

**OPINION 6**  
**BOSE'S WINNING GOAL FOR INDEPENDENCE**

**WORLD 8**  
**FAMILIES OF GAZA HOSTAGES CALL ON GOVT TO BRING THEM HOME**

**MONEY 10**  
**GOYAL ASKS FCI TO ADOPT TECH, CUT OPERATIONAL COST**

NEW DELHI, MONDAY JANUARY 15, 2024; PAGES 12 & 3

# the pioneer

www.dailypioneer.com

WHEN CRICKET MEETS TENNIS  
 12 SPORTS



## Major jolt to Congress as Deora quits

**DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI**

In yet another setback for the Congress, on the day it launched the second leg of the 6,500 km Bharat Jodo Yatra on Sunday, former Union Minister Milind Deora quit the party "to walk the path of development" and joined the Shiv Sena led by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The Congress alleged that the timing of Deora's departure from the party was orchestrated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for headline management to counter the yatra, and asserted that it would have no impact. On his part, Deora ended a "55-year-old association" of the Deora family with the Grand Old Party. The former Mumbai South MP announced his decision to resign from the primary membership of the party on the social media platform. Deora was the head of the Mumbai Congress at one time and is the son of the party stalwart late Murli Deora. "Today marks the conclusion of a significant chapter in my political journey. I have tendered my resignation from the primary membership of the Congress, thereby ending my family's 55-year relationship with the party. I am grateful to all leaders, colleagues, and karyakartas for their unwavering support over the years," said Deora.

Later, he went to Siddhivinayak Temple in Prabhadevi to offer prayers. In the afternoon, Deora joined the Shiv Sena in the presence of Eknath Shinde at Varsha, the official residence of the Chief Minister. Earlier in the day, when Deora stepped out of his residence "Ramalayam" in south Mumbai, he told reporters that he was "going to walk on the path of development." Deora also launched a veiled attack on the Congress leadership after joining the Shiv Sena, saying that his parent party is not the same as it used to be when Manmohan Singh launched economic reforms. He emphasised that the Congress is now criticising industrialists and businessmen, labeling them as anti-nationals. Deora expressed his belief that PM Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah have a vision for developing the country. He also praised Shinde as the "most accessible" chief minister. Deora, recently appointed as the joint treasurer of the All India Congress Committee, had previously expressed disapproval of the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) staking a claim to the Mumbai South Lok Sabha constituency, which he had represented in the past. In the undivided Shiv Sena, Arvind Sawant, now with the



Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde welcomes former Congress leader Milind Deora who joined Shiv Sena in Mumbai on Sunday PTI

Thackeray faction, had defeated Deora in both the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh remarked that while one Milind Deora departs, "lakhs of Milinds who believe in our organisation and ideology stay." Ramesh revealed that Deora had contacted him over the phone last Friday, expressing his desire to speak with Rahul Gandhi regarding his concerns about the Shiv Sena (UBT) claiming the South Mumbai Lok Sabha seat. "He messaged me on Friday at 8:52 am, and then at 2:47 pm, I replied, 'Are you planning a switch? At 2:48, he sent a message, 'Is speaking to you not possible? I said I will call you, and at 3:40, I spoke to him," recounted Ramesh. "He (Deora) expressed concern that it is a sitting Shiv Sena seat. He wanted to meet Rahul Gandhi, explain the situation about the seat, and also requested me to talk to

Mr Gandhi about it," added the Congress general secretary. "However, it became apparent that this was all a farce, and he had already decided to leave." Ramesh alleged the timing of the announcement of his departure was clearly determined by the PM. Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut, however, asserted that there would be no compromise on the Mumbai South Lok Sabha seat. In a swipe at the BJP, NCP (Sharad Pawar faction) MP Supriya Sule questioned whether the saffron party had no talent of its own. Following Deora's resignation, Mumbai Congress president Varsha Gaikwad expressed regret, stating that it was unfortunate he had chosen to leave the party on the day when Rahul Gandhi-led "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra" commenced from Manipur. Deora's departure from the Congress adds to a growing list of young leaders who have left the party to embark on new journeys in other political entities, predominantly the BJP. The lack of resolution for lingering issues and intra-party factionalism has previously prompted several promising leaders from the Rahul camp to leave. The list is extensive, with former Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister Sachin Pilot

standing out as the sole exception. Pilot chose to remain with the Congress despite promises made to him by the top brass, which were not fulfilled when he called off his revolt in 2020 and returned to the Congress, citing a resolution of differences with his adversary Ashok Gehlot, the then CM. Union Minister under the Congress-led UPA regime, Jyotiraditya Scindia, resigned from the Congress to join the BJP in March 2020 and is currently a minister in the Modi Cabinet. Scindia stated that he could no longer tolerate the disrespect coming from veteran Kamal Nath. Another ex-UPA minister, Jitin Prasada, left the Congress, citing the party's growing disconnect with the people. Subsequently, a series of exits occurred, with Priyanka Chaturvedi joining the erstwhile undivided Shiv Sena, former Mahila Congress chief Sushmita Dev quitting for the TMC, former Union Minister RPN Singh, former Punjab Congress chief Sunil Jakhar, and party spokesperson Jaiveer Shergill joining the BJP. The exodus began with then Assam Congress stalwart Himanta Biswa Sarma leaving the party for the BJP on the eve of the 2014 polls. Congress stalwarts Amarinder Singh, Ghulam Nabi Azad, and Kapil Sibal also remain on the list of Congress exodus.

## 45 tonne laddoos for Ram devotees

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW**

As the highly anticipated "pran prathishtha" ceremony for the Ram Temple in Uttar Pradesh's Ayodhya approaches on January 22, an impressive 45 tonnes of mouthwatering laddoos are undergoing meticulous preparation to be distributed to devotees and VIPs in attendance. In a dedicated hall for their preparation, trays laden with these sweet treats proudly showcase an arrangement that spells out the name "Ram" in both Hindi and English, infusing a thoughtful and sacred dimension into this grand endeavor. A committed team of confectioners from Varanasi has been working tirelessly to ensure the timely production of these laddoos. The ongoing production is set to continue until February, catering to the expected influx of devotees participating in the celebratory events at the Ayodhya temple. These specially crafted laddoos, accompanied by other religious items, will be distributed to devotees visiting the Ram Temple. Importantly, the laddoos will boast a shelf life of three to four months, ensuring their freshness for an extended period.



A mithai wala involved in the preparation, revealed that the prasad package for devotees will not only include the delectable laddoos but also a book, jhola (bag), and a chunni (scarf) adorned with the name "Ram". VIPs attending the ceremony on January 22 will receive a specially designed tiffin box featuring the sticker of Lord Ram and a depiction of the Ayodhya Temple. The laddoos, a quintessential element of this prasad, are made with pure desi ghee, combining besan (gram flour) with delightful flavors of cardamom, cashews, and saffron. Ashok Yadav, a dedicated worker involved in the laddoo preparation in Ayodhya, emphasised the use of pure desi ghee in creating this special treat. "We are combining one kilogram of besan with one kilogram of sugar and one kilogram of cow ghee," he shared, further describing the laddoo as a renowned delicacy from Banaras (Varanasi).

Continued on Page 2

## Rahul kicks off Yatra 2.0

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ IMPHAL/NEW DELHI**

Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi embarked on the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra from Manipur on Sunday, promising to bring peace and harmony to the ethnically violence-hit State. Addressing a public meeting in Thoubal, south of Manipur's capital Imphal, Rahul criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi, suggesting that, for the BJP and the RSS, Manipur might not be considered a part of India. "Lakhs of people faced losses, but the Prime Minister has not come here to wipe your tears, hold your hand, or embrace you. Maybe for Narendra Modi, the BJP, and the RSS, Manipur is not a part of India. Your pain is not their pain," Rahul said.



Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Ashok Gehlot, Sachin Pilot, KC Venugopal, Deepender Singh Hooda and others upon their arrival in Imphal ahead of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra on Sunday PTI

March 20 after 67 days. Earlier, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also criticised the Prime Minister, stating that he came to the northeastern State only to seek votes and not to share the grief of the people when they are in pain. "Modi has time to drive by the sea, take a dip in the sea but has not come to Manipur. Modi keeps chanting 'Ram, Ram', but he should not do it just to seek votes. The BJP mixes religion and politics, inciting people," he said at the launch of the yatra. "The BJP has 'Ram' on its lips but carries a knife by their side.

