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CPI-M RULE: THE  
UNTOLD KERALA STORY

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## INDIA BLOC RESTIVE

### Fissures emerging on a daily basis

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■  
NEW DELHI

The Opposition bloc INDIA is showing signs of complete disarray. One of the major stakeholders in the alliance, Uddhav Thackeray of Shiv Sena, has reached out to JDU president Nitish Kumar, RJD supremo Lalu Prasad, Chief Ministers Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal, and NCP boss Sharad Pawar to quickly work out the appointment of a convener for the INDIA bloc, aiming for better coordination as the crucial Lok Sabha polls could be announced anytime now. On Thursday, a coordination meeting of the bloc was held at the residence of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, with the presence of party leader Rahul Gandhi and others. Briefing the media about the meeting, Congress general secretary Mukul Wasnik said a report presentation was made to Kharge and others, resolving to swiftly work on the seat-sharing formula. "Congress coordination committee held several rounds of meetings with the State leaders pertaining to the Lok Sabha seats within their jurisdiction. Sooner the



aspects of these will be discussed with the other stakeholders of the INDIA bloc to consolidate the talks on seat sharing as the consensus is to instal a INDIA bloc government at the Centre by dislodging the Modi-led BJP's misrule," Wasnik said. On the other hand, Congress expressed 'displeasure' with their INDIA coalition partners — Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal and AAP in Punjab and Delhi. Sources said that Thackeray called all the leaders over the phone and is believed to have proposed the name of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar as the convener of the largest Opposition coalition.

Sources said that Kejriwal, who is currently embroiled in an ED summons controversy, has expressed his support for Nitish Kumar as the convener after talks with Uddhav. "Nitish Kumar was very crucial in forming INDIA alliance. The Congress will not have a problem with the decision as there will be two top posts in the alliance — chairperson and convener," said Shiv Sena (UBT) spokesman Sanjay Raut. Sharad Pawar-led NCP faction leader Supriya Sule also commented on the matter, saying that she has not received any confirmation on Nitish Kumar's appointment as the convener. On December 19, the INDIA bloc parties held their fourth meeting in Delhi where Mamata proposed Kharge as PM candidate. In a statement that may upset stakeholders, Punjab Congress president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring said on Thursday that the AICC has instructed the state unit to contest all 13 seats. "In today's meeting, there was no discussion about seat sharing or alliance in Punjab. We are prepared to compete for all 13 seats. Discussions about candidates and election

strategy will take place in the next couple of months," said Raja. Last week, Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann, leading the AAP-led government, sparked a war of words between Congress and AAP when he remarked, "Sooner, people will say 'once upon a time there was a Congress,' indicating that the grand old party is fading out. On the matter of seat sharing in West Bengal for the Lok Sabha polls, State Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury took on the ruling TMC in the State, commenting that Mamata's real intention is now evident. "They are saying that they (TMC) will give two seats (to Congress) in West Bengal. Those seats already have Congress MPs. What new are they giving us? We won these two seats by defeating Mamata Banerjee and the BJP. What favour are they doing to us? Who will trust her (Mamata Banerjee)? It is Mamata who needs Congress to win... Congress can fight and is capable of winning more seats on its own. We will show. We don't need to keep these two seats on Mamata's pity..." Chaudhary said on Thursday in Kolkata.

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## With ED hot on the trail, Kejriwal to head to Gujarat

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid speculation about his possible arrest by the Enforcement Directorate following his repeated refusal to appear before them, AAP convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal alleged on Thursday that the ED's repeated summons in the alleged liquor scam, just before the upcoming Lok Sabha poll, are an attempt to hinder his campaigning. This is despite the ongoing two-year investigation into the matter. The Delhi CM emphasised that his honesty is his biggest asset, and the BJP wants to tarnish his honesty with fake cases. AAP convener issued a video message amid intense speculation that he would be arrested in connection with the alleged liquor scam. "For the last two years, you have heard the words 'sharab ghotala' several times. There have been multiple raids in connection, but agencies didn't find a single rupee. Where did the money go? Did it just vanish into thin air? The truth is there has been no corruption," Kejriwal said in a video message a day after skipping the third summons of the ED. Meanwhile, the AAP also announced that Kejriwal will leave for a three-day tour of Gujarat on Saturday in view



Media personnel outside the residence of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal  
Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

of the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. AAP sources said Kejriwal's Gujarat visit was part of a tour related to the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Jan Sabhas and party events are on the AAP convener's agenda, said sources, adding that the AAP convener will address public meetings and party workers during his election tour. The announcement came a day after Kejriwal skipped the third summons issued to him by the ED for questioning related to the alleged excise scam. Notably, many AAP leaders, including Delhi Ministers Atishi, Saurabh Bharadwaj, and Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak, late on Wednesday, cited sources and said that the ED is likely to raid and arrest their chief. Several AAP workers also gathered outside Kejriwal's residence this morning, anticipating ED action. On the other hand, the ED has declined the claim and termed the reports of raids at Arvind Kejriwal's residence as 'nothing but rumors'. Officials said they are examining the letter and will summon Kejriwal once again. "Many AAP leaders have been falsely implicated in this connection, and they are languishing in jail while there is no evidence against them. Now, the BJP wants to arrest me. My biggest strength is my honesty. They want to defame me, hurt my image with false accusations," Kejriwal said. Speaking on the summons, Kejriwal mentioned that his lawyers told him that the summonses were illegal.

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## CM Jagan's sister Sharmila merges with Congress

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

YS Sharmila, the daughter of former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy and founder of YSR Telangana Party, joined the Congress here on Thursday. She also announced the merger of her YSR Telangana Congress with the Congress, and said she would fulfil any responsibility given to her. Sharmila joined the Congress in the presence of party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and former party president Rahul Gandhi. She later met Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi at her residence. Lauding the Congress, she said it is the largest and "most secular" party in the country as it unwaveringly serves all communities and unites all sections of people. "I am very happy to be merging the YSR Telangana party with the Congress. It gives me immense joy that the YSR Telangana party is going to be a part of the Indian National Congress from today onwards," she said. Describing her father and former Chief Minister YSR Reddy as a legendary leader of the Telugu people, she said he not only served the Congress all his life, but also gave his life serving the Congress.

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## Trouble for AAP as Mohalla Clinics face CBI probe

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Thursday referred an alleged scam involving ghost patients at Mohalla Clinics in Delhi to the CBI. According to the allegations, fake pathology and radiology tests were conducted on non-existent patients at Mohalla Clinics, aiming to make illegal payments to private labs in the guise of referrals as part of the purported scam. This development follows Saxena's recent directive for a CBI probe into the alleged supply of drugs to Delhi government hospitals that failed "quality standard tests." The impact assessment report from the Delhi Government Health Department has revealed concerning findings. In 11,657 records from these seven Mohalla Clinics, patients' mobile numbers were listed as 'zero.' Furthermore, in 8,251 cases, the mobile number column was left blank, and in 3,092 cases, the mobile numbers were entered as '9999999999'. Officials also identified 400 entries with non-existent mobile numbers starting with 1-5, and 999 cases where the same mobile number was associated with 15 or more patients. The report raised questions about the legitimacy of prescriptions, as doctors marked attendance through pre-recorded videos. An official queried, "Who prescribed these tests and medicines to patients — non-medical staff?" An enquiry was conducted by the vigilance and Delhi Government's



Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

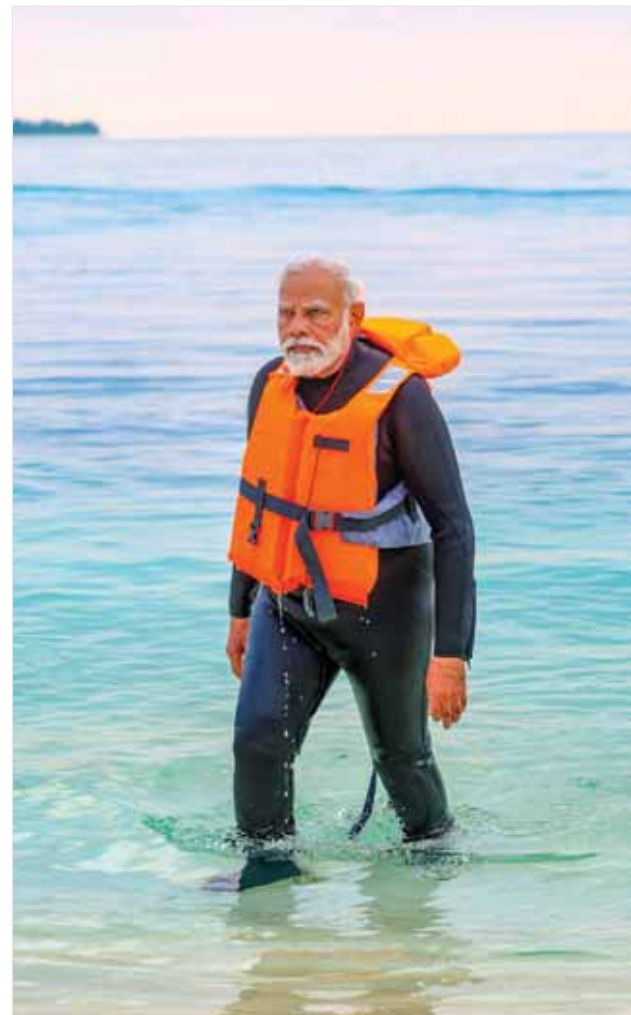
health departments at the Mohalla Clinics to investigate the lab investigations outsourced to private diagnostic companies. According to the enquiry report shared by the LG's office, fake and non-existent mobile numbers were used to register patients and for subsequent lab tests supposedly done on them. Duplication of mobile numbers was also allegedly noticed. "The data has clearly revealed that fake lab tests were carried out at these Mohalla Clinics, warranting further inquiry," said an official from the LG's office. The alleged scam came to light in September 2023 when it was observed that some doctors and staff at seven Mohalla Clinics in South-West, Shahdara, and North-East districts were fraudulently marking their attendance through pre-recorded videos. The Delhi Government initiated a facility to provide 450 types of medical tests for free to impoverished patients at Mohalla Clinics across the city starting from January 1 of the previous year.

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## Modi's Island Odyssey in Lakshadweep

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday thanked the people of Lakshadweep for their hospitality during his visit there on Wednesday. He also posted pictures of his undersea exploration on X and shared his "exhilarating experience" of the sojourn in the islands located in the Arabian Sea. He went snorkelling to explore the undersea life there and said, "For those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list. During my stay, I also tried snorkelling - what an exhilarating experience it was." Modi also shared pictures of his early morning walks on the pristine beaches of Lakshadweep and some moments of leisure, sitting on a chair by the beach. "In addition to the scenic beauty, Lakshadweep's tranquility is also mesmerising. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on how to work even harder for the welfare of 140 crore Indians," he said. Modi was in Lakshadweep on January 2 and 3 to inaugurate the Kochi-Lakshadweep Islands Submarine Optical Fiber Connection and lay foundation stone for the renovation of primary healthcare facility and five model Anganwadi centres. He also dedicated several projects to the nation. "Recently, I had the



Prime Minister Narendra Modi tries snorkelling during his visit to Bangaram in Lakshadweep  
PTI

opportunity to be among the people of Lakshadweep. I am still in awe of the stunning beauty of its islands and the incredible warmth of its people. I had the opportunity to interact with people in Agatti, Bangaram and Kavaratti. I thank the people of the islands for their hospitality. Here are some glimpses, including aerial glimpses from Lakshadweep," Modi said on X. He said the government's focus in Lakshadweep was to uplift lives through enhanced development. "In addition to creating futuristic infrastructure, it is also about creating opportunities for better healthcare, faster internet and drinking water, while protecting as well as celebrating the vibrant local culture. The projects that were inaugurated reflect this spirit," Modi said. "Had excellent interactions with the beneficiaries of various government schemes. It is inspiring to see firsthand how these initiatives are fostering better health, self-reliance, women empowerment, improved agricultural practices and more. The life journeys I heard were truly moving," he said. "Lakshadweep is not just a group of islands; it's a timeless legacy of traditions and a testament to the spirit of its people. My visit has been an enriching journey of learning and growing," the Prime Minister said.

## Winter of discontent in Delhi as mercury dips

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The national capital has been experiencing wintry mornings and nights since New Year's eve, causing people to shiver both at home and in workplaces. Icy winds and a heavy fog in the higher altitudes have kept the city in the grip of winter. A day after recording its lowest daytime temperature of the season, Delhiites woke up to yet another cold and grey morning, with the maximum temperature recorded at 12.5 degrees Celsius — seven notches below the season's normal at the Safdarjung Observatory station on Thursday. This is a record low

for the season, leading to foggy and cold day-like conditions." The recorded minimum temperature was around 7.7 degrees Celsius, just one notch above the normal. With cold conditions expected in the upcoming days, the weather office forecasts that on Friday, both the maximum and minimum temperatures are likely to settle around 13 and 6 degrees Celsius, respectively. Safdarjung, Delhi's main weather station, reported a visibility of 500 metres at 8:30 am, with the minimum temperature recorded at 7.7 degrees Celsius, slightly above the normal for the season.



According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD) data, Palam recorded a maximum temperature of 11.4 degrees Celsius, nearly seven notches below the season's normal, while the minimum temperature stood at 7.5 degrees Celsius. The Ridge recorded a maximum temperature of 12 degrees Celsius, approximately five notches below the normal. In Aya Nagar, the maximum

temperature was recorded at 12 degrees Celsius. "The first 10 days of January are typically considered the coldest, but this year, it is relatively warmer compared to the previous year," said Kuldeep Privastava, scientist and head of the Regional Weather Forecasting Centre. The decline in the maximum temperature has led to bitter cold in Delhi, with the minimum temperature already around 7 degrees Celsius. A meteorological "cold day" is declared when the maximum temperature is 4.5 degrees below normal, and the minimum temperature is below 10 degrees Celsius. The peak

temperature usually occurs between 3 pm and 4 pm. The three-hour readings recorded by the IMD indicate ambient temperatures in the low double digits (10-11 degrees Celsius) for most parts of the day between 8:30 am and 5:30 pm, except for some hours between 2:30 pm and 5:30 pm. "The normal maximum temperature for Delhi at this time is around 17.3 degrees Celsius, and the normal minimum is 6-7 degrees Celsius," said IMD officials. The weather department has issued a yellow alert for "cold day" conditions in some areas along with moderate fog.

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## China heaps praise on Indian economic feat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

In a rare commendation, Global Times, a prominent Beijing-based Chinese media outlet, has published an article praising India's significant strides in economic development, social governance, and foreign policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This rare acknowledgment of India's advancements and Prime Minister Modi's strategic vision by Global Times signifies the growing

recognition of India's burgeoning global influence and the implications of its assertive posture on the international landscape. The article, written by Zhang Jiadong, the Director of the Centre for South Asian Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, highlights India's remarkable achievements over the past four years. It acknowledges India's robust economic growth, improvements in urban governance, and a shift in attitude towards international relations, notably with China.

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# Shah launches tur dal procurement portal

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

Union Cooperation Minister Amit Shah on Thursday launched a tur dal procurement portal through which farmers can register and sell their produce to NAFED and NCCF at a minimum support price or market price, saying that the move aims to make India self-reliant in pulses by 2027.

It may be noted that the tur dal procurement portal comes at a time when the domestic tur output in the 2023-24 kharif season is anticipated to be lower for the second straight year in view of fall in acreage and the central nodal agencies hope to procure maximum quantity for maintaining sufficient buffer and keep a lid on retail inflation ahead of general elections.

After the launch, Shah said before the sowing operation, tur farmers can register on the portal to sell their produce to NAFED and NCCF at minimum support price (MSP).

A similar facility will be unveiled in future for urad and masoor farmers as well as maize farmers, he said. The minister also transferred via Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) about Rs 68 lakh to 25 farmers registered with



NAFED and NCCF towards payment for sale of tur via the multilingual portal. The National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd (NAFED) and the National Cooperative Consumers' Federation of India (NCCF) are two central nodal agencies that undertake pulses procurement on behalf of the government for maintaining a buffer stock. They also buy pulses under the Price Support Scheme when the rates fall below the MSP.

The registered tur farmers will have an option to sell either to NAFED/NCCF or in the open market. Suppose the open market price of tur remains higher than the MSP at the time of harvesting, in that case an average rate will be arrived through a formula, he said, adding that the pay-

ment will be done through DBT. Noting that more farmers were not taking up pulses farming in the country because prices were not assured, he said that with procurement via the portal, the initiative will bring a major reform in the agriculture sector and help achieve self-reliance in pulses production. "Tur will be procured from farmers and it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guarantee," he added. Tur production had touched a record of 4.87 million tonnes in 2016-17 kharif season and in the consecutive years the output fell and reached as low as 3.31 million tonnes in 2022-23. As per the initial estimate of the agriculture ministry, tur output is pegged at 3.42 million tonnes for 2023-24 kharif season.

## Rashmi appointed Maharashtra's first woman DGP

**T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI**

Nearly four months after the Bombay High Court dismissed two phone tapping cases against her, the Maharashtra Government on Thursday appointed senior IPS officer Rashmi Shukla as the new State Director-General of Police (DGP), the first-ever woman to occupy the coveted post. An IPS officer of 1998 batch, Shukla replaces Rajnish Sheth, who retired on December 31, as the new DGP of the state. Shukla, who is currently the Director-General of Seema Sasashtra Dal, had earlier worked as the Director of the State Intelligence Department (SID) and held other prestigious state and central postings. Shukla, it may be recalled, had come under rough weather during the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government over the alleged tapping of Opposition leaders' phones during the Devendra Fadnavis-led government between 2014 and 2019. Two FIRs had been registered against Shukla for allegedly tapping the Opposition leaders. In the first FIR in Mumbai, Shukla had been accused of illegally tapping phones of Shiv Sena (UBT) leaders Uddhav Thackeray, Sanjay Raut and NCP leader Eknath Khadse, while she faced the charge of Congress leader Nana Patole's telephone in the second FIR registered in Pune.

# Congress seeks action against Sattar

**T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI**

Turning up the heat on State Minister of Minority Development Abdul Sattar for his questionable language, the Maharashtra Congress on Thursday demanded action against him for shocking instructions to the police to "beat these people like dogs, break their backs" an irate group of people gathered at a programme organised on the occasion of his birthday. Flaggng the issue of lathi-charge ordered by the minister to quell the mob that created ruckus at a programme organ-

ised on the occasion of his birthday, Maharashtra Pradesh Congress chief spokesperson Atul Londhe said: "Apart from ordering lathi-charge at the irate group of people, Sattar asked the police to 'beat these people like dogs, break their backs, what's the point of having 1,000 policemen when you can't even beat up 50,000 people?'" "Is Abdul Sattar a minister or a goon? Will Chief Minister Eknath Shinde show the courage to take action against the arrogant Sattar?," Londhe asked. Alluding to the lathi-charge

that took place at the minister's birthday function, Londhe said: "Seeing that the program organized by him was causing chaos, the minister got angry and ordered a lathi charge on the audience and the police also did as they were instructed". "Are the Maharashtra policemen being used for providing security for the minister's birthday parties? Seeing the language of Abdul Sattar, he is not fit to be a minister, but Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar do not have the courage to take action against such

controversial ministers," Londhe said. Controversies are not new to Sattar. His name had figured in the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) scam that broke out in August 2022, while his name came up in the 37 acre grazing land scam Sattar's PA name came up in bogus raid recovery when he was agriculture minister. Sattar had allegedly used foul language for NCP MP Supriya Sule. "Sattar has always shown his arrogance of power but now people will make such arrogant and unreasonable Sattars sit at home," Londhe said.

## NCP leader in soup for calling Lord Ram meat eater

**T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI**

Ahead of the inauguration of Ram temple at Ayodhya, a senior Nationalist Congress Party (Sharad Pawar) leader has found himself in an unsavoury controversy over his comment that Lord Ram had turned a "meat eater" after he was exiled from Ayodhya kingdom. NCP (SP) National General Secretary Jitendra Ahwad had stirred up the hornet's nest by dubbing Lord Ram as 'meat-eater' when he was exiled from the Ayodhya Kingdom.

While ancient scriptures and also in the Valmiki version of Ramayana epic, Ahwad had said at the temple town of Shirdi in Ahmednagar district on Wednesday: "Lord Ram was never a vegetarian. He was a non-vegetarian. Where will a person living in the forests for 14 years find vegetarian food? Is it correct or not.?" After his comments sparked a massive controversy, an unfazed Ahwad softened his stand and said: "I express my regret if his comment had hurt the religious sentiments of anyone."

## EC revises proforma for symbol allocation to RUPPs

**PNS ■ NEW DELHI**

The Election Commission on Thursday said it has revised the proforma to allot common symbols to registered unrecognised political parties, which have submitted contribution reports and audited annual accounts for the last three financial years. As per the EC, the Registered Unrecognised Political Parties (RUPPs) will also have to submit election expenditure statements of the party for the last two elections if it has contested any. The RUPPs were earlier giving these details sepa-

rately, officials said, adding these details are now being made part of the format of application for common symbols. "Accordingly, the Commission has revised the proforma of application for Common Symbol Allotment under the provisions of Para 10 B of the Election Symbols (Reservation & Allotment) Order, 1968," the poll body said in a statement. The EC said the party seeking common symbol allotment from January 11 has to furnish a declaration, duly signed and notarised as per Annexure III.

# Winter of discontent in Delhi as mercury...

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Several flight operations were delayed at Delhi airport while 26 trains were delayed in arrival by three to eight hours due to low visibility amid foggy conditions. In light of the prevailing cold weather conditions, administrations in Uttar Pradesh's Noida and Greater Noida ordered schools to remain shut for students up to Class 8 till January 6. The 24-hour average Air Quality Index (AQI) recorded at 4 pm on Thursday was 377, which stands in the 'very poor'

category. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data, the Air Quality Index was recorded at 377 in RK Puram on Thursday morning, 312 in Lodhi Road, 377 ITO area and 387 in the IGI Airport area. Meanwhile, the air quality at Anand Vihar plummeted to the 'severe' category with PM2.5 at 428 and PM10 at 433, as per the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The AQI at ITO also remained in 'severe' category with PM2.5 reaching at 447 and PM10 at 403. The

Carbon Monoxide (CO) was recorded at 79, in the 'satisfactory' category. The particulate matter PM2.5 at Punjabi Bagh also reached 441 while PM10 was at 407, both in the 'severe' category. The air quality at Jahangirpuri air quality monitoring station also entered into 'severe' category with PM2.5 at 466 and PM10 444. The CO also reached at 101 or 'moderate'. The PM2.5 at Okhla Phase-II was recorded at 411 and PM10 at 405 both in the 'severe' category. The CO was at 106, at

the 'moderate' levels. At Mundka the AQI remained in the 'severe' category with PM2.5 at 401 and PM10 at 303, in the 'very poor' category. At Bawana, the air quality was in the 'very poor' category with PM2.5 at 375 and PM10 at 282, in the 'poor' category, while the AQI monitoring station at Dwarka sector 8 recorded PM2.5 at 400 and PM10 at 321, both in the very poor category. In its forecast, the IMD said a thick blanket of fog has swallowed the vast Indo-Gangetic

plains, stretching from Pakistan to West Bengal, plunging North India into an icy grip. Dense to very dense fog shrouds Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, North Rajasthan, North Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and even parts of Bihar and Jharkhand. This relentless mist not only disrupts visibility but also triggers biting cold days, and even severe cold day, conditions across the region. While minimum temperatures remain surprisingly above normal, day temperatures in

Punjab and parts of Haryana have nosedived significantly below average. This stark contrast paints a picture of an unusually chilly North India, where residents shiver despite relatively warmer nights. According to the weather department, over the next two days, no significant change in weather is expected in east India. In Central India, minimum temperatures are likely to rise by 2-3 degrees Celsius over the next three days, with no significant change thereafter.

# INDIA BLOC RESTIVE

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Meanwhile Congress panel entrusted with drafting the party's manifesto for the coming Lok Sabha elections held its first meeting on Thursday and discussed various points to be included in the document. In its bid to wrest power from the BJP after 10 years, the Congress is aiming to present an alternative positive agenda to the public. "This was the first meeting of the manifesto committee. It was an exchange of preliminary thoughts and ideas, and how we proceed with the drafting of the manifesto. The next meeting will take place next week," panel chairperson P Chidambaram said after the meeting.

## CM Jagan's sister Sharmila merges with...

**From Page 1**  
"Today, it would give him great joy that his daughter is following in his footsteps and is going to be a part of the Congress itself," she said. "The Congress is still the largest secular party of our country. The Congress has always upheld the true culture of India. The Congress has built our nation's foundations. The Congress has unwaveringly served all communities, uniting all sections of the people of India," Sharmila said in the presence of top party leadership. "I truly honour the Congress because it is the most secular party, the largest secular party of the country," she said. She said Rahul Gandhi has won the confidence of the people with his Bharat Jodo Yatra and that also led to the party's victory in Karnataka. Sharmila said she was happy that she was part of the Congress victory in Telangana. She had announced her support to the

Congress during the recent assembly polls in Telangana to end the alleged corrupt and anti-people rule of the BRS led by K Chandrasekhara Rao. "I also realised that is going to have a domino effect in Telangana and, therefore, I graciously withheld from contesting in Telangana. Congress stood a chance of victory in Telangana and we did not want to break the anti-KCR vote. The Congress won in Telangana and I am most happy that we contributed a part to that victory," she said. She said it was her father's dream to see Rahul Gandhi as prime minister of our country and she would be happy to contribute to it. "It was my father's dream to see Rahul Gandhi as prime minister of our country and I am very glad that I am going to be a part in making that happen. Whatever responsibility the Congress will lay on me, I promise to fulfil that responsibility with all loyalty, integrity and diligence," Sharmila said.

