 200,000 officials in both the civil and defence sector. Chaudhari said in the past nine years, IAF had trained more than 5,000 foreign trainees from countries of the Global South. He also added that indigenous aerospace platforms such as LCA, LCH, Akash Missile systems and radars offer competitive and reliable options for air forces of the Global South, boosting India's economic and technological clout. He reiterated IAF's role in international relief and rescue operations, which had further strengthened India's leadership role in the Global South. The event also included the launch of two books. “Indian Air Power: Contemporary and Future Dynamics” authored by Air Marshal (Dr) Diptendu Choudhury (Retd) and “Aeroengine Fundamentals and Landscape in India: A Way Forward” authored by Air Vice Marshal Suresh Singh.

Half of Bills passed by LS discussed for less than 2 hours each, says report



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Half of the Bills passed by the 17th Lok Sabha so far were discussed for less than two hours each and only 16 per cent of them were referred to parliamentary standing committees, data compiled by think tank PRS Legislative Research shows. The report came a day after the conclusion of the Winter session — the last full-fledged session of the 17th Lok Sabha. According to an analysis by PRS Legislative Research, 172 bills were discussed and passed during the term of 17th Lok Sabha, of which 86 bills in the Lok Sabha and 103 bills in the Rajya Sabha were discussed for less than two hours each. Similarly, of the 172 bills, only 16 bills in the Lok Sabha and 11 in the Rajya Sabha saw more than 30 members taking part in the debate. The report stated that no bills were referred to House committees in the Winter session. The proportion of bills referred to committees has decreased from 71 per cent during the 15th Lok Sabha and 25 per cent in the 16th Lok Sabha to 16 per cent during the 17th Lok Sabha. It is also on its way to becoming

the only Lok Sabha to have not elected a deputy speaker. The Constitution mandates Lok Sabha to elect a deputy speaker after the elections as soon as possible. Between December 14 and 21 of the Winter session, 100 MPs were suspended from the Lok Sabha and 46 from the Rajya Sabha. This accounts for 19 per cent of the strength of each House and is the highest number of suspensions in any Lok Sabha term so far. All questions that were asked by suspended members were removed from the list of questions listed for responses. Since December 14, the day when the first group of MPs was suspended, 12 per cent of the questions were cancelled in the Lok Sabha and 13 per cent in the Rajya Sabha. In this session, Trinamool Congress MP in the Lok Sabha Mahua Moitra was expelled on grounds of ethical misconduct. In the past, MPs have been expelled from Parliament on three other occasions. In 2005, eleven members were expelled from Parliament for taking money in exchange for asking questions. Prior to that, one member each was expelled in 1978 and 1976.

Rajya Sabha elections for 3 seats from Delhi, 1 from Sikkim on January 19



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Friday announced elections to four Rajya Sabha seats — three from Delhi and one from Sikkim — will be held on January 19. The six-year term of Sanjay Singh, Sushil Kumar Gupta and Narain Dass Gupta (all from the Aam Aadmi Party) ends on January 27 next year. The term of Hishey Lachungpa (Sikkim Democratic Front) ends on February 23 next year. In a statement, the EC said the election to fill up the four vacancies will be held on January 19 (Friday). The nomination process will start on January 2 with the issuance of notification and January 9 will be the last date to file papers. The polling will take place from 9 am to 4 pm and the counting of votes will commence from 5 pm. Singh is in judicial custody after being arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in a money laundering case linked to the

Delhi excise policy. He has been under suspension from the Rajya Sabha since July 24 for unruly behaviour in the House. The EC noted that the National Capital Territory of Delhi has been allocated three seats in the Rajya Sabha. The three vacancies in Rajya Sabha from Delhi are being filled by holding “three separate elections in accordance with the law on the subject as each of these three vacancies fell under three different cycles, which were determined at the time of the initial constitution of the Rajya Sabha in 1952 itself”, the poll panel said. The decision of the commission to hold three separate elections was challenged in the Delhi High Court in 1994 in the A K Walia Vs the Union of India and Others case on behalf of the Indian National Congress, contending that all the three vacancies should be filled by holding a common election as the elections to the Rajya Sabha are held under the system of proportional representation, the poll panel noted.

Centre using technology to deliver hassle free services, says Jitendra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh on Friday said the Centre is making maximum use of technology to ensure hassle-free delivery of services to the citizens. He said transparency, accountability and citizen-centricity became the hallmark of the country's governance model ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over in 2014. “The era of working in silos is long over. The government is making maximum use of technology to ensure hassle-free delivery of services to the citizens. Capacity building programmes enable us to be ready for that,” Singh said. Addressing Dr Rajendra Prasad National Convention III (series of memorial lectures) on ‘G20 people centric governance and public policy’, organised by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) here, the minister said citizen-centric governance will evolve into an increasing role of the citizens in the decision-making process. Beginning with India's vaccine success story in January, Singh said, the year gone by with just a week left, witnessed Prime Minister Modi's citizen-centric governance model.



India's prestige as a space power was well-established by the flawless landing of Chandrayaan-3 on the virgin south polar region of the moon,” he said. Talking about India's emergence in the comity of nations, Singh said that India was earlier not taken seriously, but now the world has veered around to the agenda set by Prime Minister Modi and India at the G20. “Over 200 meetings of the G20 were held at 65 cities across India during the course of the year. Assuming a leadership role on climate change, PM Modi stressed on Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment). With the target of net zero by the year 2070, as committed by PM Modi, India is well set on course to achieve its staggered emission targets,” Singh said. “From issues like terrorism, cyber security to anti-corruption, the G20 meetings chaired by India throughout the year have been very successful,” he added. The minister said India is today among the leading five or six nations in the world using quantum technology. “Our CPGRAMS (Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System) public grievances portal, DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) and SVAMITVA (Survey of Villages Abadi and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas) programmes are cited the world over as technology-driven people-centric reforms,” Singh said. “Today the world is ready to be led by India,” he added.

Reliance Retail realises Modi's vision of Go Vocal for Local



ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

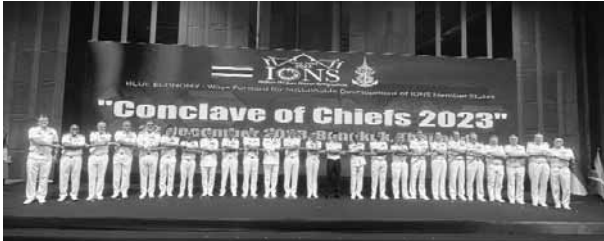
In a significant step towards realising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of ‘Go Vocal for Local’, business conglomerate RIL's retail arm Reliance Retail has collaborated with the Deendayra Antyodaya Yojna — National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), a government's flagship to enable local artisans of the Self Help Groups (SHGs) to showcase their products on its e-commerce platform Jiomart. It will also help set-up and support the rural SHGs artisans to navigate and operate their account on the marketplace. With this alliance, SHGs associated with the DAY-NRLM will get to widen their market and visibility and offer their curated products to customers of JioMart across the country, Additional Secretary, Rural Livelihoods, Union Ministry of Rural Development Charanjit Singh said after a pact was signed in this regard at an event here on Friday. “This collaboration will enable SHGs to be on-board as sellers onto the e-commerce fold on JioMart and this initiative will further boost the Ministry's provision under the SARAS collection to be available to a larger consumer base.

“With this alliance, SHGs will get to widen their market and visibility and offer their curated products to customers of JioMart across India. As part of the partnership between MoRD and JioMart, once on-boarded, all SHG sellers associated with the DAY-NRLM will get to avail benefits and guidance in growing their businesses online,” said Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development Swati Sharma. Commenting on the venture, President and Chief of Public Policy and Regulatory, Reliance Retail Limited, Dr. Ravi Prakash Gandhi said that partnering reflects the government's ‘Make in India’ initiative and this partnership helps us align and further strengthens our commitment. We aim to transform the digital retail ecosystem in the country and through this collaboration we want to empower growth and also facilitate digitization of millions of SHGs. The DAY-NRLM is a flagship poverty alleviation program of the Government and is the world's largest initiatives to improve the livelihoods of the rural poor while JioMart is Reliance Retail's e-tail arm boasts to have one of India's largest home-grown e-marketplace destinations.

India takes over as co-chair of IONS maritime security, HADR

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India has taken over as the co-chair of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Working Groups on Maritime Security and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) for the forthcoming cycle at the 8th edition of IONS Conclave of Chiefs in Bangkok from December 19-22, officials said here on Friday. Giving details, they said the conclave was conducted by Royal Thai Navy (RTN) and Chiefs of Navies and Senior Delegates from 27 Members/Observer countries participated in the event. Indian Navy chief Admiral R Hari Kumar attended the event with a three member Indian Naval delegation. During the Conclave of Chiefs, Thailand assumed the duties of Chair of IONS and Work Plan for next two years was finalised. As a first, Flag designed by India was selected as the IONS Flag. During the Conclave, Admiral Kumar held fruitful interaction



with the host, Admiral Adooong Pan-Iam, Commander-in-Chief, Royal Thai Navy and complimented him for taking over Chairmanship of IONS. Both Leaders expressed commitment towards sustaining an upward trajectory of bilateral defence engagements including naming of Indian Navy(IN)- RTN Bilateral based on historical and cultural connect. Further, he also interacted with Heads of Delegation from Australia, Bangladesh, France, Iran, Italy, Malaysia, Maldives, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Spain, and discussed bilateral maritime issues. On the side-lines of Conclave, Indian Navy chief also visited Indian Naval Ship Kadmatt at Bangkok, and interacted with

the ship's crew, commending them for successful long range deployment. The IONS was conceived by the Indian Navy in 2008 as a forum which seeks to enhance maritime cooperation among Navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive platform for discussions on regionally relevant maritime issues that would lead to common understanding on the way ahead. The inaugural edition of IONS was held in February 2008 at New Delhi, with Indian Navy as the Chair for two years (2008 - 2010). India is also scheduled to take over as the Chair of IONS (2025-27) during 9th CoC planned to be conducted in India in end 2025.

Friday shortest day, longest night of year due to winter solstice

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Friday was the shortest day and longest night of the year due to ‘Winter Solstice’ that occurred at 8.57 am. This time transition happens on December 21 or December 22 every year as part of the season change. As a result, the shortest daylight hours occur in the Northern Hemisphere. The Winter Solstice was also the beginning of Chillai Kalan, the 40-day harshest winter period in Kashmir when there are maximum chances of snow and rains. In Delhi, the Sun rose at 7.09 am, and set at 5.29 pm, making the day 10 hours, 19 minutes, and 17 seconds long. In Amritsar, the Sun rose at 7.29 am and set at 5.30 pm, making the day 10 hours, 05 minutes and 13 seconds long. In Gangtok, the Sun rose at 6.21 am and set at 4.46 pm, making the day 10 hours 24 minutes and 59 seconds. In Kolkata, the Sun rose at 6.12

am and set at 4.57 pm, making the day 10 hours, 45 minutes and 07 seconds. In Mumbai, the Sun rose at 7.07 am and set at 6.06 pm, making the day 10 hours, 59 minutes and 29 seconds. In Kanyakumari, the Sun rose at 6.28 am and set at 6.17 pm making the day 11 hours, 39 minutes and 22 seconds. In Bengaluru, the Sun rose at 6.39 am and set at 5.59 pm, making the day 11 hours, 21 minutes and 53 seconds. The Winter Solstice is also the shortest day and longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, and the longest day and shortest night of the year in the Southern Hemisphere. During the winter solstice, the Northern Hemisphere receives indirect sunlight, and the day is shorter than 12 hours, while the Southern Hemisphere receives direct sunlight. It is the beginning of summer in the Southern Hemisphere.

Researchers develop AI tool to detect nerve disorder

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru have developed an artificial intelligence (AI) tool that can detect carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), a nerve-related disorder. CTS occurs when the median nerve in the wrist is compressed, leading to symptoms such as numbness, tingling, or pain. The AI tool developed by IISc researchers in collaboration with Aster-CMI Hospital, Bengaluru detects CTS by identifying the median nerve in ultrasound videos. CTS is one of the most common nerve-related disorders, specifically affecting individuals who perform repetitive hand movements, such as office staff who work with keyboards, assembly line workers, and sports persons, they said. Currently, doctors use ultrasound to visualize the median nerve and assess its size, shape, and any abnormalities. However, interpreting ultra-

sound images and videos can be challenging, especially in regions where the boundaries of the nerve are not clear. To address this challenge, the researchers developed an AI tool based on a machine learning model with a transformer architecture. The model was originally designed to detect multiple objects in YouTube videos but was modified to focus on tracking the median nerve in ultrasound videos. The researchers collected and annotated ultrasound videos from both healthy participants and individuals with CTS to train the model. Doctors currently use ultrasound to visualise the median nerve, and assess its size, shape, and any potential abnormalities. “But unlike X-rays and MRI scans, it is hard to detect what is going on in ultrasound images and videos,” said Karan R Gujarati, a former MTech student at IISc. “At the wrist, the nerve is quite visible, its boundaries are clear, but if you go down to the elbow region, there are many

other structures, and the boundaries of the nerve are not clear,” said Gujarati, first author of the study published in the journal IEEE Transactions on Ultrasonics, Ferroelectrics, and Frequency Control. Tracking the median nerve is also important for treatments that require doctors to administer local anaesthesia to the forearm or block the median nerve to provide pain relief. “Imagine a video of an autonomous car. If the car is moving on the road, you want to track the car,” said study corresponding author Phaneendra K Yalavarthy, Professor at CDS. “In the same way, we are able to track the nerve throughout the video,” Yalavarthy said. The model was also able to automatically measure the cross-sectional area of the nerve, which is used to diagnose CTS. This measurement is performed manually by a sonographer. “The tool automates this process. It measures the cross-sectional area in real time,” said Bathala.

Video of Karnataka CM in ultra luxury private jet goes viral

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The opposition BJP on Friday came down heavily on the Congress government in Karnataka for flaunting their ‘rich fortunes and luxury lifestyles’ following a viral video on social media showing Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his cabinet colleague B Z Zameer Ahmed Khan in a private jet. The CM hit back by questioning the flying preferences of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the viral video, Siddaramaiah is seen seated in a swanky private jet along with Housing Minister Zameer Ahmed Khan and Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda, among others. In a post, Minister Khan is seen walking inside the jet with a popular Bollywood song playing in the background. Karnataka BJP President B Y

Vijayendra in a post of ‘X’ said: “If bigotry had a face, @INCKarnataka govt would be the Best of it! At a time, when whole of Karnataka is reeling under severe drought, farmers staring at the worst of crisis with loss of crops & no rainfall & hardly any development works taking off, all that @CMofKarnataka & his team of cabinet ministers could think of is flaunting their Rich Fortunes & Luxury Lifestyles over the poor damsels of the State!” “By the way, they were traveling in this luxurious aircraft to seek funds for drought relief works! What a crude mockery of our distress! Splurging the Taxpayers’ money comes so easy for @INCIndia ministers!” Vijayendra said in the social media post. Asked about Vijayendra’s tweet on the chief minister travelling in a luxury jet, Siddaramaiah

Draws sharp reaction from BJP



counter-questioned, “How does Narendra Modi travel? You tell me first. Please ask this question to the BJP people. Which plane does Narendra Modi travel in? He travels alone. Why does he travel alone? BJP leaders will keep saying something silly.” Later, the CM took to ‘X’ and slammed the BJP, claiming that

the Prime Minister himself undertook 74 foreign trips. “The hundreds of crores of money spent by the BJP who brought down the coalition government (of Congress and JD-S) through ‘Operation Lotus’, flew the MLAs around Delhi and Mumbai in a special plane, stayed in luxury hotels for weeks

and had fun, were not collected by the BJP leaders as labourers in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee project, but the tax money earned by the poor people of the state.” He wondered whether the BJP leaders had any moral rights to object to his traveling in a special flight to discuss the state’s drought situation with PM Modi. “From June 15, 2014 to September 2023 , the Prime Minister has made 74 foreign trips. According to figures from the Prime Minister’s official website, the average cost per trip is Rs 8.9 crore. The country ranks 111 on the hunger index. When the people of the country are suffering from hunger, it is said that the Prime Ministers travel abroad by special plane and have fun,” Siddaramaiah shot back.

Biren thanks Modi for acknowledging Manipur importance

PTI ■ IMPHAL

Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Friday thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi for acknowledging the importance of Manipur and naming a defence warship after the state capital Imphal. Addressing the curtain raiser ceremony of the Commissioning of INS Imphal, Indian Navy’s stealth guided missile destroyer, he also thanked Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and all the navy officials for taking this initiative. “It is a proud moment for all Manipuris and we will all stand for a strong and united India... I thank Prime Minister Narendra Modi for acknowledging the importance of Manipur and naming a defence warship after Imphal,” Singh said at the programme held at Kangla here.