They should not have such an approach towards the people," the Congress president said. Kharge said the Congress stood for social justice, secularism, and equity. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra is being undertaken to safeguard the Constitution and democracy and to combat fascist forces, he said. The Congress president expressed pride that a leader of his party was moving from door-to-door to spread the message of peace. Earlier, Kharge unveiled the bus on which Gandhi and other Congress leaders will travel from Manipur to Mumbai as

part of the yatra. The Congress leaders also paid homage at the Khongjom War Memorial in Thoubal. Rahul reached the Imphal airport in the afternoon and was accorded a rousing welcome by Congress supporters. He then went to a nearby private ground, named "Nyay Maidan," from where the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra began. Lok Sabha member Danish Ali, recently suspended by the BSP, also joined the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, stating that he would be failing in his duty as a politician if he did not participate in the "biggest drive for unity and justice." Ali has actively aligned himself with the opposition, criticising the BJP and its policies, even though the Mayawati-led BSP has maintained a distance from the BJP-led NDA as well as the opposition bloc INDIA. BSP suspended him in December for "anti-party" activities. Ali sat alongside Congress leaders in the front row on the dais at the Yatra flag-off event in Thoubal on Sunday and later joined Gandhi on the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra bus. He recalled that Rahul Gandhi was the "first leader to express solidarity" with him after he faced a hate "attack" in Parliament when a BJP MP used derogatory words against him.

## Frigid weekend chill grips Delhi

**RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI**

First Lohri and now Makar Sankranti: the national capital continued to experience severe cold conditions on Sunday morning. The minimum temperature dropped to 3.4 degrees Celsius at Lodhi Road, marking this winter's lowest, and was four notches below the normal. A thick layer of fog was observed in several parts of Delhi. This represented a marginal dip from Saturday's 3.6 degrees Celsius and Friday's 3.9 degrees Celsius, both of which were the season's lowest on those respective days. The mercury has consistently been dropping in the national capital for the past few days. The maximum temperature was recorded at 20.6 degrees Celsius, one notch above the normal. With the air quality in Delhi reaching "severe" levels, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has



Ranjian Dimri | The Pioneer

decided to implement restrictions under Phase III of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP). This includes a ban on the operation of BS-III petrol and BS-IV diesel four-wheelers, with a potential fine of ₹20,000 for violators. This measure will be enforced in Delhi and the districts of Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, and Gautam Budh Nagar, aiming to reduce vehicular emissions, a major contributor to air pollution. The Air Quality Index (AQI) on Sunday stood at 447. Due to dense fog, more than 100 flights

were delayed at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International (IGI) airport on Sunday morning, with 10 flights being diverted to Jaipur. Delhi Airport experienced chaos as dense fog disrupted flight operations, leaving passengers stranded inside planes. Airlines communicated through social media that flight schedules might be impacted due to adverse weather conditions. Among the affected flights, Air India's flight AI 185 from the national capital to Vancouver, scheduled to depart early in the morning, was rescheduled. Runway congestion, worsened by limited visibility, resulted in a gridlock where incoming flights had no available parking slots, leaving travelers stranded inside their planes after landing. One person died, and four were hospitalized with injuries after a multi-truck pileup due to fog on the Eastern Peripheral Expressway in Greater Noida, according to the police on Sunday.

Continued on Page 2

## Maldives sets March 15 deadline for Indian troops pullout

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu on Sunday asked India to withdraw its military personnel from his country by March 15 even as the two sides deliberated on finding a "mutually workable solution" to enable continued operation of the Indian military platforms in the island nation. The issue was extensively discussed at the first meeting



of the India-Maldives high-level core group in Male. The two sides decided to set up the core group on the contentious issue following a

meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Muizzu on the sidelines of the COP28 summit in Dubai last month. "Both sides also held discussions on finding a mutually workable solution to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian and medvac services to the people of Maldives," the Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement.

Abdulla Nazim Ibrahim, the principal secretary to the Maldivian President, said at a media briefing in Male that Muizzu asked the Maldivian delegation to inform Indian officials in the core group meeting that the troops must be withdrawn by March 15. Indian military personnel cannot stay in the Maldives. This is the policy of president Muizzu and that of this administration, Ibrahim said.

Continued on Page 2

### CAPSULE

#### Ram temple event is spiritual: Reddy

**Hyderabad:** Union Minister G Kishan Reddy on Sunday said the Ram Temple consecration ceremony is a spiritual programme and not being done for "electoral gains". The whole country, including the Muslims are awaiting this moment, the Minister said.

#### Covid cases down

**New Delhi:** India recorded 375 new cases of coronavirus, while the number of active infections has declined to 3,075, the health ministry said on Sunday.

## Bundling up strays for compassion

**ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Even as numerous ESamaritans are already extending a helping hand to offer respite to stray animals in the ongoing biting cold, the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) has also joined the cause, urging individuals to provide cots and mattresses to these homeless creatures, particularly in Northern India, which is in the grip of harsh weather. AWBI Secretary SK Dutta, in a recent letter, appealed to the general public, saying, "As we grapple with an intense cold wave affecting our nation, it is crucial for us to address the well-being of our stray

animals. "Furthermore, it is most urgent to provide appropriate bedding and mattresses to stray animals. This measure is essential not only to meet their thermal requirements but also to ensure a level of comfort vital for their survival." "This small gesture of providing bedding and cots to these stray animals will reinforce our humane commitment towards voiceless animals, thereby fulfilling our fundamental duties envisaged under Article 51 A(g) of the Constitution of India," said Dutta. The Animal Welfare Board of

India (AWBI) is an apex body for the protection and safeguarding of the rights of animals, as well as ensuring that the five freedoms of the animals are upheld and no animals are subject to any unnecessary pain or suffering. While the official efforts of the AWBI, a statutory body established under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, 1960, may have gladdened many hearts, there are individuals already contributing their part to bring warmth into the lives of these furry beings. On the social platform X, a clamor for assistance resonates, echoing the collective call to make this



winter a tad more bearable for our four-legged companions. Animal lover Vidit Sharma, known as @TheViditsharma, said, "Sharing a glimpse of our morning rituals! The

preparation for feeding thousands of stray dogs and other animals in need is in full swing. With a cold wave gripping the NCR for the next 30 days, winters are tough for

our furry friends. Join us in making this season a bit easier for them with warm, hearty meals." Sharma's venture is also crafting cozy vute beds for stray dogs in bone-chilling winters. Another netizen, Divyanshu Upadhyay, with the handle @divyanshu\_hope, said, "Our team has come forward to help stray dogs stay warm in winters. Donating clothes made by women working in our stitching center, we are helping our furry friends stay comfortable during the cold months." "They deserve to live," he adds. Social influencers like Dr. Vedika, known as

@vishkanyaaa, are supporting the NGO 'House of Stray Animals' and highlighting its efforts to help stray dogs stay warm during winters. She pointed out, "They are donating woolen blankets, sweaters, and even beds to keep those furry friends comfortable during winter. Have one? Why don't you put one on who needs it most?" in her post. According to Sanjay Mahapatra, the founder of House of Stray Animals, a city-based NGO, every year many animals die during winter due to hypothermia, pneumonia, or an inability to combat diseases.

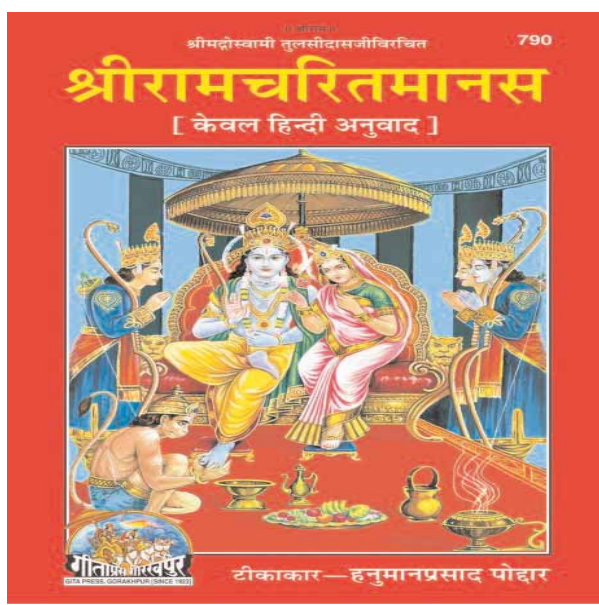
Continued on Page 2



# Get free Ramcharitmanas soon

PTI ■ GORAKHPUR

The Gita Press will allow free download of the Ramcharitmanas from its website as it is unable to meet an increased demand for the holy book ahead of the January 22 Ram temple consecration ceremony, an official said. Established in 1923, the Gita Press is one of the world's largest publishers, and according to its manager Lalmani Tripathi, it has published 95 crore books in 15 languages. The Gorakhpur-based publisher, which was awarded the Gandhi Peace Prize last year, has stores across the country. Giving a comparison, he said in 2022, it had printed and distributed around 75,000 copies of the Ramcharitmanas. Since the announcement of the date of the "Pran Prathistha" at the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the demand for the book has increased manifold, he said. The date of the ceremony, which will be attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was announced by the



Ram temple trust on October 26 last year. "Due to limited space, we are unable to meet the demand for printing and distribution of the Ramcharitmanas," Tripathi said.

