

OPINION 6

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF PHILANTHROPY

WORLD 8

ISRAELI DEFENCE MINISTER LAYS OUT VISION FOR NEXT PHASE OF GAZA WAR

MONEY 10

INDIAN ECONOMY OUTPERFORMING PEERS: UN

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SHIFT IN ATTITUDE HELPED IN 2ND TEST: RAHUL
12 SPORTS

TMC goons tear into ED officials

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ SANDESHKHALI

Several Enforcement Directorate officials and members of the Central forces escorting them were grievously injured on Friday morning when they were attacked and chased away by around two thousand Trinamool Congress members armed with bamboos, brickbats, etc. The incident occurred at Sarberia village of Sandeshkhali Police Station in North 24 Parganas, about 73 km east of Kolkata. The officials had gone there to conduct raids on the properties of SK Sahjehan, a TMC strongman, to investigate his alleged role in the multi-crore ration scam. This scam has already led to the imprisonment of Jyotipriya Mallick, the Bengal Forest Minister, formerly in charge of the Food Ministry, last October.

"We were conducting raids at SK Sahjehan's house around 8 in the morning. As the CRPF men were breaking the locks, suddenly thousands of people, including women armed with sticks and bamboos, charged in from all directions. They pushed us around and then attacked us. Our vehicles were literally smashed, and we had to run in all directions for our dear lives," recounted an official. Among the injured was an assistant director-level



One of the ED official injured in an assault by supporters of TMC leader Sheikh Sahjehan during a raid at the latter's residence in North 24 Parganas on Friday PTI

official, according to sources, and the officials have been admitted to a private facility in Kolkata. Locals reported that CRPF men had to beat a hasty retreat on the broken vehicles, while some of the ED men fled on auto-rickshaws and totos when hundreds of armed men charged at them menacingly. Some sought refuge in the local police outpost, while others rushed to the riverside and were ferried across on police boats, sources added.

Apart from the attackers, some levelheaded people in the area privately praised the Central forces for showing utmost restraint in the melee. "God save us and many others... the Central forces acted very professionally by not opening fire. If they had done so, there would have been many casualties, and that could have led to mayhem in the area," said a local teacher who was going to his school in the morning. The planned nature of the

attack was further supported by reports that the fleeing officials were waylaid at Basanti Highway en route to Kolkata. "Their passage was blocked by trucks. They were pulled out of their vehicles and hit with bamboo sticks. I saw two of them getting hit on the head, and one was bleeding profusely. We were so afraid that we could not go to help," said a local shopkeeper, adding, "the bleeding officials were not even ready to go to

the nearby health centre. They somehow managed to take auto-rickshaws." "What will you do when you are encircled by a thousand armed people from all sides in a distant land? It was a village, and many of us had to jump into the paddy fields to run to safety. We were running helter-skelter for some time. Are we doing national duty? Are we combat people, or are we dacoits?" an official said, literally on the verge of breaking down.

The raids were part of ED operations in 10 places, including the premises of TMC leader Shankar Adhya in Bongaon and SK Sahjehan in North 24 Parganas. Their premises were reportedly being raided due to their alleged connections to the ration scam. It is also alleged that Adhya has been involved in money trading, and the agencies were looking into his possible role in money laundering related to recruitment and ration scams. Switching to Sandeshkhali, Union Minister of State for Home Nisith Pramanik, giving his first reaction to the incident, said, "It is the duty of the State police to provide security, but things work differently in Bengal where security forces are under regular attack." He said Friday's attack was not on the Central officials but "on the federal structure." He added, "The Centre has taken this matter very seriously, and we will inquire into it with all seriousness." Curiously, local TMC MLA Srikanto Mahato justified the mob attack, calling it "jano rosh (public anger)." He said, "How do the villagers know who has come? It could be dacoits; it could be thieves in uniform trying to break open the locks. So they thought that they should protect the house of their dear leader, and they ran to save his house."

Continued on Page 2

MHA unleashes CBI on Mohalla Clinics

STAFF REPORTER ■ New Delhi

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has ordered a CBI enquiry into the supply of substandard medicines in Delhi government hospitals and whether the drugs were also distributed through Mohalla Clinics. The CBI probe was ordered following a recommendation by Delhi Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena in December last year. The Delhi Government's Directorate of Vigilance had written to the home ministry requesting the probe. Launching a scathing attack on Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal after the MHA directed a CBI probe into the alleged procurement and supply of spurious and non-standard drugs, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva welcomed it and said he wanted to see how far the AAP convenor can "run" from ongoing investigations. "The probe will shed new light on the reasons why such low-quality medicines were supplied to government hospitals, thereby endangering the health of patients. It will also reveal the extent of kickbacks to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his cabinet colleagues. This scam amounts to playing with public health. It is shameful," Sachdeva added.



Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj also welcomed the CBI enquiry into the alleged supply of substandard medicines to Delhi government-run hospitals and demanded the immediate suspension of the health department's secretary. "I had given directions for carrying out an audit of medicines immediately after assuming office in March last year, but the (Delhi government) health secretary did not follow the directions. I welcome the CBI enquiry into the matter, but why is the Centre shielding the official? He should be immediately suspended," Bharadwaj said. Bharadwaj said that out of the "43 samples" collected from three hospitals, only five of them were declared "not of standard quality."

Continued on Page 2

Indian Navy Daredevils dive in to rescue our citizens

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Navy's elite marine commandos on Friday successfully carried out an operation to intercept a hijacked merchant vessel and rescue several crew members, including at least 15 Indians. The Liberian-flagged vessel MV Lila Norfolk was hijacked off the coast of Somalia. The Navy deployed a warship, maritime patrol aircraft, helicopters, P-8I, and long-range aircraft, along with Predator MQ9B drones following the incident involving MV Lila Norfolk. "All 21 crew members, including 15 Indians, onboard the vessel, were safely evacuated from the citadel," said Indian Navy's spokesperson Commander Vivek Madhwal. "The sanitisation carried out by MARCOs commandos confirmed the absence of hijackers. The attempted hijacking by the pirates was likely abandoned following a forceful warning by the



Indian Navy's maritime patrol aircraft regarding interception by naval warships," he added. Providing details of the rescue operation, Navy officials mentioned that the Indian warship INS Chennai intercepted the hijacked ship around 3:15 pm on Friday and instructed the approximately five pirates to abandon the vessel. The Indian Navy Marine Commandos boarded the hijacked ship and commenced sanitisation. MV Lila Norfolk was hijacked late on Thursday near the coast of Somalia.

The hijacking was reported by the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), a British military organisation that tracks movements of various vessels in strategic waterways. Following the incident, the Indian Navy deployed its destroyer INS Chennai, and a Navy aircraft constantly tracked the hijacked ship. It was hijacked by pirates 300 nautical miles east of Somalia. The ship was sailing from Port Du Aco (Brazil) and was bound for Khalifa Bin Salman in Bahrain. The Indian Navy's maritime patrol aircraft overflew the

vessel early Friday and established contact with the vessel, ascertaining the safety of the crew, officials said. "The Indian Navy remains committed to ensuring the safety of merchant shipping in the region along with international partners and friendly foreign countries," the spokesperson added. Last month, the Navy deployed several warships into the sea to "maintain a deterrent presence" after a series of recent shipping attacks, including a drone attack near India's coast attributed to Iran by the United States. The latest attack comes at a time when many vessels have been rerouted from the Red Sea, where Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels have conducted drone and missile attacks in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, amid Israel's conflict with Hamas. In the previous month, a drone attack targeted the MV Chem Pluto tanker 200 nautical miles (370 kilometres) off the coast of India.

Deep freeze grips Delhi

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi on Friday experienced a chilling day with the maximum temperature plummeting to 14.6 degrees Celsius, five degrees below the normal range. About half a dozen weather stations recorded the maximum temperature hovering around 13 degrees Celsius, marking the season's lowest and the second "severe cold day". The upper atmosphere of Delhi remained shrouded in thick fog throughout the day, blocking sunlight and creating "cold day" conditions, as predicted by the India Meteorological Department (IMD). Despite a minimum temperature of 9.4 degrees Celsius, which is three notches above normal, the cold spell persisted. The ongoing cold spell in Delhi led to a record-breaking peak winter power demand of 5,559 MW on Friday. According to the IMD, a "cold day" occurs when the minimum temperature falls below 10 degrees Celsius, and the maximum temperature decreases by 4.5-6.4 degrees below the normal range for the season. On the other hand, a "severe cold day" is



declared when temperatures drop by 6.5 degrees Celsius below the average for the season. According to the IMD, the Safarjung Observatory reported a minimum temperature of 9.4 degrees Celsius at 8:30 am, exceeding the normal range by more than two notches. Conversely, the Ridge Observatory recorded a low of 9.1 degrees Celsius. The temperature difference between the maximum and minimum was minimal, with the mercury touching 9.4 degrees Celsius in the morning, a degree above normal. Various locations in and

around Delhi recorded different maximum temperatures: Jafarpur at 13.1 degrees Celsius, Ridge at 13.2 degrees Celsius, Lodhi Road at 13.2 degrees Celsius, SPS Mayur Vihar at 13.3 degrees Celsius, Palam at 13.8 degrees Celsius, Narela at 14 degrees Celsius, Pitampura at 14 degrees Celsius, Ayanagar at 14.2 degrees Celsius, Pusa at 14.3 degrees Celsius, Noida at 13.2 degrees Celsius, Gurugram at 14.1 degrees Celsius, Faridabad at 13.1 degrees Celsius, and Ghaziabad at 13.1 degrees Celsius. Delhi last experienced a colder day on January 25,

2022, when the mercury plummeted to 12.1 degrees Celsius. The capital's coldest day on record occurred on December 30, 2019, with a maximum temperature of just 9.4 degrees Celsius. A day is categorised as "cold" when the maximum temperature falls 4.5-6.4 degrees below the seasonal norm. Conversely, a "severe cold" day is declared if temperatures plunge 6.5 degrees below the average for the season. Real-time data from the State Load Dispatch Centre indicated that Delhi's peak winter power demand reached 5,559 MW at 11:05 am. Officials noted that the previous highest peak demand witnessed in Delhi during the winter was 5,526 MW on January 6, 2023. A BSES spokesperson reported that BSES Rajdhani Power Limited (BRPL) and BSES Yamuna Power Limited successfully met peak power demands of 2,379 MW and 1,136 MW, respectively, in their respective areas. Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited, responsible for power supply in North Delhi, achieved a peak power demand of 1,735 MW, said a company spokesperson.

Ram Lalla empowers Ayodhya for business boost

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The scheduled consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22 has not only established the holy city as a spiritual centre but has also opened doors for substantial business opportunities nationwide. According to preliminary estimates by the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), the economic impact of Ram Mandir is expected to surpass ₹50,000 crore. Praveen Khandelwal, Secretary General of CAIT, said the temple has created numerous business prospects, especially benefiting small manufacturers and traders. The inauguration of Ram Mandir has spurred a business boom related to puja and religious items.

"The demand for various items associated with worship, such as Shri Ram Mandir models, has become a centre of attraction. These models are available in different sizes. On the other hand, idols, pictures, and artifacts related to Ram Mandir and other deities have seen a considerable surge. These products are crafted from materials like pine wood, wood, cardboard, etc. Additionally, there is a growing demand for religious literature, Hanuman Chalisa, Aarti compilations, and related items," he said. Meanwhile, temples in the national capital are also gearing up to mark the momentous occasion of the consecration ceremony at the Ram Mandir on January 22. The temples in Delhi will be bedecked with lights,



decorations, diyas, and flowers for the special occasion. As the date of January 22 approaches, the demand in the markets is increasing day

by day, leading to the fact that many individuals involved in their traditional businesses have started dealing in items related to the celebrations of Ram Mandir. Items like flags,

banners, and merchandise have gained immense popularity, indicating widespread attraction to the symbol of Ram Mandir. Products like clothing with images of Ram Mandir, Ram Darbar, and other deities are also witnessing high demand. Besides, there is a substantial market demand for various items used in worship, such as clay, brass, and other metal lamps, single lamps, and multi-lamp holders for Aarti, as well as incense stick stands. Additionally, there is a significant market presence of various items like incense sticks, dhoop (incense), cow dung cakes, scented cups, loban (gum resin), camphor, kumkum (vermillion), sandalwood, roli (vermillion powder), akshata (rice grains used in rituals), and candles made from cotton, along with

Ganga water, all of which are highly favored by customers. Khandelwal further said there is also a high demand in the market for accessories used in worship, such as mats, rugs, sheets, and fabrics made from jute and other materials. Additionally, devotees' interest extends to prasad offerings such as fruits, sweets, and other edible items. Items like malas, beads, lockets, pendants, and other accessories associated with worship are experiencing robust sales. "Moreover, decorative items for home embellishment, like torans, welcome hangings, and artificial flower garlands, are in high demand," traders said. The surge in demand for items related to religious rituals, including havan materials and offerings, is steadily increasing. As

preparations intensify for the grand celebration on January 22nd, there is a significant focus on meeting the demand for sweets, fruits, and dry fruits, as well as home and shop decorations. In addition, the music industry's involvement in creating songs related to Ram Mandir provides opportunities for lesser-known artists and orchestras to participate in events related to the temple across the country. "The overall impact of Ram Mandir on various businesses suggests a robust economic message, emphasising prosperity and entrepreneurship within the country," Khandelwal added. Ravinder Goyal, the trustee of Jhandewalan Mandir, said the temple will celebrate Diwali on that day, and all the rituals

will be performed. "Jhandewalan Mandir will be organising a community kitchen in Ayodhya for the duration of one-and-a-half months starting from Makar Sankranti on January 15," Goyal said. He added that decorations, diyas, a day-long program of devotional songs, and worship would take place. Daati Maharaj said that the construction of the temple inside Shri Sidh Shakti Peeth Shanidham Mandir, located at Asola, is underway. "An idol of Prabhru Shri Ram will be installed on the same day, coinciding with Ayodhya's idol installation ceremony," he said. He also highlighted that various programmes are set to unfold here from January 17 and will culminate on January 22 to coincide with the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya.

Covid death counts jumps to two digits

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Covid cases continue to surge with India recording a single-day rise of 761 infection incidences while for the first time death toll was in double digit at 12 mortalities. Kerala reported five deaths, four were from Karnataka, two in Maharashtra, and one in Uttar Pradesh, according to the Union Health Ministry. The number of cases of COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1 reported from 12 states till January 4 rose to 619 against 541 reported from nine states as of January 3. Of 619 sub-variant cases, 199 cases were from Karnataka, 148 from Kerala, 110 from Maharashtra, 47 from Goa, 36 from Gujarat, 30 from Andhra Pradesh, 26 from Tamil Nadu, 15 from Delhi, 4 from Rajasthan 2 from Telangana and one each from



Odisha and Haryana. The active caseload saw a slight rise from yesterday's 4,423 to 4,334, the data updated at 8 am stated. The total number of cases stood at 45 million. The death toll rose to 533,385, with 12 fatalities reported. The case fatality rate was pegged at 1.18 per cent, the Union Health Ministry said. Kerala has the highest number of active Covid cases at 1,249 in India, followed

by Karnataka at 1,240, and Maharashtra at 914. Tamil Nadu's active Covid-19 cases stand at 190, and Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh at 128 each. However, much to the relief, pointed out the officials, even though the number of cases is rising and the JN.1 sub-variant has been detected in the country, there is no cause of immediate concern as the majority of those infected are opting for home-based treatment, indicating mild illness. The Centre has already asked states and Union territories to maintain a constant vigil amid an uptick in the number of Covid cases and the detection of the JN.1 sub-variant in the country. States have been told to ensure effective compliance of the detailed operational guidelines for revised surveillance strategy for COVID-19 shared by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The WHO has classified JN.1 as a separate "variant of interest" given its rapidly-increasing spread, but said it poses a "low" global public health risk. The JN.1 sub-variant of the coronavirus was previously classified as a variant of interest (VOI) as part of the BA.2.86 sub-lineages, the parent lineage that is classified as a VOI, the world body said.

LeT terrorist killed in encounter in Shopian

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU



A joint team of security forces Friday eliminated a Lashkar-e-Tayyeba terrorist involved in the killing of an army officer Umer Fayaz, a Kashmiri pandit, non-local labourers and recruiting a large number of local youth in the ranks of a terrorist outfit in South Kashmir's Shopian district. Police identified the deceased terrorist as Bilal Ahmed Bhat son of Ghulam Rasool Bhat of Chek Cholan, Shopian. The operation was conducted by the security forces after receiving information about the presence of terrorists in the Chotigam area of Shopian. During the search operation, as the joint party approached the suspected spot, the hiding terrorist fired indiscriminately upon the joint search party, which retaliated effectively, leading to an encounter. In the ensuing encounter, 01 terrorist was killed and his

body was found in the Harmain area of Shopian on May 10. According to police, Bilal, a category A terrorist, was involved in the killing of two non-local labourers in the Harmain area. His involvement also surfaced in the killing of a Kashmiri pandit namely Sunil Kumar Bhat son of G Bhat & injuring another Kashmiri pandit Pretim Nath son of Arjun Nath Bhat, both residents of Chotigam Shopian. He was also involved in the attack on local Bal Krishan @Sonu resident of Chotigam. According to police, he was active in the Pulwama and Shopian districts and played a pivotal role in instigating local youth to join terrorist ranks and induced 12 local youth into the ranks of pro-Pakistan terrorist outfits. Besides other terror crimes, he was also involved in the killing of an arrested terrorist who was leading the search party during a CASO at Nowgam in the year 2022.

Attack on ED team ghastly incident: WB Governor

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

Taking a strong view of the attack on the Enforcement Directorate officials, Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose on Friday warned the State Government asking it to take strong action against the offenders who attacked the ED and CRPF officials even as he said, if a government fails in its basic duty, the Constitution of India will take its course. I reserve all my constitutional options for appropriate action." The Governor who summoned the State Chief Secretary, Home Secretary and Director General of Police asking them to submit their reports to him, said that the State could not be allowed to degenerate in to a banana republic of sorts. "Bengal is not a banana republic. The sole responsibility of preventing violence is with the government. The government should act effectively or face consequences," Bose said adding, "it (attack on ED team) was a ghastly incident. It is alarming and deplorable. A civilised government must stop barbarism and vandalism in a democracy." Pradesh Congress president too was severe on the Mamata Banerjee Government asking for immediate imposition of President's Rule in Bengal. "It seems that the law and order situation has broken down in Bengal ... where the ED and even armed CRPF men is not spared then where is the chance of a common man ... it is a fit case for President's Rule ... now it is the Governor and the Centre to decide." The TMC immediately shot back with State minister Shashi Panja questioning his political leanings. "He is talking like the BJP men do without going into the details," she said.

Our democracy history very ancient: Birla

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Sharing experiences and engaging in dialogue are the strengths of Indian democracy, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla said on Friday and noted that it has been further fortified by increased involvement of women and inclusion of the last person in society. Addressing about 500 elected women representatives from rural and urban local bodies at the Central Hall of Parliament, Birla underscored the importance of democratic practices, tracing them since the Chola dynasty. They also participated in three sessions on legal framework, gender sen-

sitive governance and GIS rural planning. "Sharing our experiences, discussing and engaging in dialogue are the strengths of our democracy, and that is why India's democracy is also historic. Our democracy is not just post-independence, its history is very ancient and its heritage is rich," he said. Birla said that democracy has always been ingrained in Indian

thoughts, effectiveness and culture. "The decisions and resolutions in the assembly and committees were made with consensus, and although disagreements arose, discussions and dialogues ultimately led to conclusions," the Lok Sabha speaker said. Birla said that "as we celebrate the 75-year journey of independence, we have fortified democracy, ensuring active participation, increased involvement of women and the inclusion of the last person in society". He expressed pride in India's democracy, noting the country's global leadership in the democratic realm. National Commission for Women (NCW) Chairperson Rekha Sharma highlighted women's role in politics.

She challenged traditional gender roles, saying, "If I am not a mother, wife or sister, does that mean I am not a woman? Can't I work with equal strength? My identity should be based on my name, not my relationship as a wife or mother." Sharma urged women to realise their individual identities and emphasised the need for more women in politics. The NCW chairperson also highlighted the challenges women face, noting that many didn't attend the event due to their husbands' absence. She advocated for increased women's representation in politics, suggesting that the 33 per cent reservation in Parliament would be a step towards achieving gender parity.

Bomb scare at National Museum

Kolkata: There was a bomb scare in Kolkata's National Museum when the Kolkata Police on Friday received an email from an unknown group. The threat mail stated that several bombs were planted inside the Indian Museum, and those would explode any moment," a police officer said adding the mail also asked the police to publicise the report immediately. The bomb disposal squad of Kolkata Police and sniffer dogs were immediately rushed to the area and started search operation at the museum around 11.30 am, sources said. PNS

Use of artificial intelligence discussed for helping public

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Senior Government officials and industry experts discussed the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for redressal of public grievances and promotion of universalised face authentication processes for simplification of service delivery during a brainstorming session, said an official statement issued on Friday. The session -- 'Emerging and Future e-Governance Initiatives, e-Commerce Initiatives, and Emerging Technologies' -- was organised by the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG) on Thursday. The session marked a significant effort to promote knowledge exchange among key players in the realm of e-service delivery, e-governance and innovative technology implementation, said the statement issued by the Personnel Ministry. Fifteen domain experts and distinguished representatives from leading organisations, including Deloitte, PwC, Primus Partners, KPMG, QCI, and EY attended the session along with the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG) officials. During the session, V Srinivas,

Secretary, DARPG, spoke about how the e-service delivery horizon has broadened across the country in the last few years with 1,574 mandatory e-services delivery being reported by the states and union territories in NeSDA (National e-Governance Service Delivery Assessment) Way Forward report of November 2023, as against only 872 services in the 2019 report. He highlighted how the states and union territories have shifted e-service delivery focus to unified service portals as a single stop for getting the e-services and a number of states have already achieved 100 per cent saturation. Thereafter, sector specialists from the e-gov strategy domain shed light on the achievements, emerging scenario and future direction of e-governance and e-commerce, including the emerging technologies, and shared some global best practices case studies, the statement said. Srinivas concluded the session by "charting the way forward to focus on promotion of universalised face authentication processes for simplification of service delivery, usage of AI in grievance redressal, push towards e-commerce initiatives and strong media outreach to disseminate best practices", among other things.

Harivansh participates in 27th Conference of Speakers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Deputy Chairman Rajya Sabha, Harivansh participated in a range of discussions at the 27th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth (CSPOC) at Kampala, Uganda. Inclusive Parliament must reflect diversities of the People, Passing of Women's Reservation Bill is a landmark and testimony to inclusiveness of Indian Parliament, said Harivansh. Health and well being of Parliamentarians directly

impacts the quality of governance and the lives of the people they serve, he added. The Deputy Chairman further said efforts are on to make the Parliament fully digitised and paperless. Indian Parliament has always been proactive in creating the enabling legal framework and institutions to deal with impacts of climate change, Harivansh said according to a Press note issued by the Rajya Sabha secretariat. The Deputy Chairman Rajya Sabha participated in a range of discussions at the 27th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the

Commonwealth (CSPOC) at Kampala, Uganda. These discussions included subjects such as 'Environment, Climate Change and Role of Parliament', 'Diverse and Inclusive Parliaments', and 'Health and Well-being Support in Parliaments' which were held across two days. During the discussion on Environment and Climate Change, Harivansh underlined various initiatives undertaken by the government as well as the Parliament. Parliament had debated and discussed them in detail. He further added that "Indian

Parliament has always been proactive in creating the enabling legal framework and institutions to deal with impacts of climate change". Speaking about the India's 'Go Green' initiatives, Harivansh said that E-vehicles are being used to ferry MPs to the Parliament Complex. In another discussion on diverse and inclusive Parliaments, Harivansh said that an inclusive Parliament must reflect diversities of the People and also focus on diverse needs of different groups including those of the youths and women.

