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PAK GENERAL PLAYS A RARE SECULAR TUNE!

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MONEY 10

INDIA TO REMAIN FASTEST GROWING MAJOR ECONOMY IN 2024

NEW DELHI, MONDAY JANUARY 1, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3

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SIMRANJEET TO LEAD INDIA IN FIH HOCKEY5S WC 11 SPORTS

Modi calls for Rambhajan drive on social media

Excitement in country in connection with Ram Mandir: PM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Stating that "there is excitement and enthusiasm in the entire country in connection with the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya", Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday termed it a "historic moment" and urged people to share artistic creations such as 'bhajans' relating to it on social media with the hashtag 'Shri Ram Bhajan'. He said this compilation will transform into a flow of emotions and devotion, immersing everyone in the ethos of Lord Ram. Modi also highlighted India's twin wins at this year's Oscars for the song "Naatu Naatu" from "RRR" and documentary short "The Elephant Whisperers" in his last Mann Ki Baat address for 2023. Modi said the country is imbued with the spirit of 'Viksit Bharat' and self-reliance, and asserted that this spirit and momentum has to be maintained in 2024 as well.

Speaking at the 108th episode of his monthly Mann Ki Baat radio programme, Modi mentioned this is the 108th episode of our shared journey. "For us the importance of the number 108 and its sanctity is a subject of deep study. 108 beads in a rosary, chanting 108 times, 108 divine sites, 108 stairs in temples, 108 bells, this number 108 is associated with immense faith. That's why the 108th episode of



'Mann Ki Baat' has become all the more special for me," he said. Modi also pointed out that there are many experienced as well as new emerging young artists who have composed heart-warming bhajans.

"There is excitement and enthusiasm in the entire country in connection with the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. People are expressing their feelings in a multitude of ways. You must have noticed that during the last

few days, many new songs and new bhajans have been composed on Shri Ram and Ayodhya," Modi said. Many people are also writing new poems, he noted.

"There are many experienced artists in it and new emerging young artists have also composed heart-warming bhajans. I have also shared some songs and bhajans on my social media," the Prime Minister said. It seems that the art world is

becoming a participant in this historic moment in its own unique style, he said.

"One thing comes to my mind. Could we all share all such creations with a common hash tag? I request you to share your creations on social media with the hashtag Shri Ram Bhajan (#shriRamBhajan)," Modi said. "This compilation will turn into a flow of emotions and devotion in which everyone will be immersively imbued with the

ethos of Ram," he added. Modi also emphasised on physical and mental health and highlighted several unique efforts for 'Fit India'. During the broadcast, Isha Foundation founder Sadhguru, Indian Women's Cricket Team Captain Harmanpreet Kaur, chess legend Vishwanathan Anand and actor Akshay Kumar shared their fitness tips. Sadhguru emphasised the importance of working on internal mental health and cultivating an equanimous chemistry within ourselves — a chemistry of peacefulness, joyfulness, and blissfulness. He stressed that this transformation is crucial for every individual's life and for the cultural life of a society and nations around the world. Cricketer Kaur said regular exercise and a full seven-hour sleep are essential for maintaining a healthy body and staying fit. Chess grandmaster Anand said his fitness tip to all 'Mann Ki Baat' listeners would be to keep calm and focus on the task ahead.

"The best fitness tip for me, absolutely the most important fitness tip, is to get a good night's sleep. I think seven or eight hours is an absolute minimum so we should try as hard as possible to get a good night's sleep because that is when the next day you are able to get through the day in calm fashion," he said.

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Putin praises Modi for sturdy India, Russia ties

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ties between India and Russia have developed dynamically despite the difficult international situation in the world, President Vladimir Putin has said in his New Year message to President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Incidentally, Putin met External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar last week during the latter's visit to Moscow and invited Modi to visit Russia next year. "We will be glad to see our friend, Prime Minister Modi in Russia," Putin told Jaishankar. So far, 21 annual summits have taken place alternatively in India and Russia. The last summit took place in New Delhi in December 2021.

Meanwhile, his New Year message said, "The messages addressed to President of the Republic of India Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister of the Republic of India Narendra Modi note that, despite the difficult international situation, the special and privileged strategic partnership between Russia and India continues to develop dynamically. In the outgoing year, trade has been growing at an exceptionally high rate and joint projects in various areas have been successfully implemented."

Putin also stressed the cooperation between the two countries to develop multifaceted bilateral ties and coordinate efforts to strengthen security and stability at the regional and global levels.

The document said "Putin praised the results of India's chairmanship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the G20 and



stressed his conviction that Moscow and New Delhi will continue to develop multifaceted bilateral ties and effectively coordinate efforts to strengthen security and stability at the regional and global levels."

In addition, Vladimir Putin extended Christmas and New Year greetings to several former foreign heads of state and government, including Belarus, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Brzail, South Africa, Turkey and many others.

On December 28, Putin met Jaishankar who was on his formal visit to Moscow from December 25 to 29 as a part of the ongoing high-level exchanges between the two sides. During the meeting, Putin emphasised the positive stance of Modi on complex global developments, including the situation in Ukraine.

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the pioneer
WISHES ITS READERS
A VERY HAPPY
new year
2024

As the offices of The Pioneer will remain closed on January 1, the next edition will be published on January 3

Navy boosts surveillance amid drone attacks

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In the backdrop of drone attacks on merchant vessels in the Arabian Sea and Gulf Aden in the last few days, the Indian Navy has significantly enhanced its surveillance apparatus in the two sectors by deploying frontline destroyers and frigates in view of recent incidents of attacks on merchant vessels, officials said here on Sunday. Liberian-flagged cargo vessel MV Chem Pluto, with 21 Indian crew members, was the target of a drone attack off India's west coast on December 23, triggering security concerns as the incident came amid Iran-backed Houthi militants launching strikes on several commercial ships.

Another commercial crude oil tanker, MV Sai Baba, that was

on the way to India came under a suspected drone strike in the Southern Red Sea on the same day.

"The last few weeks have witnessed increased maritime security incidents on merchant vessels transiting through international shipping lanes in Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Central/North Arabian Sea," the Navy said. It also referred to a recent piracy incident on merchant ship MV Ruen approximately 700 nautical miles from the Indian coast.

"The recent drone attack on MV Chem Pluto, approximately 220 nautical miles South West of Porbandar, indicates a shift in maritime incidents closer to Indian EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone)," the Navy said in a statement.

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3 held for rape of IIT BHU student

PTI ■ VARANASI (UP)

Police have arrested three accused in connection with the alleged rape of a female student of IIT at the BHU campus, a police official said on Sunday. SHO of Lanka police station Shivakant Mishra said the accused have been identified as Kunal Pandey, Anand alias Abhishek Chauhan and Saksham Patel. The alleged incident of rape occurred on the night of November 1. According to the complainant, she had gone out of her hostel with a friend when three men on a motorcycle forcibly took her to a corner and gagged her after separating her from her friend near the Karman Baba temple. The accused then allegedly stripped the woman, made a video of her and took photos. They let her go after about 15 minutes and took her phone number, the complainant stated.

Delhi NCR shivers

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

There is no respite from the bone-chilling winter as the people in Delhi-NCR woke up to yet another cold morning on the last day of the year, with moderate to dense fog amid the festive atmosphere causing disruptions in transportation and affecting several trains.

The minimum temperature was recorded at 11.7 degrees celsius, five notches above the season's average and the maximum temperature stood at 15.9 degrees celsius, five notches below the normal. The city's average Air Quality Index (AQI) was recorded at 382 in the 'very poor' category at 4 pm as compared to 400 on Saturday. The India Meteorological Department (IMD), meanwhile, said the mercury will dip further in the first week of January 2024. The minimum temperature is expected to remain in the range of 10 to 7 degrees Celsius in the national Capital at the Safdarjung Observatory. The average maximum and minimum temperatures for December so far this year are higher than they were for the month in recent years.



IMD data showed the average AQI for the month is worse than it has been in recent years — in 2022, the average for December was 319, while it was 336 in 2021, 332 in 2020, and 337 in 2019. The last time a higher average was recorded was in 2018 — 360. Meanwhile, the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Delhi has reached the 'severe' category, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), exacerbating concerns about air pollution and visibility issues during the period of dense fog. The noxious conditions, forecasts warned, are likely to persist over at least three more days, with air quality likely to worsen further if people decide to burst firecrackers New Year's Eve.

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J-K based Tehreek e Hurriyat banned

PNS ■ JAMMU

The Union Government headed by Narendra Modi on Sunday declared another pro-Pakistan separatist amalgam Tehreek-e-Hurriyat (TeH) as an 'unlawful association' under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA). The decision was announced by Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Shah said the group was found spreading anti-India propaganda and continuing terror activities to fuel secessionism in Jammu and Kashmir.

He said under Modi's zero-tolerance policy against terrorism, any individual or organisation found involved in anti-India activities would be thwarted. "The 'Tehreek-e-Hurriyat, J&K (TeH) has been declared an 'Unlawful Association' under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The outfit is involved in forbidden activities to separate J&K from India and establish Islamic rule," Shah wrote on 'X'.

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After SC nudge, India finally gets law to appoint CEC, ECs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Legislation on the appointment of Election Commission members was the biggest highlight of 2023 for the Union law ministry which saw a change of guard this year as Arjun Ram Meghwal took over the reins from Kiren Rijiju. The year saw the Law Commission working on a formula to synchronise all assembly polls by extending or reducing the tenure so that all state elections can be held along with the Lok Sabha polls from 2029 onwards.

Also, a high-level committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind began examining the issue of holding simultaneous elections in the country. In March, the Supreme Court, while delivering its verdict on pleas seeking a collegium-like system for the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and election commissioners, ruled that the appointments will be made by the president on the recommendation of a panel comprising the prime minister, the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha and the chief justice of India. It also said the direction on the



appointments to the post of CEC and ECs will continue to hold good till a law on the issue is enacted by Parliament, it added. Since the establishment of the Election Commission on January 25, 1950 -- a day before India became a republic -- there was no law laying down a mechanism for the appointment of chief election commissioner and election commissioners. A law introduced in 1991 dealt with service conditions of the members of the poll panel but not on their appointment.

The Supreme Court order put things in motion and the law ministry came out with a proposed legislation to lay down the procedure to appoint the CEC and the ECs. However, amid protests by the opposition and former CECs, a slew of amendments were made to the bill, retaining the status of the members of the poll panel equivalent to judges of the Supreme Court and upgrading the status of the search committee. As per the original bill, the cabinet secretary was to head the

three-member search committee. Now, it will be headed by the law minister. The bill was passed by Parliament during the winter session and it later got the President's assent. The mechanism for the appointment of the CEC and other ECs will come into play when Election Commissioner Anup Chandra Pandey demits office on February 14 on attaining the age of 65. Pandey is set to retire days before the poll panel is likely to announce the schedule for the 2024 Lok Sabha election and the government may like to fill up the vacancy at the earliest. The year 2023 also saw the Law Commission under Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi (retired), initiating a fresh consultation process on the Uniform Civil Code by seeking views from the public and religious organisations. The law panel also gave its report on sedition law, underlining its need in the Indian criminal justice system with added safeguards. In a sudden development in May, the law portfolio was taken away from Kiren Rijiju and handed over to Arjun Ram Meghwal. While Rijiju was known for triggering controversies by questioning the collegium sys-

tem of appointing Supreme Court and high court judges and hitting out at the alleged "tukde-tukde gang", Meghwal has refrained from making any such comment so far. Amid repeated observations by the apex court over the delay in the appointment of judges, as many as 110 judges were appointed in high courts. The Fast Track Special Courts (FTSC) Scheme was further extended for three more years from April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2026, at a total outlay of Rs 1,952.23 crore. The FTSCs were set up in the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case to deliver swift justice for women and children. In September, the Union Cabinet approved the third phase of the eCourts Project as a central sector scheme with a financial outlay of Rs 7,210 crore to be implemented over four years. The eCourts Mission Mode Project is the prime mover for improving access to justice using technology. As part of the National eGovernance Plan, the eCourts Project has been under implementation since 2007 for ICT enablement of the Indian Judiciary. The Phase II of the project concluded in 2023.

Modi calls...

From Page 1

Akshay advised listeners to avoid shortcuts for long-lasting fitness. "You should change your lifestyle on the advice of doctors and not by looking at the body of a film star. Actors are often not what they look like on screen. Many types of filters and special effects are used and after seeing them, we start using wrong shortcuts to change our body. "Nowadays, so many people take steroids and go for this six-pack or eight-pack," he said. With such shortcuts the body swells from the outside but remains hollow from the inside, Akshay asserted. "In this New Year, promise yourself: No chemicals, no shortcut. Exercise, yoga, good food, sleeping on time, some meditation and most importantly, happily accept the way you look. After today, don't live a filter life, live a fitter life," the actor said. During the broadcast, Modi listed several achievements

and highs the country experienced in various spheres this year. He pointed out that the record business on Diwali proved that every Indian is giving importance to the mantra of 'vocal for local'. "Even today many people are sending me messages pertaining to the success of Chandrayaan-3. I am sure that, like me, you too feel proud of our scientists and especially women scientists," he said. "When 'Natu-Natu' won the Oscar, the whole country rejoiced with fervour. Who would not have been happy to hear about the honour accorded to the 'The Elephant Whisperers'? Through them the world saw the creativity of India and understood our bonding with the environment," Modi said. He pointed out that this year Indian athletes also performed marvellously in sports with Indian players winning 107 medals in Asian Games and 111 medals in

Asian Para Games. "Indian players won everyone's heart with their performance in the Cricket World Cup. The victory of our women's cricket team in the Under-19 T-20 World Cup is very inspiring. The achievements of players in many other sports added to the glory of the country," Modi said. In his remarks, the PM said India is brimming with self-confidence and is imbued with the spirit of 'Viksit Bharat (developed India)' and self-reliance. "We have to maintain the same spirit and momentum in 2024 as well," Modi said. He also said India becoming an 'innovation hub' symbolises the fact that "we are not going to stop". India, he said, accomplished many special achievements this year, including the passage of the women's reservation bill. In his remarks, Modi also recalled the contribution of Savitribai Phule and Rani Velu Nachiyar.

Delhi NCR...

From Page 1

The deterioration in air quality appeared to be on account of the low day-time temperature that the city has seen over the last two days. Several trains, including both local and long-distance services, experienced disruptions from two to seven hours due to foggy conditions, leaving passengers stranded and frustrated. As many as 23 trains in the Delhi area are reported to be late behind schedule, according to Indian Railways. Trains that are running late include Puri-New Delhi Purushottam Express, Kanpur-New Delhi Shramshakti, Howrah-New Delhi Poorva Express, Saharsa-New Delhi Vaishali Express, Rewa-Anand Vihar Express, Allahabad-New Delhi Prayagarj Express, Azamgarh -- Delhi Kaifiyat Express, Bhagalpur -- Anand Vihar Vikramshila, Rajendranagar -- New Delhi Sampoon Kranti. The visuals from Subroto Park, DND flyover, and India Gate showed the vehicular

movement crippling owing to less visibility. Despite the rise in pollution levels, the dense fog that had engulfed Delhi over the past five days -- throwing flights, trains and road traffic into chaos -- finally appeared to ease. According to IMD, there was a significant improvement in visibility at the IGI Airport on Sunday. Runway Visual Ranges (RVRs) now range from 500 to 800 metres, indicating improved aviation conditions. Very dense fog is when visibility is between 0 and 50 metres, 51 and 200 metres is 'dense', 201 and 500 metres 'moderate', and 501 and 1,000 metres 'shallow', it said. The IMD has issued a weather advisory forecasting cold wave conditions along with very dense fog conditions with visibility less than 50 metres over many parts of Punjab from late evening to the next day morning, extending until January 4. West Uttar Pradesh is expected to experience very dense fog during midnight and morning hours from December 30 to January 4.

Putin praises...

From Page 1

"We know the stance of Prime Minister Modi and we mentioned that repeatedly on many occasions. Well, his attitude towards some complex developments, including the flashpoints like...in Ukraine," he noted. The Russian President mentioned that he has advised Prime Minister Modi on the developments in Ukraine multiple times and indicated that further discussions on the matter would take place. "Many times, I advised him of how things have been going there and I know that he (PM Modi) is willing to do his utmost so that the issue is resolved by peaceful means. So, we probably will delve into that deeper now, and we will give additional information to you on that time," Putin added. The Russian President also expressed gratitude for the progressing relationship between Russia and India amid global turmoil.

Didi to bank on Bengali Asmita

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In an apparent bid to counter Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Desh Bhakti slogan, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has decided to bank on Bengali Asmita or Bengali pride so to say. Apparently the State Government on Sunday declared Poila Boisakh -- that usually takes place on April 15 -- as the State Day. It is also considered the New Year Day of the Bengali calendar of Bangabada. The State government also made it mandatory to sing Banglar Maati Banglar Jal (Bengal's earth and water...) a song by Poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore at every Government programme. A government notification in this regard said that "After careful consideration, it is hereby declared that the 'Poila Boisakh' (1st day of the month of Boisakh of Bengali calendar year) will be observed as State Day and it will be named 'Bangla Divas'." The song will be regarded as the State Song and its approximate playing time will be 1 minute and 59 seconds," the notification said adding, "the State Day shall be celebrated by all the people of West Bengal with respect and dignity every year. The State Song shall compulsorily be played with due respect in all state government functions at the start of the function and the National Anthem shall be played compulsorily at the conclusion of it."

Bhagwat visits Bengal celebrities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

Close on the heels of top BJP leaders Amit Shah and JP Nadda visiting Bengal last week, Rashtriya Swyam Sevak chief Mohan Bhagwat on Sunday completed two-day silent visit of Bengal when he met a number of "highly respected people and celebrities." Earlier on Saturday Bhagwat met Upen Biswas former CBI Joint Director who cracked the Bihar animal husbandry scam before joining the Trinamool Congress and becoming a minister in Bengal post 2011 change of power in the State. Biswas, known for his integrity had recently acted as one of the whistle-blowers in the infamous school level recruitment scam that saw a number of ministers and MLAs going to jail. Bhagwat also met percussionist and table player Pandit Bikram Ghosh and film actor Victor Banerjee who had a few decades ago acted in David Lean's Passage to India. "We had a fine discussion on various issues... he listened to my sons playing table and was very pleased... It was good year ending for me... I told him that though I will not be able to visit Ayodhya on January 22 as I have two shows, I will definitely visit there soon," Ghosh said.

Sonia craves arhar ki daal, chawal after trip from abroad

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Whenever former Congress president Sonia Gandhi goes abroad there is one dish she craves for immediately upon her return and that is 'arhar ki daal' and 'chawal'. Sonia Gandhi shared her food preferences in a video released on New Year's eve on Rahul Gandhi's YouTube channel, and in it, both are seen making orange marmalade following a recipe of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. In the video titled 'Mum, Memories and Marmalade', the mother-son duo of Sonia and Rahul are seen having a light-hearted banter about food. While preparing the marmalade, Rahul Gandhi says, "If the BJP people want to get the jam, they can get it too. What do you say, mummy?" "They will throw it at us," Sonia Gandhi quips, evoking laughter from Rahul, who adds, "That's good, then we can pick it up again." As he goes about preparing the marmalade from scratch by plucking oranges to peeling and slicing them, Rahul says, "This is my sister's recipe, she found it and improved it. I am only implementing it." In the over five-minute video, Sonia Gandhi also shares what annoys her about Rahul. "He is stubborn, I am as well. Both of us are stubborn. So you can understand," she says. On what



she likes about him, Sonia Gandhi says, "He is very affectionate, very caring. Especially when I am not well, both Rahul and Priyanka take care of me." On who is the best cook in the house, Rahul says it was Sonia Gandhi's mother. "Then she learnt a whole bunch of things from dad's Kashmiri relatives," he adds. Talking about food preferences, Sonia Gandhi says, "When an Indian person goes abroad, I am not talking of today because there are Indian restaurants everywhere... You cannot get adjusted to the foods in the UK and elsewhere." "Similarly, when I came here it took me time to get adjusted to the Indian flavours especially the chilies," she says Sonia Gandhi says she did not like 'hara dhaniya', to which Rahul picks but now she likes it a lot. She also did not like pickles but now she likes pickles a lot, Rahul says. "It took me a little time but now I really love it. Whenever I go abroad, the first thing that I have to have when I come back is 'arhar ki daal aur chawal'," Sonia Gandhi says.

Navy boosts surveillance...

From Page 1

"In response to these incidents, Indian Navy has substantially enhanced maritime surveillance efforts in Central/North Arabian Sea and augmented force levels," it said. "Task Groups comprising destroyers and frigates have been deployed to undertake maritime security operations and render assistance to merchant vessels in case of any incident," the Navy said. It said aerial surveillance by P-8 I long-range maritime patrol aircraft and remotely piloted aircraft (UAV) has been enhanced to have a complete maritime domain awareness. Towards effective surveillance of EEZ, the Indian Navy is operating in close coordination with the Coast Guard, it said. "The overall situation is being closely monitored by Indian Navy in coordination with national maritime agencies. Indian Navy remains committed to ensuring safety of merchant shipping in the region," it said.

J-K based Tehreek...

From Page 1

The pro-Pakistan group was earlier headed by deceased separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who Masarat Alam Bhat succeeded. Bhat is also known for his anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda. Bhat is currently in jail and his party the Muslim League of Jammu Kashmir was declared a banned organisation on December 27. One more separatist organisation Democratic Freedom Party led by Shabir Shah was also banned by the Union Home Ministry.