The commissioning of INS Imphal not only adds another dimension to our country’s maritime capabilities but also stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of our armed forces,” he later said on X. “This warship, named after our vibrant state’s capital, Imphal, reflects the unity and strength that define us as a nation... May INS Imphal sail with pride, safeguarding our nation and contributing to the peace and security of our region,” he said in the post. Equipped with BrahMos surface-to-surface missiles and anti-submarine indigenous rocket launchers, the ship was delivered to the Indian Navy on October 20 by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL), Mumbai. On the ethnic strife in the state, the chief minister said peace has been restored in the state.

Women safety priority of Government: Sharma

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma said on Friday that women’s safety is the priority of the government. He also instructed police officers to take action in cases of organised crime and paper leaks. Sharma held a high-level meeting of police officers at the Chief Minister’s Office. In the meeting, the chief minister said that cases of harassment of women have come to light on a large scale in Rajasthan in the last few years. The government’s priority is to bring back the honour and glory of the state by protecting women. He said the department should take all necessary steps for this. The chief minister said the special investigation team (SIT) formed to investigate government recruitment paper leaks will take effective action and give justice to the youth. Sharma directed police officers



to take action by conducting special operations against gangs committing organised crimes. He said organised crimes should be eliminated from the state. He said that various types of crimes have increased in the last few years. This has had an adverse impact on the image of the state. People’s confidence in the police will have to be strengthened again. He said that the state government will provide every kind of cooperation to police officers. Sharma held detailed discus-

sions with the home department and senior police officers on various issues related to crime control and law and order of the state. Chief Secretary Usha Sharma said that women’s safety is the main priority of the state government. For this, work will be done with proper coordination at every level. Director General of Police Umesh Mishra said that the police is committed to providing security to the common people by preventing all types of crimes.

Tourists throng Kashmir for Christmas, New Year

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

Tourists are heading to Kashmir in droves to celebrate Christmas and welcome the New Year, with hotels at the famous destinations in the valley sold out for the weeks ahead, especially in anticipation of snowfall. Officials said tourists are making a beeline to Kashmir, especially to the famous ski resort of Gulmarg, in north Kashmir’s Baramulla district, and Pahalgam, in south Kashmir’s Anantnag. Describing it as a positive indication, Tourism Secretary Syed Abid Rasheed Shah said he was confident that the winter months would be successful for Kashmir’s tourism. “The way the numbers and trends are coming, with both domestic as well as foreign tourists, my expectation is that the winters will be a grand success. Destinations like Gulmarg and Pahalgam are already sold out. Gulmarg is totally sold out for Christmas and the New Year’s Eve. This is a very positive indication,” he said. Gulmarg, the tourist destination at an altitude of 8,000 feet, 50 km

north of summer capital Srinagar, is also known as the ‘Switzerland of Asia’. Shah said warm hospitality of the people of Kashmir and all the stakeholders have played an important role in reviving tourism. The tourism department has lined up various activities to enrich the experience of New Year revellers as a number of programmes have been planned for the New Year’s Eve, including a musical evening, a fire-cracker show, night skiing, and torch skiing. Asif Burza, a young hotelier who is the managing director of Ahad Hotels and Resorts - a chain of hotels across various destinations in the valley - said the recent snowfall has increased tourist influx to Kashmir. “The tourist arrivals and bookings are looking great. Hotels in Gulmarg are fully booked, while occupancy in Pahalgam and even in Srinagar is very good,” Burza told PTI. He said the tourism players are expecting the footfall to improve further with snowfall in the coming days. “Hotels are fully booked for the last ten days of December and



the first week of January,” he added. Rauf Trambo, the president of Travel Agents Association of Kashmir (TAAK), said the bookings for December-end and January were very good. “The numbers for Christmas and New Year are very good. The bookings are better than the last year. A good number of tourists are visiting the valley,” he said. He said while there was full

occupancy in Gulmarg, the numbers were better for Pahalgam and Srinagar as well. The TAAK president said Kashmir has become an all-weather destination and tourist arrivals have stretched all year round. “This year, the tourism season for Kashmir has extended to eight-nine months, unlike before when it was for two-three months only,” he said. Attributing the increase in

tourist arrivals to the change in the narrative around Kashmir over the last few years, Trambo expressed hope the industry will develop on a positive note and a huge influx of tourists will be seen in the next year, especially with Kashmir getting connected to the railway map of the country. He said a good number of foreign tourists were also showing a keen interest in Kashmir and if the travel advisories by some

countries are lifted, “we could become the number one travel destination in the country”. However, hotelier Burza said domestic tourists matter the most for the economy as they have good capacity to pay. “The paying capacity of domestic tourists has increased and they have contributed to economy. The tourism that matters, that contributes to the economy, is domestic tourism because domestic tourists have a good capacity to pay and spend not only on hotels, but local arts and crafts as well,” he said. The hotelier said Kashmir is the preferred destination for high-end domestic tourists. Crediting the support from the film industry, as many movies and TV series have been shot in the valley in recent times, for an increasing influx of tourists, Burza expressed hope of an increased footfall in the coming weeks. “We are getting a good support from the film fraternity. Leo, which has done well at the box office, was shot at Pahalgam for two months. Many more projects are lined up and that is giving us hope for the last quarter of the financial year,” he said.

Secretary of the tourism department there is a lot of positivity around tourism in Jammu and Kashmir. “Many new destinations of Kashmir have received awards and appreciations this year. So, there is a huge positivity, there is a huge element of hope and growth and development in the tourism sector. “Tourism is going to the places which are off-beat destinations and people from all over the world are going there. Trekking has been revived. People are now visiting many such destinations where they were not going before. We have also promoted border tourism at a larger scale,” Shah said. He said the winter season is one of the core focus areas, and other than Gulmarg which is the famous winter destination of the country, this time the department is focusing in a big way on destinations like Sonamarg, Doodhpatri, Baderwah, and Sanasar. “We are focussing on diversification of the tourism portfolio in terms of products of tourism, destinations, and in terms of improving the livelihoods of the people,” Shah added.



Shiv Sena (UBT) will contest 23 of 48 Maharashtra Lok Sabha seats: Raut

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut on Friday claimed his party will contest 23 of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra. Talking to reporters, Raut said a detailed discussion took place before the meeting of the opposition bloc INDIA in the national capital earlier this week during which he, along with Shiv Sena (UBT) leaders Uddhav Thackeray and Aaditya Thackeray, held talks with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, senior leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, as well as AICC general secretary K C Venugopal. “We will contest 23 seats because we have always been contesting on the same number,” Raut said. The Shiv Sena (UBT) is part of the Maha Vikas Aghadi, which also comprises the Congress and the Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party. These parties are also part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). He did not comment on the number of seats the Congress and NCP contest will contest. “The seat-sharing has almost been decided. That (talks) will take place in Delhi because there is no single (Congress) leader in Maharashtra to take decisions and if there are leaders they don’t have the authority to take decisions. They have to again ask Delhi,” Raut added. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the undivided Shiv Sena contested 23 seats in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party and won 18. Of these 18, a total of 13 are now aligned with Chief Minister Eknath Shinde post the split in the Sena in June last year.

Must work to remove all remnants of colonial legacy: Himanta

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday urged the people to erase all remnants of colonial legacy and work together to build an ‘atma nirbhar’ nation. He appealed to the people of Assam to pledge to create a movement encompassing all sectors, from agriculture to Information Technology (IT), so that the state can achieve economic self-sufficiency. Addressing a meeting at Gohpur in Sonitpur district to mark the birth centenary of freedom fighter Kanaklata Barua, Sarma said, “As India moves towards 100 years of independence, we must all work together to dismantle all remnants of our colonial legacy. We must work together for creating an ‘atma nirbhar Bharat’ economically”. Seventeen-year-old Kanaklata was shot dead by the police during the Quit India Movement in 1942 while leading a group to hoist the Tricolour on the Gohpur police station premises.



Sarma maintained that the current regime in New Delhi, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, has been working to do away with the colonial legacy. He cited replacing the colonial era criminal justice laws with new acts, shifting to the new Parliament building and renaming of roads as instances where Modi and Shah have shown how the country is coming out of the colonial legacies. “All remnants of colonial rule have to be erased and replaced with an atma nirbhar

Bharat”, the CM added. “India won’t build its economy based on imported products, but will develop its own capabilities to create its own legacy,” he asserted. Paying tributes to the memory of freedom fighters like Kanaklata and others, Sarma maintained that though the political freedom they had strived for has been achieved, economic freedom is yet to materialise. He underlined the importance Mahatma Gandhi had laid on both political and economic freedom and exhorted the people of the state to work for it. “Assam has to get rice, lentils, potatoes, onions from outside. When prices of potatoes and onions are increased by some traders outside the state, we carry out agitations here. But we don’t take to growing these on our own land,” he said. He urged the people not to create ‘movement of protests and agitations’ but a movement of boosting own production and capabilities in all sectors, ranging from agriculture to IT.

Students protest killing of former MLA by insurgents in Arunachal

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

Various students’ organisations under the aegis of All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU) on Friday staged a rally here to protest the killing of former Congress MLA Yumsem Matey. Denouncing the act of rebel groups in the three districts of Tirap, Changlang and Longding, hundreds of students marched from Akashdeep complex to Raj Bhavan holding anti-insurgency banners and placards. The protesting students later submitted a five-point memorandum to Governor Lt Gen K T Parnaik (Retd). The demands

of the students’ organisations include securing peace and normalcy in Tirap, Changlang and Longding (TCL) region, to fast track the investigation of the MLA killing case through NIA. They also demanded immediate release of village chief of Chop village in Longding district, sealing of the international border and expelling of insurgent groups to secure peace in TCL region and three battalion forces to check cross-border crimes in each district. The state government on Thursday decided to transfer the case relating to the brutal killing of Matey, to the National Investigation Agency (NIA).

The government has requested the Union Home Ministry to take up the matter with the NIA to probe the incident, following a request from the state police department, Deputy Secretary in Home Department, Likha Sampu said in a statement here. On December 16, Matey was shot dead by unknown assailants near the Indo-Myanmar border in the Lazu circle of Tirap district. Matey, a former Congress legislator, along with three of his followers had gone to the village for some personal work when someone took him towards a jungle on some pretext and fired at him killing him on the spot.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Theatre of the absurd

With a number of acts that bring it no glory, a Parliament session ends rather unceremoniously

The just-concluded winter session of Parliament has, sadly, nothing to show in terms of furthering or strengthening democracy. It did witness a flurry of activity, ranging from impassioned speeches to breaches of decorum and the passage of crucial Bills, not to forget the smoke bomb that set into motion a chain of events leading to the suspension of a record number of Opposition MPs. A major takeaway, apart from cash-for-query accused Mahua Moitra's expulsion and the suspension of MPs, was the passage of a few significant Bills, particularly those related to criminal laws and the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners. But the passage of these important Bills without any discussion was overshadowed by the record number of suspension of MPs for "unruly behaviour" following the security breach. Their fault: demanding a statement from Prime Minister Narendra Modi or Home Minister Amit Shah on the issue, albeit in a rather unruly manner. The Speaker acted swiftly to suspend almost one-third of the Lok Sabha, probably to set an example. But his action set a wrong precedent instead. Manoj Kumar Jha, an RJD MP, and Congress leader Shashi Tharoor called the suspension "a badge of honour." Mahua Moitra's expulsion earlier would also go down as the fastest judgement by the Speaker, 90 minutes to be precise, as the hallmark of winter session. However, nothing beats the suspension of MPs for demanding a just debate on breach of security in Parliament.

On the sidelines also, there was no dearth of controversies. Trinamool Congress' (TMC) suspended MP Kalyan Banerjee was seen mimicking Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar while Congress leader Rahul Gandhi filmed the act. Of course, it did not go down well with the ruling dispensation but then an MP cannot be suspended while under suspension. The Opposition has claimed that the Government's move was an attempt to stifle debate. The Opposition pressed for a statement on Parliament security breach but the Government, in turn, accused it of intentionally disrupting proceedings. In response, the Speaker took disciplinary action, including the suspension of members. The imposition of suspensions is a mechanism to maintain order and discipline, but it also sparks debates about the balance between freedom of expression and maintaining decorum in the hallowed halls of democracy. Amidst the political drama, Parliament managed to address a few critical legislative matters. The session's adjournment after a series of high-profile events marks a significant chapter in India's parliamentary history. As the political dynamics evolves before the general elections due next year, the last session of import of this Lok Sabha will go down in the annals of history as the most dramatic, traumatic and cryptic session ever.



A Sikh devotee shows his skills on 'Nagar Kirtan' procession, ahead of the 'Sahibzada', in Amritsar

Security risk management for a secure future

GenAI is a dual-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a security risk, on the other it promises improved threat detection and predictive capabilities

GenAI brings a paradigm shift in cybersecurity, with its capabilities to emulate human understanding, and learnings and the promise of both enhancing IT security and preventing new potential vulnerabilities. It can be a partner in protecting IT environments while being used to create new attack vectors. The stakes for IT and security are high, posing the question of what organizations need to do to unlock value responsibly. The Dell Technologies Generative AI Pulse Survey reveals that 37% of IT decision-makers report some organizational hesitancy when it comes to GenAI adoption. Security concerns are among the top five contributors to hesitancy toward GenAI implementation. As with any emerging technology, there are risks we must manage while making sure these technologies reflect our human values. At the same time, GenAI also offers a great deal in helping us protect our IT environments.

Addressing GenAI risks
As the capabilities of GenAI expand, security is a top-of-



mind for everyone. Hackers can use the speed and automation in which GenAI works, uncovering vulnerabilities faster, evolving malware in real-time, and building better phishing emails and digital spoofing. According to Dell Technologies Innovation Index report 2023, only 34% of Indian businesses are currently employing a holistic end-to-end security strategy integrating both hardware- and software-based protections. GenAI systems require proper security measures to help from becoming the target of attacks. Securing GenAI begins by implementing an infrastructure rooted in trust, starting at the device level and spanning to the data and user. The goal is to have robust access control measures that prevent damaging access and potential misuse of the system. To secure data, capabilities such as data classification, encryp-

tion and secure data storage and transmission need to be in place. Human involvement is crucial for regular audits, identifying system anomalies, mitigating bias, and adhering to ethical guidelines. **GenAI & cybersecurity**
While the industry works to address the risks of GenAI, it holds promise to become an ally in cybersecurity, opening avenues to help better protect organizations in the face of threats. As GenAI analyzes vast amounts of security data for an enterprise, makes predictions and is continuously learning, cybersecurity teams can better address threats. GenAI can then predict future threats or identify vulnerabilities since it learns from past incidents and threat intelligence feeds. Automation can transform how we approach security, especially in the prevention and detection control areas. By automating threat detection, GenAI reduces the time to discover and respond to attack attempts. Automating routine cybersecurity tasks, such as incident reporting or threat-sharing efforts, allows security teams to focus on

more strategic tasks. Professionals work on what matters the most with faster access to insights they can act on. Content creation may not be the first feature that comes to mind when one thinks about GenAI and cybersecurity, but this is a relevant capability for security awareness training. Leveraging GenAI for personalized training modules, using user roles, past behaviours, and common threats can reduce human error, a key factor in security incidents. **An optimistic view**
Throughout human history, we've managed the risk of innovation while advancing human progress. The key lies in using its benefits while proactively and vigilantly addressing the risks. Robust security measures, continuous monitoring and a flexible, ever-evolving approach to data privacy and ethics are recommended. As we dive into the GenAI era, the relationship between AI and cybersecurity will continue to be one of symbiotic evolution. *(The writer is VP, Infrastructure Solutions Group, Dell Technologies India, views are personal)*



MANISH GUPTA

Global conflicts fuel Sino-Russian cooperation

China and Russia, the two states, at loggerheads with the US have found a common cause. In their shared world view the US doesn't take centre stage