Murmu receives credentials from envoys of 5 nations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Friday received credentials from envoys of five nations, including Sri Lanka and Greece, during a ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Those who presented their credentials were Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka High Commissioner Kshenuka Dhireni Senewiratne, Ambassador of Greece Aliki Koutsomitopoulou and Republic of Zambia High Commissioner Percy P Chanda, a statement issued by the president's office said.

Varanasi court judgment today on making ASI survey report on Gyanvapi mosque public

PTI ■ VARANASI (UP)

A Varanasi court is likely to give a ruling Saturday on making the sealed ASI survey report on the Gyanvapi mosque complex public and providing copies of it to the Hindu and Muslim sides. The court of District Judge A K Vishvesh on Friday said since the order on the issue has not been typed out yet, it will be given on Saturday, said Madan Mohan Yadav, the lawyer for the Hindu side. The counsels of both Hindu and Muslim sides as well as that of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) were present in court. The ASI on Wednesday urged

the court not to make its report public for at least four more weeks. The judge could not take up the matter on Thursday as he was busy at an event, his office said, adding that the matter was then posted for Friday. Following a July 21 order of the district court, the ASI carried out a scientific survey of the Gyanvapi premises, located next to the Kashi Vishwanath temple here, to determine whether the mosque was constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple. The survey was ordered by the court after the petitioners claimed the 17th-century mosque was constructed over

a pre-existing temple. On Wednesday, Yadav said the ASI requested the court for four more weeks before the sealed survey report is opened. The ASI submitted its survey report to the district court in a sealed cover on December 18. Yadav said the ASI referred to a recent judgment of the Allahabad High Court while urging the court to delay the opening of the report. The Allahabad High Court had on December 19 dismissed several pleas from the Muslim side challenging the maintainability of a suit seeking restoration of a temple where the Gyanvapi mosque now stands in Varanasi.

TMC goons tear into ED officials

From Page 1

Trinamool Congress spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said, "The BJP is using the ED to malign TMC leaders by conducting sporadic raids. This is being done to instigate the people before the elections so that the ruling party gets a bad name. But they will not succeed." Reacting to the incident, BJP State president Sukanto Majumdar said the attack on the law enforcement agency was a reflection of the future of the people of Bengal, adding, "It is an indication of what the Rohingyas are doing to the law and order in the state." State Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari called the attack on government officials "an attack on the constitution and the sovereignty of India that should be taken very seriously. There should be an NIA probe ordered into the incident," he said. "Horrific. The Law & Order Situation in West Bengal is in shambles. ED Officials & CRPF Jawans brutally attacked in Sandeshkhali; North 24 Parganas district, while conducting a raid at TMC leader Sheikh Shahjahan's house. I doubt that Rohingyas are present amongst the Anti-National attackers," he wrote on X. ED and CRPF dispatched two parallel reports to their

respective authorities in Delhi, sources said. Meanwhile, your correspondent gathered the following reports on the TMC strongman Sk Sahajehan, considered the main mastermind behind Friday's attack. SK Sahajehan, the Trinamool Congress strongman whose influence extends over an extensive part of North and South 24 Parganas, began as a CPI(M) worker during the Left rule. He transitioned into a "social worker-cum-strongman" after 2014 when he joined the Trinamool Congress, convinced that there was no chance of the Left coming back to power anytime soon. Over the past decade, Sahajehan, named in numerous criminal cases, including homicide but known for his "decent looks and suave ways," has built an empire worth tens of crores, according to locals in North and South 24 Parganas districts. They added that he owns several fisheries, fish processing units, fish markets, brick kilns, besides having interests in money trading, ferry business, and sand and earth quarrying worth crores. Locals also mentioned that he had been on good terms with jailed Food Minister Jyotipriya Mallick.

MHA unleashes CBI on Mohalla Clinics

From Page 1

At a press conference, he stated that in the official report, the terms "NSQ" or "not of standard quality" have been used many times, and it is "nowhere mentioned that the drugs are fake, imitation, poison, spurious." He added, "You cannot write it officially like that as it wasn't so." In a note, Saxena mentioned that the drugs allegedly "failed quality standard tests" and had the "potential

of endangering lives" in hospitals run by the Delhi government. The Delhi government's Directorate of Vigilance had written to the home ministry requesting the probe. The letter stated that any action for supplying 'Not of Standard Quality' drugs should not be confined to the CPA, and there is a need to investigate the entire supply chain — the role of the suppliers who procured from manufacturers and provided supply to the end-

users, i.e., hospitals (patients). "Besides, there is a need to lift the corporate veil to understand the gravity and motives of supplying 'Not of Standard Quality' drugs," read the Directorate of Vigilance letter. The drugs found to be of "substandard quality" included critical life-saving antibiotics used for the treatment of lung and urinary tract infections, such as Cephalexin, according to officials.

The list also included a steroid, Dexamethasone, used for curing life-threatening inflammation in the lungs and joints, and swelling in the body, anti-epilepsy and anti-anxiety psychiatric drug Levitiracetam, and anti-hypertension drug Amlodipine, the officials said. "In this context, it is not out of place to mention that the matter of 'Mohalla Clinics' was already entrusted to the CBI, and a Preliminary Enquiry (PE) was also

registered..." the communication read. According to a vigilance department report submitted to the lieutenant governor, of the 43 samples of drugs sent to government laboratories, three failed the test, and 12 reports were pending. Furthermore, out of another 43 samples sent to private laboratories, five failed. Drugs such as Amlodipine, Levitiracetam, and Pantoprazole failed the test in both government and private laboratories.

Cephalexin and Dexamethasone failed test in private laboratories. Delhi Minister Atishi on Friday accused the BJP-led Centre of trying to destroy the national capital's "world-class" healthcare system by initiating fake inquiries. Atishi said at a press conference that the AAP dispensation's mohalla clinic model has received praise worldwide. "Mohalla clinics are a clean and well-maintained setup where medicines are given

free to every person. The BJP-led Centre is trying to destroy Delhi's world-class health model. How is it being done? By leveling false allegations and initiating fake inquiries," she added. The minister said no inquiry has ever been refused. "Every day inquiries are being initiated. We have never refused any inquiry. This inquiry is not being carried out to investigate corruption but to ensure that officers are scared and fear is instilled in medical

superintendents of hospitals," she said. "It also needs to be investigated whether the same drugs which have been procured by the Central Procurement Agency (CPA) are also being distributed to the patients through the 'Mohalla Clinics' or not," read the communication by the Department of Vigilance to MHA. Atishi alleged that these inquiries will scare officers now and reiterated that it is the BJP's conspiracy to stop them from working.

AAP names Maliwal, Sanjay Singh, ND Gupta for RS

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI
The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Friday nominated Delhi Commission for Women chief Swati Maliwal who has been working closely with party chief Arvind Kejriwal since his days as an activist as its candidate for the January 19 Rajya Sabha elections and renominated jailed AAP leader Sanjay Singh and ND Gupta for a second term in the Upper House of Parliament. Maliwal will replace Sushil Kumar Gupta, as a member of the Rajya Sabha. The elections to three Rajya Sabha seats in Delhi scheduled to be held on January 19.

Sushil Kumar Gupta has expressed his intent to redirect his focus towards the electoral politics of Haryana," AAP said. According to AAP, Sanjay Singh and N D Gupta's names have been proposed in the AAP's PAC meeting for their second term as Rajya Sabha MP for their second term. "Sushil Kumar Gupta has conveyed his aspiration to actively engage in the vibrant electoral landscape of Haryana, and we respect his decision to pursue this path," stated a senior AAP leader. The third name that the AAP has proposed is Maliwal. She later resigned from the post of DCW chief after her nomination. The nominations for three RS seats of Delhi began on January 3 and the poll will be held on January 19. Since AAP has 62 out of the 70 seats in the Delhi assembly, the



three AAP nominees are set to be elected unopposed. Taking a dig at the Kejriwal government, Delhi BJP spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor has said that by re-nominating Sanjay Singh to Rajya Sabha, Kejriwal has shown that he is

an equal partner in Sanjay Singh's corruption. On the other hand, by deciding to send Maliwal to Rajya Sabha, Kejriwal has tried to calm the ongoing power struggle between two women leaders of his party. Kapoor has said that ever since Ms. Atishi's

stature was increasing in the cabinet, Ms. Swati Maliwal had been making Ms. Atishi uncomfortable by raising issues like lack of street lights for women safety on the streets. Maliwal was appointed as the Chairperson of the DCW in 2015, where she has been instrumental in spearheading initiatives to address issues such as acid attacks, sexual harassment, and women's safety in Delhi. She was also a core member and among the youngest to join the Indian Against Corruption movement, which was led by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal. She was married to AAP leader Naveen Jaihind, however, they have been divorced since February 2020. Born in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, Maliwal attended Amity International School before earning a bachelor's



Winter power demand rises to all time high

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The cold spell underway in Delhi pushed the national capital's peak winter power demand to an all-time high of 5,559 MW on Friday. According to real-time data from the State Load Dispatch Centre, Delhi's peak winter power demand clocked 5,559 MW at 11.05 am. The officials said the previous highest peak demand witnessed in Delhi during the winter was 5,526 MW on January 6, 2023. Delhi's peak power demand this winter is expected to cross 5700 MW this year. A BSES spokesperson said BRPL (BSES Rajdhani Power Limited) and BYPL (BSES Yamuna Power Limited) successfully met peak power demand of 2,379 MW and 1,136 MW, respectively, in their areas. "Apart from these, BSES discoms are using avenues like 'Banking', 'Power Exchange' and ensuring sufficient 'Spinning Reserves' to dispose of surplus power as well as ensuring reliable power supply, as also making arrangements to get power during summer months. "In case of any unforeseeable contingency, BSES discoms will buy short-term power from the exchange. Adding to these efforts are the advanced load-forecasting statistical and modelling techniques, which are helping the discom accurately forecast the power demand," it said. Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited (TPDDL), which supplies power in North Delhi, met a peak power demand of 1,735 MW, a company spokesperson said.

wind power, ~40 MW from Waste-to Energy and ~160 MW of roof-top solar power installed on rooftops in South, West, East and Central Delhi. In fact, upto 60% of the maximum 'winter' power demand of upto 3600+ MW in BSES area will be met with green power," BSES said. Apart from these, BSES discoms are using avenues like "Banking", "Power Exchange" and ensuring sufficient "Spinning Reserves" to dispose of surplus power as well as ensuring reliable power supply, as also making arrangements to get power during summer months. "In case of any unforeseeable contingency, BSES discoms will buy short-term power from the exchange. Adding to these efforts are the advanced load-forecasting statistical and modelling techniques, which are helping the discom accurately forecast the power demand," it said. Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited (TPDDL), which supplies power in North Delhi, met a peak power demand of 1,735 MW, a company spokesperson said.

DMRC integrates Metro, bus ticketing services

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With the objective of providing more facilities to commuters, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) in an effort to ensure 'ease of booking' tickets through the digital transformation has incorporated its ticketing services into the 'One Delhi' mobile application. It seamlessly combine both the Metro and Delhi's city bus services. Currently utilized for generating QR tickets for DTC buses, the 'One Delhi App' now serves as a comprehensive platform for streamlined travel arrangements by including QR tickets for Delhi Metro also. The facility was launched at Metro Bhawan jointly by Dr. Vikas Kumar, Managing Director, DMRC, Ashish Kundra, IAS, Transport Commissioner, Govt. of NCTD, and Praveesh Biyani, Head, Centre for Mobility, IIIT-D in the presence of other senior officials here on Friday. This integration has been done in collaboration with IIIT-D (Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi) which manages the 'One Delhi' app for the Delhi Government. The 'One Delhi'

app launched by the Delhi Government offers all details as well as ticketing options regarding the national capital's bus services. Presently, DMRC is offering sale of digital QR tickets through multiple channels like, DMRC Saarthi (Momentum 2.0) app, Whatsapp, Paytm, DMRC Travel app, etc. and Phonepe & Ridlr (For Airport Express Line only). Around 1.2 lakh digital QR tickets are sold daily through these channels. 'One Daily App' presently used for issuing digital QR tickets for DTC buses only and average number of daily ticket sales is 1.5 lakh per day with around 3.0 lakh active users. The integration of issuing QR tickets for Metro and DTC buses through 'One Delhi App' will add one more channel for issuing Delhi Metro tickets and will facilitate commuters to use one single app for booking Delhi Metro and Bus tickets. This strategic partnership will make commuting on Delhi Metro even more convenient, offering passengers a one-stop solution for their transportation needs. The app goes beyond just ticketing by offering integrated trip planning for buses and Metros.

MCD separates hospitals for improved services

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In an effort to upgrade services to common people, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has separated two of its hospitals namely Rajan Babu Institute of Pulmonary Medicine and Tuberculosis and Maharishi Valmiki Hospital. These two hospitals were merged in 2017 for the purpose of upgrading health services with the approval of the North Delhi Municipal Corporation. After the merger both the hospitals were facing difficulty in providing quality healthcare services due to which it was decided to separate the functioning of both the



hospitals, officials said here on Friday. According to the new arrangement, the administrative and financial matters of both the hospitals will be separate and independent. Chest, TB, surgical and eye OPDs will be operated from Rajan Babu

Hospital. Bronchoscopy and PFT operations will also continue. Pediatric OPD will also start functioning in future. Maharishi Valmiki Infectious Disease Hospital will continue to run medicine, paediatrics, ENT (4 days a week) and skin OPD (twice a week) and anti-rabies clinic. Rest of the services will continue to operate as before. Rajan Babu Hospital will have a Mycobacteriology, Biochemistry, Microbiology and Pathology department with doctors from the respective departments, while Maharishi Valmiki Hospital will have a Microbiology, Biochemistry and Pathology department with doctors

from the respective specialties. However this hospital will continue to use the lab services and OT of Rajan Babu Hospital till the establishment of lab services and OT. Apart from this, the mortuary services of Rajan Babu Hospital will be used till the provision of a mortuary chamber in Maharishi Valmiki Hospital. Even after separation, both the Rajan Babu and Maharishi Valmiki Institutes will continue to work mutually and collaboratively in matters of emergency, ambulance services, laboratory, radiology and specialist services so that resources can be efficiently and optimally utilised.

Only 20% forest land cleared of encroachment since 2019

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Only about a fifth of encroached forest land in Delhi has been cleared since 2019, with a panel formed by the National Green Tribunal to identify and reclaim such land, expressing strong dissatisfaction regarding the slow progress. According to the minutes of the seventh oversight committee meeting, merely

83,828 hectares of the total encroached forest area of 398.61 hectares in Delhi have been reclaimed so far. The Director General of Forests and Special Secretary in the Union Environment Ministry, who heads the panel, expressed strong discontent with the sluggish pace of encroachment removal in the ridge area. The chairperson has instructed district magistrates



and deputy conservators of forests to ramp up efforts in collaboration with the respective deputy commissioners of police within a specific time frame

for encroachment removal. It has been decided that all district magistrates concerned would appoint an officer from their districts as nodal officers, not below the rank of additional district magistrates, to coordinate with the respective deputy conservators of forests concerning matters related to ground-level encroachment removal. The district magistrates have

been asked to ensure regular District Task Force meetings are held every fortnight and attended by senior officers from the Revenue, Police and the Forest departments to address encroachment removal promptly. The committee was informed about Delhi Environment Minister Gopal Rai's directive against conducting any encroachment removal without submitting a detailed

plan to Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. However, the panel's chairman emphasised that no such procedure exists for encroachment removal from forest areas. The district magistrates and deputy conservators of forests must ensure encroachment removal adheres strictly to the provisions of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, and the relevant rules, on a case-by-case basis, he said.

Kejriwal greets Sisodia on birthday

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday greeted his former deputy Manish Sisodia on his birthday, and lauded his courage in an "era of dictatorship". Making a reference to the BJP, Kejriwal also said the friendship between him and Sisodia never broken "no matter how hard the conspirators try". The AAP supremo also shared an old picture of him with Sisodia, wherein the two could be seen walking a street. "This friendship is very old. Our affection and trust are very strong. This passion to work for the people is also

very old. No matter how hard the conspirators try... This friendship, affection and trust will never be broken. "The BJP has kept Manish behind the bars for last 11 months in a fake case. But Manish is standing against their oppression. He has not bowed down to their dictatorship now and will not do so in the future. Manish's courage inspires us all in this era of dictatorship. Happy birthday Manish," Kejriwal wrote on X. Delhi minister Atishi, who was given charge of most of the portfolios held by Sisodia after his resignation, also greeted the AAP leader on his birthday calling him as

the best education minister. "Today is Manish sir's birthday. Every year we used to celebrate this day with much fun and frolic but it is sad that the person who fulfilled the dream of providing world class education to the children of the poor has been kept in jail for 11 months in a false case. "You are our inspiration and strength, Manish sir. Hopefully, you will be with us soon and we will celebrate this festival. My salute to the best education minister of the country," Atishi wrote on X. Sisodia was arrested by the Central Bureau of

Investigation (CBI) on February 26 last year, for his alleged role in corruption in the formulation and implementation of the Delhi Excise Policy 2020-21. The AAP leader has been in custody since then. The ED arrested Sisodia in a money laundering case stemming from the CBI FIR on March 9 after questioning him in Tihar jail. Sisodia, who held the excise portfolio, resigned from the Delhi cabinet on February 28. The Delhi government had implemented the excise policy on November 17, 2021 but scrapped it at the end of September 2022 amid allegations of corruption.

Atishi inspects new school in East Vinod Nagar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Education Minister Atishi inspected a new school in East Vinod Nagar along with officials from the Public Works Department and the Education Department. The school will be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities, including smart classrooms, excellent labs, libraries, lifts, and other world-class amenities for children. The construction of this school is progressing rapidly. During the inspection, Atishi directed officials to expedite the remaining construction

work so that children can study in their sparkling new building in the upcoming academic session. During the inspection, the Education Minister said that this splendid school is being constructed in the legislative assembly of Manish Sisodia that will ensure to bring world-class education to every child. Atishi said, "When she first saw the drawing of this school, it felt as if this was a building of a top university in the United States." "I am pleased that a splendid government school building is soon going to be available

for approximately 5000 children in this area. People used to call this school the 'tent school', but after the construction of the new building, they will know it as the 'school with a building like American universities.' Every student studying here or those who have studied here before will take pride in it," she added. The new building of the school will be 4-storey high with 101 rooms. The school will be equipped with modern facilities, including smart classrooms, labs, libraries, lifts, and an activity room.

Woman held for abducting newborn girl

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 23-year-old woman was arrested for allegedly kidnapping a newborn girl from a hospital in Rohini here, police said on Friday. The kidnapped infant was safely handed over to her parents, they said. Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Rohini, Gurjib Singh Sidhu, said a 19-year-old woman reported on Wednesday that her newborn baby was kidnapped from Dr Baba Saheb Amedkar (BSA) Hospital by an unknown woman. "An FIR was registered and a search operation was launched," he added. A team was formed and more than 500 CCTV footage of possible routes in the vicinity were analysed, police said. The DCP said that a woman was seen boarding a red colour e-rickshaw with the kidnapped child in one of the CCTV footage at the Rohini West Metro Station. "The team traced the e-rickshaw driver and examined him," he added. The DCP said that the e-rickshaw driver had dropped the woman near the main gate of the ESI Hospital in Rohini Sector-15. "The police also came to know that the woman interacted with two persons in front of the DTC depot," he added. The officer further said that the police traced them and got to know that the woman used their mobile phone to call her family. "We later arrested the woman and the kidnapped girl was recovered from her possession," he added.

Court nod for polygraph tests on Parliament security breach accused

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A city court on Friday allowed the Delhi Police to conduct polygraph tests on the accused involved in the parliament security breach, after five of the six accused gave their consent. Neelam Azad refused to give her consent for the polygraph test. The Delhi Police special cell, which is probing the case, had sought permission from the court to conduct a polygraph test of all the accused namely - Manoranjan D, Sagar Sharma, Amol Shinde, Neelam Azad, Lalit Jha and Mahesh Kumawat - all charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Additional Sessions Judge Hardeep Kaur, who also extended the police custody of all the accused by eight days, allowed the investigating



officer to conduct the polygraph test of Manoranjan D, Sagar Sharma, Amol Dhanraj Shinde, Lalit Jha and Mahesh Kumawat. The court passed the order after noting the consent of the accused, excluding Neelam Azad, to conduct their polygraph test. The judge passed the order on an application moved by police, which had sought permission to conduct the polygraph test of all the accused.

The police sought extension of custody submitting that their social media data and data from SIM cards are yet to be retrieved. The police had registered a case on the complaint filed by the deputy director (security) of parliament. The case was registered under sections 186 (obstructing public servant from discharging public duties), 353 (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty), 452 (house trespass after preparation for hurt assault and wrongful restraint), 153 (giving provocation with intent to cause riot), 34 (acts done by several person in furtherance of common intention) and 120B (criminal conspiracy) of Indian Penal Code and under sections 16 and 18 of UAPA.

NDMC releases 'Right of Way' policy draft

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) on Friday released the draft of the 'Right of Way' policy for public feedback on fixed rates for setting up telegraph infrastructure like mobile towers and optical fibre cables and action to be taken in case of an installation violation. The NDMC has framed a draft policy for underground and overground Telecommunication Infrastructure in areas under its jurisdiction. The draft has been uploaded on NDMC's website and the last date for the feedback submission is January 18. "The policy has been framed in pursuance of the provisions of the Indian Right of Way Rules, 2016, which was notified by the Department of Telecom, Government of India as the



RoW Rules, 2016 as amendment in 2023 to regulate underground and overground telecommunication infrastructure," an official said. According to the draft policy, it intends to promote the installation of micro communication equipment that can be installed on any

type of structure or building and in-building solutions (IBS) for places where there is poor connectivity and the objective is to strengthen the quality of mobile networks. The draft states that any telecom service provider or infrastructure provider, registered or licensed with the Department of Telecommunications is

eligible to seek permissions under this policy to make provision of the communication and connectivity infrastructure. The policy states that any application for obtaining clearance for the existing unauthorised mobile towers shall be submitted within two months of issue of this policy, following which, the matter would be taken as per laid down procedure by the NDMC. "Once the application is submitted within due time, the operation of the mobile tower shall not be discontinued till disposal of the application by the NDMC. However, the towers and poles installed without permission shall be liable for applicable charges as mentioned ... Along with a penalty imposed at Rs 10,000 per month up to Rs 5 lakh," it said.

TMC Government continuation threat to national security: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Friday came down heavily on the Trinamool Congress over an incident of attack on Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials in West Bengal, saying the continuation of the party's government under Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is a threat to national security. The ED officers were reportedly assaulted and their vehicles damaged allegedly by sup-

porters of TMC leader Sheikh Sajahan when they tried to raid his residence in North 24 Parganas district this morning in connection with a probe into the ration distribution scam. According to officials, the ED officers left their damaged vehicles and took auto rickshaws and two-wheelers to move out of Sandeshkhali. At least two of the officers suffered serious injuries and were taken to a hospital. Reacting sharply to the incident, BJP co-in-charge for polit-



ical affairs in West Bengal Amit Malviya wrote on X, "This is how lawless Bengal is." "Continuance of the TMC government in West Bengal is a national security threat," he said. Malviya said the team of ED and accompanying media was attacked when it raided the premises of block-level TMC leaders Sheikh and Shankar Adhya. State food minister Jyoti Priya Mallick has already been arrested in connection with the scam.

Hundreds of men and women gathered at the spot shouting slogans and attacked the officials, the BJP leader said, adding "Shahjahan Sheikh, in particular, is close to Abhishek Banerjee, nephew of CM Mamata Banerjee, who is also the Home Minister of Bengal." "It is likely that several of those who came out to attack the probe agency officials are illegal migrants, who have been patronised by the local TMC leaders, to serve as their vote bank," Malviya added.



Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar receives the Guard of Honour during the NCC Republic Day Camp 2024 in New Delhi on Friday. PTI

Cadets are leaders of tomorrow: VP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Friday here lauded the role of National Cadet Corps (NCC) in channelizing the energy of youth into positivity and said the cadets are leaders of tomorrow and are the most vital stakeholders in the growth and rise of Bharat. Making these points while inaugurating the Republic Day NCC camp for this year, he also said the NCC instills punctuality, resilience, loyalty, and hard work that shape the cadets into active, productive citizens and the most valuable human resource of the country. Dhankhar said by their actions and conduct, NCC cadets exemplify "Unity in Diversity" adding the NCC ensures your organic growth as ambassadors for national awareness campaigns, fostering integration across cultural, religious, and geographical lines.

The Vice President said he was happy to note a pro-women change taking place very impactfully within the NCC. Now there is increasing female participation. "I had the occasion to witness it a while ago. During the upcoming Republic Day, female cadets will proudly march down the Kartavya Path in two exclusive contingents with two female bands," he said. Stating that NCC cadets are role models for the nation's youth, Dhankhar urged them to continue to conduct themselves with the highest dignity and discipline. "Even after NCC training, you must remember that the cadet spirit is eternal and lasting. You have to nurture it and it will blossom," he said. "I am confident that you all will continue to work with the same enthusiasm, valor, and dedication to make our Bharat, a larger democracy, a truly developed nation, and a world leader by 2047," Dhankhar said.

Cabinet okays MoU to achieve net zero carbon emission in Railways

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Cabinet during a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday approved a MoU signed between India and USAID/India to help the Indian Railways achieve net-zero carbon emission by 2030. A press statement issued by the Indian Railways on Friday said the Cabinet was apprised of the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/India on June 14, 2023. "The MoU provides a platform for Indian Railways to interact and share the latest developments and knowledge in the railway sector," it said. "The MoU facilitates utility modernisation, advanced energy solutions and systems, regional energy and market integration and private sector participation and engagement, training and seminars/workshops focusing on specific technology areas like renewable energy, energy efficiency and other interactions for knowledge sharing," said the note. According to the Indian Railways, it earlier worked with USAID/India for the deployment of rooftop solar systems across railway platforms. The MoU states that the Indian Railways and USAID/India will jointly work for long-term energy planning, including clean energy for the Indian Railways. They will develop an energy effi-



ciency policy and action plan for Indian Railways buildings and plan for clean energy procurement to achieve its net-zero vision. "Technical support for addressing regulatory and implementation barriers" and "bid design and bid management support for system-friendly, large-scale renewable procurement" are areas on which the two sides will work together. Besides, the MoU will focus on supporting the Indian Railways in the promotion of e-mobility and collaboratively hosting events, conferences, and capacity-building programmes in the identified areas. According to the Railways, the MoU will help reduce its dependence on imported fuel such as diesel and coal, among others. "Deployment of renewable energy plants will give fillip to renewable energy technology in the country. This will help in the development of the local ecosystem, which subsequently gives a boost to local product development," the statement said. "Technical assistance for the services under this MoU is intended to be provided by USAID under the SAREP initiative. This MoU is not an obligation of funds or a commitment of any kind, and it is non-binding. This does not involve any financial commitment from the Indian Railways," it added.

Ready to extend all support: Modi to Kishida after Japan earthquake

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has written to his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida expressing India's solidarity with Japan and its people affected by the devastating earthquake on January 1. On Thursday, Modi wrote to Kishida that India values its relationship with Japan as a special strategic and global partner, and is ready to extend all possible assistance at this hour, sources said.

Around 90 people were killed when a 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck Japan's northernmost peninsula of Noto on Monday. The prime minister conveyed to his Japanese counterpart that he is "deeply anguished and concerned" over the earthquake and expressed "deepest condolence" to the families of those killed in the quake, the sources said. "I am deeply anguished and concerned to learn about the major earthquake that struck Japan on January 1," Modi said.



"I express my deepest condolences to the bereaved families of those who lost their lives. We stand in solidarity with Japan and its people affected by the disaster," a source quoted Modi as writing to the Japanese prime minister. Japan's Kyodo news agency said on Friday the death toll in the quake rose to 92 with over 240 people still missing. It said authorities doubled the number of Self-Defence forces' personnel taking part in earthquake rescue operations to 4,600.

Ramesh concerns on VVPATS require no clarifications: EC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Dismissing Congress leader Jairam Ramesh's concerns on the VVPATS, the Election Commission on Friday said that it raised "no new assertions or reasonable and legitimate doubts which require further clarifications", adding the rules governing paper slips were introduced by the grand old party-led government in 2013. In a communication to Ramesh, the poll body also expressed "full faith in the use of the EVMs in the elections" and made it clear that literature in the public domain on EVM including the latest updated Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) (85 Questions) answers all reasonable and

legitimate aspects of the use of EVMs adequately and comprehensively. "Rule 49A and 49M of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, governing VVPAT and handling of paper slips was introduced by INC (Indian National Congress) on 14th August, 2013," said the letter signed by Pramod Kumar Sharma, Principal Secretary in the Election Commission. Ramesh had written to the Election Commission on December 30 last year, requesting that a delegation of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) be given an appointment to put forth their views on the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips. The opposition alliance



had at a meeting on December 19 voiced doubts about the integrity of functioning of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and wanted the VVPAT slips to be handed over to the voters, who could drop it in a separate box. The opposition alliance had also demanded 100 per cent matching of the slips and the EVMs.

"The recent letter dated December 30, 2023, does not raise any unresponded issue on EVM/VVPAT," Sharma said. He said the letter dated December 30, 2023, said to be in sequence of the earlier letters "has no new assertions or reasonable and legitimate doubts which requires further clarifications".

The Commission also dubbed as "out of context" the references made to other countries and their Constitutional Courts about the use of the EVMs in the elections. "Based on the outcomes of the elections conducted using EVMs, legal framework, established jurisprudence, technical security and administrative safeguards, the Commission has full faith in the use of the EVMs in the elections," Sharma asserted. The poll body pointed out that political parties and candidates are associated at every stage of handling of the EVMs, starting from FLC, storage, movement, training, randomisation, commissioning, mock polls, start of poll, close of poll and counting. The

Commission said issues covering all aspects of the EVMs like non-tampering, non-hacking, micro controllers, end-to-end verifiability, legal provisions, counting, technical competency, manufacturing and source code have already been addressed by it. "It is stated that current EVMs in use in the Indian elections are compliant to the extant legal framework created and strengthened by the successive Union governments of the day and jurisprudence evolved over 40 years by the Constitutional Courts of India," the Commission said. Anything beyond the existing legal framework and established jurisprudence is beyond the singular domain of the Commission, it added.

AI model can predict which Covid variant to cause wave

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Which SARS-CoV-2 variants are likely to cause new waves of infection? You can now know them beforehand as scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US have developed a new Artificial Intelligence (AI) model that can predict early before any variant which SARS-CoV-2 variants are likely to cause new waves of infection. Current models used to predict the dynamics of viral transmission do not predict variant-specific spread. The team led by Retsef Levi from MIT's Sloan School of Management studied what factors could shape the viral spread based on an analysis of 9 million SARS-CoV-2 genetic sequences collected by the Global Initiative on Sharing Avian Influenza Data (GISAID) from 30 countries, along with data on vaccination rates, infection rates, and other factors. The findings are published in the journal PNAS Nexus. The patterns that emerged from this analysis were used to build a Machine Learning-enabled risk assessment model. The model can detect 72.8 per cent of the variants in each country that will cause at least 1,000 cases per million people in the next three months after an observation period of only one week after detection. This predictive performance increases to 80.1 per cent after two weeks of observation.

Fatigue in long-Covid due to muscle cells producing less energy: Research

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Researchers at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) have uncovered evidence explaining why individuals with long Covid endure prolonged fatigue, discomfort, and pain after physical activity. The study, published in Nature Communications, examined 25 long Covid patients and 21 individuals who had recovered fully from Covid. The participants, all of whom were previously healthy and within working age, engaged in a short exercise on a bicycle. The results showed that, on average, those with long Covid had a reduced exercise capacity compared to healthy participants. The researchers looked at the blood and muscle tissue 1 week before the cycling test and 1 day after the test. The researchers discovered that the persistent fatigue in patients with long-Covid has a



biological cause, namely mitochondria in muscle cells that produce less energy than in healthy patients. "We're seeing clear changes in the muscles in these patients," said Michèle van Vugt, Professor of Internal Medicine at Amsterdam UMC. "We saw various abnormalities in the muscle tissue of the patients. At the cellular level, we saw that the mitochondria of the muscle, also known as the energy factories of the cell, function less well and that they produce less energy," said Rob Wüst, Assistant Professor at Department of Human Movement Sciences at the VU University. "So, the cause of the fatigue is really biological. The brain needs energy to think. Muscles need energy to move.

India, Mauritius ink MoU to jointly develop small satellite

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Mauritius will jointly develop a small satellite which will be launched by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) early next year, the Union Cabinet was apprised on Friday. India and Mauritius had signed a MoU for development of a joint small satellite during the visit of Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan to Port Louis on November 1 last year. The MoU will help to establish a framework for cooperation between Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and Mauritius Research and Innovation Council (MRIC) on the development of a joint satellite as well as for cooperation on the use of the ground station in the island nation. "Some of the subsystems for the joint satellite will be taken up through the participation of Indian industries and would benefit the industry," an official statement said. The satellite realisation is proposed to be completed in 15 months time



frame, it said. The Union Cabinet, at a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was apprised about the MoU. An official statement said the collaboration through the joint development of the satellite will help in further ensuring continuous support from the Mauritius government for the Indian ground station at Mauritius, which is critical for India's launch vehicle and satellite missions. In addition, the joint satellite building will also help in ensuring MRIC support from their ground station for ISRO's small satellite mission in future. The estimated cost for the joint satellite is Rs 20 crore, which will be borne by India.

Space cooperation between India and Mauritius dated back to 1986 when ISRO established a ground station in Mauritius for tracking and telemetry support for its launch vehicle and satellite missions. The current space cooperation is being governed by the country-level agreement signed in July 2009, which superseded the 1986 agreement. Based on the interest expressed by MRIC in jointly building a small satellite for Mauritius, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) had requested ISRO to initiate discussions on realizing an India-Mauritius joint satellite. The MEA will provide funding for realisation, launch and operation of the joint satellite.

NMC introduces post doctoral fellowship courses in medicine

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a move aimed to promote research and clinical skill development among post-graduate students, the National Medical Commission (NMC) Regulations, 2018, the existing NEET-PG examination will continue till the proposed National Exit Test (NExT) becomes operational for the purpose of PG admission. The new regulations state that all post-graduate students will work as full-time resident doctors and for "reasonable working hours" and will be provided "reasonable time for rest" in a day. They will be permitted a minimum 20 days of casual leave per year and five days of academic leave per year. Subject to exigencies of work, post-graduate students will be allowed one weekly holiday, the new regulations said. "Earlier there was no written provision of leaves," Dr Oza said.

Board of the National Medical Commission (NMC) explained. As per the new regulations which have replaced the Postgraduate Medical Education (Amendment) Regulations, 2018, the existing NEET-PG examination will continue till the proposed National Exit Test (NExT) becomes operational for the purpose of PG admission. The new regulations state that all post-graduate students will work as full-time resident doctors and for "reasonable working hours" and will be provided "reasonable time for rest" in a day. They will be permitted a minimum 20 days of casual leave per year and five days of academic leave per year. Subject to exigencies of work, post-graduate students will be allowed one weekly holiday, the new regulations said. "Earlier there was no written provision of leaves," Dr Oza said.

Overarching earth sciences scheme 'Prithvi Vigyan' gets Cabinet nod

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Friday approved "Prithvi Vigyan", an overarching initiative comprising five on-going sub-schemes related to earth sciences, at a cost of Rs 4,797 crore over a five-year period from 2021-26. The Union Cabinet, at a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the proposal of the Ministry of Earth



Sciences to club the sub-schemes. The schemes are "Atmosphere and Climate Research-Modelling Observing Systems and Services", "Ocean Services, Modelling Application, Resources and Technology", "Polar Science and Cryosphere Research", "Seismology and Geosciences" and "Research, Education, Training and Outreach". "The overarching scheme of 'Prithvi Vigyan' (PRITHVI) will enable

development of integrated multidisciplinary earth science research and innovative programmes across different MoES institutes," an official statement said. It said these integrated research and development efforts will help in addressing the grand challenges of weather and climate, ocean, cryosphere, seismological science and services and explore the living and non-living resources for their sus-

tainable harnessing. The objectives of the overarching "PRITHVI" scheme includes augmentation and sustenance of long-term observations of the atmosphere, ocean, geosphere, cryosphere and solid earth to record vital signs of the earth system and change, development of modelling systems for understanding and predicting weather, ocean and climate hazards, and understanding the science of cli-

mate change. It also includes exploration of polar and high seas regions of the earth towards discovery of new phenomena and resources, development of technology for exploration and sustainable harnessing of oceanic resources for societal applications, and translation of knowledge and insights from earth systems science into services for societal, environmental and economic benefit.

Rajasthan portfolio allocation

CM keeps home, excise among 8 departments

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma on Friday allotted portfolios to ministers, keeping eight departments, including home and excise, for himself.

Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari was given finance, tourism, art and culture, public works department, and women and child development. Prem Chand Bairwa, who was also sworn in as a deputy chief minister on December 15, got technical education, higher education, Ayurveda, transport and road safety.

Kirodi Lal Meena got the agriculture, rural development, disaster management and public grievances departments, and Rajyavardhan Rathore industries, IT and communications, youth affairs and sports, skill development and entrepreneurship and Sainik Kalyan.

Both had resigned from Parliament to fight the assembly polls in which the BJP bagged 115 out of the 199 seats where elections were held.

Barring the chief minister and the deputy chief ministers, 22 ministers were sworn in at a ceremony at the Raj Bhawan here on December 30.

Among the other cabinet ministers, Madan Dilawar was allocated the school education, Panchayati Raj and Sanskrit education departments, and Gajendra Singh Khimsar medical and health.

Chief Minister Sharma retained the departments of personnel, planning, information and public relations, and anti-corruption bureau.

Kanhaiya Lal has public health and engineering and groundwater departments, and Jogaram will be the minister of parliamentary affairs, law and legal affairs. Suresh Singh Rawat was allotted the water



resources department, Avinash Gehlot social justice and empowerment and Sumit Godara food and civil supplies and consumer affairs.

The tribal area development and the home guards departments were given to Babul Kharadi, while Hemant Meena got the revenue and colonisation departments.

The ministers of state were also allotted portfolios. Minister of State (Independent charge) Surendra Pal Singh TT was given the agriculture marketing board, command area development and water utilisation department, Indira Gandhi canal department and the minority affairs department.

Surendra Pal Singh is the BJP's nominee for the Karanpur seat where polling was held on Friday. He was sworn in as a minister in the ceremony held last week.

Other ministers of state with independent charge are Sanjay Sharma (forest, environment and climate change, science and technology), Gautam Kumar (cooperatives, civil aviation), Jhabar Singh Kharadi (urban development, local self-government) and Heera Lal Nagar (energy).

Ministers of state Otarum Devasi (Panchayati Raj, rural development, disaster management), Manju Baghmara (public works department, women and child development, child rights department), Vijay Singh (revenue, colonisation, Sainik Kalyan), KK Vishnoi (industry and commerce, youth affairs and sports, skill development and entrepreneurship) and Jawahar Singh Bedham (home, 'gopalan' or cow care, animal husbandry and dairy and fisheries) were also allotted portfolios.

Earlier in the day, Rajasthan Governor Kalraj Mishra approved the list of portfolios for the ministers as proposed by the chief minister.

Assam transporters unions decide to call off strike

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Transporters' unions of Assam, whose strike against the new penal law on hit-and-run cases brought commercial vehicle services to a standstill on Friday, decided to call off their agitation, an official said. The strike will be withdrawn at 5 am on Saturday, he said.

The decision to call off the 48-hour strike was taken following discussions with the state government. "The transporters' unions have agreed to withdraw the strike from 5 am tomorrow," the senior official, privy to the talks, said.

"We have assured them that their demands will be placed before top authorities and their interests would not be compromised," he added.

The strike had been called by the joint forum of transporters' unions from 5 am on Friday till 5 am on Sunday against the new penal law on hit-and-run cases. Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), which is set to replace the colonial-era Indian Penal Code (IPC), drivers causing serious road accidents due to negligent driving and running away without informing the police or the administration can face up to 10 years in prison or a fine of Rs 7 lakh.

The punishment for such offences was two years under the IPC. All commercial vehicles, including school buses and



app-based taxis, have been off the roads since morning in response to the strike.

In several places, including Guwahati, Tinsukia, Tezpur, Gohpur, Bijnai and Bongaigaon, the protestors came out on the streets and raised slogans against the government.

In Bongaigaon, several drivers burnt their driving licenses maintaining that with the stringent measures proposed under the new law, they will not be able to sustain in their current profession.

In some places, including Guwahati and Dibrugarh, strike supporters were seen preventing vehicles, including private cars, from plying the roads. Office-goers had a difficult time reaching their workplaces as buses, taxis and app-based

Buddha, Basaveshwara, Ambedkar considered as divine incarnates: Karnataka HC

PTI ■ BENGALURU

While dismissing a public interest litigation that challenged the sanctity of the oath taken by Members of the Legislative Assembly in the name of certain persons instead of as mandated in the Constitution, the High Court has said that Buddha, Basaveshwara and Ambedkar are considered as divine incarnations which is the same meaning the Constitution employs to denote 'God'.

"At times, tall figures like Bhagawan Buddha (563 BCE - 483 BCE), Jagajyothi Basaveshwara (1131-1196), Dr. B R Ambedkar (1891-1956), etc., are held as 'daivaanushasambhootas' i.e., divine incarnates which the English word 'God' employed in the constitutional formats in Third Schedule, does not denote the same," the Division Bench of Chief Justice Prasanna B Varale and Justice Krishna S Dixit said in their judgement.

Further, the HC said that "God-neutral" oath taking was permitted. "It is said in Kannada 'devanoba, naama halavu' nearly meaning that: God is one, though he is called by multiple names. This is in line with what 'Brihadaranyaka Upanishad' states: 'ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti'" which literally means that, truth is one and the wise call him with various nomenclatures. It is significant to note that the format permits God-neutral oath taking," it said.

Challenge on withdrawal of sanction to prosecute DKS referred to CJ for larger bench



PTI ■ BENGALURU

A single-judge-bench of the Karnataka High Court on Friday referred the petition challenging the withdrawal of the sanction given to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to investigate a case against D K Shivakumar to the High Court Chief Justice for placing before a larger bench of his choice.

"I am afraid because of the enormity of the questions, in deciding the enormity of such a large issue, I think Division Bench is required," Justice Krishna S Dixit said and then ordered, "Having heard the learned counsel for petitioners and learned Advocate General for the State, I am of a considered opinion that the paper be placed before the Chief Justice for consideration at the bench and strength of his choice."

Two separate petitions filed by BJP leader and MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatnal and the CBI came up before the single judge bench on Friday. Yatnal's petition was filed earlier and the court had questioned the validity of his petition and how he could be considered an affected party in the criminal proceedings. Yatnal's counsel submitted to the court that any private citizen has locus standi to challenge a cabinet decision of the government which has stifled criminal prosecution. The court observed that it was a unique case.

"This is a first of its kind case in the state. It is a virgin case in the state," it said while observing that similar cases have happened in other states. The court said that the question is whether the decision taken by the previous government (giving sanction) is binding on the government which is elected subsequently. The HC also said that since the CBI has also filed a challenge to the withdrawal of the consent, the validity of the petition filed by Yatnal also has to be considered. CBI counsel Prasanna Kumar submitted that the Lokayukta has been handed over the investigation by the state and it has filed an FIR. The CBI sought the records of this new investigation and asked that the investigation be handed over to it. The HC issued notices to the respondent state and Lokayukta. The HC also directed that until the final hearing of the petitions, the Lokayukta should not pro-

ceed in the case. The counsel for the CBI argued that in a similar situation, the Supreme Court had taken the view that once a state government has accorded consent for a probe, it cannot be withdrawn with retrospective effect. "Therefore, the investigation at the hands of CBI should go on to the final product," it was submitted. Considering the enormity of the issue, the single judge referred it to the chief justice for a larger bench. Based on the Income Tax Department raids and Enforcement Directorate's probe, the CBI had sought sanction from the state government to file an FIR against D K Shivakumar which was granted on September 25, 2019. Following a change in power after the May assembly elections, the new government, in which D K Shivakumar is deputy chief minister, withdrew the sanction on November 28, 2023. Challenging the November 28 order of the government withdrawing consent, Yatnal approached the HC alleging that it is illegal. The CBI has also approached the HC challenging the withdrawal of consent.