"We do not have the preparedness to suddenly print and provide 2 lakh to 4 lakh copies of the Ramcharitmanas. Since last month, we have managed to make available 1 lakh copies of the book," he

said. Even after this, the demand is not being met, Tripathi said and added that Gita Press does not have sufficient stock. "In many places, we have to humbly say that we do not have stock available. Recently, we received a demand for 50,000 Ramcharitmanas from Jaipur and a demand for 10,000 copies came from Bhagalpur, which we had to regretfully decline. This is the scenario across the entire country," the manager said. "Currently, we are uploading the Ramcharitmanas to the Gita Press website. Starting from Tuesday, it will be available for free download. We will provide this service for 15 days, allowing up to 50,000 people to download," Tripathi said. If the demand increases, "we will scale-up the traffic capacity, enabling up to 1 lakh people to download the Ramcharitmanas simultaneously", he said and added that this service could also be extended. Ever since the announcement

of the date of "Pran Prathistha" (consecration ceremony), there has been an increasing demand for the Ramcharitmanas and the pressure to supply the book has increased, he said. People are so enthusiastic that they are considering distributing the Ramcharitmanas, the Sunderkand and the Hanuman Chalisa on a large-scale for recitation, Tripathi said. He said after the "Pran Prathistha", the demand for the book may further increase as a people visiting ayodhya after the ceremony, "might think about taking the Ramcharitmanas as 'prasad' to their homes". "Considering that we publish books in 15 languages and have over 2,500 book distributors associated with us, we also need to take into account their demands as their livelihoods are dependent on it. We are exploring various options to expand our capacity so that we can meet the increasing demand for books," Tripathi said.

# IAF puts up spectacular air display over marine drive

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Mumbaikars had a pleasant outing in south Mumbai on Sunday, as they witnessed a spectacular air display conducted by the Indian Air Force (IAF) over the picturesque Marine Drive as part of its outreach programme to create awareness and foster a deeper connection between it and the local community. Airborne from a number of air bases, the IAF teams enthralled thousands of people gathered at the Marine Drive and those witnessing the event from their balconies and roof-tops of the buildings located along the 4 km-long Queen's Necklace, as the Marine Drive overlooking the Arabian Sea. A scintillating display by Akash Ganga team members with air warriors skydiving from an AN-32 at Girgaon Chowpatty regaled the people gathered with their precise



landing. An impressive display by the Surya Kiran team mesmerized those present. The SU-30 MKI and Sarang Helicopter display team showcased the professionalism of the IAF personnel with their perfectly timed and synchronised manoeuvres. While Maharashtra Governor of Maharashtra Ramesh Baise was the chief guest on the

occasion, several civil and military dignitaries joined the event and witnessed the air show. The air display was aimed at showcasing the skills, capabilities, creating awareness about it and also motivating the youth to choose the IAF as a career option. The event was conducted in coordination with the Maharashtra government.

# Leader caught with 41 kilogram of marijuana

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

In an incident quite embarrassing for the Opposition BJP ahead of the general elections the Bengal Police has arrested a local BJP leader and seized 41 kgs of marijuana from his house at Sankrail in Howrah district. While the BJP saw a Trinamool Congress hand in the arrest of Nemat Das a Mandal (zonal) president and husband of a local BJP panchayat member the accused himself said that he had been a "victim of a conspiracy hatched by my own party men." Three others also have been arrested with Das. The TMC however went ahead with publishing pictures of Das with senior leaders like Suwendu Adhikari and State BJP president Sukanto Majumdar asking the police to



find out whether the saffron party's senior leaders were connected to the illegal ganja trade or not. "We have photographs of Suwendu Adhikari and Sukanto Majumdar with this man ... so why the police will not investigate their role in such cases," RMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh asked. BJP State leader Samik Bhattacharya however wondered why only opposition workers were getting involved in "ganja cases". He said, "the

number of BJP men who are in jail on charges of ganja trafficking will now raise questions on whether Bengal is the largest producer of ganja in the country and if so what the police are doing ... and how so much ganja is coming to Bengal." Both the BJP and the Left leaders have often accused the TMC for threatening the opposition workers with false cases of marijuana trafficking should they not leave their parties and join the ruling outfit.

# BJP cashing in on sadhus attack: TMC

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress has launched a frontal attack on the BJP for trying to politicise isolated incidents like the attack by the local villagers on three Ganga Sagar-bound sadhus in Purulia district. Rejecting the saffron outfit's claims that not only the common people but also the pious Hindus like the Sadhus were not safe in Bengal ruled by Mamata Banerjee, TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh on Sunday said that the BJP was trying to use a misunderstanding and a resultant "stray" attack on sadhus as a political tool ahead of the 2024 general elections. "The villagers had mistook the sadhus for child-lifters which is a common phenomenon in villagers ... this misunderstanding led to the attack on the sadhus and the BJP is making it a political issue," said Ghosh adding the saffron out-



fit had become so politically bankrupt that "they have to use even holy men to get votes ... this whereas the sadhus themselves had said that it was matter of misunderstanding and praised the policemen who promptly visited the area and rescued them." The sadhus who were coming from Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh and were travelling to Ganga Sagar for a holy bath on the occasion of Makar Sankranti were detained and then beaten by people at Kashipur village. The district SP Abhijit Banerjee subsequently said about the January 11 incident that the

Sadhus had lost their way and had asked three minor girls for the right direction when the villagers got suspicious and attacked them. "The police immediately rushed to the spot and rescued them ... the sadhus themselves aborted their journey to Ganga Sagar saying that their vehicle had been damaged and we let them go to from where they had come," the SP said. "Some people have gone mad ... they are playing with the emotions of the people in order to bake their political breads ... but at the end of the day they will miserably fail in their Endeavour because this is Mamata Banerjee's Bengal," said State minister Shashi Panja adding spreading rumors and then taking political dividend out of it was "BJP's age-old practice." Earlier comparing the incident to a previous one happening at Palghar in Maharashtra were some sadhus

were lynched by the local villagers BJP national president JP Nadda on Saturday said that said that "when the whole country was becoming 'Rammay (emotionally swept in the name of Lord Rama) ... Mamata Banerjee's men in Bengal are attacking the Sadhus ... one does not understand what problem the TMC has with the santani people." BJP IT cell charge de affairs Amit Malavya said, that it was "absolutely shocking incident reported from Purulia in West Bengal. In a Palghar kind lynching, sadhus traveling to Ganga Sagar for Makar Sankranti were stripped and beaten by criminals, affiliated with the ruling TMC. In Mamata Banerjee's regime, a terrorist like Shahjahan Sheikh gets state protection and sadhus are being lynched. It is a crime to be a Hindu in West Bengal." Meanwhile, in a parallel development senior TMC MP Kalyan Banerjee on Sunday

launched a scathing attack on the BJP saying that its policies would let it down in Bengal. "They (BJP) have done immense harm to their cause in Bengal ... this time not a single MP will go to Parliament," Banerjee said. Referring to the coming Budget session he said "the BJP MPs will go for the last time in Parliament in the coming Budget Session beginning January 31 and ending February 9 ... thereafter they will not be seen in Lok Sabha again as not a single BJP MP will win from Bengal." He said that the people have been able to understand the BJP's divisive politics and so they have united against them. "The BJP lives by the support of the ED, CBI and courts whereas TMC lives by the support of the people in whose hearts reside Mamata Banerjee and there is no way they can unseat her from their heart," he said.

# Severe gum disease linked to lung failure

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

There's yet another reason to ensure oral hygiene. A new research has said periodontitis — a severe gum disease — worsens chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a potentially fatal lung disease. The study is published in the journal mSystems. According to the World Health Organization, COPD is the sixth-leading cause of death worldwide. It is not curable. In higher-income countries, tobacco smoking is the leading cause of COPD; in low- and middle-income countries, both tobacco smoking and house-

hold air pollution are significant risk factors. Researchers from Sichuan University in China said that bacteria associated with gum disease promote COPD through the activation of 2 types of cells, Gamma delta T cells and M2 macrophages, that are important to the immune system. Focusing on this mechanism might offer new, practical strategies for COPD prevention or control. "By enhancing periodontal therapy and targeting the inhibition of Gamma delta T cells and M2 macrophages [we] may be able to help control the progression of COPD," said microbiologist Boyu Tang,



doctoral student at West China Hospital of Stomatology at Sichuan University. Periodontitis is a gum disease that results from the untreated buildup of plaque, a sticky film made primarily of bacteria. Over time, the plaque can harden into tartar and cause irritation and inflammation of

gum tissue, and then produce deep gaps between the teeth and gums where bacteria flourish and may lead to bone loss. For the study, the team used mouse models to show how those bacteria could aggravate progression of COPD. In one experiment, they showed that mice infected with both periodontitis and COPD had worse progression of COPD than mice infected with COPD alone. In another experiment, they found that in mice orally infected with P. gingivalis, the bacteria migrated to and infected lung tissue, leading to a significant, observable change in the lung microbiota. In experi-

ments using mouse lung tissue, a team of researchers connected the dots by showing that P. gingivalis could activate the immune cells, promoting their ability to produce cytokines associated with worsening COPD. Further observations using flow cytometry and immunofluorescence revealed that periodontitis promoted the expansion of the immune cells in the lung tissue. Finally, in experiments using mouse lung tissue, the group connected the dots by showing that P. gingivalis could activate the immune cells, promoting their ability to produce cytokines associated with worsening COPD.