In a post on X, she later said she is delighted on merging the YSR Telangana Party with the Congress, the party her father belonged to, "the party that he lived in, that he served tirelessly, and breathed his last in". "This moment would make him most ecstatic and nothing can be more heartening than this homecoming for me," she said. "Back to the party that is the biggest secular party in the country and upholds the pluralistic and true culture of India and had built this nation from its foundation, unwaveringly serving all communities, uniting all," she said. "As much as the daughter of YSR I will perform as the soldier of Congress for the people of the country, to uphold democratic values, protect constitutional rights and preserve unity and brotherhood amid current disturbing trends perpetrated from divisive forces," she also

said in her post. Sharmila earlier during her joining also raised the issue of ethnic violence in Manipur, and said "as a Christian it pained me that such cruelty took place in Manipur." She said 2,000 churches were vandalised and 60,000 people became homeless in the state. "That kind of cruelty is something that I have not been able to digest even to this day. That struck me that this is what will happen if a secular party is not in power," she said. "Therefore, I am joining the Congress and merging the YSR Telangana Party with the Congress very gladly today because I know that the Congress will uphold all sections of the people in Indian society," she asserted. After chairing her party meeting on Tuesday in Hyderabad, Sharmila had said she and other leaders will meet the top leadership of the Congress, including Kharge, and make a "crucial" announcement in Delhi.

## With ED hot on the trail, Kejriwal to head...

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"I wrote in detail why their summonses were illegal. But they did not reply because they had no reply. Should I follow illegal summonses? I will cooperate if a legal summons is sent to me," Kejriwal said. "The BJP has nothing to investigate. They just want to stop me from campaigning in the Lok Sabha election. Otherwise, why would they summon me just ahead of the elections? The investigation has been going on for two years. The CBI called me eight months ago. Didn't I attend that? I provided all the answers to whatever the CBI asked. But they just want to arrest me on the pretext of summoning me," Kejriwal added. "My lawyers have told me that the ED summonses are illegal. The BJP wants to arrest me to stop me from campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls," said Kejriwal, adding that he has written to the ED thrice, saying their summonses are "illegal" but

has not received any response. "They haven't replied because they know that their summonses are illegal. Should I follow illegal summonses? If legally sound summonses are issued, I will follow them. My greatest wealth is my honesty. They want to break me by tarnishing my image," he said. Alleging that the summonses were being issued at the behest of the BJP with an intention to stop him from campaigning in the forthcoming Lok Sabha poll, Kejriwal said, "If a legally correct summons comes, he will fully cooperate. The BJP's objective is not to investigate; their objective is to stop me from campaigning in the Lok Sabha elections. Just before the Lok Sabha elections, they have sent me a summons. ED is calling me just two months before the election, which proves that they have no investigation in mind. The BJP is using ED and CBI to poach leaders from other

parties. There is more than one instance of how leaders who join the BJP immediately get a clean chit. Today, Manish Sisodia, Satyendra Jain, and Sanjay Singh are in jail not because they indulged in corruption, but because they refused to join the BJP. Had we done something wrong, we would have joined the BJP by now," Kejriwal said. Appealing to the countrymen to stand by him in this hour of crisis, he said, "The country cannot move forward by putting honest leaders in jail and allowing corrupt people to join their party. What's going on? Whatever is going on is very dangerous. This is very bad for our democracy; it must be stopped. I have always fought for the country. My body, mind, and resources are for the country, every breath of mine is for the country, every drop of my blood is for the country, each cell of my body is dedicated to the country. We must save the country

together. I am fighting against them with all my might; I need your support." Earlier, security around Kejriwal's residence was beefed up on Wednesday night. The Delhi Police, however, said the security around the CM's house was beefed up to "manage" media persons who have gathered there since Wednesday after party leaders claimed that Kejriwal would be raided and arrested. "The roads leading to the CM's house have been shut, and police personnel are deployed at all the entry/exit gates. Even the staff deployed at the CM's house has been stopped from entering," an AAP source said. "The ED is gearing up to raid and arrest Kejriwal," another source from the party said. Delhi cabinet minister and AAP leader Atishi on Wednesday night said on X, "News coming in that ED is going to raid Arvind Kejriwal's residence tomorrow morning. Arrest likely."

## Trouble for AAP as Mohalla Clinics...

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Two private companies were hired to conduct these tests. The assessment report specified that the seven Mohalla Clinics subjected to the impact assessment were located in Jaffar Kalan, Ujwa, Shikarpur, Gopal Nagar, Dhansa, Jagjeeet Nagar, and Bihari Colony areas. Recommending a CBI probe into alleged fake laboratory tests in Aam Aadmi Mohalla clinics, Saxena said, "It is deeply upsetting that such fraud is allowed to be perpetrated on the general public." In December 2022, the Delhi Government increased the number of free lab tests offered at state-run hospitals and Mohalla clinics from 212 to 450. Despite the LG's approval of the proposal, an audit of tests prescribed at health facilities, as requested by the LG, was not carried out. Officials suggest that the scam may involve

hundreds of crores of rupees. Reacting to this, Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj said the AAP Government had last year de-empanelled several doctors and staffers at Mohalla clinics for wrongdoing and also demanded the sacking of the health secretary. According to officials, "grave" fraudulent practices have been found to be prevalent in the lab tests being carried out in the name of patients visiting Delhi government hospitals and Mohalla clinics, with payments being made to private labs. "It is indicative of a scam running in hundreds of crores (of rupees). Saxena had issued these directions while clearing a file pertaining to the extension of lab testing services to private parties for patients visiting Mohalla clinics and Delhi government hospitals

in December 2022," an official said. The Delhi government's Vigilance and Health Departments carried out an investigation to look into the lab investigations that were being outsourced to private diagnostic companies. In August last year, it was found that some doctors and staff of seven Mohalla clinics in southwest, Shahdara, and North-East districts resorted to "unethical practice" to fraudulently mark their attendance through pre-recorded videos, the official said. Patients at these Mohalla Clinics were provided medical consultation, and medicines were disbursed by unauthorised staff in the absence of doctors, endangering the lives of the patients, the official said. In September last year, action was taken against the staff, and they were de-empanelled, and FIRs were lodged against them, he said.

Subsequently, a review of sample lab testing data for three months - July to September last year - retrieved from two private service providers was carried out. "It was found that fake or non-existent mobile numbers were used for the registration of patients and subsequent lab tests that were supposedly done on them," the official said. "Also, there was duplication of mobile numbers. The data has clearly revealed that fake lab tests were carried out at these Mohalla clinics that need to be further inquired," the official said. Reacting to Saxena's recommendation of a CBI probe, Bharadwaj said the health secretary should be held responsible for the "sub-standard medicines" being supplied in Delhi government hospitals and the alleged scam at Mohalla clinics. In September last year, the AAP government

had announced the de-empanelment of 26 staffers, including seven doctors, posted at Mohalla clinics for allegedly trying to manipulate the attendance system, the minister said during a press conference here. "If there are complaints about the standard of medicines or patient records in Mohalla clinics, officials are responsible for it. We have already said that action should be taken against the health secretary but nothing has been done," he said. "Why not suspend the health secretary? What are you waiting for? These people (senior officials) have been deployed by them (LG and BJP government at the Centre) only," he said. In December 2022, the Aam Aadmi Party government announced that it would provide 450 types of medical tests free of cost at its hospitals and health centres from January 1, 2023.

## China...

**From Page 1**  
For instance, when discussing the trade imbalance between China and India, Indian representatives previously primarily focused on China's measures to reduce the trade imbalance. However, they are now placing more emphasis on India's export potential, as noted by the author. The article notably commends India's proactive approach in fostering a 'Bharat narrative,' emphasising the nation's strategic confidence. The author states that, with its rapid economic and social development, India has become more strategically confident and proactive in creating and developing a 'Bharat narrative.' "In the political and cultural spheres, India has shifted from emphasising its democratic consensus with the West to highlighting the 'Indian feature' of democratic politics. Currently, there is even more emphasis on the Indian origins of democratic

politics," he adds. This shift, the author asserts, reflects India's ambition to escape its historical colonial shadow and position itself as a global influencer, both politically and culturally. Furthermore, the article lauds India's foreign policy strategy under Prime Minister Modi, highlighting the nation's multi-alignment approach and the strengthening of ties with the US, Japan, and Russia while displaying a nuanced stance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The article notes that India's strategic thinking in foreign policy has undergone another change and is clearly moving toward a great power strategy. "Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed power, he has advocated for a multi-alignment strategy, promoting India's relations with the US, Japan, Russia, and other countries and regional organisations," says Professor Zhang. The article notes that India has always considered itself a world power.

## Book penned by astrophysics student

**STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI**

A book titled "Fantasy, Reality, or Delusion? A Collection of Short Stories and Poems", authored by 18-year-old Jyotsna Pathak, a college-going and aspiring astrophysicist, will be launched at the India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, on January 7. In her debut work, the author delves into the complex psycho-social problems of modern urban living, which are increasingly creating dysfunctional families and broken societies. She discusses what happens when fantasy and desires gain control over your mind every time you seek refuge from the unfortunate truth. Jyotsna has written various articles for her school magazine and likes to spend her free time watching football and horror movies.

# Upsetting that such fraud allowed: LG on fake laboratory tests

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Recommending a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into alleged fake laboratory tests in Aam Aadmi Mohalla Clinics, Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena said, "It is deeply upsetting that such fraud is allowed to be perpetrated on the general public." Making this observation, he also said the alleged fraud speaks volumes of the irresponsible and lackadaisical approach of successive Health Ministers as indeed Chief Minister, towards public health. "It is deeply upsetting that such frauds allowed to be perpetrated on the general public which speaks volumes of the irresponsible and lackadaisical approach of successive Health Ministers as indeed Chief Minister, towards public health. While tall claims are frequently made in various forums by the GNCTD regarding provid-

ing world class health infrastructure in Delhi, the recent finding regarding spurious drugs and now fake lab tests, bring to the fore dark realities that belie any claims on the contrary. Since CBI has already initiated the enquiry with respect to AAMCs and subsequently into the matter of 'Not of Standard Quality' drugs, the proposal is approved. It may also be ensured that pending payments of outsourced labs may be released only after proper scrutiny and thorough verification/inquiry," the Saxena said in a noting. Tens of thousands of tests were recommended prima-facie to 'ghost patients'. Empirical data proving entry of fake mobile numbers/ blank mobile numbers of fictitious patients, fake attendance of doctors and fictitious data of patients establishes wide spread corruption, manipulation of documents, forgery of records with the sole intention to loot government

exchequer and extend undue benefits to private parties operating the AAMCs as well as dispensaries, polyclinics and Hospitals of Delhi Government, officials said regarding the alleged fraud. Saxena said while tall claims are frequently made in various forums by the GNCTD regarding providing world class health infrastructure in Delhi, the recent finding regarding spurious drugs and now fake lab tests, bring to the fore dark realities that belie any claims on the contrary. "I am constrained to note with deep concern that my apprehensions regarding the possibility of financial impropriety, wasteful expenditure and malpractices involving health of the poorest of the poor, through manipulation and distortion of factual data in outsourcing of diagnostic services to private players, have come out to be true. It is alarming to say the least,



that within a span of few days, I have been presented with another file, after the one dealing with 'Not of Standard Quality' drugs being supplied in government hospitals and Mohalla Clinics - wherein, now gross irregularities in the lab testing being done by private agencies in Mohalla Clinics has been brought to the fore. These irregularities/financial improprieties coupled with recent findings regarding sub-standard quality of drugs being provided in the Government Hospitals of GNCTD have laid bare the fact that public health sector is plagued with various omissions and commissions at all fronts at the cost of hapless patients who are desperately dependent on these indispensable services in the capital city of the country. What is even more reprehensible is the fact that the targeted population of these services at the Mohalla Clinics, are the poorest of the poor who have no recourse to any other means than the ones being provided by the government," he said. "It is needless to re-emphasize the critical importance and

sensitivity expected for efficient functioning of public health system. However, the instant revelations regarding huge amount of loss to the exchequer at the cost of the common citizen, adversely affecting the needy and the public health mechanism as a whole, seems to have defeated the whole objective for which the concept of AAMCs was institutionalised," he added. The document showed that Delhi government's health department has outsourced the lab investigation services to the selected service provider viz. - MIS Agilus Diagnostics Ltd (formerly SRL Ltd, and Mis Metropolis Health Care Ltd in February 2023. These services providers are providing lab services in all Aam Aadmi Mohalla Clinics (AAMC), Delhi Govt. Dispensaries (DGDs), Seed PUHCs, Hospitals and associated Polyclinics in three clus-

ters. In August 2023, it came to the notice of the Department that some Doctors/Staff of AAMC (Aam Aadmi Mohalla Clinic) posted in Shahdara, North-East & South-West District resorted to unethical practice to mark their attendance fraudulently on 3 tablet module by pre-recorded video, thereby violating the MoU & ToR regarding patient services. The patients were consulted and medicines were disbursed to them in the absence of the Doctor by the empaneled staff who were not competent and not authorised to do so thereby endangering the lives of the patient. In September 2023 immediate action was taken against these staffs and they were de-empaneled. Also FIRs were registered against them. In October 2023 in continuation of this action, a review of sample of lab testing data (retrieved from both diagnos-

tics labs web portal) was carried out. A random analysis of lab data for 3 months - July to Sept. 2023 - in Metropolis and Agilus Lab Management Information System (LMIS) was carried out and it was observed that even during the period when the now de-empaneled Doctors were marking their attendance fraudulently through pre-recorded videos the lab tests are being recommended, meaning thereby that lab tests was being recommended without presence of treating doctor, which is clear violation of SOPs laid down. Also it was found that a single mobile number (which is an important detail for identifying each patient visiting health facility for lab test) is occurring again and again (duplication) for many patients with different names. The data suggest that lab tests could have been entered which need to be enquired.

# Hizbul ultra with ₹10 lakh bounty held

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a significant development, the Delhi Police Special Cell arrested Javed Ahmed Mattoo (32), a prominent Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist, on Thursday in the national Capital. Mattoo, who was A++ terrorist, captured with a 9 MM star pistol, magazine, six live cartridges and a stolen car. He was wanted in 11 terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir and was among the top 10 targets in the Valley on the list of security agencies. He was carrying a reward of Rs 10 lakh on his head. He was wanted in connection with multiple terror-related incidents in Jammu and Kashmir. The arrest was made following a successful search operation conducted by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), as confirmed by the Delhi Police

Special Cell. With the coordination of Special Cell of Delhi Police and central agencies, Javed Mattoo, an A++ category terrorist who has a bounty of Rs10 lakh on him, was arrested today... After taking him into police custody remand, we will further action against him," Special Commissioner of Delhi Police HGS Dhaliwal said. He added that Mattoo was found travelling on the DND in a stolen vehicle and that a pistol was recovered from him at the time of the arrest. The police, said Dhaliwal, had been tracking Mattoo from Delhi's Nizamuddin. He also said that though Mattoo concealed his identity and was leading a "camouflaged" life, he "maintained contact with his associates." According to the police, Mattoo went underground after getting



injured in an exchange of fire with security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. He then fled to Nepal on the instructions of Pakistan's spy agency ISI. A few days ago, the Delhi Police received information that Mattoo would be coming to Delhi-NCR to collect arms and ammunition. Acting on the tip-off, sources keeping tabs on sleeper cells and weapon suppliers were activated. The

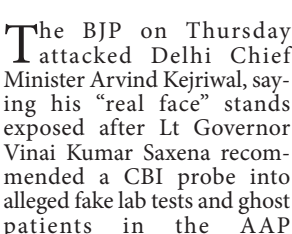
police were also informed that Mattoo's Pakistan-based handler would be coordinating the delivery of arms and ammunition, and he would carry out terror strikes in Jammu and Kashmir. Mattoo, a resident of Sopore in Jammu and Kashmir, had also visited Pakistan on several occasions. According to the police, Mattoo was part of a seven-member module of the Hizbul Mujahideen. While four of the module's members had died during gunfights with security forces in separate incidents, two are still working from Pakistan, Dhaliwal said. Mattoo's involvement in various terrorist activities in the Jammu and Kashmir region had made him a high-priority target for law enforcement agencies. Requesting anonymity, another

officer said Abdul Mazid Zargar, a resident of Sopore, was among Mattoo's associates. Currently, Zargar is in Pakistan and he is involved in cross-border smuggling, the officer said. "Abdul Qayum Nazar was the operational in-charge of the terrorist module. He was killed in an encounter in Jammu and Kashmir," the officer said. Tariq Ahmed Lone, another associate of Mattoo, was a Pakistan-trained terrorist. Lone fell to death after he jumped from a bridge when he was surrounded by security forces, the officer added. The officer said Imtiyaz Kundu, also Mattoo's associate, fled to Pakistan in 2016. His name has surfaced in several cases in Kashmir, the officer said. Mehraj Halwai and Pakistan-trained terrorist Wasim Guru, also linked to Mattoo, were killed in an encounter by secu-

city forces in Jammu and Kashmir, the officer said. In 2010, Dhaliwal said, Mattoo along with his associates had killed Head Constable Mohammad Yusuf outside the Sopore police station. Mattoo along with four others had in 2010 also launched an attack on the residence of the Sopore superintendent of police. They were armed with AK-47s and had lobbed grenades at the residence, he said. In 2012, Mattoo suffered a bullet injury during another attack on the police station. Due to the injury, he faced problems while walking, police said. Dhaliwal said after this, they killed two Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) jawans and snatched their service weapons. They also attacked a police patrol team, injuring its members, the SCP said.

# Real face of Kejriwal stands exposed: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI



The BJP on Thursday attacked Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, saying his "real face" stands exposed after Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena recommended a CBI probe into alleged fake lab tests and ghost patients in the AAP Government's mohalla clinics. Reacting to AAP's charge that the BJP wants to arrest Arvind Kejriwal to prevent him from campaigning in the Lok Sabha elections, BJP said the Delhi chief minister has been behaving like a fugitive. In what could be seen as yet another setback for the AAP ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, Saxena ordered a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into allegations of fake diagnostic tests prescribed by the Kejriwal government-run Aam Aadmi Mohalla Clinics to benefit private labs. The development comes days after Saxena ordered a CBI probe into the alleged supply of drugs that had failed "quality standard tests" to Delhi government-run hospitals. Referring to Kejriwal skipping the ED summons over the liquor policy case, Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva called AAP 'choron ki baraat' (a procession of thieves) and said Kejriwal has been behaving like a fugitive. "Since morning I have been watching the 'Choron ki Baraat' (procession of thieves) making noise and mourning for Kejriwal. When you did corruption what happened that time? You (Kejriwal) are running away from the investigation agency. You have been called three times by ED but you did not go there. Now you are mourning that you can be arrested. Delhi CM it's your responsibility to follow the rules but you are not following that," he said. "There was only a liquor scam so far, now there is a medical scam. And its self-claimed Bharat Ratna, who claims to be outright honest, has done it (scam)," Sudhanshu Trivedi,



the BJP's national spokesperson, said during a press conference at the party headquarters in the national capital. "Amid all the drama from Vipassana meditation to poll campaigns, the character of an outright honest (leader) is ruined completely" with the Lt Governor recommending the CBI probe, Trivedi charged. "It has become very clear that you first set up a mohalla clinic, initially started ordinary tests and then made arrangements for big tests, and eventually outsourced all these things to a private entity. It is somewhat like what had happened in the liquor scam," he added. Attacking Kejriwal, the BJP leader said this is a "moral issue" and not a technical one. "Tens of thousands of tests were recommended prima facie to ghost patients (at mohalla clinics)," he said, referring to a note written by the Lt Governor on the alleged scam. "That's why they used to oppose Aadhaar also so that there is no possibility of any complications (in continuing with the alleged irregularities)," the BJP leader alleged. Trivedi demanded that Kejriwal reply on the allegations, saying the Delhi chief minister is running scared of the probe agency because he knows he cannot face its questions. Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly, Ramvir Singh Bidhuri slammed the Kejriwal saying the Delhi Chief Minister should cooperate with the probe agency. "Kejriwal has no right to remain in office. He should resign immediately because his government has become a breeding ground for scams, with new scandals emerging daily.

# Israeli Embassy blast: Police write to Jamia for CCTV footage

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Days after a blast near the Israeli Embassy, the Delhi Police has written to the Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) to provide the CCTV footage from the cameras installed at the walls of the university. According to sources, police suspect that one of the persons who visited the blast site at the Prithviraj Road two hours prior to the incident had come from Jamia Nagar in Southeast Delhi. He had taken an auto-rickshaw nearby the Jamia metro station. "The letter was written to the university as multiple CCTV cameras are installed at the walls of the university. These cameras are faced towards the Okhla Road from where one of the suspects in the blast took the auto-rickshaw," a police officer said. The accused, who is yet to be identified, is believed to be the prime suspect who planted the bomb near the Israeli embassy on December 26, the officer added. Police have already questioned the auto-rickshaw driver, sources said. Police have found with the help of the CCTV footage that

the suspect moved towards the India Gate after visiting the spot at the Prithviraj Road. Sources said the NSG, which had collected the samples from the spot, has told the Delhi Police that it was not an IED (improvised explosive device) blast but it could be a locally made bomb. However, its report is yet to be submitted. The blast occurred on December 26 evening in the area between the boundary walls of a house on plot number four - Nanda's House - and the Central Hindi Training Institute on plot number 2A on the Prithviraj Road. The area has bushes, plants and trees and no CCTV camera. The blast site is behind the Israeli embassy on Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Road, running parallel to Prithviraj Road. No one was injured in the blast. Police had found an "abusive" letter addressed to the Israeli ambassador near the blast site. On December 29, the Delhi Police registered an FIR against "unknown" people and transferred the case from the local police station to the Special Cell.

# Bharadwaj refutes charges of BJP against Mohalla Clinic

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj on Thursday said the people under probe for allegedly supplying substandard drugs to city hospitals were chosen by "them" and not his party's Government. Bharadwaj also refuted the allegation made by BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi that more than 500 patients are being treated in each Mohalla Clinic (AAMC) of Delhi every day. "This is very unfortunate and an old habit of BJP spokespersons to lie in their press conferences. This is a cheap tactic to defame the world-renowned model of Mohalla clinics in Delhi. To set the record straight, the data of OPD consultations in the 484 AAMCs functional during the month of December, 2023 is being provided," he said. Earlier Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena has recommended a CBI probe into alleged fake lab tests and ghost patients at Delhi's mohalla clinics. Before this, Saxena has ordered a CBI probe into the supply of drugs that



allegedly failed "quality standard tests." Bharadwaj at a press conference at the party office, said, if they are saying, "corruption has happened in mohalla clinics, then suspend the health secretary." Bharadwaj said the had in September addressed a press conference, announcing the de-empanelment of 26 staffers, including seven doctors, posted at mohalla clinics, for allegedly trying to manipulate the attendance system. "As far as the health department is concerned, or mohalla clinics, drugs, and whether

the standard is good or not, or if anyone is entering phone number or entering random digits, or some wrong number (at mohalla clinics), this has to be checked by officials, and they have a DGHS above and above that health secretary is there," he argued. It is their job to do "random checks" at their level, the minister said. "Who has appointed the DGHS? not us. Who has appointed the health secretary? not us. Who has chosen them, you all know. People chosen by them (for these posts) are committing wrong things. And, they themselves are probing it. "So, they are probing people appointed by them only, and not probing us. We have given it in writing that they be removed," Bharadwaj told reporters. Sharing a data, Bharadwaj said it is very clear that in 39 clinics, there was an average of less than 75 patients per day. In 237 Mohalla clinics, there was an average count of 76 to 150 patients per day. In 129 clinics, there was an average fall of 151 to 180 patients per day. Mohalla

clinics with patient count of 181 to 200 per day were 44. In 33 clinics, the average patient footfall per day was between 201 to 250. The only two clinics which saw the highest footfall in the month of December were having between 250 to 301 patients per day. The health minister hit out at the BJP over its allegation that money to the tune of crores was lost in these scams but the government took no action. "In small issues, officers lose their jobs immediately. One act of negligence leads to suspension. "And, here you are saying that a large number of people were given spurious drugs and no one has been suspended, no action has been taken, how is it happening?" Bharadwaj said. "You are saying corruption has happened in mohalla clinics, so suspend the health secretary. What are you waiting for? "This is an unusual investigation. Because, they are people appointed by them only. They are saying they have committed corruption and not removing them. Wonderful! What governance," he said.

# City records longest spell of very poor or worse AQI in last six years

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The National Capital Region recorded the longest spell of 'very poor' or worse air quality and the maximum number of smog episodes in November and December 2023 in the last six years, according to a new analysis. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), an independent think-tank that analysed pollution data for Delhi-NCR, said the gradual long-term improvement in annual PM2.5 levels since 2015-17 halted in 2023. This occurred despite cleaner-than-usual summer and monsoon seasons and significantly reduced intrusion of smoke from farm fires in northern states. However, this winter witnessed unusually low surface wind speeds, trapping high levels of local pollution. Due to the impact of unusual winter levels, the overall annu-



al levels have plateaued and worsened, reversing the gains of the long-term downward trend, the CSE said. Despite a decrease in stubble burning contributing to Delhi's pollution this year, coupled with increased rainfall in November and milder winter conditions, the annual level should have improved. Instead, adverse meteorological conditions, specifically lower wind speeds, exacerbated the situation due to persistently high local pollution, it added. Delhi had been experiencing a consistent decline in its annual PM2.5 levels since 2015-17, with 2020 being the only outlier due to pandemic lockdowns. However, this down-

ward trend halted in 2023. Delhi's PM2.5 annual average for 2023 (as of December 29) stood at 100.9 micrograms per cubic metre, marking a 2 per cent increase against 2022 and 6 per cent higher than the remarkably clean 2020. The average annual PM2.5 concentrations were 115.8 microgrammes per cubic metre in 2018, 109.2 in 2019, 95.1 in 2020, 106.2 in 2021, 98.6 in 2022, and 100.9 in 2023, according to the data. The analysis revealed that while summers are becoming cleaner, winters are becoming more polluted. In 2023, the summer months (March to June) were significantly less polluted (14-36 per cent) than in 2022. Conversely, the winter months of January, November and December were much more polluted in 2023 (12-34 per cent) compared to the same months in 2022, the CSE said.