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
Ph.D. Admission- January, 2024
Online applications are invited for admission to Ph.D. January, 2024 in various courses latest by 17-01-2024. For details consult University website www.gndu.ac.in
Director of Research
NA/12/21184/2023/31194 Dated CHD :- 1/5/2024

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 firms/contractors registered with UPLC Lucknow 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 & <https://etender.up.nic.in>. Please ensure to see these website for any changes/amendments & corrigendum etc.
1. 07/Mgr.(Syst.)/Grievance Redressal System/2023-2024, Design, Development and implementation of Grievance Redressal System for NOIDA. Cost ₹ 33.93 Lacs
The above tenders can be uploaded by date 11.01.2024 upto 5.00 PM Pre-qualification shall be opened/downloaded on date 12.01.2024 at 11.00 AM.
Manager (System)
CLEAN, GREEN, SAFE & SECURE NOIDA

मध्यप्रदेश प्रदूषण नियंत्रण बोर्ड
पर्यावरण परिसर, ई-5, अरेरा कॉलोनी, भोपाल-462016
फोन : 0755-2466191, वेबसाइट : www.mppcb.mp.gov.in
ई-मेल : pur_mppcb15@rediffmail.com
ई-निविदा आमंत्रण सूचना

रियल टाइम वाटर क्वालिटी मॉनिटरिंग सिस्टम (आर.टी.डब्ल्यू.क्यू.एम.एस.) के प्रदाय, स्थापना, कमीशनिंग तथा संचालन व संधारण हेतु निविदा
मध्यप्रदेश प्रदूषण नियंत्रण बोर्ड, मुधालय, भोपाल द्वारा मध्यप्रदेश की विभिन्न नदियों जैसे नर्मदा, वेरवा, मन्दाकिनी, ताप्ती एवं अन्य जल निकायों की जल गुणवत्ता की मॉनिटरिंग हेतु 12 रियल टाइम वाटर क्वालिटी मॉनिटरिंग सिस्टम (आर.टी.डब्ल्यू.क्यू.एम.एस.) के क्रय, स्थापना, कमीशनिंग एवं संचालन व संधारण हेतु निर्माताओं/एजेंसी/अधिकृत फर्मों/सेवा प्रदाताओं से ई-निविदाएं पोर्टल <http://www.mptenders.gov.in> पर दिनांक 14.02.2024, 3.00 बजे दोपहर तक आमंत्रित की जाती है। निविदा के अन्तर्गत प्राप्त प्रथम कन्डर (तकनीकी बिड) दिनांक 16.02.2024 को दोपहर 3.00 बजे ऑनलाइन खोला जावेगा। आवश्यक तिथि सहित विवरण एवं निविदा प्रपत्र हेतु ई-निविदा पोर्टल www.mptenders.gov.in तथा बोर्ड की वेबसाइट www.mppcb.mp.gov.in का अवलोकन करें। भविष्य में निविदा के संबंध में किसी प्रकार का संशोधन समाचार पत्र में प्रकाशित न होकर केवल पोर्टल पर ही उपलब्ध रहेगा। अगर इस बिड में किसी भी गतिविधि के लिए निर्धारित कार्यक्रम में उल्लेखित किसी भी तिथि पर शासन द्वारा अक्काश घोषित किया जाता है तो वह तिथि आगामी कार्यदिवस में स्थानांतरित हो जाएगी।
म.प्र. माध्यम/113146/2024

PUBLIC NOTICE
It is to inform to the public at large that Mr. Vishu Goel who is purchasing the Flat No. 101, ON FIRST FLOOR, WITHOUT ROOF RIGHTS, BACK SIDE ON PLOT NO. 2, OUT OF KHASRA NO. 509 & 318, SITUATED AT RAJEEV VIHAR (DAMODAR VIHAR), KTORA, COLONY, PARGANA LONI, TEHSIL & DISTT., GHAZIABAD, U.P. from (1) Mr. Shiv Kumar Bansal & (2) Mr. Satveer Rathore S/o Mr. Kunal Singh Rathore vide Sale Deed dated 03.12.2021 duly registered as vide doc No. 10080, book no.1, vol no. 17403, pages 307-326, dated 03.12.2020, SR-Sadarli, GZB, and same to be financed by Aditya Birla Housing Finance Limited, That the Death Certificate of Late Mr. D.S Verma S/o Mr. Chet Ramerma and SMC of deceased Late Mr. D.S Verma S/o Mr. Chet Ramerma have been lost/misplaced/or not available, if any person having any type of claim/right/interest over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 7 days from today, failing which it shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrance, in the office of M/s. Legal LLP Office No. G-43, at Ground Floor, on Plot No. D-61, Sector-2 Noida, UP-201301, Contact: 98102139438

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
No. CE/PRO/ACTS-32723/04 dtd.03.01.2023
e-TENDER CALL NOTICE
Name of the work: Providing concrete road from TTB Junction (MCHP) to new Flyover and repairing of Bitumen surface in front of MCHP Workshop inside Harbour area. Estimated cost: Rs. 3,10,39,308.96. Last Date & time of submission : 23.01.2024 upto 17:00 Hrs. Refer our website for details: eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app.
Sd/- Executive Engineer, PRD, PPA
PPA/PR/78/2023-2024 dtd.04.01.2024

PUBLIC NOTICE
Notice is hereby given to public at large on behalf of my client Mr. Rajendra Kumar Kohli who intends to purchase Second Floor Portion of Plot No. 45, area measuring 324.37 sq. mtr., in Block-F, situated in the layout plan of Shivaji Enclave, Sector-F, Najafgarh Road, New Delhi from Mrs. Poonam Sachdeva and Mr. Manoj Sachdeva who were the owners through GFA dated 07.08.1997 and ATS dated 07.08.1997 respectively executed by Mr. Gouri Shankar Arora & Mr. Ganesh Kumar Arora Read with Conveyance Deed Regd. on 18.04.2015 executed by The PDI through MCD Slum & J.D. Department. If any person(s)/institution(s) has/have any claim on the said property may please inform to us in the address mentioned below with documentary evidence within 07 days of the issue of this notice. Failing which my client shall be responsible in any way to address any claim. **Md. Khairul Hussain (Advocate)**
Viksha Legal, 4/E, 2nd Floor, Jhandewalan Extn. 1, 110055, vikshalegal@gmail.com, Ph: 011-41255022, Mob No. 9810391872

PUBLIC NOTICE
Public is informed that Arvind S/o Ramesh Chander has lost his previous original documents i.e. sale deed dated 28/09/2020 no 3581 in favour of Satbir Singh S/o Umed Singh in original regarding the Property Situated at Village Kanhi 7.5 Distt. Rohtak- Measuring 10 Kanal 16 Marla. if any person has found/ information/ possession/ knowledge for above said missing documents then submit/ intimate within 07 days to Pankaj Sharma, Advocate, Chamber 392, Distt. Courts Rohtak. Ph no- 9896553019. There after any kind of claim will not be accepted.
Pankaj sharma, Advocate

NORTHERN RAILWAY
NOTICE
Sub: Regarding Pre-Bid meeting against Tender No.-07235090 due on 01.03.2024. In reference to above subject Tender No.-07235090 due on 01.03.2024 for procurement of "Supply Installation, Testing & Commissioning of PAPIS". Pre-Bid conference for subject Tender is schedule on 31.01.2024 at 11:30 Hrs at Conference Hall, 2nd Floor, Stores Department, Baroda House, New Delhi. 52/24

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE

APPENDIX IV-A
Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Property
E-Auction Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8(6) and Rule 9(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.
Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower(s) and Guarantor(s) that the below described Immovable Property mortgaged to Indiabulls Housing Finance Limited (CIN : L65922PL2005PLC136029) and Indiabulls Asset Reconstruction Company Limited (CIN : U68110MH2006PLC305317) acting as a Trustee of Indiabulls ARC- XXXI Trust (both IHFL and IARCL) are jointly and severally referred to as ("Secured Creditor"), the physical possession of which has been taken by the Authorised Officer of the Secured Creditor, will be sold on "as is where is", "as is what is" and "whatever there is" basis on 24.01.2024 from 02.00 P.M. to 04.00 P.M., for recovery of the following amounts due to IHFL and IARCL:
DUES OF INDIABULLS HOUSING FINANCE LIMITED:

S. No.	Loan Account Number	Outstanding Amounts (In Rs.) as on 26.12.2023
1.	HHLDCP00210364	Rs. 16,53,694/- (Rupees Sixteen Lakh Fifty Three Thousand Six Hundred Ninety Four only)

DUES OF INDIABULLS ASSET RECONSTRUCTION COMPANY LIMITED:

S. No.	Loan Account Number	Outstanding Amounts (In Rs.) as on 26.12.2023
1.	P008XXXI (Old Loan Account No. HHEDCP00210362)	Rs. 8,60,815/- (Rupees Eight Lakh Sixty Thousand Eight Hundred Fifteen only)

The Loan Account No. HHEDCP00210362, along with all right(s), title(s), interest(s), underlying security(ies), pledge(s) and / or guarantee(s) including the Immovable Property, has been assigned by IHFL to and in favour of Indiabulls Asset Reconstruction Company Limited ("IARCL") vide Assignment Agreement dated 21.08.2023, and the same has been renumbered by IARCL and bears new Loan Account No. P008XXXI. Consequently, IARCL has also become a Secured Creditor for the said Assigned Loan Account. IARCL has given its consent to IHFL to issue this Notice of Sale.

The amounts mentioned in both the tables given above are pending towards the respective Loan Accounts of IHFL and IARCL, by way of outstanding principal, arrears (including accrued late charges) and interest till 26.12.2023 with applicable future interest in terms of the Loan Agreement(s) and other related loan document(s) w.e.f. 27.12.2023 along with legal expenses and other charges, due to the Secured Creditor from PRAHLAD VISHWAKARMA and APARNA VISHWAKARMA.

The Reserve Price for the Immovable Property will be Rs. 7,50,000/- (Rupees Seven Lakh Fifty Thousand only) and the Earnest Money Deposit ("EMD") will be Rs. 75,000/- (Rupees Seventy Five Thousand only) i.e. equivalent to 10% of the Reserve Price.

DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY
FREEHOLD RESIDENTIAL FLAT NO. G-4, GROUND FLOOR, REAR SIDE MIDDLE (LIG WITHOUT ROOF RIGHTS) COMPRISED IN 1 BEDROOM, 1 DRAWING ROOM CUM DINING ROOM, 1 KITCHEN, TOILET AND BALCONY, HAVING SUPER COVERED AREA OF 400 SQUARE FEET I.E. 37.16 SQUARE METER BUILT ON PLOT NUMBER C-1/99 SITUATED IN RESIDENTIAL COLONY DLF DILSHAD EXT.-2, VILLAGE BRAHMPUR URF BHOPURA, PARGANA LONI, TEHSIL AND DISTRICT GHAZIABAD, GHAZIABAD - 201005, UTTAR PRADESH, TOGETHER WITH PROPORTIONATE UNDIVIDED RIGHTS AND SHARE IN THE LAND UNDERNEATH.
THE PLOT IS BOUNDED AS FOLLOWS:-
EAST : PLOT NUMBER C-1/98, NORTH : ROAD 30 FEET,
WEST : PLOT NUMBER C-1/100, SOUTH : OTHER'S PLOT,
For detailed terms and conditions of the sale, please refer to the link provided on the website of the Secured Creditor i.e. www.indiabullshomeloans.com. For bidding, log on to www.auctionfocus.in.
Date : 02.01.2024 AUTHORIZED OFFICER
Place : GHAZIABAD INDIABULLS HOUSING FINANCE LIMITED

Chief Engineer, Uttarakhand Rural Roads Development Agency,
First Floor, Directorate of Panchayatiraj, Opp-IT Park, Sahasradhara Road, Dehradun
Ref. No.:2004/11-02(xix)-2ITCO/URRDA/23 Dated : 05-01-2024
PRADHAN MANTRI GRAM SADAK YOJANA (PMGSY) e-Procurement Notice-27/2023-24
The Government of India has received a loan/credit number "LN 8864 IN" from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/International Development Association towards the cost of Rural Roads Project (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana) and intends to apply a part of the funds to cover eligible payments under the contracts for construction of works as detailed in NIT. Bidding is open to all bidders from eligible source countries as defined in the bidding document.
The Chief Engineer, URRDA on behalf of Governor of Uttarakhand invites the item rate bids in electronic tendering system for construction of works under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana in the Districts of Pithoragarh for 01 number of packages with estimated cost totaling to Rs. 2.47 Crore including their maintenance for five years from the eligible contractors (Class-A and above) registered with PWD/CPWD or equivalent".
Date of release of Invitation for Bids through e-procurement: 06-01-2024.
Availability of Bid Documents and mode of submission: The bid documents are available online and should be submitted online in www.pmgstendersuk.gov.in. The bidder would be required to register in the web-site which is free of cost. For submission of the bids, the bidder is required to have Digital Signature Certificate (DSC) from one of the authorized Certifying Authorities.
The bidders are required to submit original affidavit regarding correctness of information furnished with bid document as per provisions of Clause 4.4 B (ii) of ITB with **CONCERNED CIRCLE OFFICES, mentioned in SBD/MBD, only up to or before the time and date of the submission of the Bids (for World Bank funded works) and on a date not later than three working days after the opening of technical qualification part of the bid (for Regular PMGSY Works),** either by registered post or by hand, failing which the bids shall be declared non-responsive. No physical documents will be accepted after the closing date and time of submission of bids.
Last Date/Time for receipt of bids through e-procurement: 12-01-2024 01:00 PM.
For further details please log on to www.pmgstendersuk.gov.in
Chief Engineer, URRDA, Dehradun.
* Non Registered bidders may submit bids, however, the successful bidders must get registered in appropriate class with appropriate authorities before signing the contract.
Note : For e-Procurement for any sort of queries 0135-2608125 number may be contacted 10:00 AM to 05:00 PM.

Office of the Superintending Engineer
3rd Circle, Public Works Department, Pithoragarh
Email : sepwdph@rediffmail.com
Letter No. : 69 / 208C-03(Yata 'D')/2024 Dated : 03/01/2024
National Competitive E-Tender Notice
The Superintending Engineer 3rd Circle, Public Works Department Pithoragarh invites tender through E-Tendering (Two Bid System) on behalf of "Hon'ble Governor of Uttarakhand" for following works. All other information will be available online from date 08-01-2024 at 5.00 PM onward on website <http://www.uktenders.gov.in>

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Earnest Money (in Lac)	Cost of Tender (₹)	Validity of Tender (day)	Period of Completion (months)	Contractor's Category of Registration
1	Improvement work by Hotmix (B.M./S.D.B.C.) at internal roads in Tanakpur and Banbasa constituency area and district Champawat under Hon. CM announcement no. 35/2023 under state sector and 3 years maintenance work.	5.06	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	06 month	Category 'B' & higher for Road works, in State Govt./ Govt. of India
2	Improvement work by Hotmix in SH 109 Sukhidhang-dhura Reetha sahib motor road, (Brajnagar Taliyabanj portion) and SH 110 Sukhidhang-shyamlati motor road of constituency and district Champawat under Hon. CM announcement no. 36/2023 under state sector and 3 years maintenance work.	9.33	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	12 month	Category 'A' & higher for Road works, in State Govt./ Govt. of India
3	Improvement work of State Road No. 111 Laluwapani-Banlekhh motor road under Champawat constituency of Champawat district by Hotmix and 3 years maintenance work under Honorable Chief Minister's announcement no. 37/2023	6.45	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	12 month	Category 'A' & higher for Road works, in State Govt./ Govt. of India
4	Improvement of the internal link road of Champawat by Hotmix and three-year maintenance work under Champawat constituency of Champawat district under Honorable Chief Minister's announcement no. 38/2023	16.35	5000.00 +18% G.S.T.	120	12 month	Category 'A' & higher for Road works, in State Govt./ Govt. of India



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Divided they stand

INDIA bloc fissures widen; can it fight the Lok Sabha elections together as an entity?

The INDIA bloc, considered a strong alliance to take on the BJP when it took shape, is now bogged down by serious internal problems. Cracks within are widening each passing day, with the Congress acting like the big boss and regional parties digging their heels in. To divert attention, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge is going all out against the Modi Government, pointing out its failures. While the Government tries to play down his remarks, Kharge insists that it is using emotive subjects to distract citizens. The biggest problem for the INDIA bloc is the growing disagreement among its constituents. Varied political beliefs, interests and the desire to secure their own interests are causing these gaps to widen. Lately, there have been public fights on important policies, showing how fragile the alliance is. Even if the Congress chief is right about the Government using emotive issues (like the Ram temple) to shift focus from its failures, it won't be enough to keep the bloc together. Kharge says the ruling party is using sensitive topics to divert attention from serious issues like economic problems, unemployment and governance failures. While the INDIA bloc is together on these issues, the major problem causing divisions is finalising seat distribution and the formula for it in the upcoming general elections. Regional leaders are firm about pocketing more seats and not sharing their strongholds with national parties like the Congress. For the INDIA bloc to stay intact, three main issues need solving pronto: seat sharing, choosing a PM candidate, and agreeing on a common minimum programme.



Leaders also need to stop airing their grievances publicly without consulting others. It does not help when the TMC offers two seats to Congress, and AAP insists on fighting all 13 seats in Punjab. Also, naming Kharge as the PM candidate doesn't make sense until his party leaders agree. The common minimum programme is the least controversial, so that is where they should start, taking it step by step to form a united front against the NDA. Besides, they must also not forget why they formed the INDIA bloc in the first place. It was to dislodge the BJP from power as the ruling party is supposedly sending their leaders to jail, and intimidating them with ED and CBI raids. Ostensibly the whole Opposition came together as these parties were not given a fair chance in Parliament and several Opposition leaders were suspended on one pretext or the other. The INDIA bloc parties must realise they stand no chance against the BJP-led NDA if they fight separately. A divided vote will benefit only the BJP, considering PM Narendra Modi's charisma, as was evident in the recent Assembly elections. The choice is clear for them: fight together or face defeat. As the INDIA bloc deals with internal issues, finding a way forward means committing to open dialogue and compromise; otherwise, the election result is pretty much decided even before the polls are officially announced. Ego has no place in the scheme of things.

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PICTALK



NCC cadets perform during the NCC Republic Day Camp 2024, in New Delhi

The evolving landscape of philanthropy



VEERENDRA MISHRA

Adapting to the evolving nature of philanthropy is imperative for creating a brighter future. Every contribution, irrespective of its size, has the potential to exert a profound impact

The importance of social sector trends lies in their ability to shape and guide the strategies and activities of organisations operating in the social and nonprofit sectors. As we step into 2024, it becomes imperative to anticipate and comprehend the emerging trends that are poised to shape the ethos of giving and altruism. Understanding social sector trends empowers organisations to make well-informed decisions. Leaders and decision-makers, armed with insights into the current landscape, can proactively anticipate challenges, identify opportunities, and formulate effective strategies to address the evolving needs of society. Recognising prevailing trends facilitates the judicious allocation of resources, allowing nonprofits and social enterprises to prioritise areas gaining significance. This ensures that limited resources are directed towards initiatives with the highest potential for positive impact. Social sector trends often mirror shifts in public attitudes, government policies, and funding priorities. Intimately connected to the needs and aspirations of communities, these trends enable organisations to engage with communities more effectively. This engagement fosters a deeper understanding of local challenges and preferences, enriching the context for impactful interventions. In essence, social sector trends act as barometers of societal needs and preferences. While we talk about social sector trends, human rights take centre stage, which serves not only as a catalyst for social change but also as a gauge of democratic governance, making them an integral indicator of societal transformation. Viewed through this lens, the imperative becomes the realisation of a societal shift where the full enjoyment and exercise of human rights prevail. Therefore, the critical task at hand is to usher in social change that ensures the robust realisation of human rights. Philanthropy, in its current state, is undergoing rapid evolution, and these trends are set to redefine the landscape, fostering a more impactful and meaning-



ful world. Digital Philanthropy: In an increasingly interconnected world, the rise of digital philanthropy is palpable. The fusion of technology and altruism facilitates seamless contributions through crowdfunding platforms, blockchain-driven transparency, and virtual reality experiences that enable donors to witness the direct impact of their contributions. Impact Investing Gains Momentum: The concept of "doing well by doing good" is set to become even more prevalent in 2024. Impact investing, combining financial returns with measurable social or environmental benefits, will attract socially conscious investors seeking both financial growth and positive global change. Decentralised Philanthropy: Blockchain technology continues to disrupt traditional philanthropy by introducing transparency and security. Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs) will empower communities to collaborate, make decisions, and allocate resources collectively, promoting democratic giving and trust. Personalised Philanthropy Journeys: Donors now demand more than transparency; they seek personalised experiences. Nonprofits will leverage AI and data analytics to tailor their communications, offering donors opportunities to engage in projects



DATA ANALYTICS WILL PLAY AN INCREASINGLY PIVOTAL ROLE IN PHILANTHROPIC DECISION-MAKING. DONORS AND ORGANISATIONS WILL USE DATA TO MEASURE IMPACT, REFINE STRATEGIES, AND OPTIMISE RESOURCE ALLOCATION

aligned with their passions and values. Circular Philanthropy and Sustainability: As environmental concerns grow, philanthropy will increasingly focus on sustainability and circular economies. Donors will fund projects promoting waste reduction, recycling, and eco-friendly initiatives, contributing to a greener future. Collaborative Philanthropy Ecosystems: Philanthropic organisations will foster greater collaboration in 2024. The focus will shift from competition to synergy as nonprofits, governments, corporations, and individuals work together to address complex global challenges. Philanthrocapitalism Evolves: The era of philanthrocapitalism will continue to evolve, blurring the line between the public and private sectors as mega-philanthropists strategically allocate vast resources, reshaping global social and economic systems. Virtual Reality for Empathy and Education: Virtual reality will be harnessed to cultivate empathy and awareness among donors. By immersing themselves in the stories of beneficiaries, donors will gain a deeper understanding of the issues they address, leading to more informed giving. Inclusive Giving and Diversity: Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) will be paramount in philanthropy. Organisations will prioritise diverse leader-

ship, foster inclusive practices, and fund projects addressing systemic inequalities to ensure philanthropy benefits all. Data-Driven Philanthropy: Data analytics will play an increasingly pivotal role in philanthropic decision-making. Donors and organisations will use data to measure impact, refine strategies, and optimise resource allocation. Organisations cognizant of these trends can customise their proposals to align with the interests and priorities of potential funders, thereby increasing their likelihood of securing essential financial support. In our interconnected world, social sector trends frequently transcend geographic boundaries. Grasping global trends empowers organisations to draw insights from international best practices, tailor successful models to local contexts, and actively participate in global dialogues addressing critical social issues. Embracing these changes and adapting to the evolving nature of philanthropy is imperative for creating a brighter future. Every contribution, irrespective of its size, possesses the potential to exert a profound impact. Remaining informed, engaged, and steadfast in supporting causes aligned with one's values ensures a collective commitment to positive social change. (The writer is the Director RACE Lab, Samvedna India, views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Vedic way of predicting weather and its anomalies



V N BAHUGUNA

Atharva Veda gives a fascinating insight into understanding and predicting the weather, emphasising the importance of the purity of five elements

Medical experts have consistently asserted that the risk of heart disease significantly increases as the level of air pollution rises. Given the detrimental impact of air pollution on health, scientists conduct various types of research to shield society from this menace. What measures can a society, grappling with multiple problems, take to safeguard itself and create a healthy and conducive environment? How can scientific research contribute to supporting society? Certain activities such as vehicular traffic, industries, brick kilns, and similar operations cannot be halted permanently due to their crucial role in human life. In the contemporary era of advanced meteorological technology and sophisticated pollution monitoring systems, the ancient wisdom of Vedic knowledge emerges as a fascinating and often overlooked source of insights into weather patterns and environmental conditions. The Vedas, ancient Indian scriptures dating back thousands of years, encompass a wealth of information on var-



ious aspects of life, including agriculture, health, and the environment. This article delves into the Vedic forecast of weather and pollution, illuminating the intriguing intersections between traditional wisdom and contemporary challenges. The Vedas, especially the Atharva Veda, include references to atmospheric phenomena, celestial bodies, and the cyclical nature of seasons. The sages of ancient India were astute observers of nature, developing a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between the cosmos and the Earth. They acknowledged the influence of celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and planets on weather patterns.

A pivotal concept in Vedic meteorology is the comprehension of the five elements (Pancha Bhoota) - earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The balance and interaction of these elements are believed to govern weather conditions. The movement of the sun, the moon, and the constellations was meticulously studied to predict changes in weather, including the onset of monsoons and the duration of seasons. The Vedas also emphasise the significance of environmental purity and the repercussions of disrupting the natural balance. Although pollution is not explicitly termed in ancient texts, indirect references are made through discussions on the sanctity of rivers, forests, and air. The concept of 'Pancha Maha Yagna' or the five great sacrifices underscores humans' duty to protect and preserve the environment as an offering to divine forces. The ancient seers advocated for sustainable practices and responsible living to avoid disturbing ecological harmony. The Vedas underscore the value of planting trees, conserving water, and treating

nature with reverence - principles remarkably relevant in today's context as we grapple with the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change. Just as rain eventually falls in other seasons, air pollution increases on specific days. Is the phenomenon of increasing and decreasing air pollution natural? Even in ancient mythological history, there are descriptions of an increase in air pollution, with smoke from industries or vehicles not being the reason. Therefore, regarding air pollution, predictions about increased Air Quality Index (AQI) levels can be made through Vedic science. Based on Vedic science, I have been making predictions about such natural events for many years. It is noteworthy that the basis of predictions in Vedic systems is purely mathematical. By knowing the correct weather forecast well in advance, society can exercise restraint and take steps to lower pollution levels. (The writer is a Vedic expert and astrologer, using Vedic knowledge to predict various aspects of weather; views are personal)

THE IMPORTANCE OF BIRDS IN NATURE

Sir - We often overlook the significance of the small beings in our ecosystem that play a crucial role in balancing the environment. Birds, often considered a barometer for the planet's health, are commemorated on January 5 as National Birds Day to celebrate their special place in our hearts. Whether it's the woodpecker in your backyard or the common pigeons in the park, birds have always captivated us with fascination, love, and adoration. Regrettably, many birds today face endangerment or protection status, primarily due to habitat loss and illegal pet trade. Urbanisation, ecosystem degradation, infrastructural development, environmental pollutants, and climate change further contribute to their decline. Bird species are dwindling, and it is imperative that we take steps to save them. Birds act as 'ecosystem engineers,' serving as seed dispersers, pollinators, and scavengers. By planting more trees, reducing plastic use, and avoiding pesticides, we can create a bird-friendly environment by providing them with shelter and nesting areas. Let's extend our efforts by spreading awareness for these tiny creatures who form the backbone of our environment. Tashi Baheti | Ujjain

PLAYING SOFT HINDUTVA POLITICS

Sir - The invitation to attend the inauguration of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya has brought much delight to the BJP, causing divisions not only within the parties affiliated with the INDIA alliance but also within individual parties like the Congress or Samajwadi Party. It has starkly exposed the moral bankruptcy of so-called "secular" parties (except CPM), whose principles seem to be discarded when electoral interests come into play. In a society where the majority religion holds sway in the national arena, these parties cannot afford to ignore the significant population intoxicated by rabid Hindutva if winning votes remains their

Celebrating women-led films



The Kerala Story has emerged as the highest-grossing female-led film of 2023, chronicling the journey of an aspiring nurse coerced into extremism. The film addresses critical issues such as conservatism and the trafficking of women. The presence of women-led films successfully holding their ground in the predominantly male-dominated film industry is truly inspiring. In addition to The Kerala Story, films like Rocky aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani, featuring Alia

Bhatt as the female protagonist, challenge stereotypes and contribute to promoting feminism and gender equality among the masses. Likewise, web series such as Dahanu, Kaala Paani, Scoop, and Taali transcend the confines of the big screen, sparking conversations that defy stereotypes and foster a culture where everyone's voice is acknowledged and appreciated. The success of women-led films is not merely a triumph for creators; it represents a victory for audiences yearning for authentic stories. What is particularly noteworthy is how these movies extend their influence beyond mere entertainment, actively contributing to reshaping societal mindsets. By portraying the strength, resilience, and complexity of female characters, these films challenge prevailing beliefs and encourage a more inclusive perspective. They prompt viewers to question stereotypes, fostering a culture that embraces the rich diversity of human experiences. Gourja Soni | Delhi

sole concern. Hence, these parties are offering flimsy excuses to defend the indefensible. It is evident that the Congress is playing the card of "soft Hindutva." However, supporting the construction of a Ram Temple at the expense of a mosque, illegally destroyed at the alleged "Ram Janmabhoomi" spot, raises questions about sanity and morality. If the Congress cannot immediately reject the invitation, the term "Secularism" on the lips of party leaders might sound ironic henceforth. Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

VERDICT ON SEBI OR ADANI?