# Fake casting director held for duping aspiring models

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 43-year-old man, who posed as a casting director and allegedly duped many aspiring models on the pretext of providing them work, has been arrested, police said on Sunday. Gaurav Khanna, a resident of Malviya Nagar, used Instagram to target the models, a police official said, adding profile sheets and details of 15 struggling models and three mobile phones have been seized from him. "An aspiring model complained at Kirti Nagar police station that

a fake casting director was cheating struggling models on the pretext of providing them photo-shoot and event assignments," Deputy Commissioner of Police (west) Vichitra Veer said. The complainant told police that she was contacted by Khanna through Instagram, introducing himself as a casting director of the production house namely "ANG Productions", the DCP said. "Khanna gave her a portfolio offer and asked her to make a payment of Rs 20,000. Subsequently, he proposed upcoming selections for a lehenga and jewellery shoot

with a reputed company and asked her to pay Rs 75,000 more," said the police officer. According to the officer, the model paid Rs 10,000 to Khanna. Later, when she enquired from the company about the production house and their shoot dates in Delhi, she came to know that there was no shoot planned in Delhi. The model later visited the office of ANG Production, where she came to know that Khanna had vacated the premises. Following an investigation, police arrested Khanna from his Malviya Nagar residence.

# Slum demolition sparks war of words between AAP, BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Cabinet ministers DAtishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj on Sunday visited slum clusters in the national Capital and accused the BJP of conspiring to remove slum dwellers while the Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly, Ramvir Singh Bidhuri slammed the Arvind Kejriwal government saying AAP leaders are shedding crocodile tears for the slum dwellers these days. "If slum dwellers are removed anywhere in Delhi, flats are ready in Delhi for their rehabilitation," he said. On Sunday, Atishi visited B R camp slum while her Cabinet colleague Bharadwaj met residents of slums near the Safdarjung Flying Club in south Delhi. "The BJP-led central government is conspiring to raze the slum areas of Delhi and relocate its residents 40 to 50 km away from their homes. AAP and (Delhi) Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal are standing with them (slum dwellers)," Atishi said, during her visit to



the slum cluster. She said, "Today, I visited BR Camp, located just behind the Race Course, where approximately 500 houses are currently occupied. The BJP had promised residents, before every election, that it would provide a house in place of the existing houses they are living in. Residents of BR Camp showed the forms they had filled out before the elections to secure homes from the BJP." "A notice by the DDA has been pasted on the houses, informing residents that their houses will be demolished. They have been told that some of them will get houses in Narela, which is about 50 kilo-

meters from here. However, the people of BR Camp are sure that they want a house where they are already living because that is what the law also says," Atishi added. Echoing similar views, Bharadwaj said that drivers, maids, cooks, etc have been living in Delhi's JJ clusters with their families. Taking a dig at the AAP government, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva said the Modi government has built thousands of houses for the poor at Kathputli Colony, Kalkaji and Jailerwala Bagh in Delhi, but Arvind Kejriwal should tell how many houses he has given to the poor during his tenure.

# Frigid weekend chill...

From Page 1 The Indian Railways reported that 22 Delhi-bound trains were delayed by one to six hours due to fog in the national capital and several other states. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the Safdarjung base observatory recorded 3.5 degrees Celsius (four notches below the normal), Palam 5.9 degrees Celsius (one notch below the normal), Ridge 4.4 degrees Celsius, and Ayanagar 4 degrees Celsius (four notches below the normal). The maximum temperatures recorded in Palam, Lodhi Road, Ridge, Ayanagar, Jafarpur, Narela, Pusa, and Mayur Vihar were 16.1 degrees Celsius, 19.9 degrees Celsius, 19.5 degrees Celsius, 15.5 degrees Celsius, 17.3 degrees Celsius, 18.7 degrees Celsius, and 17.2 degrees Celsius, respectively. While sunlight helped to increase the maximum temperature during the day on Sunday, the night and morning were characterized by a cold wave with dry, icy northwesterly winds, compelling people to stay indoors. It was the coldest Makar Sankranti after Lohri this year. This day is followed by warmer and longer days and marks an

end to a bitter cold spell. Day duration from now will increase, and nights will shorten, linked to the strong belief that the extreme cold conditions will also recede hereon. This period of Uttarayan lasts for around six months. Sankranti means the movement of the sun, and Makar Sankranti is the most important of all the 12 Sankranti that fall in a year. A blanket of fog also enveloped North India during the night and early morning, reducing visibility and affecting movement on Sunday morning. At Indira Gandhi International Airport, dense fog brought the visibility down to zero at 5 am, marking the longest spell of dense fog this winter. More than 100 flights, including a special IndiGo flight carrying Congress leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, to Manipur's Imphal for the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, were delayed at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International (IGI) airport on Sunday morning, with nine flights being diverted to Jaipur. Several passengers found themselves stranded inside their flights at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport on Sunday, enduring hours of delay as adverse weather conditions prevented queued planes from taking off.

# Bundling up strays for...

From Page 1 Mahapatra mentioned, "We try to reduce that number by providing everything at our disposal. A large number of people join us to volunteer, and that gives us hope." The NGO has already provided sweaters or winter jackets to more than 3,200 dogs, as per reports. Vets emphasize that during winters in India, stray dogs face numerous challenges that put their health and safety at risk. With no warm shelter to protect them from harsh weather conditions, these animals are often left to fend for themselves in the freezing cold. "They are more susceptible to illnesses, hypothermia, and frostbite, and are forced to scavenge for food and water amidst the scarcity of these resources. This also leads to malnutrition and dehydration, making these animals even more vulnerable to infections," they pointed out.

# 45 tonne laddoos for...

From Page 1 A spokesman for the Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra confirmed that thousands of VIP guests have received invitations for the ceremony on January 22. The Trust has arranged a warm welcome and special gifts, including 'Ram Raj' for all attendees. As part of the celebration, the Trust will distribute special 'Motichoor laddus', made from desi ghee, as 'Prasad' to the guests. Meanwhile, the General Secretary of Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, Champat Rai, inaugurated machines donated for making prasad and community food ahead of the 'Pran Prathistha' ceremony. With the aroma of freshly prepared laddoos filling the air and meticulous attention to detail, Ayodhya's Ram Temple is poised not only to witness a divine ceremony but also to offer its devotees a delightful culinary experience, symbolizing the sacred essence of the occasion. The convergence of tradition, devotion, delectable delights is set to make the 'pran prathistha' ceremony a memorable and spiritually enriching event for all in attendance.

# Maldives sets March 15...

From Page 1 "During the meeting, both sides held discussions on wide-ranging issues related to bilateral cooperation towards identifying steps to enhance the partnership, including expediting the implementation of ongoing development cooperation projects," the MEA said in a statement. "It was agreed to hold the next meeting of the high-level core group in India on a mutually convenient date," it said. Around 90 Indian personnel are currently staying in the Maldives primarily to operate and maintain two helicopters and an aircraft. The Indian delegation at the meeting comprised High Commissioner Munu Mahawar and a number of other diplomats from the Indian mission. The Maldivian team comprised the Ambassador at large in the foreign ministry, Ali Naser Mohamed, and the Maldivian high commissioner to India, Ibrahim Shaheeb, among several other officials.



# Curbs on BS II petrol, BS IV diesel vehicles as air severe

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With the air quality in Delhi turning 'severe', the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has decided to impose restrictions under phase III of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP). This includes a ban on running BS-III petrol and BS-IV diesel four-wheelers. Car owners may be fined Rs 20,000 for violating the ban. This measure will be enforced in Delhi and the districts of Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, and Gautam Budh Nagar. The objective is to reduce vehicular emissions, a significant contributor to air pollution. The air quality index (AQI) on Sunday stood at 447. The Delhi government banned the use of BS-III petrol and BS-IV diesel four-wheelers in the national capital on Friday in response to an order from the Centre's air quality monitoring panel, citing poor air quality in the city and NCR. The Commission also advised state governments to take a decision on discontinuing schools for up to Class 5. Delhi's air quality deteriorated to 'severe' for the first time this year due to low temperatures and low wind speed over the last 48 hours. Construction work related to



national security or defence, projects of national importance, healthcare, railways, metro rail, airports, inter-state bus terminals, highways, roads, flyovers, overbridges, power transmission, pipelines, sanitation and water supply are exempted from the ban. The CAQM, a statutory body responsible for forming air pollution reduction strategies for the region and their implementation, noted a significant rise in Delhi's AQI (458 and 457 at 10 am and 11 am) due

to unfavourable climatic conditions and local pollution sources. Anticipating a prolonged period of severe air quality, the committee decided to implement GRAP Stage-III curbs ('severe' air quality index (AQI) range) immediately to prevent further deterioration. "CAQM Sub-Committee for operationalisation of GRAP called on an emergency meeting Sunday morning in view of sudden deterioration of air quality of Delhi-NCR from last evening. The Sub-