With more travellers, planes, airports, bullishness greets slightly clouded aviation skies

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

"Bullishness" greets the skies as more passengers are set to step into airports and more aircraft, including A350s, are ready to carry them in expanding routes in 2024 even as the fate of two bankrupt airlines remain uncertain. A slew of airports and terminal building inaugurations and revised norms to address pilot fatigue issue will also happen in the new year. "As far as goals for 2024 are concerned, it is to enable many more airports to be put in place, the fleet size to grow... We are getting roughly 2-5 planes a month between Air India, IndiGo and Akasa Air. "We are going to rapidly expand our connectivity and it is also our intent to try and establish the first international air hub in India," Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia told PTI in an interview. Air India and IndiGo placing orders for 970 planes, Go First filing for voluntary insolvency proceedings, an amended insolvency framework to address aircraft lessors' concerns, and air passenger traffic touching a record high of more than 4.63 lakh in a single day in November, were among the key developments in 2023. Scindia emphasised there is a "bullishness" with regard to civil aviation and the outlook is positive. "As far as airlines are concerned, we need to concentrate on a great travel experience, increased OTP (On Time Performance) and make sure we have as many aircraft in the air," the minister said.



For 2024, the country's largest airline IndiGo's CEO Pieter Elbers said the demand for air travel remains robust, and despite the global supply chain challenges, the overall operating environment remains conducive. While profitability will be uncertain, aviation consultancy CAPA Advisory said that after a long time, India has a stable airline system led by IndiGo and Air India Group. Looking back at 2023, following are among the notable developments. Go First, long impacted by Pratt & Whitney engine problems, filed for voluntary insolvency proceedings in May. Legal battles started by Go First lessors looking to take back their planes deepened and even forced the government to amend certain norms under the insolvency law. Prior to that, 2023 started off on a turbulent note for Tata Group-owned Air India as an incident of a drunk passenger allegedly urinating on a woman onboard an international flight that happened in 2022 flared up and aviation regulator DGCA also slapped a fine on the car-

Air, FlyBig, Fly91 and Air Taxi. Air India placed historic orders for 470 planes from Boeing and Airbus while IndiGo has placed the "world's largest ever single aisle fleet order" for 500 Airbus aircraft. Akasa Air is expected to place a three-digit order for aircraft soon. Air India will operate the wide-body A350 in the new year. However, grounding of aircraft remains a key concern. Among others, IndiGo is likely to ground some planes next year for inspection due to certain P&W engine problems. As Scindia said, "it is very unfortunate and shocking that most of the AOG (Aircraft On Ground) are due to one original equipment supplier that is P&W." In December, the civil aviation ministry said 164 planes were lying idle at 15 airports. More airports and terminal buildings are set to be operational, including the Jewar airport in Uttar Pradesh in September-October, and also Navi Mumbai airport in Maharashtra. "In 2014, we had 74 airports and in the last nine-and-a-half years under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we have built an additional 75 airports, taking the total to 149," he said. Delhi airport, the country's largest airport, is projected to see over 70 million passenger traffic this fiscal ending March 2024. While air traffic continued to soar, many a time passengers grappled with tough times, mainly in the form of flight delays and service quality issues.

Ministry refuses to disclose notes on deliberations to grant CERT-IN exemption from RTI Act

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Union personnel ministry has refused to disclose file notes related to deliberations to grant CERT-IN, the national nodal agency for responding to computer security incidents, exemption from the Right to Information Act, according to a response under the transparency law. According to a gazette notification on November 23, CERT has been included in the second schedule of the RTI Act which will exempt it from the provisions of the Act except when the information it holds and sought by an applicant pertains to allegations of corruption or human rights violations. Venkatesh Nayak, director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, said he approached the Department of Personnel and Training, seeking file notes related to the decision to include the organisation in the list of exempted organisations in the RTI Act. The information was denied to him, citing section 24 of the Act, he added. "Section 24 of the RTI Act provides that nothing contained in this Act shall apply to the intelligence and security organisations specified in the second schedule of the RTI Act. The proposal of exemption of Indian

PUBLIC NOTICE

This is to inform the general public that Sh. Abhishek Srivastava is the owner of Property No. 5-412 (Old Property No. 110) area measuring 50 sq. yds. out of Kharsa No. 116/13. Situated in Unauthorized Colony Mahavir Enclave Part II & III Utam Nagar Delhi. He acquired the above property Authorization Slip dated 01.11.2023 vide doc. No. 2023/1611/3018 executed by DDA. Sh. Abhishek Srivastava is now selling the Second Floor without roof rights of the above said property to Sh. Amrendra Kumar and further Sh. Amrendra Kumar is currently in the process of mortgaging the aforementioned floor with Aditya Birla Housing Finance Limited. Any objections or concerns regarding this transaction should be raised within a period of 07 days from the date of this public notice. Any objections submitted after the completion of this 07-day period will not be considered binding with respect to the said property or the interests of our client. If anyone wishes to raise an objection, please do so within the stipulated 07-day period by contacting Law Vertices: North (Advocates & Legal Consultants) at Office No. 11, 1st Floor, Building No. A-44A, Sector-16, Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201301. Landline(s): +91(0)120-3101683/4562809; e-mail: accounts@lvnorth.in

Computer Emergency Response Team from the ambit of RTI Act has been dealt in File No.1/3/2021-IR II which relates to amendment in second schedule to the RTI Act, 2005; the response from the DoPT said. It said the information provided by the organisations concerned, including the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team, for their inclusion in the second schedule is of secret nature and exempted under section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act. The section relates to information, disclosure of which would prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the state, relation with foreign state or lead to incitement of an offence. "Further, information is also exempted under section 8(1)(i) of the RTI Act being record of deliberations of Secretaries and other officers and part of the Note for Committee of Secretaries which itself is Secret," the response read. Nayak called the refusal "simply intriguing" because his previous applications seeking records related to the RTI exemption granted to other security and intelligence organisations were furnished. "When the NDA government decided to include the Strategic Forces Command (SFC) under the excluded list, the CPIO gave me all the information, including file noting and correspondence and the note put up to the Committee of Secretaries," he said.

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10,000 police personnel deployed to maintain law and order

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police is geared up to tackle any nuisance and law and order condition in the city on New Year's Eve while the traffic police have deployed more than 2,500 personnel for smooth movement of vehicles, officials said on Sunday.

According to the police, more than 10,000 personnel will be deployed on the ground to curb hooliganism and traffic violations.

"We want everyone to welcome the New Year with great zeal. But if someone is found causing nuisance on roads, they will face action," Deputy Commissioner of Police (northeast) Joy Tirkey said.

A senior police official said drunk driving, stunts by motorcycle riders and loud exhaust sounds of any vehicle are strictly prohibited in Delhi and stressed that no one will be



Delhi Traffic Police have been allowed to flout the rules. As many as 250 teams of the deployed to curb drunk driving, officials said. Movement of vehicles going

towards Connaught Place will be regulated after 8 pm on Sunday. Around 450 motorcycles will also be positioned at different places, Special Commissioner of Police (Traffic) SS Yadav said.

According to the police, adequate personnel will be deployed in areas where high footfall is expected.

Meanwhile, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) on Saturday said commuters will not be allowed to exit the Rajiv Chowk metro station after 9 pm on New Year's Eve to ease overcrowding.

However, entry of passengers into the station will be allowed, it said.

Services on the rest of the metro network will continue to remain available as per the regular timetable, DMRC Principal Executive Director Anuj Dayal said in a statement. On Sunday, police put up mul-

tiplayers of barricades in Delhi's border areas near Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The Delhi Fire Department is geared up to handle any emergency in the city on New Year's Eve.

"Our priority is to maintain a joyful atmosphere while prioritizing the safety of all people," Chief of Delhi Fire Service Atul Garg said.

In anticipation of high footfall at popular locations, the fire department has implemented strategic measures to handle any emergency.

"These locations include Ansal Plaza, Lajpat Nagar, Connaught Place, Palika Bazar, Gandhi Nagar Market, Pacific Mall, Rani Bagh Market, Chhatrapur, Majnu Ka Tila, Hauz Khas village market, Guru Hanuman Marg, Aero City Mukherjee Nagar, Kalka Ji temple, Prachin Hanuman temple and some other area," Garg said.

DFS stations fire tenders at key locations in city

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

As the national capital gears up to ring in the New Year, the Delhi Fire Services (DFS) has made elaborate arrangements to ensure that the celebrations go off smoothly, officials said on Sunday. The department has stationed fire tenders at key locations that are likely to witness high-octane celebrations and high footfalls, they added.

In a post on 'X', DFS chief Atul Garg said, "DFS has made elaborate arrangements for the safety of Citizens of Delhi on the eve of New Year and in addition to fire stations are in alert mode fire tenders will be placed at following locations to meet any

emergency if arises (sic). Happy new year to all."

Authorities have identified 10 to 12 vulnerable locations in the city where special arrangements have been made, the officials said.

These locations include Ansal Plaza, Lajpat Nagar, Connaught Place, Palika Bazar, Gandhi Nagar Market, Pacific Mall, Rani Bagh Market, Chhatrapur, Majnu Ka Tila, Hauz Khas Village market, Guru Hanuman Marg, Aero City, Mukherjee Nagar and the Kalkaji temple area.

"Our priority is to maintain a joyful atmosphere while prioritising the safety of all people," Garg told PTI earlier.

Sad to see Bhardwaj creating row over invites to Ram Mandir opening event: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a request to the people to not attend the Ram temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya on 22 January, Aam Aadmi Party spokesperson and Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj has questioned Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over inviting the upcoming event. Bhardwaj said the Ram Temple belongs to the whole country and who is the BJP to decide who to invite and who to leave out? He said the people will go whenever they want to.

Reacting over Bhardwaj's statement, Delhi BJP leaders said it is sad to see Aam Aadmi Party leader Saurabh Bhardwaj creating controversy over invites for Shri Ram Mandir consecration ceremony at Ayodhya on 22nd January.

Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said that they AAP MLA and his party Aam Aadmi Party like most other opposition parties



on record opposed to Shri Ram Mandir's construction till 4 years back and it is surprising to see that leaders of these parties are today creating controversy over invites for consecration ceremony.

The Delhi BJP Spokesperson said that Saurabh Bhardwaj statement smacks of political frustration and we wish to remind Bhardwaj that it is not BJP but Shri Ram Janam Bhumi Kshetra Trust which is

AAP national meeting to be held in virtual mode



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party's national executive meeting will be held virtually on Sunday, party sources said.

Delhi Chief Minister and AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal has been summoned by the

Enforcement Directorate to appear before it for questioning on January 3 in an excise policy-linked money laundering case.

"The meeting will be held virtually," the sources said.

Kejriwal returned to Delhi from a Vipassana meditation session on Saturday.



People take a stroll on the India Gate on the eve of the New Year 2024

Ranjan Dimri

Excise scam, former WFI chief case, Parliament breach dominate Delhi courts proceedings in 2023

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Grappling with a sexual harassment complaint against former WFI chief and BJP strongman Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a raft of cases related to the alleged excise policy scam involving Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) bigwigs, including Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, the UAPA case against news portal NewsClick and the glaring breach in Parliament security, Delhi's district judiciary was a hive of activity in 2023.

A special court dealing with the excise policy matters denied bail to former Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia in the alleged corruption and money laundering cases lodged by the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate, respectively. The court also denied bail to senior AAP leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh in a money laundering case linked to the alleged scam.

A Rouse Avenue court for



cases against lawmakers saw the then Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief Singh locked in a legal wrangle with a group of women grapplers who accused him of sexual harassment.

The court summoned Singh, accused of having committed offences like outraging the modesty of the women wrestlers, making sexually-coloured remarks, stalking and criminal intimidation, and granted him bail after he appeared before the judge, saying "no purpose will be served by taking him in custody, at this stage". It said, "When undertrial

and their sympathisers that she had accused Singh of sexual harassment because of perceived injustice to her.

The case against news portal NewsClick before a Delhi court under anti-terror law - the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act - involving its founder Prabir Purkayastha and human resources department head Amit Chakravarty also made the headlines.

The presiding judge, at the fag end of the year, received an application by Chakravarty seeking to turn an approver in the case being probed by the Delhi Police. The court also granted police more time to complete its investigation in the case.

The Parliament security breach case grabbed the headlines during December, with a Delhi court dealing with the custody proceedings of the six arrested accused. The court also received an application from police seeking polygraph test of all of them. It will be taken up for hearing on January 2.

Cases related to the 2020 North East Delhi riots also hogged newspaper headlines. In one such matter, a special Delhi court discharged student activists Sharjeel Imam and Asif Iqbal Tanha in the Jamia Nagar violence case, saying as the Delhi Police was unable to apprehend the actual perpetrators, it booked the accused as "scapegoats".

The court asked Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora to instruct all investigating officers (IOs) in cases related to the 2020 riots "to compulsorily attend the proceedings at the stage of consideration of charges".

A Delhi court also summoned former Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot in a criminal complaint filed by Union Minister Gajendra Singh Sekhawat, who accused him of defamation.

Another court acquitted former Haryana Minister Gopal Goyal Kanda in the abetment to suicide case involving former air hostess Geetika Sharma.

Kingpin of Mewat based ATM breaking gang arrested

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police's Special Cell has arrested a wanted criminal, also the kingpin of Mewat-based ATM breaking gang when he was on his way to Guwahati to commit the crime. According to police, the accused has been identified as Mohd. Jahid (31), a resident of Nuh (Mewat), Haryana. He was also found involved in 15 previous cases registered in the national capital and other states.

The official said that Jahid was also a 'proclaimed offender' in two cases. According to police, specific information was received about the arrival of a key member of the gang named Mohd. Jahid at Palam between 5 p.m. and 6.30 p.m. on December 25.

"A trap was laid around the red light at Palam Airport and Jahid was nabbed from the spot," said the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) Alok Kumar. On interrogation, it also came



to light that he and his associates have recently stolen Rs 7.5 lakh from an ATM booth in the Welcome area of Delhi, and a case has already been lodged there.

"Members of the gang used to identify unguarded ATM booths in less-lit and isolated areas. Thereafter, they conducted a thorough reconnaissance of the area around ATM booths. They would sprinkle black paint on the CCTV cameras after entering the ATM booths and would also wear face masks and monkey caps to conceal their identities," said the DCP.

"They would cut the machine with the help of gas cutters and take out the cash trays. Members of the gang would use robbed/stolen cars like Creta, Scorpio, etc. with fake number plates to commit crimes," said the DCP.

The DCP said that Jahid is a habitual offender and was previously involved in nearly 15 criminal cases including 14 ATM breaking in Delhi, MP, Haryana, and Assam.

"The remaining members of the gang have also been identified, and efforts are being made to nab them," the DCP added.

Graylag Geese join ever increasing flock at Surajpur Wetlands

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Surajpur wetland in Greater Noida has witnessed lesser number of migratory birds except comparatively larger number of Graylag Geese than other duck species in December.

According to TK Roy, Ecologist and Conservationist, Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) by Wetlands International South Asia, mismanagement by Gautam Budh Nagar Forest Division, Noida and making it an entertainment tourism park is one of reasons for the arrival of a lesser number of birds.

Roy said around 3,137 waterbirds of 37 species were found in Surajpur wetland in December, 2023. In 2022, 1,453 waterbirds of 46 species

arrived here. Ecologists say that several species of birds have stopped coming to the wetland as the residential colonies which have come up around Surajpur, are using it as a landfill. It said global climate change impact is the common reason of delayed and lesser migratory water birds arrival almost everywhere but several other reasons - dries up the wetland, covers the wetland surface by water hyacinth, over fill up the wetland by channelize most polluted industrial water and human disturbance also lead to lesser number of birds. Heaps of non-biodegradable waste - plastic bags, household waste and food scrap - can be seen piled near the waterbody that once hosted the hundreds of winter migrants.

As regards Surajpur wetland,



the survey said earlier the wetland used to very good site for diverse species of large number of long distant winter migratory water birds. The reserve forest was also good habitat for few other wildlife species and diverse species of terrestrial birds already decreased due to being promoted it as Entertainment Tourism Park by name of Ecotourism by cut down original reserve forest habitat about 30 - 40% with limited plantation of trees keep-

ing wide gaps and ground habitat developed as green grassland for picnic, entertainment, enjoyment activities. As a result forest habitat degraded and overall bird species diversity with population decreasing is disturbance for bird's foraging, roosting.

The sprawling Surajpur wetland, about 14km from Noida. It is situated near Surajpur Village in Dadri Tehsil of District Gautam Budh Nagar under Greater Noida Industrial Development Authority, Uttar Pradesh, which comes under Western Wildlife Circuit. Many birds come and pay a visit and often make it their home. It proves to be a good habitat for migratory birds including from Siberia. Wetlands are known for freshwater which is important for aquatic life where many ani-

mals and plants survive. One of the other major problems which Surajpur wetland is going through is the uncontrolled growth of Jalkumbhi also called Water Hyacinth. The wetland is located 800m from Delhi - Noida - Dadri Road, 6 Kms. from Dadri Railway Station, 26 Kms. from Delhi, 90 Kms. from Aligarh, 24 Kms. from Noida City and

3 Kms. from Greater Noida City, Uttar Pradesh. A survey conducted by Roy has found decline in arrival of migratory water-birds at wetlands at Delhi and NCR. This decline has been attributed to global climate change, high level of air pollution, delay in arrival of winter season, increasing human intervention and drying up wetlands.

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Modi to visit TN, Lakshadweep soon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Tamil Nadu and Lakshadweep on January 2 and 3 during which he will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of multiple development projects...



and three projects for rail line electrification viz Tiruchirappalli-Virudhunagar; Virudhunagar - Tenkasi Junction; Sengottai - Tenkasi Junction - Tirunelveli-Tiruchendur. The rail projects will help in improving the rail capacity to carry freight and passengers and contribute to economic development and employment generation in Tamil Nadu.

Minister will also lay the foundation stone of important road development projects. These include construction of 31 km long stretch four lane road from Mugaiyur to Marakkanam of NH 332A. The road will connect ports at the East Coast of Tamil Nadu, enhance road connectivity to the world heritage site - Mamallapuram and provide better connectivity to Kalpakkam Atomic Power Plant.

Madurai - Tuticorin Pipeline; and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL)'s 697 km long Vijayawada-Dharmapuri Multiproduct (POL) Petroleum Pipeline (VDPL). Further, the projects whose foundation stone will be laid include development of 323 Km of natural gas pipeline from Krishnagiri to Coimbatore section of Kochi-Kootanad-Bangalore-Mangalore Gas pipeline II (KKBMPL II) by Gas Authority of India Ltd (GAIL); and laying of POL pipelines in Common Corridor for proposed grass root terminal at Vallur, Chennai. These projects of the petroleum and natural gas sector will be a step towards fulfilling the industrial, domestic and commercial requirements of the energy in the region. These will also lead to employment generation in the region and contribute to employment generation.

ment projects worth more than Rs 1,150 crore. In a transformative move, the prime minister had resolved to overcome the challenge of slow internet speed in Lakshadweep island by initiating the Kochi-Lakshadweep Islands Submarine Optical Fiber Connection (KLI-SOFC) project and made an announcement on it in the Independence Day speech in August 2020 at the Red Fort. The project has now been completed and will be inaugurated by Modi. This will lead to an increase of internet speed for more than 100 times (from 1.7 Gbps to 200 Gbps), the statement said. For the first time since Independence, Lakshadweep will be connected through Submarine Optical Fibre Cable. The dedicated submarine OFC will ensure a paradigm shift in communication infrastructure in Lakshadweep islands, enabling faster and more reliable internet services, telemedicine, e-governance, educational initiatives, digital banking, digital currency usage, digital literacy etc. Modi will also dedicate to the nation the Low Temperature Thermal Desalination plant at Kadmat, which will produce 1.5 lakh litres of clean drinking water every day. He will also dedicate to the nation the Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTC) in all households of Agatti and Minicoy islands. Other projects which will be dedicated to the nation include the solar power plant at Kavaratti, which is the first ever battery backed solar power project of Lakshadweep. It will help to reduce dependency on Diesel based Power Generation plant; and the new administrative block and 80 Men barrack in India Reserve Battalion Complex at Kavaratti.

India developing defence industrial ecosystem for self reliance: Rajnath

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday said the Government is developing a strong base of domestic defence industrial ecosystem to make India a strategic economy and the defence ministry is making all efforts to achieve the target of becoming self-reliant in the defence sector. He made these assertions while addressing the 21st convocation ceremony of Tezpur University, Tezpur. Highlighting the various steps taken by the Ministry of Defence to achieve Aatm Nirbharta in defence, Rajnath stressed that for the first time, the import of arms was restricted. "We issued five positive indigenization lists, under which 509 such defence equipment have been identified, whose manufacturing will now be done indigenously. In addition, we have also issued 4 positive indigenization lists of Defence Public Sector Undertakings, in which 4,666 items have been identified which will now be manufactured in our country," he said. Underscoring the government's focus on domestic defence manufacturing, he quoted that for the first time, the production has crossed the record figure of Rs. One Lakh Crore. "The total value of India's defence exports, which



was Rs 1,521 crore in 2016-17, has increased almost 10 times to reach a record level of Rs 15,920 crore in 2022-23," the defence minister stated. Rajnath elaborated on the proactive attitude of the present government in tackling any situation, which has replaced the crisis of credibility with a culture of confidence. "India is no more tolerant of the 'let-it-be' approach. Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the new India believes in 'let's-do-it' approach," he said. On the issue of women empowerment, Rajnath said, the government has taken steps to ensure proper representation of women in all sectors including the military. "Today, women are walking shoulder to shoulder with men in every field in the country. From fighter planes to Chandrayan, there is no field

in which the presence of women is not seen," he said. Underscoring the significant role of youth in making the country Viksit Bharat, Rajnath said, the idea of making India an economic and military superpower is based on confidence in the capabilities of talented youth. "To empower the youth and enhance their capabilities, our government has promoted start-up culture and innovation ecosystem," he added. Mentioning the start-up culture initiated by the Ministry in the Defence Industrial Sector, Rajnath said the Innovation for Defence Excellence (iDEX) has been successfully promoting innovative ideas since its inception. "Because of the various efforts by the Government to promote entrepreneurship among youth, today there are over one lakh start-ups in the country," he said.

