

**OPINION 6**

WILL WE EVER CONFRONT CHINA, CALL ITS BLUFF?

**WORLD 8**

US PLANS TO MEET TAIWAN'S NEW LEADER

**MONEY 10**

EQUITY BENCHMARKS END WITH MARGINAL GAINS

NEW DELHI, FRIDAY JANUARY 12, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹3



# the pioneer

www.dailypioneer.com



AVANI TIED 2ND DESPITE A BAD THIRD ROUND  
11 SPORTS

## Congress on backfoot over BJP invite

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A war of words has broken out between the ruling party at the Centre, the BJP, and the Opposition parties over the "decline" of the invitation to the Ram Temple consecration at Ayodhya by top leaders of the Congress and other Opposition members. While the Congress-led Opposition termed the Ayodhya ceremony a political one, the BJP called the Congress "anti-Ram" after the party declared that Mallikarjun Kharge, Sonia Gandhi, and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury would not be attending the ceremony in Ayodhya. The Left parties and the TMC have also declined to attend the ceremony, which will be attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, top political functionaries, celebrities, industrialists, and a host of eminent personalities. In a letter shared on its official handle on Wednesday, the Congress termed the mega consecration ceremony as an "RSS/BJP event." Congress alleged that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP have turned the temple in Ayodhya into a "political project." The BJP lashed out at the Congress, stating that the party's stand and its allies have regularly "insulted" Hindus and Sanatana Dharma. BJP MP Sudhanshu



Ayodhya Ram Mandir model

Trivedi recalled how the Congress boycotted the inauguration ceremony of the new Parliament building and the G20 Summit as well. "From 2004 to 2009, Congress boycotted Kargil Vijay Diwas. The party did not issue any statement for 10 days after the Pokhran nuclear test conducted in May 1998 under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government," Trivedi said. A day after harsh criticism from the BJP, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday endorsed the Congress high command's decision not to attend the ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, saying the BJP has turned a religious event

into a political affair. He also pointed out that four Shankaracharyas are reported to have boycotted the consecration of the temple "in protest against the misuse of the Ram Mandir for politics." Siddaramaiah's comments turned the issue into a war of words as other BJP leaders also responded to the Karnataka CM's comments. As the political war of words continued over invitations, TMC leader Derek O'Brien on Thursday recalled West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's over a decade-old quote that "religion is private, festivals are for everyone" and said not a truer word has been spoken. "Religion is private, festivals

are for everyone", Mamata Banerjee, 2011. Not a truer word spoken," O'Brien said in a social media post. The TMC leader's post came as the BJP has been criticising Opposition leaders for turning down the invitation to the consecration ceremony on January 22. In similar remarks, Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav said, "religion cannot be a part of politics" and accused the BJP of hiding behind religion. When asked about attending the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple, he said, "How can the BJP decide whom to invite and whom not? This does not mean a call from Lord Shri Ram; it is a call from the BJP." BJP MP Harnath Singh Yadav said that Congress has opposed the Ram Janmabhoomi right from the beginning and left no stone unturned in putting all obstacles that it could. Karnataka BJP President CT Ravi said Congress has always been against Hindutva. **Continued on Page 2**

had also declined an invitation, with the Left party saying religion is a personal choice and should not be converted into an instrument of political gain. It is not clear if TMC chairperson Mamata Banerjee has received an invitation for the ceremony. The Bengal CM had alleged on Tuesday that the BJP was indulging in a "gimmick show" through the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. The TMC supremo asserted that "she does not support festivities that exclude other communities" and does not believe in dividing masses on religious lines. In similar remarks, Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav said, "religion cannot be a part of politics" and accused the BJP of hiding behind religion. When asked about attending the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple, he said, "How can the BJP decide whom to invite and whom not? This does not mean a call from Lord Shri Ram; it is a call from the BJP." BJP MP Harnath Singh Yadav said that Congress has opposed the Ram Janmabhoomi right from the beginning and left no stone unturned in putting all obstacles that it could. Karnataka BJP President CT Ravi said Congress has always been against Hindutva. **Continued on Page 2**

## LAC situation sensitive but stable: Army chief Pande

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

As tension continues to prevail at the border with China for the past three years, Army Chief General Manoj Pande on Thursday said the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh is "stable" but "sensitive". He asserted that Indian troops are maintaining a "high state" of preparedness to deal with any challenge. He also mentioned a decrease in overall incidents of violence in Jammu and Kashmir. However, he expressed concern about an increase in such incidents in the Rajouri-Poonch sector. Pande pointed out that terror infrastructure continues to thrive across the border, making an apparent reference to Pakistan's support for various terrorist groups. Addressing these points during the annual press conference ahead of Army Day on January 15, the Army Chief said India and China are engaged in talks at both the military and diplomatic levels to resolve the remaining differences. Trouble began in May 2020 when Chinese troops attempted to alter the status quo at the Line of Actual



Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Pande addresses a press conference ahead of Army Day in New Delhi on Thursday

Control (LAC) in Ladakh. Expanding on India's readiness, Pande emphasised that our operational preparedness remains at a high level. He also mentioned that the Indian Army is maintaining adequate reserves to confront any security challenges in the region. Indian and Chinese troops have been in a confrontation for over three years at certain friction points in eastern Ladakh, even as both sides completed disengagement from several areas following extensive diplomatic and military talks. "Regarding the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, the Army Chief mentioned that the ceasefire understanding

with Pakistan is holding along the Line of Control (LoC), despite infiltration attempts. He said, "We are successfully thwarting infiltration attempts along the LoC." General Pande also noted a decrease in overall incidents of violence in Jammu and Kashmir. However, he pointed out that such incidents have increased in the Rajouri-Poonch sector. Expressing concern, he said, "The situation and terrorist activities in Rajouri and Poonch in the last 5-6 months are troubling because, as peace is being restored in the valley, our adversaries are fostering proxy tanzems in the area." **Continued on Page 2**

# When Ram opens His eyes to his followers, Modi will bring down the curtain on non-believers

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In a momentous event filled with spiritual significance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to perform the ceremonial act of opening the eyes of the Ram Lalla idol at the sanctum sanctorum of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on January 22. The upcoming ceremony signifies the culmination of the seven-day Pran Pratishtha (consecration) rituals, marking a pivotal moment in the history of the revered temple. A senior official from the Ram Mandir Trust disclosed that the Prime Minister will use a matchstick-sized golden stick to open the eyes of the Ram Lalla idol at the sanctum sanctorum, surrounded by 11 Vedic priests. The conclusion of this act will mark the end of the celebrations, he said. Commencing on January 16, the Pran Pratishtha rituals will unfold within the sacred precincts of the

temple. The centrepiece of these rituals involves the installation of Ram Lalla's new idol, meticulously crafted from Karnataka's black stone. This symbolic act is scheduled for January 17, when the idol will be placed on an opulent golden throne. To facilitate the Vedic rituals integral to the consecration ceremony, eight havan kundis will be arranged within the temple's sanctum sanctorum. Each kund will be assigned to a yajman (the beneficiary on whose behalf the rituals are performed), a priest, and several assistants, ensuring the meticulous execution of the ceremonies. Describing the intricacies of the rituals, a priest involved in the consecration ceremony shared, "A havan kund is a square structure where a sacred fire is kindled, and all offerings are made during a religious ceremony." Lakshmi Kant Dixit, a Vedic priest from Varanasi, along with a team



of 121 other priests, will conduct the main rituals. The sanctum sanctorum will witness the presence of 11 Vedic priests, including Dixit, who serves as the head priest orchestrating the sacred proceedings. This

landmark event is not only a celebration of spirituality but also a testament to the unity and devotion of millions who hold the Ram temple in high reverence. As the nation eagerly awaits the momentous conclusion of the