Sir - The recent verdict by the Apex court in the Adani group of companies-related cases should not be seen as a cause for celebration for Adani but rather as a vote of confidence for SEBI. The verdict is based on technical aspects rather than merit, emphasising the limitations of the Apex court in interfering with SEBI's functioning.

The complaint should contain tangible evidence to prove SEBI's inefficiency or inability to investigate Adani's companies, allowing the Apex court to take a position as desired by the complainant. Therefore, the judgment should not be projected as a clean chit to the Adani group of companies. While SEBI's probe is taking an unreasonable amount of time, changes affecting the course of the investigation are occurring. This case highlights the need for more stringent provisions to monitor and control corporate companies, and organisations like SEBI should be more professional and transparent in their functioning. The government, despite promoting the 'Ease of doing business,' must ensure a balance by implementing net-like provisions to filter and make business activities safe. AG Rajmohan | Anantapur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

QUALITY EDUCATION NEEDS QUALITY TEACHERS

Quality teachers and an inclusive curriculum are a must-have for good education



SAKSHI SETHI

In the words of Dan Rather, "The dream begins, most of the time, with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called truth."

Education forms the most important part of the life of an individual. The kind of education one receives largely depends upon the kind of teacher one has, especially in the early years of schooling. In today's scenario, teachers come in all types and sizes. Yet the downside of the quality of the Indian education system is generally acknowledged and is extremely worrisome. In recent research, it was found that around 45 million teachers are still needed to achieve quality education for everyone and everywhere.

Quality teachers ignite dreams, inspire actions and nurture greatness. They are also the guiding lights that fuel dreams, spark curiosity unlock the potential within every student and make a profound impact on many lives but looking at the current scenarios, the question that worries everyone is the education industry, especially the schools, are they lacking such quality teachers?

There is no denying the fact that teachers and coaches are major doors to the progress of any economy. They are very knowledgeable, humble, and confident and instill a love of learning on the contrary, this profession seems to be the last resort for school and work applicants in the current scenario. Today, many take this profession for want of anything else to do. Also, many quality teachers are not sticking around due to a lack of support, lack of professional development and difficult school culture and climate which is a cause of great concern for the authorities at large. The authorities at all levels need to appreciate the sacrifices of teachers be it standing in the classrooms for long hours, having to stay back after school hours and many more without getting any incentives instead of that. Apart from causing financial stress, this profession has even become a cause of mental health.



Great people can create some quality works, but quality teachers can produce thousands of great people as they are the masters of their craft. They set expectations for themselves as well as their students. It is important to remember that teachers with all sorts of qualities can be found in all colours, shapes and sizes. In the words of Jim Henson, "Kids don't remember what you try to teach them, they just remember what you are."

In a quality education system, teachers play a pivotal role as facilitators of knowledge and mentors, guiding students towards intellectual curiosity and a deeper understanding of subjects. Accessible and inclusive education ensures that all individuals, regardless of socio-economic background or other disparities, have the opportunity to unleash their full potential.

Investing in quality education is an investment in the future, laying the foundation for a more just, innovative, and prosperous society. As societies evolve, the emphasis on providing accessible, equitable, and excellent education remains essential for fostering a brighter and more sustainable future for all.

Remember, quality education starts with funding quality teachers, and funding quality teachers begins with quality funding of basic education. It is only quality education that is crucial to break the cycle of poverty and allow the children to create a better life for themselves as well as their families. Good infrastructure, quality teachers and an inclusive curriculum are and will always be the components of a well-organised basic educational structure.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

Sri Lanka: Quest for reconciliation

Interestingly, in post-conflict nations, many feel truth commissions and reconciliation processes haven't effectively addressed systemic issues



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

Appointing toothless commissions to investigate alleged crimes and conduct fact-finding is a recurring issue, with some commissions genuinely seeking the truth to implement comprehensive measures preventing recurrence, while others merely aim to buy time and conceal the truth. Regardless of intent, the plight of individuals remains unchanged until addressed, necessitating profound restructuring to mitigate the root causes behind violent social upheavals. Unfortunately, history has shown that democracy has not consistently triumphed. Politicians in post-conflict nations, the so-called liberal democracies, and most of their darling NGOs deliberately ignore democratically resolving the structural problems afflicting broken democracies, often treating victims as mere commodities.

Following nearly 15 years of persistent armed conflict, Sri Lanka has once again reached a pivotal moment with the introduction of a bill to establish the Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation, marking a significant stride forward. Though belated, this move is undeniably commendable. Against a backdrop of news stories sowing social phobia and fostering negativity among the general public, this development provides a glimmer of hope during precarious times.

The bill, presented as an act, outlines the establishment of the Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka, defining its powers and functions. It further emphasises the necessity of monitoring the implementation of the commission's recommendations to ensure accountability. Recognising truth-seeking as a fundamental right for all Sri Lankans, integral to their right to an effective remedy, the bill underscores the potential contributions of such mechanisms to national unity, peace, the rule of law, coexistence, equality with tolerance, respect for diversity, and reconciliation. The ultimate goal is to prevent disharmony and violence, securing the well-being of all Sri Lankans, including future generations.

The commitment extends to a national policy of truth-seeking and the advancement of national unity and reconciliation, reinforcing the State's assurance of freedom, equality, justice, fundamental human rights, and the independence of the judiciary as recognised under the Constitution. The Commission for Truth, Unity, and Reconciliation, to be headed by a chairperson and supported by established regional offices, shall be comprised of not fewer than seven and not more than twenty-one members.

According to the bill's stated objectives, the Commission is mandated to investigate, inquire, and provide recommendations regarding complaints, allegations, or reports related to damage or harm to persons or property, loss of life, or alleged human rights violations anywhere in Sri Lanka. These incidents must be connected to, or consequent to, the conflict in the Northern and Eastern Provinces during the period 1983 to 2009, or its aftermath. However, echoing the pattern of other commissions, it is underscored that the Commission's recommendations do not constitute a determination of civil or criminal liability for any individual.

This moment prompts me to reflect on the invaluable experiences I gained during my tenure at the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) as a communication consultant, under the distinguished



THE IRONY LIES IN THE DISILLUSIONMENT OF PEOPLE IN NUMEROUS POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES THAT ESTABLISHED TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS, INCLUDING ARGENTINA, GUATEMALA, LIBERIA, RWANDA, SIERRA LEONE, PERU, NEPAL, AND EVEN THE MUCH-PRAISED SOUTH AFRICA

leadership of former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. She, with whom we have shared a memorable time in addressing the most sensitive issue in the country, struggled with serious structural degeneration caused by the malpractices of those who wielded power. Her remarkable efforts to bridge ethnic divides in the country were a clear demonstration of her commitment to fostering unity. She never hesitated to acknowledge and categorize any wrong political decisions, whether made by her or even her immediate family members, which I find truly inspirational.

ONUR was established with noble aspirations of achieving lasting peace. However, amidst political uncertainty, the initiatives of this national institute plunged into the abyss of eclipse. In those days, ONUR undertook comprehensive initiatives, addressing issues beyond the surface. We not only engaged with Colombo-based NGOs, which were merely challenging the prevailing narrative that often prioritised a select few while neglecting those in remote areas, but ventured into the North and East. It was remarkable to witness former Tamil Tigers expressing confidence in the central government's efforts and the state administrative mechanism to rebuild and reunite their families—an aspect seldom highlighted. Among ONUR's key projects was Sahodara Pasal, where around a hundred students from various ethnicities, attending different schools, spent a week together in one place. At an event in Kandy, three female students, representing Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim backgrounds, stood united against the rain, sharing a single hijab as a symbol of strength and diversity. Despite initial misconceptions, these students developed bonds transcending ethnic lines, hugging and crying at the program's end, pledging lasting friendships. Unfortunately,

when I revisited ONUR three years later, the prioritisation of crucial social integration initiatives like Sahodara Pasal had waned. This neglect poses a risk of growing disparity and division, deviating from the path toward true unity and reconciliation.

The irony lies in the disillusionment of people in numerous post-conflict countries that established truth and reconciliation commissions, including Argentina, Guatemala, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Peru, Nepal, and even the much-praised South Africa. They harbour a collective sentiment that most truth commissions and reconciliation processes have failed to address their systemic issues. What prevails is an overarching politicisation, a malaise that transcends past truths and impedes their ability to break free. To truly escape their plight, they must depoliticise their tragic experiences, reclaim suppressed freedoms, and radically reshape their dismal reality. The key lies in inventing a new form of political solidarity that transcends national, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities—a bold move to build bridges over mass graves and ruins. Deep and thorough reconciliation alone cannot achieve this, as it inherently aligns with the status quo, perpetuating existing power relations and ideological deadlocks that bear the true responsibility for the tragedy. Victims seek more than reconciliation; they yearn for recognition of their tragic fate, a political cause to emerge from victimhood. Humanitarian assistance, spanning from necessities to weaponry, proves inadequate; genuine liberation arises not from aid but from unwavering political solidarity—a steadfast dedication to freeing them from a decade-long ordeal.

History paints a consistent narrative of conflicts as an inherent facet of human civilisation, profoundly shaping humanity's trajectory. Sri Lanka is not an exception. Svetlana

Alexievich aptly notes war's enigmatic hold on the human experience and its enduring impact on societies. Despite its monumental significance, there's a tendency to downplay the seriousness of war. The grim and daunting nature of conflicts may tempt us to avert our gaze, but avoidance doesn't diminish their historical weight. Wars have consistently redirected the course of human history, both by forging new pathways into the future and closing down others.

Recognising the transformative impact of conflicts underscores the paramount importance of reconciliation. More than a mere talk show or commodity, reconciliation embodies a profoundly humanistic approach to our daily life engagement. It acknowledges the intricate aftermath of war, emphasising the imperative for societies to unite, heal, and carve a path toward more harmonious coexistence. Prioritising reconciliation signifies a commitment to understanding the human dimensions of conflict, nurturing empathy, rebuilding trust, and ultimately striving for a future that transcends the scars of the past. In this light, reconciliation isn't just a historical necessity but an indispensable element in shaping a more compassionate and interconnected world.

Genuine reconciliation drives national consensus, inevitably guiding the nation toward steadfast national interests—the foundational principles of a truly national state. If our education system perpetuates religious and exclusivist ideologies, no matter how empathetic our discourse about victims of a conflict that ended 15 years ago, the seeds of hatred will persist, waiting to explode—an ominous lesson from history.

(The writer is a Sri Lankan journalist and worked as a communications consultant for the Government of Sri Lanka. Views are personal)

Integrate technology solutions for effective HR management

The atmosphere within your workplace speaks volumes about your company. It is where employees sense their value, and this sentiment is reflected in the quality of their work

The mark of technology has transformed the dynamics of finance companies, with the dominance of tech-driven functions revolutionising elements of finance such as continuous accounting, market trading, real-time trends, interest rate swapping, forensic auditing, advanced analytics, and data quality.

According to recent industry forecasts, the Digital Investment market within India's Fintech sector is anticipated to expand at a rate of 13.73% between 2023 and 2027, culminating in a market volume reaching US\$66.46 billion by 2027.

The increasing demand for a technology-driven finance industry underscores the necessity of integrating tech-



NISHIT SOOD

nological support across every operational facet to deliver profitable outcomes for all stakeholders. Advancements like internet banking, mobile payments, peer-to-peer lending, robo-advisory services, and crypto-currencies have notably transformed the finance sector. However, the integration of technology in the finance industry does not diminish the vitality of the human factor that has been the foundation of the

industry for a long time. **Overlap of Operation & HR** Amid the rapid evolution of financial services, the importance of HR technology remains paramount. With the sector experiencing exceptional technological changes, HR leaders play a crucial role in fortifying your organisation's resilience and fostering growth in this dynamic landscape. The upheaval caused by digitalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic is not something that can be easily ignored. While your customers can execute one-tap payments, your HR department may struggle with tracking Excel sheets containing employees' payments. This scenario is just one among many challenges faced by Fintech's HR department.

Fintech companies are leveraging technology to increase efficiency and productivity, while HR departments are burdened with managing the personal information of 400-500 employees. This presents a critical business issue. According to a survey conducted by the global public relations firm Ketchum, 52% of employees in the financial services sector reported higher levels of burnout at work compared to pre-COVID-19 times. The innovative nature of the sector should not cast a shadow on the well-being of those working within the organisations. Your organisation's HR department must have on-demand access on any device, at any time, to support the workforce when needed. **Finance & Accounting**

HR departments can automate payroll processes, ensuring timely and hassle-free payments for everyone. This automation enables HR to dedicate more time to employee engagement, retention, and well-being. Beyond simply automating payrolls, the Fintech sector can also assist in managing employees' financial health. In an uncertain economic climate shadowed by the looming threat of inflation, Fintech HR solutions can empower your staff to gain better control over their finances. **Personal Development** Tech-driven HR in the Fintech sector can support the personal development of millennials and Gen-Z hires. Skilling and upskilling have become the ultimate goals of many

employees, with nurturing opportunities becoming a reason for retention too. Companies can provide training on utilising FinTech tools for personal and business purposes. FinTech HR offers workshops and sessions to teach employees using tools like budgeting apps, investment platforms, and online payment systems. This helps for better personal finance management and empowers staff to streamline processes, boosting workplace productivity. **Productivity & Management** HR automation plays a significant role here. Automation software enables HR managers to accurately manage logging and compensation for hundreds of employees, monitoring attendance in real-

time. Integrating a time-tracking tool with your HR or administrative payroll software streamlines the entire process and enhances transparency across departments. This integration tracks overtime, ensures compliance, and facilitates fair compensation, providing employees with the assurance of fair compensation for their work. **Employees' Data Protection** Data has become a new mining gem for the industry to dig into and analyse for profits. To protect the customers' data, extensive measures are taken. Let's talk about your employees' data. It is vital to put security measures in place to save internal data from any cyber breach. **Utilise Superior Solutions** Whatever industry or sector

it is, it is crucial to hire and retain the best for every HR department. Whether it is for scaling up the business or aligning the growth of the industry with the organisation, human resources are important. The atmosphere within your workplace speaks volumes as soon as you step through the door or engage with a team. It's where employees sense their value, and this sentiment reflects in the quality of their work. With businesses rapidly expanding, they automate routine tasks to allow HR teams to focus on nurturing employee relationships and enhancing their experiences. (The writer is co-founder and chief flow officer at BYLD group; views are personal)

Israeli defence minister lays out vision for next phase of Gaza war

AP ■ RAFAH (GAZA STRIP)

Israel's defence minister on Thursday laid out his vision for the next phase of the war in Gaza, describing how Israeli forces would shift to an apparently scaled-down "new combat approach" in northern Gaza, while continuing to fight Hamas in the south of the territory "for as long as necessary".

Ahead of a visit by the US secretary of state, Yoav Gallant also outlined a proposal for how Gaza would be run once Hamas is defeated, with Israel keeping security control while an undefined, Israeli-guided Palestinian body runs day-to-day administration, and the US and other countries oversee rebuilding.

Israel has come under heavy international pressure to spell out a post-war vision but so far has not done so. The issue is likely to be on the agenda in Secretary of State Antony Blinken's talks this weekend in Israel and other countries in the region. The United States has pressed Israel to shift to lower-intensity military operations in Gaza that more precisely target Hamas, after nearly three dev-

astating months of bombardment and ground assaults.

The vagueness of many of Gallant's provisions made it difficult to assess how much they mesh with the US calls.

The document issued by Gallant was titled a "vision for Phase 3" of the war, and Gallant's office said the phase had not yet begun. It also said the ideas were Gallant's and not official policy, which would have to be set by Israel's war and security cabinets.

Gallant, who is a member of both cabinets, may be aiming to put his personal plan before the Americans ahead of others in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, which includes hard-right members likely to want a tougher approach.

Israel's campaign in Gaza has killed more than 22,400 people, more than two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory. The ministry's count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants. Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas after its October 7 attack, in which militants killed some

1,200 people and abducted around 240 others.

Much of northern Gaza, which troops invaded two months ago, has been flattened beyond recognition.

Associated Press footage from Gaza City showed people wandering through a shattered landscape with large fields of broken concrete and splintered wood and streets lined with toppled buildings.

With the focus now in the south, Israeli forces are battling Hamas militants in the city of Khan Younis and in urban refugee camps in the centre of the territory.

Some 85 per cent of Gaza's 2.3 million (23 lakh) people have been driven from their homes and squeezed into smaller slivers of the territory. Israel's siege of the territory has caused a humanitarian crisis, with a quarter of the population starving because not enough supplies are entering, according to the UN.

At the same time, airstrikes and shelling across Gaza continue to destroy houses, burying families taking shelter inside.

An Israeli strike on

Thursday flattened a home in Mawasi, a small rural strip on Gaza's southern coastline that Israel's military had declared a safe zone. The blast killed at least 12 people, Palestinian hospital officials said. The dead included a man and his wife, seven of their children and three other children ranging in age from five to 14, according to a list of the dead who arrived at Nasser Hospital in nearby Khan Younis.

There was no immediate response from Israel's military.

Gallant's statement underlined that the war would go on until Hamas' military and government capabilities are eliminated and the more than 100 hostages still in captivity are returned.

In the north, the statement said, forces will shift to a new approach that includes raids, destruction of tunnels, "air and ground activities and special operations". The aim would be "the erosion" of the remaining Hamas presence.

There was no word whether northern Gaza's population, which has almost entirely been driven south, would be allowed to return.

Sri Lanka President backs India-mooted solution to Tamil community's demand

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Friday backed the India-mooted 13th Amendment as a solution to address the minority Tamil community's long-pending demand for political autonomy.

India has been pressing Sri Lanka to implement the 13th Amendment which was brought in after the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement of 1987. The 13A provides for the devolution of power to the Tamil community.

Addressing a group of professionals in Jaffna, the capital of the Tamil-dominated Northern Province, Wickremesinghe said the devolution of power shouldn't merely be a political concept but an economic reality.

The 13A became a part of Sri Lanka's constitution in 1987 through the direct intervention

of the then-Indian government led by prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

It created nine provincial councils for nine provinces with a temporary merger of the North and East which the Tamil minority claims is their traditional homeland.

"If we examine the provisions of the 13 Amendment, there is ample authority to establish a robust local economy. We pledge not to intervene in those affairs. I am encouraging you to take the initiative," Wickremesinghe said.

Presently, the Western Province is the sole region capable of substantial independent spending, while others are financially dependent on it, he said. "This situation warrants reconsideration. By utilising the powers within the 13th Amendment, each province can chart its course to development. It's time to put these pow-

ers into action," he said.

Wickremesinghe's willingness to grant full powers other than police to provinces was shot down by the powerful Buddhist clergy who claimed the move could endanger the unitary state of Sri Lanka.

An all-political party meeting called by Wickremesinghe last year to reach a consensus on implementing the 13A ended up in a stalemate.

"Take Japan, for instance, it is not a federal state yet various departments and regions are well developed...Look at the United Kingdom - Scotland and Wales have their own developed economies. Why can't we emulate such functioning regional economies," the president asked.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which fought for a Tamil homeland for nearly 30 years had rejected the 13A.

They fought the Indian Army that was deployed as part of the Indo-Lanka Accord.

In 2013, the Tamils for the first time voted for their own chief minister for the North. The previous provincial elections were severely hampered by the LTTE's armed campaign.

The current Tamil political parties stay sceptical of the political will in the majority Sinhala south to fully implement the 13A.

The Tamils put forward their demand for autonomy since gaining independence from Britain in 1948 which from the mid-70s turned into a bloody armed conflict.

Over the years, the Sri Lankan government has been aggressive against Tamilian groups following its war with LTTE which collapsed in 2009 after the Sri Lankan Army killed its supreme leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.



A crane tries to remove the wreckage after the collision between two trains in West Java, Indonesia, on Friday. The trains collided on Indonesia's main island of Java on Friday, causing several carriages to buckle and overturn, officials said. AP/PTI

Rival Koreas conduct provocative drills along tense sea boundary

AP ■ SEOUL

The rival Koreas fired artillery rounds into the sea as part of provocative drills along their disputed sea boundary on Friday, in violation of the fragile 2018 inter-Korean military agreement.

The firing exercises are expected to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Experts say North Korea will likely intensify a run of weapons tests and its warlike rhetoric ahead of South Korea's parliamentary elections in April and the US presidential election in November. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea fired 200 rounds in the waters north of their western sea boundary on Friday morning. It was North Korea's first front-line maritime firing exercise in about a year. Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesperson Lee Sung Joon told a televised briefing that the North's artillery firing was "an act of provocation that threatens peace and heightens tensions on the Korean Peninsula." Lee said South Korea suffered no damage.

In a tit-for-tat step, South Korea had its troops on two border islands fire artillery rounds

south of the sea boundary later Friday, but North Korea's military didn't immediately respond. South Korea's Defense Ministry said the military will maintain a firm readiness to strongly punish any provocations by North Korea.

North Korea's state media haven't made any comments. Ahead of the South Korean drills, authorities blared broadcasts via street loudspeakers and sent text messages to residents on the five major border islands, asking them to evacuate to safe places. They worried North Korea could conduct a new round of firing training in response but lifted the evacuation order a few hours later as they detected no suspicious activities by the North's military, according to local officials.

The Koreas' poorly marked western sea boundary witnessed bloody naval clashes in 1999, 2002 and 2009. The North's alleged torpedoing of a South Korean warship killed 46 South Korean sailors in March 2010, and the North's artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island — one of the five border islands where the evacuation order was issued on Friday — killed four South Koreans in November

2010. The 2018 agreement requires the two Koreas to halt live-fire exercises and aerial surveillance in buffer and no-fly zones that they established along their border. But the deal is in danger of collapsing after both Koreas took steps to breach the accord amid bickering over the North's first successful military spy satellite launch in November.

South Korea resumed front-line aerial surveillance in protest at the North's satellite launch. North Korea responded that it would deploy powerful weapons at the border and won't abide by the 2018 deal any longer. South Korea later accused North Korea of restoring front-line guard posts that it had dismantled under the 2018 deal.