VHP seeks action against fraudsters duping people in name of Ram temple



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

The Vishva Hindu Parishad on Sunday said "some people" have been seeking funds in the name of the Ayodhya Ram temple trust without any approval and a complaint has been made to Uttar Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and the Union home ministry requesting for immediate action against them. Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) national spokesperson Vinod Bansal also cautioned people against falling into the trap of people "trying to dupe" them in the name of the temple trust - Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra. He also shared on the microblogging site the complaint sent to the Uttar Pradesh police chief, a copy of which was marked to Adityanath and Home Minister Amit Shah. "Beware! Some people are trying to cheat people carrying

fake ID of Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra," the VHP spokesperson Bansal said in a social media post. "We have sent the formal Complaint to the Uttar Pradesh DGP, Lucknow Range IG to take immediate steps in the matter of faith," Bansal said in another post on the microblogging site. In a social media post, the VHP had recently said that no one has been given permission to form a separate committee and collect funds for the January 22 consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya. "No one has been given permission to form a separate committee and print receipts to collect funds for (upcoming) consecration ceremony at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya," VHP general secretary Milind Parande had said. "Society should also remain alert in such a situation," Parande had said in his post on X on December 22.

Centre rejects Mann allegations on tableau

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

The Centre on Sunday rejected as "baseless" Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's criticism of the BJP-led government for not including the state's tableau in the Republic Day parade 2024 and his allegations of discrimination. The AAP leader recently attacked the central government for allegedly discriminating against Punjab and said that both Punjab and Delhi were excluded from the list of states whose tableaux have been selected for the parade on January 26. In its response, the Ministry of Defence issued a statement saying tableaux proposals from states and Union territories



and central ministries or departments are evaluated by an "expert committee" comprising eminent persons in the fields of art, culture, painting, sculpture, music, architecture and choreography among others. "The tableau proposal of Punjab was considered in first three rounds of meeting of the Expert Committee. After the third round of meeting, the

tableau of Punjab could not be taken forward by the Expert Committee for further consideration for not aligning to the broader themes of this year's tableau," it said. The defence ministry also said states and UTs not selected for the Republic Day parade 2024 were being invited to showcase their tableaux in Bharat Parv at the Red Fort from January 23-31 in accordance with a MoU signed with the states and UTs. However, Mann categorically stated that Punjab would not showcase its tableaux in Bharat Parv. In a post in Punjab on 'X', Mann said the state's tableau, which was to showcase the sacrifices made by freedom fighters such as Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev and Lala Lajpat Rai, will not be sent to 'rejected cat-

egories'. The defence ministry further said due to the time allotted for tableaux in the overall duration of the parade, shortlisting is done by the expert committee to ensure the participation of the best ones. For the Republic Day parade 2024, 30 states and UTs had shown willingness to participate, including Punjab and West Bengal, it said. "Out of these 30 States/UTs, like every year, only 15-16 States/UTs will be finally selected to present their tableaux in the Republic Day Parade 2024," the statement added. The statement further stated that as per the MoU, Punjab and Delhi have signed with the government of India, states have agreed to display their

tableau in the Republic Day parade in one of the three years starting from January 26, 2024. "Hence their criticism of not being selected this year (2024) is not objective and unfounded," it said. The ministry added that the tableau of Punjab was shortlisted for the Republic Day Parade from 2017 to 2022, six times in the last eight years. "As states have to be treated equally, it is essential that states should be given the opportunity to display their tableaux as per a formula. Government of India is preparing a three-year programme covering all states/UTs which will be shared with all the States/UTs. Hence, the criticism by these states is baseless," it asserted.

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Celebrate Diwali on Jan 22 to mark Ram temple inauguration: Shinde

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Sunday asked the Mumbai civic commissioner to illuminate temples and buildings here with decorative lights and "celebrate Diwali" on January 22, the day of consecration of Lord Ram temple in Ayodhya. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and more than 6,000 people are expected to attend the consecration ceremony at Ayodhya in UP.

Speaking at a cleanliness drive in Mumbai, CM Shinde said, "The Ram temple will be inaugurated on January 22. I want to ask to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) commissioner to celebrate Diwali across Mumbai city. Let there be lots of decorative lightings on all the temples and buildings in Mumbai." "All parts of Maharashtra should celebrate on January 22



with Diwali-like enthusiasm," the CM told reporters while responding to a question. The chief minister said the Ram temple was a dream of (Shiv Sena founder) late Balasaheb Thackeray and several devotees of Lord Ram. "Modiji made the dream (of building the Ram temple) into a reality. What PM Modi speaks, he ensures to make it a reality. Be it the Railways or airports, he implements his promises. Everyone accepts Modi's guarantees," Shinde said. He thanked PM Modi for

turning into reality the dream of crores of Indians and Balasaheb Thackeray's wish of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. Shinde said the only guarantee that works in the country at present is PM Modi's guarantee. The results of the recent assembly elections in three states (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh) have proved it, he added. Asked if the Ram temple inauguration was being used for political gains, Shinde said, "The Ram temple is a matter of people's faith, thus it cannot be a political issue." Those who were known for working from home, will sit permanently at home. They will get a strong message from voters, he said indirectly referring to his predecessor former chief minister Uddhav Thackeray. Such people should think properly before making any comment over the Ram temple, Shinde said. On Sunday, deep cleaning initiatives were undertaken at 10 places in Mumbai as part of

the government's ongoing drive to bring down the air pollution in the state capital and make it clean. Shinde spoke about the importance of such a campaign in Mumbai and other parts of the state. "We use recycled water for deep cleaning. We have not used drinking water for this purpose," he told reporters. The cleaning of beaches, major and small roads, public toilets and other places has been undertaken and the people, NGOs and schools are part of this drive, the CM said. "We need to take this cleanliness drive to all parts of the states. All the municipal corporations, councils and small towns will implement this cleanliness drive. Competitions will be organised among different self-governing bodies," he said. Shinde said his government is also encouraging road repairs as part of this drive. If there are some empty plots, concept like an urban forest can be implemented there, he said.

Congress in West Bengal divided over ties with TMC

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

One subtle move by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee seems to have left Bengal Pradesh Congress vertically divided over a possible alliance with the Trinamool Congress. Days after the top TMC leadership said that they could at best leave two parliamentary seats of Behrampur and Malda South — presently held by the trio-colour party — for the Congress following a declaration by the Chief Minister that her party would take on the BJP alone in the State a verbal battle has ensued in the PCC leadership with one side favouring alliance with Banerjee at any cost and the other wanting to stick to the previous seat-sharing arrangement with the Left. Close on the heels of Banerjee's ekla chalo statement PCC president Adhir said that neither he nor the Congress depended on the Chief Minister's mercy to win seats in Bengal. "I won the 2019 elections from Behrampur on



my own strength and won it this time also," he said. "Congress is fighting on its own ... we are strong enough to fight our own battle. If the TMC holds discussions with someone it is their responsibility to explain ... it is their own matter... Their leaders have said that they are with the INDIA alliance in the rest of the country but in Bengal they will fight alone ... the Congress will not beg for an alliance in this State because we are strong enough to win our own seats." However Malda South MP and a senior State Congress leader Abu Hasem Khan Chowdhury immediately opposed Chowdhury saying he was no body to decide on important

issues like an electoral alliance. Apparently unsure of his chances Abu Hasem said, "It is for the AICC to decide whether there will be any alliance with the TMC or not and Adhir Chowdhury has nothing to do with this ... whatever he said may be his own opinion." In 2019 the Congress won Behrampur and Malda South seats within a seat sharing formula with the Left Front. Even last year the Congress and the Left together trounced the TMC from Sagardighi Assembly seat in Murshidabad district by a whopping margin of 53,000 votes. It is another matter that the Congress candidate soon switched sides to join the TMC. Incidentally the Congress had this time round demanded at least six seats — of Darjeeling, Malda South, Behrampur, Murshidabad, Purulia and Basirhat from the TMC — for the alliance to be successful. The TMC apparently rejected the demand earmarking only two seats for the Congress. On the other hand if the Congress strikes an alliance

with the Left it is confident of getting about 8-10 seats apart from the present two, inside sources said. Referring to the issue of alliance, CPI(M) central committee member and former MP Sujan Chakrabarty said that the Left had made it clear that it will fight the BJP and the TMC in Bengal. "We had arrangements with the Congress earlier ... let us see if such a system can be worked out this time ... the two sides may take decision on this subsequently ... but in any case we are through with our Insaf Yatra led by Meenakshi Mukherjee which was an overwhelming success in the State." TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said that "if Adhir Chowdhury continues to hold the CPI(M) hands which itself has drawn a big zero in the State then it is his choice ... we don't have to say anything about that ... but he will have to remember that the Congress had been at the receiving end of the CPI(M) attacks for the 34 years of the Left rule."

ISRO to usher in 2024 with launch of satellite to study black holes

AP ■ SRIHARIKOTA

Dec 31 (PTI) ISRO is set to welcome the new year with the launch of its first X-Ray Polarimeter Satellite that would offer insights into celestial objects like black holes, onboard a Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle rocket on Monday. The launch comes after the success of its Gaganyaan Test Vehicle D1 mission in October. The PSLV-C58 rocket, in its 60th mission, would carry primary payload XPoSat and 10 other satellites to be deployed in low earth orbits. The 25-hour countdown commenced on Sunday for the lift-off scheduled at 9.10 am from the first launch pad at this spaceport, located about 135 kms east of Chennai, on January 1. "The countdown commenced for PSLV-C58 at 8.10 am today," ISRO sources said. The X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XPoSat) is aimed to investigate the polarisation of intense X-ray sources in space. According to ISRO, it is the first dedicated scientific satellite from ISRO to carry out research in space-based polarisation measurements of X-ray emission from celestial sources. Besides ISRO, the US-based National Aeronautics Space Agency (NASA) conducted a similar study — the Imaging X-Ray Polarimetry Explorer mission in December 2021 on the remnants of supernova explosions, the particle streams emitted by black holes and other cosmic events. While space-based X-ray astronomy has been established in India focusing on imaging, and time domain studies, Monday's mission marks a major value-addition to the scientific fraternity, the space agency said. The objective of the PSLV-C58 mission includes measuring polarisation of X-



rays in the energy band 8-30 keV emanating from about 50 potential cosmic sources, to carry out long term spectral and temporal studies of cosmic X-ray sources. The X-ray polarisation serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for examining the radiation mechanism and geometry of celestial sources. The primary payload of XPoSat is POLIX (Polarimeter Instrument in X-Rays) which is designed to measure polarimetry parameters by Raman Research Institute and XSPECT (X-ray Spectroscopy and Timing) built by the U R Rao Satellite Centre, Bengaluru. The Mission life is about 5 years. The space-based study of X-Ray polarisation is gaining utmost importance internationally, and in this context, the XPoSat mission would play a significant role, ISRO added. XPoSat is anticipated to bring substantial benefits to the Astronomy community globally. Apart from its capability of timing and spectroscopy-based observations, the insights derived from X-ray polarisation measurements on celestial objects like black holes, neutron stars, and active galactic nuclei, hold the potential to significantly improve the understanding of their physics.

Karnataka BJP MP accuses CM of targeting his family

PTI ■ MYSURU

BJP MP Pratap Simha on Sunday alleged that Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah is out to finish his family only to 'politically rehabilitate' his son Yathindra Siddaramaiah. He claimed that the Chief Minister is targeting him to pave the way for his son to win the Lok Sabha elections next year. Siddaramaiah dismissed the allegations, saying that only those who violate rules are arrested and not the innocent. Pratap Simha was reacting to his brother Vikram Simha's arrest in connection with the felling of a large number of trees in a farm in Hassan to grow ginger. Vikram was arrested on Saturday evening and taken to the hospital for a medical check-up today. "My brother's name was not there in the FIR earlier. He wasn't even absconding. Yet, he was arrested," the Mysuru-Kodagu BJP MP told reporters here.



Simha further claimed that the CM will not stop with the arrest. "For your (Siddaramaiah) son's political future, you will make all the efforts to trample Pratap Simha. You will defame me and drag my family into this. You are trying to frame my brother," the MP alleged. Simha charged that the Chief Minister is trying to rehabilitate his son Yathindra, who gave up the Varuna seat to enable his father contest the Assembly elections from the constituency in May this year. "For his son's future, Siddaramaiah is out to finish

my family. Please arrest my elderly mother and sister also but I want to tell you that the people of Mysuru-Kodagu are with me," the MP said. Speaking to reporters here, the Chief Minister rejected the charges. "Whoever violates rules will be arrested. Why will someone be arrested without any reason," Siddaramaiah sought to know. He said no innocent person would be harmed in his tenure. Rejecting Simha's allegations, Karnataka Forest Minister Eshwar Khandre said action would follow when trees worth crores of rupees are felled illegally.

ULFA pro talks faction defends peace pact

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Facing widespread flak over its peace accord, the leadership of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) pro-talks faction on Sunday defended the pact saying they received more than expected from the government. Addressing a press conference here after returning from New Delhi, ULFA (pro-talks) chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa said the integrity of Assam has been guaranteed through the agreement and the government of India has also committed to protect it. "We have got more than what we sought from the government of India regarding the development of Assam. However, many people are making fun of it saying it is just a package," he added. With the help of the peace agreement, the interests of the indigenous people have been protected, Rajkhowa said.



The militant leader also apologised to the people of the state for killing thousands of innocent citizens during the 44-year long armed insurgency. "I have gone to the houses of many people who lost their lives due to the struggle of ULFA and apologised to them. We also wholeheartedly apologise for the Dhemaji blast and the families of the victims," he added. The 2004 blast at Dhemaji College Ground on Independence Day had claimed 18 lives, including 13 children. A day after the blast, Rajkhowa said in a statement that security forces had used schoolchildren as shields to defy the outfit's boycott call.

95 detained after cops raid rave party in Thane; drugs seized

PTI ■ THANE

At least 95 people were detained after the police raided a rave party near a creek in Maharashtra's Thane city in the early hours of Sunday, an official said. Officials of the Crime Branch Unit V- Wagle Estate and Unit II Bhiwandi conducted the raid at an open space in a remote area near Vadavali Creek around 3 am, the official said. At least 95 persons, among them five women, were found partying at the site and have been detained, deputy commissioner of police (crime) Shivraj Patil said. The police have arrested Tejas Kubal (23) and Sujal Mahajan (19), who organised the party, he said. The police recovered 70 gm of charas, 0.41 gm of LSD, 2.10 gm of Ecstasy pills, 200 gm of ganja and alcohol from the scene, and also seized 21 motorcycles, the official said, adding that the total value of the seizure was Rs 8 lakh.

Air quality deteriorates in many Bihar cities with dip in mercury

PTI ■ PATNA

With a dip in temperature, the air quality index (AQI) of many cities in Bihar turned 'poor' on Sunday. Bhagalpur recorded 'very poor' air quality with an AQI of 324, while Arrah, Sasaram, Saharsa, Araria, Rajgir and Patna recorded 'poor' air quality. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) 'Air Quality Index' (AQI) bulletin of December 30 till 4 pm of 238 cities stated that Bhagalpur recorded an AQI of 324 (very poor level). Six other Bihar districts where the AQI was in the poor category on December 30 were Arrah (292), Sasaram (285), Saharsa (262), Araria (259), Rajgir (245) and Patna (208).



The AQI is an assessment of the air quality taking into account eight pollutants - PM 2.5 (particulate matter less than 2.5 microns), PM 10 (particulate matter less than 10 microns), nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, ozone, carbon monoxide, ammonia and lead.

An AQI between zero and 50 is considered "good" (minimal impact), 51 and 100 "satisfactory" (minor breathing discomfort to sensitive people), 101 and 200 "moderate" (breathing discomfort to people with lungs, asthma and heart diseases), 201 and 300 "poor" (breathing discomfort

to most people on prolonged exposure), 301 and 400 "very poor" (respiratory illness on prolonged exposure), and 401 and 500 "severe" (affects healthy people and seriously impacts those with existing diseases). Commenting on deteriorating air quality in the state, Bihar State Pollution Control Board (BSPCB) Chairman Devendra Kumar Shukla told PTI on Sunday, "It is true that the air quality has deteriorated in certain cities in the state. It is because of climatic conditions.... This deterioration in air quality is primarily due to northwesterly winds carrying pollutants from stubble fires, coupled with calmer wind conditions and dipping temperatures".

Vice President to visit Hamirpur on January 6

PTI ■ HAMIRPUR (HP)

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar will be visiting Hamirpur on January 6 and his programmes during the day include interactions with students of educational institutions, according to officials. Besides his interactions with students at the National Institute Technology and the Career Point University in Kharwad, the vice president will also be attending programmes at the Police Ground in Dosadka, the officials said. The district administration is making necessary preparations for his visit, they said. Hamirpur Deputy Commissioner Hemraj Bairwa, who reviewed the preparations for the proposed



visit on Saturday, said the detailed and final programme of the vice president has not been released yet. He directed officials to make all necessary arrangements according to protocol. Bairwa also asked the public works department and national highway officials to ensure immediate repair of all roads. Security would be beefed up ahead of the visit, the officials said.

NIA scaled up crackdown on terror networks in 2023

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) scaled up its crackdown against terror networks this year, conducting over 1000 raids after registering 68 cases and arresting 625 accused across the country, an official said on Sunday. The anti-terror federal agency also achieved a stupendous 94.70 per cent conviction rate with 74 accused sentenced in various cases, the official said. The official said another highlight of the NIA action in 2023 was multiple raids conducted to identify suspects behind the attacks on High Commissions of India in Ottawa and London and Consulate General in San

Francisco that involved criminal trespass, vandalism, damage to public property, and attempts to cause hurt to Indian officials and damage the Consulate building through arson. The agency identified 43 suspects behind these attacks using several innovative methods of investigation, including crowd-sourcing of information while investigating the larger conspiracy. "The attacks on the High Commissions of India in Ottawa and London, as well as on the Consulate General of India, San Francisco, USA, also remained the focus of the NIA actions offences against Indian interests abroad through the

year, which witnessed more than 50 raids and searches as part of the agency's efforts to unravel the conspiracy behind the attacks on Indian Missions abroad," the NIA Spokesperson said. She said the NIA has stepped up its investigation in these cases in recent months and examined more than 80 persons in India suspected to be part of the conspiracy. Besides getting five of India's most wanted, including Arsh Dala and Rinda, listed as "individual terrorists", four terror outfits were banned by the Centre in 2023 on NIA's proposal, the official said. The official said a total of 68 cases were registered this year as the agency went against

'Jihadi', operatives of terrorist outfits active in Punjab, Naxals and gangsters in a big way in 2023. These cases encompass 18 Jihadi terror cases in multiple states, three cases from Jammu and Kashmir, 12 cases of LWE, seven cases involving terrorist and organised criminal activity in Punjab, five cases of the Northeast, and two cases related to Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN). A total of 1040 pan-India searches and raids were conducted in the outgoing year against 957 the previous year, leading to the arrest of 625 accused - 28 per cent more than 490 arrested in 2022, the agency said, adding the arrested include 47

absconders, including five deported from the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The agency arrested 65 accused in ISIS cases, 114 arrested for jihadi terror cases, 45 accused of human trafficking cases, 28 accused of terrorist and organized criminal activity and 76 accused of Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) cases. As many as 513 accused were chargesheeted during 2023, against 459 in 2022, the official said. The agency said Rs 56 crore worth of assets belonging to the accused and suspects were attached as part of a strategy to squeeze terror funding and dismantle transnational terror-

criminal networks. "In 2022, the agency had attached a total of 37 properties worth Rs. 10.53 crore, while in 2023, the figure went up to 240 (including 156 bank accounts) with a total value of Rs. 55.90 crore. "These properties belonged to the accused and suspects involved in terrorism, LWE, explosives and other prominent cases. The attachments, made under various provisions of UA(PA), included 12 properties (of which four were bank accounts), worth Rs. 1.5 crore, of six listed 'Individual Terrorists', she said. The NIA achieved a "stupendous" 94.70 per cent conviction rate, with 74

accused sentenced in various cases in the outgoing year, the official said. "The number of persons chargesheeted and convicted stood, respectively, at 513 and 74, as against 459 and 79 in 2022. The 74 accused convicted during 2023 were sentenced to various quantum of 'Rigorous Imprisonment' and 'Fines as punishment,' she said. The agency said massive crackdowns across states were conducted to bust ISIS and Hizb-ul-Tahrir terror modules. A two-day anti-terror conference was organised in November to strengthen, synchronise and boost the nationwide response to terror, the official said. The agency arrested 47

suspects, 14 more than the last year, who were on the run. "One of the biggest breakthroughs in this regard came with the arrest of a key absconding accused in the Attari border heroin seizure case, involving smuggling of over 102 kgs of the narcotics from Afghanistan via the India-Pak border. "Also, arrests made upon deportation and extradition signify NIA's commitment to pursuing offenders across its international borders. While Amritpal Singh alias Ammy, Amrik Singh, Manpreet Singh alias Peeta and Mandeep Singh were deported from the Philippines, Vikram Brar was arrested upon deportation from the UAE," she said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Leap of faith!