Pran Pratishtha rituals, Ayodhya becomes the focal point of a profound cultural and religious experience, reinforcing its standing as a symbol of India's rich heritage. **WEEK OF RITUALS: Countdown**

to Consecration at Ayodhya's Ram Temple. As the historic moment approaches for the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, a meticulously planned week-long series of rituals will pave the way for the grand culmination on January 22. Here is a glimpse into the spiritual journey unfolding at the sacred site: January 16 to 17: The host appointed by the temple trust will lead the atonement ceremony on the banks of the Saryu River, purifying the surroundings in preparation for the upcoming rituals. January 18: Formal rituals commence with Ganesh Ambika Puja, invoking Lord Ganesh for the successful completion of the event. This day also includes Varun Puja, Matrika Puja (worship of seven goddesses), Brahmin Varan (Vedic rituals for knowledge), and Vastu Puja (clearing harmful elements from the surroundings). January 19: The day features Agni Sthapana, the installation of sacred fire to purify the atmosphere, along with Navagraha Sthapana for peace and tranquility. A havan, involving the ritualistic burning of offerings like grains and ghee, will be conducted. January 20: The sanctum sanctorum undergoes purification with holy water from the Saryu. Rituals such as Vaastu Shanti (cleansing the land) and Annadhivas (worshipping the idol using food grains) follow. January 21: The idol receives a divine bath with 125 urns, and the Shayadhivas ritual is performed, symbolising the deity's restful state. January 22: The much-anticipated day arrives. In the morning, the Ram Lalla idol is worshipped, leading up to the consecration in the afternoon during the auspicious Mrigashira Nakshatra — a specific celestial time chosen for the Pran Pratishtha.

**CAPSULE**

### Tremors in north India, epicentre near Kabul

NEW DELHI: An earthquake of magnitude 6.1 struck Afghanistan on Thursday with tremors rippling through parts of north India, the National Centre for Seismology said. The epicentre for the quake, which struck at 2.50 pm IST, was 241 kilometres north northeast of Kabul.

### Pankaj Tripathi quits as Election panel icon

NEW DELHI: Actor Pankaj Tripathi, who was appointed as the 'National Icon' of the Election Commission of India, has voluntarily stepped down from his position. "Acknowledging his role as a political leader in an upcoming film, actor @PankajTripathi has voluntarily stepped down as #ECI National Icon as per terms of MoU. #ECI expresses gratitude for his impactful contribution to voter awareness & #SVEEP since Oct 2022," read a statement on the social media handle of ECI, posted by spokesperson ECI on X.

# PM to inaugurate the longest sea link today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL), now known as Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewari Nhava Sheva Atal Setu, the longest sea bridge constructed at a cost of over ₹17,840 crore in the country, on Friday around 3.30pm. Besides, Modi will inaugurate the 27th National Youth Festival in Nashik and later launch development projects worth over ₹30,500 crore in Maharashtra. Atal Setu has been constructed at a total cost of more than ₹17,840 crore. It is about 21.8 km long, a 6-lane bridge with approximately 16.5 km over the sea and about 5.5 km on the land. It is the longest bridge in India and also the longest sea bridge in the country. The foundation stone of the bridge

was laid by the Prime Minister in December 2016. According to an official statement, it will provide faster connectivity to Mumbai International Airport and Navi Mumbai International Airport, reducing travel time from Mumbai to Pune, Goa, and South India. Additionally, it will enhance connectivity between Mumbai Port and Jawaharlal Nehru Port. Around 12:15 pm, Prime Minister Modi will reach Nashik, where he will inaugurate the 27th National Youth Festival. At approximately 3:30 pm in Mumbai, the Prime Minister will inaugurate and travel on the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri — Nhava Sheva Atal Setu. At around 4:15 pm, the Prime Minister will participate in a public programme at Navi Mumbai, inaugurating, dedicating to the nation, and

laying the foundation stone for multiple development projects. The Prime Minister will inaugurate, dedicate to the nation, and lay the foundation stone for multiple development projects worth more than ₹12,700 crore during the public programme in Navi Mumbai. The Prime Minister will also lay the foundation stone for an underground road tunnel connecting Eastern Freeway's Orange Gate to Marine Drive. The 9.2 km tunnel will be constructed at a cost of more than ₹8,700 crore, representing a significant infrastructure development in Mumbai that will reduce travel time between Orange Gate and Marine Drive. Furthermore, the Prime Minister will dedicate phase 1 of the Surya regional bulk drinking water project to the nation. Developed at a cost exceeding Rs 1,975 crore, this

project will provide drinking water supply to the Palghar and Thane districts of Maharashtra, benefiting approximately 14 lakh people. During the programme, the Prime Minister will dedicate approximately ₹2000 crore to railway projects for the nation. These projects include the dedication of 'Phase 2 of Uran-Kharkopar railway line,' which will enhance connectivity to Navi Mumbai by extending suburban services from Nerul/Belapur to Kharkopar to Uran. The Prime Minister will also flag off the inaugural run of the EMU train from Uran railway station to Kharkopar. Other rail projects to be dedicated to the nation include a new suburban station, 'Digha Gaon,' on the Thane-Vashi/Panvel Trans-harbour line, and the new 6th Line between Khar Road & Goregaon railway station.



Indian Army's women team displays their skills during the rehearsals ahead of Republic Day







It is Congress Bharat Todo Anyay Yatra: Nadda

He questions role of grand old party in uniting country

"divide and rule" politics and had done everything to divide the country and now organising a march to hide its misdeeds, Nadda said while addressing party workers during the state executive meeting here.

"The Congress has always worked for breaking India, destroying India," the BJP chief claimed. Nadda alleged that the Congress is only interested in "vote bank" politics and never thought beyond voters and politics.



the Congress worked to unite the country. They (Congress) always tried to "divide the country in the name of vote bank politics", he alleged.

JNU, where was Congress then? The next day, Rahul Gandhi went to JNU, stood by the students, and said there would be no FIR. Are they not trying to break India? Nadda questioned and demanded a

public apology from Gandhi. He claimed that Rahul Gandhi even insulted everyone from the OBC community by saying "All Modis are thieves". "Rahul, please read the history of the country to know how your ancestors divided the country. Be it the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and Shah Bano case, the Mandal Commission, toppling of elected state governments 90 times since Independence under Article 356 and insulting B R Ambedkar..." Nadda said.

break and weaken India? After all these, now you are bringing Nyay Yatra", Nadda wondered. The BJP president also alleged that the opposition INDIA bloc was formed to protect black money and the families of the leaders of the respective parties. These leaders have CBI cases pending against them, he claimed adding: "It is an alliance formed for personal gains. It has no relation to India." Nadda alleged that Congress chief ministers do not keep promises as they come to power, enjoy their term and again come to power by fooling people.

the ruling BJP is accountable to the people and takes along every stakeholder, Nadda said. "The Modi government is committed to GYAN — gareeb (poor), youth, annadata (farmer) and naari shakti (women power). The Modi government has uplifted 13.5 crore people from the poverty line," he claimed. The BJP president alleged that the previous non-BJP governments ignored Northeast India. "Modi has given huge importance to the Northeast, where he has visited 60 times. He has ended 50 years of violence and turmoil by signing a number of peace accords in the region," he asserted.

Narrow escape for PDP chief Mehbooba As car meets with accident; driver, PSO hurt

Former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister and PDP Chief Mehbooba Mufti escaped unhurt after her four wheeler met with an accident at Sangam in Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag district on Thursday. However, Mufti's personal security officer and driver suffered minor

injuries. The PDP Chief was on her way to Khannabal to meet the victims of a fire incident at the time of the accident. Front portion of the SUV was damaged after it collided with another civilian vehicle. Mehbooba Mufti was later escorted to her destination in a separate vehicle after she refused to cancel her engagement.