History is witness to the fact that time undoes the strongest and the weakest alike. Where the West drifts further away from Russia, China steers strategically closer to Moscow than ever before beckoning a time of a desired world order, one that can be a popular alternative to the US-dominated one. The China and Russia partnership has diversified into a strategic alliance that can enmesh all their allies in a comprehensive bracket of flourishing economic prosperity. **A partnership with a vision**
Though no formal alliance ties the two, Sino-Russian relations have forged a dependable bond despite sharing a past of disputes and differences. Putting the tumultuous period of the 1960s behind them, post-Soviet Russia and China have diversified their engagements into many streams of collaboration, from formal support in the UN General Assembly to regional security exercises to expansive trade supply. West Asia is the most recent example of their unified views as both parties take a stance of titrated neutrality. Both the Chinese Communist Party and the Kremlin support the 2-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict. The timeline of this West Asian conflict comes as a breather for Russia as the global gaze shifts its attention from Ukraine to Palestine, which consequently gives the China-Russia duo more time to scale up and reinforce their shared views on conflicts through fulsome shows of their efforts toward building peace in the war zone. Statements enumerating Russia's undulating efforts towards a peaceful resolution in West Asia dot headlines as the Kremlin both criticizes Hamas and offers aid to Palestine. Maintaining a precise balancing act, Russia and China manage to push and pull each other's weight on the scales of global scrutiny and show a face of powerful solidarity. One of the cornerstones of the China-Russia partnership is their economic collaboration. As the United States pursued protectionist policies and trade wars, China and Russia sought to strengthen

their economic ties. Ever since Russia's isolation from the West after it declared war on Ukraine, China has stood as its strongest supporter economically reporting a 23% jump in its crude oil exports from Russia from the previous year. In a recent agreement, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin decided to trade in local currency. With China's heavy energy demands and Russia's rich resource supply this agreement facilitates smoother trade and interdependence. Though China and Russia promote strategic autonomy they have continually enhanced their security and military cooperation via joint military exercises and the exchange of military technologies that are unavailable to China otherwise. The recent combat exercises in the Sea of Japan and near Alaskan waters are a sign that the Ukraine war has only brought Beijing and Moscow closer together validating the US' growing anxiety towards China's growing influence. Xi and Putin had already released a joint statement, weeks before the Ukraine invasion - a strategic move at securing geopolitical support as suggested by experts and academicians - announcing a "no limits" strategic partnership between the two states that also expressed criticisms and grievances against the US. Even as



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EVEN AS THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR RAGES ON, THE TWO MAINTAIN A SYNONYMOUS CRITICISM OF US INVOLVEMENT IN WEST ASIAN AFFAIRS EVEN THOUGH CHINA SHOWS RESTRAINT IN MAKING EXPLICIT REFERENCES

the Israel-Hamas war rages on, the two maintain a synonymous criticism of US involvement in West Asian affairs even though China shows restraint in making explicit references. The continual strengthening of bonds between the two is evidence of successful withstanding of international pressure and isolation. The China-Russia partnership is birthed from the insecurity of a Western-centric world order spearheaded by the US. Both nations have strategically and consciously crafted their diplomatic and economic engagements as counterbalances to the US' sphere of influence and containment strategies which they criticize as contributing to deteriorating regional stability. They continue to push for a new world order of intense economic collaboration through more native, multilateral institutions such as the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the BRI forum and are steadily accumulating support for the same. Perfectly coupled as high energy demand and high resource supply calibre states respectively, China and Russia have already invested significant diplomatic and economic efforts into seamless energy cooperation. The Power of Siberia II gas pipeline and the Yamal natural gas project are prominent examples of the

same. Putin's recent visit to Beijing also focused highly on the energy cooperation between Russia and China, a strategy repeatedly executed by the Kremlin since Ukraine's invasion as China accommodated the largest share of Russian oil exports in recent years. The two envision energy cooperation that promotes greater Eurasian integration and extends to East Asia. A spell of doom or a lesson in power projection for the US? As China and Russia strengthen their alliance, they assert their influence in regions traditionally dominated by the US, such as Central Asia and the Arctic with a combined power projection in the area. Their diversified and conscious economic engagements with regional blocs and states unclaimed by US influence could pose a threat to Washington's unilateral tendencies of power hoarding. Sino-Russian vision promises a data-backed increase in economic prosperity by up to 4% through their projected plans like the BRI and North Sea Route alternative. In a world that is streamlined to the capitalist system of economic growth, such a prospect might be difficult to turn away from amidst rising diplomatic complications and proxy wars. *(The writer is a researcher and an expert on international relations, views are personal)*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA BLOC PROTESTS

Sir — INDIA bloc MPs on Thursday marched from Parliament to Vijay Chowk to protest the suspension of opposition lawmakers, with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge asserting that the Prime Minister and the government had violated parliamentary privilege by not speaking on the security breach issue inside the House. Carrying a huge 'Save Democracy' banner and placards with messages like 'Opposition MPs Suspended' 'Parliament Caged' and "Democracy Expelled" written on them, the lawmakers took out the march. The opposition wanted to speak on the issue but the Prime Minister and Home Minister did not turn up either in the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha. Unfortunately, the Home Minister and Prime Minister did not come to the House to apprise about the security breach. They spoke about issues which should be spoken about in the House, and not outside. Opposition MPs are repeatedly requesting Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla to allow the lawmakers to speak on the security breach issue, Kharge said, alleging that the ruling party members were disturbing proceedings. Kharge urged the government to "behave democratically." INDIA bloc leaders will protest at Jantar Mantar on Friday against the suspension of MPs and nationwide protests will also be held in all district headquarters against the government's "immoral and illegal" behaviour of this government. In an apparent reference to the mimicry issue and Dhankhar's remarks on it, Kharge said, "The Rajya Sabha Chairman has brought casteism to Parliament by raising an issue. A political row broke out on Tuesday after Trinamool Congress leader Kalyan Banerjee derisively mimicked Dhankhar during the opposition's protest on the stairs of Parliament against the MPs' suspension, drawing strong condemnation from the ruling BJP. With these fresh suspensions, the total number of members suspended from the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha since December 14 has gone up to 143.

IPL: Profit over Cricket



With the annual cricket razzmataz, the IPL (Indian Premier League) knocking at the New Year's door following the IPL auction wherein Australian sensation Mitchell Starc outstripped one and all his peers in the auction race by proving himself to be the most expensive buy at around Rs 25 crore in a bid-

ding competition. Interestingly, this otherwise 'gentleman's game', is turning into a more and more profitable business endeavour with each year passing that also underscores the commercialization that the game is turning into a cash cow, with a huge fan-following as well. The flip side of the matter is that the IPL has turned into a brand. This scenario should, however, not be allowed to turn this marquee event into the one obfuscating the real essence of the sport given that for the IPL to last long with credibility, what matters most is the 'striking balance' between the pecuniary gains and the sports spirit which helps keep the ball of cricket enthusiasts' 'craze rolling!

Azhar A Khan | Rampur

After two men jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber on December 13 and released smoke from canisters, the opposition has been disrupting House proceedings demanding a statement from the government on the security breach.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

DOES NOT HURT TO KNOW HINDI

Sir — DMK party is tasting its own medicine with Nitish Kumar, Bihar's Chief minister rebutting and attacking DMK MP for not knowing Hindi. Showing ignorance of not knowing the national language after being an MP for several years is rather strange. Nitish Kumar lost his cool when Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leader TR Baalu asked for a translation of his speech which was delivered in Hindi during the INDIA bloc leaders meeting. DMK supremo M K Stalin and TR Baalu were also present when Nitish Kumar was addressing the INDIA bloc leaders. We call our country Hindustan and Hindi is our national language and at least MPs must learn it.

C K Subramaniam | Chennai

CONFERRING ARJUN AWARD

Sir — The decision to confer the Arjun Award to Athletes like Satwik Sairaj,

Chirag Chetty, Mohammed Shami, Hockey player Krishan Bahadur and others is recognition of their talent. However, the most amazing and cynosure among the major awardees is the para player Sheetal Devi. At the same time, the conferring of the Dronacharya Award to the five coaches is a welcome move. Although these prestigious awards are been conferred every year, the point of glee is that young talent like Sheetal Devi is among those the recipients. Also, it's been a little late, but better than never for Chirag and Satwik to get this sports honour. This time it has been a privilege for the mix of young and experienced players to get the honour and prove their worthiness for the Arjun Award. From boxing to badminton to cricket to archery to wrestling, the ceremony will be an exciting one, and therefore as a sports lover, we can love and cheer everyone among athletes for their success and triumph in clinching such a prestigious honour from the government itself.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

ELECTION TIME IN INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

It is in the best interest of the region that politically stable governments get elected



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

It is an interesting and maybe, high decibel political noise time in India's neighbourhood, with almost all its neighbours and Bharat going for general elections in 2024. While domestic politics do not impact diplomatic relationships it is a different game when it comes to India and its neighbours. India is deeply engaged with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka on many fronts and all of them are going in for elections next year. All three of them also have to balance out their relations with China, vis a vis India, to maintain stability in their domestic economies, while not compromising on their long-term bilateral relationship with India. Bangladesh with which India shares an extremely intimate geographical embrace, is the first one to go into polls in the first two weeks of the new year. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who shares an excellent relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has ruled the country for fifteen years and is almost certain to return to power for the fourth time. Bangladesh is one of the most crucial allies India has in the region and both have serious stakes in maintaining a free open rules-based Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh geographically sits in a critical part of the Indian Ocean serving as an important port of transit. Its geographic location and proximity to many Indian northeastern states allow it to provide a crucial land route for trade, and human movement connecting the north-eastern part of India to South East Asia and beyond.



Prime ministers of both countries had a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit held in Delhi in September. In a press statement, both parties mentioned "the operationalization of the Agreement on the use of the Chattogram and Mongla Ports and commissioning of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline". They also expressed appreciation for the operationalization of the settlement of bilateral trade in INR and encouraged the business community on both sides to utilize the mechanism. They looked forward to beginning negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), covering trade in goods, services, and protecting and promoting investment. Last month Bangladesh and India inaugurated three critical fracture projects including "The Akhaura - Agartala Cross-Border Rail Link; Khulna - Mongla Port Rail Line; and Unit - II of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant where India promised to invest nearly \$2bn in Bangladesh." China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner and India comes a distant second. India is aware that a stable reliable democratic partner is India's best bulwark against an aggressive, money-pushing autocratic dragon, waiting to push any boundaries to press India more on its strategic borders. Meanwhile, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was delivering a foreign policy outlook for India in the new century to business leaders at an industry association event. He said "The nature of how trading rules have been implemented over the last two to three decades actually has raised a lot of question marks about its effectiveness and the credibility of the regime. A large part of my attention, the economic side of my attention, is very much on how we deal with the world economically, how we support our businesses, how we support our consumers, how we increase our employment". With no direct references to the ongoing and upcoming dance of democracies in India and its neighbourhood, it is essential to continue the bilateral dialogue on strategic interests even though it may get subdued under the shrill noise of campaigns. It may be worth mentioning that India's not-so-friendly neighbour Pakistan also faces a general election next year and it is in India's best interest that they too get a stable government.

(The writer is a political analyst, views are personal)

COP28: High on rhetoric, less on action

The COP 28 offers no credible action. On meeting the 'funding gap', save a token amount for Loss and Damage Fund (LaDF), there was nothing to show



UTTAM GUPTA

The just concluded 2023 United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP28), in Dubai, has pledged to "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science". The 'net zero' refers to a scenario wherein the emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere equals their removal. Historically 'indiscriminate' and 'excessive' use of fossil fuels – a generic term for major fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas – mostly by the developed countries led by the USA and EU bloc countries has overwhelmingly contributed to GHGs. According to Union Minister for Power and New and Renewable Energy RK Singh, "developed nations emit 22 tons per capita of GHGs against India's emission level being a mere 2.1 tons per capita". Yet, any commitment to action in this area wasn't even mentioned in the outcome documents of the previous COPs. Against this backdrop, the very mention of 'shifting away from fossil fuels' in the COP28 declaration and its endorsement by all the 198 participating countries is in itself a great accomplishment. But, the good news ends here. The mere inclusion of a reference to fossil fuels in the text has no meaning if it comes without credible commitments particularly by the major polluters in the past (read: developed countries) backed up by 'action plans' in different areas and financial and technological support to the developing countries for making energy transition to new and renewable sources of energy. None of these figures are in the outcome document. Even worse, we see an acceleration in investment activity by the USA and other major oil and gas-producing countries for expanding fossil fuel extraction. In fact, within two days of the end of COP 28, the summit president Sultan al Jaber, who won laurels for helping hammer out the agreement, has said "his own company (read: Abu Dhabi National Oil Company or ADNOC) will continue to invest in fossil fuels". According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the exploration and production plans of producer governments will



INDIA WHICH HAS PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN SHEPHERDING THE DELIBERATIONS AT COP 28 COULDN'T HAVE GOADED THE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES INTO UNDERTAKING REDUCTION COMMITMENTS ON OIL AND GAS

add 69 per cent more output than what is consistent with even a less-ambitious 2 degrees C warming goal. India which has played a pivotal role in shepherding the deliberations at COP 28 couldn't have goaded the developed countries into undertaking reduction commitments on oil and gas. This is because it depends overwhelmingly on imports 85 per cent in the case of crude oil and 50 per cent in gas for meeting its consumption requirements and most of it is sourced from the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) besides the USA. If the latter cut their production drastically to meet climate goals, this would adversely affect the former by reducing global supply and increasing prices. According to a briefing by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), during CY 2022, countries provided a record US\$1.3 trillion in subsidies to support their proliferating fossil fuel production and consumption systems. Sans the withdrawal of these subsidies, it won't be possible to phase out these fuels. COP 28 declaration calls for "phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that do not address energy poverty or just transitions". This formulation is vague and susceptible to multiple interpretations. For instance, the industry could justify the continuation of fossil fuel subsidies in the name of addressing energy poverty or even supporting the transition to 'renewable energy citing inadequate storage capacity which is essential for sustainable supply from the latter. The COP28 text calls for "accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power" while not referring to oil and gas. The developed countries are being 'too clever by half'. They are already on their way to abandoning coal. During CY 2023, consumption of coal in the USA and EU bloc coun-

tries is expected to fall by 20 percent each whereas in India and China, it will increase by 8 percent and 5 percent respectively. India and China together with Indonesia account for 70 percent of global coal demand. Given the above, it suits the developed countries to go for accelerating phase-down of coal. In contrast, India depends on the use of coal for around 75 per cent of the total power generation. According to Singh, even after massive expansion in renewable source-based capacity (solar, wind etc), the share of coal-fired capacity will remain substantial at about 33 percent by 2030. This includes 78-80 GW (gigawatts) of additional charcoal–the capacity to be added during this period. This new capacity addition would have been in jeopardy if Indian negotiators hadn't forced the deletion of an earlier draft text that talked about 'limiting new coal plants'. All along, India has exhorted developed countries to follow the principle of 'common but differentiated' responsibilities. Put simply, it wants them to take the lead in achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 saying historically they have been the biggest polluters even as the contribution of developing countries is minimal. This is nowhere reflected in the outcome document of COP 28. The document talks of tripling global renewable energy and doubling energy efficiency improvements in sync with the ambition to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Centigrade above pre-industrial levels threshold. But, it doesn't spell out measures to achieve this. The poor and developing countries neither have access to technologies needed for making the transition nor there is any sign of financing commitments by developed countries. According to a UN report, about US\$ 4.3 trillion per year needs to be invested in clean energy till 2030, increasing thereafter to US\$

5 trillion a year till 2050, to be able to reach net zero emissions by 2050. Of this, developing countries, excluding China, would need at least US\$2.4 trillion a year. The offering from rich states to poor nations is minuscule when compared to these mammoth requirements. The COP 28 also gave a call to enhance adaptation action and support under the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA). Under adaptation programs, countries are required to respond to anticipated climate change impacts in a multitude of areas such as erecting buildings and infrastructure that is 'safer' and more 'sustainable'; replanting forests and restoring damaged ecosystems; diversifying crops to enable farmers to better able to adapt to changing climates and so on. Here also, the outcome was satisfactory. The adaptation funding gap has been estimated at US\$ 215 – 387 billion annually up to 2030. But, there was no commitment to it. The outcome document did not say how the adaptation finance can be scaled up and how the rich countries can be held to their obligations. The summit adopted an agreement for a new Loss and Damage Fund (LaDF). This fund will provide financial assistance to vulnerable countries, including India, that are already experiencing the devastating impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events etc. The fund will be operational by 2024 with an initial corpus of over US\$400 million. To conclude, COP 28 was big on rhetoric but little in terms of 'credible' action. On meeting the 'funding gap', sans a token amount for LaDF, there was nothing to show. As for India, while pursuing its clean energy transition goal, it was able to retain the flexibility to decide the 'energy mix' suited to its needs – including the use of coal for meeting power generation requirements.