2024 promises to be a year of happy and landmark developments for India and the world

As we bid farewell to 2023 and welcome the New Year, 2024 – a leap year – promises to be a roller-coaster. From international relations to sports events, political landscapes to technological advancements, there is much to look forward to in the next 12 months. To begin with, in world affairs, the BRICS nations – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – are expected to consolidate their alliance and expand their collaborative efforts. Besides, on the first day of the year itself, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are set to join the grouping as full members. This expansion will involve increased economic cooperation, joint initiatives in R&D and collective efforts to address global challenges such as climate change and public health crises. A series of crucial elections is scheduled in 2024 with India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the US among those going to polls. These elections will play a pivotal role in shaping the course of these nations. Indeed, the US elections will determine not only domestic policies but have implications for global dynamics, too. The year would be especially crucial for India as general elections will be held in April-May and the BJP will face off against the INDIA bloc for the first time. Before the polls, the Ram temple inauguration in Ayodhya and Rahul Gandhi's Nyay Yatra would be the major happenings that can have far-reaching impact on national politics. It would be interesting to watch how India navigates 2024.



The world's eyes will turn to Paris as the city hosts the 2024 Summer Olympics. This sporting extravaganza will not only showcase the prowess of the best athletes but also serve as a platform for world harmony. The tech landscape is also poised for groundbreaking developments in 2024. With advancements in Artificial Intelligence, quantum computing and space exploration, the year holds the promise of transformative technologies that could reshape the way we live and work. Glimpses of these technological advancements were visible in 2023 but now these promise to be more profound. India, with its burgeoning tech industry, is likely to play a significant role in these innovations. On the downside, however, the Ukraine war may linger on and uncertainty in Gaza persist. Another cause of concern could be COVID-19, or its sub-variants. All countries, including India, will have to strengthen healthcare systems and bolster pandemic preparedness. The New Year is expected to be crucial for global climate action. India, as a major player in the fight against climate change, is likely to take further steps to transition towards sustainable practices. International collaborations and commitments are anticipated to address environmental challenges collectively. It is crucial to approach the future with optimism, resilience and a commitment to collaborative efforts for a better and more sustainable world as not everything happens as planned or for the better. Here is wishing our readers a very Happy New Year.

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PICTALK



Girls in traditional Himachali attire hold balloons to form 2024 during New Year celebrations, in Shimla

Pak General plays a rare secular tune!



BHOPINDER SINGH

General Muneer is playing a very different tune, optics, text and the accompanying outreach as part of the much-needed recalibration

It is the regressive effect of religiosity that the politicians are in no position to take a stand against religious extremism and if anything, they have to maintain a façade of matching piety and sectarianism to garner popular votes. Historically there has been an unease about Pakistani Qaid-e-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah's first Presidential address to the Constituent Assembly (Aug 11, 1947). Amongst many counterintuitive statements addressed to the first (and only) nation to be born in the name of religion, is Jinnah's insistence on secularism and liberality, in it. Jinnah's stand was disagreeable for those who wanted it to be the literal 'land of the pure' or a theocratic state. Tellingly the religious hardliners ensured that the same was blacked out from newspapers and successive governments feigned ignorance and even removed the same from official records. Even audio recordings of this landmark speech mysteriously 'disappeared'. The shariaisation of Pakistan was enthusiastically partaken by successive dispensations and obliteration of the past and rewriting history that was bereft of any secularism or inclusivity, ensued. The Pakistan of current times is perhaps far too puritanical, extremist, and intolerant even by the standards of a Jinnah, the man who is responsible for the partition.

Today, the chickens of religious extremism are coming home to roost, and Pakistan is staring at the hopeless situation with almost all arms of governance i.e., politicians, bureaucracy, judiciary, clergy and even elements of the once secular, Pakistani Armed Forces, surrendering recklessly to such revisionist beliefs. Some leaders like Taliban Khan (Imran Khan) or even General Zia-ul-haq drove the slide into religious fire by giving its Armed Forces a revised motto like 'Iman, taqwa, jihad fi sabilillah' (A follower of none but Allah, the fear of Allah, Jihad for Allah) are to be blamed for the ensuing morass, ignorance and weaponisation of society that has forsaken better sense, for blind bigotry. Earlier 'Kashmir' and 'Islam' were the only two issues that banded the amoral concept of the 'two-nation theo-



ry' that besets Pakistan – today with the relative peace and progress of Kashmir (certainly when compared to Pakistan) and pernicious impact of religious extremism backfiring on Pakistan, there is a serious rethink about its patent ways. However, so deep-rooted and inextricable is the regressive effect of religiosity that the politicians are in no position to take a stand against religious extremism and if anything, they have to maintain a façade of matching piety and sectarianism to garner popular votes. In such charged and explosive times, even if there were to be progressive elements within bureaucracy or judiciary, they too would have to bend to the times, that be. All this societal and institutional capitulation virtually leaves only the relatively more disciplined and moderate institution of the Pakistani Armed Forces to take charge of the narrative and salvage the nation from its downward spiral. This too, is not easy as the Pakistani 'establishment' (Military) has also got infected with the invariable air of religiosity that blows across Pakistan. Little is known about the current Pakistani Army Chief's personal predilections other than that he too is a rare Haffuz (learnt the Quran completely) and that he is not from the flamboyant and westernised school of officering like an Ayub



ALL THIS SOCIETAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPITULATION VIRTUALLY LEAVES ONLY THE RELATIVELY MORE DISCIPLINED AND MODERATE INSTITUTION OF THE PAKISTANI ARMED FORCES TO TAKE CHARGE OF THE NARRATIVE AND SALVAGE THE NATION FROM ITS DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Khan, Yahya Khan, Pervez Musharraf etc. But presumably as the 'chosen' successor to the decidedly liberal former Army Chief, General Qamar Bajwa, at least he is not from the Imran Khan coterie (unlike the deposed Lt Gen Faiz Hameed). General Muneer has his back to the wall with him losing Pakistani soldiers to attacks from religious extremist groups, virtually daily. The days of railing gladiator-like against India, Kashmir, West/US or in support of the Taliban in Afghanistan have simply outlived their utility – General Muneer has no choice but to do the exact opposite, instead. With the Pakistan-facing Taliban breathing down his neck and the choice of 'normalising' relations with India still not on the practical menu – his best bet is to 'normalise' his relations with the United States and to actively demonstrate inclusive, healing and secular actions, within Pakistan's fractured society. General Muneer's dash to the United States where we met the who's who to reiterate his 'ally' status and beseech donors to bail out Pakistan from the economic mess, is from the same playbook. Last week he did the unthinkable in recent times by making a bold outreach to the vulnerable Christian community during Christmas and suggesting a refreshing definition of

the 'enemy' of Pakistan to be one who was, "hell-bent towards creating fissures using religious, ethnic and political vulnerabilities". Clearly traditional enemies like 'India' or new ones like 'West' or 'US' took a backseat. The General got his official institutional social media handle i.e., Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) to talk about promoting greater interfaith harmony! The departure from usual content further entailed insisting on 'truth and knowledge-based opinions about national issues rather than following rhetoric and propaganda'. The situational coup de grace was when he tellingly invoked the missing bits from Jinnah's deliberately suppressed speech on Aug 11, 1947, and posted verbatim Qaid's comment, "You are free. You are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan". Clearly, General Muneer is knowingly playing a very different tune, optics, text and the accompanying outreach are part of the much-needed recalibration. Ironically, India would want the General to succeed as it can ill-afford a failed state on its border.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

2023: THE YEAR THAT WAS

Sir — India reflects on a year (2023) marked by significant political, sports, and entertainment milestones. From the country rejoicing as Chandrayaan-3 landed successfully on the moon to collective mourning during multiple natural disasters and heartbreak when India lost the cricket World Cup finals - 2023 was a roller-coaster ride for the country. India had a lot to celebrate this year - a new Parliament, two successful space missions, an effective rescue mission to drill out people stuck inside a collapsed tunnel and the Indian stock market scales to new highs. But the ethnic violence in the Northeast that led to hundreds of people losing their lives, multiple natural disasters and accidents killing scores and reputed women wrestlers of the country fighting against sexual harassment also dominated the headlines this year. India had a lot to celebrate this year. In May, India received a new Parliament building, described as "embodying the culture, pride, and spirit of the entire nation". Situated adjacent to the existing Parliament House and constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 971 crore, the new building can accommodate 888 parliamentarians in the Lok Sabha and 300 in the Rajya Sabha, representing an increase from the existing 543 and 250. India rejoiced in July with the launch of Chandrayaan-3, its moon mission. The celebration continued into August when Chandrayaan-3 made history by achieving a successful lunar landing on August 23. Though it's not good for the country, even then India overtakes China as the world's most populous country: Officially surpassing China, India is now the most populous country globally. Taking the helm of the G20, India assumed the role of host for a two-day summit in New Delhi on September 9-10, bringing together representatives from member and guest nations. Politically, the nation witnessed the creation of the INDIA bloc, record-high MP suspensions, and Assembly polls in nine states. The month of March witnessed the dominating headlines of the disqualification of

India's diplomatic victory



The eight Indian Navy veterans facing the death penalty in Qatar have seen their sentences reduced; a higher court in Qatar commuted their punishments to prison terms of 3-25 years. The Ministry of External Affairs of India confirmed the reduction in sentences for the eight former Navy officers involved in the Dabra global case. The reduction of the death sentence

followed diplomatic efforts by New Delhi. Prime Minister Modi also met Qatar's Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on the sidelines of COP 28 in Dubai. The meeting appears to have played a significant role in this case. The signing of the 2014 treaty, enabling the transfer of prisoners between India and Qatar to complete their sentences in their home country, adds an important dimension to this case. The navy veterans may be brought to India for the rest of their imprisonment. This reversal of the death sentence highlights the value of diplomatic agreements. This can be termed as one of India's recent diplomatic victories, but the Indian government and spy agencies have to be careful while conducting operations on foreign soil. Indian nationals have recently been arrested in different countries due to charges of espionage and murder.

Preetiyukta Mohakud | Bhubaneswar

senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi from the Lok Sabha. **Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee** | Faridabad

WITCH HUNTING

Sir — It is deplorable that the primitive and evil practice of "witch hunting" continues to thrive in parts of India, especially in Assam. An Adivasi woman was burnt alive by a group of men, in front of her husband, suspecting her to practice "witchcraft" in Assam's Sonitpur district a few days ago, sending shock waves across the country. With such despicable incidents being reported from the state at a frightening frequency it is time for the government and the police to tie loose ends up in law. A strong law on prohibition and prevention of witch hunting does exist in Assam but the enforcement has been indecisive. Witch hunting is a "mob culture"; the government cannot be content with mere slogans and awareness drives. Women are the targets in areas where rumour-mongering on causes of disease and death is blamed on the "witches". **Ganpathi Bhat** | Akola

DISPOSAL OF URBAN WASTE

Sir — The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has proposed to use inorganic solid waste in the construction of highway road projects, following the success of pilot projects. To resolve the problem of disposal of urban solid waste and limited land availability for construction of embankments, MoRTH through NHAI has undertaken two pilot projects for the utilisation of inert material which is one of the major components of municipal solid waste. The disposal of solid waste generated daily is a major environmental challenge being faced in urban areas across the country. As per a rough assessment, around 10,000 hectares of land are locked in dump sites. Due to limited land availability, these landfill sites are on the verge of attaining maximum capacity and pose serious environmental and health hazards. **Bhagwan Thadani** | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Vijayakanth: The tragedy king of Tamil politics

Despite some highs, Vijayakanth would be remembered as an actor who failed to make an impact in politics



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

Vijayakanth, popularly known as Karuppu MGR (the black MGR) and poor man's Rajinikanth, rose to fame as an actor in low-budget Tamil movies. Though he had a string of successes, movie makers were not confident in betting on him as a minimum-guarantee actor. He earned the goodwill of the people through social work and charity. The Desiya Mupporukku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK for short) was launched by Vijayakanth in 2005 at a time when the Tamil electorate was waiting for a refreshing change from the DMK and the AIADMK, with which they were frustrated. Vijayakanth offered the voters a corruption-free and development-oriented government under him. Though the DMDK had contested from all the 234 assembly constituencies, the only person to get elected from the party was Vijayakanth, his first foray into the assembly. The DMDK managed to mobilize 8.38 per cent of popular votes and there was a feeling that Vijayakanth could be the third alternative the people were waiting for.



A section of the political pundits termed the reduction in the number of seats won by the AIADMK and the DMK as a result of DMDK cutting into the traditional vote share. The DMDK increased its vote share in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls to 10 per cent though the party drew a blank in the scoreboard. Leaders like Panruti Ramachandran who was in political wilderness following his ouster from the AIADMK had joined Vijayakanth and advised him to forge an alliance with Jayalalithaa. In the 2011 assembly election, the DMDK emerged as the second largest party after the AIADMK winning 29 seats. The DMK lost the race for the post of Leader of Opposition. Had Vijayakanth restricted his tantrums and loose speeches in the assembly, it was almost certain that he would have occupied the

prime position in Tamil Nadu politics. But it was not to be like that. Vijayakanth ridiculed Jayalalithaa when she hiked the power tariff as well as the price of milk sold by the State Government. Within a fortnight more than 15 members of the 29-member DMDK crossed over to the AIADMK and sat as a separate block. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the DMDK cast its lots with the NDA. The AIADMK swept the polls by winning 37 of the 39 seats leaving one each to the BJP and the PMK. The husband-wife team earned a big appreciation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the industrious and hard campaign done by them across the State. When it was time for the 2016 assembly polls, Vijayakanth made yet another faux pas by joining hands with Thol Thirumavalavan (VCK, a Harijan outfit) and Vaiko's MDMK. The Thirumavalavan and Vaiko declared that Vijayakanth would be the Front's chief minister candidate. He lost the election and forfeited his deposit while his party failed to win even a sin-

gle seat. Vijayakanth understood that theatrics alone would not help him to win elections. The political grapevine is that Vaiko and Thirumavalavan had a hearty laugh after the results were announced! The results of the 2016 election took a heavy toll on the health of Vijayakanth and his public appearances became rare. Vijayakanth was not his old self and had lost coherence in speech and way of thinking. What his life tells the world is that politics is a different game and one should have an inherent passion for the game of power play. M G Ramachandran and J Jayalalithaa who made it to the top from the world of celluloid had learnt a lot about politics before venturing out to this uncertain terrain. Tamil Nadu people will remember Vijayakanth as the king of tragedy who failed to make an impact in politics. The only consolation for his fans is that there are no other political leaders in the present generation in Tamil Nadu who would create pangs of separation as Vijayakanth. (The writer is special correspondent The Pioneer; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

DEALING WITH FOMO OF OUR KIDS

Have conversations with your children, discover what lights up their eyes



ARCHANA AGARWAL

Remember when coding suddenly became the talk of the playground? It seemed like overnight; every parent was signing their kid up for coding classes. But not every child dreams in algorithms and computer languages. Some may thrive with paints and canvases, others with numbers, and some with the simple magic of a well-spun story. In the rush to keep our children at the forefront, it's easy to forget that keeping up with the neighbours' kids isn't the key to our children's success. It's like this: if little Joey next door is a piano prodigy, forcing your own child to tinkle the ivories isn't going to turn them into Mozart if their heart just isn't in it.

The Myth of Keeping Up — Why More Isn't Always Better

When kids are pushed into activities they don't enjoy, they don't shine, and that spark of learning dims. That's not just opinion; it's what many parents and educators see time and again. Take it from someone who's seen the light. The new education policy is about realizing that our kids aren't cookie-cutter samplings. They're individuals, each with their own quirks, interests, and dreams.

It works like this. Instead of a classroom full of future engineers and doctors, picture one where each student dives into learning that fits them just right—whether it's astronomy or ancient history. That's where personalized learning comes in. It's an approach that says every child's education should be as unique as their fingerprint. The truth is, discovering what a child loves, what they're good at, should start early. Think of it as planting a garden of talents. The earlier you find the right seeds—in this case, a child's interests—the better you can nurture them into full bloom. For instance, Sachin Tendulkar, was not on a cricket field, but sitting in an accounting class he cared nothing about. He may never have become the master blaster we revere today.



Tailoring Education to Fit Every Child

So, what parents and guardians need isn't a crystal ball to see the future, but a little faith. It's trading in the anxiety-driven FOMO for a calm trust in our children's natural curiosity and their right to a tailored education. Let's channel our drive to do right by our kids into helping them explore their unique paths. The message is clear: let's not wait for a career crisis in ninth grade to figure out who they want to be. The journey starts now. By aligning their present explorations with their natural inclinations, we're not only preparing them to succeed—we're setting them up to be happy, too. So, next time we feel that tug of FOMO as we hear about the latest trend sweeping through the schoolyard, let's remember that our kids aren't missing out—they're just on a different adventure, one that honours their individuality and where the endgame is joy in learning and in life.

How Can We Help?

We can start small. Have conversations with your children, discover what lights up their eyes, and create that spark. Then foster it, guide it, and watch as it grows into a flame that propels them through life. This is the true antidote to FOMO: facilitating a journey of self-discovery for our kids, grounded in faith in their unique talents, and leading to accomplishment and contentment that are both profound and personal. Your child doesn't need to ride the wave of every passing fad, they need the support to sail their own course—a course that's just as worthy, rewarding, and bursting with potential. After all, the goal isn't to clone the genius next door but to cultivate the genius within.

(The writer is co-founder & CEO, of Joonify, views are personal)

Dubai Consensus endorses Indian view



K S TOMAR

COP28 exhibits India's philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is a family) and extends unequivocal support to UAE's COP28 presidency



It is In Consonance With Cop28's Future Action Plan. Coal, Gas and Oil may stay for some decades in developing countries including India. The outcome of the recent 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP28, held in Dubai was a completely juxtaposition and collocation of a well-thought strategy and farsighted vision as its 11,000-word unanimously called for transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems in an equitable and orderly manner in the world which is also being termed as India's victory as compared to previous summits. COP28 exhibits India's philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the world is a family) and extended unequivocal support to UAE's COP28 presidency which has shown transparency, fairness and free exchange of thought amongst all participating countries.

India's future strategy. India has already projected its resolve to become carbon-neutral by 2070 hence it does not have any plan to re-purposing coal-based power stations before 2030. India has stressed the dire need for the accelerated efforts which are required amongst the countries towards the goal of phase-down of unabated coal power. It leaves room for India to avert an energy crisis because it permits a requirement-based addition of new coal plants which is essential for its fast-growing economy. Due to China and India's pressure and weightage, the UAE Consensus document dropped references to "limiting the permitting of new and unabated coal power generation" which is in the interest of people of both nations and will prove beneficial in the long run. But it is a fact that India will have to depend upon fossil fuels for longer periods as compared to developed nations though more than 100 nations have pleaded for the phasing out of coal-based dependence. Experts suggest that developed nations will have to liberally contribute to the fund meant for the purpose of achieving the goal for fossil fuels otherwise it will remain as a mirage.

The success of the event rightly warranted celebrations which was visible but critics say that it could be short-lived as production of Oil, coal and gas continue to rise hence Fossil fuel companies are focusing and planning for enhanced production for decades. As per data, several countries are still fully reliant on fossil fuels for revenue and economic growth which makes the path patchy but a good beginning has been made to tackle the climate crisis.



ONE OF THE BIGGEST TAKEAWAYS FROM COP28 PERTAINS TO THE LACK OF COMMITMENT AND RESOLVE OF DEVELOPED NATIONS TO PROVIDE SUFFICIENT FUNDS TO MOST CLIMATE-VULNERABLE NATIONS TO ADAPT TO THE ESCALATING IMPACTS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Environment experts say that India's strategy and policy are in accordance with the Dubai Declaration which lends credibility and farsightedness to the limitations on permitting new and persistent coal generation in several countries in the world. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has demonstrated his resolve to make climate action, a collaborative process, which leaves no one behind and takes every nation along to achieve the final goal.

In view of the marathon discussion during the COP28 conference, none can deny the fact that India believes in the climate action plan which veers around the theme of displaying collaboration and camaraderie for action-oriented approach towards a healthier and greener future. India has urged every nation to adopt decisions of the Dubai Consensus which have got the theme of Global Stock-take and The Global Goal thereby re-emphasizing PM Modi's principle based on equity and climate justice. Experts say that India has demonstrated through its G20 presidency climate action that its resolve is based on the principle of collective action which ensures the participation of every country.

Victory For India's Policies COP28 provided an equal playing field for India and other developing nations whereas COP26 held in Glasgow was a big setback because its declaration called for the 'phase down of unabated coal power' which is the backbone of our fulfilment of energy needs. It did not mention the use of fossil fuels like oil and gas which are being used by developed nations including the United States.