Committee decides to invoke 8 point action plan as per Stage-III of revised GRAP in the entire NCR with immediate effect," the panel said. "Make a decision on discontinuing physical classes in schools for children up to class 4 and conduct classes in an online mode. Intensify public transport services and introduce differential rates to encourage off-peak travel. Enforce a strict ban on construction and demolition activities in the entire NCR, except essential projects," it

added. CAQM measures, invoked for the third time this winter, effectively ban BS III petrol and BS IV diesel four-wheelers from plying in Delhi, Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and Gautam Budh Nagar. The measures also put an immediate ban on private construction in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). On January 1, the Centre has ordered the revocation of anti-pollution restrictions under Stage-III of GRAP in the entire Delhi-NCR with immediate effect after improvement in the air quality index. On Sunday, the air quality at Anand Vihar plummeted in the "severe" category with PM 2.5 and PM 10 crossing 500 while the NO2 reached 133 and CO at 132, both in the "moderate" category, as per the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) at 6 p.m. The AQI at ITO also remained in 'severe' category with PM 2.5 breaching the 500 mark and PM 10 at 480, or "severe". The CO was recorded at 110 or "moderate". The PM 2.5 at Punjabi Bagh also reached 477 while PM 10 was at 404, both in the 'severe' category. The air quality at Jahangirpuri air quality mon-

itoring station also entered into 'severe' category with PM 2.5 at 462 and PM 10 455. The CO was also reached at 97 or 'satisfactory'. The PM 2.5 at Okhla Phase-II was recorded above 500 mark and PM 10 at 487 both in the 'severe' category. At Mundka the AQI remained in the 'very poor' category with PM 2.5 at 365 and PM 10 at 210 or "very poor". However, at Bawana, the air quality was in 'very poor' category with PM 2.5 at 342 and PM 10 at 196, or "moderate". The AQI monitoring station at Dwarka sector 8 recorded PM 2.5 at 470 and PM 10 was at 433, both in the "severe" category. The AQI at the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) airport station plummeted with PM 10 at 469 and PM 2.5 was at 413, both in the "severe" levels. The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) is the Centre's air pollution control plan implemented in the region during the winter season. It categorises actions into four stages: Stage I - 'Poor' (AQI 201-300); Stage II - 'Very Poor' (AQI 301-400); Stage III - 'Severe' (AQI 401-450); and Stage IV - 'Severe Plus' (AQI>450).

## School timings changed to overcome fog hurdles

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi schools will open for physical classes from January 15, Monday as the extended winter break ends but as a precautionary measure for the prevailing foggy situation no school including double shift schools will start before 9 am and no school will have classes beyond 5pm, an order issued on Sunday said. All teaching and non-teaching staff shall report for duty as usual, it said, adding school heads must inform all students, parents and staff about the revised schedule on Sunday. "In continuation of Order dated 07/01/2024, it is directed that all students of Government, Government Aided and Recognised Private Schools shall join back classes in physical mode at their respective schools with effect from 15/01/2024(Monday). This includes Nursery, KG and Primary classes as well. However, taking precaution in view of the prevailing foggy conditions, no school (includ-

ing double shift schools) will start before 9 a.m. and have classes beyond 5 p.m. till further directions. All teaching and non teaching staff shall report for duty as usual. The HoSs must inform all Students. Parents and Staff today itself through Mass SMS facility, Phone Calls, SMC and other suitable means of communication," Directorate of Education said in the order, issued on Sunday. As the temperature dipped in Delhi intensifying the fog situation during the morning hours, there was uncertainty over whether the winter break would be extended for a few more days. On January 7, Delhi education minister Atishi announced that winter break would be extended till January 12 amid the ongoing cold wave situation in the national capital. "Schools in Delhi will remain closed for the next 5 days due to the prevailing cold weather conditions, for students from nursery to class 5," Atishi tweeted.

## 6 dead after inhaling toxic fumes from coal braziers in two incidents

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Six people, including four members of a family, died allegedly after inhaling toxic fumes from coal braziers in two separate incidents in the national capital. Both the incidents took place on Saturday night as the people were asleep in their homes with coal braziers (angithis) to ward off the prevailing bone-chilling cold, police said. Delhi is reeling under severe cold conditions as the minimum temperature dropped to 3.5 degrees Celsius -- this winter's lowest -- on Sunday morning. In the first incident, which took place in the Khera Kalan village near Alipur in outer Delhi, a 40-year-old tanker driver, his 38-year-old wife, and their two sons, aged nine and seven, were found dead in a room that was locked and coal brazier was found lit inside. The deceased have been identified as Rakesh (40), who was a driver of a water tanker, his wife Lalita (38), their two sons



Piyush (8), and Sunny (7), police said. "On Sunday morning around 7 am, a PCR call was received at Alipur police station, saying one person was found lying unconscious at Khera Kalan village in Delhi. Immediately staff was rushed to the spot," a senior police officer said. Police found that the door of the room was locked from inside. "Our teams first broke the glass window and managed to open the door. Later, the team found four people inside of the room in an unconscious state. They were rushed

to the hospital, where doctors declared them dead," the officer said. Police said that the forensic team and the crime team found a coal brazier (angithi) inside the room. Prima facie, it seems that all four died due to suffocation, police said. Further investigation and proceedings into the matter has been started under section 174 of the CrPC, they said. In a similar incident, two Nepal-native men were found dead in their room after they allegedly inhaled toxic fumes from a coal brazier in

Inderpuri area of west Delhi, police said. According to the police, the deceased have been identified as Ram Bahadur (57) and Abhishek (22). Police said Bahadur was a driver by profession and Abhishek was working as a domestic help. "A call was received at 8.30 am that two persons residing in a room are not opening their rented house door," a police officer said. Police said that it was found that the two men were locked in their third-floor room from the inside. "The door was forced open and two people were found unconscious. They were rushed to a nearby hospital, where doctors declared them dead," the officer said. "One 'angithi' with burnt residue was found in the room. There was one window that was found to be closed. No injuries were found on the bodies," said the officer. Police have started further investigation and proceedings into the matter under section 174 CrPC.

## 32 more establishments get LG approval to function 24x7

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena has approved the exemption u/s 14, 15 and 16 of the Delhi Shops & Establishment Act, 1954 to 32 establishments to work on a 24x7x365 basis. Of these, seven approvals have been granted to establishments that had applied for exemption for their women employees during night times. The exemptions have been given with fool-proof assurances about the safety of employees by the establishments. These 32 applications, pertains to Logistics & Courier Services, Hotel & Restaurants, Retail Trade, Storage Management Services and Other Commercial Establishments related to Ayurveda and Food Items. These include, Godfrey Phillips India Ltd., Hiveloop, E-Commerce E-Pvt. Ltd., Sunny Ridge Kila Resorts, Scootsy Logistics, Organic



India Pvt. Ltd. And Bikanerwala International. "A total number of 52 online applications were received in Labour Department upto December 21, 2023, out of which 20 were incomplete / duplicate/deficient in certain respects and have been temporarily kept on hold till deficiency is removed. The remaining 32 applications have been proposed by the

Department of Labour for grant of exemption under Section 14, 15 & 16 of Delhi Shops & Establishment Act, 1954. With this, the total number of establishments that have been granted exemptions, in last one year after Saxena took over, has risen to 667. Out of these, 29 applications were approved in August 2023 and 83 applications in November 2023," Raj

Niwas official said on Sunday. Section 14 of Delhi Shops and Establishment Act regulates the Working Conditions of Young Persons and Women. It lays down that no young person or woman can be required or allowed to work, whether as an employee or otherwise, between 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. during summer (1st April to 30 September) and 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. during Winter (1st October to 31 March). Section 15 regulates Opening and Closing Hours of Shops and Establishments. Such timings are / ought to be fixed by the Government by General or Special Orders. Section 16 mandates that every shop and establishment shall remain closed on one day, after 6 working Days. Section 4 empowers the Government to grant exemption from the provisions of the Act to any shop / Establishment. In the present case, the applicants have sought exemption from Section 14, 15 & 16 of the Act.

## Atishi approves road strengthening to give three East Delhi roads makeover

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi PWD minister Atishi on Sunday approved a road strengthening project to give three roads in east Delhi a makeover under the East Zone area of Kondli and Trilokpuri. These roads include Road Number 109 - from Sapera Basti to Khoda Chowk, Dallapura Road - from Timber Market to Noida Border, and Buddha Singh Marg - from Manav Ashray Kat to Dallapura T-Point. Under the project, the Public Works Department will undertake the strengthening of these road stretches, painting work for lane marking, parapet walls/railings, etc., ensuring compliance with standards. Approving the project, PWD Minister Atishi said these project will improve the roads of East Delhi and make them long-lasting. "Along with this, the project will also make the area beautiful. The Arvind Kejriwal government is committed to making the roads of Delhi safer for commuters and providing them a pleasant experience. The government is systematically identifying the loopholes to address the key issues affecting the condition of roads in the city. In this plan, specialists conduct a thorough assessment of roads, utilizing modern techniques for maintenance and strengthening, ensuring they can withstand heavy traffic and any weather conditions," Atishi said.