It said the maximum number of smog episodes occurred in November-December 2023, surpassing the last six years' corresponding periods. A smog episode is defined as at least three or more consecutive days with air quality in the 'severe' category. "Delhi typically experiences two smog episodes in November and December. In 2023, by December 24, there were three episodes, and on December 30, Delhi was witnessing its third continuous day of 'severe' air quality, marking the city's fourth smog episode," the CSE said. "Overall, November-December 2023 seems to have had the most consistently poor air compared to the last six winters, with minimal fluctuations in daily PM2.5 levels. The data indicates it was the longest spell of 'very poor' or worse air in the last six years," it said.

# Noida records best average AQI in 2023 since 2017

STAFF REPORTER ■ NOIDA

In the seven years from 2017, Noida recorded its best average AQI in 2023 and the second-best average PM10 and PM2.5 concentrations in the air, according to official data. The average Air Quality Index (AQI) for 2023 in Noida was recorded at 188. It was recorded at 199 in 2022, 208 in 2021, 189 in 2020, 218 in 2019, 229 in 2018 and 214 in 2017, according to the annual CAAQMS (Continuous Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Stations) data. According to the Central Pollution Control Board

(CPCB), an AQI between 0-50 is 'good', 51-100 is 'satisfactory', 101-200 is 'moderate', 201-300 is 'poor', 301-400 is 'very poor' and 401-500 is 'severe', with the possible impact of air quality on health increasing at every stage. In terms of particulate matter (PM)2.5, the average for 2023 was 83, up from 79 in 2022 but down from 99 in 2021, 94 in 2020, 111 in 2019, 116 in 2018 and 163 in 2017, the data showed. In terms of PM10, the average for 2023 was 189. The figure was 210 in 2022, 221 in 2021, 183 in 2020, 221 in 2019, 210 in 2018 and 189 in 2017,

according to the data. PM2.5 and PM10 refer to fine particulate matter in the air, with the numbers indicating their size in micrometres. PM2.5 are fine particles with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less, about the width of a human hair. These are so small that these can penetrate deep into the lungs and even enter the bloodstream, posing significant health risks. PM10 are coarser particles with a diameter of 10 micrometres or less, about the width of 10 human hairs. While not as concerning as PM2.5, these can still irritate the airways and worsen respiratory problems.

# India logs 760 Covid cases; 2 die

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
India saw a single-day rise of 760 new cases of Covid while two more people succumbed to the viral disease, the Health Ministry said on Thursday. The number of active cases of the infection has been recorded at 4,423, it said. The new fatalities — one each from Kerala and Karnataka — were reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8 am. The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits till December 5, but cases have again gone up after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions. The daily numbers were in lakhs at the peak of the pandemic, which began in early 2020 and has seen more than 4.5 crore people getting infected and over 5.3 lakh deaths in about four years since then



across the country. The number of people who have recuperated from the disease stands at over 4.4 crore with a national recovery rate of 98.81 per cent, according to the ministry's website. Meanwhile, patients hospitalised with Omicron BA.5 are more likely to die than those with other Covid-19 variants or with flu, according to a new study led by the US Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The study, published in the Open Forum Infectious Diseases, looked at the proportion of hospitalised Covid-19 and influenza patients admitted to a US intensive care unit (ICU) in 2021 and 2022. Findings showed that the percentage of hospitalised Covid-19 patients admitted to the ICU was similar to seasonal influenza but patients during the Omicron BA.5 period continued to experience more in-hospital deaths than adults hospitalised with influenza. The association with increased in-hospital death was strongest among adults aged 18-49 years; there was no significant difference in deaths between patients with Covid-19 and influenza among older ages. "The epidemiology of Covid-19 continues to evolve. Our data suggest that from the Delta-predominant period to the Omicron BA.5-predominant period, the severity of patients hospitalised with Covid-19 generally decreased," said Noah Kojima, from the CDC's Influenza Division in Georgia. The study included 5,777 and 2,363 eligible adults hospitalised for Covid and flu, respectively. Amid the Delta variant-predominant period

(October to December 2021), 1,632 were hospitalised, compared with 1,451 during the Omicron BA.5 period (June to September 2022). During the 2011-22 respiratory virus season, 2,363 people were hospitalised for flu. Although there was a decline in the severity of COVID-19 hospitalisation during the study period, overall severity during later Omicron sublineage periods (BA.2 and BA.5) was generally similar. Continued monitoring of severity trends is warranted as new variants circulate and population-level immunity changes, the team said. The reduced disease severity amid Omicron BA.5 predominance is likely multifactorial, including increased population-level SARS-CoV-2 immunity from vaccination and previous infection, broader availability of effective drugs, and refined clinical management strategies, they noted.

# Defence Ministry inks 2 contracts to procure Open Military Wagons

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
Ministry of Defence on Thursday inked two contracts for procurement of 697 Bogie Open Military (BOM) Wagons at a cost of Rs 473 crore with Jupiter Wagons Limited and procurement of 56 Mechanical Minefield Marking Equipment (MMME) Mark II at a cost of Rs 329 crore with BEML Ltd, under Buy (Indian-IDDM) category. The total cost of two contracts is Rs 802 crores. The BOM Wagons and MMME will be produced with equipment and sub-system sourced from indigenous manufacturers, giving a boost to the indigenous manufacturing and participation of the private sector in defence production, realizing the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat. Bogie Open Military (BOM) wagons, designed by Research



Design and Standard Organization (RDSO) are specialist wagons used by the Indian Army for mobilization of the Army units. BOM wagons are used to transport light vehicles, Artillery Guns, BMPs and Engineering Equipment from their peacetime locations to operational areas. This Critical Rolling Stock will ensure speedy and simul-

taneous induction of units and equipment into operational areas during any conflict situation besides, facilitating their peacetime movement for Military exercise and movement of units from one station to another. Marking of all minefields is a mandatory requirement as per amended Protocol-II on Convention in certain Conventional Weapons to which India is a signatory. MMME has been designed to operate cross country with complete load of stores and carry out marking of minefields with minimal time and manpower employment. The equipment is based on an in-service High Mobility Vehicle having advanced mechanical and electrical systems which will reduce the timings for minefield marking during operations and will enhance the operational capability of Indian Army.

# Thakur raps Kejriwal for skipping ED summons

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
In a fiery response to the continuous evasion of ED summons to Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and mounting allegations of corruption in Mohalla clinics operated by his Aam Aadmi Party Government, Union Minister for Information & Broadcasting and Youth & Sports, Anurag Singh Thakur, pulled no punches in denouncing Kejriwal's administration. Characterising Kejriwal and his Government as "staunchly corrupt", Thakur said, "Arvind Kejriwal and his Government who came into politics by declaring themselves as the champions of honesty, have now descended into the epitome of corruption. "Scandal after scandal is unraveling, and not a single individual to whom they handed out certificates of strict honesty is



receiving bail from the courts. Deputy Chief Minister, Ministers, and MPs — all behind bars." "First, the fake medicines scandal surfaced, and now the fake testing scam is unfolding. This is a direct assault on people's lives — a Government that is unequivocally fake. Kejriwal who once showed himself as a leader committed to honesty, is now infamous for playing with lives, fostering anarchy, corruption, and baseless accusations against constitutional institutions." In a pointed query to Kejriwal, Thakur questioned the Delhi Chief Minister's apparent disregard for the country's rules and regulations. "Why is Kejriwal afraid to face the ED? Is he above the law?" Notably, the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi has recommended a CBI investigation into the alleged corruption in testing conducted in Mohalla clinics run by the Aam Aadmi Party government. Thakur's strong statement came in response to Aam Aadmi party's accusation of vendetta politics.

# Shocked by terrible bombings in Iran in which 95 died: MEA

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
India on Thursday said it is shocked and saddened over the "terrible" bombings in Iran's Kerman city, and expressed solidarity with the Government and people of the Gulf nation. At least 95 people were killed and many others injured on Wednesday in two bomb explosions near the cemetery of slain Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, who was killed in a drone strike in 2020. "We are shocked and saddened on the terrible bombings in the Kerman City of Iran. At this difficult time, we express our solidarity with the government and people of Iran," External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims and with the wounded," he said on X. The people killed and injured had gathered at a ceremony near Soleimani's cemetery to



commemorate the commander on his fourth death anniversary. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said Iran is taking "legal and international actions" over the terror attacks in Kerman. "Based on preliminary information from official sources, this ministry has initiated immediate legal and international actions through the

United Nations regarding the terrorist attack in Kerman," Amirabdollahian said in post on X. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei issued a message following the attacks in which he warned "criminals" of punishment and a hard response over the tragedy, according to IRNA news agency.

# Dinesh K Tripathi assumes charge as Vice Chief of Navy

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
Vice Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi on Thursday assumed charge as Vice Chief of the Navy succeeding Vice Admiral Sanjay J Singh, who became Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the crucial Western Naval Command. Prior to taking charge as the vice chief, Tripathi was serving as the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Western Naval Command. An alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, he was commissioned into the Indian Navy on July 1, 1985. A Communication and electronic warfare specialist, he served on frontline warships of the Navy as signal communication officer and electronic warfare officer. Tripathi commanded Indian naval ships Vinash, Kirch and Trishul. He has also held various impor-



tant operational and staff appointments, including fleet operations officer of the Western Fleet at Mumbai, director of naval operations and principal director of network centric operations and naval plans in Delhi. On promotion to the rank of Rear Admiral, he served as assistant chief of naval staff (policy and plans) at the naval headquarters and as the Flag Officer Commanding of the Eastern Fleet. Vice Admiral Sanjay J Singh took over as the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C) Western Naval Command on Wednesday.

# Researchers identify enzyme responsible for yellow hue in urine

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
More than 125 years ago, scientists identified urobilin as the yellow pigment in urine, but they didn't know what was responsible for the urobilin's production. Now, researchers at the University of Maryland and National Institutes of Health have found that the microbial enzyme bilirubin reductase is responsible for giving urine its yellow hue. This unraveling of the enzyme could help researchers learn more about gut health, inflammatory bowel disease and jaundice. "It's remarkable that an everyday biological phenomenon went unexplained for so long, and our team is excited to be able to explain it," Brantley Hall, an assistant professor in the University of Maryland's Department of Cell Biology and Molecular Genetics, said in a news statement. Urine is a combination of water, electrolytes and waste that your kidneys filter out from your blood. It turns out urine's color is connected to the body's red blood cells, researchers said. As red blood cells degrade, a bright orange pigment called bilirubin is produced. The pigment is typically secreted into the gut, where it can then be excreted or partially reabsorbed. Once the bilirubin arrives in your gut, the microorganisms in your intestines can convert the bilirubin into other molecules, the study found. "Gut microbes encode the enzyme bilirubin reductase that converts bilirubin into a colorless byproduct called urobilinogen," Hall, the study's lead author, said. "Urobilinogen then spontaneously degrades into a molecule called urobilin, which is responsible for the yellow color we are all familiar with." The study authors said that before their research, scientists thought there were multiple enzymes involved, rather than a single enzyme.

# Modi, Shah to attend conference of DGPs, IGPs in Jaipur on January 5, 7

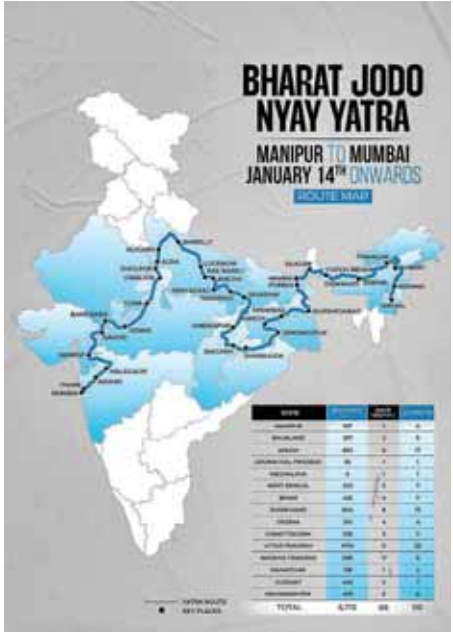
**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
Implementation of the three criminal laws enacted recently, activities of pro-Khalistani groups and terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir are among the key issues to be discussed at a three-day conference of DGPs and IGPs in Jaipur beginning January 5, officials said on Thursday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will interact with the country's top police officers before addressing them at a formal session while Union Home Minister Amit Shah will be present throughout the conference that will span several sessions. Issues to be handled during the general elections, cyber crime, Maoists' problem, and interstate police coordination are some of the other major topics expected to be discussed during the meeting, a Union Home Ministry (MHA) official said. About 250 officers in the rank of Director General of Police (DGP) and Inspector General of Police (IGP) will physically attend the conference at the Rajasthan International Centre in Jaipur while more than 200 others are likely to participate virtually. Many officers have been tasked with delivering presentations on specific subjects such as counterterrorism, online fraud, cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, activities of pro-Khalistani groups and Left wing extremism among others, the MHA official said. There will be detailed deliberations on how to face all these emerging internal security challenges. Modi will attend conference on January 6-7, his office said. A statement by the Prime Minister's Office said another key agenda of the conference is deliberations on the road map for implementation of the new criminal laws. Further, the conference will also deliberate on futuristic themes in policing and security like the challenges posed by new technologies such as AI, Deepfake etc. And ways to



deal with them, it said. The conference also provides an opportunity to identify tangible action points and monitor their progress, which is also presented before the prime minister every year. The conference is the culmination of extensive deliberations involving police and intelligence officers from district, state and national levels on identified themes, the statement said. Best practices from states and Union territories under each of the themes will be presented at the conference so that states can learn from each other, it said. Since 2014, the prime minister has taken a keen interest in the DGP conference, it added. Free flowing thematic discussions over breakfast, lunch and dinner have also been planned in this year's conference. This will provide an opportunity to senior police officials to share their views and recommendations on key policing and internal security issues affecting the country to the prime minister. Till 2013, the annual meet was held in New Delhi. The following year, after the Modi government came to power, it was decided to hold the event, organised by the MHA and the Intelligence Bureau, outside the national capital. Accordingly, it was first held in Guwahati in 2014, Rann of Kutch in 2015, the National Police Academy in Hyderabad in 2016, the BSF Academy at Tekanpur in 2017, Pune in 2019. In 2020, the meet was held virtually during the Covid pan-

# Congress renames Rahul led yatra as Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Congress on Thursday renamed the Rahul Gandhi-led Manipur-Mumbai yatra starting on January 14 as the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, which will travel through 100 Lok Sabha segments in 15 states including Arunachal Pradesh, and asserted it will prove to be as "transformative" as his earlier cross-country march. Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said the party is inviting all leaders of the Indian National Inclusive Developmental Alliance (INDIA) bloc to join the yatra anywhere along its route. The yatra's route was finalised at a nearly three-hour meeting Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge chaired with general secretaries, state in-charges, state unit chiefs and Congress Legislature Party leaders at the AICC headquarters here, Ramesh said at AICC press conference. According to the route released by the party, the yatra would stay the longest period in Uttar Pradesh, covering 1,074 km in 11 days. It would pass through the politically-vital areas of Amethi, Rae Bareilly, Varanasi and Prayagraj. Ramesh said the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra would traverse 6,713 km in buses and on foot. The yatra will cover 110 districts, 100 Lok Sabha seats and 337 assembly segments in 66 days, starting January 14 from Imphal. He asserted that the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra would prove to be as impactful and transformative as the earlier Bharat Jodo Yatra from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. Explaining the reason for the renaming the yatra from the earlier Bharat Nyay Yatra, Ramesh said all members who attended the meeting including Kharge were of the unanimous view that the success of the Bharat Jodo Yatra had led to it becoming a brand in its own right and had gotten embedded in the minds of the people and that its value should not be lost. "The 'Nyay' idea comes from the first line of the preamble of the Indian Constitution which secures for all its citizens justice -- social, economic and political," Ramesh said. Then comes liberty, equality and fraternity and all these are all inter-related principles, he said. During the Bharat Jodo Yatra, Rahul Gandhi had raised three big issues of rising inequality, growing social polarisation and increasing political tyranny and authoritarianism, and the way out of this is to ensure justice for the people, Ramesh said. "The idea of justice is the idea of the yatra but because we had a yatra which proved to be transformative of Indian politics, everyone was unanimous that we should combine the two... Nyay is the objective of the yatra," he said. Ramesh also pointed out that though earlier it was announced that the yatra would cover 14 states, they also had Arunachal Pradesh in mind but there were some logistical and security



issues, which have now been sorted out. So, the yatra would now cover 15 states, including Arunachal Pradesh, he added. Giving details of the yatra and its route, Ramesh said it will begin on January 14 from Imphal and will be in Manipur for a day, covering 107 km and four districts. Then it will enter Nagaland and cover 257 km and five districts in two days before traversing 833 km and 17 districts in Assam in eight days, Ramesh said. The yatra will then move to Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya for a day each. According to the route map, the yatra in West Bengal will be for five days, covering 523 km and seven districts, and in Bihar for four days, covering 425 km and seven districts. In Jharkhand, the yatra will cover 804 km and 13 districts in eight days, Ramesh said. It will travel through four days in Odisha, covering 341 km and four districts and in Chhattisgarh for five days, covering 536 km and seven districts. Ramesh said the east to west yatra will be of maximum time in Uttar Pradesh for 11 days, covering 1,074 km and 20 districts. In Madhya Pradesh the yatra will cover 698 km and nine districts in seven days and two districts in Rajasthan for a single day. The yatra will cover five days each in Gujarat and Maharashtra, traversing 445 km and 479 km respectively. The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra would conclude in Mumbai on March 20 or 21, Ramesh said. Asked whether AAP leaders would also be invited to join the yatra, Ramesh said all INDIA bloc leaders would be invited to join the yatra at various points of the yatra and asserted that AAP was part of the coalition.

# Hospitals, blood banks can only charge processing fees for blood: DCGI

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
Asserting that 'blood is not for sale', the top drug regulator, Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has made it clear to the hospitals and blood banks that they can charge only processing fees for blood. They have been prohibited from charging any other fees. The move aims to check the practice of overcharging for blood by the hospitals and blood banks. In a communication to all states and UT drugs controllers cum licensing authorities, the DCGI stated that the decision was taken in view of the opinion that "blood is not for sale". Referring to the 62nd meeting of the Drugs Consultative Committee held on September 26, 2023, the DCGI in the letter on December 26 said, "It was recommended with respect of agenda No. 18 of ATR point 3, for overcharging of blood, it was opined that blood is not for sale, it is only for supply and only processing cost may be charged by the blood centre." The revised guidelines stipulate that only processing fees can be charged for blood or blood components which ranges between Rs 250 to 1,550 for blood or blood components. The DCGI has asked states and UT drug controllers to direct all blood centres under their jurisdiction to adhere to the revised guidelines. According to official sources, per unit of blood in case of no blood donation is priced between Rs 3,000 to Rs 8,000 by private hospitals. In cases of blood shortage or rare blood groups, the charges may go up higher.

# Chails Article 370 abrogation



ice-President of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar Thursday lauded the collective role played by the Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary in the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A of the Constitution, underscoring these provisions as 'obstacles to democratic governance'. With Article 370 no longer being part of the Constitution, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's dream has been translated into reality, said the Vice-President.

What had been intended as a temporary provision of the Constitution had gone on to become detrimental to the nation, said the Vice-President, creating an ecosystem that had handicapped the people of the region. Highlighting the affirmative steps being taken by the government in the region, Dhankhar noted that sections of society in Jammu and Kashmir who had earlier been denied their rights and benefits under government schemes, now have a greater voice in governance and

ecosystem that favours meritocracy, and empowerment of women - all of which, he said, are ground realities in India today. Stressing on the fifth parameter, Dhankhar drew attention to the opportunities that have opened up for the women of Jammu and Kashmir, with the availability of property rights following abrogation of Article 370, in addition to the rights conferred by the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. Abrogation of Article 370 and the enabling initiatives taken by the government in Jammu and Kashmir have resulted in "development being completely delinked from partisan interests", said the Vice-President. Recognising that every individual has a right to participate in politics, the Vice-President cautioned that politics must not be allowed to become a deterrent to progress. Expressing his appreciation for the nation's progress in the domain of biotechnology, the Vice-President made special mention of India's position as the world's third-largest startup ecosystem, having a greater number of uni-

corns than China. Highlighting the extent of India's internet penetration and its great number of digital transactions, Dhankhar also emphasised upon the importance of nurturing a robust research ecosystem for the progress of the country. In his address, the Vice-President also congratulated the graduating students and awardees of the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences & Technology, Jammu, whose 8th Convocation Ceremony he was scheduled to attend earlier in the day. Dhankhar conveyed his regrets for his inability to attend the event owing to adverse weather conditions. The flight had to be rerouted through Pathankot before the event in Kathua, owing to the deteriorating weather situation. Union Minister of Science and Technology, Dr. Jitendra Singh, Secretary, Department of Biotechnology, Dr. Rajesh Gokhale, Secretary, Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Dr. N. Kalaiselvi and other dignitaries were also present on the occasion.

# Polling for Karanpur Assembly seat today

PTI ■ JAIPUR  
Polling for Rajasthan's Karanpur assembly seat will be held on Friday, officials said on Thursday and added all arrangements have been made for it. Surendra Pal Singh TT, the BJP nominee for this seat, has already been sworn-in as a minister. He was inducted as a minister of state (independent charge) in Bhajanlal Sharma's government on December 30 last year, a move opposed by the Congress. Under the rules, the non-legislators can be included as ministers with the condition that they get elected within six months. Former chief minister and senior Congress leader Ashok Gehlot had called it a clear violation of the code of conduct and an attempt to influence the voters there. The election on Karanpur seat in Sriganganagar district was adjourned due to Congress candidate Gurmeet Singh Koonar's death. The Congress has fielded Koonar's son Rupinder Singh. The voting will take place from 7 am to 6 pm on Friday and the result will be declared on January 8, officials said.



Chief Electoral Officer Praveen Gupta said that voting would be held in 249 polling stations in Karanpur. There are 2.40 lakh voters in Karanpur assembly constituency, including 1,25,850 men, 1,14,966 women and 10 transgender voters, he said and added that 180 service voters are also registered. As many as 12 candidates are contesting the election in Karanpur. The elections in 199 out of 200 assembly seats in the state were held on November 25 last year and results were declared on December 8. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged victorious winning 115 seats while the Congress managed to bag 69 seats.



# Last rites of five victims of terrorism in Manipur performed

PTI ■ IMPHAL  
The last rites of five persons who were gunned down by cadres of the proscribed Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) were performed at Lilong Chingjao in Manipur's Thoubal district on Thursday. Religious and civil rights leaders who attended the rituals appealed to people not to make provocative statements on social media which could offend other communities. They said legal action will be taken against those who make such remarks. Earlier, the Joint Action Committee (JAC) formed in connection with the killings decided to take the bodies for final rites after the state government agreed to an ex gratia of Rs 10 lakh each to the next of kin of the deceased, Rs 2 lakh to the seriously injured, and Rs 1 lakh to those who sustained minor injuries, according to officials. JAC convener Md Habibullah told reporters that the state government had assured them of providing jobs to the next of kin of the deceased. In an official notification, the state government also announced the formation of a six-member special investigation

team headed by SDPO Yairipok Md Riyajuddin Shah to probe the killings. Four persons were killed and 10 sustained injuries in Thoubal district's Lilong Chingjao when RPF members opened fire on a few locals on Monday. One person succumbed to injuries on Tuesday. Members of the RPF had come "to extort money" from a person in the locality, which led to an altercation followed by the shooting, an official said. Following the violence, curfew was reimposed in Thoubal, Imphal East and Imphal West, Kakching and Bishnupur districts. In a video message, Chief Minister N Biren Singh condemned the violence, and appealed to people, particularly the residents of Lilong, to maintain peace. More than 180 people have been killed and several hundred injured since ethnic violence broke out in Manipur in May last year.