Contrary to it, the "Dubai Consensus" is being dubbed as a landmark event in the history which was signed by 200 nations and became a reality despite some dissenting voices which, no doubt, is a big achievement of the much criticized U.A.E Presidency. Experts attribute it to other factors like commitment, flexibility and mandatory requirement of each country to survive in future.

India to become carbon-free by 2070

India has already projected its resolve to become carbon-neutral by 2070 hence it does not have any plan to re-purpose coal-based power stations before 2030. India has stressed the dire need for the accelerated efforts that are required amongst the countries towards the goal of phase-down of unabated coal power. It leaves room for India to avert an energy crisis because it permits the addition of new coal-based plants which is essential for its fast-growing economy. Due to China and India's pressure and weightage, the UAE Consensus document dropped references to "limiting the permitting of new and unabated coal power generation" which is in the interest of people of both nations and will prove beneficial in the long run. But it is a fact that India will have to depend upon fossil fuels for a longer period as compared to developed nations though more than 100 nations have pleaded for the phasing out of coal-based dependence. Experts suggest that developed nations will have to liberally contribute to the fund meant for the purpose of achieving the goal for fossil fuels otherwise it will remain as a mirage.

The United States backs Dubai consensus. Experts appreciate U.S. Climate Envoy John Kerry's clarion call to consider the COP28 deal, as a clear and unambiguous message to the world, that needs to move away from fossil fuels which has been agreed upon by even those countries that economically rely on fossil fuels. It is also significant that the fossil fuels issue was on the table for discussion and every nation is striving hard to find a long-term solution that should augur a new era in the field of climate action.

Critics have got their reservations about the COP28 summit agree-

ment which lacks a comprehensive account of all factors in order to achieve carbon emission targets in future.

Several scientists have expressed their concern over carbon capture which is still unproven and there is an attempt to distract the attention from policies to cut fossil fuels. The doors have been left open to ensure the continuation of the fossil fuels expansion drive which may have an adverse impact on the final goal of the COP28 declaration. Analysts opine that one of the biggest Takeaways from COP28 pertains to the lack of commitment and resolve of developed nations to provide sufficient funds to most climate-vulnerable nations to enable them to adapt to the escalating impacts of the climate crisis besides strengthening their economies to move towards renewable energy and achieve Net Zero goal by 2050. The final draft does not take care of the earlier commitment of \$100 billion per year by developed nations per year which has not been met so far. As per the projected figure, developing nations will require about \$6 trillion prior to 2030 and adaptation may warrant \$388 billion per annum and a clear energy transition will consume \$4.29 trillion per year until 2030. It does not mention even the minimum level of funds requirement and it is silent on this issue whereas a commitment has been made for a meagre fund of \$470 million which needs to be enhanced.

Against this backdrop, climate experts and scientists opine that there is no option with developing nations but to switch over to new targets. It is an open secret that these nations are dictated by their energy needs and weak financial status hence oil, gas and coal are here to stay though COP28 may show a path to understanding the serious fallout leading to a climate catastrophe in future.

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

Unidentified disease takes toll on livestock in Doda, Jammu

The administration must swiftly dispatch a team of veterinary doctors to the affected areas, to safeguard the livestock of poor, and their livelihood

Amidst the renewed headlines of the COVID-19 pandemic, a different crisis is unfolding in the secluded Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir. Here, an unknown ailment has become a cause of worry among the nomadic communities, claiming the lives of numerous domesticated animals that constitute the primary source of income for the underprivileged. Consequently, the economic repercussions of these animal deaths are causing widespread distress. The local veterinary department has faced challenges in identifying the disease and administering appropriate treatment.



BABER NAFICE

the animals stopped eating and drinking, succumbing to the illness within a few days. It is crucial to note that for the denizens of these remote regions, livestock rearing is a means of economic empowerment as they earn their income through the sale of milk and dung. The gravity of the issue becomes apparent when considering that numerous households in this area rear hun-

dreds of animals. There have been repeated pleas from the locals urging prompt administrative intervention and measures to preserve the animals' lives. The administration has yet to dispatch veterinary doctors to the affected villages, intensifying the distress among the populace.

In this context, social worker Muhammad Iqbal emphasizes that the residents of these mountainous regions confront various challenges during the winter season. The area remains snowbound for three months, rendering it inaccessible. Failure to address these challenges before winter sets in could significantly impact the overall well-being of the people in this region. Another social worker, Adil Hussain, points out that the unknown

epidemic among livestock has been steadily increasing in these areas for some time, hinting at potential future difficulties for the local population.

Sayma Bano, a local woman, is deeply troubled by the lack of compensation for the losses incurred due to the death of livestock from the disease. She emphasizes the crucial need for the administration's attention to compensate the poor for their losses. Sayma has already informed the District Development Commissioner, Vishwapal Mahajan, about the dire situation. She urges him not only to arrange compensation for the deaths of animals but also to ensure better treatment for the surviving livestock against this disease. Despite their



efforts, there has been no positive response so far. She underscores that the administration's silence on this issue is aggravating their difficulties. Fatima Farooq, the Block Development Officer of

Thathri, adds to the concern by stating that this unknown disease has been progressively affecting the livestock in the Thathri sub-district. The current trajectory of the disease spreading this year indicates

that people might have to face more difficulties in the near future.

The central question arises: What is this disease, and what are its underlying causes? Addressing this query, local veterinarian Dr Talib Hussain mentions that the exact causes of this disease are yet to be determined. However, changing environmental conditions and adverse weather are believed to be contributing factors. Poor-quality fodder is also identified as a potential cause for the disease's spread. Dr Hussain advises livestock owners to provide their animals with fresh grass instead of contaminated fodder. While he acknowledges that the government and administration are taking the issue seriously, he highlights a severe shortage of

veterinary doctors in the Doda district. Consequently, it's impractical for doctors to visit every household for animal inspections. Nevertheless, he suggests that through veterinary camps organized by the department, animal treatment can be facilitated. Dr. Hussain urges livestock owners to take precautions themselves and promptly contact the nearest veterinary doctor if any signs of illness appear in their animals. Despite the challenges, there is hope that the administration will swiftly dispatch a team of veterinary doctors to these areas, safeguarding both the income sources of the poor and their livestock from this unknown disease.

(Baber Nafice is a journalist from Doda, J&K. Views are personal. Charkha Features)

Israeli strikes in central Gaza kill at least 35

AP ■ DEIR AL-BALAH

Israeli strikes in central Gaza killed at least 35 people Sunday, hospital officials said, as the military targeted areas in several parts of the territory a day after the country's prime minister said the war will continue for "many more months," resisting international calls for a cease-fire.

The military said Israeli forces were operating in Gaza's second-largest city, Khan Younis, and residents reported strikes in the central part of the tiny enclave, after Israel this week made that region the new focus of its war.

The war has raised fears of a broader regional conflagration. The US military on Sunday said it shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired toward a container ship by Yemen's Houthis rebels in the Red Sea. Hours later, four boats tried to attack the same ship, but US forces opened fire, killing several of the armed crews, the US Central Command said.

Israel says it wants to destroy Hamas' governing and military capabilities in Gaza, from where it launched its October 7 attack on southern Israel that killed 1,200 people and took 240 people hostage, according to Israeli authorities.

Israel's unprecedented air and ground offensive has killed more than 21,600 Palestinians and wounded more than 55,000 others, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza.

The war has sparked a humanitarian crisis, with a quarter of Gaza residents facing starvation, according to the United Nations. Israel's bombardments have levelled vast swaths of the territory, making parts uninhabitable and displacing some 85 per cent of Gaza's inhabitants.

Israel expanded its offensive to central Gaza this week, targeting a belt of dense urban neighbourhoods that house refugees from the war surrounding Israel's creation in 1948 and their descendants. The fighting has left Palestinians in Gaza with the feeling that nowhere is safe.

In the area of Zweida in central Gaza, an Israeli airstrike killed at least 13 people and

wounded dozens of others, according to witnesses. The bodies were draped in white plastic and laid out in front of a hospital, where prayers were held before burial.

"They were innocent people," said Hussein Siam, whose relatives were among the dead. "Israeli warplanes bombarded the whole family."

Officials from Al-Aqsa Hospital in central Deir al-Balah said the 13 were among 35 bodies received on Sunday.

The Israeli military said it was battling militants in Khan Younis, where Israel believes Hamas leaders are hiding. It also said its forces operating in Shati, in northern Gaza, found a bomb in a kindergarten and defused it. Hamas continued to launch rockets toward southern Israel.

Israel has faced stiff resistance from Hamas since it began its ground offensive in late October, and the military says 172 soldiers have been killed during that time.

The magnitude of the destruction in Gaza coupled with the war's length has raised questions about the achievability of Israel's goal to quash Hamas as well as about its plans for post-war Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said Israel must maintain open-ended security control over the Gaza Strip, without saying what would come next. At a news conference Saturday, where he said the war would continue for "many more months," he reiterated his intention to preserve an Israeli military foothold in a narrow strip of land in southern Gaza near the border with Egypt.

"(It) must be in our hands, it must be sealed. It's clear that any other agreement will not guarantee the demilitarization that we need and require," Netanyahu said. Israel says Hamas has smuggled weapons in through the Egyptian border, but Egypt is likely to oppose any Israeli military presence there.

In his public remarks about Israel's plans for the Gaza Strip, Netanyahu has also said he won't allow the internationally-backed Palestinian Authority, which administers some parts of the West Bank, to participate in

any future rule over Gaza.

That position has put Netanyahu at odds with the Biden administration over who should run Gaza after the war. The US backs the idea that a unified Palestinian government should run both Gaza and parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank as a precursor to eventual statehood.

Israeli media have reported that Netanyahu has repeatedly dodged holding meetings with his War Cabinet about the post-war possibilities.

Israelis, who still largely stand behind the war's goals, are showing signs they are losing patience.

On Saturday night, thousands protested against Netanyahu, one of the largest demonstrations against the long-serving Israeli leader since the war began. The country, which is sharply divided over Netanyahu and a legal overhaul plan he has set in motion, has remained mostly united over the war.

"It is true that the state of Israel has many enemies and threats, but unfortunately today Prime Minister Netanyahu and his continued rule is the most significant existential threat to our country and our society," said protester Gal Tzur.

A separate protest Saturday called for the release of the 129 remaining hostages held by Hamas. Families of hostages and their supporters have demanded that the government prioritize hostage releases over other war objectives, and have staged large protests every weekend.

Egypt, one of the mediators between Israel and Hamas, has proposed a multistage plan that would kick off with a swap of hostages for prisoners, accompanied by a temporary cease-fire — along the lines of an exchange during a weeklong truce in November. But the sides still appear far from striking a new deal.

The leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad militant group holding Israeli hostages said Sunday there will be no exchange with Israel before the war ends and Israel withdraws its troops from the Gaza Strip, echoing Hamas' position.

US forces shoot down ballistic missiles in Red Sea

AP ■ BEIRUT

The US military said Sunday it shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired toward a container ship by Yemen's Houthis rebels in the Red Sea. Hours later, four boats tried to attack the same ship, but US forces opened fire, killing several of the armed crews, the US Central Command said. No one was injured on the ship.

The Singapore-flagged MAERSK HANZGHOU reported they had already been hit by a missile Saturday night while transiting the Southern Red Sea and requested assistance, CENTCOM said in a statement. The USS GRAVELY and USS LABOON responded to the call for help, and the Denmark-owned vessel was reportedly seaworthy and no injuries were noted, the statement added.



"This is the 23rd illegal attack by the Houthis on international shipping since Nov. 19," CENTCOM said.

In another statement, CENTCOM said the same ship issued an additional distress

call about a second attack "by four Iranian-backed Houthis small boats." The attackers fired small arms weapons at the MAERSK HANZGHOU, getting to within 20 meters (about 65 feet) of the vessel, and

attempted to it, CENTCOM said.

A contract-embarked security team on the ship returned fire, the central command said. U.S. helicopters from the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier and GRAVELY responded to the distress call and while issuing verbal warnings to the attackers, the small boat crews opened fire on the helicopters using small arms, the statement said.

"The US Navy helicopters returned fire in self-defense," sinking three of the four boats, killing the crews while the fourth boat fled the area, CENTCOM said, and no damage to US personnel or equipment was reported.

The Iran-backed Houthis have claimed attacks on ships in the Red Sea that they say are either linked to Israel or heading to Israeli ports. They say

their attacks aim to end Israel's air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip following the attack by the Palestinian militant group Hamas on Oct. 7.

On Saturday, the top commander of U.S. naval forces in the Middle East said Houthi rebels have shown no signs of ending their "reckless" attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea even as more nations join the international maritime mission to protect vessels in the vital waterway and trade traffic begins to pick up.

Since the Pentagon announced Operation Prosperity Guardian to counter the attacks just over 10 days ago, 1,200 merchant ships have travelled through the Red Sea region, and none has been hit by drone or missile strikes, Vice Adm. Brad Cooper said in an Associated Press interview.

Sunak keen to clinch FTA with India by April: Report

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is keen to clinch a free trade agreement (FTA) with India in time for Easter, which falls at the end of March 2024, according to a UK media report. The India-UK FTA talks began in January last year, aimed at significantly enhancing the GBP 36-billion bilateral trading partnership. A new round of negotiations, expected to be the last, is set to start early in the new year after the thirteenth round concluded on December 15.

"Prime Minister Mr Sunak and India's premier Narendra Modi are said to be keen to get the deal wrapped up by April," reads a report in the 'Daily Express' newspaper updated on Saturday. "It is hoped a deal can be signed and sealed before India's general elections begin on April 1," it claims. The newspaper quoted a source close to the trade talks on the UK side to say that a lot of progress has been made, but some of the "hardest" aspects remain pending.

"We have made a lot of progress, but the last stuff to do is the hardest. We have negotiators out there most weeks going through the details, and we



have a deadline of their elections," the source told the newspaper. "Both Rishi Sunak and Narendra Modi remain keen, so it's just a case of seeing if we can get it over the line," the source added. The UK hopes an FTA will open up its trade in Scotch whisky and cars to India, as well as services and investment opportunities. Meanwhile, India would seek better access to its manufactured goods and services and a deal on professional visas.

With both India and the UK heading into a general election year in 2024, signing off on a trade agreement has taken on particular urgency before leaders on both sides get into campaign mode.

A joint outcome statement

released last week by the UK Department for Business and Trade (DBT) said: "The thirteenth round of negotiations for the UK-India Free Trade Agreement took place from 18 September to 15 December. The round included sessions, both in person, in London and Delhi, and virtual talks.

"As with round 12, these negotiations focused on complex issues, including goods, services, and investment. The UK and India will continue to negotiate towards a comprehensive and ambitious Free Trade Agreement. The fourteenth round of negotiations will take place in January 2024," the statement said.

Under the format so far, the fourteenth round is likely to be hosted by London, with talks taking place between officials in a hybrid format — both in person and virtually. "We have made substantial progress... I think both sides are very aware of the importance of the FTA and will make the utmost effort to get there. So, we have to take it as it happens," External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told reporters after his meetings with Sunak and other senior Cabinet ministers during a UK visit last month.

Mexico, Venezuela restart repatriation flights amid pressure

AP ■ MEXICO CITY

Mexico and Venezuela announced Saturday that they have restarted repatriation flights of Venezuelan migrants in Mexico, the latest move by countries in the region to take on a flood of people travelling north to the United States. The move comes as authorities say at least 10,000 migrants a day have been arriving at the US-Mexico border, many of them asylum seekers. It also comes as a migrant caravan of thousands of people from across the region — largely Venezuelans — has trekked through southern Mexico this week.

The repatriation flights are part of an agreement made between regional leaders during a summit in Mexico in October that aimed to seek solutions for migration levels that show few signs of slowing down.

Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations said the two countries began repatriations with a flight on Friday and a second on Saturday in an effort

to "strengthen their cooperation on migration issues." The statement also said the two countries plan to implement social and work programs for those repatriated to Venezuela.

"Mexico and Venezuela reiterate their commitment to address the structural causes that fuel irregular migration in the region, and to achieve a humanitarian management of such flows," the statement read.

Mexico's government said it previously carried out a similar repatriation flight last Jan. 20 with 110 people.

As migration has soared in recent years, the US government has pressured Latin American nations to control the movement of migrants north, but many transit countries have struggled to deal with the quantities of people.

This week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other Biden administration officials were in Mexico City to meet with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador about the high levels of migrants landing on the US-Mexico border.

Prosecutors urge appeals court to reject Trump's immunity claims

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Special counsel Jack Smith urged a federal appeals court Saturday to reject former President Donald Trump's claims that he is immune from prosecution, saying the suggestion that he cannot be held to account for crimes in office "threatens the democratic and constitutional foundation" of the country.

The filing from Smith's team was submitted ahead of arguments next month on the legally untested question of whether a former president can be prosecuted for acts taken while in the White House.

Though the matter is now being considered by the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, it is likely to come again before the

Supreme Court, which earlier this month rejected prosecutors' request for a speedy ruling in their favour holding that Trump can be forced to stand trial on charges that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The outcome of the dispute is critical for both sides especially since the case has been effectively paused while Trump advances his immunity claims in the appeals court.

Prosecutors are hoping a swift judgment rejecting those arguments will restart the case and keep it on track for trial, currently scheduled for March 4 in federal court in Washington. But Trump's lawyers stand to benefit from a protracted appeals process that could significantly delay the case and potentially

push it beyond the November election.

Trump's lawyers maintain that the appeals court should order the dismissal of the case, arguing that as a former president he is exempt from prosecution for acts that fell within his official duties as president.

Smith's team has said no such immunity exists in the Constitution or in case law and that, in any event, the actions that Trump took in his failed effort to cling to power aren't part of a president's official responsibilities. The four-count indictment charges Trump with conspiring to disrupt the certification in Congress of electoral votes on January 6, 2021, when rioters motivated by his falsehoods stormed the US Capitol in a vio-

lent clash with police. It alleges that he participated in a scheme to enlist slates of fake electors in battleground states who would falsely attest that Trump had won those states and encouraged then-Vice President Mike Pence to thwart the counting of votes. Those actions, prosecutors wrote, fall well outside a president's official duties and were intended solely to help him win reelection. "A President who unlawfully seeks to retain power through criminal means unchecked by potential criminal prosecution could jeopardize both the Presidency itself and the very foundations of our democratic system of government officials to use fraudulent means to thwart the transfer of power and remain in office," Smith's team wrote.

Pope recalls Benedict XVI's love, wisdom on his death anniversary

AP ■ VATICAN CITY

Tributes were paid on Sunday on the first anniversary of the death of Pope Benedict XVI, with Pope Francis praising his love and wisdom and Benedict's private secretary expressing hope he might one day be declared a saint. Benedict, the first pope to retire in six centuries, died last December 31 at the age of 95 in the Vatican monastery where he spent 10 years as a pope emeritus. He is buried in the grottoes underneath St. Peter's Basilica. Speaking at the end of his weekly noon blessing, Francis said the faithful feel "so much love, so much gratitude, so much admiration" for Benedict. He praised the "love and wisdom" with which Benedict guided the church and asked for a round of applause from the pilgrims and tourists gathered in St. Peter's Square.

Earlier in the day, Benedict's longtime secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, celebrated a special Mass in the basilica and then participated in an anniversary event



to reflect on Benedict's legacy.

Speaking on the sidelines, Gaenswein acknowledged some of the polemics that surrounded Benedict's decade-long retirement alongside Francis in the Vatican, but said they would be forgotten in favour of the substance of his ministry and his final words: "Lord, I love you."

History, Gaenswein said, would judge Benedict as a "great theologian, a very simple person and a man of deep faith".

Francis frequently praised Benedict's

decision to retire as courageous and said he, too, might follow in his footsteps. But now that Benedict has died, Francis has reaffirmed the papacy is generally a job for life, and a consensus has emerged that the unprecedented reality of having two popes living side by side in the Vatican created problems that must be addressed before any future pope decides to step down.

Benedict, a noted conservative theologian who spent a quarter-century as the Vatican's doctrine chief, remained a point of reference for conservatives and traditionalists, who have only increased their criticism of Francis in the year since he died. Francis, for his part, has appeared now to feel more free to impose his progressive vision of a reformed church now he is no longer under Benedict's shadow.

Gaenswein, whom Francis exiled to his native Germany soon after the death, recalled that Benedict had only expected to live a few months, maybe a year, after his 2013 resignation.

Erdogan lashes out at oppn

AP ■ ISTANBUL

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan blamed opposition parties for "exploiting" a dispute between two Turkish football clubs and Saudi officials. The Turkish Super Cup final that was to be played in Saudi Arabia on Friday was postponed indefinitely after Istanbul rivals, Galatasaray and Fenerbahce, refused to take to the pitch and returned home. Hundreds of fans of both clubs arrived at Istanbul's airports before dawn to greet and cheer them.

A joint statement by the Turkish Football Federation and the clubs on Friday cited "organisational disruptions" as the reason for the postponement, and thanked Saudi Arabia for its efforts in organizing the game. However, media reports claimed the dispute



was centered around players wearing jerseys featuring Turkey's secularist founding father, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and carrying a banner with his motto, "Peace at home, Peace in the world." 2023 is the centennial of the proclamation of modern Turkey by Ataturk, and both clubs had earlier pressed for the game to be played on home soil rather than Saudi Arabia. Earlier, media

reports had claimed Turkey's national anthem would not be played and Turkish flags would not be allowed in the stadium, but Turkish officials denied those claims.