The Minister further added that the Delhi Government is working in a phased manner to strengthen the roads of Delhi. "Given that the construction of these roads took place quite some time ago, there is a current need for their maintenance. The riding quality of the roads has been affected due to cutting for cable and pipe laying by civic agencies. Therefore, maintenance and beautification work is now commencing here. PWD officials are instructed to complete the work within a specified timeframe and strictly adhere to all safety guidelines to avoid any inconvenience to travellers," she added. To ensure that the people of Delhi do not face any issues with noise pollution and traffic congestion, PWD regularly performs maintenance work on the roads as needed. For the strengthening of these roads, PWD officials have conducted a thorough inspection of their current condition and requirements. After careful examination, the government has approved these projects.

## 5,000 visit Baansera to celebrate kite festival

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

More than 5,000 people visited the sustainability-themed bamboo park 'Baansera' here to celebrate the two-day international kite festival that ended on Sunday. The 'Patang Utsav' organised by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was inaugurated by Delhi Lieutenant Governor (LG) VK Saxena on Saturday. According to DDA, people came out in large numbers with their families on the second day

of the festival at 'Baansera' in the Sarai Kale Khan area on the banks of river Yamuna. According to Raj Niwas officials, over 5,000 people visited the park to celebrate the kite festival, and all tickets were sold out by the second day. The festival's success has also opened the way for the DDA to organise more such events at different sites in the city, a senior official said. The officials said that cultural performances such as Bhangra, Garba, Ghoomar, and Bihu were also a big hit at the event.



The festival also saw over 30 kite enthusiasts from Rajasthan, Sikkim, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab, Lakshadweep, and Gujarat exhibit their skills. Kites of various

shapes, sizes, and colours, including those themed on the Indian national flag, trains, and eagles, were flown during the festival. The festival also had major attractions like a theme pavilion displaying the history of kites in the form of a gallery, food stalls, and an exclusive kids' zone. Besides, handcraft stalls from various states, including Karnataka, Rajasthan, Bihar, and Himachal Pradesh, were put up during the festival. A 'Plant Bazaar' was also set up for people to buy

plants. Besides Saxena and other dignitaries, foreign envoys and diplomats from countries like Seychelles, Mongolia, Mali, Burundi, Bolivia, Niger, Austria, Maldives, Libya and Peru also participated in the festival, the official said. The event was planned as a recreational opportunity for people to visit along with their families to enjoy festivals on the auspicious occasion of Lohri, Makar Sankranti, Bihu, Maghi, Uttarayani, and Pongal, he added.

## DU VC gets invitation to Ram temple consecration ceremony

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi University Vice Chancellor Yogesh Singh has been invited for the January 22 consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya, according to an official statement. The invitation for the "Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha" programme was given to Singh by Vishwa Hindu Parishad international working president Alok Kumar, he said. Accepting the invitation at his residence here, the vice chancellor said it is a matter of pride and honour for the country that the "Pran Pratishtha" (consecration) of the idol of Lord Ram is taking place in his temple in Ayodhya. "January 22, 2024, will prove to be a day to be written in the history of India when the world will see India's identity, India's resolve and India's glory," Singh said and added that the Ram temple in Ayodhya is the sym-



bol of India's identity and its pride. The vice chancellor said that "today, International Working President of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Alok Kumar, had come for the invitation to Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha", according to the statement. "I feel very fortunate that they have extended me such an invitation here. For this I express my heartfelt gratitude to him," Singh said. The vice chancellor said that the University of Delhi is associated with this campaign in every way possible and it is a matter of great honour.

## Migratory birds skip Dhanauri wetlands: AWC

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Global climate change has taken its toll on famous Dhanauri wetlands in Greater Noida this winter with a lesser number of migratory birds flocking here, according to the latest report of the Asian Waterbird Census (AWC). It is part of the International Waterbird Census (IWC). Dhanauri wetland spreads over an area of approximately 101.21 hectares surrounded by crop fields and is a popular destination for bird watchers. It was a good habitat for water birds, especially a large number of threatened species includes UP state bird Sarus Crane and winter migratory water birds. However, wetland's existence depends on monsoon rainfall; it dries up in summer and turns into a small pond having no other independent water source. Present century global climate change impacts badly i.e. delays seasonal change, lesser rainfall, declines or dries wetland



habit, delays winter season, migration of long distant migratory birds as well poor conservation, management of wetland habitats as example, Dhanauri wetland. This year apart from global climate change mostly delayed migration impacts everywhere but lack of proper conservation, management of wetland habitats another prime reason for arrival, lesser species diversity and number of migratory water birds on prominent wetlands as recorded at Dhanauri wetland. AWC 2024 on January 08 conducted by AWC Delhi State Coordinator, T K Roy, ecologist, ornithologist with a

team of expert birders from WISA HQ, universities, NGO recorded least water bird species diversity and overall lesser population. During AWC 2024 recorded declined water bird species diversity and total number i.e.

total species diversity 31 includes 15 resident species and 16 migratory species of total number 1,454 in comparison 35 species in 2023 includes 18 resident and 17 migratory species of total number 1,861; 40 species in 2022 includes 20 resident and 20 migratory species of total number: 2,459 usually maximum number of the migratory species - Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Coot, Graylag Geese, few other species includes IUCN Red-listed threatened birds but this year least number of these species at Dhanauri wetland.

**LIC** LIFE INSURANCE CORPORATION OF INDIA  
Corporate Communication Department  
Jeevan Bharati Building, Tower - B, 124 Connaught Circus, New Delhi - 110001. Ph: 011-23259228/8590

**NOTICE FOR EMPANELMENT OF ADVERTISING AGENCIES**  
LIC of India invites applications for empanelment of advertising agencies for undertaking PR & Media work in the States/UTs of Delhi, Haryana, Chandigarh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir & Ladakh. The agency must have their office in Delhi and should have annual gross income of more than Rs. 2 Crores in the last three financial years. For complete details please log on to our website [www.licindia.in](http://www.licindia.in) and click "Tender" for application form and documents. Completed offers should reach the Zonal Office, Delhi in a sealed cover marked "Application for empanelment of Advertising agencies" on or before **29.01.2024**. LIC of India reserves the right to accept or reject any or all the offers without assigning any reason whatsoever. **Zonal Manager**



# BJP leaders begin drive to clean temples across India

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders were seen with mops and brooms to clean up temples in various parts of the country on Sunday after Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged citizens to kickstart cleanliness campaigns in temples ahead of the 'Pran Pratishtha' on January 22. BJP national president JP Nadra participated in a cleanliness drive at Guru Ravidas Mandir, Karol Bagh in Delhi. Nadra garlanded the statue of Saint Guru Ravidas in the temple and then did cleanliness work for the next half an hour. He listened to the hymns of the Mahila Mandal of the temple and took blessings sitting in front of the statue of

Saint Guru Ravidas. Nadra said the BJP has decided to carry out a cleanliness campaign at temples across the country from Makar Sankranti to January 22 (consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya). "Following the directions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP has decided that from Makar Sankranti to January 22, we (party leaders and workers) will conduct a cleanliness campaign at several temples and holy premises in the country," he told reporters as he kicked off the campaign from Delhi's Ravidas Temple. In a post on X in Hindi, he said that he felt blessed to come to the place. "... Under this campaign, all of us are doing 'Shramdaan' (voluntary work) in various temples from



BJP National president JP Nadra during a cleanliness drive at Guru Ravidas Mandir ahead of the Pran Pratishtha of Ram Lala, in New Delhi, on Sunday

January 14 to 22, participating in 'bhajan-kirtan' (singing devotional songs) and on January 22, we will engage in the worship of Lord Shri Ram by lighting 'Shri Ram Jyoti' in our homes," he added in the post. He listened to the hymns of the Mahila Mandal of the temple and took blessings sitting in front of the statue of Saint Guru Ravidas. BJP National General Secretary Dushyant Gautam, Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva, Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri and Kapil Mishra also offered shramdaan for cleanliness. Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi participated at Connaught Place's Hanuman Mandir cleanliness drive while Kapil Mishra

participated in Marghat wale Baba Hanuman Mandir near Nigambodh Ghat Kashmeri Gate. Bidhuri visited Shree Radha Krishan Mandir in Jaitpur-II and participated in the cleanliness drive. Lekhi posted pictures on X, saying she offered 'shramdaan' at the old Hanuman temple near Connaught Place. "Shramdaan, in the name of Lord Shri Ram. On the call of the illustrious Prime Minister of India, Respected Shri @narendramodiji, on the launch of the cleanliness campaign to be run at pilgrimage sites and temples from January 14-22, today I did Shramdaan under the #SwachhTeerth campaign at the ancient Shri Hanuman Temple located in Connaught Place in my parliamentary constituency,"

Lekhi, the BJP MP from New Delhi constituency, posted on X. She also called upon people to contribute to this "great campaign and celebrate Diwali by keeping our pilgrimage sites clean and lighting Ram Jyoti on January 22". Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh chief ministers Yogi Adityanath, Bhupendra Patel, Bhajan Lal Sharma and Mohan Yadav joined the cleanliness campaign in Ayodhya, Gandhinagar, Jaipur and Ujjain, respectively. Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw attended the exercise at a temple in Baleswar in Odisha. Union ministers Dharmendra Pradhan and Meenakshi Lekhi were among others who cleaned up temples in different places.