South Korea has previously accused North Korea of having already breached the deal numerous times with firing drills at the buffer zones, including one as recently as December 2022 off the Korean Peninsula's east coast. "North Korea is now in the stage of finding a justification for provocation after scrapping the 2018 military agreement," said Lee Sang Sook, a research professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and

National Security. "There is a possibility for North Korea to ramp up provocation steadily, so big and small provocations along the western sea boundary and the land border are expected this year." North Korean leader Kim Jong Un fired off fierce, derisive rhetoric against South Korea in a key ruling-party meeting at the end of December. He said South Korea must not be considered as a partner for reconciliation or unification, and ordered the military to use all available means — including nuclear weapons — to conquer South Korea in the event of a conflict.

Experts say Kim likely believes that a boosted military capability would increase his chances of wresting US concessions if former President Donald Trump is reelected in the US presidential election. Earlier Friday, North Korea's state media said Kim ordered authorities to increase production of mobile launch vehicles for missiles during a visit to a munitions factory. Kim said the role of the factory producing transport erector launchers, or TELs, is "very important" in bolstering North Korea's national defense because of a looming military showdown with its rivals.

Maldivian President Muizzu to visit China next week

PTI ■ BEIJING

Mohamed Muizzu, the new Maldivian President, will pay a state visit to China from January 8 to 12, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced here on Friday.

Muizzu, who is seen as a pro-China politician, took oath as the eighth President of the Maldives after defeating the India-friendly incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the presidential runoff held in September.

Muizzu is visiting China at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said in a press release.

Muizzu's predecessors in the recent past visited India first, considering the wide-ranging bilateral ties and the Maldives' proximity to India, followed by China which has expanded its influence in the island nation by investing in major infrastructure projects there.

However, Muizzu chose Turkey as his first destination for a foreign visit soon after his election followed by the UAE where he met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) on December 1 and discussed the progress of the wide-ranging bilateral ties.

During the meeting, both leaders agreed to set up a core group to discuss the multi-dimensional relations and further deepen ties.

The meeting took place after Muizzu requested New Delhi to withdraw 77 Indian military personnel from the Maldives and decided to review more than 100 bilateral agreements between the two countries.

Earlier, Muizzu's government announced its plans to drop a hydrographic survey agreement with India.

Muizzu will be the second-highest politician to visit China in recent weeks.

The new Maldives Vice President Hussain Mohamed Latheef last month visited China, his first visit abroad, and took part in the China-sponsored China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, (CIORF) in Kunming.

During the meeting, he said cooperation in the Indian Ocean must include all countries in the region and avoid factionalism to bring about development among the ocean communities in the area.

Significantly, while praising Chinese infrastructure projects, Latheef made no mention of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under which most of the Maldives' infrastructure projects were built.

The BRI is an ambitious plan initiated by President Xi in 2013 to develop new trade routes connecting China with the rest of the world via land and maritime networks to improve regional integration, increase trade and stimulate economic growth.

Indian-American medical biller held for million-dollar fraud

PTI ■ NEW YORK

A 61-year-old Indian-origin medical biller has been arrested for stealing more than USD 1 million from doctors who provided medical care to injured workers in New York, according to the Attorney General's Office here.

Amrish Patel and his two companies — Medlink Services and Medlink Partners — were charged on Wednesday with 27 felony counts for the thefts they allegedly committed from January 2012 through January 2019, New York Attorney General Letitia James announced.

Patel and the companies were charged with one count of insurance fraud in the first degree, one count of grand larceny in the first degree, one count of grand larceny in the second degree, one count of grand larceny in the third degree, one count of scheme to defraud in the first degree, 11 counts of falsifying business records in the first degree and 11 counts of workers' compensation fraud.

He was released with electronic monitoring and a USD 100,000 bond, according to the New York Attorney

General's Office.

Patel, who provided billing services to a Brooklyn-based orthopaedic surgery practice, submitted falsified claim forms to the New York State Insurance Fund (NYSIF) to steal at least USD 1.1 million in workers' compensation reimbursements for himself. "Doctors and health care professionals provide crucial care to our communities, and they rely on accurate and ethical billing to sustain these services and ensure our wellbeing," said Attorney General James.

"When money is illegally diverted away from doctors and providers, all New Yorkers suffer as a result. Fraud of any kind will never go unchecked in our state, and my office will continue to use every measure to hold accountable those who seek to cheat New Yorkers for personal gain. I thank our partners for their invaluable support and collaboration on this case," James.

"Fraud in any part of the workers' compensation system is detrimental to trust and hurts the entire system, including medical providers, carriers, businesses, and injured workers," said New York State Insurance Fund Executive

Director and CEO Gaurav Vasisht.

"I am thankful for the collaboration of the Attorney General and Inspector General's offices on this investigation," Vasisht.

"Workers' compensation fraud is not a victimless crime," said New York State Inspector General Lucy Lang.

"The defendant compromised the integrity of this crucial safety net when he took advantage of his trusted position to ensure accurate billing for medical providers and health insurers. I am grateful to the Office of the Attorney General and the New York State Insurance Fund for their partnership in rooting out this fraud."

Starting in 2011, Patel and his companies handled billing services for a Brooklyn-based orthopaedic surgery practice and were responsible for submitting billing for surgeries related to work-related injuries under the New York State Workers' Compensation Law.

Under the law, authorised providers are reimbursed for their treatment of injured workers by the insurance carrier for the employer.

Survivors are found in homes smashed by Japan quake

AP ■ WAJIMA

A woman was pulled carefully from the rubble 72 hours after a series of powerful quakes started rattling Japan's western coast.

Despite rescue efforts, the death toll on Friday grew to at least 94 people, and the number of missing was lowered to 222 after it shot up the previous day.

An older man was found alive on Wednesday in a collapsed home in Suzu, one of the hardest-hit cities in Ishikawa Prefecture. His daughter called

out, "Dad, dad," as a flock of firefighters got him out on a stretcher, praising him for holding on for so long after Monday's 7.6 magnitude earthquake.

Others were forced to wait while rescuers searched for loved ones.

Ishikawa officials said 55 of those who died were in the city of Wajima and 23 were in Suzu, while the others were reported in five neighbouring towns. More than 460 people have been injured, at least 24 seriously.

The Earthquake Research

Institute at the University of Tokyo found that the sandy coastline in western Japan shifted by up to 250 metres seaward in some places.

The earthquakes set off a large fire in the town of Wajima, as well as tsunamis and landslides in the region. With some routes cut off by the destruction, worries grew about communities in which water, food, blankets and medicine had yet to arrive.

The United States announced USD 100,000 in aid on Friday, including blankets, water and medical sup-

plies, and promised more help would come. Dodgers major leaguer Shohei Ohtani also announced aid for the Noto area, though he did not disclose the amount.

Thousands of Japanese troops have joined the effort to reach the hardest-hit spots on the Noto Peninsula, the centre of the quake, connected by a narrow land strip to the rest of the main island of Honshu.

Experts warned of disease and even death at the evacuation centres that now house about 34,000 people who lost their homes, many of them

older.

Masashi Tomari, a 67-year-old oyster farmer who lives in Anamizu city in Ishikawa, said it was tough sleeping on the floor with just one blanket. There was no heating until two stoves finally arrived Thursday — three days after the 7.6 quake struck.

"This is a terrible, cold place," he said.

Tomari felt at a loss thinking about his home, where broken glass and knocked over items littered the floor. It was pitch dark at night because the area was still out of power.

Air safety experts search for voice data from plane debris in runway collision

Tokyo (AP): A team of transport safety officials searched for a voice recorder from the severely burned fuselage of a Japan Airlines plane on Friday, seeking crucial information on what caused a collision with a small coast guard plane on the runway at Tokyo's Haneda airport.

Meanwhile, JAL also started using heavy machinery to remove some of the debris for storage in a hangar to allow the runway to reopen.

Six experts from the Japan Transport Safety Board, walked through the mangled debris of the Airbus A350-900 that was lying on the run-

way searching for the voice data recorder.

JTSB experts have so far secured both the flight and voice data recorders from the coast guard's Bombardier Dash-8 and a flight data recorder from the JAL plane to find out what happened in the last few minutes before Tuesday's fatal collision.

All 379 occupants of JAL Flight 516 safely evacuated within 18 minutes of landing as the aircraft was engulfed in flames. The pilot of the coast guard plane also escaped, but its five other crewmembers were killed.

Ukraine unleashes drones, missiles at Russian areas

AP ■ KYIV

Russian air defences downed dozens of Ukrainian drones in occupied Crimea and southern Russia on Friday, officials said, as Kyiv pressed its strategy of targeting the Moscow-annexed peninsula and taking the 22-month war well beyond Ukraine's borders.

Air raid sirens wailed in Sevastopol, the largest city in Crimea, and traffic was suspended for a second straight day on a bridge connecting the peninsula, which Moscow seized illegally a decade ago, with Russia's southern Krasnodar region. The span is a crucial supply link for Russia's war effort.

The Russian Defence Ministry said its defences intercepted 36 drones over Crimea and one over Krasnodar, part of an emerging pattern of intensified Ukrainian aerial attacks in recent days.

A Ukrainian Neptune anti-ship missile also was destroyed over the northwestern part of the Black Sea, the ministry said.

The developments came after three people were injured Thursday night by other Ukrainian rocket and drone attacks on the Russian border city of Belgorod and the surrounding region, said Belgorod Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov. On January 6, Ukrainian attacks on

Belgorod killed 25 people, officials there said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pledged to strike more targets on the Crimean Peninsula and inside Russian border regions this year. The goal is to unsettle Russians as President Vladimir Putin seeks another six years in power in a March 17 election.

Following a drone strike deep inside Russia last year, Zelenskyy said Ukraine had developed a weapon that can hit targets 700 kilometres away. He said last month Kyiv plans to produce 1 million drones, which have become a key battlefield weapon.

Other Ukrainian officials said it aims to manufacture this year more than 10,000 attack drones with a range of hundreds of kilometers, as well as more than 1,000 longer-range drones that can hit targets well behind the front line and inside Russia.

Both sides are raising the stakes of their long-range warfare as soldiers remain bogged down on the wintry battlefield. The UK Defence Ministry said on Friday that "ground combat has continued to be characterized by either a static front line or very gradual, local Russian advances in key sectors."

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has acquired ballistic missiles from North Korea and fired at

least one of them into Ukraine on December 30, the White House said Thursday, citing recently declassified US intelligence. It also is seeking close-range ballistic missiles from Iran, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

Ukraine said it stopped 21 out of 29 Russian Shahed drones launched late on Thursday and early on Friday. The assault injured two people, including a 14-year-old, and was the latest of almost daily Russian drone attacks in the new year.

Zelenskyy thanked Germany late on Thursday for a delivery of military aid, especially air defence materiel that he said "is timely and focused on our priorities."

Ukraine "should look to continue degrading Russia's ability to wage war by conducting an escalating campaign of airstrikes on targets far behind the front lines throughout occupied Ukraine and inside Russia itself," according to Mykola Bielieskov, a research fellow at Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies.

"This could include attacks on troop concentrations, military bases, and munitions stores along with logistical hubs and armament production facilities," he wrote in an assessment published by the Atlantic Council, a US think tank.

Feb 8 polls could be a farce, doubts Imran

PTI ■ LONDON/ISLAMABAD

Raising serious doubts over whether the scheduled February 8 polls in Pakistan will be held, jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has reiterated his "engineered" removal from power in 2022 by the establishment "under pressure from America" and the lack of "level playing field" in the elections.

The charge in the write-up attributed to him in The Economist published on Thursday with the title 'Imran Khan warns that Pakistan elections could be a farce', has already been denied both by the Pakistan government and the US Department of State.

The write-up paints a scathing criticism of Pakistan's current political scenario even as it reiterates Khan's oft-repeated allegations and ends with the demand for "free and fair" elections for political stability and the need for reforms. He also claims that "with democracy under siege", Pakistan is "headed in the opposite direction."

Founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, 71-year-old Khan is incarcerated at the Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi, convicted in the Tishakhana corruption case and being tried under multiple other cases, including one under the Official Secrets Act

in connection with the May 9 violent protests by his supporters that damaged military installations across Pakistan.

His nomination has been rejected by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) as is the case with that of many other leaders of his party ahead of the February 8 general elections for both national and provincial assemblies.

While expressing fears that the election scheduled for February 8 may not take place at all, the article stated that even if they do, such polls would be a "disaster and a farce" since PTI is being denied its basic right to campaign.

"Whether elections happen or not, the manner in which I and my party have been targeted... has made one thing clear: the establishment — the army, security agencies, and the civil bureaucracy — is not prepared to provide any playing field at all, let alone a level one, for PTI," Khan wrote.

The PTI founder went on to describe in detail how his ouster in March-April 2022 was "engineered" under pressure from America, which he alleged, "was becoming agitated with my push for an independent foreign policy and my refusal to provide bases for its armed forces."

Khan also said he wanted to be a friend to all and not anyone's proxy for war, an opinion shaped by the huge losses

suffered by Pakistan, including the loss of 80,000 lives while collaborating with America's "war on terror."

He also described in detail the cipher case, how the caretaker governments are illegal as the elections were not held within 90 days, blamed the ECP for rejecting his nomination, hindering the party's internal elections, and also lodging cases against him and his party colleagues "simply for criticising the Commission."

Meanwhile, Khan's The Economist write-up went viral on social media and garnered a volley of reactions in Pakistan. Some PTI supporters also shared the Urdu translation, some shared screenshots — the original is behind a paywall — and some even went ahead with an audio-visual of Khan reading it out generated using AI.

Pakistan's leading daily The Dawn said, "While sources within the party were hesitant to comment on how the writing may have been relayed to the publication (in London) from inside prison, they insisted that the words were indeed those of Mr Khan."

It also said that some observers expressed doubts over whether the article was indeed by Khan, but many noted that the tone and content of the article was consistent with his views. Earlier, reacting to questions on



Pakistan elections, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, "we want to see free and fair elections that are conducted in accordance with Pakistan's laws."

"It's not for the United States to dictate to Pakistan how it conducts — the exact specifics of how it conducts its election, but to make clear that we want to see those elections conducted in a free, fair, and peaceful manner that includes freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and ultimately a full, open, reliable, vibrant democratic process," Miller said on Thursday in Washington.

China calls for peaceful coexistence with US

AP ■ BEIJING

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Friday that the United States and China must insist on peaceful coexistence and transcend their differences like they did when they established diplomatic relations 45 years ago this week.

Wang also promised that giant pandas would return to the US — and specifically California — by the end of the year.

"China-US cooperation is no longer a dispensable option for the two countries or even for the world, but a must-answer question that must be seriously addressed," he said.

Wang struck a largely conciliatory note at a lavish banquet marking the anniversary with 300 guests at a hall in the sprawl-

ing Diaoyutai state guest house complex in the Chinese capital.

The two countries are trying to navigate — and avoid a war — in what may be their most difficult waters since the US ended official ties with Taiwan and recognised the communist government in Beijing as the government of China on January 1, 1979.

China's rise as an economic and military power is challenging long-standing American leadership in the Asia region and globally.

"The world is currently undergoing profound changes unseen in a century," Wang said. "We must think about how to calibrate the direction of the large ship of China-US relations (and) avoid hidden reefs and dangerous shoals."

Both Wang and David Meale, the deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy, cited congratulatory letters exchanged by Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden on Monday's anniversary.

Meale, who spoke after Wang, said Biden expressed his commitment to managing the relationship responsibly and said he looked forward to building on the progress made by past leaders of the two countries.

Wang did criticise the use of "the big stick of sanctions" and engaging in power games, charges that China often levels at the United States. He denied that China seeks to supplant any other country and called on the US to respect China's development path and core interests.

Pak SC reserves verdict in lifetime disqualification case

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Friday reserved its judgment in the hearing of a key case that would settle the issue of lifetime disqualification of some leading politicians, including former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan.

The verdict is expected to determine once and for all the controversy around the period of disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution and the Elections Act 2017.

A 2018 judgment by a five-member bench of the apex court had declared that disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) was for life, but changes made in the Elections Act 2017 on June 26, 2023, by a coalition government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) restricted it to a five-year term only.

A seven-member bench, headed by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, conducted the hearing on Friday.

During the hearing, the chief justice remarked that the Supreme Court verdict on lifetime disqualification and the amendments to the Elections Act 2017 could not co-exist. He also stated that discrepancies in the apex court's interpretation and the law could result in "confusion" in the upcoming general elections.

At the hearing's conclusion, the

chief justice said a short order would be issued without specifying a time for its announcement.

"We will try to come up with a shorter order as soon as possible. Probably not today, but it will be very soon, God willing," he said.

During the hearing, which spanned several days, the court heard many lawyers, garnering their views on the duration of disqualification.

The remarks made by the chief justice and some other judges indicated they were not comfortable with the lifelong ban on convicted politicians, the Pakistani media reported.

However, it was not clear if the limit of disqualification should be imposed through a court order or an amendment to the Constitution.

Most of the arguments were in favour of nullifying the concept of the lifelong ban and limiting it to a five-year term. However, the chief justice repeatedly said that he also wanted to hear arguments supporting lifelong disqualification and asked lawyers to come forward.

Sharif, former prime minister and also a frontrunner for the fourth term in the February 8 general elections, was disqualified in the Panama Papers case in 2017. His rival Imran Khan, who was disqualified in the Tishakhana corruption case last

year, also was hit by the same law.

However, Sharif got a kind of relief when his party-led government amended the election laws last year to limit the disqualification to five years, which allowed him to file nomination papers for the upcoming elections.

The controversy was not over as his candidature has been challenged as the interpretation of Article 62(1)(f) clashed with the changes made in the Elections Act 2017. The outcome of the hearing would decide the future for both Sharif and Khan, as well as many other politicians.

Seventy-four-year-old Sharif's case was final until the period of disqualification was reduced. However, 71-year-old Khan's disqualification has not attained finality, and his appeal against it is still pending.

Incarcerated Khan's nomination papers for the February 8 general elections were rejected on December 30 based on disqualification due to his conviction in the offence of "moral turpitude" in a corruption case and other reasons, a government official had reasoned.

Earlier, the issue came into the focus of the Supreme Court last month during the hearing of a petition of a politician from Dera Ghazi Khan, Badshah Khan Qaisarani, who was disqualified for producing a fake graduation degree.

Pak Senate passes resolution seeking delay in elections

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Senate on Friday approved a resolution seeking a delay in the general election, citing cold weather and security concerns, increasing the political uncertainty ahead of the planned polls on February 8.

The resolution, tabled by independent Senator Dilawar Khan, received overwhelming support in the upper house of Pakistan's Parliament. However, Information Minister Murtaza Solangi and three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party opposed the move.

Senator Khan said that most areas of the country were currently experiencing harsh cold weather, so participation in elections in those areas was unmanageable.

Raising concerns about the security situation, he said the law and order situation was not good and added that politicians were being targeted, including an attack on Jamiat Ulama-Islam Fazl (JUI-F) chief Fazlur Rehman.

"Even security forces are being attacked in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (provinces)," he added.

The resolution was passed with only 14 lawmakers in attendance, according to the Dawn newspaper, despite clear orders by the Supreme Court to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to stick to its announcement to hold the elections on February 8.

The move by the Senate is expected to increase political and economic instability in the country. The Pakistan Stock Exchange reacted negatively to the resolution, and the share market immediately fell by more than 800 points.

Biden to stress on democracy in campaign pitch

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden will kick off his 2024 pitch to voters on Friday, the day before the anniversary of the violent riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, by posing the question of whether democracy is still a "sacred cause" worth sacrificing for.

Biden believes the upcoming election is largely about that question, according to a Biden adviser who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the Democratic president's expected remarks.

Whether or not the nation agrees may end up a central question of the 2024 race.

The president will speak from near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington and the Continental Army spent a bleak winter nearly 250 years ago.

And he'll talk about how Washington spoke to his army about democracy as a "sacred cause."

The January 6 attack was a vivid reminder of how that democracy can be tested, Biden is expected to say, according to the adviser.

At least nine people who were at the Capitol that day died during or after the rioting, including several officers who died of suicide, a woman who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break into the House chamber, and three other Trump supporters whom authorities said suffered medical emergencies.

Although the chaos of January 6 came down on members of both political parties, it is being remembered in a largely polarized fashion now, like other aspects of political life in a divided country.

Biden will characterise his predecessor as a serious threat to the nation's founding principles, arguing that Trump — who has built a commanding early lead in the Republican 2024 presidential primary — will seek to undermine US democracy should he win a second term.

Trump, who faces 91 criminal charges stemming from his efforts to overturn his loss to Biden and three other felony cases, argues that Biden and top Democrats are themselves seeking to undermine democracy by using the legal system to thwart the campaign of his chief rival.

In the days after the attack, 52 per cent of US adults said Trump bore a lot of responsibility for January 6, according to the Pew Research Center. By early 2022, that had declined to 43 per cent.

The number of Americans who said Trump bore no responsibility increased from 24 per cent in 2021 to 32 per cent in 2022.

Brazil postpones visa requirements for US, Canada and Australia citizens to April

AP ■ RIO DE JANEIRO

Brazil postponed for the second time the reintroduction of requirements to obtain tourist visas for citizens of the US, Australia and Canada, officials said.

Former president Jair Bolsonaro scrapped the visa requirements in 2019 to support the tourism industry, but the three countries continued to demand visas from Brazilians. The South American country requires visas from travellers based on principles of historical reciprocity and equal treatment.

The government initially postponed the visa implementation on October 1. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in September then set January 10 as the new deadline. On Thursday night, Brazil's presidency said it would be postponed yet again till April 10. The statement said the government was still finalizing the new visa system and wanted to avoid implementing it close to the high season, mainly during the New Year's celebrations and Carnival festivities in February, which attract tens of thousands of tourists.

Lula reinstated the visa requirements after he took office one year ago. The countries in question initially included Japan, but the east Asian nation struck a deal with Brazilian authorities in September to ease travel provisions between the two, keeping its citizens off of the new list.

Capitol riot, 3 years later: Hundreds of convictions, yet 1 major mystery unsolved

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Members of far-right extremist groups. Former police officers. An Olympic gold medalist swimmer. And active duty US Marines.

They are among the hundreds of people who have been convicted in the massive prosecution of the January 6, 2021 riot in the three years since the stunned nation watched the US Capitol attack unfold on live TV.

Washington's federal court system remains flooded with trials, guilty plea hearings and sentences stemming from what has become the largest criminal investigation in American history. And the hunt for suspects is far from over. "We cannot replace votes and deliberation with violence and intimidation," Matthew Graves, the US attorney for the District of Columbia, told reporters on Thursday.

Authorities are still working to identify more than 80 people wanted for acts of violence at the

Capitol. And they continue to regularly make new arrests, even as some January 6 defendants are being released from prison after completing their sentences.

The cases are playing out at the same courthouse where Donald Trump is scheduled to stand trial in March in the case accusing the former president of conspiring to overturn his 2020 election loss in the run-up to the Capitol attack.

Here's a look at where the cases against the January 6 defendants stand:

More than 1,230 people have been charged with federal crimes in the riot, ranging from misdemeanour offenses like trespassing to felonies like assaulting police officers and seditious conspiracy. Roughly 730 people have pleaded guilty to charges, while another roughly 170 have been convicted of at least one charge at a trial decided by a judge or a jury, according to an Associated Press database.

Only two defendants have been acquitted of all charges, and those were trials decided by a judge

rather than a jury.

About 750 people have been sentenced, with almost two-thirds receiving some time behind bars. Prison sentences have ranged from a few days of intermittent confinement to 22 years in prison. The longest sentence was handed down to Enrique Tarrio, the former Proud Boys national chairman who was convicted of seditious conspiracy for what prosecutors described as a plot to stop the transfer of power from Trump, a Republican, to Joe Biden, a Democrat.

Many rioters are already out of prison after completing their sentences, including some defendants who engaged in violence. Scott Fairlam — a New Jersey man who punched a police officer during the riot and was the first January 6 defendant to be sentenced for assaulting law enforcement — was released from Bureau of Prisons custody in June.