# Tension in Thrissur as BJP objects to Youth Congress KSU action

PTI ■ THRISSUR (KERALA)  
Tensions rose in the city on Thursday as BJP workers vehemently objected to Youth Congress-KSU workers attempting to sprinkle cow dung water on the stage used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an event the previous day. According to Hindu belief, cow dung water is used to cleanse impurities from a place. Police said that tensions escalated in the area when Youth Congress and Kerala Students Union (KSU) workers staged a march towards Thekkinkadu Maidan, where the event had been held the previous day. They were allegedly protesting because the branches of a banyan tree near the venue were cut as part of the security measures for Modi's programme on Wednesday. BJP workers, who were engaged in dismantling the stage on Thursday countered the march, which resulted in a tense atmosphere. Police intervened promptly and had to use force to disperse the two groups, restoring order in the area. "There was a push and shove between the activists. The tension eased when officers stationed themselves between the two groups," a police officer told PTI. The protesting Youth Congress-KSU workers were removed from the spot, he added. BJP's district leaders said the party's workers only prevented the Youth Congress members from sprinkling cow dung water at the venue. Youth Congress workers, however, alleged that BJP activists arrived armed with sticks, intending to attack them during their protest against the cutting of the banyan tree branches. The BJP workers blamed the Youth Congress-KSU workers, saying they



caused trouble before the stage in Thekkinkadu Maidan was dismantled. BJP state chief K Surendran strongly criticised the Congress, claiming that the act of sprinkling cow dung water on the Vadakkumanatha temple ground (Thekkinkadu Maidan) exposed the party's elitist mindset. In an apparent reference to Modi's OBC background, Surendran attributed the Congress's actions to them questioning how a person from a backward caste could speak on the sacred land of Lord Vadakkumanathan. He also alleged that the Congress had previously used casteist slurs against the country's President and Vice President. In a democracy, protests should be held in a respectful manner, he stressed. He added that such protests would not be tolerated under any circumstances.

# Congress upset after TMC allots it just 2 seats in WB

SUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA  
The Congress Party has strongly reacted to the Trinamool Congress' setting aside for the grand old party a meager two parliamentary seats in Bengal. Saying that "Mamata Banerjee has made her minds clear about what she thought about the INDIA alliance," Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury on Thursday said his outfit was not begging for seats from the TMC. "Mamata Banerjee has made her intentions clear by allotting two seats for us which the Congress had won in 2019 without the TMC's support... so there is nothing new in what they are offering... we are not beggars and had not been begging for seats... it is the TMC which will need our help this time and not the other way round," he said. "We will show this time how Congress can win its seats without the help of TMC besides retaining the existing seats with us. We don't need Mamata Banerjee's mercy," he said, adding, the TMC would fare miserably in the coming elections. Incidentally, the Chief

Minister had last week said that the TMC would alone fight in Bengal whereas in the rest of the country the Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance would take on the BJP. "Only TMC can take on the BJP in Bengal and set a model for others across the country. No other party can do it." In 2019 out of the 42 parliamentary seats from Bengal the TMC had won 22 while the BJP had won 18. The Malda South and Behrampur seats were won by the veteran Congress MPs Abu Hasem Khan Chowdhury and Adhir Chowdhury respectively defeating their nearest Trinamool rivals. In both the cases the Congress had a seat adjustment with the Left while the TMC fought independently. Adhir Chowdhury's intense reaction comes at a time when the Congress is vertically divided over any kind of alliance with the TMC which has for the past two years been plagued by corruption charges that have seen a number of its senior leaders including ministers, MLAs and district presidents other lesser leaders going to jail. Even its second-in-command and national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee who is also the nephew of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been grilled several times to explain his role in cattle smuggling and recruitment scams. The talks for seats at the national level notwithstanding, there has been a tremendous groundswell in the Bengal Congress against any kind of alliance with the TMC which, the grassroots Congress worker allege, single-handedly destroyed the Congress' organization in the State by either engineering defection in that party or implicating its thousands of workers in false cases. "How will we face the people of down below... all these years we had been fighting against the TMC... all these years our grassroots workers have been at the receiving end of TMC brutalities... their houses were burnt, their women taken away, their lands snatched and their men forced to flee their houses... and now if the top leadership impose an alliance on us then it would be counterproductive." PCC leader Kaustav Bagchi had earlier said.

**Public Notice**  
This is to inform the general public that Mrs. Rekha is the GPA Holder of Mr. Om Prakash the unequal owner of House No. 2313-AC/ILG/FF area measuring 14.68 sq. meters. Situated at Sector-55, Housing Board Colony, Faridabad, Haryana. The legal ownership was established through Conveyance Deed dated 12.06.2012 vide Doc. No. 3493 executed by Housing Board Haryana. Mrs. Rekha as GPA Holder of Mr. Om Prakash intends to transfer the property by way of Sale Deed of the aforementioned property to Subsequently, Mr. Rahul Kumar Jha is in the process of mortgaging the said property with PNB Housing Finance. Any objections or concerns regarding this transaction should be raised within a period of 07 days from the date of this public notice. If anyone wishes to raise an objection, please do so within the stipulated 07-day period by contacting Law Veritas: North (Advocates & Legal Consultants) at Office No. 11, 1st Floor, Building No. A-4/A, Sector-16, Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201301. Landline: (91)-9110120-310183 / 4522809; e-mail: accounts@lvnorth.in

**New Okhla Industrial Development Authority**  
Administrative Building, Sector-6, Noida G.B Nagar, (U.P.)  
Website: www.noidaauthorityonline.com

**E-TENDER NOTICE**  
E-Tenders are invited from eligible contractors / firm for the following jobs against which bids can be uploaded and same shall be opened / downloaded as per schedule mentioned. The details and conditions of all tenders are available on Noida Authority's official website : [www.noidaauthorityonline.in](http://www.noidaauthorityonline.in) & <https://etender.up.nic.in> Please ensure to see these websites for any changes / amendments & corrigendum etc.

| SL No. | Job No                            | Name of Work   | Tender Amount (in Lacs.) |
|--------|-----------------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1      | 49/DGM(E&M)/S.M.(E&M)-III/2023-24 | Providing lighting arrangement in different wards of sector-28, 29, 37 and Sector-30, Noida. | 97.87                    |
| 2      | 50/DGM(E&M)/S.M.(E&M)-III/2023-24 | Strengthening of Street light on road between sector-42 & 46, 42 & 43 and 47 & 48, Noida.    | 87.71                    |

The above tenders can be uploaded by dated 18.01.2024 up to 5.00 PM. Pre-qualification shall be opened / downloaded on dated 19.01.2024 at 11.00 AM.

**A) Re-Tender Work:-**

| SL No. | Job No                           | Name of Work  | Tender Amount (in Lacs.) |
|--------|----------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1      | 25/DGM/Sr.M.(E/M)-II/2023-24     | SITC of New Fountain at Sector-56, Noida.   | 48.49                    |
| 2      | 18/DGM(E&M)/Sr.M.(E/M)-I/2023-24 | Restoration Maintenance of 16 Mtr./30 Mtr. High Mast light in Sector-82, 91, 92, 93, 93A, 93B, 104, 105, 108, 110 & Village Gejha Tilptabad & Hazipur.            | 94.83                    |
| 3      | 20/DGM(E&M)/Sr.M.(E/M)-I/2023-24 | Augmentation of Electrical Conversion System related to Street lights in Sector-82, 91, 92, 93, 93A, 93B, 104, 105, 108, 110 & Village Gejha Tilptabad & Hazipur. | 78.92                    |
| 4      | 24/DGM(E&M)/Sr.M.(E/M)-I/2023-24 | Shifting of 33KV line alignment of plot no.1 in Sector-93B, Noida.  | 34.51                    |

The above tenders can be uploaded by dated 11.01.2024 up to 5.00 PM. Pre-qualification shall be opened / downloaded on dated 12.01.2024 at 11.00 AM.

Dy. General Manager (E&M) NOIDA  
**CLEAN, GREEN, SAFE & SECURE NOIDA**

**NORTHERN RAILWAY**  
TENDER NOTICE (Through e-tendering)  
Name of work with its location: Provision of Telecom facilities in CW Construction of Media Cell for Railway Board at 2nd floor of Traffic Accounts (TA) Building, S.E. Road, New Delhi  
App. Cost of the work (₹): ₹ 47,60,485.23/- only  
Earnest Money Deposit (₹): ₹ 95,200.00/- only  
Address of the office: Senior Divisional Signal & Telecom Engineer-C, Northern Railway, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Annex-1, DRM Office, New Delhi-110055.  
Date & Time for upload the tender / closing of tender: Tender uploading / closing date & time - 29.01.2024 up to 15.00 hrs.  
Website particular & notice board location where complete details of the tender can be seen etc.: See the Northern Railway website www.ireps.gov.in & Notice board at S&T branch, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, DRM Office, State Entry Road, New Delhi-110055.  
Tender No. 558-Sig-16-Tele-OT-986 Dated: 03.01.2024  
SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE 30/24

**MODI RUBBER LIMITED**  
CIN: L25199UP1971PLC003392  
Registered Office: Modinagar - 201204; Dist. Ghaziabad, (U.P.)  
Corporate Office: 4-7C, DDA Shopping Centre, New Friends Colony, New Delhi-110025; Website: www.modirubberlimited.com  
Email: investors@modigroup.net; Phone: +91-11-47107398

**NOTICE**  
Pursuant to regulation 29 of SEBI (LODR) 2015, Notice is hereby given that 304<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Company is scheduled to be held on Monday, 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2024 at 11.30 AM at Corporate Office: 4-7C, DDA Shopping Centre, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, New Friends Colony, New Delhi-110 025 to inter-alia approve the following:  
(1) To consider and approve of notice through postal ballot for appointment of Ms. Nadira Hamid (DIN: 00252987) as Independent Director for a period of 5 (five) years.  
For Modi Rubber Limited  
Sd/-  
(S K Bajpai)  
Date : 04.01.2024 Head - Legal & Co. Secretary

**DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL-I, DELHI**  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Jeevan Tara Building, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001  
TA 569/2022  
**UNION BANK OF INDIA (CORPORATION BANK) VS SANJAY KUMAR SRIVASTAVA AND ORS.**  
To, (1) SANJAY KUMAR SRIVASTAVA AND ORS, A 106 2ND FLOOR GURUGRAM-122018 Gurgaon, HARYANA - 122018 Also At: DGM PRODUCTION FILM INDUSTRIES AREA PR-V 1915 CONCEPT HARYANA 131029  
(2) MS TULIKA SRIVASTAVA W/O SHRI SANJAY KUMAR SRIVASTAVA A 06, IIIND FLOOR SOTHED FLOOR GURGAON 122018  
(3) MS AMRPAI SMART CITY DEVELOPERS P LTD 307, 3RD FLOOR NIPUN TOWERS PLOT NO 15 COMMUNITY CENTRE KARKARDOOMA DELHI 110092  
Also At: C-5640 SECT-62 NOIDAUP  
Whereas the above named applicant has instituted a case for recovery of Rs. 33,33,237/- (RUPEES THIRTY FIVE LAKHS THIRTY THREE THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED THIRTY SEVEN ONLY) against you and whereas it has been shown to the satisfaction of the Tribunal that it is not possible to serve you in ordinary way. Therefore, this notice is given by advertisement directing you to make appearance before LD, Registrar on 10.01.2024 at 10.30 A.M. (for further details kindly visit DRT website [www.drttribunal.gov.in](http://www.drttribunal.gov.in) or Phone Number: 011-23748473).  
Take notice that in case of your failure to appear on the above mentioned day before this Tribunal, the case will be heard and decided in your absence.  
Due to ongoing Pandemic Situation, all the matters will be taken up through Video Conferencing and for that purpose:- All the Advocates/Litigants shall download the "Cisco Webex" Registration/Software, "Meeting ID" and "Password" for the next date of hearing qua cases to be taken by Registrar/Recovery Officer-I and Recovery Officer-II shall be available one day prior to the next date at DRT Official Portal i.e. "drtgovin" under the Public Notice Head. In any exigency qua that, the Advocates/Litigants can contact the concerned official at Ph. No. 011-23748473.  
The Given under my hand and seal of the Tribunal on this 30th December 2023.  
By order of this Tribunal, Assistant Registrar Respondent may contact under mention Phone number for further enquiry.  
Mr. Amit K. Dar, LD, Registrar, DRT-I, Phone No: 011-23748473, Email: drt1delhi-dfs@nic.in

**NOTICE**  
Notice is hereby given pursuant to Regulation 29 under Regulation 47 of the SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015, that a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Company will be held on Friday, 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2024, inter-alia, to consider and approve the Un-Audited Financial Results of the Company for the quarter ended on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2023.  
The information contained in this notice is also available on the Company's website [www.cubical90.com](http://www.cubical90.com) as also on the website of the Stock Exchange viz. BSE Limited - [www.bseindia.com](http://www.bseindia.com).  
For Cubical Financial Services Limited Sd/-  
Place: New Delhi (Ashwanti Kumar Gupta) Managing Director  
Date: 04-01-2024

**CORRIGENDUM**  
ICICI Bank Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, 3rd Floor, Plot No- 23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005  
Demand notice publication under SARFAESI Act for Loan Account No. 159005002868 Name of the Borrower M/s SHRI TRADING COMPANY, BABITA, NEERAJ YADAV, JITENDER YADAV, & were the Demand notice dated October 06, 2022, it's publication dated March 28, 2023 at Dainik Uttam Hindu (Hindi) & Pioneer (English) & Symbolic possession notice dated June 20, 2023 & it's publication dated June 24, 2023, Dainik Uttam Hindu (Hindi) & Pioneer (English) & Pioneer (Hindi) & Physical possession notice dated December 13, 2023 & it's publication dated December 16, 2023 Dainik Uttam Hindu (Hindi) & Pioneer (English) & Pioneer (Hindi) under the securitization, reconstruction of financial asset and enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002 and in exercise of the power conferred under section 13(2) the property address mention in the entire sarfaesi proceedings is Commercial Property located at KHEWAT NO.91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 KITA 15 TOTAL MEASURING AREA 45 KANALS 7 MARLAS 5 SARSAI SITUATED AT NOONI KALAN, TEHSIL NARNAUL DISTT MAHENDRAGARH VIDE REGISTERED TRANSFER OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTY WITHIN BLOOD RELATION DEED NO 2163 DATED 30-10-2020 IMMOVABLE PROPERTY ISSUED BY SUB REGISTRAR OFFICE NARNAUL MUTION NUMBER 1544 DATED 9-11-2020 ISSUED BY REVENUE AUTHORITY NOONI KALAN respectively. We wish to mention that inadvertently and unintentionally a typographical error has occurred in the said the Property address mention in above mention notice and it's publication is COMMERCIAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT KHEWAT NO. 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 KITA 15 TOTAL MEASURING AREA 45 KANALS 7 MARLAS HAVING ITS 104/863 SHARE IE 11 MARLA 5 SARSAI SITUATED AT NOONI KALAN, TEHSIL NARNAUL DISTT MAHENDRAGARH VIDE REGISTERED TRANSFER OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTY WITHIN BLOOD RELATION DEED NO 2163 DATED 30-10-2020 IMMOVABLE PROPERTY ISSUED BY SUB REGISTRAR OFFICE NARNAUL MUTION NUMBER 1544 DATED 9-11-2020 ISSUED BY REVENUE AUTHORITY NOONI KALAN. We therefore, request you to please read the same as COMMERCIAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT KHEWAT NO-70, NEW KHEWAT NO-100 & LATEST KHEWAT NO-113/100, KHATONI NO-91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 & NEW KHATONI NO-117 TO 125 & LATEST KHATONI NO-128, KITA 15 TOTAL MEASURING AREA 45 KANALS 7 MARLAS HAVING ITS 104/863 SHARE IE 11 MARLA 5 SARSAI SITUATED AT NOONI KALAN, TEHSIL NARNAUL DISTT MAHENDRAGARH VIDE REGISTERED TRANSFER OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTY WITHIN BLOOD RELATION DEED NO 2163 DATED 30-10-2020 IMMOVABLE PROPERTY ISSUED BY SUB REGISTRAR OFFICE NARNAUL MUTION NUMBER 1544 DATED 9-11-2020 ISSUED BY REVENUE AUTHORITY NOONI KALAN. We therefore, request you to please read the same as COMMERCIAL PROPERTY LOCATED AT KHEWAT NO-70, NEW KHEWAT NO-100 & LATEST KHEWAT NO-113/100, KHATONI NO-91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 & NEW KHATONI NO-117 TO 125 & LATEST KHATONI NO-128, KITA 15 TOTAL MEASURING AREA 45 KANALS 7 MARLAS HAVING ITS 104/863 SHARE IE 11 MARLA 5 SARSAI SITUATED AT NOONI KALAN, TEHSIL NARNAUL DISTT MAHENDRAGARH VIDE REGISTERED TRANSFER OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTY WITHIN BLOOD RELATION DEED NO 2163 DATED 30-10-2020 IMMOVABLE PROPERTY ISSUED BY SUB REGISTRAR OFFICE NARNAUL MUTION NUMBER 1544 DATED 9-11-2020 ISSUED BY REVENUE AUTHORITY NOONI KALAN.  
Date : January 05, 2024 Authorized Officer  
Place : Delhi/ NCR ICICI Bank Limited



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Restive region

### Bloodshed and unrest in West Asia are not a good omen for world peace

The worst fears about the war spilling over in West Asia are coming true. The region is always simmering, marked by conflicts, regional power struggles and religion-related intricacies. The politically unstable land is now a virtual warzone with key players such as Israel and the Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon disrupting peace. Apprehensions that Israel's war in Gaza could spread across came true as twin explosions have ripped Iran, claiming more than 100 lives following a strike in Lebanon that killed the Hamas's deputy leader. More than 200 other people were wounded when the blasts, about 15 minutes apart, struck mourners commemorating slain Revolutionary Guards Gen Qasem Soleimani. Israel and Iran have long been bitter enemies. Violence involving Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen has spiked during the Gaza war. There have been repeated, deadly exchanges of fire across the Lebanon-Israel border, attacks on ships in the Red Sea area vital for global trade, and strikes against



US-led coalition forces in Iraq and Syria. In a nutshell, West Asia is on fire. Lebanon's Iran-backed armed group Hezbollah blamed foe Israel for the strike in its Shiite Muslim stronghold of southern Beirut. This could escalate the war as Hezbollah has vowed that the killing of Aruri would not go unpunished. Lebanon, situated at the crossroads of West Asia, has been a focal point for geopolitical manoeuvring.

Hezbollah, a Shiite militant group with political and military influence, has emerged as a significant player in the region. Backed by Iran, its involvement in the Syrian civil war and ongoing tensions with Israel add a layer of complexity to the regional dynamics. The group's

ability to exert influence beyond Lebanon's borders raises questions about the balance of power in the region. Iran, a major player in West Asia, has experienced a series of mysterious explosions, adding a new dimension to the regional unrest. Economic woes, international sanctions and domestic discontent contribute to the complex political landscape within Iran. The repercussions of these events are not limited to the country's borders. The Israel-Gaza conflict exacerbates tensions, Hezbollah's influence introduces an element of sectarianism, and the mysterious blasts in Iran raise concerns about internal stability. International actors, including the United Nations and other global powers, may intensify efforts to mediate conflicts and promote diplomatic solutions. A renewed focus on dialogue and negotiation could pave the way for regional stability. The emerging politics in West Asia, shaped by the Israel-Gaza conflict, Hezbollah's influence and the Iran incidents, present a complex and volatile scenario. As global attention remains focused on the region, international actors must engage in diplomatic efforts, promote dialogue and address the root causes of conflicts. Only through a comprehensive and cooperative approach can these nations hope to achieve lasting stability and foster a more peaceful future.

## PICTALK



Students on the 8th convocation of Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, in Jammu

## The second Nakba: Palestinians are paying the price

### The humanitarian crisis is getting worse with each passing day in Gaza. The clamour for ceasefire grows as civilians bear the brunt

The Israel-Hamas conflict, which began with a sudden attack on October 7 by Hamas resulting in the death of 1,200 Israeli civilians, the Israeli army continues its bombardment of civilian areas, including refugee camps in Gaza. This has led to 85% of the 2.3 million Gazans leaving their homes. Despite this, the Israeli Prime Minister has pledged to prolong the war until Hamas is eliminated. According to the Gaza Health Ministry, the conflict has resulted in approximately 21,507 deaths and 55,915 injuries since October 7.



Attack on October 9. While Palestinians may or may not sympathize with Hamas, it is argued that they should not be held accountable for the attack. The UN Secretary-General contextualizes the situation, stating that the Palestinian people have endured 56 years of occupation, with their land consumed by settlements and marred by violence.

The involvement of the Palestinian population in the conflict is largely involuntary, and they find themselves caught in the crossfire. The Israeli forces show no discrimination in their attacks, impacting permanent Palestinian residents who had to flee to Southern Gaza for refuge. The ongoing war sees the Israeli army targeting hostages, assaulting journalists and photographers, and obstructing UN humanitarian aid, exacerbating shortages of food, water, medicines,

and electricity in the region. The indiscriminate approach to targeting both terrorists and civilians has led to deaths, disease, and displacement among the Palestinian population.

Israel's confidence and unyielding stance are attributed to unwavering support from the US, which has vetoed UN resolutions for an immediate ceasefire and provided military assistance without congressional approval. The US administration justifies these actions by citing the urgency of Israel's defensive needs.

Accusations of "genocidal acts against the Palestinian people in Gaza" have prompted South Africa to approach the International Court of Justice. The British ambassador to the UN warns of a humanitarian catastrophe if the conflict continues, despite the UK joining the US in vetoing a UN ceasefire resolution. Most other countries, including India, advocate for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Despite international calls for a ceasefire, Israel rejects them, with Prime Minister Netanyahu asserting that the war will continue

until its conclusion. The US remains firm in its support, emphasizing its commitment to Israel's security.

Critics argue that the US's steadfast support for Israel stems more from geopolitical interests and the arms trade than a genuine commitment to Israel's well-being or a two-state solution. Concerns are raised about the potential escalation of the conflict into a regional, multi-front war involving proxy forces supported by Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. To prevent further escalation, advocates for humanistic values and peace call for the cessation of hostilities, a ceasefire, and a commitment to the two-state solution as the only path to sustainable peace. The UN Secretary-General emphasizes that the grievances of the Palestinian people should not justify the horrific attacks by Hamas, and these attacks should not result in the collective punishment of the Palestinian population.

(The writer is a retired professor from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and a member of the governing council, INTACH; views are personal)



SUKHDEV SINGH

# CPI-M rule: The untold Kerala story



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

### The Communist rule in Kerala is a comedy of errors. While State welfare takes a backseat, the kith and kin of leaders enjoy plum posts

Ronald Reagan, 40th President of the USA (1981-1989) was well known for his sense of humor and innocent observations about global affairs. One of his pastimes was to collect anecdotes associated with the then Soviet Union and Communism.

One of the anecdotes quoted by him was about a conversation between a US citizen and his counterpart from Soviet Union. In the course of the discussion, the US citizen told his Russian friend: "Do you know that we have democracy and freedom in our country. Any US citizen can enter the Oval Office of the White House (office of the US President), bang his table and tell the President that Mr. Reagan, I don't like the way you run this country. We have that much freedom in the US."

Pat came the reply from the Russian. "What's the big deal in it? We too can barge into the Kremlin (the center of power in Soviet Union), pound on our President's table and yell at him that "Comrade Gorbachev, I do not approve of the way President Reagan runs the US".

The Communists have their own meaning for democracy. The best examples are the Peoples' Republic of China, and Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (North Korea). Though these countries used to swear by democracy, the fun is that people in these countries do not know the meaning of democracy! The official mouthpiece of CPI-M is People's Democracy!! Party workers and activists read only Deshabhimani (CPI-M owned newspaper) in Kerala. In party villages in north Malabar region (districts of Kannur, Kasaragod and to some extent in Kozhikode district) only CPI-M approved newspapers and periodicals are allowed. Party villages are those villages where the writ of the party only runs. There is no father-mother-son-daughter relations in these villages. Those who violate party diktats better leave the villages or they would end up as dead bodies. This is not exaggeration but the real facts which are happening in these villages. The Muslims who had voted for



the UDF in the 2019 Lok Sabha election hoping a big win for the Congress were let down by the massive win registered by the BJP. They cast their lots with the Marxists in the 2021 assembly election. From Day One of their second tenure in 2021 nothing was working right for the CPI(M). The precedence of the State has been that whenever the Marxists come to power at Thiruvananthapuram, they jampack all government, semi-government and autonomous bodies with party cadres and their relatives. While P Sadasivam, the former Governor, danced to the tunes of the CPI-M, the present incumbent of Raj Bhavan, Arif Mohammed Khan, turned out to be a tough nut to crack.

He put a spoke on the moves by the CPI-M to appoint party leaders/cadre/ and their relations as vice chancellors and faculties which made chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his sidekicks furious. Though the governor earned a lot of goodwill from the people of the State, for whom he was the true Leader of Opposition, the CPI-M government approached the Supreme Court asking for a directive to



THE PRECEDENCE OF THE STATE HAS BEEN THAT WHENEVER THE MARXISTS COME TO POWER, THEY JAMPACK ALL GOVERNMENT, SEMI-GOVERNMENT AND AUTONOMOUS BODIES WITH PARTY CADRES AND THEIR RELATIVES

the Governor to sign the Bills passed by the Legislature and the council of ministers. Meanwhile the Supreme Court declared null and void the extension given to Gopinath Raveendran as vice chancellor of Kannur University. Raveendran, a fellow traveler of the CPI-M and a resident of the chief minister's village was appointed based on the pleas and persuasion of Vijayan and his minister for higher education Bindu (wife of CPI-M polit bureau member A Vijayaraghavan).

It is an open secret that the names of vice-chancellors and faculty members have to be cleared by the State Committee of the CPI-M before they are appointed. The PhD degrees are awarded to scholars based on the recommendations made from AKG Centre, the imposing State head quarters of the CPI-M. Most of the Ph Ds awarded in arts and humanities have become a laughing stock in the academic world of Kerala. The PhD scholars themselves do not know the topic in which they have been awarded the doctorates. There was a time when job seekers from Kerala had made a beeline to Calcutta, Chennai

and Mumbai to earn a livelihood. Now, fortune seekers from Bengal are flooding Kerala's job market since the Left Front rule reached its zenith in Writers Building at Calcutta.