(The writer is a policy analyst, views are personal)

Empowering India's farmers through the neo-cooperatives

India's visionary cooperative economic framework catalyses inclusive development, global integration, and social prosperity

On Kisan Diwas today, there is a critical need for a large-scale communication initiative to educate and empower marginalized farmers in rural areas about the innovative Cooperative Economic Framework. This framework, conceptualized by Team India, aims to revive the Cooperative organization in Amrit Kaal and enable farmers to benefit from the vision of "Sahkar se Samridhi" set by the newly formed Ministry of Cooperation. The Cooperative Economic Framework marks a significant shift, renewing the Social Contract between the government, the masses, and other stakeholders. With 290 million Cooperative Members in India, this sector is poised to



BINOD ANAND

embrace a comprehensive vision of inclusive development, challenging traditional economic forecasts. The transformation involves reimagining Primary Agriculture Cooperative/Credit Society (PACS) as Multipurpose entities, facilitating inclusive business ventures at the grassroots level. This paradigm shift not only catalyses indifferent growth and job creation but also empowers farmers with unprecedented bargaining power. A monumental initiative within this framework is the World's Largest Decentralized Grain Storage Plan in the Cooperative sector. This plan, involving the creation of warehouses, custom hiring centres, and primary processing units

at the PACS level, aims to leverage technology like Blockchain to issue E-tokenized warehouse receipts. This innovation has the potential to revolutionize the entire food grain value chain, reducing wastage and transportation costs while ensuring fair prices for farmers. Cooperatives are now enabling farmers to operate Retail Petrol/Diesel outlets, LPG Distributorships, and Jan Aushadhi Kendra, opening avenues for income generation and contributing significantly to GDP. The newly formed National Multi-State Cooperative Export Society is also playing a crucial role, with 2,625 PACS/cooperative societies from 22 States and UTs already members. This cooperative is actively exporting rice and sugar to multiple

countries, with profits returning to farmers through dividends. Farmers in rural India need not rely on moneylenders for microloans, thanks to the availability of credit through various institutions competing to support farming communities. The Cooperative Economic Framework, with its emphasis on regenerative agriculture and improved access to credit, is yielding positive results for farmers. As the world grapples with challenges and turns away from values of trust and solidarity, India's Cooperative economy stands out as a potential solution. The newly formed World Cooperative Economic Forum, led by Dileep Sanghani, aims to democratize the global value chain, creating Cooperative

Exchanges and Economic Zones. This forum, focused on exports and employment, could significantly impact the socio-economic profile of marginalized populations worldwide. The hope is that by 2024, the United Nations will recognise India's PACS to APEX model as a neo-cooperative Framework, integrating Indian cooperatives with global counterparts. The use of modern technology like Blockchain and E-trading could make this integration a powerful tool for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in creating social and solidarity frugality and reducing poverty. Introducing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) through Cooperatives

in remote areas enhances productivity, connectivity, and knowledge sharing. Cooperatives can play a crucial role in the profitable and social development of emerging markets, and their competitiveness needs strengthening through legal, non-supervisory, and executive support, access to finance, and human capital development. The potential transformation of PACS into Mini Mandis opens new marketing opportunities, fostering rural economic growth. The Cooperative Economic framework aims to create a network of PACS-led Cooperative Economic Zones, promoting decentralized production and a centralized processed Indian Agri-Export market. This approach could also spur the

manufacturing of Drones and other profitable farm enterprises within these zones. On this Kisan Diwas, it's time to celebrate the vision of "Sahkar se Samridhi" that has made this Cooperative movement possible. The contributions of visionaries like the Late Tribhuvan Das Patel and Sardar Patel, who laid the foundation, are integral to the realization of this modernized Gram Swarajya powered by blockchain technology. As India sets a new tune for a Social and Solidarity economy, it is hoped that the ripple effect reaches the global North and resonates with modern Development economists.

(The writer is secretary general CNRI and member PM-MSP Committee; views are personal)

14 die in Prague university shooting

Three foreign nationals among wounded

AP ■ PRAGUE

Three foreign nationals were among the 25 people wounded when a student opened fire at a university in the Czech capital, Prague, shooting dead 14 people before killing himself, authorities said Friday. It was the worst mass shooting in Czech history. Interior Minister Vít Rakusan said police in Prague worked overnight and all the 14 who died in Thursday's attack have been identified. The Institute of Music Sciences confirmed that its head, Lenka Hlavkova, was among the dead.

The Czech Foreign Ministry confirmed that three of those wounded were foreigners — two from United Arab Emirates and one from the Netherlands. The bloodshed took place at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, where the 24-year-old shooter was a student, Prague Police Chief Martin Vondrasek said. Petr



Mourners hug outside the headquarters of Charles University after a mass shooting in Prague, Czech Republic, Friday.

AP/PTI

Matejcek, the director of the police regional headquarters in Prague said the gunman killed himself on the balcony of the university building when police officers approached him. The gunman's name has not been released.

Authorities warned that

the death toll could rise. Early on Friday, with the scene of the shooting still sealed off by the police, people could be seen lighting candles to mourn the victims at an impromptu vigil by the university headquarters.

Police said on Friday they have boosted security at

schools and other “soft targets” — usually public facilities that are difficult to secure — in a preventive measure. University rectors also said they would work with police experts on more preventive measures to increase security around campus.

Police have released no details about the dead and wounded or a possible motive for the shooting at the building. Rakusan said on Thursday that investigators didn't suspect a link to any extremist ideology or groups. Officials said they believed the gunman acted alone.

Vondrasek, the police chief, said they believe the man killed his father earlier on Thursday in his hometown of Hostoun, just west of Prague, and that he had also been planning to kill himself. He also said the gunman was suspected of killing a man and his 2-month-old daughter on December 15, in

Prague. Police said the shooter had legally owned several guns and that he was heavily armed during the attack.

Leaders from many countries, including the United States, and the UN Secretary-General conveyed their condolences. The Czech government declared Saturday a national day of mourning to honour the victims.

Previously, the nation's worst mass shooting was in 2015, when a gunman opened fire in the southeastern town of Uhersky Brod, killing eight before fatally shooting himself.

The building where the shooting took place is located near the Vltava River in Jan Palach Square, a busy tourist area in Prague's Old Town. It is just a few minutes' walk from the picturesque Old Town Square, a major tourist attraction where a popular Christmas market attracts thousands of visitors.

Gaza death toll surpasses 20k

AP ■ RAFAH (GAZA STRIP)

The Palestinian death toll in Gaza surpassed 20,000, health officials said Friday, the latest indication of the staggering cost of the war as Israel expanded its ground offensive and ordered tens of thousands more people to leave their homes. The deaths, amounting to nearly 1 per cent of the territory's pre-war population, are just one measure of the devastation wrought by the conflict that over 11 weeks has displaced nearly 85 per cent of Gaza's people and levelled wide swaths of the tiny coastal enclave.

More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving, according to a report Thursday from the United Nations and other agencies describing the crisis caused by Israel's bombardment and siege on the territory in response to Hamas' October 7 attack.

Despite the emergency, a UN Security Council vote on aid deliveries and terms for a cease-fire was delayed again late Thursday, after days of high-level negotiations.

The United States, which has veto power, has pushed back against calls for an immediate cease-fire and giving the UN sole responsibility for inspecting aid deliveries. Israel, citing security grounds, insists it needs to be able to screen goods entering Gaza.

The US said it would back a revised resolution that calls for “creating the conditions” for a cease-fire, rather than an immediate end to fighting. Other countries support a stronger text and said diplomats would need to consult their governments before a vote, which is expected later Friday.

Martin Griffiths, the UN humanitarian affairs chief, lamented the world's inaction.

“That such a brutal conflict has been allowed to continue



Palestinians stand around a car targeted in an Israeli airstrike on a car in Rafah, Gaza Strip on Friday.

AP/PTI

and for this long — despite the widespread condemnation, the physical and mental toll and the massive destruction — is an indelible stain on our collective conscience,” he wrote in a post on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter.

Israel, shielded by the United States, has resisted international pressure to scale back its offensive and has said it would press on until Hamas, the militant group that has ruled Gaza for 16 years, has been destroyed.

The military has said that months of fighting lie ahead in southern Gaza, an area packed with the vast majority of the enclave's 2.3 million people, many of whom were ordered to flee combat in the north in earlier stages of the war.

Since then, evacuation orders have pushed displaced civilians into ever-smaller areas of the south as troops focus on the city of Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest. The military said late Thursday that it is sending more ground forces, including combat engineers, to Khan Younis to target Hamas militants above ground and in tunnels.

On Friday, the military ordered tens of thousands of residents to leave their homes in Burej, an urban refugee camp, and surrounding communities, within the territory that Israel originally told people to flee to.

The air and ground campaign also continued in the north, even as Israel says it is in the final stages of clearing out Hamas militants there.

Mustafa Abu Taha, a Palestinian farm worker, said ground battles and air strikes have continued in his hard-hit Gaza City neighbourhood of Shijaiyah, adding that many areas have become inaccessible because of massive destruction from air strikes.

“They are hitting anything moving,” he said of Israeli forces.

In the city of Rafah, on the border with Egypt, an air strike on a house killed six people, including an infant, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies at a hospital. Rafah is one of the few places in Gaza not under evacuation orders, but has been targeted in Israeli strikes almost every day.

Turkiye detains 304 with suspected links to ISIS

Ankara (AP): Turkish security forces have rounded up 304 people suspected of links to the Islamic State extremist group in simultaneous raids across Turkiye, the interior minister said on Friday.

Ali Yerlikaya said the suspects were detained in 32 provinces but the majority of them were in Turkiye's three largest cities, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir.

The operation, code-named “Heroes-34,” was conducted jointly by the police intelligence and counter-terrorism squads, Yerlikaya said on the X social media platform.

There was no information on the suspects' nationalities.

The militant group has carried out a string of deadly attacks in Turkiye, including a shooting at an Istanbul night club on January 1, 2017, which killed 39 people during New Year celebrations. It was not clear if the latest operation was part of a security sweep leading up to the New Year festivities. “There will be no respite for the terrorists for the sake of the peace, unity and solidarity of our beloved nation,” Yerlikaya said. “With our security force's superior efforts, our fight will continue uninterrupted.”

His ministry posted a video on X showing images of the raids, including anti-terrorism police breaking down a door, handcuffing suspects and leading them into police vehicles.

France completes military withdrawal from Niger

Abuja (AP): France on Friday completed the withdrawal of its troops after they were asked to leave Niger by the country's new junta, ending years of on-the-ground military support and raising concerns from analysts about a gap in the fight against jihadi violence across the Sahel region of Africa.

The last French military aircraft and troops departed Niger by the December 22 deadline set by the junta which severed ties with Paris after the coup in July, the French Army General Staff told The Associated Press by email.

France already announced this week that it would close

its diplomatic mission in Niger for “an indefinite period.” However, the country would continue to be involved in the Sahel — the vast expanse south of the Sahara Desert which has been a hot spot for violent extremism — although differently, President Emmanuel Macron said Thursday during a visit to a base in Jordan.

“I decided on some important reconfigurations,” Macron said.

“We will continue to protect our interests over there but our armies won't be as present permanently, will be less stationary and also less exposed,” he said. The departure of the French troops will

“leave Niger and the entire Sahel worse off” in terms of overall counterterrorism efforts as Niger was seen as the last remaining Western partner in the decade-long fight against jihadi groups in the region, said Ryan Cummings, director of Africa-focused security consulting company Signal Risk.

Some 1,500 French troops were training and supporting the local military in Niger, which had been envisioned as the base for counterterrorism operations in the region after anti-French sentiment grew in Mali and Burkina Faso, both run by juntas that have also forced French troops out.

But after deposing Niger's

democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum, the nation's junta led by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani severed military relations with France and other European countries. Instead, he sought defense cooperation with Russia, whose private mercenary Wagner Group is already active in parts of Africa but faces an uncertain future there following the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

The withdrawal of foreign military missions is already affecting security in Niger, where the number of attacks has surged, according to Oluwole Ojewale with the Dakar-based Institute for Security Studies.



Activists dressed in national costume act in a Christmas performance a few days before Christmas at a city central railway station in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Thursday.

AP/PTI

Pacific storm dumps heavy rains in California's coastal cities

Santa Barbara (AP): Torrential rain flooded homes and streets in Southern California's coastal cities Thursday, stranding some drivers in typically idyllic Santa Barbara and compounding holiday travel headaches.

The downpours targeted Ventura and Santa Barbara counties northwest of Los Angeles County overnight, swamping areas in the cities of Port Hueneme, Oxnard and Santa Barbara, where a police detective carried a woman on his back after the SUV she was riding in got stuck in knee-deep floodwaters.

Rainfall rates exceeding 3 inches (7.6 centimeters) an hour unleashed flash flooding about 1:30 a.m. in Ventura County, the National Weather Service said. Later in the morning, streets began filling with water in parts of Santa Barbara as the storm delivered another deluge. By midday, the rain and wind had eased and residents ventured outside to look at the damage.

Sven Dybdahl, owner of olive oil and vinegar store Viva Oliva in downtown Santa Barbara, said he had trouble finding dry routes to work

Thursday morning, but most of the heavy rains and flooding had receded shortly before 11 a.m. He said he was grateful that the weather is only expected to be an issue for a few days at the tail end of the holiday shopping season, otherwise he'd be worried about how the rains would affect his store's bottom line.

“It will have an impact but thankfully it's happening quite late,” he said. The city of Port Hueneme issued evacuation orders for residences on four streets and warned of potential evacuations on four other

streets.

About 60 houses were affected by the orders, all in a senior citizen community, said Firefighter Andy VanSciver, a Ventura County fire spokesperson. An evacuation center was set up at a college gymnasium. Three people from the senior community were taken to hospitals out of an abundance of caution, and there were multiple rescues of drivers from flooded vehicles, he said.

The city of Oxnard said in a social media post that many streets and intersections were heavily impacted.

UK family visa salary threshold hike to be in 'incremental stages'

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK's proposed hike in the minimum annual salary threshold for British citizens and permanent residents to be eligible to sponsor a spouse or partner on a Family Visa will take place in “incremental stages”, the government has told Parliament. The update came on Thursday in reply to a written parliamentary question in the House of Lords, stating that the threshold will initially rise to GBP 29,000 in early 2024 from the current level of GBP 18,600 and then be followed by two further increases. The move has been branded a “rowing back” by the Opposition after Home Secretary James Cleverly had told the Commons earlier this month that the threshold will jump to GBP 38,700, in line with the minimum salary requirement for the Skilled Worker visa route. Latest Home Office documents now say that while the intention remains to align both thresholds, it will be done in stages over time.

“The MIR (Minimum Income Requirement) will be increased in incremental stages to give predictability,” said Home Office Minister Lord Andrew Sharpe in his Lords statement.

“In Spring 2024, we will raise the threshold to GBP 29,000, that is the 25th percentile of earnings for jobs which are eligible for Skilled Worker visas, moving to the 40th percentile (currently GBP 34,500) and finally the 50th percentile (currently GBP 38,700 and the level at which the general skilled worker threshold is set) in the final stage of implementation,” he said.

He reiterated Cleverly's stance that the MIR had not been increased for over a decade and therefore no longer reflected the level of income required by a family to ensure they are self-sufficient and do not need to rely on public funds.

“Family life must not be established here at the taxpayer's expense and family migrants must be able to integrate if they are to play a full part in British life... It is intended that this change will contribute to reducing net migration when it is introduced in spring 2024,” he added. Labour's shadow home secretary Yvette Cooper, who had warned of rushed weddings between now and spring 2024 by those desperate to circumvent the new rules, accused the government of failing to properly assess the impact of the changes.

Palestinians prepare for somber Xmas amid war

AP ■ NEW YORK

It's normally a moment of pure joy for the Rev. Khader Khalilia: the excitement, the giggles, the kisses, as his young daughters — in their Christmas pajamas — open their gifts. But this year, just the thought of it fills Khalilia with guilt.

“I'm struggling,” said the Palestinian American pastor of Redeemer-St. John's Lutheran Church in New York. “How can I do it while the Palestinian children are suffering, have no shelter or a place to lay their heads?”

Thousands of miles away, near Jesus' biblical birthplace of Bethlehem, Suzan Sahori has been working with artisans to bring olive wood Christmas ornaments into homes in Australia, Europe and North America. But Sahori is in no mood for festivities: “We're broken, looking at all these children, all this killing.”

In a traditional season of merriment, many Palestinian Christians — in Bethlehem and beyond — are gripped with helplessness, pain and worry amid the Israel-Hamas war. Some are mourning, lobbying for the war to end, scrambling to get relatives to safety or seeking comfort in the Christmas message of hope.

In the occupied West Bank, Sahori, executive director of Bethlehem Fair Trade Artisans, an organization sell-

ing crafts, will pray for peace and justice. She's grateful she's safe — but wonders if that could change. She's also angry. “The joy in my heart is stolen,” she said. “I'm saying, God, how are you allowing all these children to die? ... I'm mad at God; I hope He forgives me.”