Mufti's daughter Iltija Mufti, who is also the media advisor to the PDP president, confirmed that her mother is safe. "Mufti's car met with a terrible accident enroute Anantnag today. Thanks to the grace of god she and her security officers escaped unhurt without any serious injuries," Iltija Mufti posted on X.

Public Notice regarding land area measuring 70 Sq. Yds. in the area of Village Bhagal Begumpur, Pargana & Tehsil Dadr, District Gautam Budh Nagar, U.P.

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

Public Notice regarding land area measuring 280 Sq. yds. out of Khara No. 146 Mn Situated in the Old Aadi of Village Hazarpur Wazidpur, Noida.

Public Notice regarding land area measuring 280 Sq. yds. out of Khara No. 146 Mn Situated in the Old Aadi of Village Hazarpur Wazidpur, Noida.

MAHARAJA CHHATRASAL BUNDELKHAND UNIVERSITY. NOTICE INVITING TENDER FOR PRINTING AND SUPPLY OF DEGREE CERTIFICATES BY GeM PORTAL.

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

HAPPY MAKAR SANKRANTI AND LOHRI TO ALL FROM KAMAL PIYUSH

Public Notice regarding land area measuring 70 Sq. Yds. in the area of Village Bhagal Begumpur, Pargana & Tehsil Dadr, District Gautam Budh Nagar, U.P.

Public Notice regarding land area measuring 280 Sq. yds. out of Khara No. 146 Mn Situated in the Old Aadi of Village Hazarpur Wazidpur, Noida.

SALE NOTICE. The under mentioned Assets will be sold through auction on "AS IS WHERE IS BASIS" and "AS IS WHAT IS BASIS" for recovery of dues as per court orders, in the following cases:-

कार्यालय नगर पालिक निगम, भोपाल. प्रधानमंत्री आवास योजना (PMAY) हाऊसिंग फॉर ऑल प्रकोष्ठ (HFA CELL)

CHANGE OF NAME. I, Daleep S/o Shri Shankar R/o 242/A, Street No-02, Ghundali Gaon Krishna Nagar, Delhi-110051 have changed my name from Daleep to Dalip for all purposes.

ECL Eastern Coalfields Limited. "All the tenders issued by CIL and its subsidiaries for procurement of Goods, Works & Services are available on i) Website of Coal India Limited: www.coalindia.in, ii) Website of ECL: www.easterncoal.nic.in, iii) CIL e-Procurement Portal: https://coalindiaticenders.nic.in, iv) Central Public Procurement Portal: https://eprocure.gov.in. In addition, procurement is also done through GeM Portal: https://gem.gov.in".

ICICI Bank. Branch Office: ICICI Bank Ltd, 3rd Floor, Plot No.23, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi- 110005. Symbolic Possession Notice

कार्यालय नगर परिषद पथरिया जिला दमोह. क्र./लोक निर्माण/निविदा/2024/414 पथरिया दिनांक 10.01.2024

OK PLAY INDIA LIMITED. CIN No. L28219HR1988PLC030347. Regd. Office: 17-18, Roz-Ka-Meow Industrial Estate, Tehsil Nuh, District Mewat, Haryana - 122103

ICICI Bank. Branch Office: ICICI Bank Limited, 3rd Floor Shal Tower, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi-110005. PUBLIC NOTICE - TENDER CUM E-AUCTION FOR SALE OF SECURED ASSET

ICICI Bank. Branch Office: ICICI Bank Limited, 3rd Floor Shal Tower, New Rohtak Road, Karol Bagh, Delhi-110005. PUBLIC NOTICE - TENDER CUM E-AUCTION FOR SALE OF SECURED ASSET



www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

## India dreams big

India poised for a bigger global role, PM Modi's plan to make it a developed nation is difficult but doable

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set an ambitious vision: With the world order evolving swiftly, India is poised to emerge as a developed nation within the next 25 years. This proclamation reflects India's determination to not only adapt to the transforming global dynamics, but also to actively shape its destiny on the world stage. Modi's statement comes at a time when the global balance of power is undergoing significant changes. Established power centres are facing challenges, while emerging economies are seizing opportunities to redefine their roles. India, with its demographic dividend, economic reforms and technological advancements, stands at the forefront of this transformative wave. Central to India's ascent on the global stage is its commitment to economic reforms. The Government has implemented a series of initiatives aimed at boosting economic growth, fostering innovation and attracting foreign investment. The "Make in India" campaign, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) rollout and efforts to improve the ease of doing business have positioned India as an attractive destination. The Prime Minister's emphasis on self-reliance, as articulated in the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative, reflects a strategic vision to build a robust economy. Similarly, he recognises the pivotal role of technology in shaping the future.



India's prowess in IT, coupled with a thriving start-up ecosystem, positions the nation as a key player in the so-called 'fourth industrial revolution.' Initiatives such as "Digital India" and "Smart Cities" underscore India's commitment to leveraging technology for inclusive development. Besides, the geopolitics is favouring India to raise its stock in the new world order. Strategic partnerships and diplomatic engagements have expanded, allowing India to become an important player in regional and global affairs. The Quad exemplifies India's collaborative approach towards addressing shared challenges and promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region. To become a developed nation, however, we would need a lot more: A strong cohesive society, strong leadership, rock-solid democracy and independent institutions. While the vision for India as a developed nation within 25 years is inspiring, it is not without challenges. Issues such as poverty, inequality, environmental sustainability and infrastructural development will be critical. The Government's ability to navigate these challenges, coupled with continued economic reforms and global collaborations, will determine the success of India's transformative journey. But it would go to the credit of PM Modi to have a futuristic vision and inspire people to work for it. This is what leaders are supposed to do: Galvanise the nation for a quantum leap and create a conducive environment for people to perform to their optimal potential. This is what made Japan great and fuelled the American dream. It is now India's turn to join the Super League!

geopolitics is favouring India to raise its stock in the new world order. Strategic partnerships and diplomatic engagements have expanded, allowing India to become an important player in regional and global affairs. The Quad exemplifies India's collaborative approach towards addressing shared challenges and promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region. To become a developed nation, however, we would need a lot more: A strong cohesive society, strong leadership, rock-solid democracy and independent institutions. While the vision for India as a developed nation within 25 years is inspiring, it is not without challenges. Issues such as poverty, inequality, environmental sustainability and infrastructural development will be critical. The Government's ability to navigate these challenges, coupled with continued economic reforms and global collaborations, will determine the success of India's transformative journey. But it would go to the credit of PM Modi to have a futuristic vision and inspire people to work for it. This is what leaders are supposed to do: Galvanise the nation for a quantum leap and create a conducive environment for people to perform to their optimal potential. This is what made Japan great and fuelled the American dream. It is now India's turn to join the Super League!

### PICTALK



A nomadic shepherd from Rajasthan with his herd during a cold winter day, in Gurugram

# Will we ever confront China, call its bluff?



DEEPAK SINHA

Despite all our aggressive posturing and chest-thumping, humble pie seems to be our favourite dish, at least when it comes to China