# Indian Armed forces one of finest in world: IAF Chief

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari on Sunday said the Indian armed forces have transformed with changing times to meet the challenges of the "entire spectrum of warfare". In his address at an event hosted here to mark the 8th Armed Forces Veterans Day, Chaudhari also asserted that resilient spirit, leadership, and vision of its veterans have laid the foundation of today's armed forces.



Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari speaks during the 8th Armed Forces Veterans Day event at Manekshaw Centre in New Delhi on Sunday

The programme held at Manekshaw Centre in Delhi Cantonment was also attended by Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar, several senior officers of the three services, a large number of veterans or their family members. "The Indian armed forces, we will all agree, are one of the finest in the world and have transformed with changing times to meet the challenges of the entire spectrum of warfare," the IAF chief said. The Indian Air Force, in particular, has grown from a very modest beginning just about 90 years ago to being "one of the most formidable air forces in the world", he said. This has been possible only through the "sustained efforts and yeo-

man services" rendered by the forces' veterans over the years, Air Chief Marshal Chaudhari added. "I acknowledge with gratitude the sterling contributions made by all our veterans, whose resilient spirit, leadership and vision have laid the foundation of today's armed forces," he said. Today is also a day to poignantly remember all the veterans who laid down their lives for the nation, the IAF chief said, adding, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty".

The IAF, the youngest of the services, is only 91 years old. And, as of December 31, 2023, "we have on record, 2,21,204 veterans," he said. The IAF chief shared that it has been a diligent effort to reach out to each and every veteran. "I am aware there are teething issues, we are taking up these issues constantly with the service providers and the Controller General of Defence Accounts," he said. In his address, Air Chief Marshal Chaudhari also shared some data regarding SPARSH and other initiatives. The System for Pension

Administration (Raksha) or SPARSH is a web-based system for processing pension claims and crediting the pension directly into bank accounts of defence pensioners without any external intermediary. "In the year gone by, 1.85 lakh legacy pensioners have been migrated onto SPARSH," the IAF chief said. The Navy chief, in his address, underlined the contribution made by the veterans to the armed forces. "I can say with conviction that our armed forces of today are a product of the visionary leadership, unflinching efforts and selfless service of our veterans. I would like to assure each and every one of you that we will leave no water uncharted in carrying forward this legacy," Admiral Kumar said. So, towards that end, the Navy's efforts have been focused on being a combat-ready, credible, cohesive and future-proof force, he said. "While pursuing our many operational commitments, the Bharatiya Nav Sena remains committed to ensuring the welfare of our ex-servicemen," the Navy chief added. The Navy has been following a multi-pronged approach of proactive outreach, positive interaction, and persistent communication to address various issues faced by our veteran community, Admiral Kumar said. He noted that the outreach programme has been expanded. "We are aware that the serving Navy is a transit Navy, while the veteran Navy is a permanent Navy, that is where finally all of us will reach," the Navy chief said. The Indian Navy is privileged to have the continuing benefit of "your experience and wisdom", and it looks forward to "your invaluable guidance, unstinted support and forthright suggestions to help us better address issues faced by both the services as well as the veteran community," he added.

Wreath-laying ceremonies and veterans' rallies were being organised in Srinagar, Pathankot, Delhi, Kanpur, Alwar, Jodhpur, Guwahati, Mumbai, Secunderabad, Kochi and several other places to mark the day, the Defence Ministry said in a statement later in the day. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh led the celebrations by addressing a veterans' rally at the Air Force Station in Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, it said. Around 1,000 ex-servicemen attended the event. He interacted with them and expressed heartfelt gratitude to them for their selfless service to the motherland. Singh emphasised that the veterans hold a special place in the heart of every Indian. "We for Veterans' anthem was played at various public places as an ode to the veteran community, the statement said. The celebrations also witnessed the release of maiden 'SAGAR SAMVAD' magazine, a yearly journal published by the Directorate of Ex-Servicemen Affairs of the Indian Navy covering information, policies and various topics of interest for the veterans. The Indian Air Force and the Indian Army also released the 'VAYU SAMVEDNA' and 'SAMMAN' magazines respectively, it added.

# Pongal reflects national spirit of Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat, says PM Modi

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**



Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the festival of Pongal reflects the national spirit of 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' and the same emotive connect could be witnessed in Kashi-Tamil and Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam. In his address at the Pongal celebrations held at the residence of Union Minister L. Murugan in the national capital, Modi said festive fervour marked every home in Tamil Nadu and wished joy, prosperity and contentment in the lives of all the people. Drawing similarities to India's diversity with 'Kolam', the prime minister said that when every corner of the country connects emotionally with each other, the nation's strength appears in a new form. Considered as a welcome symbol and a sign of auspiciousness, Kolam is a popular art form, which involves making drawings on the ground -- at the entrance portion to the house -- using a variety of rice flour. Modi said: "The festival of

Pongal reflects the national spirit of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat." The same spirit can be witnessed in the tradition started by Kashi-Tamil Sangamam and Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam which records enthusiastic participation of Tamil people in large numbers. The prime minister said, "This feeling of unity is the biggest force to build a Viksit Bharat by 2047. The main element of the Panch Pran that I have invoked from the Red Fort is to energize the unity of the country and to strengthen the unity." Quoting saint poet Thiruvalluvar, the prime minister underscored the role of educated citizens, honest businessmen and good crop in nation-building. During Pongal, fresh crop is offered to God which puts 'Annadata Kisans' at the center of this festive tradition.

# 30 crore Ayushman Cards created under PM health scheme

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**



Over 30 crore Ayushman Cards have been created under the Centre's flagship health insurance scheme Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) since its launch five years ago, according to the Union Health Ministry. With 4.83 crore Ayushman Cards, Uttar Pradesh tops the list of States with the highest number of Ayushman Cards created. Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra stand at number two and three positions with 3.78 crore and 2.39 crore Ayushman cards respectively. 11 States have more than 1 crore Ayushman card holders. The scheme was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on September 23, 2018. It provides assurance of Rs 5 lakh per year per family, ensuring that quality healthcare is made accessible to low-income earners in the country. Female beneficiaries form 49 per cent of all beneficiaries, accounting for 146 million Ayushman cards. Data suggests that 48 per cent of all treatment provided under the scheme has been availed by female beneficiaries. General medicine is the most consulted specialty under the scheme, with over 11 crore patients under the AB-PMJAY, the data said. It is followed by infectious diseases (43 crore consultations), general surgery (30 crore consultations), and medical oncology (25 crore consultations). The top five specialties with respect to consultations amount to a combined total of Rs 18,483.35 crore paid out of the public exchequer since the scheme's launch.

Currently, the scheme provides 919 Health Benefit Packages (HBPs), covering 1,670 procedures under 26 specialties. General surgery has the highest number of HBPs with 105 packages, whereas medical oncology covers the most procedures at 264. According to data provided by the government, more than 167 million Ayushman cards have been created during the last two financial years. "As of date, during 2023-24, more than 7.5 crore Ayushman cards have been created, implying that approximately 181 Ayushman cards are created every minute," a ministry communication stated. The National Health Authority (NHA), the body responsible for implementing AB-PMJAY, describes the scheme's primary objectives to be ensuring comprehensive coverage for catastrophic illnesses, reducing out-of-pocket expenditure, and improving access to hospitalisation care. Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY has successfully catered to 6.2 crore hospital admissions worth more than Rs. 79,157 crores. If the beneficiary would have availed the same treatment on their own outside the ambit of AB-PMJAY, the total cost of the treatment would have gone nearly 2 times higher, thus, saving more than 1.25 lakh crore out of pocket expenditure of poor and deprived families," the statement said.