In better times, she finds the Christmas spirit in the Bethlehem area unmatched: It's in songs cascading into streets bedecked with lights, markets displaying decorations, and the enthusiasm of children, families and tourists snapping photos with towering Christmas trees.

Now, it's all quieter, somber. Tree lighting ceremonies she attended last year have been scrapped. The heads of churches in Jerusalem have urged congregations to forgo “any unnecessarily festive activities.” They encouraged priests and the faithful to focus on Christmas' spiritual meaning and called for “fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land.”

Thousands of Palestinians have been killed in Israel's ongoing offensive in Gaza, launched after Hamas' October 7 killings and hostage-taking in Israel.

Days before Christmas, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said two Christian women at a church compound in Gaza were killed by Israeli

sniper fire. The Israeli military said troops were targeting Hamas militants in the area; it said it was investigating the incident and takes such reports very seriously.

Khalilia is striving to comfort the distraught amid his distress.

“It's hard to watch. It's hard to do your job,” he said. “People are looking for us to walk with them in their suffering.” He worries about family in the West Bank; a brother lost his income working for a hotel as travel cancellations pummeled tourism.

Khalilia, who's from a town near Bethlehem, said his daughters will likely get fewer presents, with the savings going toward helping children in Gaza. Many in the US, he said, don't realize that Palestinian Christians exist — some ask if he converted from Islam or Judaism.

He tells them, “When you sing O Little Town of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, remember that Jesus was born in my hometown.”

There are 50,000 Christian Palestinians estimated to reside in the West Bank and Jerusalem, according to the US State Department's international religious freedom report for 2022. Approximately 1,300 Christians lived in Gaza, it said. Some Christians are also citizens of Israel. Many Palestinian Christians live in diaspora communities.

S'pore reported 965 COVID-19 cases last week

Singapore (PTI): The number of fresh COVID-19 cases in Singapore jumped to 965 in the past week, up from 763 the previous week. The number of patients admitted to intensive care units (ICU) went up from 23 to 32 in the same period. These are the highest numbers of new weekly hospitalisation and ICU admission for COVID-19 patients in 2023, TODAY newspaper reported on Thursday.

Most COVID-19 patients here are infected by JN.1, a sub-lineage of the coronavirus Omicron subvariant BA.2.86. With the JN.1 variant, winter conditions in the northern hemisphere and more people choosing not to wear masks have fueled the increase in COVID-19 cases, TODAY, citing experts, reported.

Based on the available international and domestic data, there is no clear indication now that BA.2.86 or JN.1 are more transmissible or cause more severe disease than other circulating variants, according to the Ministry of Health (MOH). The estimated number of COVID-19 cases from December 10 to 16 was also the highest recorded for the year, with 58,300 cases for epi-week 50, up from the previous record of 56,043 cases in the preceding week. The MOH's published figures show that the seven-day moving average estimated daily number of cases has been dropping in recent days.

APPENDIX IV-A Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Property E-Auction Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8(6) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002. Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower(s) and Guarantor(s) that the below described Immovable Property mortgaged to Indiabulls Housing Finance Ltd. [CIN: L65922DL2005PLC136029] ("Secured Creditor"), the physical possession of which has been taken by the Authorised Officer of the Secured Creditor, will be sold on "as is where is", "as is what is" and "whatever there is" basis on 25.01.2024 from 02.00 P.M. to 04.00 P.M., for recovery of Rs. 33,73,620/- (Rupees Thirty Three Lakh Seventy Three Thousand Six Hundred Twenty only) pending towards Loan Account No. HHLVA500447934, by way of outstanding principal, arrears (including accrued late charges) and interest till 18.12.2023 with applicable future interest in terms of the Loan Agreement and other related loan document(s) w.e.f. 19.12.2023 along with legal expenses and other charges due to the Secured Creditor from PRASAD ALIAS PRASAD P.K. and RENUJIPRASAD. The Reserve Price of the Immovable Property will be Rs. 21,00,000/- (Rupees Twenty One Lakh only) and the Earnest Money Deposit ("EMD") will be Rs. 2,10,000/- (Rupees Two Lakh Ten Thousand only) i.e. equivalent to 10% of the Reserve Price.	
DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY FLAT NO. 1003 MEASURING 1549 SQUARE FEET ON 10TH FLOOR, TOWER - 8 IN THE PROJECT KNOWN AS ANSAL GREEN ESCAPE SITUATED IN SECTOR 35, SONIPAT - 131001, HARYANA. For detailed terms and conditions of the sale, please refer to the link provided on the website of the Secured Creditor i.e. www.indiabullshomeloans.com. For bidding, log on to www.auctionfocus.in	
Date : 19.12.2023 Place : SONIPAT	Sd/- Authorized officer Indiabulls Housing Finance Limited
APPENDIX IV-A Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Property E-Auction Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8(6) and Rule 9(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002. Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower(s) and Guarantor(s) that the below described Immovable Property mortgaged to Indiabulls Housing Finance Ltd. [CIN: L65922DL2005PLC136029] ("Secured Creditor"), the physical possession of which has been taken by the Authorised Officer of the Secured Creditor, will be sold on "as is where is", "as is what is" and "whatever there is" basis on 08.01.2024 from 02.00 P.M. to 04.00 P.M., for recovery of Rs. 16,37,497/- (Rupees Sixteen Lakh Thirty Seven Thousand Four Hundred Ninety Seven only) pending towards the Loan Account No. HHLDCP00356305, by way of outstanding principal, arrears (including accrued late charges) and interest till 18.12.2023 with applicable future interest in terms of the Loan Agreement and other related loan document(s) w.e.f. 19.12.2023 along with legal expenses and other charges due to the Secured Creditor from SHEKHAR KUMAR SINGH and BHOLA SINGH. The Reserve Price of the Immovable Property will be Rs. 10,00,000/- (Rupees Ten Lakh only) and the Earnest Money Deposit ("EMD") will be Rs. 1,00,000/- (Rupees One Lakh only) i.e. equivalent to 10% of the Reserve Price.	
DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY PROPERTY BEARING NO - RZ-23, AREA MEASURING 40 SQ. YDS. I. E., 33.45 SQ. MTRS., FF (BACK SIDE / NORTHERN SIDE UNIT), KHASRA NO. 4, SITUATED AT REVENUE ESTATE OF VILLAGE BINDAPUR, IN THE COLONY KNOWN AS SOUTH-EXTENSION - II, UTTAM NAGAR, NEW DELHI - 110059. EAST : PLOT NO. 22A WEST : PLOT NO. 23A NORTH : PASSAGE 08 FT. SOUTH : OTHER UNIT	
For detailed terms and conditions of the sale, please refer to the link provided on the website of the Secured Creditor i.e. www.indiabullshomeloans.com. For bidding, log on to www.auctionfocus.in	
Date : 19.12.2023 Place : NEW DELHI	Sd/- Authorized officer Indiabulls Housing Finance Limited

Cipher case: SC nod to Imran, Qureshi's bail

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

In a relief to jailed former prime minister Imran Khan ahead of elections, Pakistan's Supreme Court on Friday approved his and close aide Shah Mahmood Qureshi's bail in the cipher case related to the alleged leakage of state secrets.

The apex court also directed the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leaders to submit surety bonds worth Rs 1 million each, the Dawn newspaper reported. The order was issued by a three-member bench headed by Justice Sardar Tariq Masood and comprising Justices Athar Minallah and Syed Mansoor Ali Shah on a set of PTI petitions ahead of the February 8 general elections.

The case is based on the allegation that a diplomatic document sent by the Pakistan embassy in March last year was mishandled by Khan, 71, and Qureshi, 67, and they violated the secrecy laws of the country.

However, Khan will remain in jail as he is convicted in the Toshakhana corruption case about the concealment of details of state gifts. During Friday's hearing, Justice Masood observed that the statement of a witness is taken on oath, but Azam Khan's - ex-principal secretary of former premier Khan who is a key witness in the case - statement was taken without one, the Express Tribune newspaper said.

He then inquired if an investigation was conducted regarding Azam's prolonged disappearance. Referring to the National Security Council's (NSC) meeting held over the matter during Shehbaz Sharif's tenure as premier, Justice Masood inquired why the then-premier claimed that the cypher document was missing if during the meeting it was suggested that a demarche should be issued.

"Mashallah, the Islamabad High Court has already given a decision on the matter. The only job that appears to be remaining is providing [the accused] a noose" Justice Masood remarked, expressing his displeasure with the proceedings in the lower court. The acting chief justice then wondered how two NSC meetings were held on the issue if the cypher was missing.



During the court proceedings, the top court also heard the petition against Khan and Qureshi's October 23 indictment. At the outset of the hearing, Justice Masood remarked that the indictment that was challenged was already nullified by the Islamabad High Court (IHC) on November 21.

As a result, Khan and Qureshi's October 23 indictments in the case also stood null and void, and the trial was conducted again. Justice Masood said that the fresh indictment will not be affected by the previous proceedings that were declared invalid by the IHC. At this, Khan's counsel Hamid Khan argued that the trial was taking place on the previous chargesheet.

Justice Masood noted that the petition against the old chargesheet has become infructuous. "If you have an objection to the fresh indictment then challenge it in the high court," the judge told the lawyer.

To this, Hamid requested the court to wait for the IHC's decision against the in-camera trial in the cipher case.

Khan's other counsel Barrister Salman Safdar said that Hamid had made amendments to his petitions, requesting the court to take it as a fresh one.

The court then adjourned the hearing on the plea against indictment and took up the bail petitions. Speaking to the media following the SC verdict, PTI lawyer Barrister Salman Safdar said the cipher case has reached its conclusion. He said the federal government failed to prove that the cipher case is a serious offence that carries a maximum penalty of death sen-

tence or life imprisonment. Safdar said when nothing was found in other cases against the PTI leaders then the government used the cipher case against them for "political victimisation".

"Supreme Court has made some observations [regarding the cipher case] which will make it difficult for the government to defend [the case] in the trial court," he added. "The cipher case has become zero, nothing is left in this now," he said. The Federal Investigation Agency's charge sheet alleges the document was never returned by Khan. The PTI has long held that the document contained a threat from the United States to oust Khan as prime minister.

The Special Court (Official Secrets Act) had begun the cipher trial afresh last week at the Adiala district jail after Khan and Qureshi were indicted for a second time in the case on December 13. Khan and Qureshi, who is also behind bars, were first indicted in the case on October 23. Both had pleaded not guilty. The trial was being held at the Adiala Jail and four witnesses had already recorded their statements when the Islamabad High Court termed the government's notification for a jail trial "erroneous" and scrapped the entire proceedings.

The IHC had endorsed Khan's indictment, disposing of his plea against the same, but had also instructed the special court judge to ensure a "fair trial". Khan was ousted through a vote of no-confidence in April 2022. More than 150 cases have been registered against him since his ouster from power.

Will address reservations on level playing field: SC

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party on Friday said that the election commission has assured that it would address its concerns regarding a lack of a level playing field in the February 8 general election. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) lawyer Shoaib Shaheen made the remarks after a party delegation met with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) here following the directives issued by the Supreme Court earlier in the day.

A three-member bench of the Supreme Court instructed the top election body to address the concerns of jailed former prime minister Khan's party about the lack of a level playing field in the upcoming elections. The bench, comprising Justice Sardar Tariq Masood,

FEBRUARY 8 ELECTIONS IN PAK

Justice Athar Minallah and Justice Syed Mansoor Ali, directed the PTI to submit its complaint to the ECP at 3 pm on Friday and ordered the attorney general to facilitate the two sides to address the issue. It also asked the top election body to examine thoroughly and address all concerns raised by the PTI. The party had alleged that its top leadership was in jail and its candidates were being harassed, making it difficult for candidates to file their nomination papers for the elections being held on February 8, 2024.

Speaking to the media after meeting with the ECP, PTI lawyer Shaheen said, "They (ECP officials) have promised that the grievances will be addressed," the Dawn newspa-

per reported. Expressing hope that the commission would play its role in ensuring free and fair elections, Shaheen said it assured the party that all the complaints that had been raised would be resolved.

Separately, the ECP also issued instructions to the Islamabad chief commissioner, Islamabad and Sindh police chiefs and all four chief secretaries and provincial election commissioners regarding candidates' nomination papers, according to the report. The letters said that various complaints were received about electoral candidates facing difficulties obtaining and submitting nomination papers, with snatching of documents also reported. The ECP took "serious notice" of the matter and

Imran Khan's nomination papers submitted

PTI ■ LAHORE

Disqualified and jailed former prime minister Imran Khan on Friday had his nomination papers submitted at Mianwali, his home constituency in Punjab province, for the February 8 general elections.

Khan, the 71-year-old founder of the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was convicted in what is known as the Toshakhana corruption case on August 5 this year, a charge that also disqualified him from contesting any elections for five years. Khan filed a plea in the Islamabad High Court, which turned it down, prompting his party to move the Supreme Court.

The cricketer-turned-politician did get a bail from the apex court but he remains in jail on account of his arrest in two other cases.

On Friday, PTI leader Umar Bodla appeared on behalf of the former prime minister and submitted Khan's nomination papers for the National Assembly's NA-89 constituency, according to Geo News. According to the revised poll schedule announced by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the prospective candidates could submit their nomination papers by Sunday. The scrutiny of nomination papers will be held from December 24 to 30. "Khan's legal team says that the

district court, which sent Khan to jail and had him disqualified, gave a baseless judgment," Geo News added.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's election commission on Friday extended the deadline for filing nomination papers for the February 8 general elections by two days till Sunday after major political parties sought more time to complete the time-consuming exercise.

According to the schedule issued by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), potential candidates are required to file nomination papers from December 20 to 22. The top election body began accepting nomination papers from prospective candidates on Wednesday. The deadline for the filing of papers was set to expire at 4:30 pm on Friday. However, in a press release on Friday morning, the electoral watchdog announced that nomination papers can now be filed till Dec 24 (Sunday). It said the decision was taken in response to requests from political parties and to facilitate the candidacy process.

"Political parties must submit priority lists for specific seats to returning officers within the stipulated time," it said. With little than over a month left for polls, the electoral watchdog has entered election mode. Last week, the commission issued the elec-

tion schedule, putting an end to uncertainty surrounding the exercise.

Returning officers will examine the nomination papers from December 25 to 30, as specified in the schedule. The statement underscored that "all activities as listed in the election schedule released on December 15 will be held as planned". The electoral watchdog also confirmed that the amended schedule was available on the ECP website. The statement further emphasises that the changes did not affect the poll date and that elections would be held on February 8.

In Lahore, PML-N Chief Organiser Maryam Nawaz Sharif reportedly received nomination papers. She is expected to contest elections from a national or provincial assembly constituency from Lahore and submit nomination papers on Friday.

After fresh delimitation, the National Assembly would consist of 336 seats, including 266 general seats, 60 seats reserved for women, and 10 for non-Muslims. Those contesting for the National Assembly would have to submit Rs 30,000 with nomination documents, while the fee for a provincial assembly is Rs 20,000. A candidate is legally allowed to submit a maximum of five nomination papers.

Six labourers killed in attack in Pak northwest



Bodies of labourers killed in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

PTI

PTI ■ PESHWAR

Unidentified militants shot and killed at least six labourers who were working on the construction site of a police station in Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Friday, police said. The tragic incident took place in Wana, South Waziristan Tribal District.

The labourers were killed after being shot at point-blank range by unidentified militants while they were in their tents. As many as 6 labourers, who worked on the construction site of a police station were killed, police said. District Police Officer South Waziristan Farmanullah con-

firmed the incident and said that the police are investigating the killings from every angle. However, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack. Caretaker Chief Minister of the province Justice Retired Arshad Hussain has condemned the killing of six labourers and prayed for their eternal peace. In August, at least 11 labourers were killed and two injured in a terrorist attack in the same district. Recently, Pakistan has been hit by a wave of terrorist activities orchestrated by various terror outfits. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province was the most affected by terror attacks in November, recording 51 attacks with 54 deaths and 81 injuries.

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea may have started operating a light-water reactor at its main nuclear complex in a possible attempt to establish a new facility to produce bomb fuels, the UN atomic energy and outside experts said. If correct, the assessment would show that North Korea has taken a step to implement leader Kim Jong Un's repeated vows to build more nuclear weapons in response to what he described as intensifying US-led military threats.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has observed increased levels of activity at and near the light-water reactor at the Yongbyon nuclear complex and since mid-October, a strong water outflow from its cooling system, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said on Thursday. The observations were consistent with the commissioning of the reactor, Grossi said.

"The LWR, like any nuclear reactor, can produce plutonium in its irradiated fuel, which can be separated during reprocessing, so this is a cause for con-

North Korea's reported use of a nuclear complex reactor might be an attempt to make bomb fuels

cern," he said. "I repeat that the further development of (North Korea's) nuclear program, including the construction and operation of the LWR, is a violation of UN Security Council resolutions and is deeply regrettable."