Mark Twain once wrote, "An uneasy conscience is a hair in the mouth." It appears General Naravane, the former Chief of Army Staff, is extremely keen to get that hair out of his mouth. He has done so by penning his memoirs, "Four Stars of Destiny", due out shortly if cleared by the Government. If the few excerpts that have been published are any indication, he appears to shed fresh light on both, the much-touted Agnipath Scheme and the ongoing confrontation with China in Eastern Ladakh. It has most certainly let the cat out among the pigeons, and in many ways, sheds light on why our government's response to Chinese belligerence has been so passive, timid and restrained. Both events may also very well have been responsible for his non-selection as the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), after the tragic demise of General Rawat, despite being the senior most amongst the Service Chiefs. Of course, the latter may be pure speculation, because in appointing General Chauhan as CDS, this government has displayed either utter ignorance or a complete lack of sensitivity to how the military process works or the importance of seniority. Thereby, immense damage has been done to the sanctity of the chain of command. The playing of favourites by manipulating service rules and superseding Service Chiefs has not done the incumbent any favours either. His credibility has come under question and that of his appointment is seriously damaged. This lack of cohesion within the upper echelons of our military is reflected in the lack of progress towards theorization and jointness. There are times when those in government, especially at the highest levels, are forced to implement their political masters' policies or directions that they may personally not agree with. Generally, in such circumstances, objections are placed on record during discussions, but once a lawful decision has been given, it becomes their duty to



implement it to the best of their abilities. The dilemma that arises is when the government servant is convinced that the directions to be implemented will have debilitating consequences on the organisation or the country and it would be unconscionable to implement them. In such circumstances, it would be their moral obligation to go public with their objections and refuse to implement them, regardless of their impact on their career. About the Agnipath Scheme, the General admits he was taken aback when his similar, but extremely limited, proposal, "The Tour of Duty" Scheme, was enlarged and pushed through by the PMO for universal application, without the acquiescence of the Service Chiefs. If unconfirmed reports are correct that he had put his misgivings and objections on record to the MOD and therefore paid the price for it, then his relief, General Manoj Pande, has much to answer for. Undoubtedly, it is a poorly conceived scheme that has had a debilitating impact on the Army's capabilities. The fact that the present Chief and



THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THOSE IN GOVERNMENT, ESPECIALLY AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS, ARE FORCED TO IMPLEMENT THEIR POLITICAL MASTERS' POLICIES OR DIRECTIONS THAT THEY MAY PERSONALLY NOT AGREE WITH

the chain of command were aware of its flaws and yet did not back General Naravane speak poorly of their moral courage. They now find themselves in the impossible position of having to cover up the flaws by not exposing the Agniveers to any kind of danger, a ridiculous situation indeed. As regards the confrontation in Eastern Ladakh, it seems rather intriguing that the Government was given feedback by the Army Chief on the aggressive moves being undertaken by the Chinese, it was left to the Raksha Mantri, no doubt after telephonic discussions with the PM and NSA, to convey to the General to act as he thought necessary. As General Naravane himself points out "I was handed a hot potato. With this carte blanche, the onus was now totally on me." As events transpired, it is quite clear that the General preferred to tread with caution and was unwilling to take any robust measures to regain lost ground to avoid provoking Chinese escalation. Though it seems purely in the realms of sheer wishful thinking if one believes that if escalation suit-

ed the Chinese, they would await a provocation by us! Our civilian leadership seems unaware of the dictum "wars are too important to be left to generals". In any case, how can all responsibility be thrust on any one individual? Isn't that the very reason that we have institutions and processes in place for the higher direction of war? Shouldn't all this have been in the purview of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)? Shouldn't it have been convened to take formal cognizance of the prevailing situation, obtain assessments, discuss contingencies and options and give clear-cut directions to the military? Sadly, the impression given is that as events took a turn for the worse, everyone who mattered was intent on passing the buck. Despite all our aggressive posturing and chest-thumping, humble pie seems to be our favourite dish, at least when it comes to China. (The author, a military veteran, is a visiting fellow with the Observer Research Foundation and a senior visiting fellow with The Peninsula Foundation, Chennai, views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### GOOD THINGS TAKE TIME TO HAPPEN

Sir — Patience plays a pivotal role in our lives. When a person turns over a new leaf and stays committed towards it, then he encounters the fruit of hard work. The journey is completely filled with different challenges to be faced every day, and one has to stick to one's guns. Things may not seem to happen the way we expect at the initial stage, but patience is the only thing that gives us the result of our blood, sweat, and tears.

As it is said, tough times never last, but tough people do. The journey of life is like a game of chess, and we play this game with it. After every move of ours, it makes the next move. Our moves are considered to be the choices, and their moves are called consequences. We will be tested, we will be challenged, and we will be pushed to the brink. However, when we are found to play this game well, it wins by allowing us to win the game. The only priority should be to stay zealous and committed to whatever work we do and not to fret too much about the result. As the Bhagavad Gita also says, "Perform your duty but do not have any expectation of the fruit."

Ayani Dangi | Ujjain

### NATIONAL STARTUP DAY

Sir — Eight years after launching Startup India, the Indian government is all set to introduce the next leg of the journey on January 16, which the PM decreed as National Startup Day. While the initial phase concentrated on consumer internet and service-based start-ups, this time, the program will emphasize deep technology entities, encompassing those focused on semiconductor research, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity.

The government's involvement, coupled with the growing enthusiasm of private and public stakeholders, will likely create a conducive environment for this budding sector. Founders are eager to get support in the form of tax exemptions, regulatory compliance provisions, and fast-tracked patent processes, which are essential given

### Mental health helpline



Thousands of people have started seeking help from mental health helplines to deal with sadness, sleep disorders, anxiety, stress and other psychological issues. This shows that people have started to express their emotions rather than taking harsh steps to deal

with life's issues. Another heartwarming news is that men form the majority of people reaching these helplines. These helplines have many benefits- the calls are confidential, listeners don't judge the sentiments and counsellors are good listeners as they are trained to handle others' emotions. Most of the common issues that are heard revolve around relationships, suspiciousness, suicidal tendencies or attempts so the counsellors suggest solutions like stress management, meditation etc to the caller.

While it's good to note that the number of response rates to these helplines has increased still many people aren't aware of such helplines. The government should increase the number of helplines in areas like Kota, IITs and almost all colleges and schools as students face a high amount of stress and no one is there to understand what they are going through.

Gourja Soni | Delhi

the extended time and financial backing that deep tech start-ups require for profitability. Fortunately, insights gained from Startup India II's initial plan tweaks suggest the upcoming phase may introduce stable policies, improved taxation norms, and collaborative research initiatives with academia and industry. This move aligns with the government's ongoing efforts to bolster start-ups. The focus on deep tech anticipates global recognition, attracting investments, and generating employment opportunities. Overall, the Startup India program's second phase is crucial in supporting the growth of deep-tech start-ups, especially as India bolts to become the global flagbearer for technology innovation.

C K Subramaniam | Chennai

### ODISHA'S GROWING AVIATION INFRA

Sir — Chief Minister Naveen Pattnaik yesterday inaugurated a new airport in Malkangiri district, which falls in the south-western part of the state. The new airport is spread over an area of 283 acres developed for 70 crores. A 1620-meter-long and 30-meter runway is made for take-off and

landing purposes. Initially, 9-seater aircraft will operate from the airport. This is the seventh functional airport for the state. In recent years, state governments have worked rapidly on making new airports in the state.

These ports will enhance connectivity in the region. Good connectivity will bring avenues of business, tourism, and education. Further, it will bring social and economic developments for the local people that will transform their lives in those areas. Few airports among the seven airports are dedicated in Maoist regions. So good connectivity will also help the administration strengthen the law and order situation and eradicate Maoist elements in those districts. The new and developing aviation infrastructure of Odisha will give a chance for middle-class families to experience flight journeys. It will also help to boost the state's economy, tourism, and regional connectivity.

Deba Prasad Nayak | Dhenkanal

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Direct mobile broadcasting is a gamechanger

Direct to mobile (D2M) technology removes the necessity for the internet, delivers TV and radio broadcasts directly to mobile



SANJAY SHARMA

India, which is increasingly asserting its self-reliance, has unveiled another instalment of indigenous technology. Sankhya Lab, in collaboration with Prasar Bharati and IIT Kanpur, has developed a technology within India that enables the direct viewing and listening of broadcasts, such as TV and radio, on mobile devices. Importantly, this functionality requires no internet connection or spectrum, thanks to a special chip designed to be compatible with various phones, including iPhones, Androids, and standard mobile phones.