The dispute became a hot-button issue over the weekend and featured extensively on opposition media outlets. However pro-government media outlets, as well as the clubs, the football federation and Turkish politicians remained mostly quiet on the subject.

Turkey's conservative president broke his silence late Saturday night during an awards ceremony. "We wish for Turkish sports, especially football, to become a topic not of disputes, but of successes. Turning sports into a topic of daily political rivalry is wrong and serves no benefit to our sports," he said.

Auckland first major city to ring in 2024

AP ■ CANBERRA

Auckland has become the first major city to ring in 2024, with thousands cheering a fireworks display sprouting from New Zealand's tallest structure, Sky Tower, and a downtown light show.

This year's New Year's Eve celebrations are overshadowed by the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which have cast a pall over festivities and heightened tensions across parts of the world. Many cities are deploying extra security and some places have canceled New Year's Eve events altogether.

In Auckland, light rain throughout Sunday had cleared as forecast by midnight over the city of 1.7 million people before the countdown began on an illuminated digital display near the top of the 328-metre communications and observation tower. Two hours later in

neighbouring Australia, the Sydney Harbor Bridge will become the focal point of a renowned midnight fireworks display and light show viewed annually by around 425 million people worldwide, according to city authorities.

More police than ever have been deployed throughout Sydney to ensure safety as more than 1 million people — equivalent to one in five of the city's population — converge on the harbour waterfront for the best available views, state government authorities said in a statement.

Many revellers have been camping at the best vantage points since Sunday morning.

The waterfront has been the scene of heated pro-Palestinian protests after the sails of the Sydney Opera House were illuminated in the colours of the Israeli flag in response to the October 7

attack by Palestinian militant group Hamas that triggered the war.

In New York's Times Square, officials and party organizers say they are prepared to welcome crowds of revellers and ensure their safety.

At a security briefing Friday, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said there were "no specific threats" to the annual New Year's Eve bash, which is expected to draw tens of thousands of people to the heart of midtown Manhattan.

The celebrity-filled event will include live performances from Flo Rida, Megan Thee Stallion and LL Cool J, as well as televised appearances from Cardi B and others. Organisers said in-person attendance is expected to return to pre-COVID levels, even as foot traffic around Times Square remains down slightly since the pandemic.

Amid near-daily protests in New York sparked by the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, police said they would expand the security perimeter around the party, creating a "buffer zone" that will allow them to head off potential demonstrations.

"We will be out here with our canines, on horseback, our helicopters, our boats," Adams said. Officials will also monitor protests with drones, he said. "But as we saw last year, after having no specific threats, we get a threat."

During last year's New Year's Eve party, a machete-wielding man attacked three police officers a few blocks from Times Square.

Security will also be heightened across France on Sunday, with 90,000 law enforcement officers set to be deployed, domestic intelligence chief Céline Berthon said Friday.

Of those, 6,000 will be in

Paris, where French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said over 1.5 million people are expected to attend celebrations on the Champs-Élysées.

Speaking at a news conference, Darmanin cited a "very high terrorist threat" because, in part, of "what is happening in Israel and Palestine," referring to the Israel-Hamas war.

Darmanin said that police for the first time will be able to use drones as part of security work and that tens of thousands of firefighters and 5,000 soldiers would also be deployed. New Year's Eve celebrations in the French capital will centre on the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, including DJ sets, fireworks and video projections on the Arc de Triomphe, highlighting "changes in the city and faces of the Games," according to the press service of the City of Paris.

Kim vows to launch 3 more spy satellites, produce more nuclear materials in 2024

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to launch three additional military spy satellites, produce more nuclear materials and introduce modern attack drones in 2024, as he called for "overwhelming" war readiness to cope with US-led confrontational moves, state media reported Sunday.

Kim's comments, made during a key ruling Workers' Party meeting to set state goals for next year, suggest he'll intensify a run of weapons tests ahead of the US presidential elections in November. Observers say Kim believes a boosted nuclear capability would give him another chance to launch high-stakes summit diplomacy with the US to win sanctions relief if former President Donald Trump returns to the White House.



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un delivers a speech during a year-end plenary meeting of the ruling party, which was held between December 26 and 30, in Pyongyang. AP/PTI

During the five-day meeting that ended Saturday, Kim said anti-North Korea moves by the United States and its followers have been unprecedented this year, pushing the Korean Peninsula to the brink of a nuclear war, according to the official Korean Central News Agency. Kim cited the expansion of US-South Korean military exercises and the temporary deployment of powerful US military assets such as bombers and a nuclear-armed submarine in South Korea - steps the allies have taken in response to the North's weapons testing spree since last year.

"The grave situation requires us to accelerate works to acquire overwhelming war response capabilities and thorough and perfect military readiness to suppress any types of provocations by the enemies at a stroke," Kim said, according to KCNA. Kim set forth plans to launch three more military spy satellites next year in addition to the country's first reconnaissance satellite launched in November.

He underscored the need to establish "a reliable foundation" to build more nuclear weapons, an apparent reference to facilities to produce fissile materials like weapons-grade plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Kim also ordered authorities to enhance submarine capabilities and develop various types of modern unmanned combat equipment such as armed drones, according to KCNA.

"Pyongyang might be waiting out the US presidential election to see what its provocations can buy with the next administration," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul. "The Kim regime has closed the political door on denuclearization negotiations but could offer rhetorical restraint and a testing freeze in exchange for sanctions relief," Easley said.

"Although North Korea has no intention of giving up nuclear weapons, it might try to extract payment for acting like a so-called responsible nuclear power."

Kim has been focusing on modernizing his nuclear arsenal since his diplomacy with Trump, then the US president, broke down in 2019 due to wrangling over how much sanctions relief the North could be given for a partial surrender of its nuclear program. Experts say Kim likely thinks that Trump, if elected for a second term, could make concessions as the US is preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine war and the

Israel-Hamas fighting. Nam Sung-wook, a professor at Korea University in South Korea, said if President Joe Biden is reelected, North Korea won't get what it wants. But he predicted a Trump win could revive summit diplomacy between the two countries, saying Trump will likely say during his campaign that he can convince North Korea to suspend intimidating weapons tests. He said Kim's vow to ramp up production of plutonium and uranium is meant to add to his negotiating cards in potential diplomacy with the Americans.

Nam said North Korea will also test-launch more intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the continental US this year. "North Korea will act to the fullest extent under its timetable for provocation until the US election day," Nam said. During his speech at the party meeting, Kim used bellicose, derisive rhetoric against South Korea, calling it "a half-paralyzed, deformed US colony" with "Yankee culture." He said South Korea must not be considered as a partner for reconciliation or unification. He ordered the military to use all available capabilities including nuclear to conquer South Korea in the event of a poten-

tial conflict. Some analysts have speculated that limited armed clashes between the Koreans along their tense land and sea border could happen in the coming year. South Korea's spy agency said last week that North Korea will likely launch military provocations and cyberattacks ahead of South Korean parliamentary elections in April and the US presidential election in November. Kim also maintained that North Korea must solidify cooperation with "anti-imperialist, independent" countries that he said oppose US-led Western hegemony.

Kim didn't mention those countries by name. But North Korea has been seeking to beef up its cooperation with Russia and China, which have repeatedly blocked the US and others' attempts to toughen UN sanctions on the North over its banned missile tests. The US and South Korea accuse North Korea of supplying conventional arms like artillery and ammunition to Russia in return for high-tech Russian technologies to boost its own military programs.

Julianne Smith, US permanent representative to NATO, said earlier this month the US assessed that the suspected Russian technologies North

Korea seeks are related to fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, ballistic missile production equipment or materials of that kind. Smith said US intelligence indicates that North Korea has provided Russia with more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions.

South Korean officials said Russian support likely enabled North Korea to put its spy satellite into orbit for the first time on November 21. Many foreign experts are skeptical about the satellite's ability to take militarily meaningful high-resolution images. But South Korean Defense Minister Shin Wonsik said in November that Russia could help North Korea produce higher-resolution satellite photos.

Kim has said North Korea needs a space-based surveillance system to better monitor its rivals and enhance his missiles' precision-attack capabilities. Yang Uk, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, assessed that North Korea hasn't yet obtained functioning ICBMs that can launch nuclear strikes on the continental US. But he said North Korea's shorter-range, nuclear-armed missiles can reach South Korea and Japan, where a total of 80,000 American troops are stationed. Estimates on the size of North Korea's nuclear arsenal vary, ranging from 20-30 bombs to more than 100. The UN atomic agency and foreign experts recently said North Korea appears to have started operating a light-water reactor at its main nuclear complex in a possible attempt to secure a new source for weapons-grade plutonium.

Meanwhile, Kim said during the meeting that North Korea made "eye-opening" achievements on economic projects this year by fulfilling or exceeding set quotas in major areas such as farming, housing construction and fisheries. The claim cannot be independently confirmed, and Nam, the professor, said the self-praise appears aimed at burnishing Kim's image as a leader who cares about public livelihoods as well as military issues.



Fireworks explode over Sydney Harbour as New Year's Eve celebrations get underway in Sydney, Australia on Sunday. AP/PTI

New Year gives a clean slate for long-elusive resolutions

New York (AP): It's an annual end-of-year exercise in futility for many. But a clean slate awaits at the stroke of midnight for the next round of resolutions. From the first spray of fireworks to the closing chorus of "Auld Lang Syne" 366 days into the future — 2024 is a leap year — it could be the year for finally achieving long-elusive goals, fulfilling aspirations and being resolute on all those New Year resolutions.

"As humans, we are creatures that aspire," said Omid Fotuhi, a social psychologist who is a motivation and performance researcher. "The fact that we have goals, the fact that we want to set goals is just a manifestation of that internal and almost universal desire to want to stretch, to want to reach, to want to expand and grow," said Fotuhi, the director of learning innovation at Western Governors University Labs and a research associate at the University of Pittsburgh.

"New Year's resolutions are one of those ways in which we

do that," he said. "There's something very liberating about a fresh start. Imagine starting on a blank canvas. Anything is possible."

If so, could this be the year to run a marathon, vanquish (or make peace with) old foes such as the bathroom scale and a thickening waist? Maybe learn Mandarin or register to vote, and actually vote? So many questions, and so much time to delay. Tim Williams used to issue himself a panoply of resolutions: lose weight, drink less, exercise more and yada yada. Now, he doesn't bother. "In the past, I would make them, and I would fail or give up on them or whatever," said Williams, a part-time resident of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Carla Valeria Silva de Santos, a Florida transplant from Brazil, wants to learn to play the guitar. A native Portuguese speaker, she wants to learn Spanish and improve her English. With any resolution, she said, the ultimate goal is "to improve your life and be

in peace with yourself."

Josh Moore, another Fort Lauderdale resident, sees things in line with the natural philosopher Sir Isaac Newton and physics. For every action there must be an equal reaction. "If you do something like eat a bunch of candy or a bunch of desserts at a holiday party, go run," he said, while interrupting a jog with his dog. "Maybe you went out drinking too much and you might have a hangover. But then next day when you're feeling better, go to the gym."

Too many people are too soft on themselves, he posited. "You've got to actually hold yourself accountable."

Resolutions don't have to be big, grandiose or overly ambitious, Fotuhi said. Even if they are, he said value should not exclusively be derived from the achievement but also be measured by what you become by trying to better yourself.

"Goals are only there to serve a function to get you started," Fotuhi said.

Xi: China's economy has become more resilient and dynamic than before

Beijing (PTI): Chinese President Xi Jinping said on Sunday that China's economy has become "more resilient and dynamic than before" as he vowed to consolidate and strengthen the momentum of economic recovery and work to achieve long-term economic development.

"We have gone through the test of winds and rains, have seen beautiful scenes unfolding on the way, and have made plenty of real achievements. We will remember this year as one of hard work and perseverance. Going forward, we have full confidence in the future," Xi said in his 2024 New Year message. Xi said that as China achieved a smooth transition in COVID-19 response efforts, its economy has sustained the momentum of recovery, and steady progress has been made in pursuing high-quality development in the outgoing year,

state-run Xinhua news agency reported. "Having weathered the storm, the Chinese economy is more resilient and dynamic than before," he said.

Xi said that while pursuing its development, China has also embraced the world and fulfilled its responsibility as a major country. Noting that next year will mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, he said his government will steadfastly advance Chinese modernization, fully and faithfully apply the new development philosophy on all fronts, speed up building the new development paradigm, promote high-quality development, and both pursue development and safeguard security. "We will consolidate and strengthen the momentum of economic recovery, and work to achieve steady and long-term economic development," the president said.

Russia launches fresh drone strikes

AP ■ KYIV

Russia launched a fresh drone assault on Ukraine on Saturday night, after promising that strikes on the Russian border city of Belgorod earlier in the day "would not go unpunished". The Ukrainian Air Force said Sunday that it had shot down 21 of 49 drones launched by Russian forces overnight.

Twenty-eight people were wounded in an attack on the eastern city of Kharkiv, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said Sunday. A central hotel, apartment buildings, kindergarten, shops and administrative buildings sustained damage, according to the regional prosecutor's office. In the Kyiv region that surrounds the capital, a Russian drone attack caused a fire to break out at a critical infrastructure facility, local officials said. They did not identify the facility further.

The Russian attacks came after shelling in the center of the Russian border city of Belgorod Saturday killed 24



In this photo provided by the Ukrainian Emergency Service, firefighters put out a fire after Russia's missile attack in Kharkiv, Ukraine, on Sunday. AP/PTI

people, including three children. A further 108 people were wounded in the strike,

regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Sunday, making it one of the deadliest attacks

on Russian soil since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine 22 months ago.

Russian authorities accused Kyiv of carrying out the attack, which took place the day after an 18-hour Russian aerial bombardment across Ukraine killed at least 41 civilians. Russia's Defense Ministry said it identified the ammunition used in the strike as Czech-made Vampire rockets and Olkha missiles fitted with cluster-munition warheads. It provided no additional information, and The Associated Press was unable to verify its claims.

"This crime will not go unpunished," the ministry said in a statement on social media. In an emergency meeting at the UN Security Council demanded by Russia Saturday night, envoy Vasily Nebenzya accused Kyiv of a "terrorist attack." In comments carried by Russian state media, Nebenzya claimed Ukraine had launched "a deliberate act of terrorism directed against civilians."

5 terrorists killed in Pak's Balochistan

PTI ■ LONDON

Five terrorists were killed in an encounter in Pakistan's troubled Balochistan province, the army said on Sunday. During the conduct of an intelligence-based operation on the night of December 30-31, five terrorists "were sent to hell" following intense clashes between troops and the militants, according to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the army.

The terrorists' hideout was also busted and a cache of arms, ammunition and explosives was recovered, it said, adding that a sanitisation operation was being carried out to eliminate other terrorists in the area. "The security forces of Pakistan, in step with the nation, remain determined to thwart attempts of sabotaging peace, stability and progress of Balochistan," the statement added. Pakistan has witnessed an increase in terror attacks in

recent months, especially in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. A day earlier, the army said five terrorists were killed during an operation in the Mir Ali area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan District.

Earlier this month, as many as 25 soldiers were killed in two separate incidents on a single day, including a terrorist attack in Dera Ismail Khan, claiming the lives of 23 soldiers. That was the military's highest single-day death toll from terrorist attacks reported this year.

According to statistics issued by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), the country witnessed the highest number of suicide attacks since 2014 during this year, with nearly half of them targeting the security forces.

As many as 48 per cent of deaths and 58pc of injuries were inflicted upon security forces personnel.

1.89L cops deployed across Bangladesh ahead of polls

PTI ■ DHAKA

Bangladesh has deployed more than 1.89 lakh policemen to ensure law and order ahead of the January 7 general election being boycotted by the main opposition BNP, media reports said on Sunday.

Presently, the country's police force has around 2.13 lakh personnel, including civil staff. The Daily Star newspaper reported. A total of 1,89,000 police personnel have been deployed nationwide, who will be on election duty with magistrates on the voting day, besides patrolling and working in the strike teams, Deputy Inspector General (operation) at Police Headquarters, Anwar Hossain was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

According to the bdnews24

news portal, 1,74,000 police personnel will be on duty without any leave, while the remaining 15,000 policemen will be engaged in routine work.

Additional policemen and plainclothesmen have been deployed to the areas vulnerable to violence or irregularities. Hossain told the news portal. Since October 29, the ailing former premier Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has held intermittent nationwide strikes and transport blockades.

The BNP is boycotting the general elections after the government rejected its demand for an interim non-party neutral government to organise the voting. According to a media tally, 11 people died, 386 vehicles were torched, and four trains were derailed from tracks

in the past two months in political violence. Police arrested thousands of opposition activists and figures, including de-facto BNP leader and party secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, over charges of violence.

The BNP is carrying out an anti-election street campaign, calling for intermittent strikes and transport blockades, saying no election under the incumbent government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would be fair or neutral. It has also called for civil disobedience against the ruling Awami Party-led dispensation, urging people not to pay taxes and utility bills to press its demand for a non-party interim government for election oversight by amending the country's Constitution.

More Rohingya refugees arrive in Indonesia

Medan (Indonesia): Some 170 likely Rohingya refugees, mostly hungry and weak women and children, were found on a beach in Indonesia's North Sumatra province after weeks at sea, officials said on Sunday.

The group arrived on a beach at Kuala Besar, a fishing village in Langkat district, late on Saturday, said the village head, Muhammad Amiruddin.

Villagers who saw the group of Rohingya Muslims helped them with food and water as they waited for further instructions from immigration and local officials in North Sumatra province, he said. However, residents around the beach hesitated over having the refugees in their villages, Amiruddin said.

"We helped them as they look very weak from hunger and dehydration," Amiruddin said, "But many residents can-

not accept them to live in our village because they will only bring problems later."

A mob of students on Wednesday attacked the base of a local community hall in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province, where 137 Rohingya were taking shelter. The incident drew an outcry from human rights group and the UN refugee agency, which said the attack left the refugees shocked and traumatised.

Indonesia's navy said on Thursday that it forcibly pushed a boat packed with refugees back to international waters after the vessel approached the shores of Aceh province a day earlier. It's unclear whether the refugees who arrived late Saturday in neighbouring North Sumatra province were from the same boat that was pushed away by the navy on Wednesday.

Putin lauds Russian unity as Ukraine war overshadows celebration

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin praised Russia's "united society" in his prerecorded New Year's address to the nation, the country's state news agencies reported on Sunday.

Putin addressed Russians in a video that ran under four minutes long, significantly shorter than the New Year's speech he gave last year, according to state news agency RIA Novosti. Millions of people were expected to watch the new address when it airs on TV as each Russian time zone region counts down the final minutes of 2023 on Sunday.

The first to see it were residents of the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Chukotka region in Russia's Far East, some nine hours ahead of Moscow. Returning to tradition

after speaking flanked by soldiers last year, Putin delivered his address to the nation against the backdrop of a snowy Kremlin. In remarks carried by RIA Novosti, he described 2023 as a year marked by high levels of unity in Russian society.

"What united us and unites us is the fate of the Fatherland, a deep understanding of the historical stage through which Russia is passing," the president said. He also lauded Russian citizens' "solidarity, mercy and fortitude."

The nearly 2-year-old war in Ukraine was front and center in the address, with Putin directly addressing Russia's armed forces involved in what the Kremlin has termed its "special military operation" in the neighbouring country.

"We are proud of you, you are heroes, you feel the support of the entire people," the president said. According to state media, he emphasised that Russia would never retreat and asserted there was no force that could divide Russians and stop the country's development.

The address' broadcast comes a day after shelling in the centre of the Russian border city of Belgorod Saturday killed 24 people, including three children. Another 108 people were wounded, Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Sunday, making the attack one with the most casualties on Russian soil since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine 22 months ago. As last year, New Year's celebrations were toned down in Moscow, with the traditional fireworks and concert on Red Square canceled.

India to remain fastest growing major economy in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India decisively withstood global headwinds in 2023 and is likely to remain as the world's fastest-growing major economy on the back of growing demand, moderate inflation, stable interest rate regime and robust foreign exchange reserves.

Despite widespread pessimism witnessed among the developed nations and the worsening geopolitical situation, India recorded a gross domestic product (GDP) expansion of 6.1 per cent in the March quarter. The growth moved up to 7.8 per cent in the June quarter and was 7.6 per cent in the September quarter.

For the first six months of this fiscal, the growth was 7.7 per cent. The growth momentum is expected to sustain in the December quarter, making India the fastest-growing major economy in the

world much ahead of China. According to the latest growth projections of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which appear conservative, India will record a growth of 6.3 per cent in 2023, ahead of China and Brazil at 5.2 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively.

For 2024, the OECD expects India to grow at 6.1 per cent and China at 4.7 per cent.

On the other hand, major economies, including the US, UK and Japan, are likely to witness either deceleration or very nominal increase in economic growth rates in the coming year.

India's performance on the economic front in 2023 appears even better, when viewed from a global perspective.

As per the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) World Economic Outlook, global growth is estimat-



ed to decelerate from 3.5 per cent in 2022 to 3 per cent in 2023 and further to 2.9 per cent in 2024.

Ashima Goyal, Member of the Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), said India's growth has "shown great resilience despite many external shocks. This is due to increasing

economic diversity and the role of policy in smoothing shocks." Equipping people with better skills and assets, she said, "will add up to give India good growth in 2024 and beyond".

Dharmakirti Joshi, Chief Economist at rating agency Crisil, said geopolitical developments will again test

the resilience of India's domestic demand in the coming year. "We expect the GDP to grow at 6.4 per cent in the coming fiscal year, a tad lower than the current one. The lagged impact of interest rate hikes and the global slowdown will be the key drags," he noted.