The International Atomic Energy Agency has not had access to Yongbyon or other locations in North Korea since the country kicked out the agency's inspectors in 2009. The IAEA has said it uses satellite imagery and open source information to monitor developments in North Korea's nuclear program.

Observers say light-water reactors are best-suited for electricity generation, but North Korea could adapt one at Yongbyon to produce plutonium for weapons. Shin Jongwoo, a military expert at the Seoul-based Korea Defense and Security Forum, said the

Yongbyon complex isn't used for producing civilian energy so outsiders suspect the reported light-water reactor operation is related to the North's nuclear weapons program.

"North Korea has talked about bolstering its nuclear strength and building more tactical nuclear weapons to be mounted on ballistic missiles. So (the light-water reactor operation) is suspected to be activities" to extract plutonium, Shin said. Plutonium is one of the two key ingredients used to manufacture nuclear weapons, along with highly enriched uranium. Yongbyon has long produced plutonium from its widely known 5-megawatt reactor, and the light-water reactor would be an additional plutonium-producing source. Yongbyon has an uranium-enrichment facility as well. Construction of the light-water reactor began a decade

ago. It is known to have a bigger capacity than the 5-megawatt reactor, meaning it could produce more bomb fuel, according to Lee Choon Geun, an honorary research fellow at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute.

Lee said plutonium is better suited for miniaturised nuclear warheads. Some experts say North Korea has been working to build warheads small enough to be placed on short-range missiles targeting South Korea. Grossi said recent observations indicate that the water discharge seen in October is warm, an indication the reactor has reached criticality. But without access to the facility, the IAEA cannot confirm the reactor is operating. In 2019, during a summit with then-President Donald Trump, Kim Jong Un offered to dismantle the

Yongbyon complex if he won extensive sanctions relief. But the Americans rejected Kim's offer because it would be a limited denuclearization step that would leave North Korea's already-built nuclear weapons and covert nuclear facilities intact. After his diplomacy with Trump fell apart, Kim has

focused on enlarging his nuclear arsenal and building more high-tech weapons in what experts believe is a bid to increase his leverage in future diplomacy with the US. In a key political meeting in December 2022, Kim ordered the "exponential" expansion of the North's nuclear arsenal.

FORM 6 INVITATION FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FOR TERIYAKI BUILDERS PRIVATE LIMITED OPERATING IN TRADING BUSINESS AT NEW DELHI (Under sub-regulation (1) of regulation 36A of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (Insolvency Resolution Process for Corporate Persons) Regulations, 2016)	
RELEVANT PARTICULARS	
1. Name of the corporate debtor along with PAN & CIN/ LLP No.	Teriyaki Builders Private Limited (Formerly Known as Oasis Suppliers Private Limited) PAN No.: AABCO4960P CIN : U51909DL2011PTC377749
2. Address of the registered office	Registered Office: 865, Ground Floor, Shop No. 2, Gali No. 7, Govindpur, Kalkaji New Delhi, South Delhi-110019 Earlier Registered Office : 740 GF, Janta Flat, GTB Enclave, Dilshad Garden, Delhi, North East Delhi-110093
3. URL of website	Not Applicable
4. Details of place where majority of fixed assets are located	No Fixed Assets of Corporate Debtor as per the provisional financial statements as on CIRP Commencement date i.e. 29th August, 2023
5. Installed capacity of main products/ services	NIL
6. Quantity and value of main products/ services sold in last financial year	NIL
7. Number of employees/ workmen	5
8. Further details including last available financial statements (with schedules) to provisional list	Details can be sought by email to Resolution Professional at cirp.teriyakibuilders@gmail.com
9. Eligibility for resolution applicants under section 25(2)(h) of the Code	Details can be sought by email to Resolution Professional at cirp.teriyakibuilders@gmail.com
10. Last date for receipt of expression of interest	08/01/2024
11. Date of issue of provisional list of prospective resolution applicants	15/01/2024
12. Last date for submission of objections to provisional list	20/01/2024
13. Date of issue of final list of prospective resolution applicants	29/01/2024
14. Date of issue of information memorandum, evaluation matrix and request for resolution plans to prospective resolution applicants	03/02/2024
15. Last date for submission of resolution plans	04/03/2024
16. Process email id to submit Expression of interest	cirp.teriyakibuilders@gmail.com
Note: 1. This Form G is an extension of the original Form G published in The Pioneer (English Edition) and Dainik Samvaat Times (Hindi Edition) on 2nd December, 2023. The last date for submission of COI is now extended till 8th January, 2024. 2. The abovementioned timelines are subject to the approval of the Hon'ble NCLT for extension of the time of CIRP Process beyond 29th February, 2024.	
Sd/- Resolution Professional of M/s Teriyaki Builders Private Limited (Formerly Known as Oasis Suppliers Private Limited) Regn. No. -IBBI/PA-02/IP-ND0216/2017-18/10668 Address: 311, Agarwal Chamber-2, Plot No. 30, 31, Veer Savarkar Block, Opp. Metro Pillar No. 58, Shakarpur, East Delhi-110092 Email Address: sg_1973@rediffmail.com Contact No.: +91-9811547321	
Dated : 22.12.2023 Place : Delhi	

Joe Biden set to sign executive order aimed at financial facilitators of Russian def industry

Washington (AP): President Joe Biden is set to sign an executive order giving the US Treasury Department the authority to target financial institutions that facilitate Russia's efforts to bolster its defence industry. The new sanctions authority is meant to gum up the Kremlin's push to restock the Russian military's depleted arsenal after nearly 22 months of fighting in Ukraine.

Russia has already lost over 13,000 pieces of equipment, including tanks, drones and missile systems, according to a US assessment. The White House said Biden plans to sign

the order later on Friday. "We expect financial institutions will undertake every effort to ensure that they are not unwitting facilitators of circumvention and evasion," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement announcing the order.

"And we will not hesitate to use the new tools provided by this authority to take decisive, and surgical, action against financial institutions that facilitate the supply of Russia's war machine." The latest effort to tighten pressure on Russia comes just weeks after Biden and G-7 leaders met virtually

to discuss support for Ukraine as rancor spreads in Washington over the cost of backing Kyiv in a war that has no end in sight. The White House has been locked in talks with key lawmakers to approve more money for Ukraine. Biden has proposed USD 110 billion package of wartime aid for Ukraine, Israel and other national security priorities.

GOP lawmakers have declined to approve the money until the White House agrees to major immigration and US-Mexico border policy changes. The Defence Department says it has nearly run out of avail-

able funds for supporting Ukraine's defense. The G-7 leaders said in a statement following the December 6 meeting that they would work to curtail Russia's use of the international financial system to further its war in Ukraine and target "Russian military procurement networks and those who help Russia acquire machine tools, equipment and key inputs."

Russian defence spending rose by almost 75 per cent in the first half of 2023, and Russia is on track to devote a record amount to defense next year.

India strongly objects to pushing talks on investment facilitation at WTO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has strongly objected to efforts of certain countries to push a proposal on investment facilitation at the WTO, saying the agenda falls outside the mandate of the global trade body and cannot be deliberated in formal meetings.

According to the statement of the Indian delegation in a meeting of the General Council of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), held during December 13-15, negotiation on investment does not belong to the WTO.

"I would like to reiterate that Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD), which supposedly facilitated investment, did not pertain to multilateral trade relations. Investment per se is not trade," the statement said.

It added that certain members began an informal process that did not have any legal sanctity, and now, at the end of their informal process, they are back to consensus seeking on their outcome of an informal process the foundation of which is devoid of consensus.

"What could be more ironic in



eral forum upon a consensus," the statement said.

It added that certain members began an informal process that did not have any legal sanctity, and now, at the end of their informal process, they are back to consensus seeking on their outcome of an informal process the foundation of which is devoid of consensus.

"What could be more ironic in

WTO than this, i.e., violating the treaty-embedded right of members to start consensus-based negotiations on mandated issues, and then at the end of such unrecognized and unlawful process, seeking consensus from those very members whose treaty-embedded right was intentionally vitiated in the first instance," it added.

The General Council is the

highest decision-making body of the WTO after the Ministerial Conference (MC), which meets once in two years. The MC 13 meeting is scheduled from 26 to 29 February 2024 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Member countries who are pushing for the proposal include Chile and Korea. Earlier also, India raised its

serious concerns over bringing issues related to investment facilitation within the ambit of WTO saying that these are bilateral matters and can not be decided at multi-lateral forums. The statement said that it is a matter of "serious concern" that the proponents of IFD are trying to force their interests into the rule-based WTO multilateral system in violation of rules.

As far as the investment aspects of trade are concerned, the agreement on TRIMS (Trade-Related Investment Measures) and the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) already deal with trade-related investment aspects in goods and services, respectively.

The TRIMS deals with certain trade-related investment measures that can restrict and distort trade.

The GATS dealt with the supply of services through commercial presence in the territory of any other member, which was related to trade in services and not purely investment.

India added that if some countries want to negotiate the subject, they should do it outside the formal structure of the WTO.

It said that the document placed by those countries is an outcome of an "illegal" process nurtured in a rule-based multilateral system, and "therefore, we would not like it to be placed before the ministers".

Trade ministers of the 164 countries would gather in Abu Dhabi for MC 13.

"Negotiation on investment does not belong to WTO. India's concern emanates from the fact that proponents of IFD, a joint statement initiative (JSI) process, should not be attempting to bring a non-mandated, non-multilateral issue to the formal process in the WTO in violation of the WTO framework and fundamental rule of consensus-based decision-making for starting a negotiation," the statement said.

There has not been any Ministerial mandate for starting negotiations on investment-related matters, it added.

Finance Ministry asks banks to monitor top 20 IBC cases

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Finance Ministry on Friday asked heads of public sector banks to monitor and review the top 20 Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code cases as part of their bad assets management.

During a meeting with managing directors and CEOs of public sector banks (PSBs), Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi asked them to review the top 20 cases monthly for their resolution.

Besides, he also asked them to monitor cases long pending for admission and resolution under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC).

The meeting also reviewed the working of the National Asset Reconstruction Company Limited (NARCL).

Going forward, the finance minister would also review the functioning of banks on various aspects.

NARCL, a government entity, was incorporated in 2021 with a majority stake held by Public Sector Banks and the balance by private banks with Canara Bank being the sponsor bank.



It is registered with the Reserve Bank of India as an Asset Reconstruction Company under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002.

The Cabinet in 2021 cleared a proposal to provide a government guarantee worth Rs 30,600 crore to security receipts issued by NARCL.

As per the provision, NARCL would pay up to 15 per cent of the agreed value for the bad loans in cash and the remaining 85 per cent would be government-guaranteed security receipts.



Stock markets climb for 2nd day on buying in IT; Sensex rises 214 points

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Stock markets extended gains for a second day on Friday following buying in IT stocks and firm trends in the US markets.

The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 241.86 points or 0.34 per cent to settle at 71,106.96. During the day, it jumped 394.45 points or 0.55 per cent to 71,259.55. The broader Nifty went up by 94.35 points or 0.44 per cent to 21,349.40. Among the Sensex firms, Wipro jumped over 6 per cent, the most among the frontline companies. HCL Technologies, Tata Motors, Maruti, Tata Steel, Infosys, Tech Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro and JSW Steel were the other major winners.

Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services, "The 'buy on dips' strategy continues to drive investors during the subdued week. Mid and small caps remain in the limelight, benefiting from ease in oil prices and the anticipation of a potential rate cut in CY24, supported by slower-than-expected US GDP growth and weakness in the dollar, signalling early rate cuts."

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.04 per cent and midcap index climbed 0.74 per cent.

Among the indices, realty rallied 2.52 per cent, IT jumped 1.93 per cent, metal (1.92 per cent), teck (1.75 per cent), auto



(1.37 per cent) and healthcare (1.25 per cent). Bankex and financial services were the laggards.

"Overnight gains in the US markets and a sharp upsurge in domestic IT stocks aided sentiment in local indices. Although markets were a bit wobbly, markets stayed in positive territory in the second half as other sectoral stocks from metal, oil & gas, auto and realty pack rallied behind the markets," said Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd.

On the weekly front, the BSE benchmark declined 376.79 points or 0.52 per cent and the Nifty dipped 107.25 points or 0.49 per cent.

In Asian markets, Tokyo settled with gains while Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong Seoul ended lower.

European markets were trading on a mixed note. The US markets ended in the positive territory on Thursday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 1.01 per cent to USD 80.19 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,636.19 crore on Thursday, according to exchange data.

The BSE benchmark jumped 358.79 points or 0.51 per cent to settle at 70,865.10 on Thursday. The Nifty rallied 104.90 points or 0.50 per cent to 21,255.05.

Peak power demand to touch 3.5 lakh MW by 2030-31: Minister

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The peak electricity demand in India is expected to touch 3,50,670 MW mark by 2030-31, and the government is taking various measures to meet the increased demand, Union Minister R K Singh has said.

The peak demand has gone up from 1,35,918 MW in 2013-14

to 2,43,271 MW in September 2023. This is a rise of almost 79 per cent and the demand has been met, the minister for power said on Thursday.

A series of concerted measures have led to 70 per cent increase in generation capacity from 2,48,554 MW in March 2014 to 4 25,536 MW in October 2023, he said in Lok Sabha.

"As per 20th Electric Power Survey (EPS) report published in November 2022, the peak electricity demand in the country in 2030-31 is expected to be 3,50,670 MW. We have taken steps to meet the increased demand for power in the country," Singh said.

The minister said 27,180 MW of thermal capacity is under construction, 12,000 MW has

been bid out and 19,000 MW is under clearances. The total anticipated thermal capacity addition by 2031-2032 will be 87,910 MW.

The demand has increased rapidly due to rapid economic growth in recent years, providing new connections to 2.86 crore households and increase in hours of supply from 12.5 hours in 2014-15 to

20.6 hours in 2022-23 in rural areas , and the supply in urban areas is 23.8 hours, he said.

Thus, the total capacity under construction including thermal, renewable, hydro and nuclear stands at 1,32,148.5 MW.

The total capacity addition by 2031-32 is likely to be 4,64,124 MW, Singh said.



SBI signs \$165mn LoC with World Bank for rooftop solar projects

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State Bank of India (SBI) on Friday said it has signed a USD 165 million (over Rs 1,300 crore) Line of Credit (LoC) with the World Bank for promoting rooftop solar project in the country.

The LoC is for supporting grid-connected rooftop Solar PV Projects in residential and institutional sectors, SBI said in a regulatory filing.

Earlier this week, SBI signed a 200 million euro (about Rs 1,800 crore) LoC with the European Investment Bank (EIB) for supporting climate action projects.

Organised food, grocery retailers topline seen clipping at 14-15 per cent next fiscal

PTI ■ MUMBAI

A healthy demand from small towns will help brick-and-mortar food and grocery retailers log 14-15 per cent revenue growth next fiscal in spite of rising competition from e-commerce platforms, says a report.

Last year, the segment clipped at a record 30 per cent and the projected 14-15 per cent growth, translating to three years of strong growth on the trot. This year the industry is expected to clip at 15 per cent, Crisil Ratings said in a note on Friday.

But modest demand from the discretionary segment comprising general merchandise such as crockery, home appliances and utensils, and apparel, due to inflationary pressures, will keep their operating margins range-bound at 6-6.5 per cent in the current and next fiscals, down from 6.9 per cent last fiscal, the report said.

Food and non-food grocery

segments contribute 75-77 per cent of revenue for F&G retailers, and the balance from discretionary products, which offer relatively higher margins.

Strong cash flows and steady working capital cycle will limit the players' dependence on external debt, ensuring strong balance sheets and stable credit profiles, said the report based on an analysis of six players that account for a fourth of the Rs 2.4-lakh-crore organised F&G market.

According to Poonam Upadhyay, a director with the agency, healthy demand outlook and low penetration will ensure mid-teen revenue growth this fiscal and the next. She also expects area addition to increase 20 per cent cumulatively over fiscals 2024 and 2025 on top of a substantial 40 per cent increase in fiscals 2022 and 2023.

Meanwhile, retailers are also expanding into omnichannel platforms to compete with commerce players.

LIC shares settle 4 per cent up; reach 52-week high

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) stock ended nearly 4 per cent higher on Friday after the insurer got more time to comply with the minimum public shareholding norm.

The stock rallied 7.25 per cent to reach its 52-week high of Rs 820.05 during the day on the BSE. It later ended at Rs 793.10, up 3.73 per cent. At the NSE, shares of the company ended at Rs 792.20, climbing 3.62 per cent. During the day, it jumped 7.39 per cent to Rs 821 -- its 52-week high level.