The introduction of this new technology, known as D2M, is expected to trigger a significant revolution in video broadcasting by eliminating the need for internet connectivity. A major advantage lies in its applicability for both central and state governments to implement public welfare schemes and disseminate awareness on a large scale. By incorporating the chip into mobile phones distributed to underprivileged individuals, the government can effectively communicate in remote areas at a minimal cost.



Additionally, the technology will alleviate internet traffic and eliminate the need for consumers to have an internet plan. D2M proves particularly beneficial for broadcasts with a large audience, such as live telecasts of cricket matches or national addresses by the Prime Minister or President, as it enables viewing or listening without requiring an internet connection. Similar to watching broadcasts on TV without internet, D2M extends this capability to mobile devices through the dedicated chip. This service facilitates broadcasting various programs, including educational or competitive online classes, to inform and entertain the public. Sankhya Lab has developed

the D2M chip using advanced technology, and the service is currently undergoing trials in Delhi. The plan is to expand the service to other metropolitan areas and subsequently to rural regions. Notably, the broadcast can utilise BSNL towers, whose network spans the entire country, ensuring rapid dissemination once the service is efficiently operational. The launch of D2M is poised to elevate India's standing in the global broadcasting arena, providing a world-class facility that will be easily accessible to citizens. This technology not only aids in integrating isolated and deprived individuals into the mainstream but also enhances the reputation of Indian technology on the international stage.

In conclusion, India's stride towards self-reliance takes another remarkable leap with the introduction of indigenous technology by Sankhya Lab, Prasar Bharati, and IIT Kanpur. The innovation, known as D2M, marks a significant milestone in the realm of video broadcasting by enabling direct viewing and listening of broadcasts on mobile devices without the need for internet connectivity or spectrum. The D2M technology, facilitated by a specially designed chip compatible with a range of mobile phones, has the potential to revolutionise communication and awareness nationwide. Beyond the immediate advantage of eliminating the dependence on the internet, D2M holds great promise for the effective implementation of public welfare schemes and large-scale awareness campaigns by both central and state governments. The integration of the chip into mobile phones distributed to underprivileged individuals could foster cost-effective communication in remote areas.

(The writer is a journalist; views are personal)



## FIRST COLUMN

## THE MALDIVES-INDIA TIES: DRIFTING APART

Diplomatic tensions surge as the Maldives Govt tilts towards China



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

In the shifting sands of diplomacy, it is not often that a beautiful postcard picture taken in the backdrop of a blue ocean lined with palm groves creates a tsunami of ultra-nationalist emotions or emoticons clashing between two nations. The postcard in question was shared by Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi when he got to spend some time on the pristine beaches of Lakshadweep islands. This prompted a couple of junior ministers in Maldives to troll the Indian PM on social media, with language which could be considered to be abusive depending on the sensibilities. The junior ministers were promptly sacked and the Maldives Envoy in India was summoned by the Ministry of External Affairs. However, what brewed in the background was a huge wave of Boycott Maldives, trends by an army of Indian social media surfers. Some celebrities who had recently vacationed in the Maldives during the holiday season joined the chorus adding weight to anti-Maldives trends on social media. It is a different aspect that not many social media surfers have ever dreamt of going to Maldives or are even aware of the capital of Lakshadweep.

What this brief exchange of unpleasanties exposed was the decline in the relationship between India and Maldives especially after Maldivian president Mohammed Muizzu took charge. Mr Muizzu is considered to be pro-China and has largely been part of the India Out campaign for over a decade. India has, the closest neighbour to Maldives, separated by just 70 nautical, been one of the first responders to any distress for this archipelagic nation. India has for several decades maintained warm relations with Maldives cooperating and helping in the Defence, infrastructure, education and healthcare sectors. The defence sector cooperation is crucial as according to the Ministry of External Affairs, India provides nearly seventy per cent of defence training requirements for the Maldivian National Defence Force.

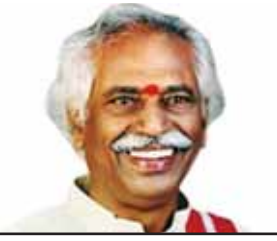


In a world where almost every economic asset of a nation, including scenic natural tourist spots is being weaponised, a strategic balance is required with neighbours. India is one of the biggest contributors to the Maldives tourism economy, where well-heeled Indians prefer to spend their vacations. However, the current Maldivian president has been insistent on throwing away a few Indian defence force personnel stationed in Maldives. While this may be a strategic setback for India, it will equally hurt Maldives, as it rushes in the Chinese Dragon's firewall. He hailed China as the most valued ally. One of the press releases from the President's office stated "Dr Muizzu emphasised the prominence of his visit to China, as it is his first state visit to a foreign nation. Reflecting on the long-standing and fruitful government-to-government and business-to-business cooperation between the two countries, the President expressed his delight at the strong presence of both Chinese and Maldivian businesses at the forum. He stated that China remains one of the closest allies and developmental partners of Maldives. He also noted that the Maldives became a party to H.E. President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative in 2014, which helped infrastructure projects in the Maldives. President Dr Muizzu highlighted his vision for the expansion of the central airport and commercial port, emphasising that the Government is keen to explore partnerships under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The President also highlighted the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed between China and the Maldives, citing that the FTA would boost bilateral trade and investments, particularly by increasing the export of fish products to China, marking it as a key priority explored within the FTA." Maldives is trying to shift from India First to China First policy, a reversal from the earlier regimes. However, India has to patiently manoeuvre around the firewall and wait for the Maldives to come back as a close ally.

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

## Viksit Bharat: Youth to play a pivotal role

Today we celebrate the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda as the National Youth Day. His teachings are a great source of inspiration for the Indian youth



BANDARU DATTATREYA



Swami Vivekananda, a 19th century Indian philosopher, spiritual leader, a great thinker, orator, poet, and the greatest patron of the youth envisioned the youth as the driving force behind the regeneration of India and the world. He believed that the latent power within the youth, if harnessed and directed towards noble ideals, could bring about a profound transformation in society. Swami ji emphasized the importance of character-building, moral integrity, and a strong sense of self-confidence among the youth. He encouraged them to cultivate a harmonious blend of modern education and spiritual wisdom, advocating for an education system that not only imparts knowledge but also fosters a sense of duty and self-reliance with social responsibility.

Swami ji, a great Hindu saint whose Jayanti we celebrate as the National Youth Day on January 12 every year, visualized a generation of youth who would be fearless, selfless, and committed to serving humanity. For him, service to the destitute was the real service to God. He wanted the youth of the country to have strong willpower to serve the motherland and the masses. He once said: "Go, all of you, wherever there is an outbreak of plague or famine, or wherever the people are in distress, and mitigate their sufferings" by serving the country. Swami Ji's electrifying speech at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, on September 11, 1893, left an indelible mark on the gathering comprising religious and spiritual personalities of different faiths from across the world. He started his speech by addressing the gathering from the core of his heart as 'sisters and brothers of America' which was followed by thunderous applause from the audience.

He said: "It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the

warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects." Further, he told the august audience: "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration but we accept all religions as true... I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations on earth."

His famous clarion call for the youth - 'Arise, awake, and stop not until the goal is reached' and 'You have to grow from the inside out. None can teach you, none can make you spiritual. There is no other teacher but your soul' - emphasised the fact that the strength and vitality of a nation lay in the hands of its youth. For him, youth are the torchbearers of positive change, possessing the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity necessary to shape a better future and encouraging them to recognize and channel their inner strength, urging them to develop self-confidence and fearlessness. He said: "The greatest sin is to think that you are weak...All the powers in the universe are already ours. It is we who have put our hands before our eyes and cry that it is dark...Take risks in your life. If you win, you can lead; if you lose, you can guide."

Swami ji advised youth to be on the playgrounds. He wanted youth

with muscles of iron, nerves of steel and gigantic hearts. He was of the firm view that youth should be physically strong and mentally sound. That is why Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji has initiated the Fit India movement. I make a humble appeal to the principals of all schools and colleges, and Vice Chancellors of universities to see that our students at least spend one hour on the playgrounds.