ALL EYES ON THE SUPREME COURT: Defense attorneys and prosecutors are close-

ly watching a case that will soon be heard by the US Supreme Court that could impact hundreds of January 6 defendants. The justices agreed last month to hear one rioter's challenge to prosecutors' use of the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding, which refers to the disruption of Congress' certification of Biden's 2020 presidential election victory over Trump.

More than 300 January 6 defendants have been charged with the obstruction offense, and so has Trump in the federal case brought by special counsel Jack Smith. Lawyers representing rioters have argued the charge was inappropriately brought against January 6 defendants.

The justices will hear arguments in March or April, with a decision expected by early summer. But their review of the obstruction charge is already having some impact on the January 6 prosecutions. At least two defendants have convinced judges to delay their sentences until after the Supreme Court rules on the matter.

Greece unveils palace where Alexander the Great became king

AP ■ ANCIENT AIGAI (GREECE)

It was the largest building of classical Greece: the palace where Alexander the Great was proclaimed king before he launched a conquest that took him as far as modern-day Afghanistan.

The Palace of Aigai in northern Greece was fully reopened Friday following a 16-year renovation that cost more than 20 million Euros (USD 22 million) and included financial support from the European Union (EU).

It was built more than 2,300 years ago during the

reign of Alexander's father, Philip II, who had transformed the kingdom of Macedonia into a dominant military power of ancient Greece. Aigai was its royal capital.

"After many years of painstaking work, we can reveal the palace... What we are doing today is an event of global importance," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said at an inauguration event at the site Friday.

The palace contained column-rimmed courtyards, courts, places of worship, and spacious banquet halls, its floors decorated with patterned mar-

ble and intricate mosaics. The building covered a ground area of 15,000 square metres (1,60,000 square feet), a little under the area covered by the US Capitol building.

Shaped like two adjoining, unequally sized, square donuts, the Palace of Aigai was the administrative and spiritual centre of the kingdom. The palace remains and nearby royal tombs are a United Nations World Heritage Site at the area next to the modern village of Vergina. Like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, the marble columns were resurrected by fitting pieces of stone

unearthed in the ruins together with replica replacement parts.

Some 65 kilometres (40 miles) southwest of the port city of Thessaloniki, in northern Greece, Aigai drew international attention in the late 1970s during burial mound excavations in the area of rolling green hills with patches of wild poppies and daffodils.

The late Greek archaeologist Manolis Andronikos led the digs and discovered the royal tombs, recovering a gold casket and other gold artifacts as well as the bones widely believed to belong to Philip II. The discov-

eries revealed the sophistication of the ancient Macedonians, who had often been sidelined in historical accounts by attention on Athens.

Angeliki Kottaridi was still an archaeology student at university when she joined the project as a young assistant. She devoted her life's work to the excavations and decades later became the driving force behind the new museum at Aigai, which opened a year ago, and the palace restoration.

She retired on December 31 as head of the region's archaeological service and was

honoured at Friday's ceremony. "What you discover is stones scattered in the dirt, and pieces of mosaics here and there," Kottaridi told state television ahead of Friday's inauguration.

"Then you have to assemble things and that's the real joy of the researcher," Kottaridi said. "So when people ask me what makes me happy, I tell them it's not the moment something is revealed. It's the moment you realize you can take the knowledge one step further."

The renovated site will open to the public Sunday.

Indian economy outperforming peers: UN

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS
India is projected to grow at 6.2 per cent in 2024, supported by robust domestic demand and strong growth in the manufacturing and services sectors, the United Nations has said.
The UN World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2024 report, launched here on Thursday, said that gross domestic product in South Asia is projected to increase by 5.2 per cent in 2024, driven by a robust expansion in India, which remains the fastest-growing large economy in the world.
"Growth in India is projected to reach 6.2 per cent in 2024, slightly lower than the 6.3 per cent estimate for 2023, amid robust domestic demand and strong growth in the manufacturing and services sectors," the report said.
India's GDP is projected to increase to 6.6 per cent in 2025. The report notes that economic growth in India is projected to remain "strong" at 6.2 per cent this year mainly supported by resilient private consumption and strong public investment. While manufacturing and services sectors will continue to support the economy, erratic

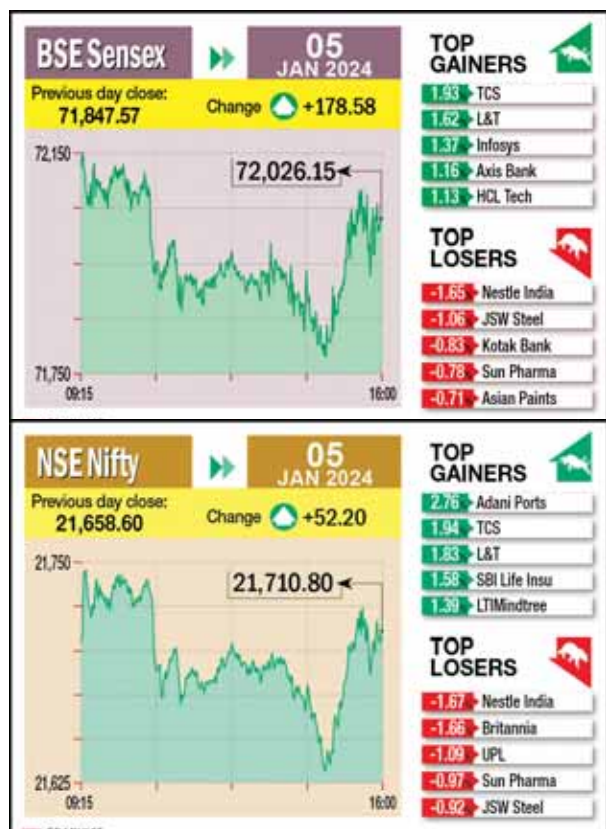
rainfall patterns will likely dampen agricultural output, it said. "Indian economy again outperformed its peers, not just this year but the last few years," Chief of the Global Economic Division Monitoring Branch, Economic Analysis and Policy Division (UN DESA) Hamid Rashid told reporters.
He said that India's economic growth has consistently remained over six per cent and "we believe this will continue in 2024 and 2025 as well."
Rashid noted that although inflation was relatively high for India, it didn't have to raise rates as much and inflation has come down quite a bit.
"That has allowed the government to sustain the fiscal support that it needed," he said adding that "we didn't see significant fiscal adjustments or fiscal retrenchment in India."
"Overall, domestic consumption is growing, household spending has grown, employment situation has improved quite a bit. So we are very optimistic about India's growth outlook in the near term," he said. In response to a question on factors holding back India's economic growth, Director of the Economic Analysis and Policy Division Shantanu Mukherjee



cited India's GDP growth rates of four years from 2022-2025 and said: "I'm not sure that 7.7%, 6.3%, 6.2% and 6.6% is exactly holding something back."
"In a kind of abstract sense, one would run the risk of overheating an economy if you grew at much faster rates at the size and complexity of India," he said. Mukherjee noted that the Indian government has recently modified its tax collection systems and "those have also certainly helped and given a more stable playing field for businesses and other initiatives to progress."
Highlighting risks facing the economy, he said some of those risks are more global in nature. "India still remains a very large-

tively stable. So any shock on those lines would boomerang through the economy," he said. Consumer price inflation in India is expected to decelerate from 5.7 per cent in 2023 to 4.5 per cent in 2024, staying within the two to six per cent medium-term inflation target range set by the Central Bank.
"The risk of a surge in inflation in the coming months cannot be ruled out, however, as potential increases in commodity prices and the adverse impact of climate events on food prices could disrupt the pace of disinflation," the report said.
The labour market situation in South Asia remained fragile in 2023 despite improvements in some countries.
In India, labour market indicators improved over the year, with labour force participation increasing in August to its highest rate since the onset of the pandemic, the report said, citing the Reserve Bank of India. The unemployment rate averaged 7.1 per cent in September, the lowest value in a year, with unemployment in rural areas falling despite weaker monsoon rains. Youth unemployment rates declined significantly during the first quarter of 2023 to the lowest value since the pan-

dem, it said.
The report also noted that the Reserve Bank of India has been cautious about opening the country's financial markets and has been implementing appropriate risk management systems.
The UN said global economic growth is projected to slow from an estimated 2.7 per cent in 2023 to 2.4 per cent in 2024, trending below the pre-pandemic growth rate of three per cent.
This latest forecast comes on the heels of global economic performance exceeding expectations in 2023. However, last year's stronger-than-expected GDP growth masked short-term risks and structural vulnerabilities, it said.
The better-than-expected performance for 2023 is chiefly driven by several large economies, notably the US but also Brazil, India and Mexico, Mukherjee told reporters.
The UN's flagship economic report presents a sombre economic outlook for the near term. Persistently high interest rates, further escalation of conflicts, sluggish international trade, and increasing climate disasters, pose significant challenges to global growth.



Markets extend gains on foreign fund inflows

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Benchmark stock indices BSE Sensex and Nifty closed higher for a second straight day on Friday, following gains in IT, tech and capital goods shares amid fresh foreign capital inflows.
After slipping briefly during the late afternoon trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex made a quick recovery and jumped 178.58 points or 0.25 per cent to settle at 72,026.15. During the day, it soared 308.91 points or 0.42 per cent to 72,156.48.
The Nifty climbed 52.20 points or 0.24 per cent to 21,710.80. On a weekly basis, the BSE benchmark declined 214.11 points or 0.29 per cent, and the Nifty dipped 20.6 points or 0.09 per cent.
"Markets traded volatile and ended marginally higher amid mixed cues. After the initial uptick, the Nifty drifted gradually lower and oscillated in a range till the end."
"Meanwhile, a mixed trend continued on the sectoral front wherein recovery in IT majors and follow-up buying in select heavyweights kept the traders occupied. The broader indices managed to edge higher for yet another session wherein small cap gained over half a per cent," Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.
Among the Sensex firms, Larsen & Toubro, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, HCL Techno-

Hindustan Unilever, Axis Bank, ICICI Bank and Wipro were the major gainers. Nestle India, Asian Paints, JSW Steel, Kotak Mahindra Bank and HDFC Bank were among the losers.
In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.61 per cent, and the midcap index rose 0.19 per cent.
Among the indices, IT jumped 1.29 per cent, capital goods (1.27 per cent), tech 1.03 per cent, industrials (0.97 per cent), telecommunication (0.59 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.35 per cent).
Commodities, consumer durables and metal were the laggards.
"Investors are also staying cautious ahead of eurozone inflation data today. On the domestic front, the market is moving towards the results season, and we expect the exuberance of the broader index may be tested if the December quarter earnings do not justify the valuation," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.
The services sector growth in India rose to a three-month high in December, supported by favourable economic conditions and positive demand trends, a monthly survey said on Friday.
The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Services PMI Business Activity Index rose from 56.9 in November to 59 in December, highlighting a sharp increase in output that was the most pronounced since September.

Indian economy to grow 7.3%

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Indian economy is estimated to grow at 7.3 per cent in 2023-24 against 7.2 per cent in the previous fiscal, the National Statistical Office (NSO) said on Friday in its first advance estimates of national accounts.
Releasing the first advance estimates of National Income for 2023-24, the NSO said, "Real GDP or GDP at Constant (2011-12) Prices in the year 2023-24 is estimated to attain a level of Rs 171.79 lakh crore, as against the Provisional Estimate of GDP for the year 2022-23 of Rs 160.06 lakh crore, released on 31st May 2023".
According to a statement, the growth in real GDP during 2023-24 is estimated at 7.3 per cent compared to 7.2 per cent in 2022-23.
GDP at current prices in the year 2023-24 is estimated at Rs 296.58 lakh crore against the provisional estimate of GDP of Rs 272.41 lakh crore for the year 2022-23, released on May 31, 2023, it stated.
The growth in nominal GDP during 2023-24 is estimated at 8.9 per cent against 16.1 per cent in 2022-23, it added.
In December 2023, the RBI raised India's GDP growth rate estimate to 7 per cent for 2023-24 from its earlier projection of 6.5 per cent.

India's forex reserves jump to \$623.2 bn

PTI ■ MUMBAI
India's forex reserves jumped by USD 2.759 billion to USD 623.2 billion in the week ended December 29, the Reserve Bank said on Friday.
In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had increased by USD 4.471 billion to USD 620.441 billion.
In October 2021, the country's forex kitty had reached an all-time high of USD 645 billion. The reserves took a hit as the central bank deployed the kitty to defend the rupee amid pressures caused majorly by global developments since last year.
For the week ended December 29, the foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, increased by USD 1.869 billion to USD 551.615 billion, as per the data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).
Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves.
Gold reserves were up by USD 853 million to USD 48.328 billion during the week, the RBI said.
The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were up by USD 38 million to USD 18.365 billion, the apex bank said.
India's reserve position with the IMF was down by USD 2 million to USD 4.892 billion in the reporting week, the apex bank data showed.



Government to revamp SOPs for safe tunnel construction

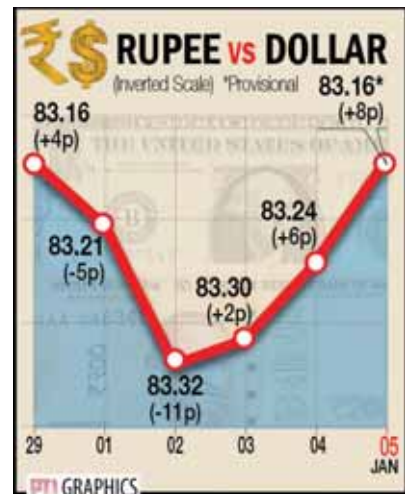
PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The government on Friday said it will revamp the standard operating procedures for tunnel construction after an expert panel found many shortcomings in the under-construction Silkyara tunnel, which collapsed in November last year, leaving 41 workers stranded for more than two weeks.
At a press briefing, Road Transport and Highways Secretary Anurag Jain said the Silkyara tunnel project in Uttarakashi is still workable, and the government will not abandon it.
An experts' panel to investigate the collapse of a portion of the under-construction Silkyara tunnel has pointed out many shortcomings in the project, he added.
"Silkyara tunnel collapse se humne kaafi kuch seekha hai (We have learnt a lot from the collapse of the under-construction Silkyara tunnel)," he said.
A total of 41 workers were trapped after a portion of the under-construction tunnel collapsed on November 12 and the workers were rescued on November 28.
The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), on December 6, constituted a five-member committee to investigate the collapse of the tunnel.
"The committee has suggested some changes in standard operating procedures (SOPs) of tunnel construction. Based on the committee's suggestion, we will change SOPs for tunnel construction to prevent the occurrence of Silkyara-like mishaps in the future," he added.

Confident of achieving 13,814-km highway construction: Road Secy

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) is confident of achieving the highways construction target of 13,814 kilometres for the current fiscal, its secretary Anurag Jain said on Friday.
Addressing a press conference, Jain further said the total length of national highways in India increased 60 per cent to 1,46,145 km till December 2023, from 91,287 km in 2014, since the Narendra Modi government came into power.
"The pace of highway construction in 2023-24 so far has been better than last year, and we are confident of achieving the 13,814-km highway construction target during the current fiscal," he said.
Up to December 31, 2023, the ministry has built 6,217 km of national highway, higher than last year's 5,774 km for the same period.
According to him, the government is planning to award 10,000 km of national highway projects in 2023-24.
Jain also said that the govern-

Rupee rises 8 paise

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee appreciated 8 paise to close at 83.16 against the US dollar on Friday, helped by a positive trend in domestic equities and fresh foreign capital inflows.
However, rising crude oil prices in international markets and a strong greenback overseas restricted gains for the local unit, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened flat at 83.23 against the greenback.
The rupee oscillated between an intra-day low of 83.24 and a high of 83.12 against the greenback and finally settled at 83.16, higher by 8 paise from its previous close of 83.24.
"The Indian rupee remained the second-best performer among the Asian currencies following Chinese currencies. The dollar inflows and stable crude oil prices helped the rupee to buck the past two week's bearish trend," said Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst at HDFC Securities.
The expectations of a strong December US



RBI tightens norms for short term commercial papers

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The Reserve Bank of India has tightened rules for the issuance of short term Commercial Papers (CPs) and Non-Convertible Debentures (NCDs), with an initial maturity of up to one year.
The new norms, which come into effect from April 1, involve six key changes.
The tenor of such short term CPs cannot be less than seven days or exceed a year, while those of NCDs cannot be less than 90 days or more than one year, the RBI said.
As per the revised norms, CPs and NCDs issued from April 1 onwards will have a minimum denomination of Rs 5 lakh and in multiples of Rs 5 lakh thereafter.
Both these debt instruments cannot be issued with options, while the settlement must be done within a period not exceeding T+4 working days, as per the new rules issued on Thursday.
CPs and NCDs shall be issued only in dematerialised form and held with a depository registered with Sebi. They cannot be permitted to be underwritten or co-accepted.
The central bank has made it mandatory for the issuer to disclose the end use of the money raised through these instruments.
According to the RBI, total subscription by all individuals in any primary issuance of CPs or NCDs shall not exceed 25 per cent of the total amount issued. CPs shall be issued at a discount to the face value, while NCDs shall be issued at a discount to the face value or with a fixed or floating rate coupon.
The coupon on floating rate NCDs shall be linked to a benchmark published by a financial benchmark administrator, or approved by the Fixed Income Money Market and Derivatives Association, which shall ensure that any floating rate approved by them is determined transparently.
The coupon on floating rate NCDs can also be linked to policy rates published by the RBI. The new norms have been issued after reviewing various directions related to the money market.

BUSINESS BRIEF



NFL has started the agri-drone pilot training of the first batch of 30 women from Punjab under the NaMo Drone Didi scheme launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi from December 12

VIT-AP ORGANISES GLOBAL MEET

AMARAVATI: The School of Electronics Engineering of VIT-AP University hosted the 5th International Conference on Advances in Distributed Computing and Machine Learning on January 5 in the campus. The conference brought together over 200 participants, including research scholars, faculty members, and students, making it a resounding success. Distinguished conveners Umakanta Nanda and Ravindra Dhuli, spearheaded the conference with the support of general chairs Lakhan Dev Sharma and Rohit Lorenzo.

Real estate opportunities in Ayodhya

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Real estate body NAREDCO on Friday said it plans to organise a builders' conference in Ayodhya to tap its commercial and residential opportunities as the holy city gears up to attract lakhs of tourists post inauguration of the Ram temple on January 22.
National Real Estate Development Council (NAREDCO) National President G Hari Babu said there are opportunities to set up hotels, resorts and apartments in Ayodhya as the tourist flow would increase in the coming months.

EV sales in India likely to grow

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Electric Vehicle (EV) sales in India is expected to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 35 per cent with annual volumes likely to touch 27.2 million units by 2032, a report said on Friday.
The report, 'India Electric Vehicle Market Overview 2023', by energy advisory, software and services firm, Customized Energy Solutions, also predicts a record-breaking sale of 1.7 million units in 2023.
EV sale in India is projected to touch about 27.2 million units by 2032 and with a CAGR of 35 per cent from 2023-2032 under business-as-usual conditions, according to the report.
The driving force behind this is a confluence of factors, including the availability of the FAME-II subsidy, which has proven to be a catalyst, with a substantial budget allocation of USD 1.2 billion assigned to subsidise various EV segments, it said.
The central government's commitment to fostering an indigenous EV ecosystem is evident in the approval of a USD 3.5-billion Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for the manufacturing of automobiles and auto components, thereby nurturing the development of the EV supply chain in the country, as per the report.
Besides, state governments are actively supporting the segment through their various respective policies towards EV promotion and bolstering the manufacturing ecosystem, it stated.
States such as Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh are leading the charge, providing incentives to encourage both EV and component manufacturing within their borders, it said.
"The confluence of supportive policies, financial incentives, and a burgeoning EV infrastructure lay a robust foundation for the transformative journey ahead," Rahul Walawalkar, Founder and President of India Energy Storage Alliance and President & MD of Customized Energy Solutions India, said. He, however, added that amid the evolving EV landscape in India, "we see not only challenges but immense opportunities for innovation and growth as well". The challenges include the high cost of EVs, inadequate public charging infrastructure, the necessity for power grid upgrades, and the absence of subsidies in some segments, as per the report.

Toyota hikes vehicle prices by up to 2.5%

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Toyota Kirloskar Motor on Friday said it has increased prices of its vehicles ranging from 0.5 per cent to 2.5 per cent on select models and variants with effect from January 1, 2024.
This increase was necessitated to partially offset the rising input costs, Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) said in a statement.
The overall price adjustment has been moderated taking into account a minimum impact on customers, it added.
Most of the passenger vehicle makers like Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai Motor India, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Honda, Volkswagen, Skoda Auto, Audi and BMW, had announced plans to increase the prices of their vehicles in January to offset the adverse impact of rising input and material costs.

Olympic qualifiers do or die outing for us: Savita

PTI ■ RANCHI

The Asian Champions Trophy victory has boosted India's morale ahead of the Olympic Qualifiers, according to captain Savita, who expressed confidence in the side's experienced players to help the women's hockey team qualify for the Paris Games.



Eight countries, including hosts India, will be vying for top three spots when the Olympic qualifiers are held here from January 13 to 19 to book berths for the Paris Games in July-August.

"The team is motivated, particularly after winning the Asian Champions Trophy," Savita was quoted as saying in a Hockey India release.

"Our preparations have been earnest and the team consists of players who have played the Olympic Qualifiers in the past and understand very well the level of performance needed to make the cut.

This is a do-or-die outing for us and we are ready for the challenge." The top three teams will qualify for the Paris Games.

The teams in the fray include reigning Olympic silver medalists Germany, former Asian Games champions Japan, Chile and Czech Republic grouped in pool A, while hosts India are grouped in pool B along with United States, New Zealand and Italy.

"Every member of the team wants to participate in the Olympic Games. That is the ultimate dream and after arriving in Ranchi earlier this week, we have got some good training sessions in the ground," India vice-captain Nikki Pradhan said.

"There is a lot of excitement not just among the team members but among the hockey fans in Jharkhand who I am sure will turn up in large numbers to show their support for us," India will take on United States in their opening match on

January 13, followed by a match against New Zealand on January 14.

After a day's rest, India will play Italy on January 16, while the semi-finals will be held on January 18 and the final on January 19.

UWW wants IOA, WFI to cooperate

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

United World Wrestling chief Nenad Lalovic wants all stakeholders, including the WFI and IOA, to co-operate so that Indian grapplers are not inconvenienced by uncertainty prevailing in the sport and can enter international competitions in the crucial Olympic year.

Still awaiting IOA confirmation ratifying elections

being the only one from India to have secured a Paris 2024 berth, while the others have disappointed because of lack of training camps and competitions for more than a year due to protests by Bajrang Punia, Sakshi Malik and Vinesh Phogat.

The three top wrestlers are demanding the arrest of former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh for allegedly sexually harassing women grapplers.

'Praggnanandhaa success inspiration for countless young Indians'

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Indian chess prodigy R Praggnanandhaa has got a new admirer in business tycoon Gautam Adani, who on Thursday announced his decision to support the 18-year-old Grandmaster.



A picture of his meeting with Praggnanandhaa as he described the Chennai-based chess star as an inspiration for countless young Indians to bring laurels for the country.

"It's a privilege to support Praggnanandhaa as he continues to win laurels in the world of chess and make India proud," Adani wrote. "His success is an inspiration to countless young Indians to believe that nothing is more gratifying than standing on the podium to celebrate our nation's greatness.

"Praggnanandhaa represents what India can and will be all about. I wish him all the very best." Praggnanandhaa is the fifth youngest Grandmaster ever, having attained the rank at the age of 12 in 2018. He won the

Xtracon Chess Open in Denmark in 2019, followed by the World Youth Championships in the U-18 category the same year. In December 2019, Praggnanandhaa attained 2,600



Top stars to feature as ITF event returns to Mandya

PTI ■ MANDYA (KARNATAKA)

Some of the top tennis talents, including India's Sasikumar Mukund, will be seen in action when an ITF event returns to the city after eight years through the Mandya Open, scheduled between January 7 and 14.