A small town like Perumbavoor in Kerala has nearly two lakh Bengali migrant laborers working in plywood manufacturing units, timber mills, eateries, and hair dressing saloons. The State Government has no records of the migrant laborers from other States working in Kerala. It could be said with guarantee that there are no commercial or business establishments in Kerala where there are no migrant workers from Bengal and Tripura.

Last heard, more than 1,000 persons which include students and job seekers, are leaving Kerala shores per day to Europe, America, Australia, Africa according to Father Alexander Koodarathil, director, Dr K M Cheriyan Institute of Heart Sciences. They will not come back to Kerala and are migrating for good, said the respected spiritual leader while addressing a public meeting.

(The writer is special correspondent with the Pioneer; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### PAKISTAN'S GAMES

Sir — In reference to Islamabad's approach to counter-terrorism, it is evident that the government has displayed a stern stance on terror-related issues, particularly with the sentencing of Hafiz Saeed, the founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba, in 2020 and 2022. This move was clearly influenced by the pressure from international bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which actively monitors policies related to combating money laundering and terror financing.

Despite persistent requests from New Delhi, Islamabad has consistently refused to extradite Hafiz Saeed, who is wanted for masterminding terror activities on Indian soil, including the 28/11 Mumbai attacks. The recent rejection of India's fresh request is in line with Pakistan's customary approach, citing the absence of a bilateral agreement as the basis for its decision.

It is crucial to note that both Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), another terror group originating from Pakistan, have been listed as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) by the United States since 2001. Additionally, the United Nations has designated Hafiz Saeed as a "terrorist." This international recognition raises concerns about Pakistan's commitment to genuinely combating terrorism, as nations remain skeptical of its efforts.

While Islamabad attempts various strategies to shield prominent figures like Hafiz Saeed, countries like the United States and India are actively working to ensure its diplomatic isolation. This approach reflects a united front against terrorism.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

### NEW LAW FOR HIT-AND-RUN CASES

Sir — In accordance with the newly enacted statutory laws, the Bhartiya Nyay Sanhita (BNS) Act of 2023 has come into effect, replacing the colonial-era Indian Penal Code of 1860. The BNS Act now stipulates a potential jail term

### Consecration ceremony at Ayodhya



As the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya is around the corner, one is compelled to reminisce about the unmerciful demolition of the Babri Masjid three decades ago in this town, and India is still no closer to knowing who was responsible for the

disgraceful act, except that it was some anti-social elements that climbed the dome. There was a movement led by LK Advani, who took out a "Rath yatra" that covered a great part of the nation and culminated at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.

The obvious question therefore is if the demolition was not pre-planned, how did more than a hundred thousand volunteers reach Ayodhya on that tragic day in such a short time? The ruination sparked violence in the UP and elsewhere that led to the killing of around 2,000 people and changed the course of the country's political trajectory through right-wing politics. Interestingly, lord Ram left his kingdom and went to the forest He is an ideal for millions. His life was a message. Had the right-wing religious bigots known this simple truth, the Babri Masjid demolition wouldn't have taken place.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

of up to 10 years and/or a fine of Rs7 lakh for serious road accidents resulting from negligent driving, where drivers flee without informing the police. Previously, such actions warranted imprisonment for up to two years.

Truckers argue that many drivers, even in minor accidents, choose to flee to avoid potential mob justice, putting their lives at risk. The introduction of stringent Hit-and-run norms has triggered protests among transporters. In response to the ensuing chaos and restricted fuel supply due to protests, the administration has implemented immediate fuel rationing for two- and four-wheelers until normalcy is restored. This has created widespread disruptions in the supply chains, transportation, and logistics, impacting various segments of society.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

### SC VERDICT ON ADANI GROUP

Sir — The Supreme Court (SC) has emphasized that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) must

take measures to prevent the loss of investors' wealth due to short selling or market volatility in the future.

During the hearing of cases related to the Adani-Hindenburg row, the apex court questioned SEBI about its intentions to safeguard investors from extreme stock market fluctuations. SEBI assured the court of the steps it has taken and stated that investigations into allegations against the Adani group are nearing completion, with no further extension sought. It's important to note that the SC has not exonerated Adani completely. The inquiry will continue under SEBI's purview and not through a Special Investigation Team (SIT). While the court has not absolved Adani of wrongdoing, it has allowed SEBI to proceed with its investigation. It is crucial to avoid running a false narrative and to acknowledge that the inquiry is ongoing.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



## FIRST COLUMN

## INDIA AND RUSSIA GET CLOSE; THE US FROWNS

India sided with Russia in the Ukraine war despite the US pressure



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The upcoming Vibrant Gujarat summit will see the highest delegation participation from Russia including from its far east. It was no surprise that the external affairs minister spent the last week of 2023 meeting senior leaders in Russia. In the two years since Russian troops stormed into Ukraine, laying claim over several parts, there has been a huge shift in geopolitics and the way India is viewed by Western powers. India was at the receiving end of severe criticism from the West and its close ally US, as it had expanded its energy purchase from Russia, which is facing sanctions. One of the first visits the external affairs minister took nearly two years back after the war broke in Ukraine, was to Washington. India patiently stood its ground on buying Russian oil and not openly condemning the war. It helped India maintain relatively stable oil prices at home when the West was going through oil-pumped inflation.

The astute diplomatic path paid off and, slowly the criticism evaporated, as the West saw merit in India buying oil from a pool different from theirs, thus cooling off prices for them. A clever phrase by PM Modi during the G20 summit declaration in 2022, that "it is not an era of war", was widely accepted across the board.



The Indian Prime Minister meanwhile met US President Biden a couple of times on multilateral platforms and topped it up with a state visit to Washington in 2023. India knows that for it to succeed in a world of competitive economic interests and politics, the US is its best bet. India managed to sign several crucial long-range bilateral cooperation agreements with the US while expanding the relationship from a defence to a technology partnership. The regular conversations between top leaders of India and the US, and the frank explanations provided to the policymakers in the US ensured that the minor glitches, if any, were sorted. It is in this context that the Indo-Russian relationship has to be viewed, which is perhaps the most stable bilateral for almost four decades. During a joint press conference with FM Sergei Lavrov of Russia, External affairs minister S Jaishankar noted, "We appreciated the fact that our trade is at an all-time high. We crossed \$50 billion turnover last year.

We expect to exceed that this year. And what is important is that this trade is more balanced. It is sustainable, and it provides for fair market access... We are today, in our trade, energy, fertilizers, and coking coal are very big components of that. We discussed mutual investments, and the need to progress on a bilateral investment treaty. We spoke about railways yesterday, about industrial zone infrastructure. We have agreed that the negotiations between India and the Eurasian Economic Union for a free trade agreement will be resumed in the second half of January this year. On energy, as I mentioned, we have today a very substantial relationship, both in terms of Indian investments in Russia and in oil and gas, which we are seeking to expand. As also in nuclear; yesterday we signed two important amendments, which will take the Kudankulam nuclear power project forward.

We also spoke about connectivity; connectivity from western India through the International North-South Transport Corridor. Also connectivity from eastern India, from Chennai to Vladivostok and the polar route." The statement sets out a roadmap for the bilateral going in for the long term. In the recent past, Russia has moved closer to China and has been on opposite sides of India's US geo-political worldview. India-China bilateral relations are in a deep freeze post the military escalations by the latter. Going into 2024 with the US and India the two largest democracies facing elections, these long-standing bilateral relationships would be widely discussed during campaigns. The Russia visit was an exercise to reiterate the importance of long-term friendships.

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

## Unemployment: Overseas jobs is a viable solution



A S MITTAL

Given the huge labour requirement in the developed countries, India could explore job opportunities for Indians there to solve its unemployment problem

Unemployment has become a major concern in recent times, especially with the widening gap between a country's economic growth and employment generation. The latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for 2022-23 has revealed interesting trends, resulting in a six-year low unemployment rate of 3.2%. However, despite the declining unemployment rate, the general perception is that the employment situation in the country is not positive. As such, there is a need to explore opportunities to deploy the workforce in developed countries, which could be the perfect solution to tackle the unemployment problem in the country.

India has a unique opportunity to export its young workforce and become a significant part of the workforce in developed countries. Developed nations are currently experiencing a shortage of workers, and India can leverage this opportunity by sending its surplus young workforce to these countries. To facilitate this, the Indian government has signed 17 Mobility and Migration Partnership Agreements (MMPA) with countries like Australia, Austria, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the UK. Additionally, agreements are underway with the Netherlands, Greece, Denmark, Switzerland, South Korea, and Taiwan to facilitate the free movement of the workforce.

India's economy currently ranks 5th in the world and is expected to become the 3rd largest in the future. However, there is a need to improve the relationship between the country's economic growth and employment generation, as the demographic dividend is not being fully utilized. It is concerning to note that while there are 13 million active job seekers on the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment's portal, the total number of vacancies in both private and government sectors is only 2.20 lakh.

India is the only country where the supply of young workforce is growing faster than demand. Every year, a massive 12 million young people become employable. This sets India apart from developed countries like the USA, Japan, and Germany which have middle-aged or elderly workforces and are facing a severe shortage of young workforce. With a young population (below 35 years) set to grow from 62% to 68% by 2030, India has an incredible opportunity to leverage its workforce and meet the demands of developed nations.

Developed countries are facing a serious shortage of workforce, leading to a rise in labour costs and inflation. While they try to keep their manufacturing and service sectors going with new technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), it's important to note that this approach has its limitations. However, India has a young and abundant workforce that is motivated by a growing working-age population. Therefore, developed nations are considering India's workforce as they seek to hire skilled workers and keep the costs of their goods and services low.

USA: The latest data unequivocally shows that the USA still has three million open jobs, and it's a fact that there are not enough workers to fill them. The US Chamber of Commerce's reports paint a clear picture of countless job openings



INDIA'S ECONOMY CURRENTLY RANKS 5TH IN THE WORLD BUT THERE IS A NEED TO IMPROVE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC GROWTH AND EMPLOYMENT GENERATION

across industries such as transportation, healthcare and social assistance, hospitality and food sectors, manufacturing, wholesale, and retail trade. According to the survey findings of the US Chamber of Commerce, nearly one in five Americans have altered their livelihood in the last three years. Among them, 17% have retired, 19% have transitioned to become homemakers, and 14% are now working part-time. Additionally, it's alarming that almost a quarter (24%) of respondents say that government aid packages during the pandemic have disincentivized them from actively seeking work. It's worth noting that younger respondents, aged 25-34, are prioritizing personal growth over job hunting right now. Shockingly, 26% of those surveyed say that they're more focused on acquiring new skills, education, or training before re-entering the job market.

EUROPEAN UNION: The situation is quite alarming in Europe. The current labour shortage in Europe is a staggering 14.3 million workers. Shockingly, the European Commission predicts that the EU's workforce will shrink by 96 million workers by 2030. This potentially catastrophic workforce crunch could lead to a loss of \$1.323 trillion in unrealized annual revenue over the next six years. Despite previous strictness on

immigration policies, in the current scenario, the Greek Parliament has now approved an amendment that allows illegal migrants to receive three-year residency and work permits for specific job sectors. As a result, Greece has requested up to 10,000 farm workers from India to address their labour shortage. A significant number of workers from Punjab have already been employed in farming, factory, or construction work there.

TAIWAN: India and Taiwan are expected to sign an employment mobility agreement in February 2024. Taiwan plans to recruit up to 100,000 Indian workers for various roles in industries such as factories, farms, and hospitals. This move is due to Taiwan's ageing population, which is expected to make up over 20% of the population by 2025. To sustain its \$790 billion economy, Taiwan is seeking Indian workers and is offering pay parity and insurance benefits to attract them.

JAPAN: Japan, being the third largest manufacturing nation in the world, is facing an imminent and severe shortage of workforce. This situation is likely to have an enormous impact on Japan's ability to retain its position as a top manufacturing hub. It's been predicted that by 2030, Japan may lose out on a staggering \$194.61 billion in revenue due to the

scarcity of labour. GERMANY: Germany is expected to face a significant impact on its manufacturing output due to a labour shortage, following Japan. As a leading manufacturing hub, Germany is currently experiencing a shortage of 2.4 million workers, with the situation expected to worsen. By 2030, it is estimated that Germany's unrealised revenue will increase to \$77.93 billion if the labour shortage reaches 10 million.

The need of the hour: The Ministry of External Affairs' Overseas Employment Division and Skill India International Centres (SIICs) are expected to take an active role in offering immigration assistance and post-placement support.

To equip the workforce with standardization and certification of skill courses that align with International Occupational Standards, SIICs must work effectively. It is important to utilize the interconnected ecosystem fully to scale up the prospective hires of more workforce and not leave any opportunity unexplored.

(The Author is vice-chairman of Sonalika Group, vice-chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, and Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council; Views expressed are personal)

## Preserve and cherish the colours of the Aryan Valley

Renowned for its rich culture, the Aryan Valley boasts a unique cultural and linguistic identity within Ladakh but if not preserved, it may perish soon

As summer approaches, travellers flock to Ladakh, a Union Territory in North India, and social media buzzes with snapshots showcasing colourful prayer flags against the stark mountains, valleys, local cuisine, and cultural gems. Amidst this visual treat, the Dard Aryan Tribe in the famous Aryan Valley stands out with their unique attire and headgear, adding a touch of local charm to the seasonal scene.

Located some 200 km from Leh, Aryan Valley, historically referred to as the DhaHanu region, is a distinct area comprising five villages - Dha, Hanu, Beema, Garkhon and Darchik spread across Leh and Kargil district. The tribe is largely dependent on agricul-



DEACHEN ANGMO

ture and then tourism. Renowned for its rich culture, Aryan Valley boasts a unique cultural and linguistic identity within Ladakh. The inhabitants don distinctive traditional attire, setting them apart from other Ladakhi regions. Aryan people craft their clothing, with men donning garments like Goncha and Shanthab made from sheepskin. Additionally, they accessorize with elaborate Kagu

jewellery, ranging from INR10000 to 70000 in value. The male attire is completed with a flower-adorned hat and Lanba Puma shoes for warmth in winter.

Aryan women showcase their allure in traditional dresses such as Stodcha (wool-made) and Lokpa (goat skin). Adorned with expensive gold and silver jewellery, including hats embellished with flowers like the ShokloMentok (Lampion flower) from their gardens, Aryan women also wear LanbaiPubu shoes. Festivals play a pivotal role in Aryan culture, with celebrations like the great harvest festival, Apricot blossoming, ChopoS rubla, and Losar featuring traditional dances and folk songs.

They speak a language distinct



from other regions in Ladakh, officially recognized as the Dardi-Aryan language. Notably, Hanu is the sole village not using this local language but rather opting for Ladakhi. Elders from Hanu village share a tale of when a king forbade the use of the native language. In contrast, the villages of Dha, Garkhon, and Darchik, not subjected to

the king's rule, continue to use their language. Recently, during the Aryan festival celebrated on October 2-3, 2023, in HanuGongma, a decision was made. The festival became a catalyst for the Hanu people to embrace their native language, marking a shift towards linguistic preservation. Volunteer teachers from GarkhonDarchik, including

Pro. TsewangGyalston, Mr. Sonam Norboo, Lec. NawangSih rap, Mr. KonchokChangpa, Lec. Dolker Arya, Mr ThinlasDorjay, and Mr KonchokSingay are actively involved in teaching the Dardi-Aryan language to Hanu students through online platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, and audio recordings as most of them work in the Kargil district.

Feedback from the students indicates a positive response, expressing appreciation for the engaging and informative online classes. Recognizing the importance of preserving their cultural heritage, Aryan villagers are committed to fostering the learning and teaching of their language and traditions. The community has also urged the

Commissioner/Secretary, Information Department, Ladakh UT, to broadcast Daily-Aryan Language Programs on All India Radio Kargil/Leh, similar to existing programs in other regional languages. The population of Aryan Valley is approximately 4927, distributed with 3111 residing in Kargil District and 1816 in Leh District.

Several noteworthy books, including "Dardistan" by Leitner, "Tribes of Hindukush" by Budluff, "Buddhist Dards of Ladakh" by Rohit Vohra, "Dard-An Indian Tribe" by Ali Hussain, and "Dardi Dictionary" by Tsewang Gyalston, offer valuable insights into the rich cultural heritage of the Dard Aryan community. In 2019, 30 members of the Dard Aryan Tribe

convened in the National Capital for a seminar, addressing the imperative need to preserve their legacy. During the discussions, they highlighted the challenges posed by modernization and migration, perceiving them as threats to their cultural identity.

In response, a memorandum was collaboratively drafted with expert assistance and submitted to the Centre, urging government intervention. However, as indicated by the Press Information Bureau, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs did not receive any formal communication from the concerned state regarding this matter.

(Deachen is a student of EJM College, Leh and is Charkha's volunteer trainer; views are personal. Charkha Features)

# B'desh opposition calls for 48-hr strike against govt, Jan 7 polls

PTI ■ DHAKA

Bangladesh's main opposition party BNP on Thursday called for a 48-hour nationwide general strike starting Saturday to demand the resignation of the "illegal government" of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and to protest against the January 7 general election, which it is boycotting.

Led by former prime minister Khadija Zia, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is boycotting the general election on Sunday. It is demanding an interim non-party neutral government to hold the election. The demand was rejected by the government headed by Prime Minister Hasina, who is heading the ruling Awami League.

BNP Joint Senior Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi announced the general strike at a press conference on Thursday. "The 48-hour hartal will be observed from 6 am on January 6, to 6 am on January 8," Rizvi said in a virtual press conference as last-minute preparations were underway for the 12th general elections.

The strike calls for the "resignation of the illegal government, establishment of a non-party neutral government and release of all party leaders and activists from prison," he said. The BNP aims to garner support for its non-cooperation movement against the Awami Party-led dispensation through the strike. It has urged 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.

Through the strike, the opposition party is also demanding the release of its leaders, including Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Standing Committee Member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, who were arrested over charges of violence. Police arrested thousands of opposition activists and figures after, according to Human Rights Watch, at least 16 people died and thousands were injured in the past three months, when dozens of vehicles, including buses and trucks, were set on

## Young voters dream of a future free from political chaos

**Dhaka (AP):** At a technology centre in Bangladesh's capital, young women huddle around a computer, discussing a coding issue. Many of them make the daily trip to Dhaka on the shining new metro rail while scouring their smartphones for the latest on social media.

For decades, political battles in Bangladesh have been fought on the streets, often with violence, by parties led by two powerful women. But there are signs of a generational change as the country of 169 million heads into another general election Sunday. While an opposition boycott and acrimony tarnish the polls, millions of young voters are seeking a different narrative. A burgeoning technology industry, lively e-commerce and a growing public digital infrastructure are helping one of South Asia's fastest growing economies capitalize on a tech-savvy workforce that is demanding change from politicians. Ahead of the election, boycotted by the main opposition led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is trying to woo first-time voters with her government's "Digital Bangladesh" project, promising a "smart Bangladesh" by 2041 and 15 million new jobs for young people by 2030.

In an address at a large election rally outside Dhaka on Saturday, Hasina asked young voters for their support "so that the advancement of Bangladesh continues."

fire in political violence. At a previous virtual press briefing, Rizvi said the BNP would hold processions and conduct mass campaigns across the country on Friday in protest against the election. The opposition's call for a strike came a day after

Some are listening. Shahrima Tanjin Arni, 26, who teaches law at Dhaka University, called Hasina a bold leader with a vision for a digital future.

"She holds the values of the past, but at the same time, she has a progressive thinking in her progressive heart, which is not very common in Bangladeshi societies," Arni said. The previous two general elections were marred by allegations of vote-rigging and intimidation, which authorities denied. Hasina, seeking a fourth consecutive term, pledges a free and fair election. But her critics allege she is undermining the process for an inclusive election and suppressing the opposition, which Hasina blames for violence.

Younger voters say they want a break from the highly polarized political culture and concerns over democratic rights. "My desire is that ... people of Bangladesh will freely exercise their voting right, their freedom of speech will be ensured and the justice system will work independently," said Abdur Rahim Rony, a student at Dhaka University. "I also wish that no political party or the government will interfere with the constitutional institutions."

One-fourth of the country's population is in the 15-29 age group, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Almost one-third of the country's 119.1 million registered voters are between 18 and 30.

authorities deployed army troops across the country to assist the civic administration in maintaining order and peace during the BNP-boycotted elections. Since October 29, the BNP has been holding intermittent nationwide strikes and

transport blockades.

The party has been saying that no election under Hasina's government would be fair while claiming that the January 7 elections would be a sham designed to reinstall the ruling Awami League for the fourth consecutive term.

Hasina, 76, is the longest-serving prime minister of Bangladesh, with the first term from 1996 to 2001 and three consecutive terms from 2009 to 2014, 2014 to 2019 and 2019 to date. The BNP had boycotted the 2014 election but took part in the 2018 polls, which party leaders later said was a mistake, alleging that the voting was marred with widespread rigging and intimidation.

Zia, the BNP chairperson, has been debarred from politics and is effectively under house arrest to serve a 17-year prison term handed down by a court on two graft charges. The 79-year-old ex-prime minister is now in a hospital with multiple health issues. Her elder son and BNP's acting Chairman Tarique Rahman has been in self-exile since 2007 in the UK to evade several graft and criminal charges.

Several Bangladesh courts declared him a "fugitive" as he took refuge in the UK to evade jail terms for several criminal charges, including a grenade attack on a rally of the then-opposition Awami League in 2004 in which 24 people were killed. Hasina narrowly escaped the attack, which also wounded some 500 of her party leaders, activists and supporters.

Bangladesh has deployed armed forces to assist the administration in holding the upcoming national election in a free, fair, and peaceful manner. The US and other major Western countries called for dialogue between the ruling Awami League and particularly with the BNP to ensure an inclusive and credible election, which saw no headway due to reluctance from both sides.

With the BNP boycotting the election and no other credible opposition party against it, Hasina's Awami League is likely to gain the upper hand and will likely form the government for the fourth consecutive term.

## 'SL President could get Tamil support if he fulfils their aspirations'

Colombo (PTI):

Ranil Wickremesinghe will certainly get the support of the Tamil political parties in the next presidential elections if he works to fulfil aspirations of Tamils in the north, a prominent leader from the community has said ahead of the Sri Lankan President's visit to Jaffna. CV Wigneswaran, the former chief minister of the Northern Province, also said he was banking on Wickremesinghe to launch all development projects in the province that were promised to Tamil political parties.

He said all problems faced by the Tamils in the north could be easily settled and the Tamil political parties eagerly await the results of the president's visit to the area. If President Ranil Wickremesinghe acts to fulfil the aspirations of the northern Tamils, he would certainly get the support of the Tamil political parties at the next presidential election, Wigneswaran said.

He said the government was yet to release 3,000 acres of land belonging to northerners acquired by the state. India has been pressing Sri Lanka to implement the 13th Amendment, which was brought in after the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement of 1987, to achieve reconciliation with the minority Tamil community. The 13A provides for the devolution of power to the Tamil community. Wickremesinghe must call the next presidential election by mid-September and hold it before mid-November.

Wickremesinghe's tenure, the balance of the ousted president Gotabaya Rajapaksa's term, began in July of 2022 and would end with the calling of the next presidential election by the elections commission. However, it is not certain if Wickremesinghe would be backed by the current ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party. Wickremesinghe, 75, has won admiration for his handling of the economic crisis which bankrupted the island nation. The support of minority Tamils would be crucial for presidential candidates to win the required 50 per cent plus one vote to be declared the winner.

# Imam shot dead outside New Jersey mosque

AP ■ NEWARK



A New Jersey imam was gunned down outside his mosque before dawn on Wednesday, leaving authorities hunting for a shooter and saying they have found no evidence yet that an anti-Muslim bias played a part in the shooting. Imam Hassan Sharif was in his car when he was shot more than once at about 6 am near the Masjid-Muhammad Mosque in Newark, the state's largest city, Essex County Prosecutor Ted Stephens said at a news conference. He was taken to a nearby hospital but died in the afternoon.

"I know that in light of global events and with a rise in bias directed at many communities we are experiencing across our state — particularly the Muslim community — there are many in New Jersey right now who are feeling a heightened sense of fear or anxiety at the news of this slaying," Attorney General Matt Platkin said. Despite that, Platkin said law enforcement has stepped up outreach to houses of worship, particularly Jewish and Muslim ones, explic-

ally acknowledging the tensions unfolding in many parts of the world amid the fighting in Gaza since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

Sharif had been a resident imam at the local mosque for five years, Newark Public Safety Director Fritz Fragé said. He remembered the imam as a leader in the interfaith community who worked to keep the city safe. "We share your pain and we promise to utilise the full resources of those here and those who are continuing to partner with us to make sure that this heinous crime is solved," he said.

The New Jersey chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the nation's

largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organisation, called Sharif a "beacon of leadership and excellence" and said while the shooter's motives are unknown, the group is advising all mosques to "remain cautious" while keeping their doors open. About 320,000 of the state's roughly nine million (90 lakh) residents are Muslims, Platkin said. After Wednesday's shooting, officials reached out to Muslim communities in the city and across the state.

"We are asking everybody in our community and our partners to let us know if there is anything that they want to be done and anything that is making them feel unsafe so we can respond," Fragé said.

## Taliban arrest women for 'bad hijab'

AP ■ KABUL

The Taliban have arrested women in the Afghan capital for wearing "bad hijab," a spokesman at the country's Vice and Virtue Ministry said on Thursday. It's the first official confirmation of a crackdown on women who don't follow the dress code imposed by the Taliban since they returned to power in 2021 and has echoes with neighbouring Iran, which has enforced mandatory hijab for decades.