When the youth are motivated by high ideals, driven by a sense of purpose, and armed with knowledge, they become an unstoppable force for good. As India is at a turning point today in its history under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Shri Modi ji, the youth has an important role to play.

The 21st century will be India's century as the country pole-vaults into the future confident of its capabilities. It is the 5th largest economy in the world today and will be the world's 3rd largest economy by 2027, as its GDP crosses US \$ 5 trillion as per the IMF estimate. By 2047, India is poised to be a US \$ 30 trillion economy with all the attributes of a developed nation. It will be a Viksit Bharat in which our youth have to play a crucial role.

In the realm of science and technology, India has achieved noteworthy milestones through missions such as Chandrayaan, showcasing its prowess in space exploration. The Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) of India has gained global recognition under the exemplary statesmanship of Prime Minister Shri Modi ji with initiatives like Aadhaar, UPI, AA

Stack, COWIN platform, and GeM, underscoring the country's commitment to digital innovation. India is making strides toward becoming a global manufacturing hub, and its services sector, particularly in IT and non-IT domains, has attained global prominence. The nation boasts a thriving startup ecosystem, hosting over 100 unicorns with a combined valuation exceeding US \$340 billion, positioning itself as the world's third-largest startup ecosystem.

During Amrit Kaal, let's make the most of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda to make an Atmanirbhar Bharat! We celebrate January 12, the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, as the National Youth Day, to draw inspiration from the "philosophy of Swami ji and the ideals for which he lived and worked could be a great source of inspiration for the Indian Youth." The dream of Ek Bharat, Sarvshrestha Bharat and making India Vishwa Guru can be realized by following the path shown by Swami ji. He was of the firm opinion that all paths lead to the one true God, as is also mentioned in Rig Veda that 'Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vadanti' (Truth is one; the wise call it by various names.) Let us resolve today to assimilate the essence of the teachings of Swami ji - national spirit, patriotism, unity in diversity, inclusivity and purity! This will be a real tribute to Swami Vivekanand and a true step towards building Viksit Bharat by 2047.

*(The author is the Governor, of Haryana. The views expressed are personal)*

THE DREAM OF EK BHARAT, SARVSHRESTHA BHARAT AND MAKING INDIA VISHWA GURU CAN BE REALISED BY FOLLOWING THE PATH SHOWN BY SWAMI JI

## Startups in the agriculture sector are pioneering innovations

The Software Technology Parks in India (STPI) serves as a catalyst for enhancing innovations in the field of agritech

Agriculture, the backbone of India's economy, contributes nearly 17% to the country's GDP against the global average of 4.4%, sustains a significant portion of the population, and contributes significantly to the GDP. In the global effort to feed a growing population sustainably, technological advancements and innovation in agriculture are more critical than ever. In recent years, the Indian agricultural landscape has witnessed a transformative wave driven by the Agri-Tech startup ecosystem. Poised at the forefront of innovation, these startups are not only addressing longstanding structural challenges but are also laying the foundation for a more sustainable and prosperous



ARVIND KUMAR

future, by improving farm productivity and ecological sustainability across the entire agri-value chain. An amalgamation of favourable government policies, increased technology access and rising demand for high-quality produce has galvanized Agri-Tech startups across the country. Never before in India's history has technology been so ubiquitous as it is today.

Auguring a paradigm shift, dynamic Indian entrepreneurs are today leveraging cutting-edge technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), Machine learning, and Data analytics to address agricultural challenges. Currently, over 2000 Agri-Tech startups are working across a myriad of domains such as organic agriculture, food processing, horticulture, animal husbandry and dairying, fisheries, and a wide assortment of combined agriculture-allied activities, to provide innovative solutions to India's agriculture sector. As per praxis analysis, the agri-tech sector has attracted significant investments amounting to USD 958 million approxi-

mately in 2022, growing at a CAGR of about 51% from 2017 to 2022. Agri-tech start-ups empower farmers to make data-driven decisions, adopt modern practices, and access real-time information through their innovative digital solutions. These solutions offer farmers higher profit margins, assistance in crop grading and packaging, product traceability, market exposure, access to quality inputs, and scientific guidance. They have led to high-yielding seed varieties and the adoption of technology-driven solutions like tractors, drones, and robots, further enhancing operational efficiency. Agri-tech contributes to envi-

ronmental conservation and climate change mitigation through ecologically sustainable practices such as organic and precision farming, agroforestry, crop rotation and water management solutions. In the recent past, a virtuous confluence of digital platforms, mechanization and biotechnology have together helped radically increase farm output, and improve crop quality while also reducing wastage. Agri-tech startups have been successful in addressing the various critical challenges plaguing the Indian agricultural industry. These include real-time weather forecasting, disaster mitigation and resilience. The lack of access to timely and accurate information has long been a hurdle for farmers in India.

Agri-tech startups are bridging this information gap through mobile applications and digital platforms. Farmers can now access weather forecasts, market prices, and expert advice at their fingertips. This democratization of information empowers farmers to make informed decisions, negotiate better prices, and improve overall farm management. Another challenge was structural supply-chain and logistics challenges due to inadequate forward and backward linkages that lead to labour sourcing and inefficiency and are the major cause of farmers not receiving their due share of the profits. Supply chain inefficiencies have led to post-harvest losses, impacting the income of

farmers. Agri-tech startups are introducing innovative solutions to streamline the agricultural supply chain. From farm-to-fork traceability using blockchain technology to data-driven logistics optimization, these startups are ensuring that produce reaches the market in a timely and efficient manner. This not only reduces wastage but also ensures that farmers receive fair compensation for their efforts. Access to fair finance has historically crippled Indian farmers, hindering productivity and technological advancements. Today, Agritech startups offer tailored solutions, providing timely credit, crop insurance, and financial products. The Government of India

supports agriculture through initiatives like e-NAM, Kisan Suvidha app, and Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, boosting the sector. The Software Technology Parks of India (STPI), under MeitY, aids Agritech startups through mentoring and funding in three CoEs. This ecosystem not only addresses immediate challenges but also fosters sustainable practices, resource efficiency, and rural development. The digitalisation of agriculture attracts tech-savvy individuals, revitalising the sector for a more vibrant and dynamic landscape, ensuring a brighter future for India.

*(The writer is the director general, Software Technology Parks of India, views are personal)*





# China 'firmly opposed to external interference' in Maldives

## Muizzu winds up visit

**PTI ■ BEIJING**

China on Thursday said that it "firmly opposes external interference" in the internal affairs of the Maldives and supports the island nation in upholding its sovereignty and independence as Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu concluded his maiden visit here amid a diplomatic row with India.

"The two sides agree to continue firmly supporting each other in safeguarding their respective core interests," said a joint statement issued at the end of Muizzu's talks with the top Chinese leaders. "China firmly supports the Maldives in upholding its national sovereignty, independence and national dignity, respects and supports the Maldives' exploration of a development path that suits its national conditions, and firmly opposes external interference in the internal affairs of the Maldives," it said, without referring to any country. The statement comes at a

Civilization Initiative (GCI) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). "The two sides agree to explore ways towards implementing the GSI in the efforts to deepen cooperation in law enforcement and jointly meet key challenges including those posed by traditional and non-traditional security challenges, to promote the development of bilateral relations and contribute to peace and stability at regional and global levels," the statement said.

"The Maldives highly appreciates the vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind, the BRI, the principle of promoting amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness with neighboring countries," it said.

"The Maldives intends to join the Group of Friends of the GDI and work with other parties to promote practical cooperation in areas identified by the GDI, so as to create synergy for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," it added.

For its part, Maldives said in the joint statement that it is



"firmly committed to the one-China principle, recognising that there is but one China in the world, the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory."