The tournament, the first ITF event to be played here since May 2015, has attracted players from over 18 countries and offers a prize pool of USD 25,000.

Apart from Mukund, other top players on the acceptance list are: Eric Vanshelboim (Ukraine), Kris van Wyk (South Africa), Giles Hussey (Great Britain) and Thomas Fancutt (Australia).

Local star SD Prajwal Dev from Mysore, who was recently included in India's Davis Cup team, is also among the five Indians to gain direct entry. KSLTA Secretary, Maheshwar Rao said: "It is our endeavour to develop and grow the sport of tennis across the state."

Avani to lead Indian team at major golf events in Australia

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Talented golfer Avani Prashanth will lead a four-member Indian team, comprising two men and two women, at the prestigious Australian Masters of Amateur Championships and the Australian Amateurs this month.

The 17-year-old Avani, who has decided to hold off her plans to turn pro for some time, will feature in both events alongside Heena Kang, while Sandeep Yadav and Rohit will play in the men's section.

The team will first feature in the annual Australian Masters of Amateur Championships from January 9-12 at the Southern Golf Club. A week later, the four Indians will play at the high-profile Australian Amateur Championship at the Yarra Yarra Golf Club and Keybrough Golf Club from January 16 to 19.

Avani is the only Indian to be ranked in the Top-50 of the world and has represented the country numerous times and even won the Queen Sirikit Cup. She was fourth in the individual section of the World Amateur Team Championships in Abu Dhabi, besides winning a professional event, while being an amateur, in Europe.

Heena, one of the two golf-playing sisters, Ceerat being the other, topped the domestic IGU Order of Merit for 2023 with a string of consistent performances and will wear India colours for the first time.

Among men, Rohit, who won twice last year in India and topped the IGU Order of Merit, and Sandeep Yadav, a consistent performer, will form the Indian team.

Rohit was also the runner-up at the 2023 All India Amateur Championships in Kolkata. Interestingly, Sandeep Yadav won the 2022 All India Amateurs, the Indian Golf Union's flagship event, which is more than 100 years old.

"It is always an honour to play for India. I have had some good results in 2023 and my long term aim is pro golf, but right now these two events in Australia, which are very prestigious, are my focus," said Avani, a two-time All India Amateur winner. "I have a lot of big events coming up in 2024, and hopefully the results will be even better than 2023, which was a great year for me."

Rybakina, Azarenka advance to Brisbane International semifinals

AP ■ BRISBANE

Second-seeded Elena Rybakina only needed to play seven games in her quarterfinal Friday to reach the final four at the Brisbane International.



Two-time champion Victoria Azarenka had a tougher run, needing three sets, about 2 1/2 hours and joking about the prospect of having to wear protective headwear to advance 6-3, 3-6, 7-5 over 2017 French Open winner Jelena Ostapenko, the No. 3 seed.

Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion, won the first set 6-1 before 11th-seeded Anastasia Potapova retired from their match with an abdominal injury. She'll next play either Linda Noskova or Mirra Andreeva.

Azarenka, who won back-to-back Australian Open titles in 2012 and '13, clinched her victory in a tense match three games after Ostapenko's emotional outburst at chair umpire Julie Kjedndie.

"With Jelena, sometimes you just have to put on a helmet and try to stay in there," Azarenka said. "She's an incredible player and a Grand Slam champion, and she's proved many times she can beat anybody on any given day."

"The quality of tennis was incredible, so to be able to go through ... I'm very proud." Azarenka hit 16 aces, had only two double-faults and moved

well but struggled at times to handle Ostapenko's powerful groundstrokes in the second and third sets.

Ostapenko broke early in the third set with a backhand winner but wasn't able to consolidate as Azarenka broke back. When Azarenka lunged forward to retrieve a drop shot and won the point to hold for a 5-4 lead in the deciding set, Ostapenko questioned whether the ball had bounced twice.

"You make so much mistakes," the Latvian player told the umpire. "I never want you on my match again. You ruin my matches." Ostapenko lost the next two points but won four straight to hold serve and make it 5-5,

before Azarenka went on a roll and won eight of the last nine points to reach the semifinals again.

She'll face either top-seeded compatriot Aryna Sabalenka, the defending Australian Open champion, or fifth-seeded Daria Kasatkina.

Rafael Nadal will be aiming to extend his comeback tournament from a year-long injury layoff when he meets Australian Jordan Thompson in a quarterfinal nightcap on Pat Rafter Arena.

The 22-time major winner has had straight-sets wins over Dominic Thiem and Jason Kubler in his first two competitive matches since the 2023 Australian Open.

Theegala takes lead in PGA Tour season opener

PTI ■ MAUI (HAWAII)

Indian-American golfer Sahith Theegala got off to a flying start with a stunning 9-under 64 at The Sentry to lead the field on day 1 of the PGA Tour season-opener at the Par-73 Plantation course in Kapalua.



Touted as one of the rising stars, Theegala, playing the event for the second time, made 10 birdies, including six in a row from the turn, to begin his bid for a second PGA Tour title following his breakthrough win at the Fortinet Championship last September.

Korea's Sungjae Im fired a stellar 8-under 65 to match his tournament low score at The Sentry as his 2024 PGA Tour campaign also got off to a great start.

He was among the bunch lying tied second alongside reigning FedEx Cup champion Viktor Hovland, two-time major champion Collin Morikawa, a resurgent Jason Day and Camillo Villegas.

The 25-year-old Im, who has two top-10s and a T13 finish last year at The Sentry, had nine birdies on the day.

Another Indian-American, Akshay Bhatia, who also had a breakthrough win in 2023 which earned him a spot in The Sentry, was lying T-25th with a round of 4-under 69.

Im's compatriot Tom Kim sank an eagle and four birdies en route a 68, while debutant Byeong Hun An, also from Korea, pencilled down seven birdies against two bogeys for a joint 19th place.

Si Woo Kim returned a 70 for T37, while eight-time PGA Tour winner Hideki Matsuyama carded a 71 for a tied-46th position.

Theegala, who came close to a win several times before snaring a title last year, when asked about the wait and how it had changed things for him, said, "Golf-wise, actually, it (Fortinet Championship win)

really hasn't changed much. If anything, it's given me a little more validation.

"As I progress in my young pro career, I realise I don't really need too much validation. It's just putting in the work and the results will come when they come. If not, work harder and just be patient. But it's something that nobody can take away and it's just a testament to all the work," he said.

"You need a couple of good breaks along the way, and I got it there. Looking back, I'm always going to be able to look back on that win and just kind of how we went about our process, and just every little thing that went into that win is always going to be used as a positive.

"If I'm struggling or doing really well, I can always look back at that and be like, 'alright, I kind of did this and that during that week', and that's something that's going to be big, I think, coming up, as I hopefully put myself in contention as

much as possible," he said.

On his first round in Maui and what pleased him the most, he added, "Probably 12 (12th hole). Just because I hit a great drive, almost got... Just hit it in the greenside bunker there. Didn't hit a great bunker shot and I had a really gnarly 8- or 9-footer that I didn't know which way it was going to break, grain was going all over the place. I just aimed it dead centre and tried to hit it hard and heeded that putt, and that settled me down a little bit more, because I knew 13, 14, 15 were very gettable too, so to make that putt was nice."

The Sentry is the first event of the 2024 PGA Tour season. It is the first of eight Signature Events in 2024, which offers an increased purse size of \$20 million and 700 FedEx Cup points to the winner.

Eligible players for The Sentry are tournament winners in 2023 and players who finished in the top-50 in the FedEx Cup Playoffs and Eligibility Points List.

Pistorius released from prison on parole

AP ■ PRETORIA (SOUTH AFRICA)

South African athlete Oscar Pistorius has been released from prison on parole and is now at home, South Africa's Department of Corrections said Friday.

The department gave no more details of Pistorius' release. The announcement came at around 8:30 a.m., indicating corrections officials had released the world-famous double-amputee Olympic runner from the Atteridgeville Correctional Center in the South African capital, Pretoria, in the early hours.

Pistorius has served nearly nine years of his 13 years and five months murder sentence for killing girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp on Valentine's Day 2013. He was approved for parole in November.

Serious offenders in South Africa are eligible for parole after serving at least half their sentence.

He was admitted into the system of Community Corrections and is now at home." Pistorius was expected to initially live at his uncle's mansion in the upscale Waterkloof suburb of Pretoria, and a police van was seen parked outside of that house.

Department of Corrections officials had said Pistorius' release time would not be announced in advance and he would not be "paraded" because they hoped to keep him away from the media glare that has trailed him since he shot Steenkamp multiple times through a toilet door at his home in the predawn hours of Feb. 14, 2013.

He will live under strict parole conditions until the remainder of his sentence expires in December 2029.

Steenkamp's mother, June Steenkamp, said in a statement earlier Friday that she had accepted Pistorius' parole as part of South African law. "Has there been justice for Reeva? Has Oscar served

enough time? There can never be justice if your loved one is never coming back, and no amount of time served will bring Reeva back," June Steenkamp said. "We remain behind as the ones serving a life sentence."

"With the release of Oscar Pistorius on parole, my only desire is that I will be allowed to live my last years in peace with my focus remaining on the Reeva Rebecca Steenkamp Foundation, to continue Reeva's legacy."

The Department of Corrections has emphasized that the multiple Paralympic champion's release - like every other offender on parole - does not mean that he has served his time.

Some of Pistorius' parole conditions include restrictions on when he's allowed to leave his home, a ban on consuming alcohol, and orders that he must attend programs on anger management and on violence against women. He will have to perform community service.



Pistorius will also have to regularly meet with parole officials at his home and at correctional services offices and will be subjected to unannounced visits by authorities. He is not allowed to leave the Waterkloof district without permission and is banned from speaking to the media until the end of his sentence. He could be sent back to

jail if he is in breach of any of his parole conditions.

South Africa does not use tags or bracelets on paroled offenders so Pistorius will not wear any monitoring device, Department of Corrections officials said. But he will be constantly monitored by a department official and will have to inform the official of any major changes in his

life, such as if he wants to get a job or move to another house. Pistorius has maintained that he shot Steenkamp, a 29-year-old model and law graduate, by mistake. He testified that he believed Steenkamp was a dangerous intruder hiding in his bathroom and shot through the door with his licensed 9 mm pistol in self-defense.

Prosecutors said he killed his girlfriend intentionally during a late-night argument.

Steenkamp's family did not oppose his parole application in November, although June Steenkamp said in a victim statement submitted to the parole board that she didn't believe Pistorius had been fully rehabilitated and was still lying about the killing.

Before the killing, Pistorius was held up as an inspiring role model after having had both of his legs amputated below the knee as a baby because of a congenital condition. He became a champion sprinter on his carbon-fiber running blades and

made history by competing at the 2012 London Olympics. But his murder trial destroyed his image. He was accused of being prone to angry outbursts and acting recklessly with guns, while witnesses testified about various altercations he had with others, including an argument in which he allegedly threatened to break a man's legs.

Pistorius was first convicted of culpable homicide — a charge comparable to manslaughter — and sentenced to five years in prison for killing Steenkamp. After appeals by prosecutors, he was ultimately found guilty of murder and had his sentence increased, although that judgment by the Supreme Court of Appeal still didn't definitively rule that he knew it was Steenkamp behind the toilet door.

Pistorius was first sent to prison in 2014, was released on house arrest in 2015 during an appeal and was sent back to prison in 2016. He was initially incarcerated at the maximum security Kgosi Mampuru II Prison in Pretoria but was moved to Atteridgeville early in his sentence because it is better suited to holding disabled prisoners.

SHIFT IN ATTITUDE TURNED IT AROUND IN 2ND TEST: RAHUL

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

India didn't have "extra fire" in the lost opening Test against South Africa but a "mental shift" turned things around, said KL Rahul after the visitors won the second game to level the two-match rubber here.

India had lost the opening Test by an innings and 32 runs in Centurion but the team regrouped to secure a seven-wicket win against South Africa within two days to record a memorable draw here on Thursday.

"I think we weren't really 100 per cent during our last match in terms of batting or bowling. We were prepared, but that extra edge or extra fire was missing, credit to South Africa as well, that they didn't allow us to reach to that confidence," the 31-year-old told 'Star Sports'. Rahul lauded the team for recovering quickly from the setback.

"There was a little bit of change of the planning and attitude only. I mean we can't say that we weren't ready during the last Test match. We were ready but there



are situations where the opposition really blasts you out of the Test match or we are not used to it," Rahul said.

"Since last 4-5 years, we've been a team that's really competed and we have won series outside of India, so we weren't ready for it and it was a huge hit for us..."

"...But it speaks volumes of how much we enjoy playing Test cricket and how much we value playing for our country and how much Test victories outside of India mean to us," he added.

India faced criticism for being ill-prepared after they were bowled out for 245 and 131 in the two innings in the first Test, while allowing South Africa to score 408 in their first essay.

"...It was just a mental shift during the turnaround time of one day. We were more ready this time and we were ready for a fight. We wanted to get this win and just do our job really well."

Rahul, who scored a memorable hundred in the first Test, admitted that they were not at their best in Centurion.

"They bowled us out very cheaply in both the innings. So, we were really happy that we could bounce off so well."



Yashasvi: Rohit helps me maintain positive frame of mind

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Yashasvi Jaiswal has no qualms in admitting that the South Africa series was a challenging one and said it was India skipper Rohit Sharma, who helped him maintain a positive mindset.

Jaiswal managed only 50 runs in 4 innings on bouncy tracks at Supersport Park in Centurion and Newlands in Cape Town as the two-Test series ended in 1-1 draw.

"Rohit Sharma helps me maintain a positive frame of mind and we needed to score runs quickly against new ball," said Jaiswal after his quickfire 28 off 23 balls set the tone during India's chase of 79.

"I just wanted to give a good start and that was all there in my mind as we had to win the match. In last 3 innings and even in this knock, I had done the same thing."

The 22-year-old knows that he needs to make improvements with regards to tackling bounce and lateral movement off the surface.

"Yes this tour has been a learning experience for me. Different environment and in every sense it has been an enjoyable experience. Learnt about improvements I need to make," Jaiswal said.

"The ball comes differently here

and I tried giving my all but I accept there were challenges. This experience will keep me in good stead as I am learning and would strive to improve during next series."

Jaiswal politely rebutted when asked if he would maintain his attacking style of batting in the upcoming Test series against England starting January 25 in Hyderabad.

"There's no particular style I want to adhere to and it's not that I have an attacking game only. I can change my game as per team's demands," he said.

"I would bat differently if it's first day and differently if it's final session and 70 runs needed. I try to change my game as per team's needs."

He gets regular tips from seniors like skipper Rohit and Virat Kohli about how to tweak his game as per situation, while coach Rahul Dravid spoke to him about specific technical aspects.

"Rahul sir told me in challenging conditions if you get beaten or get hit and still batting out there then you are doing well. How to leave deliveries from length, which deliveries to play," he said.

But what has been the best advice from coach?

"Basically, he wants me to bat freely and always with a smile."

Melbourne Stars keeper Harper hospitalised



PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Big Bash League side Melbourne Stars wicket-keeper Sam Harper was hospitalised after taking a blow on the head during a training session at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Friday.

The 27-year-old was conscious and in a stable condition. He was taken to hospital in an ambulance and will undergo scans overnight.

Harper's club said in a statement that they will provide updates about the player's health as and when they get the reports.

"Sam Harper was struck in the head whilst batting at training this evening at the MCG and subsequently taken to hospital in a stable condition."

"We ask that you respect his privacy at this time. The club will provide further updates when they come to hand," said Melbourne Stars in a statement.

Harper was training ahead of the team's clash against Sydney Sixers when he was hit on the head while batting in the nets.

A report in ESPNcricinfo said the cricketer attempted to play a cross-bat shot and got hit on the chin, "with the ball lodging under the grill of his helmet, causing a severe cut near his throat."

The report added that Melbourne Stars immediately called off the training session.

In January, 2020, Harper had suffered a serious concussion in the BBL when he collided with Hobart Hurricanes' Nathan Ellis and had to be taken to hospital, said the report.

Kohli, Jadeja to vie for Sobers Trophy

Ashwin in race for ICC Test Cricketer of Year

PTI ■ DUBAI

Star batter Virat Kohli and premier all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja will vie for the ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year award, while ace off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin will be in the race for the Test Cricketer of the Year.

Kohli and Jadeja will have to contest for the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy against Australian captain Pat Cummins and his team-mate Travis Head. Ashwin will face competition from Head and his Australia teammate Usman Khawaja along with England senior batsman Joe Root, the ICC said on Friday.

Kohli made 2048 runs in 35

matches across Tests and ODIs in 2023, including the 50th one-day hundred to go past the iconic Sachin Tendulkar during the World Cup.

Jadeja amassed 613 runs and 66 wickets in 35 matches and the numbers contained his 22-wicket haul against Australia in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy early the previous year.

Cummins garnered 422 runs and 59 wickets in 24 matches and has also led the Australians to wins in the Ashes, WTC Final and in the ODI World Cup.



produced against India. Meanwhile, Ashwin ended the year as the top Test bowler in the

wicket hauls by anyone in Tests — four.

Root was at the forefront of England's success in Test cricket last year. He registered 787 runs in eight Tests, finishing the year with a strong average of 65.58.

Australia opener Khawaja topped the run-scoring charts in the longest format last year, amassing 1210 runs at an average of 52.60, which included three centuries.

Nominees for the Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy for ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year: Chamari Athapaththu (Sri Lanka), Ashleigh Gardner (Australia), Beth Mooney (Australia), Nat Sciver-Brunt (England).

Australia topple India as world number 1 Test side

PTI ■ DUBAI

Despite a seven-wicket win at Cape Town to draw their two-match series in South Africa, India were toppled from the top spot in ICC Test rankings by Australia on Friday.

Australia's impressive effort to take an unassailable 2-0 lead over Pakistan at home in the on-going three-match series has helped them move up in the rankings. The third match of that rubber is currently underway in Sydney.

"Australia's impressive run at home against Pakistan helped them take the crown of the No. 1 Test team once again, having last held the spot briefly following their WTC Final victory," the ICC stated in a release.

In the previous update, India had more points in their kitty despite being tied with Australia at 118 rating points each.



But the drawn series in South Africa meant India were leapfrogged by Australia.

"With India drawing their two-Test series against South Africa 1-1 and Australia recording two wins in as many matches against Pakistan, the Pat Cummins-led side now top the Test rankings," the ICC said.

"It's the latest feat in a year full of them for Australia, alongside their ICC World Test Championship Final victory and their ICC Men's Cricket World Cup triumph."

India, however, are placed at the top of the World Test Championship points table following their win at Newlands with 54.16 percentage points from four Tests that include two wins, one loss and a draw.

South Africa are placed second followed by New Zealand at third and Australia at fourth with 50 percentage points each in the WTC table.

"The ongoing third Test between Australia and Pakistan and the upcoming five-match Test series between India and England will likely lead to further activity in the Test Team Rankings, with the top spot on the line alongside crucial ICC World Test Championship points," the ICC added.

Shreyas Iyer short ball problems remain a worry

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN

Just before the start of the second Test in Cape Town, Shreyas Iyer straightaway walked outside the Newlands Stadium for throwdowns after arriving for an optional training session.

The two throwdown experts Nuwan Senaviratne — the southpaw side-arm — and Raghavendra, along with batting coach Vikram Rathour, were letting it rip from 18 yards.

The idea was to get the flashy Mumbaier match-ready for short balls which has been his problem across formats from the time he made his debut.

Few minutes into the session, he got one throwdown from 18 yards, short and mean into the body that kicked up from length. It was more than 150 clicks due to the shorter distance traversed. The bat didn't come down in time and he was hit on the fleshy area between upper and lower abdomen.

He threw his bat and was literally writhing in pain. He crouched for some time trying to breathe as the physio and other support staff joined to check on him.

The issue was both mental as well as technical as Iyer didn't look comfortable at all



but with no worthy middle order reserve batter in the ranks, the Kolkata Knight Riders skipper had no competition.

He has so far played six knocks in SENA nations and his sequence of scores were 15 & 19 (Birmingham), 31 and 6 (Centurion), 0 and 4 not out (Cape Town). His Test average has now dipped from a near 50 to less than 40.

There is no doubt that Iyer is a master player against spinners and will not have problems tackling James Anderson or Chris

Woakes to deliveries that won't rise above knee roll. But on Australian tracks, come December 2024-25, if Iyer's game doesn't undergo sea change technically with proper head balance and may be slightly more chest-on stance, his struggles are certainly going to compound.

A slightly chest-on stance and a proper back and across movement would give a chance to tackle the bumper stuff.

But at nearly 30 years of age with a set muscle memory, it could be difficult to change his game upside down.

In 1982-83, Mohinder Amarnath, during his dream season, had a stance that was a bit chest-on and any bouncer that was bowled targeting his right shoulder, he would take it on the body and anything on left shoulder would be hooked imperiously.

Easier said than done but Iyer will have to find his own way.

Iyer is a player who primarily plays with hands with not much pronounced footwork. Hence on bouncy tracks, he is mentally always expecting short ball and is perennially on back foot even to deliveries where he needed to be on front foot. He is having cold feet, thinking that he will always be fed with short balls.

Devdutt unbeaten 80 give Karnataka command over Punjab

PTI ■ HUBBALLI (KARNATAKA)

Pacer Vasuki Koushik's seven-wicket haul and an unbeaten fifty by Devdutt Padikkal helped Karnataka gain complete command over Punjab on the first day of their Group C Ranji Trophy match here Friday.

Koushik made good use of the conditions to grab seven for 41 that helped Karnataka bundle out Punjab for a paltry 152 for in their first innings.

In reply, the hosts reached 142 for 3 at close as Padikkal made an

unbeaten 80 in as many balls with 14 hits to the fence. Padikkal added 76 runs for the second wicket with opener Ravikumar Samarth. For Punjab, Nehal Wadhwa offered a semblance of fight with 44 off 79 balls with seven fours.

TN in control

At Valsad, pacers M Mohammed (5/44) and Sandeep Warrior (4/57) took nine wickets among them as Tamil Nadu skittled Gujarat for an under-par 236 in their first innings.

Umang Kumar top-scored for Gujarat with 76 off 110 balls and he received good backing from Manan Hingrajia (65, 159 balls). But none of the batters could convert the starts. Tamil Nadu are yet to start their first innings.

Yuvraj powers Railways

Pacer Yuvraj Singh grabbed five for 10 from 11.3 overs as Railways shot out Chandigarh for a meagre 96 and then reached 73 for no loss at close in the first innings as bad light often played a spoilsport.



Paul shines for Tripura

At Agartala, Sridam Paul made 112 off 162 balls and veteran batter Ganesh Satish chipped in with an unbeaten 59 off 129 balls as Tripura reached a satisfactory 261 for 4 against Goa in their first innings at close.

BRIEF SCORES:

At Hubballi: Punjab 152 all out in 46.5 overs (Nehal Wadhwa 44, Mayank Markande 26 not out; Vasuki Koushik 7/41) vs Karnataka 142 for 3 in 33 overs (Devdutt Padikkal 80 not out, R

Samarth 38). At Valsad: Gujarat 236 all out in 72.3 overs (Umang Kumar 76, Manan Hingrajia 65; M Mohammed 5/44, Sandeep Warrior 4/57) vs Tamil Nadu.

At Chandigarh: Chandigarh 96 all out in 38.3 overs (Yuvraj Singh 5/10) vs Railways 73 for no loss in 16 overs (Shivam Chaudhary 45 not out, Vivek Singh 28 not out).

At Agartala: Tripura 261 for 4 in 74 overs (Sridam Paul 112, Ganesh Satish 59 not out, Sudip Chatterjee 42; Lakshay Garg 2/48).