A recent article on the state of the economy by the RBI said, "Despite significant global headwinds, the Indian economy remained the fastest growing major economy in 2023. The outlook is one of cautious optimism as consumer confidence remains positive and perceptions about current income turned up in the RBI's latest survey of households in November 2023".

RBI's dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium (DSGE) model -- which is based on microeconomic foundations and rational expectations characterising the choices of agents, such as the representative consumer, producer and the central

bank -- projects a growth rate of 6 per cent in the financial year 2024-25.

"After a couple of difficult years, the economic environment is turning more benign with inflation trending down and growth remaining robust. Most forecasts project that growth in 2024-25 would be close to but slightly lower than in 2023-24. The global slowdown and geopolitical uncertainty remain the biggest risks to growth," MPC Member Jayanth R Varma said.

Retail inflation is on a downward trajectory after touching a peak of 7.44 per cent in July. This year began with retail inflation of 6.52 per cent in January, and it softened to 4.31 per cent in May before rising to 7.44 per cent in July.

In November, the retail inflation worked out to be 5.55 per cent, which was within RBI's comfort zone but some distance away from the mean rate of 4 per cent.



Panagariya appointed 16th Finance Commission Chairman

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Sunday appointed former Niti Aayog vice chairman Arvind Panagariya as the Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission.

Joint Secretary in the finance ministry Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey will be the secretary to the commission, the government said in a notification.

"The President is pleased to constitute a Finance Commission with Dr Arvind Panagariya, former Vice-Chairman, NITI Aayog and Professor, Columbia University, as the Chairman. Members of the Commission will be notified separately," it said.

The commission will submit its report for the five-year period (2026-27 to 2030-31) to the President by October 31, 2025.

The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, last month approved the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the 16th Finance Commission.

Besides suggesting tax devolution between the Centre and states and revenue augmentation measures, the commission would review the present arrangements for financing disaster management initiatives with reference to the funds constituted under the Disaster Management Act, 2005.

The Finance Commission is a constitutional body that gives suggestions on centre-state financial relations.

The erstwhile 15th Finance Commission under NK Singh had recommended that states be given 41 per cent of the divisible tax pool of the Centre during the five-year period 2021-22 to 2025-26, which is at the same level as was recommended by the 14th Finance Commission.



Property registration in Mumbai up 4 per cent in 2023: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Property registration in the Mumbai municipal area increased 4 per cent year-on-year to an all-time high of 1,26,907 units in 2023 on the back of better demand, according to Knight Frank.

The registration number hit a record in 2023, beating the previous high of 1,22,035 units in the previous year, real estate consultant Knight Frank India data showed.

The state government collected a revenue of Rs 10,869 crore as stamp duty in 2023, up 22 per cent from the previous year.

In December, 12,255 units were registered in Mumbai city (an area under BMC jurisdiction), up 31 per cent from 9,367 units in the year-ago period.

Knight Frank has compiled the data on the registration of properties from the Department of Registrations and Stamps, Maharashtra government. The data includes sales in primary (fresh) and

secondary (re-sale) markets. Of the overall registered properties, residential units constitute 80 per cent.

Knight Frank CMD Shishir Bajjal said the demand has been driven by rising income levels, better affordability and a positive homeownership outlook.

"Notably, a 57 per cent increase in the share of high-value property registrations attests to the robustness of the market," he said.

Supported by stable interest rates and an increasing preference for bigger and better homes, homebuyer confidence continues to fuel Mumbai's real estate momentum, Bajjal said.

Akhil Saraf, founder of PropTech startup Reloy, said, "People have understood that real estate is the safest asset class along with gold. Gold has liquidity, but real estate has utility".

Economies around the world have collapsed, but the houses people own over there are safe, he added.

Indo-Australia trade deal boosts engineering exports despite import surge

PTI ■ KOLKATA

One year after the India-Australia Economic and Trade Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) came into effect, engineering exports to Australia reached USD 944 million in April-November 2023-24, a 3 per cent increase.

However, imports from Australia also saw a significant 30 per cent upswing during the same period. India's engineering imports from Australia reached USD 355.02 million during April to October 2023-24.

Despite the sharp surge in imports, EEPK India chairman Arun K Garodia remains optimistic, pointing to a positive engineering trade balance of USD 471 million between April and October 2023-24. This, he says, underscores the resilience and competitiveness of India's engineering sector.

"While imports have increased more than exports in the short term of the new trade deal, we remain optimistic about the long-term benefits for the engineering sector. We expect a surge in



exports to Australia, especially with their recent efforts to curb domestic industries and increased reliance on imports," Garodia told PTI. He added that this could attract them to other coun-

tries like India under the free trade agreement, particularly as they become accustomed to importing from diverse sources with the "China plus one" strategy.

Garodia further expressed hope that engineering exports from India could double within a year (2024). The share of India's engineering exports to its total merchandise exports to Australia also witnessed a significant rise, reaching 15.1 per cent during the review period. This increased share emphasizes the growing importance of India's engineering

sector in bilateral trade dynamics between the two nations, Garodia said.

He also highlighted a significant outcome of the ETCA, the introduction of new tariff lines for various engineering products, which is expected to boost bilateral trade. This diversification includes products like dumpers, plastic-insulated conductors, and standard wires, and cables with a steel core. The inclusion of these products signifies a broader range of engineering goods being exported under the agreement.

Equity market sets for eventful journey on LS polls, interest rate trajectory

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

With tailwinds of a remarkable year and handsome investor returns, Indian equities are set for an eventful journey in 2024, with a slew of local and global cues -- varying from interest rates to Lok Sabha polls to geopolitical happenings.

Analysts are of the view that the bull run in the domestic equity market will continue, and over the next 3-6 months, the benchmark indices -- Sensex and Nifty -- could climb up to 7 per cent.

In 2023, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 11,399.52 points or 18.73 per cent, and the NSE Nifty climbed 3,626.1 points or 20 per cent.

Lok Sabha elections, the US Presidential polls, the trajectory of interest rates, particularly in the US and India, inflation trends and geopolitical situation will be the key factors for the stock market, analysts opined.

Experts said the return of the BJP government with a majority in the 2024 general elections is a pivotal factor on the market's wishlist for the new year. As political stability plays a significant role in shaping market dynamics, the market's optimism hinges on a smooth and decisive outcome in the upcoming elections, fostering an environment conducive to sustained economic growth and prosperity in 2024, an expert said.

A note by Motilal Oswal Broking and Distribution said that Lok Sabha elections and the first budget post-election would be most important on the domestic front.

"We expect market sentiment to strengthen further as the ongoing pre-election rally is likely to continue. Any rate cut would provide an additional boost to the market," it said.

Dalal Street investors added a whopping Rs 81.90 lakh crore to their wealth in 2023 amid a raft of positive factors, including strong domestic macroeconomic fundamentals, political stability owing to the BJP's success in recent elections, optimistic corporate earnings outlook, signals from the US Federal Reserve about three



prospective rate cuts next year and heavy retail investors participation.

"India continues to be the fastest growing economy in the world, and BJP's win in recently-held state elections

has further boosted investors' sentiment. With macroeconomic factors beginning to turn positive, falling US bond yields have once again fuelled robust foreign fund inflows into the Indian market.

"Along with that, sliding crude oil prices are likely to keep inflation under check, all of which should augur well for Indian equity markets going ahead. Hence, the rally in the market is likely to further continue over the next 3-6 months, and Sensex and Nifty could see another 5-7 per cent appreciation, while midcap and small-cap indices may witness another 10-15 per cent jump," said Rakesh Mehta, Chairman of Mehta Equities Ltd.

Parth Nyati, the founder of the

stock trading platform Tradingo, said that in 2023, domestic investors took the lead, steering the market to success.

"As we transition into 2024, there is anticipation that foreign investors will join the momentum, particularly with the decline in US bond yields and weakening of the dollar index. The prevailing expectation of a cut in interest rates in the USA further bolsters this shift," Nyati said.

On the market wishlist for the next year, Nyati said the market fervently hopes for the absence of any negative surprises from the global markets that could potentially disrupt the optimistic sentiment among Indian investors.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Electronics manufacturing sector to be worth \$115 billion in 2024

India's electronics manufacturing sector is set to grow 15 per cent to be worth USD 115 billion in 2024, with players continuing to focus more on higher levels of value addition in terms of components and development of products.

The production of mobile phones, the poster boy of the country's electronics manufacturing, is expected to surpass USD 50 billion by March 2024 from around USD 42 billion in the previous financial year.

Google's Pixel smartphone production in India from the first quarter of 2024 will complete the manufacturing presence of all global majors in the country. India Cellular and Electronics Association (ICEA) Chairman Pankaj Mohindroo said the total production of electronic goods in the financial year 2023-24 is estimated to reach



USD 115 billion, buoyed by an exceptional contribution of mobile phones, which is estimated to exceed USD 50 billion in the current fiscal.

According to data shared by the government, domestic electronics manufacturing increased over four-fold to Rs 8.22 lakh crore or USD 102 billion in the last 10 years from Rs 1,80,454 crore (USD 29.8 billion) in FY14.

Mohindroo said the mobile phone exports are expected at USD 15 billion in FY24, posting a 35 per cent growth over the last fiscal.

ICEA estimates that mobile phone exports have surpassed USD 9 billion during the April-

November period of this fiscal compared to USD 6.2 billion during the same period last year. While indigenous electronics manufacturing has been growing in terms of value and volume, former RBI Chairman

Chandrasekhar. Vaishnav, in a veiled attack on Rajan, had said that he has joined the opposition and the industry has ignored the criticism of the opposition by achieving new heights in manufacturing complex technology products.

He also said that local value addition in many electronics products has increased to up to 60 per cent and projected that India will become a significant component exporter in the next three to four years.

With a strong focus on deep manufacturing and a greater degree of localisation, Mohindroo said the mobile phone industry has also been

able to achieve a state of near self-reliance in PCBAs (Printed Circuit Boards Assembly), chargers, battery packs and cables, among others.

In its race to build a semiconductor ecosystem, the government was able to get its first breakthrough with a USD 2.75 billion project by global memory chip maker Micron to set up an assembly and test plant for memory chip modules in the country with 70 per cent fiscal support from the government.

However, the sudden break up of the Vedanta-Foxconn joint venture for a proposed semiconductor plant was unexpected. Now, both entities are separately working to set up a semiconductor plant.

According to official announcements, Tata Electronics, Foxconn and HCL Group have submitted applications to set up chip plants. Chips are the most expensive and key component

required for making modern electronic devices. Fabless chipset company MediaTek India's Managing Director Anku Jain said that his company is into designing chipsets and it will explore options to source locally-made chipsets, depending on the business case, when semiconductor plants are established.

"Overall, we are bullish about the whole ecosystem being set up in India. Going forward, more and more components of this puzzle will come from India," Jain said.

Electronics components players body ELCINA estimates the electronics component manufacturing base in India is valued at over USD 11 billion while demand is in excess of USD 40 billion.

ELCINA Secretary General Rajoo Goel said India needs a special scheme for the rest of the components to complete the ecosystem.

Cooperative sector sees new avenues for expansion in 2023

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The year 2023 saw a newly set up Cooperation Ministry coming out with several initiatives including model bye-laws for making PACS multipurpose and a national cooperative body to promote exports in a bid to give further boost to the cooperative movement and open new avenues for the cooperative societies for expansion.

Set up in July 2021, the new ministry under the leadership of Amit Shah took historical steps for strengthening the cooperative sector in a short span of time, an official statement said.

"To strengthen the cooperative movement, the Ministry of Cooperation has taken 54 major initiatives, through which all cooperative societies are getting new possibilities for their economic development and expansion," it said.

Among the key initiatives taken this year, the ministry said it came out with a draft Model Bye-Laws for Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) on January 5, 2023, in order to increase their source of income and create new employment opportunities in more than 25 new sectors.

"So far, they have been adopted by 31 States/Union Territories and the work of adoption in other States is in progress," it said.

Adani raises \$15 billion in equity

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Billionaire Gautam Adani's sprawling conglomerate has raised over USD 5 billion (Rs 41,500 crore) in equity and a double of that in debt this year as the apples-to-airport group made a comeback since being hit by a bombshell short seller report.

Adani, who was the world's second-richest man at the start of the year, saw almost USD 60 billion of his personal wealth erased after Hindenburg Research in a January 24 report accused his group of market manipulation and accounting fraud.

The group denied all allegations and reworked its strategy, fueling a comeback that

now has the tycoon some USD 36 billion short of where he started the year and two notch and USD 12 billion shy of rival billionaire Mukesh Ambani. Star investor GQG Partners bought stakes worth almost USD 4.3 billion in five group companies between March and August while Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) and French energy giant TotalEnergies poured in USD 770 million in renewable energy firm Adani Green Energy Ltd, according to company filings and stock exchange data.

Parallely, the promoters infused USD 4.6 billion in repaying loans against shares, servicing loans taken for cement acquisitions and supporting green investments.

While the equity raise helped



shore up investor confidence, the group re-established its bankability with USD 6.4 billion of loans raised across five companies and refinancing of USD 3.5 billion debt taken to fund the 2022 acquisition of ACC and Ambuja Cement. Alongside, it continued with its

M&A, acquiring Sanghi cement for USD 431 million, 49.38 per cent in Indian Oil Tanking for USD 128 million, Karaikal port for USD 181 million and Coastal Energy for USD 420 million, filing and stock exchange data showed. These together with scrapping

of a USD 850 million coal plant purchase, reining in of expenses, and repayment of some debt were part of attempt to claw back the narrative by showcasing that equity can be raised not just from promoters but also global investors and that the group was a responsible borrower with prepayments and on-time payments of debt. The group now prefers slow and steady growth over the breakneck, mostly debt-fueled, expansion spree of recent years.

The Adani Group has rapidly diversified from its ports and coal-based businesses to airports, green energy, data centres, cement, digital services and media.

And the repayments and pre-paying of borrowings, both by the conglomerates' units and

the Adani family themselves, was a bid to convince investors that the group does not face any liquidity or solvency issues despite seeing almost USD 150 billion rout in market value at one point of time.

The strategy seems to be paying off with share prices of some of the 10 listed companies recovering all of the Hindenburg losses.

But on a cumulative basis, Adani Group's market cap is about 25 per cent below its previous record of Rs 19.23 lakh crore, reached before the Hindenburg Research report published on January 24. This has been helped by Supreme Court observations that Hindenburg's report could not be considered as "credible" and nor should media reports

be treated as "gospel truth" as also the US government's dismissal of the charges.

The Adani Group plans a Rs 7 lakh crore capital expenditure over the next decade for expanding its infrastructure business, according to a recent investor presentation by company management.

Six companies, including power, ports, and airports, aim to utilize bond markets for funding. Around 80 per cent of funding will come from global debt issuances, with the remainder from domestic sources.

The surge in Adani Group stocks boosted Chairman Gautam Adani's wealth, reaching USD 84.3 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

FIH Hockey5s World Cup

Simranjeet to lead India men, Rajni to captain women side

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Simranjeet Singh and Rajni Etimaru will lead the men's and women's sides respectively as Hockey India on Sunday named the Indian teams for the upcoming FIH Hockey5s World Cup to be held in Muscat, Oman. While the Hockey5s Women's World Cup will be held between January 24 and 27, the men's event is slated from January 28 to January 31. Experienced goalkeeper Rajni will have defender Mahima Chaudhary as her deputy, while Mandeep Mor will be

the vice-captain of the men's team. The women's team also comprises Bansari Solanki as the second goalkeeper, with Akshata Abaso Dhekale and Jyoti Chhatra as defenders. Among midfielders, Mariana Kujur and Mumtaz Khan have been named while Ajmina Kujur, Rutaja Dadaso Pisal and Deepika Soreng have been named as forwards. The Indian Women are grouped in Pool C along with Namibia, Poland and the United States. A total of 16 teams will participate in the Hockey5s Women's



World Cup which includes Fiji, Malaysia, the Netherlands and hosts Oman in Pool A, while Australia, South Africa, Ukraine and Zambia are in Pool B and Pool D features New Zealand, Paraguay, Thailand and Uruguay. "The team comprises young players with enough international experience and understanding of the challenges of playing a prestigious event such as the Hockey 5's World Cup," coach Soundarya said in a HI release. "We are well prepared and are upbeat ahead of the tournament."

The Indian men's team, led by Olympic bronze medallist Simranjeet, includes goalkeepers Suraj Karkera and Prashant Kumar Chauhan. Mandeep Mor will be joined by Manjeet in defence, while midfielder Mohd Raheel Mousen and Maninder Singh and forward-line comprises Pawan Rajbhar, Gurjot Singh and Uttam Singh along with captain Simranjeet. Grouped in Pool B, India will play against Egypt, Jamaica and Switzerland to make the knockout rounds. The other teams in the fray include the Netherlands,

Nigeria, Pakistan and Poland in Pool A and Pool C features Australia, Kenya, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago while Pool D includes Fiji, Malaysia, Oman and the United States. "We have chosen a very balanced team with youth and experience for this exciting format of hockey," coach Sardar Singh said. "Several players in this squad already have the experience of playing this format and are eager to perform well. We have worked hard for this tournament and look forward to finishing on the podium."

Fernandez leads Canada to win over Chile

Pegula stunned by Great Britain's Boulter

AP ■ SYDNEY

Former U.S. Open finalist Leylah Fernandez led Canada to a 2-1 victory over Chile in its opening United Cup match on Sunday. Fernandez defeated Daniela Seguel 6-3, 6-2 before Nicolas Jarry leveled the Group B tie for Chile by beating Steven Diez in straight sets in Sydney. Diez had replaced Felix Auger-Aliassime who was rested with a minor knee issue. Fernandez and Diez then clinched the deciding mixed doubles against Seguel and Tomás Barrios Vera 7-5, 4-6, 10-8 to seal the tie for the Canadians. "I'm extremely happy with

the way I played," world No.35 Fernandez said after her 73 minute win over Seguel. "It wasn't the greatest match because it is my first match of the season, the nerves, but I'm extremely happy with the way that I was able to manage it." In Perth, Great Britain's Katie Boulter stunned fifth-ranked Jessica Pegula in Group C rallying from a set down to win 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 in nearly three hours. The Americans drew level when 10th-ranked Taylor Fritz defeated Cameron Norrie 7-6 (5), 6-4 to force a deciding mixed doubles match. Later Sunday, men's No. 1 Novak Djokovic returns to Perth for the first time since the 2013 Hopman Cup when he leads Serbia in its first Group E match against Zhang Zhizhen of China. China won its opening tie against the Czech Republic 3-0 and a victory over Serbia would clinch a quarter-finals berth.

We respect all but fear none: Jhingan

PTI ■ DOHA

They might be up against formidable and higher-ranked opponents such as Australia in the upcoming Asian Cup but star Indian stopper Sandesh Jhingan on Sunday said "we respect all but fear none." India are clubbed with continental heavyweights and World Cup regulars Australia, strong central Asian side Uzbekistan and tricky Syria -- all above Stimac's team in the FIFA rankings -- in the group stage of the Asian Cup from January 13 onwards. Jhingan, one of head coach Igor Stimac's key players bracing up to appear in the Croatia's toughest test of his coaching tenure, remained unperturbed by the task that awaits his team in the coming days. Jhingan, upon his arrival at the airport here, said, "No group in the Asian Cup is easy. Of course, we've got Australia, and they need no introduction. But what we have learned in the last few years is that we must never fear any opposition. "Believe in the work you do, believe in your group, and the



sky's the limit for this batch. We must stay humble, keep improving, and hopefully do something special." At the Hamad International Airport, the players were greeted by more than a hundred Indian fans. While this will be India's fifth appearance in the AFC Asian Cup, the Blue Tigers have never made it past the group

stage after finishing runners-up in 1964, which was played in a round-robin format. Jhingan looked at the positives of the recent past. He said, "We have been getting some great support at home, and we've had a great year, which shows how fast we are improving. Now it's all about putting in our best effort here and seeing where we can land

up." Representatives from the Indian embassy in Qatar also came down to the airport and the hotel to greet the members of the national team. Stimac had arrived a day earlier in Doha and was there at the team hotel to greet every player. Drawn in Group B, India will begin their campaign against Australia on January 13 followed by matches against Uzbekistan on January 18 and Syria on January 23). The Blue Tigers have had a great year so far, winning three trophies (Tri-Nation Cup, Intercontinental Cup, and the SAFF Championship) at home, before putting in commendable performances away from home in the King's Cup in Thailand, Merdeka Tournament in Malaysia and in the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers away game against Kuwait (1-0). Stimac's boys will undergo a camp in Qatar's capital to prepare for the tournament, where the top two teams in each group, along with the four best (out of six) third-placed teams will qualify for the Round of 16.



Juventus beats Roma

AP ■ MILAN

Juventus ended a troubled year on a positive note after beating Roma 1-0 to close in on Serie A leader Inter Milan. Adrien Rabiot scored and Juventus moved within two points of Inter, which drew on Friday. Juventus started the year mired in scandal after former president Andrea Agnelli and the entire board resigned in November 2022 following an investigation by Turin prosecutors into false accounting, which led to the team being deducted 10 points. The false accounting case also led to Juventus being excluded by UEFA from the third-tier Europa Conference League for this season. Without the distraction of Europe, Juventus has been fighting hard at the top of the Serie A table and knew it had the chance to close the gap on Saturday. Former Juventus striker Paulo Dybala recovered from injury to surprisingly start and his team almost took an early lead but Bryan Cristante's shot came off the right post. Dybala went close to scoring against his former team but instead it was Juventus which broke the deadlock right at the start of the second half. Rabiot beat the offside trap to latch onto a cheeky Dušan Vlahovic back-heeled flick and slot into the bottom near corner.