The company's market valuation also climbed Rs 18,057.88 crore to reach Rs 5,01,635.57 crore. The government has granted a one-time exemption to LIC to achieve the required 25 per cent Minimum Public Shareholding (MPS) within 10 years, the state-owned insurance company said on Thursday.

India's forex reserves jump by \$9.112 bn to \$615.971 bn

PTI ■ MUMBAI

India's forex reserves jumped USD 9.112 billion to USD 615.971 billion in the week ended December 15 and the quantum of increase is one of the highest for a week, according to RBI data.

In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had risen USD 2.816 billion to USD 606.859 billion.

In October 2021, the country's forex kitty reached an all-time high of USD 645 billion. The reserves took a hit as the central bank deployed the kitty to defend the rupee amid pressures caused majorly by global developments since last year.

For the week ended December 15, the foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, increased USD 8.349 billion to USD 545.048 billion, as per the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data released on Friday.

Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound, and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves.

Gold reserves were up USD 446 million to USD 47.577 billion



during the week, the RBI said. The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were up USD 135 million to USD 18.323 billion, the apex bank said.

India's reserve position with the IMF rose USD 181 million to USD 5.023 billion in the reporting week, the apex bank data showed.

Tesla moves forward with plan to build battery factory in China

AP ■ BEIJING

American electric automaker Tesla's plans to produce energy-storage batteries in China moved forward on Friday with a signing ceremony for the land acquisition in Shanghai, China's state media said.

Construction of the factory is scheduled to start early next year with production to come on line by the end of the year, the official Xinhua News

Agency said.

The factory won't build batteries for cars but for electric utilities and other companies to store power. Such storage units have become increasingly important with the growth in solar and wind energy, which only generate electricity when weather conditions are favorable and need to store it for when residential and commercial users need it.

The new factory will initially produce 10,000 of Tesla's

Megapack units annually for sale worldwide, Xinhua said.

The Tesla project is a rare piece of good news for the Chinese economy, which has seen a sharp drop in foreign investment this year.

The Commerce Ministry said this week that foreign investment in the first 11 months of this year was down 10 per cent compared with the same period last year.

Foreign companies are worried about the Chinese govern-

ment's increasing control over business on national security and other grounds, as well as growing US restrictions on technology trade with China.

China is a major market and manufacturing centre for Tesla, and the company's CEO, Elon Musk, has built close ties with Chinese officials even as US-China relations soured. In May, he met the commerce minister and the then-foreign minister in Beijing.

Sebi floats consultation paper, proposes same-day trade settlement

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator Sebi on Friday floated a consultation paper proposing to introduce same-day settlement of trades on stock exchanges and real-time settlement on an optional basis.

This is in addition to the existing T+1 settlement cycle in secondary markets for equity cash segment. Sebi, which has trimmed the settlement timelines to as short as one day after transaction, is looking to shorten the same further.

In its consultation paper, Sebi proposed introducing "the facil-

ity for clearing and settlement of funds and securities on T+0 and instant settlement cycle on optional basis in addition to the existing T+1 settlement cycle in secondary markets for equity cash segment".

T+0 would mean settlements on the same day and instant settlement would ensure that trades are settled immediately. Sebi, in its effort to keep pace with the changing times and carry out its mandate of development of securities markets and investor protection, shortened the settlement cycle to T+3 from T+5 in 2002 and subsequently to T+2 in 2003.



Further in 2021, T+1 settlement was introduced in a phased manner which was fully implemented from January 2023.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has sought comments from the public till January 12 Sebi said

that the instant settlement mechanism would enable instant receipt of funds and securities, and eliminates the risk of settlement shortages since both funds and securities will be required to be available before placing the order, and strengthen investor protection.

"Providing the option for instant settlement will help establish Indian equities as an asset class with the features of resilience, low cost and time for transaction, superior in all ways to emerging claimants of alternative asset classes," Sebi said.

On the other hand, Sebi said there are potential concerns as

the new mechanism could lead to liquidity fragmentation and affect efficient price discovery; increase the cost of trading, as funds and securities need to be made available upfront before placing the orders; and result in divergence in the price of same security in T+0 or instant settlement cycle, and T+1 settlement cycle.

Mitigating the concerns, Sebi suggested that on liquidity fragmentation, there will be participants who can access both T+0 (or instant settlement) and T+1 markets and would bridge price and liquidity gaps between the two segments.

NATIONAL REHABILITATION EXAMINATION BOARD HOLDS CONVOCATION

New Delhi: In a landmark convocation ceremony organized by the National Rehabilitation Examination Board, an entity affiliated with the Rehabilitation Council of India under the Department of



Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, a momentous convergence of empowerment narratives unfolded at the Dr Ambedkar International Center in New Delhi. Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Pratima Bhauomik, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest, emphasizing the significance of inclusivity. The Secretary of the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and the Joint Secretary were also notable participants in this distinguished programme.

Shooters Sift, Rhythm win again

Kiran joins winners circle at national shooting trials

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sift Kaur Samra and Rhythm Sangwan became the third and fourth shooters to win both the ongoing national selection trial matches when they registered victories in the women's 50m rifle 3 positions and women's 25m pistol competitions here on Friday. Navy's Kiran Ankush Jadhav also joined the winners circle, with a victory in the men's 10m air rifle T2 trial. Sift has been in the form of her life and gave another glimpse of that with a stunning 595 in qualification, which included a perfect 200 in the first kneeling position. Bhakti Bhaskar Khamkar, who also shot well to finish second, was five points behind. Sift's score was one more than her national record score set in the Asian Games earlier this year and one less than the world record. In the eight-woman final, she shot 464.8, to give Olympian and state senior Anjum Moudgil of Punjab no chance, as the lat-



ter finished with 461.7. Priya of the Army was third. In the women's 25m pistol T2 trials, Manu Bhaker topped the qualifiers by firing a 590, but it was Rhythm who yet again piped her to the top spot with 35 hits as against the Youth Olympic champion's 32. Just like in the T1 trials, Rhythm's qualifying score of 578 and seventh place left a lot to be desired, but she was top gun when it mattered the most. Former World Cup final gold medallist and world number one Heena Sidhu finished third overall with 27 hits and was second in the qualifiers with a high score of 586. In the men's 10m air rifle, Kiran Jadhav shot brilliantly throughout the day, first posting a table-topping 633.4 and then nailing the final with a solid 252.8. One 10.9 adorned his 24-shot scoreboard while his lowest in the final was a 10.1 for his 17th shot. Assam's Hriday Hazarika was second with 250.5 while Lagad Saurav Gorakh of the Navy was third.



Indian shooting team not to compete in season opening Cairo World Cup

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India will not be competing in the season-opening ISSF World Cup in Cairo from January 24 as the national federation wants to give the shooters some "rest" and not "exhaust them" in a busy year, which also has a couple of Paris Olympic qualification events still to go. However, the decision to skip the competition was taken only recently and has left a few top shooters, who planned their competition schedule well in advance, in a bit of a quandary. National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) Secretary General Sultan Singh said the matter was being discussed by the "coaches, sports science team and everybody, and according it has been run through".

The Cairo World Cup will be held in all three disciplines — pistol, rifle and shotgun — and will conclude on February 1. "We want to give them rest and not exhaust them. Everything is run through the training structure. We don't take any decision on the training part of it without keeping the shooters as well as coaches (in the loop). "All the shooters are aware of it; it is as per the laid out policy. All the shooters are cognizant of this," said Singh.

NRAI assistant secretary, Nimit Chopra, indicated the coaches wanted the shooters not to exhaust themselves in a busy year. "Coaches want their shooters to rest and not participate in all the competitions. We have the Jakarta competition (Asia Olympic Qualification Rifle/Pistol, January 5-18) in which the full 'A' team is going," said Chopra. "The Cairo World Cup

(January 24-February 1) is immediately after the Olympic quota competition in Jakarta. The decision (not to send team) was taken last week only. "We are also not sending the 'B' team, the reason being if we don't send 'A' team and only send 'B' team, then there are some QROG (Qualification Ranking Points for Olympic Games), which the 'B' team can accumulate and it will be a disadvantage for the 'A' team (when the Olympic selection trials take place in May next year). That is why we have decided no one will go there (Cairo)."

NRAI will conduct a series of trials to select the Paris Olympic Games squad in May where only those topping in the exercise will represent the country, irrespective of whether they have earned the Games quota places for the country or not. In shooting sport, an Olympic quota is won by the country and not by an individual. India will, however, be sending its team for the ISSF World Cup (Rifle/Pistol) in Granada, Spain from February 10 to 18. But there are only two events — 10m air rifle and 10m air pistol for seniors and juniors — scheduled there. A shooter told PTI on condition of anonymity that the scheduling should be done well in advance so that shooters have seamless preparations. "We train for certain competitions and skip others. Our training is very, very systematic and any change can upset our form and rhythm. So, accordingly the federation should consider these things. Some shooters would have opted out of the Jakarta competition and trained for Cairo World Cup. Now they will miss both," the shooter said.

Sonia, Kalaivani make winning start National Boxing Championships



PTI ■ GREATER NOIDA

World Championships silver medallist Sonia Lather of Railway Sports Promotion Board (RSPB) and Tamil Nadu's S Kalaivani started their campaigns with dominating victories on the opening day of the women's National Boxing Championships here. Sonia started the bout aggressively against Mahi Lama of Madhya Pradesh in the 57kg opening round match before securing a comfortable 5-0 win. Kalaivani, last edition's silver medallist, also proved too strong for Milano Mj of Kerala in the 48kg match.

Kalaivani's relentless attack forced the referee to stop the contest in the third round and declare her the winner. Kalaivani will next square off against Haryana's Gitika, who beat Meraj Begum of Telangana after the referee stopped the contest (RSC), in the next round. Rinku (52kg) and Tannu (57kg) were the other boxers from Haryana to register victories and progress into the round of 16. Meanwhile, the 2021 Asian Youth Championships silver medallist Nivedita Karki (48kg) of Uttarakhand dominated Veronica Sohshang of Meghalaya to secure a RSC win in round 2.

Madrid, Barcelona still alone in fight for Super League

AP ■ MADRID

Real Madrid and Barcelona are struggling to find allies in their fight to revive the Super League project. The Spanish powerhouses were quick to claim victory and praise the decision by the European Union's top court on Thursday to rule against the attempt by UEFA and FIFA to block plans for the breakaway competition. But as the hours passed, there were no signs that they would get anybody else to join their crusade despite the favorable ruling. Madrid and Barcelona faced an uphill battle trying to convincing other clubs to get back on board, but they were not likely to give up anytime soon. "Allow me to tell the European clubs that we are at the dawn of a new era that will allow us to work freely, on the basis of constructive dialogue, without threats, without acting against anything or anyone, and with



the aim of innovating and modernizing football in order to continue sustaining the fans' passions," Madrid president Florentino Pérez said in a statement. The Super League deal would be especially important for Barcelona, which could potentially solve its financial difficulties if the competition was to be formed. The club said it was time to take action and invite "the parties to engage in a new phase of discussions." "As one of the clubs driving the Super League project, FC Barcelona feels that the sen-

tence paves the way for a new elite level football competition in Europe by opposing the monopoly over the football world, and wishes to initiate new discussions as to the path that European competitions should take in the future," the Catalan club said. But none of the other 10 clubs involved in the original project expressed their desire to return. Italian club Juventus had been one of the three holdout clubs until finally withdrawing earlier this year. Although its new management took steps to move away

from the project, former president Andrea Agnelli, one of the Super League's architects and whose family still owns the club, made a cryptic post on X - formerly known as Twitter - referencing a Juventus slogan that translates as "All the way to the finish," accompanied by lyrics from a U2 song. Madrid's and Barcelona's rival Atletico Madrid was one of the clubs to quickly reinstate their stance against the new competition. "The European football community does not support the European Super League," Atletico said in a statement. "Germany, France, England, Italy, Spain (except for Real Madrid and Barcelona), oppose the Super League. We advocate for protecting the broader European football family, preserving domestic leagues, and securing qualification for European competitions through on-field performance each season."

Real Madrid finds its way to victory

AP ■ MADRID,

With a late goal after a lackluster performance, Real Madrid found its way to victory and to the top of the Spanish league standings. Lucas Vázquez scored with a header in stoppage-time and Madrid pulled off a 1-0 win on the road against Alaves to reclaim first place after Girona conceded a late equalizer in its 1-1 draw at Real Betis earlier on Thursday. Madrid and Girona are tied on 45 points but Madrid was ahead on a tiebreaker. Defending champion Barcelona was third, seven points off the lead. The Catalan club edged last-place Almeria 3-2 at home on Wednesday. Madrid got the late win despite playing with 10 men from the 54th minute after central defender Nacho Fernández was sent off with a straight red card for a hard foul.

"It was a complicated match, and with a player down everybody thought that maybe today we were going to lose," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "But this team finds energy out of nowhere. We held tough and in the end we got rewarded." Vázquez was left free inside the area to score the winner with a header after a well-placed corner-kick cross by Toni Kroos. Alaves coach Luis García was livid by the bench after the goal, kicking objects, throwing his jacket, screaming and even grabbing a staff member by the jacket and shoving him back to his seat. "We can't let Lucas finish by himself like that," he said afterward. "You can't let the game slip away from you like that, against 10 men, in the final minutes." Jude Bellingham and Rodrygo, the leaders of Madrid's attack this season, were kept in check during most of the match in a poor performance by Ancelotti's



team at Mendizorroza Stadium. Neither team was able to create many significant scoring chances. Nacho was initially shown a yellow card after stepping on an opponent while going for the ball, but video review called the referee and it was determined the Madrid defender deserved a straight red card.

After Nacho was sent off, Ancelotti was forced to replace Luka Modric with midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni, who went into Nacho's position in the middle of the defense. Madrid has been playing with a squad depleted by injuries, especially in defense. Last Sunday, David Alaba became the third Madrid player to tear an anterior cruciate knee ligament. Éder Militão and goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois also sustained the same type of injury. Antonio Rüdiger started alongside Nacho in defense on Thursday. Forward Rodrygo had to be helped off the field with another apparent injury in stoppage time, though Ancelotti later said the Brazil forward was just tired. Madrid has conceded only 11 goals so far this season, the best mark among all Spanish league clubs. It is unbeaten in its last 17 games in all competitions.

Can Man City Premier League dominance end?

AP ■ MANCHESTER

While Manchester City is away, its Premier League title rivals have been getting into position to try to end the three-time defending champions' domestic dominance. Pep Guardiola has spent this week in Saudi Arabia, aiming to add the Club World Cup to the treble of trophies his team won in 2023. But back home, its title defense is faltering after a run of just one win in six games in England's top division. And having won the trophy in five of the last six seasons, City appears to face a wider challenge to its supremacy than at any point under Guardiola. Fourth-place City trails leader Arsenal by five points and doesn't return to league play until Dec. 27 at Everton. Arsenal led the league for 248 days last season before finally being overtaken by City, but



this time there are challenges from several angles, with Liverpool and Aston Villa both in contention. **ARSENAL** It remains to be seen what lessons Arsenal has learned after pushing City so close last season. No team has led the Premier League for as long in a campaign without winning the title. Arsenal spent heavily to build on its rapid progress last year, with Declan Rice joining for a reported \$138 million transfer

from West Ham in the offseason. It is paying off so far as Mikel Arteta's team sits atop the Premier League and will be guaranteed to retain first place by Christmas if it beats Liverpool at Anfield on Saturday. Liverpool trails Arsenal by one point. Arsenal has already shown its credentials by beating City twice this season, first in a penalty shootout in the Community Shield and then in the league at Emirates Stadium

in October. A win against Liverpool would be further evidence that it could go one better than last year. **LIVERPOOL** Of the likely challengers to City, Jurgen Klopp is the only manager who has gotten the better of Guardiola through Liverpool's title triumph in 2020. Second-place Liverpool's resurgence has come as a surprise given it missed out on Champions League qualification last season and has seen a host of star players depart over the past 18 months. But Klopp looks like he has put together a squad that is capable of challenging again - and his team is still in contention to win four trophies this season, having advanced to the semi-finals of the League Cup and the round of 16 in the Europa League. Liverpool plays Arsenal next month in the third round of the FA Cup.