The development is the latest blow to Afghan women and girls, who are already reeling from bans on education, employment and access to public spaces. The spokesman from the Vice and Virtue Ministry, Abdul Ghafar Farooq, didn't say how many women have been arrested or what constitutes bad hijab.

In May 2022, the Taliban issued a decree calling for women to only show their eyes

and recommending they wear the head-to-toe burqa, similar to restrictions during the Taliban's previous rule between 1996 and 2001. Farooq said the women were arrested three days ago. In voice notes to The Associated Press, he said the ministry has heard complaints about women's lack of correct hijab in the capital and provinces for almost two-and-a-half years.

Ministry officials made recommendations to women and advised them to follow the dress code. Female police officers were sent to arrest the women after they failed to follow the advice, he added.

"These are the few limited women who spread bad hijab in Islamic society," he said. "They violated Islamic values and rituals, and encouraged society and other respected sisters to go for bad hijab."

Police will refer the matter to judicial authorities or the women will be released on

strict bail, according to Farooq.

"In every province, those who go without hijab will be arrested," he warned. The arrests come less than a week after the UN Security Council called for a special envoy to engage with the Taliban, especially on gender and human rights. But the Taliban criticized the idea, saying that special envoys have "complicated situations further via the imposition of external solutions."

Late Wednesday, while expressing support for a special envoy for Afghanistan, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said America remained concerned about the Taliban's "repressive edicts against women and girls and its unwillingness to foster inclusive governance."

The decisions made risk irreparable damage to Afghan society and move the Taliban further away from normalizing relations with the international community, added Miller.

## Pak court rescinds disqualification for convicts under anti-graft laws

Islamabad (PTI):

A high court in Pakistan on Thursday restored 10-year disqualification for a convict under the anti-corruption laws by rescinding its earlier ruling to reduce it to five years, ending confusion over the length of disqualification following changes made in the election laws for public office holders.

The decision is likely to have an impact on various cases filed by politicians, including two former prime ministers, Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif, ahead of the February 8 general elections.

The National Accountability Ordinance (NAO) of 1999 provided 10-year disqualification for a person convicted of corruption but a single bench of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) reduced it to five years while hearing a case following the amendments made in the election laws in April last year. The changes made by the previous government headed by Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of Nawaz Sharif, mandated a maximum five-year period of disqualification, apparently providing relief to every convict. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) on July 25 last year challenged the IHC single-bench order limiting the disqualification to five from 10 years as provided in the NAO.

An IHC division bench comprising Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani and Justice Saman Rafat Intiaz, hearing the NAB appeal, rejected the single bench verdict and ordered to restore section 15 (disqualification to contest elections or to hold public office) of the NAO, which specifies a 10-year disqualification for convicts from "seeking or from being elected, chosen, appointed or nominated" as public office holders. The restoration of original disqualification can possibly hit former premier Imran Khan who is facing cases of corruption.

## Af Taliban supreme leader's aide holds talks with Pak FM Jilani

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A close aide of Afghan Taliban supreme leader has held talks with Pakistani authorities, including caretaker Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani, here and discussed key issues of mutual concern, including peace and security, amid simmering tensions between the two countries over the cross-border terrorism.

Haji Mullah Shirin, Governor of Kandahar and Deputy Head of Military Intelligence and Strategy of Afghanistan, who is a key figure in the Taliban's secretive hierarchy, is the first senior Taliban leader to have travelled to Islamabad in recent months.

According to a statement by the Foreign Office, the delegation met Foreign Minister Jilani on Wednesday. "They exchanged views on key issues of mutual concern, including peace and security, as well as people-to-people contacts," it

said. Jilani reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to continued engagement and mutually beneficial ties with Afghanistan. He also underscored the importance of addressing all issues of concern to harness the full potential for regional trade and connectivity.

The visiting dignitary appreciated Pakistan for the generous support extended to millions of Afghans for over four decades and agreed to continue high-level engagement and dialogue to further strengthen bilateral relations.

Earlier, the Afghan delegation led by Haji Mullah Shirin also participated in the 6th session of Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Coordination Committee, where the two sides discussed coordination mechanisms to facilitate cross border movement with a view to promoting people-to-people contacts, according to the statement.

The visit comes as relations tumbled between the two

neighbours over the issue of militants of banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) using Afghan soil to conduct militancy. Pakistan has repeatedly alleged that the TTP militants have been using the latest weapons left by the NATO forces in Afghanistan in the attacks against its security forces which they could only get with the help or connivance of officials in Kabul. It also says that TTP leaders freely live across the border in Afghanistan and cross the border at their will to orchestrate attacks.

The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies in a report stated that the country's security situation is the same as in 2014. According to the report, there was a 93 per cent increase in the rate of suicide attacks across the country last year. The banned outfit, TTP, recently released its attack figures, saying it carried out more than 60 attacks in Pakistan in the last year of December alone.

## PPP nominates Bilawal as its PM pick

PTI ■ LAHORE

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has nominated its chairman and former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as its official prime ministerial candidate ahead of the general elections on February 8, a media report said on Thursday.

The party's nomination came at the PPP's Central Executive Committee (CEC) meeting held late on Wednesday evening at Bilawal House. Soon after the meeting, a detailed post on PPP's official X handle with photos of the meeting informed that members of the CEC expressed their confidence in the leadership of party president Asif Ali Zardari and chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

"President Asif Ali Zardari presented the name of chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the candidate for the Prime Minister on behalf of Pakistan Peoples Party. The CEC has endorsed Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the Prime

Ministerial candidate of PPP," the party posted on X.

"It is with profound gratitude & great humility that I accept my party's nomination for the office of Prime Minister of Pakistan. On February 8th, we must put an end to the old politics of hate & division. Unite the country around a new politics of services," Bilawal posted on his official X handle after the meeting.

"Our 10-point plan will serve the interests of the many & not just the privileged few. Together we will defeat poverty, unemployment & inflation. Together we will build a peaceful, prosperous & progressive Pakistan," the 35-year-old leader wrote.

Bilawal, the son of slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto is contesting from the Lahore (NA-127) constituency, where he would compete with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Shaista Pervaiz Malik and a Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-backed candidate.

PPP leaders including Secretary General Taj Haider, Syed Khurshid Shah, Rana Farooq Saeed Khan, Qamar Zaman Kaira, Samina Khalid Ghurki, Murad Ali Shah, Chaudhry Aslam Gill, and Ali Badr were present at the meeting. The CEC meeting discussed in detail the party's campaign for the general election. The meeting also discussed the party election manifesto, which decided to give priority to youth and women empowerment, employment, health, and education, The News International reported.

The newspaper report further quoted Bilawal, as talking to the media after the meeting: "The law-and-order situation in 2024 is worse than that of 2018. Terrorism has created a law-and-order situation in the country," Bilawal said as he condemned the incidents of terrorism in the country, and said that to steer the country out of crises, crucial decisions would have to be taken.

"Military dictator Ziaul

Haq had tried to hinder the PPP's success by imposing Nawaz Sharif and Shehbaz Sharif in Punjab. Then, former ISI chiefs — Gen Pasha and Gen Faiz Hamid — imposed the PTI and tried to keep the PPP away from Punjab. These efforts have been made because the PPP is a party of the people and represents the common man, while the PML-N and PTI both represent the elite," Bilawal said.

"The PPP will run its campaign in all the provinces of the country and continue its struggle as per the expectations of the party workers. The PPP has always strived for the prosperity of the people. The country is currently facing a plethora of crises, be it on the political, democratic or security front," Bilawal said. "The PPP is the only party that always came up with its vision and manifesto before polls and kept people on priority," said Bilawal, flanked by Haider and former prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani.

## Scenes of loss play out across Japan's western coastline

AP ■ SUZU

His face hidden under a humble straw hat, the man stood silent, watching several helmeted rescue workers carefully lift his wife's body from the rubble, wrapped in blue plastic on a stretcher. He wiped his weary face with a rag. His eyes were red. This scene in the city of Suzu was tragically repeated across Ishikawa Prefecture and nearby regions on the western coastline of Japan after Monday's 7.6 magnitude tremor that decimated houses, twisted and scarred roads and scattered boats like toys in the waters, and prompted tsunami warnings.

The death toll stood at 81 people as of Thursday. Ishikawa officials said 47 of those who died were in the city of Wajima and 23 were in Suzu. The 11 others were reported in five neighbouring towns. More

than 330 people have been injured, at least 25 seriously. Those reported missing ballooned from 15 to 79 overnight, including a 13-year-old boy. Officials initially said 80 were missing but corrected the number later. What exacerbated matters was people visiting to ring in the new year with their loved ones when the quake hit.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reinforced rescue operations with about 3,600 soldiers in addition to the initial 1,000. Their mission is to provide those affected with fresh water and hot meals, as well as set up bathing facilities for the 34,000 who lost their homes and are now staying at evacuation facilities. Although Japan is reputed for relatively reliable disaster relief, essential supplies such as water, food and blankets have been running short.

"All we got was a couple of rice balls," said elderly Yasuo



Kobatake cupping his hand in a tiny paper cup, half-filled with water that "vanished in a sip."

When the earth trembled, Kobatake was about to wear his shoes to head out. He ran out

of the house barefoot with just one sock on. That first tremor was followed by the main more destructive quake which flung him to the ground. A concrete wall came crashing down, bare-

ly missing him. Kobatake can no longer access his destroyed house.

"So here I am with my wife sleeping beside all the others (taking shelter at the school). We talk to each other and we try to encourage each other," he said. Kobatake hoped help was on the way.

However, many roads have been blocked by landslides or suffered cracks because of the strong quake, making it difficult for trucks delivering water and food supplies to reach those in need. The hardest hit spots were on the Noto Peninsula, the centre of the quake, connected by a narrow land strip to the rest of the main island of Honshu, making alternative routes scarce.

Snow is expected over the weekend, so finding those trapped under the rubble has become even more critical.

Three days after Monday's

quake, rescuers are still pulling out people alive from under debris. But time is running out. Experts categorize the first 72 hours as crucial to finding survivors. Authorities warned more quakes and tsunamis could follow, stressing extra caution over the coming few days. Plans are also underway to fly some evacuated people out to safer areas. Aftershocks continued to rock the coastal areas, near the epicenter in Noto, about 300 kilometres from Tokyo on the opposite coast, hit on Monday.

The quake set off tsunami warnings, followed by waves measuring more than 1 metre in some places. The warnings have since been lifted. The usual pastoral landscape of Ishikawa was replaced by gray stretches of ash and charred walls, where a fire broke out in Wajima city.



# Trump asks SC to overturn Colorado ruling

AP ■ DENVER

Former President Donald Trump on Wednesday asked the US Supreme Court to overturn a ruling barring him from the Colorado ballot, setting up a high-stakes showdown over whether a constitutional provision prohibiting those who "engaged in insurrection" will end his political career.

Trump appealed a 4-3 ruling in December by the Colorado Supreme Court that marked the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment was used to bar a presidential contender from the ballot. The court found that Trump's role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol disqualified him under the clause.

The provision has been used so sparingly in American history that the US Supreme Court has never ruled on it. Wednesday's development came a day after Trump's legal team filed an appeal against a ruling by Maine's Democratic Secretary of State, Shenna Bellows, that Trump was ineligible to appear on that state's ballot over his role in the Capitol attack. Both the Colorado Supreme Court and



the Maine secretary of state's rulings are on hold until the appeals play out.

Trump's critics have filed dozens of lawsuits seeking to disqualify him in multiple states. He lost Colorado by 13 percentage points in 2020 and does not need to win the state to gain either the Republican presidential nomination or the presidency. But the Colorado ruling has the potential to prompt courts or secretaries of state to remove him from the ballot in other, must-win states.

None had succeeded until a slim majority of Colorado's seven justices — all appointed by Democratic governors — ruled last month against Trump. Critics warned that it

was an overreach and that the court could not simply declare that the Jan. 6 attack was an "insurrection" without a judicial process.

The Colorado Supreme Court decision would unconstitutionally disenfranchise millions of voters in Colorado and likely be used as a template to disenfranchise tens of millions of voters nationwide, Trump's lawyers wrote in their appeal to the nation's highest court, noting that Maine has already followed Colorado's lead.

Trump's new appeal to the US Supreme Court also follows one from Colorado's Republican Party. Legal observers expect the high court will take the case because it concerns unsettled constitutional issues that go to the heart of the way the country is governed.

All the parties to the case have urged the court to move quickly. Trump's lawyers on Wednesday asked the court to overturn the ruling without even hearing oral arguments. The lawyers representing the Colorado plaintiffs have urged oral arguments but also seek a vastly accelerated schedule, calling for a resolution by next

month. Colorado's primary is March 5.

Sean Grimsley, an attorney for the plaintiffs seeking to disqualify Trump in Colorado, said late last month on a legal podcast called "Law, disrupted" that he hopes the nation's highest court hurries once it accepts the case, as he expects it will. "We have a primary coming up on Super Tuesday and we need to know the answer," Grimsley said.

The Colorado high court upheld a finding by a district court judge that Jan. 6 was an "insurrection" incited by Trump. It agreed with the petitioners, six Republican and unaffiliated Colorado voters whose lawsuit was funded by a Washington-based liberal group, that Trump clearly violated the provision. Because of that, the court ruled he is disqualified just as plainly as if he failed to meet the Constitution's minimum age requirement for the presidency of 35 years.

In doing so, the state high court reversed a ruling by the lower court judge that said it wasn't clear that Section 3 was meant to apply to the president. That's one of many issues the nation's highest court

would consider.

Additional ones include whether states such as Colorado can determine who is covered by Section 3, whether congressional action is needed to create a process to bar people from office, whether Jan. 6 met the legal definition of insurrection and whether Trump was simply engaging in First Amendment activity that day or is responsible for the violent attack, which was intended to halt certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory. Trump held a rally before the Capitol attack, telling his supporters that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." Six of the US Supreme Court's nine justices were appointed by Republicans, and three by Trump himself. The Colorado ruling cited a prior decision by Neil Gorsuch, one of Trump's appointees to the high court, when he was a federal judge in Colorado. That ruling determined that the state had a legitimate interest in removing from the presidential ballot a naturalized US citizen who was ineligible for the office because he was born in Guyana.

# US warns Houthis to cease attacks on Red Sea vessels

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The United States and 12 allies issued what amounted to a final warning to Houthi rebels on Wednesday to cease their attacks on vessels in the Red Sea or face potential targeted military action. The Yemen-based militants have carried out at least 23 attacks in response to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza since December 19. A senior Biden administration official declined to detail rules of possible engagement if the attacks continue, but underscored that the Iranian-backed Houthis should "not anticipate another warning" from the US and its allies.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, spoke soon after the countries issued a joint statement earlier Wednesday condemning the attacks and underscoring that international patience was strained.

The statement was signed by the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Separately, the US called on the United Nations Security Council on Wednesday to take action against the Houthis and warned their financier Iran that it has a choice to make about continuing to provide support to the rebels.

"Let our message now be clear: we call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews," the countries said. "The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways."

For weeks, the 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 the Israeli air-and-ground offensive in the Gaza Strip that was triggered by the Palestinian militant group Hamas' October 7 attack in southern Israel. However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue. The

attacks have targeted commercial shipping vessels transiting through the critical Bab el-Mandeb Strait that links markets in Asia and Europe since the October 7 attack by Hamas and Israel's subsequent war against the militant group in Gaza.

The US and its allies have formed Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect ship traffic, and currently, warships from the United States, France and the United Kingdom are patrolling the area. On Sunday, US helicopters opened fire on Houthi rebels after they attacked a cargo ship in the Red Sea, killing several of them.

The US Navy helicopters returned fire in self-defence, sinking three of the four boats and killing the people on board while the fourth boat fled the area, the US Central Command said. The Houthis acknowledged that 10 of their fighters were killed in the confrontation and warned of consequences.

US ships in recent weeks have shot down waves of Houthi ballistic missiles and one-way explosive drones.

President Joe Biden has sought to keep the three-month war between Israel and Hamas from escalating into a broader regional conflict. But the official stressed that the US and its allies would respond similarly to such malign action that has impacts on global commerce anywhere around the globe.

"As the President has made clear, the United States does not seek conflict with any nation or actor in the Middle East, nor do we want to see the war between Israel and Hamas widen in the region," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said. "But neither will we shrink from the task of defending ourselves, our interests, our partners, or the free flow of international commerce."

The official said any potential action against the Houthis will be done in a "very smart way that does not potentially draw us in deep to a situation" with Iran and its proxy groups.

At the UN, US deputy ambassador Christopher Lu said that without Iranian support, the Houthis "would struggle to effectively track and strike commercial vessels navigating shipping lanes through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden."

# Lanka to deploy naval vessel in Red Sea

Colombo (PTI): President Ranil Wickremesinghe has announced that Sri Lanka will provide a Navy vessel to fight attacks by Houthi rebels on merchant ships in the Red Sea, joining countries like India in protecting the key waterway for global trade. The Iran-backed Houthi rebels have launched more than 20 attacks on merchant ships in recent weeks, claiming to take revenge against Israel for its military campaign against Palestinian terror group Hamas in Gaza. These attacks have sharply raised goods costs between Asia and Europe.

Addressing an award ceremony here on Wednesday, Wickremesinghe, who holds the defence ministry portfolio, noted that merchant shipping was hit by Houthi attacks at the Red Sea and said if the ships were to be diverted and re-routed around South Africa, the voyages would become much more expensive.

This could create (an) escalation of the cost of goods. "So we have agreed to send a Naval vessel to combat Houthi attacks in the Red Sea," he said.

The Houthis, who control most of Yemen, are currently in solidarity with Palestine because of the ongoing Israeli-Hamas conflict in Gaza. The Houthi attacks centred on the Red Sea's Bab al-Mandeb southern chokepoint have disrupted shipping in a waterway that carries about 12 per cent of global trade, according to the Times of Israel newspaper.

The rebel group will continue their attacks until more aid enters the Gaza Strip, where Israel is at war with the ruling Hamas terror group following its devastating October 7 attack that killed over 1,200 people in Israel, the report said.

Last month, an Indian-flagged crude oil tanker was among two vessels that came under drone attacks by the Houthi rebels in the Southern Red Sea, according to the US Central Command. Indian Navy on Wednesday said its ships and aircraft remain "mission deployed" for maintaining enhanced surveillance and undertaking maritime security operations.

# Iran suspects attack carried out by suicide bombers

Dubai (AP): Investigators believe suicide bombers likely carried out an attack on a commemoration for an Iranian general slain in a 2020 US drone strike, state media reported on Thursday, as Iran grappled with its worst militant attack in decades and as the wider Mideast remains on edge. The report by the state-run IRNA news agency quoted an unnamed "informed source." Wednesday's attack in Kerman killed at least 84 people and wounded another 284. It targeted a ceremony honoring Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, held as an icon by supporters of the country's theocracy and viewed by the US military as a deadly foe who aided militants who killed American troops in Iraq.

No group has yet to claim responsibility for the attack. The IRNA report quoted the official as saying that surveillance footage from the route to the commemoration at Kerman's Martyrs Cemetery clearly showed a male suicide bomber detonating explosives. The official said the second blast "probably" came from another suicide bomber, though it hadn't been determined beyond doubt.

The official also gave new distances for how far apart the blasts happened, describing them as occurring 1.5 kilometre and 2.7 kilometres away from Soleimani's crypt. The official said the bombers likely chose the locations because they were outside of the security perimeter for the commemoration. An earlier death toll of 103 was twice revised lower after officials realised that some names had been repeated on a list of victims and due to the severity of wounds suffered by some of the dead, health authorities said. Many of the wounded were in critical condition, however, so the death toll could rise. The gathering marked the fourth anniversary of the killing of Soleimani, the head of the Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force, in a US drone strike in Iraq.

# UK statistics watchdog 'looking into' Rishi Sunak's asylum backlog claim

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK's statistics watchdog on Thursday said that it is "looking into" the government's recent announcement that it had met Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's target to clear the country's asylum backlog by the end of 2023, a claim strongly contested by the Opposition.

Earlier this week, the UK Home Office said that 112,000 asylum cases were processed in the past year, which exceeded Sunak's initial target of 92,000 applications pending at the end of 2022.

However, the Opposition Labour Party had contested this and accused the government of "misleading" the public. It has now emerged that a formal complaint is likely to have been raised with the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR),



which independently monitors the use of official statistics. "The Office for Statistics Regulation confirmed it is looking into the government announcement about the asylum backlog," said a spokesperson for OSR.

While the OSR can ask for additional information from the Home Office, it does not have the power to compel data to be provided. It can, how-

er, withdraw the high quality "kite mark" it provides the Home Office with reference to their statistics released over the course of the year.

In a statement from Tuesday, the Home Office claimed that fundamental changes to the decision-making process and boosting efficiency resulted in the highest annual number of "substantive" asylum decisions in a year since 2002. It cited the use of stepped up processing, deploying an additional 1,200 caseworkers, meeting the target to double the number of asylum caseworkers and tripling productivity to ensure more illegal migrants are returned to their country of origin quicker.

All cases in the so-called "legacy backlog" were said to have been reviewed, with 86,800 decisions made. In one

four-week period from November 20 to December 17, 2023, there were 20,481 initial asylum decisions made, this is more than the number of asylum decisions made in the entirety of 2021, the Home Office statement said.

Around 4,537 claims from the so-called legacy backlog still needed a decision but Sunak's spokesperson at 10 Downing Street said that since these had been reviewed, the government considers them as "cleared".

The government describes these as complex cases, typically involving "asylum seekers presenting as children - where age verification is taking place; those with serious medical issues; or those with suspected past convictions, where checks may reveal criminality that would bar asylum".

# UK junior docs' strike enters second day

London (PTI): The health service in England is facing its second day of strikes by junior doctors on Thursday as an Indian-origin medic, also a senior officer bearer of their union, urging the government to make a "credible" pay offer so the six-day industrial action can be called off.

With over 1.2 million appointments already rescheduled since industrial action began, Dr Vivek Trivedi, co-chair of the British Medical Association (BMA) Junior Doctors Committee, told the BBC that they are willing to negotiate to end the longest strike in the history of the National Health Service (NHS).

"We strike again today. Tag @BMA\_JuniorDocs in all your posts and we'll keep sharing!" the official X handle of the British Medical Association (BMA) Junior Doctors posted early Thursday morning along

with the hashtag #PayRestoration. The X post also provided a link which had guidance (for their units across the country) on strike action. Among the other things, the link to the website also has 'Our aims', which lists three main demands of the junior doctors in the NHS in England taking strike action in 2023 and 2024.

Apart from the demand to "achieve full pay restoration to reverse the steep decline in pay faced by junior doctors since 2008/9", the Junior Doctors also want the government to "agree on a mechanism with the Government to prevent any future declines against the cost of living and inflation" and "reform the DDRB (Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body) process so pay increases can be recommended independently and fairly to safeguard the recruitment and retention of junior doctors."

# Airstrike in Baghdad kills Iran-backed militia leader

AP ■ BAGHDAD

An airstrike on the logistical support headquarters of an Iran-backed militia in central Baghdad on Thursday killed a high-ranking militia commander, militia officials said. Thursday's strike comes amid mounting regional tensions fuelled by Israel-Hamas war and fears that it could spill over into surrounding countries.

The Popular Mobilization Force - a coalition of militias that is nominally under the control of the Iraqi military - announced in a statement that its deputy head of operations in Baghdad, Mushtaq Taleb al-Saidi, or "Abu Taqwa," had been killed "as a result of brutal American aggression."

It was not immediately clear who had carried out the strike. Officials with the US military and embassy in



Baghdad did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The strike killed two people and wounded five, according to two militia officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak publicly.

One of the officials said al-Saidi was driving into the garage of the headquarters affiliated with the al-Nujaba militia, one of the members of

the PMF, along with another militia official when the car was hit, killing both.

Heavy security was deployed around the location of the strike on Baghdad's Palestine Street, and Associated Press journalists were not allowed to approach the targeted building. Iraqi war planes could be seen flying overhead.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7, a group of Iranian-backed militias calling itself the Islamic Resistance in Iraq has carried out more than 100 attacks on bases housing US troops in Iraq and Syria.

The group has said the attacks are in retaliation for Washington's support of Israel in the war against Hamas that has killed more than 20,000 people in Gaza, and that they aim to push US forces out of Iraq.

# Extreme cold leaves many without power in Nordic countries

Copenhagen (AP): Extremely cold temperatures compounded by gale-force winds and snow wreaked havoc across the Nordic region on Thursday, leaving thousands without power while others braved the cold for hours stuck in their cars along clogged highways.

Heavy rains in Germany, France and the Netherlands again caused floods in regions that have seen persistent flooding in the last two weeks. One death was reported in France.

The deep freeze disrupted transportation throughout the Nordic region amid reports of traffic chaos following closures of sections of highways and major roads. Problems with rail service have also been reported.

Electricity was cut to some 4,000 homes in Arctic Sweden where temperatures plummeted to minus 38 degrees Celsius (minus 36.4 degrees Fahrenheit), according to Swedish public radio. In the southern part of the country, motorists were stuck in their cars or evacuated to a nearby sporting complex where they spent the night. In neighbouring Denmark, police urged motorists to avoid unnecessary trips as wind and snow battered the northern and western parts of the country. In Finnish Lapland, the municipality of Enontekiö, near the border with Norway and Sweden, recorded the country's lowest temperature this winter on Thursday (minus 44.5 degrees F).



In this image from video provided by the Clark County District Court, a defendant identified by court officials and records as Debra Redden is seen launching over the desk of Judge Mary Kay Holthus during his sentencing in a felony battery case on Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024 in Las Vegas.