PULISIC POWER AC Milan also ended the year with a victory - after a difficult month - in edging Sassuolo 1-0. Pulisic netted in the 59th minute after Ismaël Bennacer's through-ball was deflected to the United States international. It was Pulisic's sixth league goal of the season. Milan, which won only one of its previous three Serie A matches and was eliminated from the Champions League, was nine points behind Inter. **SURPRISE LOSS** Bologna fell to a surprise 3-0 loss at relegation-threatened Udinese and missed the chance to move back into the Champions League spots. Bologna's third loss left it two points behind fourth-placed Fiorentina after the Tuscan team's 1-0 victory over Torino on Friday. Udinese moved three points above the drop zone and Claudio Ranieri's Cagliari, which drew against Empoli 0-0. Empoli goalkeeper Elia Caprile saved a late penalty to help his side remain within a point of safety and 17th-placed Hellas Verona, which lost at home to bottom club Salernitana 1-0. Salernitana earned its second win of the season. It was two points behind Verona. Ademola Lookman fired Atalanta to a 1-0 win over Lecce in his last match before going to the African Cup of Nations with Nigeria.

We are rank outsiders in our group: Stimac

'Our goal is to enter third round of World Cup Qualifiers'

PTI ■ DOHA

The Indian football team is entering the upcoming Asian Cup as "rank outsiders" and its main goal is to go through to the third round of the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers, head coach Igor Stimac said on Sunday. Stimac was making his assessment based on the level of competition they are expected to face in a tough group comprising continental heavyweights Australia and the physically intimidating Uzbekistan. India are drawn in Group B with World Cup regulars Australia, strong central Asian side Uzbekistan and tricky Syria -- all above Stimac's team in the FIFA rankings -- in the group stage of the Asian Cup. "Obviously, we are rank out-

siders in our group. Uzbekistan is one of the dark horses and a fantastic team, their players' physicality could cause problems. "Australia are playing at the highest level of football and we all know what they are capable of... They are regular at World Cups and will mostly clear the group stage there," Stimac said. India landed in Qatar's capital on Saturday for the tournament. And how does he plan to approach the matches? "This group is much stronger than the last Asian Cup. The most important thing for us is to have a good performance and ensure that we remain stable and in shape while playing. I am not putting any pressure on players about results. "We need to find stability, we will try to play fearless football



notwithstanding the teams we play against. I don't mind the final results. Our final goal is to qualify for the third round of World Cup qualifiers." While this will be India's fifth appearance in the AFC Asian Cup, the Blue Tigers have never

made it past the group stage after finishing runners-up in 1964, which was played in a round-robin format. India will begin their campaign against Australia on January 13 followed by matches against Uzbekistan on January 18 and Syria on January 23. The team will play a warm-up game on January 7 to see where it stands in terms of preparation before the big test. "Keeping in mind that all the other teams are in Dubai for three weeks already, we are trying to settle down to the climatic conditions and adjust in a proper way in the short time given to us." Injuries to some key players, such as Jeakson Singh, Glan Martins and Anwar Ali, have disturbed Stimac's plans just before he was to pick his final

squad of 26. "Things changed dramatically for us with injuries in recent times. Anwar Ali, Ashique Kuruniyan, Glan Martins and Jeakson Singh... We are going to miss them a lot. "It is not easy to replace Anwar as he is one of the best defenders in Asia. Jeakson was providing us stability in the build-up phase. "But we don't have time to think about those who are not with us. We will try to maximise the performance of those players who are with us here," Stimac said. Strong and well-built players like Anwar would have proven handy against teams such as Uzbekistan. "It is not just about physicality, we also lost passing quality and passing ability with these three players," said Stimac.

The 1998 World Cup semifinalist with Croatia added, "I was very happy to see Sahal (Abdul Samad) settle down at Mohun Bagan and Sandesh Jhingan is doing well at Goa. Now we all know how much Bengaluru FC have lost with the departure of Jhingan and how much Goa has benefitted." But international football is a different ball game altogether, admitted Stimac. "Pace of ISL is far below the pace of international football. So, when players arrive in national team camps we focus on sharpness, compactness and keeping stability and shape." Stimac also spoke about the importance of doing well from set pieces, for which the team has hired the services of former West Ham and Manchester City player Trevor Sinclair.

Man City ends historic year on high

AP ■ MANCHESTER

After the greatest year in Manchester City's history, Pep Guardiola's players look hungry for another. Defending champion City ended a trophy-laden 2023 with a 2-0 win against Sheffield United in the English Premier League on Saturday. Meanwhile, Manchester United looks lost after another defeat. United's 14th loss in all competitions came at Nottingham Forest by 2-1. City moved up to third, just two points behind leader Liverpool. That's not bad considering Guardiola's team has struggled to hit the heights of last season's treble-winning campaign and has been without the talismanic Kevin De Bruyne since August. The Belgium international is on his way back from a hamstring injury and City is finding form after a recent run of just one win in six league games. "We're not top of the league,



Liverpool are better," Guardiola said. "We've had injuries and some problems. Our level is really good I would say and we are there." City added the Club World Cup last week to the Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup and European Super Cup trophies it won over the past 12 months, and all were on display ahead of kickoff at Etihad Stadium, where it hasn't lost all year. "When you're walking out and

you see five trophies, it hits home to you who you are playing against and what they've achieved," Sheffield United manager Chris Wilder said. Goals from Rodri and Julian Alvarez helped City secure back-to-back wins since returning from the Club World Cup in Saudi Arabia. De Bruyne was an unused substitute, while Erling Haaland was still absent with a foot injury that has kept him out since the start of the month. The return of both of those players should only strengthen Guardiola's attempt to make history by winning an unprecedented fourth Premier League in a row. **MAN UNITED LOSE** It is a wonder how Man United is seventh on the table and not lower. Morgan Gibbs-White scored an 82nd-minute winner for Nottingham Forest to topple United for the first time since 1994.



Scottish Junior Open squash Anahat wins U-19 girls title

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Talented Indian teenager Anahat Singh produced a dominant performance, bagging the girls' under-19 title at the 2023 Scottish Junior Open squash held in Edinburgh. Anahat claimed a 11-6, 11-1, 11-5 victory over home favourite Robyn McAlpine in the final on Saturday. It capped off a spectacular year for Delhi's Anahat, who recorded the under-19 and senior National championship double and won the mixed doubles bronze along with Abhay Singh both at the Asian Games and in the inaugural Asian Mixed Doubles

Championships. Meanwhile, India's Subhash Choudhary rallied to beat compatriot Shiven Agarwal 5-11, 11-4, 6-11, 11-8, 11-5 in the boys' under-15 final, while Shreshth Iyer beat Shreyansh Jah 11-8, 11-8, 3-11, 11-8 in an all-Indian boys' under-13 final. Top-seeded Indian Aadya Budhia displayed resilience in beating Malaysia's Niewa Chew 9-11, 11-8, 8-11, 11-8, 11-9 in the girls' under-13 final, while top seed Prabhav Bajoria beat second seed Aaditya Shah 5-11, 9-11, 11-5, 11-8, 11-6 in an all-Indian boys' under-11 final. Divyanshi Jain finished runner-up in the girls' under-11 category.

Raducanu feeling reborn as she starts 2024 season in Auckland

AP ■ ELLINGTON

Former U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu says she feels "reborn" as she prepares to play her first match of 2024 at the Auckland tennis classic. The 21-year-old Raducanu has been out of action since April after wrist and knee operations and says she feels reinvigorated at the start of a new season. "I feel reborn in a way, I feel fresh," the 2021 major winner told reporters. "I feel ready, I feel happy, I feel excited. "So overall I'm feeling positive and lighter. For two years after the U.S. Open I felt maybe a bit more like with a weight on my shoulders, but now I feel completely fresh." Raducanu suffered an ankle injury in Auckland last year but played through the pain at the Australian Open. By April she had come to realize she had to take time out for surgery. "I was having wrist pains for five months before I came to Auckland so I was managing it, keeping it going and under



wraps as much as I could," Raducanu said. "I knew it was inevitable if I wanted to fix the problem but I wanted to keep going through the season. "I'm feeling a lot better now, I'm feeling stronger. I feel fitter, more positive and refreshed so I'm really looking forward to this year." Raducanu will play a qualifier in the first round of the Auckland tournament on Monday or Tuesday. Meanwhile, the 2023 U.S. Open champ Coco Gauff is drawn to play American compatriot Claire Liu in the first round as

she begins her 2024 season and defense of the Auckland singles title. Caroline Wozniacki will play Ukraine's Elina Svitolina in round one as she plays at the Auckland tournament for the eighth time. The 33-year-old made a strong comeback in 2023 after taking three years away from tennis to start a family. "I was surprised by how high of a level I was playing at from the get go," Wozniacki said. "It's not easy coming back and playing matches after a month away and I had three and a half years away."

'Gill playing too aggressively'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Legendary Sunil Gavaskar has asked Shubman Gill to curb his aggressive intentions while batting in Tests after the young batsman failed to produce a substantial outing in the first Test against South Africa at Centurion. Gill made two and 26 at the SuperSport Park and fell to pacers Nandre Burger and Marco Jansen in the first and second innings respectively as India lost the opening Test by an innings and 32 runs. Gavaskar advised Gill to take in the different needs of Test cricket as compared to white ball formats. "I think he is playing a bit too aggressively in Test cricket. There is a slight difference when you play Test cricket when compared to T20I and ODI cricket. The difference is in the ball. "The red ball moves a little more than the white ball in the air and off the



pitch as well. It bounces a little more too. He should keep that in mind," Gavaskar told Star Sports. While Gill had a fine run in the limited over versions, he has managed to score only one fifty-plus score in the traditional format in 10 innings in 2023, a hundred against Australia at home in March. His nine other outings produced scores of: 21, 5, 13, 18, 6, 10, 29 not out, 2, 26. Gavaskar hoped that Gill would find his range sooner than later. "Shubman Gill started off his career so well and we praised his shots. We can only hope that he gets back into his form. Hope he trains harder and does well in the future," said Gavaskar. India will be aiming to square the series in the second and final Test against South Africa at Cape Town, starting from January 3.



Cameron eyes Test opener role

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Veteran Australian batter Cameron Bancroft staked a claim to the vacant opener's slot post David Warner's Test retirement, saying a 'specialist' should be considered for the position. Warner is all set to retire from Test cricket after the third match against Pakistan, beginning at his home ground Sydney from January 3, 2024. In the post Warner-era, Bancroft is in contention to fill the opening role along with Marcus Harris, Matt Renshaw and Cameron Green. "I've opened the batting in Shield cricket for over 10 years. It's not an easy place to bat. It comes with challenges, and my whole career I've problem-solved trying to find ways to flourish in those sorts of circumstances. "Some players have switched and gone and opened the batting and done really well. But not everyone puts their hand up to go and open the batting," Bancroft was quoted as saying by AAP. "I feel like it probably is a specialist position and it's certainly a really challenging one. But a very rewarding one as well." Bancroft was the leading run-scorer in last season's Sheffield Shield with 945 runs at an average of 59.06, and he again tops the current season's charts with 512 at 56.88. "I've had some conversations (with selectors) over the last 12 months or so and asked some questions about what I can do to improve," Bancroft said. "I'm always looking to improve and get better. I wanted that feedback from them. But I guess it always comes down to scoring runs. So, I've just tried to go out and do the best I can no matter what format of the game that I've been playing," he added.

Hussain hopeful of box office Pant successful return

PTI ■ DUBAI

Former England captain Alyssa Hussain is hopeful of a successful return of "box office" cricketer Rishabh Pant in 2024 following his recovery from the near-fatal car crash a year back. It was on a fateful December night in 2022 when Pant suffered a horrific car accident. The wicketkeeper batter has made strong progress since then and

is likely to return to cricket ahead of the T20 World Cup in USA and the West Indies. "That was such a serious accident. The whole world held its breath and it has been a slow recovery," Hussain was quoted as saying by the ICC. "You follow on social media, on my phone and the initial first walking steps to then scenes in the gym and then scenes of him playing a bit of cricket, scenes of him with Ricky (Ponting). "I travelled with Ricky in the summer in the Ashes, and Ricky was texting him 'how's the progress coming along', and he is a box office cricketer." Following Pant's absence, KL Rahul has filled in to his shoes and produced a good show at the recent ODI World Cup, amassing 452 runs at an average of 75.33. "India have done well without him (Pant) as KL has come in and been brilliant in all for-



ms," Hussain noted. "They'll continue to be brilliant. They're lucky to have both of them, but Rishabh Pant, before his injury, was box office, and hopefully after his injury, will be box office as well." Hussain also earmarked young opener Shubman Gill to return to form in Test cricket. "He (Gill) had a very good three quarters, or nine tenths of 2023. You must have learned so much having the likes of Rohit Sharma at the other end," Hussain said. "He just fell away maybe at the end. Maybe that illness, you know, just got to him a little bit, and he's formed just in a month. We take it far too short when we're in the broadcasting world. "He's a super talent, and he's going to be the next sensation for India for years to come. So, hopefully, he'll have a good 2024."

Healy: Australia will revisit plans anticipating spin friendly pitch

PTI ■ MUMBAI

They might have recorded a narrow three-run win over India in the second ODI but Australia Women's captain Alyssa Healy said the visitors were not prepared for a spin-friendly pitch and will need to revisit their plans ahead of the third game. Indian spinner Deepti Sharma returned with figures of 10-0-38-5 to peg Australia back as they slipped from 117 for 1 to 258 for 8 after batting first. Things could have been different if the home team had not dropped as many as seven catches. Healy said Australia will have to consider more scoring options if turn is going to be a huge factor in the third and final ODI as well. "We probably weren't as prepared for how much turn there was," Healy told the media here after the match. "Early (before the game), we spoke about it, that maybe there was going to be a little bit, but probably (now) just need to chat a little bit about that if they're going to prepare something really similar for game three. "We just probably need to work out a few more different scoring areas for ourselves and obviously probably our attack as well (in regards to) what we can do to cash in on." The third ODI is scheduled on January 2 at the Wankhede Stadium.



30 or maybe 40 runs short with the bat. I thought we'd let ourselves down a little bit (by) just losing wickets at bad times. "(We) probably let India back in the game and in that regard, and probably needed at least to add on that we could, even though it was difficult conditions," she said. Healy said dismissing Richa Ghosh and 96 with Phoebe Litchfield taking a fine catch was perhaps a turning point in the game. "When we hung on to Richa Ghosh when she was on 96, that was when probably the group thought 'we're on here.' I think we could have probably caught her earlier," she said. Ghosh made the most of the two lifelines which she got on nought (dropped by Litchfield) and 36 (dropped by Annabel Sutherland) to make her highest individual score in ODI cricket so far. "They were hovering around run-a-ball for a really long period of time. We just knew if we kept creating dot balls, kept creating pressure, then chances would come, and yeah, that's exactly what the team has been really, really good at for a long period of time. We did it again," Healy said. Healy, who is yet to record a big knock for herself on this tour, said she was happy to be back on the field after a long injury (finger) layoff and is not burdened by captaincy pressure.

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

The Indian pace bowlers were not patient on a good bowling surface during the opening Test against South Africa, a virtue they will need in abundance on a batting paradise at Newlands, where spinners will have little role to play, reckoned legendary Allan Donald. India lost the first Test by an innings and 32 runs after conceding 408 in the first innings on a spicy Centurion track that offered steep bounce and enough lateral movement. "I know South Africa probably got the better of the conditions, no questions about that. They pitched the ball in a 5 and 5.5 meter area and gave it a chance to do something off the deck. But what they did better than India... they were more patient in that area and even they used the short ball a little bit more in the second innings," Donald, a fearsome pacer of his generation, decoded India's defeat in an exclusive interview to PTI. The 57-year-old, who took 330 wickets in just 72 Tests, feels Indians were waiting for things to happen. "For India, there was one debutant (Prasidh Krishna). I thought (Jasprit) Bumrah, but Indian bowlers searched too much for things to happen. They quickly reverted to shorter balls and then lost their length a bit on the shorter side and then got opened up on either side - square leg, off side and SA batters capitalized." "Come Cape Town, it will be hard work and there will be a lot more energy from both teams. Cape Town will be hard work and it will bring honesty out of both the attacks," the 'White Lightning' said.

Indian pacers creativity will be tested in Cape Town: Donald

What is it that makes Cape Town way more difficult than Centurion? "You need to be more creative in Cape Town as wickets are a lot more flatter and partnerships will stretch and that's traditionally as someone who knows it will be tougher Tests," he added. Donald says if India envisage any chance of restoring parity, they need to use the new ball judiciously. "The massive emphasis is on the new ball because traditionally if there's a South westerly wind blowing across Newlands, then you know that is going to dry the pitch up. But not in any way or form I think the pitch will turn." That assessment of Donald isn't great news for veteran off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, who is all set to be benched. "There might be some little bit (assistance) available for spinners later on but it's not going to happen. India in South Africa, there's no way that will bring Indian spinners into it. So, you can forget that part. "But your first innings bowling could reward you, if you pitch the new ball a bit fuller and try to swing it for the first 25 to 30 overs. And then start mixing your pace," he noted. Once the Kookaburra ball gets old, then India would need what Donald calls a "battering ram" or a "bully" who will ramp it up with short balls.



start coming to you, the opportunities of scoring get better. It's an interesting phenomenon as it's tough to bat. In Cape Town though, it will be a very good Test pitch. It will flatten out quickly, so you need to work very hard." In SA, hit-the-deck works more than swing. The Kookaburra ball doesn't swing after the first 20-25 overs and hence South Africa for generations produced bowlers, who could hit the deck and get enough off the surface. "We often talked in SA for generations about looking after the ball really well. We used to know that we don't have a long time for the ball to swing. So, looking after the ball is absolutely paramount. To give guys like Fannie de Villiers, Brian McMillan, Brett Schultz a bit more time to swing the ball. "If you had guys like Schultz, Donald, De Villiers and Pollock who came a bit later on, McMillan etc were guys who hit the deck. I say we are all different and bring those guys who could generate pace off the wicket. My job was to hit lengths really hard at a high pace. "Any kookaburra around the world would swing for a little bit but the red ball here, if you look after the ball, you get rewarded. So even if you are a bowler who hits the deck, your role changes."

New Zealand beats Bangladesh by 17 runs

PTI ■ MOUNT MAUNGANUI

Mitchell Santner and Jimmy Neesham combined in a 46-run partnership which steered New Zealand to a 17 run win over Bangladesh under the Duckworth-Lewis system in the third Twenty20 international on Sunday, dashing the Tigers' hopes of their first series win in New Zealand. Captain Santner and Neesham provided the cool heads New Zealand needed to overcome another top-order collapse and chase down Bangladesh's inadequate total of only 110 in a race against encroaching dark clouds and rain. New Zealand was in desperate trouble at 49-5 in the ninth over, trailing under the

Duckworth-Lewis system when Neesham and Santner came together. They stayed together and guided New Zealand to 95-5 in the 15th over when the forecast rain arrived torrentially and brought the match to an abrupt end. "I think we always knew there was going to be a bit of rain around whether it came at the end of half-way through that second innings," Santner said. "The bowlers did the job up front and it was good to get across the line in a pretty hard-fought series." In extraordinary scenes, spectators dashed for the exits of Bay Oval as the rain pelted down, driven by strong winds. New Zealand needed 78 runs to be ahead on the Duckworth-



Lewis calculation. Sunday's win leveled the three-match series at 1-1 after Bangladesh won the first match by five wickets and after the second match at Bay Oval was washed out after 11 overs. But New Zealand can no longer turn a blind eye to the failings of its top order in the ongoing absence of Kane Williamson and Devon Conway. Bangladesh may have lost the three-match one-day international series and shared the T20 series, but it achieved its first wins in New Zealand in both formats. In the third ODI, New Zealand was reduced to 70-6 and in the first T20 it was 50-5 as its top batters failed to master the Bangladesh attack. The latest collapse seemed both inevitable

and at times comical. Santner excelled as New Zealand bowled out Bangladesh for only 110 in 19.2 overs after winning the toss. Bangladesh lost three wickets for 45 runs in the power play then was bogged down in the middle overs, scoring only 32 between the seventh and 16th overs. Najmul Hossain Shanto's 17 from 15 balls was the top score. Four other batsmen reached double figures, including Towhid Hridoy who made 16 from 18 balls. Santner was particularly effective in the middle stages and there was enough grass on the pitch at Bay Oval for the ball to grip and turn a little. Santner took 4-16 from his four overs

while the seamers Tim Southee, Adam Mile and Ben Sears shared six wickets. "Bowling into the wind can be challenging at times but I was thinking of changing the pace and trying to get a bit of bounce out of the wicket," Santner said. "As a whole the seamers bowled extremely well as well to keep them to 110 on a pretty good pitch." Santner surprised a little when he chose to field on winning the toss. Bay Oval usually is a bat-first pitch with an average first innings score of 190. But with rain forecast, bowling gave New Zealand some control. In the end it was decisive and New Zealand became the first team to win a T20 at Bay Oval when batting second.