It added that the Maldives "opposes any statement or action that undermines China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, opposes all 'Taiwan independence' separatist activities, and will not develop any form of official relations with Taiwan."

"The Maldives opposes external interference in China's internal affairs under any pretext and supports all efforts made by China to achieve national reunification," it said.

China and Maldives signed 20 agreements on Wednesday after talks between Muizzu and Chinese President Xi Jinping. The agreements include cooperation in tourism to increase Chinese tourists to the island nation. China is currently placed in third position while Indian tourists constitute the highest with over

two lakhs last year followed by Russia.

The two sides signed the Action Plan for Building a China - Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2024-2028) and inked documents on cooperation in areas such as the Belt and Road, economic and technical, blue economy, digital economy, green development, infrastructure construction, and assistance for people's livelihood, the joint statement said. The two sides will actively promote economic and trade cooperation, fully leverage the mechanism of China-Maldives Joint Committee on Economic and Trade Cooperation, enhance trade facilitation, and promote high-quality development of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries, it said.

The two sides are satisfied with the outcomes of the visit by President Muizzu to China, and agree that the visit is of great significance to advancing the China-Maldives comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, it said.

"Since the establishment of diplomatic ties 52 years ago, the two countries have always respected and supported each other," it added.

President Muizzu "expressed appreciation for the warm hospitality of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Government and the Chinese people, and invited Chinese leaders to visit the Maldives at mutually convenient times," it said. Muizzu, who arrived in China on January 8 on a five-day state visit, on Thursday held talks with Chinese Premier Li Qiang and discussed the implementation of the various projects China committed to implement. He also met Zhao Leji, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress.

Muizzu and First Lady Sajida Mohammad also visited the Huawei Beijing Convention Centre, where representatives from Huawei briefed the president on how these advancements facilitate both governments and individuals in enhancing their daily operations. They also visited Tiananmen Square.

## Hasina sworn in as PM of B'desh for fifth term



Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accepts greetings from the assembled media and election observers during a press conference, a day after she won the 12th parliamentary elections, in Dhaka on January 8, 2024.

**PTI ■ DHAKA**

Hasina formed her government for the straight fourth term. She has inducted 25 ministers and 11 state ministers in her Cabinet. "We have not got the (new) ministers and state ministers' portfolios yet but it is expected to be announced later Thursday," a cabinet division official told PTI. Hasina has dropped some heavyweights like foreign minister AK Abdul Momen, finance minister AHM Mostafa Kamal, planning minister Abdul Mannan, agriculture minister Abdur Razzak and commerce minister Tipu Munshi from her new Cabinet.

Names of 13 junior ministers out of 18 state ministers in the outgoing government also did not appear in the new list and they included junior minister for foreign affairs Shahriar Alam. The new council of ministers list named 14 new faces as full ministers and seven state ministers though some of them were elevated as cabinet ministers.

Samanta Lal Sen, a doctor specialized on burn wounds, emerged as a new face in the list of full ministers as a technocrat to the surprise of many as he was never known for political activism. Simin Hossain Rimi, the daughter of the first prime minister of Bangladesh Tazuddin Ahmed, is among the new faces named on the state ministers list.

Sheikh Hasina was on Thursday sworn in as the prime minister of Bangladesh for the fifth term, days after her Awami League won an overwhelming majority in the general elections boycotted by the main opposition BNP and its allies. President Mohammad Shahabuddin administered the oath of office to 76-year-old Hasina at a ceremony joined by politicians, foreign diplomats, civil society figures and senior civil and military officials at Bangabhaban presidential palace here.

She will serve as the 12th prime minister; her fourth consecutive term and fifth overall term. Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been ruling the strategically located South Asian nation since 2009. She is among the world's longest-serving female heads of government. Following the prime minister, the new members of cabinet were sworn in by the president. Hasina's party won 223 seats in the 300-member Parliament. Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of ex-prime minister Khaleda Zia boycotted the elections after their demand for a non-party caretaker government to conduct the January 7 polls was rejected.

## Zelensky rules out ceasefire with Russia, says Moscow will use it to rearm

**AP ■ TALLINN (ESTONIA)**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Thursday ruled out a cease-fire in his country's war with Russia, saying the Kremlin's forces would use the pause to rearm and regroup before overwhelming Kyiv's troops.

"A pause on the Ukrainian battlefield will not mean a pause in the war," Zelensky said during a visit to Estonia. "A pause would play into (Russia's) hands," he said. "It might crush us afterward."

Limited cease-fires have occasionally been proposed since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 but have never taken hold. Both sides are scrambling to replenish their weapons after 22 months of fighting and with the prospect of a protracted conflict. With the roughly 1,500-kilometre (630-mile) front line mostly static during freezing winter weather, they both require artillery shells, missiles and drones that enable long-range strikes. Zelensky noted that Moscow is allegedly buying artillery shells and missiles from North Korea and drones from Iran.

Zelensky was in the Estonian capital Tallinn as part of a two-day swing through Baltic countries which have been among Ukraine's staunchest supporters in the war. The Ukrainian president is pressing allies to provide his country with more support, after already receiving billions of dollars in military aid from its Western allies.

"Ukraine needs more, it needs better weapons," Estonian President Alar Karis said during a joint news conference with Zelensky at the Presidential Palace. "We must boost military production capabilities so that Ukraine may get what it needs," he said.

"And it's not tomorrow, they should get it today," Karis noted that European Union countries have so far provided 85 billion Euros (USD 93 billion) of support for Ukraine.

But the flow of support has slowed, alarming Ukrainians who would find it hard to stand alone against their bigger neighbour. A plan by the administration of US President Joe Biden to send USD 60 billion in new funding to Kyiv is being held up in Congress. Europe's pledge in March to provide 1 million artillery shells within 12 months has fallen short, with only about 3,000,000 delivered so far.

Zelensky says Ukraine particularly needs air defense systems to fend off Russian aerial onslaughts that have repeatedly hit civilian areas, though Moscow officials insist they aim only at military targets. Recent massive Russian barrages — more than 500

## UN concerned over arrests of Afghanistan women for 'dress code violations'

**AP ■ KABUL**

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan said on Thursday it was deeply concerned by recent "arbitrary arrests and detentions" by the Taliban of women and girls for allegedly violating dress codes regarding the Islamic headscarf, or hijab. The mission said it was looking into claims of ill-treatment of women and extortion in exchange for their release, and warned that physical violence and detentions were demeaning and dangerous.

The Taliban said last week that female police officers have been taking women into custody for wearing "bad hijab."

It was the first official confirmation of a crackdown on women who don't follow the dress code imposed by the Taliban since they returned to power in 2021 — a crackdown that has echoed with events in neighbouring Iran, which saw months of protests in 2022 and has long enforced the mandatory hijab. The UN statement said hijab-enforcing campaigns in Kabul and the province of Daykundi have been ongoing since January 1, with large numbers of women and girls warned and detained. The mission also said women from religious and ethnic minorities appear to be disproportionately impacted by the enforcement campaigns.

"Enforcement measures involving physical violence are especially demeaning and dangerous for Afghan women and girls," said Rota Otunbayeva, UN special envoy and head of the mission. "Detentions carry an enormous stigma that put Afghan women at even greater risk," she said. "They also destroy public trust."

## Iran's navy seizes oil tanker in Gulf of Oman

**AP ■ DUBAI**

Iran's navy seized an oil tanker on Thursday in the Gulf of Oman that once was at the centre of a major crisis between Tehran and Washington, officials said, a seizure that further escalates tensions in the Mideast waterways.

The vessel was once known as the Suez Rajan and had been involved in a yearlong dispute that ultimately saw the US Justice Department seize 1 million barrels of Iranian crude oil on it. The seizure also comes after weeks of attacks by Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels on shipping in the Red Sea, including their largest barrage ever of drones and missiles launched late on Tuesday.