AP ■ JEDDAH (SAUDI ARABIA)

Saudi Arabia's ambitions in Soccer were made stunning and clear in 2023, and its upcoming 11-year journey toward hosting the men's World Cup promises much more of the same. In an interview Thursday with The Associated Press, Saudi soccer federation president Yasser Al Mishehal said sport and society in the oil-rich kingdom are going through transformational changes ahead of staging soccer's biggest event in 2034. "We are trying to do everything for our people, for our economy and also we want to host as many people from all different places in the world," Al Mishehal said. Soccer has taken a prominent place in the Vision 2030 plan launched in 2016 to modernize the Saudi economy and

Saudi Arabia stellar soccer year

society for a future beyond the oil production that fuels its spectacular wealth. The program was driven from its start by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, then little known outside the region and now a key player in global politics. The Saudis' statement year in soccer started with hiring Cristiano Ronaldo to a Saudi club and is ending with the current best team, Manchester City, playing for a title in Jeddah. The Club World Cup final Friday closes the first FIFA tournament played in Saudi Arabia this century, and just weeks after the biggest hosting prize was all-but guaranteed.

FIFA fast-tracked finding a host for the 2034 World Cup in October and within days there was only one candidate. The final FIFA decision must wait until late next year, but there is little doubt Saudi Arabia will add the 2034 World Cup to hosting the 2027 Asian Cup in men's soccer and up to five straight editions of the Asian Champions League finals mini-tournaments through 2029. One question for future years is if all 104 games at the World Cup will be played in Saudi stadiums - or will neighboring and nearby states be given some games to host. Such an expansion would fit a pattern for bold plans from the



crown prince and FIFA President Gianni Infantino who have built a close working relationship. "The answer is that it's going be

Saudi-only," Al Mishehal said, noting that with "a lot of cities and a lot of stadiums that we have, our plan now is just to be a sole host."

The size of Saudi Arabia compared to neighboring Qatar, which hosted a 64-game World Cup last year almost entirely in the city of Doha connected by metro lines, can be a key difference between the two tournaments. "You will find different cultures, different people, different atmosphere," Al Mishehal said of his home country, adding Qatar "did a great job. Logistics-wise it was perfect." Comparisons between how two traditionally conservative Muslim-majority societies prepared for a decade to host their World Cups will be inevitable. In Qatar, issues of access to alcohol at stadiums and displays of LGBTQ symbols such

as rainbows flared with a sponsor, some European teams and fans even after games started. Qatari organizers took a tougher stance on site after years of offering assurances. "We welcome everybody, we respect everyone but at the same time we have our own values, our own culture," Al Mishehal said. "Wherever we travel we always respect the values and culture of people that we see abroad and we expect the same from our visitors." The pace of recent reforms in Saudi society, he suggests, has been "much, much more than what we've done in the last 80 years." The pace of change in soccer

has been remarkable, if not yet as disruptive as the LIV project in golf. Ronaldo's arrival in January as a free agent on a reported \$200 million annual pay deal was the spark for lavish recruitment from European clubs that cost about \$900 million in transfer fees alone. The coach of European champion Italy, Roberto Mancini, was lured over to the Saudi national team. More high-end offers at the top of the transfer market are expected in January, likely from the same clubs now majority-owned by the \$700 billion Public Investment Fund. "I have been approached personally by several clubs from different parts of the world offering to transfer their players," Al Mishehal said, noting the deals are welcomed by the selling clubs for their own investment plans.

DEEPTI, POOJA PUT INDIA WOMEN IN COMMAND

PTI ■ MUMBAI

A sturdy 102-run unbeaten stand between Deepti Sharma (70) and Pooja Vastrakar (33) restored India Women’s command against Australia on the second day of the ongoing one-off Test, stretching the home team’s first-innings lead to 157 here on Friday.

India reached 376/7 in reply to Australia’s 219 with their resolute batting show spruced up by Smriti Mandhana’s 74, Jemimah Rodrigues’ 73 and a fine 52 from debutant Richa Ghosh.

Deepti and Vastrakar came together after India lost four quick wickets for a mere 14 runs to cede advantage to Australia, as their resistance flattened the visitors who used eight bowling options with only Ashleigh Gardner (4/100) making an impact.

The right-arm off-spinner Gardner, coming off an eight-wicket spell in the women’s Ashes Test, troubled the Indians the most as she kept nibbling away with crucial wickets while being persistent with probing

line and lengths.

But the Indians eventually wrested back control, riding on the splendid partnership between Deepti and Vastrakar, who were a mere five runs away from recording the best eighth-wicket stand for India Women’s ever when stumps were drawn.

While Deepti cracked nine fours to make 70 not out off 147 balls, it was Vastrakar whose ascend as one of India’s dependable players continued.

Having returned figures of 4/53 on the first day, Vastrakar reached 33 not out from 115 balls with four boundaries.

However, the highlight of the day was youngsters Ghosh (52) and Rodrigues (73) taking apart the Australian bowlers with disdain, putting on 113 runs for the side’s second-best partnership for the fourth wicket.

In her maiden outing with the bat in Tests, Ghosh put on a fine show of attack and resilience alike, cracking seven fours in her 104-ball innings while producing strokes on both the sides of the pitch.

But Ghosh also had Ellyse Perry to thank who spilled a sitter at

INDIA VS AUSTRALIA



mid-off when the Indian batter mistimed one off Gardner having reached 14.

However, she became the 14th Indian batter to score a fifty on debut, joining Rodrigues and Shubha Satheesh to have done so in the span of last 10 days or so.

Rodrigues displayed her control and finesse especially with the sweep shot, collecting a majority of her runs (63 per cent) on the leg side while making a fine 73 off 121 balls with nine hits to the fence.

Notching up a second consecutive fifty in as many Tests, Rodrigues appeared primed for a maiden century too but she had only herself to blame after hitting one straight to Annabel Sutherland at extra cover off Gardner.

With the pitch providing variable bounce, each of the Indian batters who got runs show-cased immaculate approach in anticipating the bounce and trusting their defence, which was not the case for a few others.

India captain Harmanpreet Kaur (0) lasted for only two balls as

she was slow to react to a delivery from Gardner which kept low and struck her pads in front of the leg stump.

India slipped further and lost the advantage when Yastika Bhatia (1) seemed to have committed herself too early into the shot to miss a sweep off Gardner and was adjudged leg-before.

Earlier in the day, overnight batters Mandhana and Sneha Rana (9) brought up their 50-run stand for the second wicket before Gardner cleaned up the latter.

Smriti was also lucky as an outside edge off Garner flew past the diving Beth Mooney at the first slip.

But there was heartbreak for Mandhana when she was run out, having danced down the track and hitting to backward point looking for a single. Mandhana was a little hesitant but seeing her partner Ghosh sprinting from the other end, she made a dash but fell short when the stumps were broken by Gardner while collecting a quick throw from Kim Garth. The India vice-captain made 74 off 106 balls with 12 fours.



Elgar to retire from international cricket after Tests against India

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

Former South Africa captain Dean Elgar on Friday announced his retirement from international cricket at the conclusion of the upcoming two-Test series against India, commencing in Centurion on December 26. Elgar made his debut in 2012 and has played 84 Tests. The left-handed batter has scored 5,146 runs at 37.28 with 13 centuries and 23 fifties.

“Elgar will fittingly end his international career with the two Test matches - the first to be played at his home ground in Centurion from 26-30 December and the second at the venue where he scored his first Test runs, Newlands Cricket Ground in Cape Town, from 03-07 January,” said Cricket South Africa (CSA) in a statement. The 36-year-old also played eight ODIs, with his last appearance in white-ball cricket coming in 2018.

“Having had the privilege to do it for 12 years internationally is simply beyond my wildest



dreams. It has been an incredible journey that I have been fortunate enough to have,” said Elgar.

“As they say, ‘all good things come to an end,’ and the Indian home series will be my last, as I have made the decision to retire from our beautiful game,” he said.

“A game that has given me so much. The Cape Town Test will be my last. My favourite stadium in the world. A place I scored my first Test run against New Zealand and hopefully my last too,” he added.

Elgar also had a successful stint as South Africa’s Test captain, winning nine out of 19 matches, while losing seven and drawing four.

South Africa’s director of cricket, Enoch Nkwe, said, “He is a real old-school cricketer that can dig in, absorb and fight. I have no doubt the game will dearly miss him. “He has always given everything for his country and never showed any fear, no matter the opposition. He was always there to take on the challenge, leading as captain when the country needed him most,” Nkwe added.



Kohli returns home due to family emergency

GAIKWAD RULED OUT OF SERIES

PTI ■ CENTURION

Virat Kohli has returned to India due to a family emergency but the senior batter will be back in time for the first Test against South Africa starting here next week.

Kohli had travelled to South Africa as part of the Indian squad for the two-Test series, which will begin at SuperSport Park on December 26.

“Virat Kohli has returned to India due to a family emergency. But he will be back before start of the first Test,” a BCCI source told PTI on Friday. It is understood that Kohli had already taken permission from BCCI brass about his short leave.

“Virat had already left on Thursday and it was pre-decided. Virat didn’t take part in the three day intra squad match where India and India A players took part,” the source added.

No one in BCCI however could confirm the nature of the emergency.

Kohli had missed out on a Test match during the last away series in South Africa due to a back injury.

He will be back in the Rainbow Nation on December 24 and will take part in the pre-match training.

Meanwhile, Indian batter Rituraj Gaikwad was ruled out of the two-match series, which is a part of the World Test Championship cycle, after fracturing his finger.

“Rituraj Gaikwad has been ruled out of the two-Test series with ring finger fracture,” the source added.

Gaikwad had injured his finger while trying to take a catch during the second ODI against South Africa earlier this week. That Gaikwad was ruled out of the first Test.

Last 4 months mentally challenging: Samson

PTI ■ PAARL (SOUTH AFRICA)

India wicket-keeper batter Sanju Samson revealed that the past three-four months have been mentally challenging for him but he kept at it by working on himself and bounced back by scoring his maiden ODI ton.

Samson was overlooked for the ODI World Cup in India with selectors preferring to go with the likes of Ishan Kishan and Suryakumar Yadav despite the Kerala batter averaging 55.7 with a strike rate of 104 in 13 ODI innings.

“The last three, four months were challenging for me mentally,” Sanju said after the 78-run win on Thursday.

“So going through all that and coming here I think doing what I did today, I think I feel really happy and grateful.”

Samson was also not picked for the Asian Games, indicating that he is really low in the selectors’ pecking order.

On Thursday, however, he took things in his own hand and scored his maiden ODI century to help India win the third

Grateful for maiden ODI ton, says batter



game and clinch the series 2-1 against South Africa.

“I’ve been blessed in my genes. My father is also a sportsman, so how much ever setbacks you have, I think there’s always no other way to come back and bounce back... Think how much you can work on yourself and how you can come back more strongly,” he added.

Elevated to the number three spot, Samson, who scored a measured 108, joined forces with Tilak Varma (52) to take

India to a competitive target.

“Honestly, I think I was not looking at the scorecard. Until I had a partnership with Tilak till then I just wanted to play and like go with the merit. I just watched the ball and bat and the boundaries and the scoring options ultimately happened. “So I was just focused on the process and playing one ball at a time and then I think the scorecard kept on ticking.

“When Tilak came in when we both had a tough four or five

overs where I think (Keshav) Maharaj, was bowling the best. I think both the ends were a bit tight. That’s when we thought that we need to go on and take some risks at the moment.”

Asked how he kept his calm during the knock, Samson said, “I don’t know actually. It comes very naturally to me.

“It’s very important to make really good decisions. When you are calm and when you are aware of your thoughts, emotions of your physical being and mental being that helps me to make some really good decisions.” The home side looked on course for victory before the Indian pacers, led by left-armers Arshdeep Singh, bowled the South Africans out for 218 in 45.5 overs.

“I think the power-play, the way South African openers batted, I thought they are taking the game away five overs before.

“But after that when our fast bowlers came in between, and the ball I think was maintained nicely by all the teammates... The fast bowlers also hit some proper areas to get those crucial wickets of David (Miller) and crucial wickets were important for us.”

West Indies wins T20 series from England

AP ■ TAROUBA (TRINIDAD)

The West Indies held its nerve in the last over to beat world champion England and win their Twenty20 series 3-2.

England, defending a measly 132 all out, bowled brilliantly at the death to raise the tension and earn a glimmer of hope at Brian Lara Stadium.

Fast bowler Reece Topley took out West Indies captain Rovman Powell in a two-run 17th over, and medium-pacer Sam Curran nabbed Andre Russell in a two-run 19th over.

The West Indies was still favored going into the last over, but needed nine runs.

Jason Holder scored three runs off the first delivery by Chris Woakes with Rehan Ahmed saving a run on the boundary behind square, then Shai Hope smacked his first six over deep point to finish the match.

West Indies made 133-6 and won by four wickets with four balls to spare. The home side also won the one-day international series 2-1.

Hope led the West Indies chase with a run-a-ball 43 not out.

But it was wobbling after eight overs when they were 54-3.

Sherfane Rutherford joined Hope in the middle and overtook the latter with his first six back over Adil Rashid’s head to reach 20.

Rutherford smacked Curran over the fence at fine leg then was caught by Curran on 30 to give Rashid 2-21 off his four overs.

The West Indies was left needing 34 from 30 deliveries, and Ahmed conceded 11 runs in the next over to relieve the pressure.

But it came straight back on when Topley dismissed Powell to finish his four overs with 2-17.

England fought well after a batting



performance that was a shadow of what it produced in the series-leveling win on Tuesday on the same ground.

England was all out for less than half

of its record score of 267-3 on Tuesday. After smashing 19 sixes then, England hit only five on the sticky, used pitch.

Opener Phil Salt top-scored for England again in an unchanged team

but an inspired West Indies side bowled and fielded with accuracy and energy.

England captain Jos Buttler was gone for 11 in the fourth over, scooping Holder to Oshane Thomas at short fine leg.

Will Jacks hit the first six of the innings then was out next ball, bowled by Akeal Hosein.

Salt was next to go in the seventh over, straight after his first six. Gudakesh Motie came round the wicket and hit the top of middle stump. No third successive hundred for Salt - he scored 38 off 22 balls.

Moeen Ali added 23 off 21 and Liam Livingstone 28 off 29, his caught and bowled to Motie starting a collapse of the last five wickets for 11 runs.

Motie and fellow left-arm spinner Hosein shared five wickets for 44 runs. They dismissed five of the top six batters.

Khawaja to challenge ICC reprimand

Says armband was for a bereavement

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Bewildered by the ICC’s decision to reprimand him for wearing a black armband during the first Test against Pakistan, Australia’s Usman Khawaja on Friday said he will contest the charge as he had told the governing body it was for a “personal bereavement.”

Khawaja had worn a black armband during Australia’s 360-run win over Pakistan in Perth last week. He had arrived for a training session on December 13 with “all lives are equal” and “freedom is a human right” inscribed on his batting spikes and had reportedly planned to wear them during the inaugural Test.

“The ICC asked me day two (of the Perth Test) what (the black armband) was for, I told them it was for a personal bereavement. I never ever stated it was for anything else,” Khawaja told reporters

“I respect the ICC and all the regulations they have, I will be asking them and contesting them ... From my point of view, that consistency hasn’t been done yet.”

“The shoes were for a different matter, I’m happy to say that, but the armband (reprimand) made no sense to me,” he added.

The opener added that the global governing body had not applied the rules consistently. “I followed all the regulations and past precedents - guys have put stickers on their bats, names on their shoes, done all sorts of things in the past without ICC approval and never been reprimanded.”

The ICC’s regulations prevent players from displaying messages of political, religious or racial causes during international matches.

However, players can wear black armbands to mark deaths of former players, family members or other significant individuals

after taking prior permission from the governing body.

The ICC reprimand for Khawaja wearing a black armband in Perth carries no financial or playing penalty.

Khawaja also denied he had “any hidden agendas” when he arrived for a training session with “all lives are equal” and “freedom is a human right” inscribed on his batting spikes, apparently in reference to the war in Gaza.

“I don’t have any agendas other than trying to shine a light on what I feel really passionately, really strong about. I’m trying to do it in the most respectful way as possible,” said Khawaja.

“What I wrote on my shoes was, really I thought about it for a while, what I was going to write. I made sure that I didn’t want to segregate different parts of the population, religious beliefs, communities.”

“Hence why I kept religion out of this. I want to be really broad over my speaking because I’m talking about humanitarian issues. I’m talking about article one of Unified Declaration of Human Rights. That is literally the crux of it,” added Khawaja.

“The reason I’m doing it is because it hit me hard. I told Nick (Hockley, Cricket Australia chief) literally just this morning that when I’m looking at my Instagram and I’m seeing kids, innocent kinds, videos of them dying, passing away, that’s what hit me the hardest.

“I just imagine my young daughter in my arms and the same thing. I get emotional talking about it right now again. And for me, that’s the reason I’m doing this. I don’t have any hidden agendas.

“If anything, you know, if anything, this brings up more negativity towards me. People come and start attacking me. I don’t get anything out of this. I just feel like it’s my responsibility to speak up on this.”