# US judge attacked by defendant in courtroom

AP ■ LAS VEGAS

A Nevada judge was attacked on Wednesday by a defendant in a felony battery case who leaped over a defence table and the judge's bench, landing atop her and sparking a bloody brawl involving court officials and attorneys, officials and witnesses said. In a violent scene captured by courtroom video, Clark County District Judge Mary Kay Holthus fell back from her seat against a wall and suffered some injuries but was not hospitalised, courthouse officials said.

A courtroom marshal was also injured as he came to the judge's aid and was hospitalised for treatment of a bleeding gash on his forehead and a dislocated shoulder, according to the officials and witnesses. The attack occurred about 11 am at the Regional

Justice Centre in Las Vegas. The defendant, Debra Delone Redden, 30, was wrestled to the floor behind the judge's bench by several court and jail officers and courtroom staff members — including some who are seen throwing punches.

He was arrested and jailed at the Clark County Detention Centre, where records showed he faces multiple new felony charges, including battery on a protected person — referring to the judge and court officers.

"It happened so fast it was hard to know what to do," said Richard Scow, the chief county district attorney who prosecuted Redden on a case that stemmed from an arrest last year on allegations that Redden attacked a person with a baseball bat. Redden's defence attorney, Caesar Almase, did not

respond to later telephone and email messages seeking comment.

Redden was not in custody when he arrived at court on Wednesday. He wore a white shirt and dark pants as he stood next to Almase, asking the judge for leniency while describing himself as a person who never stops trying to do the right thing no matter how hard it is.

"I am not a rebellious person," he told the judge, later adding that he does not think he should be sent to prison. "But if it is appropriate for you then you have to do what you have to do."

As the judge made it clear she intended to put him behind bars, and the court marshal moved to handcuff him, Redden yelled expletives and charged forward — amid screams from people who had been sitting with

Redden in the courtroom audience.

Records showed that Redden, a Las Vegas resident, was evaluated and found mentally competent to stand trial before pleading guilty in November to a reduced charge of attempted battery causing substantial bodily harm. He previously served prison time in Nevada on a domestic battery conviction, state records show.

Holthus, a career prosecutor with more than 27 years of courthouse experience, was elected to the state court bench in 2018 and again in 2022.

In a statement, court spokeswoman Mary Ann Price said officials were "reviewing all our protocols and will do whatever is necessary to protect the judiciary, the public and our employees".

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
General public is hereby informed that I Anindya Roy S/o late Mrs Bithi Roy am filing application in L&DO for substitution of the property no. C-545, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi-110019 in the name of Anindya Roy, on the grounds of Death Certificate/only Legal Heir. If there are any objections/claims on the general public on this application, the same shall be communicated to L&DO with supporting documents through registered post or by visiting L&DO at Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi or through an email at ldo@nic.in, within 30 days of publication of this notice.  
Name : Anindya Roy  
Address : C-545, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi-110019  
Phone : 9354789447

**PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY e-TENDER CALL NOTICE**  
No. EM/PEP/01/2024  
No. EM/PEP-01/2024  
Date: 01/01/2024  
Name of the Work: Design, Engineering, Supply, Installation, Testing and Commissioning of Shore to Ship Power Supply Facility at Coal Berth-I and Coal Berth-II at Paradip Port Authority on Turnkey basis. Estimated Cost: Rs. 12,83,38,000/-. Last date & time of submission of bid : dt.28/01/2024 up to 1700 Hrs. Refer our website for details https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app.  
Sd/- Executive Engineer (E), PEP-I  
PPA/PR/76/2023-2024 dt.03.01.2024

**Baba Farid University of Health Sciences, Faridkot**  
Sadiq Road, Faridkot-151203 Ph.01639-256232, 256236

**E-Tender Notice**  
E-tenders is invited for the procurement of following Equipment of department of GSGMCH, Faridkot upto 19-01-2024  
1) Micro Instruments. 2) Elisa Reader Machine 3) Fractional Co2 Laser Machine. 4) Tilt Table Test Machine 5) Body composition Analyser. 6) Automated Blood Culture System Machine. 7) Elisa Washer Machine. Terms and Conditions can be downloaded from http://eproc.punjab.gov.in. The tenders will be accepted in E-Tender mode only. Bidder can also download tender notification and document from the University website i.e. www.bfuhs.ac.in  
Registrar  
00/12/168/2023/31155 Dated CHD - 14/2024

# Markets rebound after 2 days slump

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded nearly 1 per cent on Thursday after sliding for the past two sessions, propped up by bargain hunting in realty, power and financial stocks. The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 490.97 points or 0.69 per cent to settle at 71,847.57 points. During the day, it rallied 598.19 points or 0.83 per cent to 71,954.79 points. The Nifty climbed 141.25 points or 0.66 per cent to 21,658.60 points. "Market bounced back after the last two negative trading days led by strong monthly business updates of leading banks, emphasising robust credit growth. The Realty sector was the highest gainer in anticipation of robust demand in the residential category, which was supported by healthy housing loan disbursement data announced by banks," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. Bajaj Finance was the biggest gainer on the Sensex chart, rising 4.44 per cent, followed by NTPC, IndusInd Bank, Axis



Bank, Tata Motors, Nestle, Power Grid, Infosys, Bajaj Finserv and HDFC Bank. HCL Tech, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti and Hindustan Unilever were among the losers. In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge jumped 1.49 per cent, and smallcap index climbed 1.04 per cent. "The Nifty realty index has outperformed the broader market in 2023, marking a strong turn since the RBI paused on

rate hikes in March 2023. A potential rate cut in 2024, as global rates likely head down, will be positive for the sector. However, the strong rally in realty stocks so far has priced in some of these gains. "It is important to note that property sales have favoured premium & luxury housing in this upturn so far. A potential rate cut could help the affordable housing segment more. With talks of the government reviving its interest subvention scheme for affordable housing, there seems to be some more steam to the rally," Naveen KR, smallcase manager and Senior Director - Windmill Capital, said. Among the indices, realty zoomed 6.61 per cent, utilities jumped 2.55 per cent, telecommunication (2.09 per cent), services (1.68 per cent), financial services (1.30 per cent), banking (0.93 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.82 per cent).

of Retail Research, HDFC Securities. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the negative territory. European markets were trading in the green. The US markets ended lower on Wednesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.92 per cent to USD 78.97 a barrel. On the domestic macroeconomic front, India's manufacturing sector growth fell to an 18-month low in December amid a softer increase in factory orders and output despite minimal inflation. The HSBC India Manufacturing PMI survey, conducted by S&P Global, showed that there was a softer, albeit sharp, increase in factory orders and output, while business confidence towards the year-ahead outlook strengthened. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 666.34 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. On Wednesday, the BSE benchmark fell 535.88 points or 0.75 per cent to settle at 71,356.60 points, while the Nifty slipped 148.45 points or 0.69 per cent to 21,517.35 points.



## Jio adds 31.6 lakh mobile subscribers in October

### VIL loses 20.4 lakh: TRAI data

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
India's largest operator Reliance Jio continued its momentum in the telecom market adding 31.59 lakh mobile users while rival Bharti Airtel's subscriber gain came in at 3.52 lakh in October 2023, as per monthly subscriber data by TRAI. Troubled Vodafone Idea yielded further ground on the subscriber front, as it lost 20.44 lakh wireless users in October. Overall, the industry-wide 'active' subscriber base dipped by almost 14 lakh to 104.5 crore, the data by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) showed. "TRAI's Oct-23 subscriber data indicates a continuation of muted subscriber trends, with 0.8 million wireless net adds. Vi (Vodafone Idea) continued to lose wireless subscriber market share to Bharti and R-Jio," Kotak Institutional Equities said in a note. According to TRAI monthly data, the total wireless subscribers rose to 115 crore at the end of October, logging monthly growth of 0.07 per cent. With the addition of 31.59 lakh users, Jio's total wireless subscriber count climbed to 45.23 crore in October from 44.92 crore in September. Sunil Mittal-led Airtel's wireless subscriber gain of 3.52 lakh pushed up the telco's user tally to 37.81 crore in October. The subscriber losses of Vodafone Idea Ltd (VIL) dragged its wireless user base to 22.54 crore in October, the data revealed. Cash-strapped VIL has been battling fundraising woes and subscriber losses. Overall, the total broadband subscribers rose to 88.8 million at the end of October 2023, a month-on-month growth of 0.37 per cent. In the total broadband pie at the end of October 2023, Reliance Jio Infocomm accounted for 46.234 million users (46.2 crore), Bharti Airtel 25.826 million (25.8 crore), Vodafone Idea 12.568 million (12.5 crore), and BSNL 25.09 million (2.5 crore). "As on October 31, 2023, the top five wired broadband service providers were Reliance Jio Infocomm Ltd 9.97 million, Bharti Airtel 7.17 million, BSNL 3.75 million, Atria Convergence Technologies 2.21 million and Oneott Entertainment Limited 1.13 million," TRAI said. As far as wireless broadband services base goes, Reliance Jio Infocomm had 45.2 crore subscribers, Bharti Airtel 25.1 crore, Vodafone Idea 12.5 crore, and BSNL 2.1 crore users. Wireline subscribers increased to 3.1 crore at the end of October 2023.



## IGX sees 16 per cent rise in gas volume trade in 2023

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Indian Gas Exchange (IGX) on Thursday said volume of gas traded on the platform rose 16 per cent in 2023 as producers and consumers flocked to the exchange. IGX recorded 1.22 billion cubic meters or 3.3 million standard cubic meters per day of gas trade in 2023, it said in a statement. December volume at 67 million standard cubic meters or 2.2 million standard cubic meters per day was a 7 per cent decline month-on-month. "A total of 132 trades were executed during the month. The maximum number of trades were executed in daily contract, 61 trades; followed by fortnightly and monthly contracts of 27 and 18 trades, respectively," the statement said. The most active delivery point for free market gas was Dahej and the domestic ceiling price gas was traded at Gadimoga. Other trading delivery points were Hazira, Ankot, Suvali, Mhaskal, Bhad-



but & KG Basin. During the month, the exchange traded gas flows were 37,26,500 million British thermal unit or mmBtu (around 3 mmscmd). GIXI (Gas Index of India) for December 2023 was Rs 1,098 (USD 13.1 per mmBtu), lower by 3 per cent last month. IGX traded a total of 7,82,000 mmBtu domestic ceiling price gas during the month. In 2023, IGX traded 4,84,93,750 mmBtu (3.3 mmscmd), marking a 16 per cent increase on a year-on-year basis. A total of 1,424 trades were executed during the year, maximum number of trades

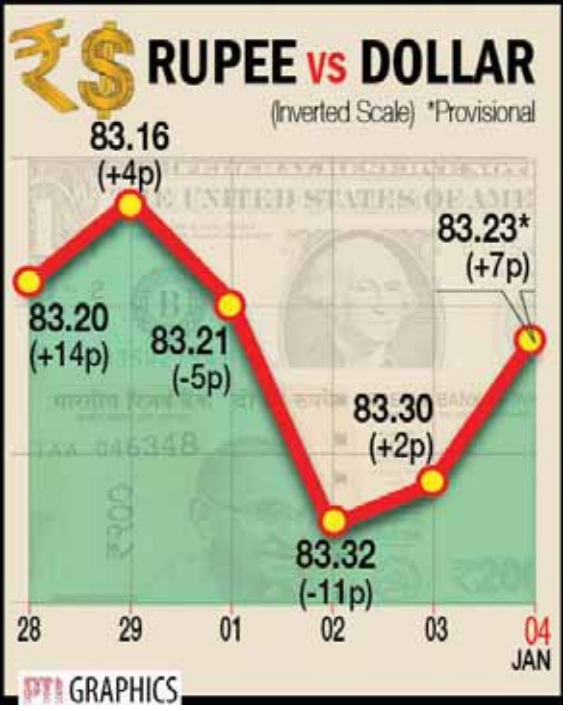
executed in daily contract followed by monthly, weekly and fortnightly contracts," the statement said. IGX offers delivery-based trade in six different contracts such as day-ahead, daily, weekday, weekly, fortnightly and monthly, under which the trade can be executed for six consecutive months. The gas trade takes place at multiple delivery points, such as - Dahej, Hazira, Ankot, Mhaskal, Bhadhbhut, Dabhol, KG Basin, Gadimoga, Suvali. It covers six regional gas hubs, namely, Western Hub, Southern Hub, Eastern Hub, Central Hub, Northern Hub, and North Eastern Hub across India. Established in 2020, IGX is India's first automated national-level gas exchange for physical delivery of natural gas. The exchange provides a neutral and transparent marketplace to multiple buyers and sellers to trade in the spot and forward gas contracts at designated physical hubs. IGX is an associate company of the Indian Energy Exchange Ltd.

## NHPC pledges to invest ₹4,000 crore in 750 MW Kuppa Hydro Storage Project

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
NHPC has inked an initial pact to invest Rs 4,000 crore in 750 MW Kuppa Pumped Hydro Storage Project at Chhota Udaipur in Gujarat. Taking a step towards clean and green energy, NHPC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Gujarat Power Corporation (GPCL) for investment in Kuppa Pumped Hydro Storage Project (750 MW) on January 3, 2024, a company statement said. According to the statement, the MoU was signed at an event organised at the Secretariat in Gandhinagar under the aegis of 'Vibrant Gujarat'. In the presence of Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, and state Energy Minister Kanubhai Desai, the MoU was signed by Arun Mahesh Babu, Managing Director, GPCL, and V. Srivastava, Executive Director, Renewable Energy and Green Hydrogen, NHPC, the statement said. As per the terms of the MoU, the NHPC shall invest an estimated Rs 4,000 crore in the proposed 750 MW Kuppa Pumped Hydro Storage Project at Chhota Udaipur, Gujarat. The implementation of this project will create significant employment opportunities and boost the local economy in the area, the statement said. The NHPC Ltd is India's leading hydropower company with a total installed capacity of 7,097.2 MW of renewable energy through its 25 power stations, including 1,520 MW through subsidiaries.

## Rupee rises 7 paise to close at 83.23 against US dollar

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
The rupee appreciated 7 paise to close at 83.23 against the US dollar on Thursday, helped by a bullish trend in domestic equities and weakness of the American currency in the overseas market. However, rising crude oil prices capped sharp gains for the local unit, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened flat at 83.30 against the greenback. The rupee oscillated between an intra-day low of 83.32 and a high of 83.21 against the greenback and finally settled at 83.23 against the dollar, higher by 7 paise from its previous close. The rupee gained for the second day in a row following a weaker greenback after mixed signals from the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting minutes. "Better-than-expected service PMI number pushed the euro higher versus the US dollar. The rupee also accumulated the gain along with other Asian currencies after Eurozone data. However, the local unit trimmed the afternoon gains amid higher crude oil



prices and importers' dollar demand," Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said, adding that "Spot USD/INR is expected to consolidate between 83.10 and 83.50". Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.32 per cent lower at 102.16. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, advanced 1.05 per cent to USD 79.07 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex surged 490.97 points, or 0.69 per cent, to settle at 71,847.57 points. The Nifty advanced 141.25 points, or 0.66 per cent, to 21,658.60 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Wednesday as they sold shares worth Rs 666.34 crore, according to exchange data. On the domestic macroeconomic front, India's manufacturing sector growth fell to an 18-month low in December amid a softer increase in factory orders and output despite minimal inflation. The HSBC India Manufacturing PMI survey, conducted by S&P Global, showed that there was a softer, albeit sharp, increase in factory orders and output, while business confidence towards the year-ahead outlook strengthened.

## PLI schemes for new sectors not being considered at present: DPIIT Secretary

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The government will focus on the existing PLI schemes for 14 sectors and for the time being is not considering to include new sectors like toys in the programme, a top official said on Thursday. Secretary in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) Rajesh Kumar Singh said the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for 14 sectors such as pharma, white goods, and electronics are doing good. "Currently we are focused on getting these 14 PLIs. All are up and running in a good way. So for the time being, the new PLIs are not being considered and we will focus on ensuring that these existing schemes get implemented well and thereafter we will see," Singh told reporters here. The government has earlier planned to extend the scheme for new sectors such as leather, toys, and new-age e-bikes to utilise the remaining amount earmarked for the 14 sectors.



The PLI scheme was announced in 2021 for 14 sectors such as telecommunication, white goods, textiles, manufacturing of medical devices, automobiles, speciality steel, food products, high-efficiency solar PV modules, advanced chemistry cell battery, drones, and pharma with an outlay of Rs 1.97 lakh crore. Singh also said the department is in the process of undertaking a third party assessment of the PLI scheme in white goods (AC and LED lights). The study is commissioned to the Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management (AJNIFM). Joint Secretary in the DPIIT Sanjiv said the institute will be looking at the scheme from all angles, including "how the scheme is working, and whether there is a need for any course correction or tweaking". The secretary further said that the department is doing this exercise for other initiatives also such as industrial corridors. "In all of them, the intent is to get the real feedback on how these interventions have helped and what are the quantifiable outcomes that have come out," Singh said.

## Gold slumps ₹420; silver plummets ₹1,900

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Gold price slumped Rs 420 to Rs 63,550 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid weak cues in the international markets, according to HDFC Securities. In the previous trade, the precious metal had settled at Rs 63,970 per 10 grams. Silver also plummeted Rs 1,900 to Rs 76,900 per kilogram, while it had closed at Rs 78,800 per kg in the previous close. "Gold edged lower on Thursday, with spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets trading at Rs 63,550/10 grams, down by Rs 420 following bearish trends in the overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the global markets, gold and silver were quoting lower at USD



2,042 per ounce and USD 23.05 per ounce, respectively. Gandhi said that Comex gold prices fell to a two-week low as uncertainty around the US Federal Reserve's plan to reduce interest rates contributed to prevailing risk-off sentiment among traders. There is uncertainty on interest rate cut timeframe after the release of the minutes of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting held last month.

## 'Housing sales up 33 per cent in top 8 cities'

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
India's top eight residential markets continued their bull run in 2023 with sales rising 33 per cent to nearly 4.11 lakh units while new supply growing 20 per cent to record 5.17 lakh units, according to PropTiger. Housing brokerage firm PropTiger, which is part of REA India that owns Housing.Com, on Thursday released its report 'Real Insight'. In 2023, housing sales grew 33 per cent to 4,10,791 units across eight major cities as against 3,08,942 units in the previous year, driven by strong consumer sentiments towards home purchases. This is the highest sales since 2013, which saw a record sales of 4,50,361 units, the consultant said. New home launches were up 20 per cent to 5,17,071 units from 4,31,510 units during the peri-



od under review. "Despite initial challenges, such as rising interest rates, escalating input costs, and surging real estate prices amid global uncertainties, the industry demonstrated exceptional resilience. The pent-up demand following the pandemic served as a key driver, propelling the property market to unprecedented levels," Vikas Wadhawan, Group CFO of REA India, said. The RBI's decision to pause rate hikes played a crucial role in boosting buyer confidence, he said. According to sales data for 2023 compared to the previous year, housing sales in Mumbai rose 29 per cent to 1,41,480 units from 1,09,677 units. New supply grew 8 per cent to 1,78,684 units from 1,65,634 units. Pune saw a 33 per cent growth in sales to 82,696 units from 62,029 units. New supply in the city rose 40 per cent to 1,05,698 units from 75,309 units. Housing sales in Ahmedabad were 51 per cent higher at 41,327 units from 27,314 units. New supply rose 71 per cent to 55,877 units from 32,663 units. Bengaluru saw a 44 per cent growth in sales to 44,002 units from 30,467 units. New supply in the IT city was up 14 per cent to 47,965 units from 42,215

## Power Finance Corporation signs MoU

**PNS ■ GANDHINAGAR**  
Power Finance Corporation Ltd (PFC), a Maharatna CPSE and the country's leading NBFC in the power sector, signed an MoU with the Government of Gujarat (GoG) on January 3. The MoU has been signed by Parminder Chopra, CMD PFC and Jai Prakash Shrivhare, IAS, MD (GUVNL) in the presence of Bhupendra Patel, Chief Minister of Gujarat; Rushikesh Patel, Minister of Health & Family Welfare, Higher & Technical Education, Law & Justice, Government of Gujarat; Raj Kumar IAS, Chief Secretary, Government of Gujarat; SJ Haider, IAS, Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Gujarat and other officials. In Chennai, sales increased 5 per cent to 14,836 units from 14,097 units. New supply rose 74 per cent to 16,153 units from 9,310 units. Delhi-NCR witnessed an 11 per cent rise in sales to 21,364 units from 19,240 units. Launches of new homes moved 34 per cent up to 20,572 units from 15,382 units. Housing sales in Hyderabad grew 49 per cent to 52,571 units from 35,372 units. New supply was down 7 per cent to 76,819 units from 82,801 units. In Kolkata, sales climbed 16 per cent to 12,515 units from 10,746 units. New supply increased significantly to 87 per cent to 15,303 units from 8,196 units. In the report, Delhi-NCR includes Gurugram, Noida, Greater Noida, Ghaziabad and Faridabad. Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) includes Mumbai, Navi Mumbai & Thane.

# U MUMBA AIMS TO MAINTAIN DOMINANT RUN IN PKL SEASON 10

PTI ■ MUMBAI

An on-song U Mumba will look to maintain their dominant run in the Pro Kabaddi League season 10 with the competition returning to the city after a gap of four years. The Mumbai leg, to be held from January 5-10 of the ongoing season, will be organised here at the National Sports Club of India comprising 11 matches, four of which the home team U Mumba will play. Having recorded four consecutive wins, U Mumba are on a roll as they eye a spot in the playoffs. Rinku, debutant Sombir and vice-captain Mahender Singh have excelled as top defenders while the 19-year-old Iranian Amirmohammad Zafardanesh has made a strong mark in the competition with 64 raid points so far. "Playing before the fans at home will boost the side to deliver their 'A' game. To me, every



game whether home or away is equally important, but we hope to make use of the home advantage with our fans cheering us on during the Mumbai leg," U Mumba coach Gholamreza Mazandarani said during an event here on Thursday.

"If you analyse the seven matches we have played, the one we could not win, went down to the wire. The last few games have seen tremendous improvement in terms of strategy under pressure," he added. U Mumba, which also became

the first team in the competition to have recorded 100 wins, will take on Bengaluru Bulls on Friday, followed by matches against Jaipur Pink Panthers on January 6, Dabang Delhi KC on January 8 and Haryana Steelers on January 10.

## BRISBANE INTERNATIONAL

# Azarenka, Ostapenko advance to a quarterfinal showdown

AP ■ BRISBANE

Victoria Azarenka is in familiar territory after reaching the quarterfinals in Brisbane, where she won her first WTA title in 2009 when the tournament was staged for the first time. The 34-year-old Azarenka beat Clara Burel of France 7-5, 6-2 on Thursday to reach the quarterfinals for the fifth time in six trips to the key Australian Open tune-up event. The former No. 1-ranked Azarenka and two-time Australian Open champion — in 2012 and 2013 — will next face third-seeded Jelena Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open champion who beat big-serving three-time Brisbane International winner Karolina Pliskova 6-2, 4-6, 6-3. Pliskova went into the match on a 10-match winning streak in Brisbane and was coming off a second-round win over another



former No. 1, Naomi Osaka, but was often on the back foot with Ostapenko hitting 50 winners. Azarenka opened Day 5 on Pat Rafter Arena and quickly took a 4-1 lead before withstanding a comeback from the No. 56-ranked Burel. She took an early break in the second set and finished off in 92 minutes. "I felt that whenever I needed, I was able to step up my game," Azarenka said.

The top two seeds were in action later Thursday. Azarenka's compatriot, Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka, was playing a night match against Zhu Lin. No. 2-seeded Elena Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion, was scheduled to meet No. 13 Elise Mertens. In the men's draw, 2017 champion Grigor Dimitrov needed just over an hour to beat Daniel Altmaier 6-1, 6-2. Second-seed

ed Dimitrov hit 20 winners, made just five unforced errors and didn't face a break point until he was serving for the match, when he rallied from 15-40 down and had to save three. "I was moving really well early on. I was reading the ball," he said. "So I did a lot of good things, right. Very happy with that." Dimitrov will next play Australian wild-card entry Rinky Hijikata, who beat Czech qualifier Tomas Machac 5-7, 6-2, 7-6 (4). Rafael Nadal, a 22-time major winner who is playing on a wild card in Brisbane after spending 12 months on the sidelines recovering from a hip injury, was taking on local Jason Kubler in a night match. The winner of that match will advance to a quarterfinal against Jordan Thompson, who got a walkover when fourth-seeded Ugo Humbert withdrew from their second-round match because of illness.