That has raised the risk of possible retaliatory strikes by US-led forces now patrolling the vital waterway, especially after a United Nations Security Council vote on Wednesday condemning the Houthis as well as American and British officials warned of potential consequences over the attacks.

Iran's state-run IRNA news agency acknowledged the seizure in a brief report late Thursday afternoon, hours after armed men boarded it. IRNA said the seizure came as the result of a court order, without elaborating.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which provides warnings to sailors in the Middle East, said Thursday's seizure began early in the morning, in the waters between Oman and Iran in an area transited by ships coming in and out of the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all oil traded passes.

The UK military-run group described receiving a report from the ship's security manager of hearing "unknown voices over the phone" alongside with the ship's captain. It said that further efforts to contact the ship had failed and that the men who boarded the vessel wore "black military-style uniforms with black masks."

The private security firm Ambery said that "four to five armed persons" boarded the ship, which it identified as the oil tanker St. Nikolas. It said that the men had covered the surveillance cameras as they boarded.

The tanker had been off the city of Basra, Iraq, loading crude oil bound for Aliaga, Turkey, for the Turkish refinery firm Tupras. Satellite-tracking data analysed by The Associated Press last showed the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker had turned and headed toward the port of Bandar-e Jask in Iran. The St. Nikolas was earlier named the Suez Rajan, associated with the the Greek shipping company Empire Navigation. In a statement to the AP, Athens-based Empire Navigation acknowledged losing contact with the vessel, which has a crew of 18 Filipinos and one Greek national. The company did not elaborate.

Attention began focusing on the Suez Rajan in February 2022, when the group United Against Nuclear Iran said it suspected the tanker carried oil from Iran's Khargh Island, its main oil distribution terminal in the Persian Gulf. Satellite photos and shipping data analysed at the time by the AP supported the allegation.

For months, the ship sat in the South China Sea off the northeast coast of Singapore before suddenly sailing for the Texas coast without explanation. The vessel discharged its cargo to another tanker in Houston as part of a Justice Department order.

In September, Empire Navigation pleaded guilty to smuggling sanctioned Iranian crude oil and agreed to pay a USD 2.4 million fine over a case involving the tanker. The US Navy's 5th Fleet, which patrols the Mideast, did not respond to a request for comment over the incident.

After the vessel, then-Suez Rajan, headed for America, Iran seized two tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, including one with cargo for major US oil company Chevron Corp. In July, the top commander of the Revolutionary Guard's naval arm threatened further action against anyone offloading the Suez Rajan, with state media linking the recent seizures to the cargo's fate.

Since the collapse of Iran's nuclear deal, waters around the strait have seen a series of ship seizures by Iran, as well as assaults targeting shipping that the Navy has blamed on Tehran. Iran and the Navy also have had a series of tense encounters in the waterway, though recent attention has been focused on the Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea.

The US and its allies also have been seizing Iranian oil cargoes since 2019. That has led to a series of attacks in the Mideast attributed to the Islamic Republic, as well as ship seizures by Iranian military and paramilitary forces that threaten global shipping.

## 6.0 magnitude quake jolts parts of Pak

**Islamabad (PTI):** Tremors were felt in multiple cities across Pakistan on Thursday following a 6.0 magnitude earthquake with epicentre in the Hindu Kush region of neighbouring Afghanistan, according to the country's meteorological department. So far, there have been no reports of loss of life or property.

The 6.0 magnitude earthquake struck at 2:20 pm (local time) in the Hindu Kush region at a depth of 213 kms, the Pakistan Meteorological Department posted on X. Tremors were felt in Islamabad, Lahore, and its surrounding areas, and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, according to DawnNews TV channel. Other cities that rocked after the jolts include Punjab's Sardogha, Khushab and its surroundings, Mandi Bahauddin, Bhakkar, and Nowshera. The earthquake was also felt in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir's Muzaffarabad, Geo News said.

## Pak rules out dialogue with TTP

**PTI ■ ISLAMABAD**

Pakistan on Thursday said that it was not interested in a dialogue with the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) after a leading cleric visited Kabul and talked of dialogue following his meeting with the Afghan Taliban leadership. Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch in her weekly press briefing said that Pakistan's stance was clear because the TTP had accepted responsibility for numerous terrorist attacks in the country.

The spokesperson said there is no change in Pakistan's policy towards the TTP.

"We have no dialogue taking place with the TTP nor do we have the intent to hold talks with it which is responsible for several terror incidents in Pakistan," she said. She once again demanded the Afghan authorities take effective action against terrorist elements including the TTP leadership. She said the Afghan authorities should ensure the elimination of terrorist hide-outs and hand over to Islamabad those responsible for terror incidents in Pakistan. "Our demand from the Afghan government is that they take action against the terrorists," she said. The issue of talks cropped at the press-stance in the wake of a visit to Afghanistan by the Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who reportedly also met Afghan Taliban's reclusive supreme chief Mullah Haibatullah Akhund.

After meetings, Rehman said that he would try to revive talks between the government and the TTP. Baloch said Rehman's visit to Afghanistan was neither on

## Pak EC challenges HC verdict on PTI's internal elections

**Islamabad (PTI):** Pakistan's top poll body on Thursday moved the Supreme Court against Peshawar High Court (PHC) verdict that annulled its decision to declare as "unconstitutional" the organisational polls in the jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party and revoked cricket 'bat' electoral symbol.

On the other hand, Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party filed a contempt of court petition against the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) over its failure to comply with the order issued on the party's petition. The developments come ahead of general elections scheduled on February 8. "The Peshawar High Court decision should be declared illegal. PTI did not hold intra-party elections as per the Election Act," the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) said in its plea submitted to the top court, according to a report in Geo News. The petition comes after sources told Geo News that ECP had held a meeting to review the PHC decision and shared that the meeting had reviewed options whether to approach the Supreme Court or not. In a major relief for PTI, the Peshawar High Court on Wednesday declared as unconstitutional the election commission's decision revoking the jailed former premier's party's cricket 'bat' electoral symbol and rejecting its organisational polls.

## Cipher case: Pakistan court withdraws stay order on Imran's in-camera trial

**PTI ■ ISLAMABAD**

A high court in Pakistan on Thursday withdrew its stay order on jailed former premier Imran Khan's in-camera trial in the cipher case while declaring all proceedings in the case after December 14 as void and invalid. Justice Miangul Aurangzeb of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) heard the appeal against the in-camera trial of 71-year-old Khan and his 67-year-old former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

The special court judge Abul Hasanat Zulqarnain on December 14 had ordered an in-camera trial due to involvement of sensitive matter, and it was challenged in IHC which had stopped the trial of the case till January 11. Attorney General Mansoor Awan and Khan's lawyer Salman Akram Raja appeared in court. Justice Aurangzeb told Awan that if he wanted the proceedings to start again, then he should do it from the date the order was passed. A relevant order will also be issued on the matter.

The attorney general in his response assured to start the proceedings again, adding that 13 witnesses were ready to have their statements recorded again. After the assurance, the court annulled all proceedings of the cipher case trial after December 14 and cancelled the stay order.

The case is related to a cable sent by the Pakistan embassy in March 2022 and Khan and Qureshi are accused of mishandling it for political purposes. Both were indicted last month and both pleaded not guilty. The Federal Investigation Agency registered the case on August 15 and the trial is being held in the Adiala Jail Rawalpindi. Khan and several of his party leaders have been facing numerous cases since the ouster of the party from power in April 2022 and later in the wake of the May 9 violence last year.

Khan was ousted through a vote of no-confidence in April 2022. He was incarcerated on August 5 last year, after an Islamabad court sentenced him to three years in prison in the Toshakhana case. He was lodged in the Attock District Jail to serve his prison term.

Later, his sentence was suspended by the Islamabad High Court, but then he was arrested in the cipher case and remained in the Attock jail on judicial remand. He was later shifted to Adiala jail.