# McIlroy eases off criticism of LIV Golf



Says Rahm defection was a smart business move

AP ■ KAPALUA

Rory McIlroy has gone from being the harshest critic of LIV Golf to extending an olive branch. He said on a British soccer podcast Wednesday he was too judgmental about players defecting and has accepted that LIV is "part of our sport now." He referred to Jon Rahm's decision to join LIV Golf last month as a "smart business move." McIlroy also suggested he helped instigate discussions with the PGA Tour and the Saudi backers of LIV Golf. He said he met with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the governor of the Public Investment Fund, at the end of 2022 in Dubai. "When I got back to America, I was on the board of the PGA Tour and I said to the guys, 'Someone has got to go talk to this guy.' Then there was a plan put in place that one of the board members would try to develop a relationship with him," McIlroy said. He said on the "Stick to Football" podcast the surprise was how quickly a deal came together. Board member Jimmy Dunne and chairman Ed Herlihy arranged the first meeting after the Masters in April. The PGA Tour and PIF announced the agreement for a commercial deal on June 6. The podcast was posted a day before the PGA Tour begins a new year that includes eight "signature events" with limited fields and \$20 million purses, a model that McIlroy helped orchestrate over the last year. He resigned from the policy board in November, saying it was taking up too much of his time. The framework agree-

ment missed its Dec. 31 deadline to get finalized, and now the PGA Tour also is negotiating with a private group of U.S. Investors. McIlroy referred to early defections to LIV as players wanting to take the easy way out, and said that players were being duplicitous for pledging support and then taking the Saudi cash. He had said no peace could be made as long as Greg Norman was in charge, and as recently as July said he "hates" LIV and hoped it went away. "If LIV Golf was the last place to play golf on Earth, I would retire. That's how I feel about it," he said in July. His tone began to soften when Rahm, the Masters champion, became arguably the biggest name to leave, because the 29-year-old Spaniard is entering the peak of his career. "I think, at this point, I was maybe a little judgmental of the guys who went to LIV Golf at the start, and I think it was a bit of a mistake on my part because I now realize that not everyone is in my position or in Tiger Woods' position," McIlroy said on the podcast. "We all turn professional to make a living playing the sports that we do, and I think that's what I realized over the last two years. I can't judge people for making that decision." McIlroy said his biggest beef is players leaving and speaking poorly about the PGA Tour or European tour because that's what gave players their start in the game. He also said the tour's deal announced June 6 legitimized what LIV is trying to do and "made it easier for guys to jump."

# Nothing is impossible: Italy captain Puglisi

PTI ■ RANCHI

Italy women's team captain Sara Puglisi said on Thursday that her side is high on confidence while gearing up for a "tough" challenge against higher-ranked teams in the FIH Hockey Olympic qualifiers scheduled to begin here on January 13. The Italian side will begin its campaign on January 13 against New Zealand, which will be the first meeting between the two teams in seven years. World No. 19 Italy are grouped in Pool B and will take on the USA on January 14, and then play their final Pool game against India on January 16. "We know it will be a tough competition. But everything is open and nothing is impossible. We will do what we need to get the results in our favour," said Puglisi after Italy arrived here. The other teams in the fray include Olympic silver medallists Germany, former Asian Games Champions Japan, Chile and the Czech Republic in Pool A. The top three teams from the tournament will qualify for the Paris Olympic Games. Opening up on the team's preparations, Puglisi said: "We have had a few months of preparations together. We have worked a lot. We have come here and we will finish our final steps of training this week and then we will start the tournament together. It is quite exciting." Italy are the second team to have arrived to Ranchi after hosts India. "We wanted to finish our preparations here so that we get used to the weather and the turf - hence we decided to come early," said Puglisi in a HI release. While Italy have achieved several distinctions in women's hockey over the years, including a gold



medal at the 2013 EuroHockey Nations Championship II, they are yet to earn an Olympic berth. "It has been a long time since we have been waiting to go to the Olympics. So, if we are able to qualify, we will be over the moon. It's a dream for everyone," the skipper said. Italy chief coach Andres Mondo also backed his team despite the lack of experience. "We are a very new and young team, and you could see we are using different formations. At the moment, we are ranked at 19. But this team, the quality of players that we have, we do not feel we are number 19," he signed off.

# Coco through to quarterfinals at Auckland Tennis Classic



AP ■ AUCKLAND

U.S. Open champion Coco Gauff overcame hard-hitting Czech teenager Barbara Fruhvirtova 6-3, 6-0 on Thursday to extend her winning the start to the year and the defense of her title at the Auckland Tennis Classic. The 16-year-old Fruhvirtova came out hitting harder than any player at the tournament so far: generating enormous power off both hands. She troubled Gauff at first and broke the American's serve to love in the third game of the first set. Gauff immediately broke back in a game of 14 points to level the set at 2-2. After saving a break point in her next service game, Gauff broke again to lead 4-2. She served for the first set at 5-3 and had to save a break point before clinching the set in 40

minutes. Fruhvirtova tested Gauff with more high top-spin but Gauff came through and finished the set with an ace. Gauff immediately broke Fruhvirtova in the first game of the second set as she began to find more depth in her returns. She also broke in third and fifth games and held her serve with confidence, highlighting her second service game with a 190 kph (118 mph) ace. Gauff had to save two break points as she served for the match at 5-0 but managed to allay any threat with her sixth ace. "I thought I played well," Gauff said. "She started really well and I was able to raise my level. I thought I served and I did better on my returns." Fruhvirtova came into the match with a WTA ranking of 117. "I thought she played a good match," Gauff said. "I've known her since she was 10 years old. We used to be in France, training at the same academy. Her and her sister (Brenda), we grew up playing or training beside each other and it's great to see her on tour. I'm sure she's going to go even further." Gauff now will play eighth-seeded Varvara Gracheva of France in the quarterfinals on Friday. Gracheva beat Lulu Sun of Switzerland 6-3, 6-4.



# Barranquilla removed as host of 2027 Pan American Games

AP ■ BUENOS AIRES

The Colombian city of Barranquilla was stripped on Wednesday of its rights to host the next edition of the Pan American Games in 2027. Panam Sports, the executive body that organizes the largest multi-sports event in the Americas, said in a statement it made the decision after the city failed once more to comply with its contractual obligations. "The decision was made after repeated non-compliance with the current contract," Panam Sports said in a statement without giving more details about the next steps to pick a host. "Due to no response after we reached another deadline, the executive committee of Panam Sports ... Has made the irrevocable decision to strip the city of its rights to host the continental event in 2027." The latest edition of the Pan American Games was held in Santiago, Chile, between Oct. 22 and Nov. 5, during which Panam Sports gave Colombia a new deadline to comply with its obligations until January. Alejandro Char, the mayor of Barranquilla, told journalists after the decision he is still hopeful the event will take place in his city, and urged Colombia's President Gustavo Petro to intervene. Char, who took office only days ago, said the city does have the financial resources to organize the event. Brazil's metropolis of Sao Paulo is for now the sole bidder to host the 2031 edition of the Pan American Games. Local media has mentioned it could step up to offer to replace Barranquilla four years in advance, which its city hall did not confirm after a request from The Associated Press.

# Scheffler voted as PGA Tour player of year

AP ■ KAPALUA

Scottie Scheffler has been voted PGA Tour player of the year over Masters champion Jon Rahm, a player vote that raises questions of whether Rahm was penalized for defecting to LIV Golf. Scheffler is the first back-to-back winner since Tiger Woods in 2006-07. The world's No. 1 player had the best statistical season since Woods by leading the tour in all the important categories from the tee to the green, along with scoring. He had the seventh-lowest adjusted scoring average (68.63) in PGA Tour history - the top six belong to Woods - and finished out of the top 10 only six times in 23 tournaments from a season that began in September 2022. At one point, Scheffler went 18 consecutive starts

where his worst finish was 12th. "Anything that you receive voted on by your peers is very special to me and being able to go home with this trophy two years in a row now is very special," Scheffler said. "I think the body of work I put in last year ... I was very proud of that consistency." What he lacked, compared with Rahm, was winning. Scheffler won The Players Championship and the Phoenix Open. Rahm, however, won four times, including his second major when he captured the Masters. The PGA Tour said voting took place from Dec. 1 through Dec. 15. Rahm, who for 18 months had been an ardent supporter of the tour, donned a LIV letterman's jacket and announced he was joining the Saudi-funded rival league on Dec. 7. The tour said Scheffler received 38% of the vote in what was



believed to be a tight race. It did not disclose the voting percentage received by Rahm, FedEx Cup champion Viktor Hovland, U.S. Open champion Wyndham Clark or Rory McIlroy. The tour previously did not release any vote totals for the award. Now it withholds what percentage of players voted. In another close race, Eric Cole was voted rookie of the year

over Ludvig Aberg of Sweden. The award comes 50 years after Cole's mother, Laura Baugh, was the LPGA rookie of the year. Cole was the only player to reach the second round of the FedEx Cup playoffs. A longtime player in golf's minor leagues, he made \$5 million in his first year on tour. Scheffler had hinted in the Bahamas last month that his

vote might go toward Rahm because while consistency is key, "we play this game to win." Asked if he was surprised to win, Scheffler said it all depended on what mattered the most to players who voted. "I guess this year they really kind of appreciated my consistency," Scheffler said. "The way I played the entire year - I think I maybe only had one or two starts that I would categorize as not great, but other than that I had a lot of starts where I just played really solid golf. And to do that for an entire season out here I think is very difficult." Cole also was a steady hand, especially for someone who had played only two regular PGA Tour events before finally getting a card. At age 35, he is the oldest rookie of the year since Todd Hamilton in 2004.

AP ■ MADRID

# Madrid, Girona extend impressive runs

Real Madrid and Girona extended their impressive runs to reach the halfway point of the Spanish league season at the top of the standings. Both teams won on Wednesday to reach 48 points after 19 games, with third-place Atletico Madrid 10 points back. Real Madrid was ahead of Girona on a tiebreaker. Barcelona can move within seven points of the leaders if it wins at Las Palmas on Thursday. Madrid edged Mallorca 1-0 at home with a late goal by Antonio Rudiger in a match that marked the return of Vinicius Junior from injury. Girona, the surprise team in Spanish soccer this season, defeated Atletico 4-3 with a winner by Ivan Martin in stoppage time. Alvaro Morata scored a hat trick for Atletico, while Antoine

Griezmann was held scoreless to remain tied with Luis Aragonés as the club's all-time top scorer with 173 goals. **THRILLER IN GIRONA:** Faced with another difficult challenge, Girona rose to the occasion yet again, overcoming Diego Simeone's Atletico to show it can be considered a genuine title contender. Martin scored the winning goal one minute into stoppage time, firing a left-footed shot into the top corner after fending off a series of Atletico defenders inside the area. The hosts led 3-1 until Morata capped his hat trick with an equalizer in the 54th. Valery Fernandez, Savinho and Daley Blind scored Girona's other goals at Montilivi Stadium. The team coached by Michel has

the league's best attack with 46 goals, four more than Madrid's. Girona has 15 wins, three draws and a lone loss coming against Madrid. It went on a 13-match unbeaten streak in all competitions since that 3-0 defeat to Madrid at home in September. Last month, it earned a convincing 4-2 win at defending champion Barcelona. "We will keep going match by match," Martin said. "We are close to securing a European place, but we have to keep this momentum and try to win as many points as possible. Then at the end of the season we'll see where we are." **MADRID KEEPS PUSHING:** Vinicius was back in action after an absence of nearly two months because of a muscle



injury, but the Spanish powerhouse struggled in attack until Rudiger broke the deadlock

with a header into the top corner after a well-placed corner kick taken by Luka Modric in

the 78th minute. "I'm very happy because it was an important goal and an impor-

tant three points for us," Rudiger said. The result extended Madrid's unbeaten streak to 18 matches in all competitions, since a 3-1 league loss at Atletico in September. That was the team's lone loss in a season in which it has won 21 matches and drawn three. Mallorca, which twice hit the woodwork at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium, stayed in 14th place, four points from the relegation zone. The team coached by Mexican manager Javier Aguirre had won two of its last three league matches - against Sevilla and Osasuna. Vinicius hadn't played since November, when he injured a leg muscle while playing a World Cup qualifier with Brazil. He had a couple of clear chances on

Wednesday but didn't capitalize on them. Madrid also had the return of defender Dani Carvajal, but coach Carlo Ancelotti remained without several key players because of long-term knee injuries, including goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and defenders David Alaba and Eder Militao. **CELTA WINS:** Celta Vigo defeated Real Betis 2-1 at home with a winner by Swedish teenager Williot Swedberg six minutes into stoppage time. The result took Celta out of the relegation zone. The Vigo team has won two of its last three league matches after enduring a 12-game winless run in the competition. Real Betis, winless in five consecutive matches in all competitions, stayed in seventh place. In a match between two teams in the relegation zone, 19th-place Granada defeated 18th-place Cadiz 2-0 at home.

# Bumrah bamboozles Proteas

## INDIA RECORD HISTORIC VICTORY IN CAPE TOWN

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Jasprit Bumrah, India's price-less fast bowling mean machine, produced a hostile spell to guide India to a series-levelling seven-wicket victory against South Africa in the shortest game ever played in Test history.

Bumrah (6/61 in 13.5 overs), the master practitioner of fast bowling, knocked the stuffing out of South Africa's middle-order in a menacing morning spell through Aiden Markram (106 off 103 balls) fought like a lone ranger on a burning deck to take South Africa to 176 in 36.5 overs at stroke of lunch on day two.

A target of 79 even on the toughest of tracks wasn't exactly a tall order and young Yashasvi Jaiswal (28) threw his bat around before skipper Rohit Sharma (16 not out) completed the formalities in the company of Shreyas Iyer (4 not out off 6) in just 12 overs.

This was India's first victory at Newlands in seven attempts and one that would be remembered for the hostility exhibited by two Indian fast bowlers - Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj, who produced a career-best six-wicket haul to bowl out South Africa for 55 in the first innings. The series-levelling win gave Rohit the bragging rights of being only the second skipper



after Mahendra Singh Dhoni (2010-11) to draw a series in the 'Rainbow Nation'.

However, South Africa remains an unconquered territory for India, who have not been able to win a Test series in the country. It was the shortest Test match ever in terms of overs bowled, bettering the previous best that involved Australia and South Africa at the MCG way back in 1932.

A total of 106.2 overs were bowled in this match while

109.2 overs were bowled in that 1932-match which Australia won. Eerily, South Africa's first innings had lasted for 23.2 overs, just like this game.

It would be surprising if the Newlands Stadium track doesn't receive a "Below Average" rating from ICC match referee Chris Broad. In fact, South African batting consultant and former national skipper Ashwell Prince had termed it as the "fastest Day 1 track" he has even seen at this venue but what worried him was the "inconsistent bounce" on offer.

As a venue, Newlands' host body West Province Cricket Association is bleeding financially and one and a half day game is basically a loss making event for it.

Skipper Rohit won't mind winning his first Test as a skipper in a SENA country but more importantly, the decisions he took was a reflection of his leadership acumen. Playing Mukesh Kumar (4 wickets) in place of Shardul Thakur

was a good move and also making the bowlers realise the ideal length to bowl after the goop up in Centurion.

The way Bumrah and Siraj read the pitch in the first essay was an example how the current generation doesn't throw in the towel after a debilitating defeat. On Thursday, the ball didn't fly off the surface as much as it did on the opening day but with enough juice available to get movement off the surface, Bumrah from his back of length

approach in the first essay reverted to a more traditional fuller length deliveries to set the alarm bells ringing for the Proteas.

This was his ninth five-wicket haul in Test cricket.

Sensing that he could soon run out of partners once David Bedingham (11) edged one behind the stumps and Kyle Verreynne misjudged the length while going for an unnecessary pull-shot, Markram started attacking the inexperienced Mukesh Kumar (2/56 in 10 overs) and the ever-profligate Prasad Krishna (1/27 in 4 overs).

Markram, found it easy to muscle the balls through the gaps as he hit 17 fours and two mighty sixes off Prasad. In the morning, a vintage Bumrah was in full bloom on a tailor-made surface. Starting at 62 for 3, South Africa quickly lost their middle-order to be 111 for 7 before Markram took charge in a 51-run stand with Kagiso Rabada where he launched into every Indian bowler. It finally took first innings hero Siraj (1/31) to induce a mistimed heave from Markram, ensuring the lead did not cross 100-run mark.

**Brief Scores:** South Africa: 55 and 176 all out in 36.5 overs (Aiden Markram 106; Jasprit Bumrah 6/61). India: 153 all out and 80/3 in 12 overs (Yashasvi Jaiswal 28).



## List of Test matches ending in two days

India's seven-wicket win over South Africa in the second Test at Cape Town on Thursday was the 25th instance when a Test match ended inside two days, dating back to 1882.

Here's the complete list of Tests that ended within two days previously.

● **England vs Australia, Oval, 1882**

It was the ninth Test match in history. Australia were bundled out for 63 but managed to limit England to 101 in their first innings with Fred 'Demon' Spofforth taking seven wickets. The Aussies could only muster 122 with Hugh Massie scoring a 55.

England were again humbled by 'Demon' despite WG Grace's 32. Spofforth took seven for 44 as Englishmen were ousted for 77 and conceded a seven-run defeat.

● **England vs Australia, Lord's, 1888**

Australia made 116 and 60 in two innings and then shot out England for 53 and 62 at the 'Home of Cricket' to achieve a 61-run victory.

● **England vs Australia, Oval, 1888**

This time, England managed to turn the tables on Australia with an innings and 137-run win inside two days. Australia were bowled out for 80 and 100 while the hosts piled 317 in their lone innings.

● **England vs Australia, Manchester, 1888**

Batting first, England made 172 with WG Grace top-scoring with a 38 and Australia failed to touch 100 in both their innings, getting dismissed for 81 and 70 to fall to an innings and 21-run defeat.

● **South Africa vs England, Port Elizabeth, 1889**

Cricket finally reached a new shore apart from England and Australia. At Port Elizabeth, SA made 84 and 129 and England replied with 148 and 67 for 2 for an eight-wicket victory.

● **South Africa vs England, Cape Town, 1889**

The second match of the series too ended inside two days. England batted first and only once making 292 with Bobby Abel striking a 120. Johnny Briggs shattered Proteas with figures of 7 for 17 and 8 for 11 as the hosts were fired out for 47 and 43 in England's innings and 202-run win.

● **England vs Australia, Oval, 1890**

Aussies made 92 and 102 and England made 100 and 95 for eight to scrape home by two wickets in two days.

● **South Africa vs England, Port Elizabeth, 1896**

England made 185 and 226 and then skittled SA for 93 and 30 as fast bowler George Lohmann had astonishing figures of eight for seven off 9.4 overs. England won by 288 runs.

● **South Africa vs England, Cape Town, 1896**

Arthur Hill made 124 as England replied to SA's first innings total of 115 with 265. The tourists then curtailed SA's second innings for 117 to celebrate an innings and 33-run victory.

● **Australia vs South Africa, Manchester, 1912**

Australia made 448 in their lone innings during a match in the triangular Test series, also involving England. The Aussies then bundled out SA for 265 and 95 to win the match by and innings and 88 runs.

● **England vs South Africa, Oval, 1912**

In the next match of the triangular series, SA were ousted for 95 in their first innings with Sydney Barnes and Frank Woolley taking five wickets

apiece. Legendary Jack Hobbs made 68 in England's 176. Barnes took 8 for 29 as SA were dismissed for 93 and England made 14 for no loss to win the match by 10 wickets.

● **England vs Australia, Nottingham, 1921**

England were shot out for 112 and 147 while the Australians made 232 and 30 for no loss to register a 10-wicket win.

● **Australia vs West Indies, Melbourne, 1931**

Sir Don Bradman made 152 as the Aussies replied to West Indies' first innings 99 with 328 for 8 declared. West Indies were dismissed for 107 in their second essay as the home side won by an innings and 122 runs.

● **South Africa vs Australia, Johannesburg, 1936**

SA were all out for 157 and the Aussies made 439 in their first innings with Jack Fingleton, who later became a well-known writer, making 108. SA were bundled out for 98 as leg-spinner Clarrie Grimmett took 7 for 40. The visitors won by an innings and 184 runs.

● **New Zealand vs Australia, Wellington, 1946**

The Kiwis were shot out for 42 and 54 and the Aussies made 199 for 8 declared to record an innings and 103-run win.

● **England vs West Indies, Leeds, 2000**

England replied to West Indies' first innings 172 with 272 of their own. They then bundled out the Caribbeans for 61 as Andy Caddick and Darren Gough took nine wickets between them. England won by an innings and 39 runs.

● **Australia vs Pakistan, Sharjah, 2002**

Legendary Shane Warne took eight wickets in both the innings as Pakistan were all out for 59 and 53. Australia won by an innings and 198 runs as they made 319 in their lone innings with Matthew Hayden making 119.

● **South Africa vs Zimbabwe, Cape Town, 2005**

SA bowled out their neighbours for 54 and 265 while making 340 for three declared for an innings and 21-run victory.

● **Zimbabwe vs New Zealand, Harare, 2005**

Hundreds by Brendon McCullum and Daniel Vettori spurred the Kiwis to 452 for 9 declared and then they bowled out the African side for 59 and 99 for an innings and 294-run victory.

● **South Africa vs Zimbabwe, Port Elizabeth 2017**

Batting first, SA made 309 for 9 declared. They then skittled Zimbabwe for 68 and 121, enough for an innings and 120-run win.

● **India vs Afghanistan, Bengaluru, 2018**

India, under Ajinkya Rahane, made 474 with openers M Vijay and Shikhar Dhawan striking centuries. Afghanistan made 109 and 103 to slide to an innings and 262-run defeat.

● **India vs England, Ahmedabad, 2021**

England made 112 and 81 and India replied with 145 and 49 for no loss on a track that turned square from first ball to register a 10-wicket win.

● **Afghanistan vs Zimbabwe, Abu Dhabi, 2021**

Zimbabwe bowled out the Afghans for 131 and 135 before making 250 and 17 for no loss of their own for a 10-wicket victory.

● **Australia vs South Africa, Brisbane, 2022**

South Africa were humbled for 152 and 99 in two innings at the Gabba. The Aussies made 218 and 35 for 4 for a six-wicket win.



## Women Deaf Premier League T10 meet from January 8, 11

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Six teams will vie for top honours in the inaugural T10 Women's Deaf Premier League competition here from January 8-11.

The teams taking part in the 12-match competition are Punjab Lions, UP Warriorz, Mumbai Stars, Delhi Bulls, Hyderabad Eagles and Bangalore Badshahs, the Indian Deaf Cricket Association announced.

The winners will receive a prize money of Rs 1,00,000, while the runners-up will get Rs 50,000. The best individual performers will also be given cash rewards.

## 'Australia women will look to be ruthless against India in T20I series'

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI

Being ruthless when on top has driven this Australia Women's team to remain dominant against India, a trait that the visitors will look to sustain in the three-match T20I series, said leg-spinner Georgia Wareham here on Thursday.

Having never lost a bilateral ODI series to India, Australia enjoy a 23-6 record in 31 T20Is against their opponents with one tied game and the remaining one producing no result.

The Aussies bounced back from a crushing defeat in the one-off Test to win the three-match ODI series 3-0.

"We speak about that a lot in our meetings (about) being ruthless - when we're on top - we like to keep doing that

and not let it slip," Wareham told the reporters on the eve of the first T20I at the DY Patil Stadium.

"If we get the opportunity to be in that position again, we're gonna keep on trying to be as ruthless as possible," she added.

Wareham also hoped Australia would be able to carry momentum from the ODI series into the shortest format.

"India, being such great competition, (it is a) really good practice, but at the same time, we still want to win over these games. Coming off of three wins in the ODIs, we will take a little bit of momentum from that," she said.

Wareham, like her teammates including captain Alyssa Healy, mentioned about India being a challenge and she



stressed that the way Harmanpreet Kaur's team plays is exciting.

"T20 cricket is, it is ruthlessly - it's that word again - but it comes down to the day. Anyone can win any game. It just takes a couple of players to have a really good day out there," she said.

the top of the order for the bowlers, and the variety that they have," she said. Wareham added: "It's really a good challenge to sort of see where we're at, I think coming up in to the (T20) World Cup in Bangladesh."

The Victorian bowler said India vice-captain Smriti Mandhana has been a 'tough' match-up for their bowlers. "For leg spinners, myself and Kingy (Alana King) it's the left-handers that have probably given us the most grief, but someone like Smriti Mandhana, is a really tough match-up against us," said Wareham.

Wareham, who played for Gujarat Giants in the inaugural Women's Premier League, joined the Mandhana-led Royal Challengers Bangalore for the second edition during the auction last month.

## RANJI TROPHY PREVIEW

# Veterans, young hopefuls embark on a fresh journey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Bright dreams of a new journey, desperation to stage a comeback and desire to rediscover old glory will be the dominant themes of this season's Ranji Trophy that begins at various centres across the country from Friday.

On the periphery, the latest edition of the premier domestic competition might appear to be having little or no say in the cricketing fortunes of a clutch of players, especially with India's batting and bowling line-ups almost sealed in Tests.

The selectors also might not ring in too many changes for the five-match home rubber against England later this month. Also India will play the red-ball format only in September at home against Bangladesh, courtesy an avalanche of white-ball matches, including the IPL and the T20 World Cup in June.

So, it might seem like there is zero incentive to toil in some remote grounds across the country over the next month and thereabouts. But in reality, a whole lot more is bubbling beneath that seemingly staid surface of insignificance over this Ranji Trophy.

No one will be more in focus than the two 35-year-old veter-



ans -- Ajinkya Rahane and Cheteshwar Pujara, whose Test careers are now in doldrums.

Rahane and Pujara will hope to log in some big runs in the competition to keep their names in the selectors' discussion, especially since several younger cricketers are also vying for a spot in the national team.

Rahane will have to carry an additional burden. Along with his personal resurrection, the elegant batter will have to lead Mumbai to a much-desired title. The 41-time champions' last Ranji triumph came in the 2015-16 season and since then they have struggled to maintain their supremacy in the domestic circuit.

They will hope that Rahane, an astute leader and tactician, can change their fortunes this time. Similarly, Karnataka's Mayank Agarwal, who was the highest run-getter the previous season with 990 runs, will want another massive season under his belt. At some stage, an opening slot could open in the Indian team, currently filled by captain Rohit Sharma and the young Yashasvi Jaiswal, and Agarwal would not want to miss that chance.

There are some serious contenders for the opening slot such as Bengal's Abhimanyu Easwaran, who is currently in South Africa as a replacement for the injured Rituraj Gaikwad. So, Easwaran will not be playing