# Kaziranga sees 27 per cent rise in winged guests

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**



Nestled within the districts of Golaghat, Nagaon, and Sonitpur in Assam, the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve (KNPTR), India's seventh UNESCO world heritage site famous for its one-horned rhinos has recorded a 27 per cent increase in the number of resident and winter migratory water birds. This iconic destination is unequivocally one of the most highly sought-after and revered tourist attractions in the country. It is renowned worldwide for its thriving population of the one-horned Rhinoceros—it is home to more than 2,613 one-horned Indian rhinos--and other animals including tiger and elephants. The two-day fifth water bird census, findings of which were revealed recently, conducted through the citizen scientist initiative from January 9 across

the 1,302 sq km wildlife reserve, confirmed the presence of 84,839 birds, which was 18,063 more than the number recorded during a corresponding survey in 2021-22. KNPTR officials said that the Kaziranga is now among the top five habitats of water birds in the country. Kaziranga's Field Director, Sonali Ghosh told a news

agency that this time the bird census was conducted in major wetlands adjoining the tiger reserve along with the water bodies within the reserve. "In the Kaziranga-Hukuma Beel in Biswanath found 3,049 birds while the Joysagar Doloni in Kaliabor recorded 1,765 birds, highlighting their conservation and protection," she said. Other prominent wetlands

adjoining the KNPTR that recorded significant bird presence were Gonak Beel (973), Sahala Beel (424), and Sisubari Beel (348). The bird census, which was launched by Assam Environment and Forest Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary on January 9 was conducted simultaneously across 115 water bodies in

three divisions of the KNPTR. The three divisions are — Eastern Assam Wildlife, Nagaon Wildlife and Biswanath Wildlife. In all, 108 enumerators and 354 volunteers as well Forest officials and staff were involved in conducting the survey. During the survey, 37,606 birds across 155 species were recorded in the Eastern Assam Wildlife Division followed by 35,231 birds of 98 species in Nagaon Wildlife division and 12,002 birds across 82 species were spotted in the Biswanath Wildlife Division. Some of the unique, rare, and endangered species reported during the January 9-10 survey were Baer's pochard, Baikal teal, greater scaup, gull-billed tern, greater white-fronted goose, great crested grebe, Pallas' gull, black stork, black-headed gull, and cotton pygmy goose. In the first census in 2018, a total of 10,412 waterfowl belonging to 80 different

species were recorded in Kaziranga while the second survey in 2020 revealed a total of 34,284 birds belonging to 98 species while 93,491 birds belonging to 112 species were recorded in 2021. According to the officials, with its unique terrestrial and aquatic habitats, Kaziranga is one of the best-protected preserves in the world. Besides being the home of the major five mammals — rhino, tiger, elephant, Asiatic water buffalo, and eastern swamp deer — the KNPTR is a world famous destination for bird watchers as it sustains more than 500 avian species. More than half of its landmass under grasslands is dotted with water bodies, locally known as 'beel'. These, along with the Brahmaputra river along the park and tributaries such as Dhansiri, Difloo, and Laokhwa Suti provide an ideal habitat for resident and migratory birds.

# Skill Development case: SC to deliver verdict on Naidu plea on January 16

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The Supreme Court is scheduled to deliver on January 16 its verdict on former Andhra Pradesh chief minister and TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu's plea challenging the high court order refusing to quash the FIR against him in the Skill Development Corporation scam case. Naidu was arrested on September 9 last year for allegedly misappropriating funds from the Skill Development Corporation when he was the chief minister in 2015, causing a purported loss of Rs 371 crore to the state exchequer. Naidu has denied the allegations. The Andhra Pradesh High

Court had on November 20 last year granted him regular bail in the case. An apex court bench comprising Justices Aniruddha Bose and Bela M Trivedi had on October 17 last year reserved its verdict on Naidu's plea challenging the high court order refusing to quash the FIR against him in the case. During the hearing on the plea before the apex court, the counsel appearing for the state had argued that Naidu's petition for quashing the FIR be rejected as the question about the applicability of section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act does not arise as the provision came into force in July 2018, while the CBI began probing the case in

2017. Section 17A was introduced by an amendment with effect from July 26, 2018 and the provision stipulates a mandatory requirement for a police officer to seek prior approval from the competent authority for conducting any enquiry or inquiry or investigation into any offence alleged to have been committed by a public servant under the Prevention of Corruption Act. The lawyers appearing for Naidu had argued that all allegations in the FIR pertain to decisions, instructions or recommendations made by Naidu when he was the chief minister and section 17A was applicable in the case as the inquiry started in December 2021.

# Government announces Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The Government on Sunday called for nominations for 'Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar', the first-ever national science awards from individuals or teams in various fields of science, technology and technology-led innovation. The awards, given across four categories, were instituted last year after scrapping more than 300 awards given by different institutions, and will comprise a medal and a citation but no cash component. The last date for filing nominations is February 28, which is celebrated as National Science Day. The awards will be announced on May 11, National Technology Day,

which is the anniversary of the Pokhran-II nuclear tests. The awards will be conferred on August 23, National Space Day to commemorate Chandrayaan-3 mission's soft landing on the moon. A total of 56 awards will be given in four categories across 13 domains - physics, chemistry, biological sciences, mathematics and computer science, earth science, medicine, engineering sciences, agricultural science, environmental science, technology & innovation, atomic energy, space science and technology. A maximum of three Vigyan Ratna (VR) awards will be bestowed to recognise lifetime achievements and contributions made in the given field of science and technology.

A maximum of 25 Vigyan Shri (VS) will be given to recognise the distinguished contributions in the given field of science and technology. The Vigyan Yuva: Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar (VY-SSB) award will be given to a maximum of 25 recipients to recognise and encourage young scientists who made an exceptional contribution in the given field of science and technology. The Vigyan Team (VT) award will be given to a maximum of three teams comprising three or more scientists, researchers or innovators who have made an exceptional contribution working in a team in a given field of science and technology.



# BJP will win over 450 seats in LS polls, says Tripura CM

**PTI ■ AGARTALA**  
Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Sunday asserted that the BJP may manage to win as many as 450 seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. In the 2019 elections, the BJP won 303 seats, while the Congress bagged 52. "There are speculations that the BJP may win 404 seats this time but my reading is different... Given the situation and preparations for the polls, our seat tally may get close to the 450-mark," Saha told reporters after symbolically drawing a wall graffiti of his party symbol lotus for campaigning in his Town Bardowali assembly constituency. Saha said the BJP's organisational groundwork has already begun with an aim to win both parliamentary seats in the state by massive margins. The chief minister also appealed to the people of the state to join Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to carry out cleanliness drives in temples to mark the consecration of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. Saha offered prayers at the Jagannath temple here and joined a cleanliness drive on the premises. "Today, I joined the cleanliness drive at



Jagannath temple here along with party karyakartas following the prime minister's appeal... I appeal to the people of the state to join cleanliness drives in all the temples that will continue till January 22," he wrote on X. Laying emphasis on the "significance of the historic moment," he said, "For the last 500 years, the Hindu society has been waiting for this moment. Finally, under the leadership of PM Modi, all of us will be witness to Ram Lala's ascension to the sanc-

tum sanctorum of the temple on January 22." BJP state president Rajib Bhattacharjee also took part in a cleanliness drive at Ramakrishna Mission Ashram here. "Lord Ram is returning to Ayodhya on January 22. To mark the occasion, we launched cleanliness drives in all the temples in the state in the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call. I appeal to the people to join the drives," he told reporters.

# Jairam rejects BJP claims of 2024 clean sweep

**PTI ■ IMPHAL**  
Senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh has rejected the BJP's claims that the 2024 poll results are a foregone conclusion, saying "Tiger zinda hai" and that the Opposition Bloc will repeat the history of 2004 when the saffron party was unseated from power despite its 'shining India' campaign. In an interview with PTI, Ramesh asserted that only a strong Congress can ensure a strong opposition and the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' is an effort to strengthen the grand old party. On how the poll preparations will be handled by the party while also managing its east to west yatra, Ramesh said a party organisation is in place and Rahul Gandhi would be part of the campaign despite his pre-occupation with the yatra. "The yatra will end by the time polls start. I expect the elections to start somewhere, maybe in



quipped, "Tiger zinda hai, that is my constant refrain" Several BJP leaders have asserted that a third term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi is certain in 2024 and the party has set a target of over 400 plus seats. On whether he believes that the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) can spring a surprise in the 2024 general elections, Ramesh said, "All I can say is that in 2003, we lost Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, people wrote the Congress off, but in 2004, the Congress formed the government, India was shining at that time." "History will repeat itself," he told PTI on Saturday evening. People will be moved more by 'anyay kaal' (period of injustice) of the last 10 years than the dream of 'amrit kaal', Ramesh said. "Amrit kaal is a dream, anyay kaal is a nightmare," he added. In 2004, the Congress came back to power leading the

United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government while the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government lost the polls despite its high-decibel 'shining India' campaign. On whether the yatra will strengthen opposition unity with the Congress party also inviting all INDIA bloc leaders to join in along its route, Ramesh said, "A weak Congress cannot ensure a strong opposition. Only a strong Congress can ensure a strong opposition. This 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' is to strengthen the Congress." Talking about the need for a follow-up yatra after the Kanyakumari to Kashmir Bharat Jodo Yatra which was also led by Gandhi, Ramesh said the yatra from Manipur is a continuation of the Bharat Jodo Yatra and is derived from the first line of the Constitution which assures to all people of India justice. The yatra is also a way of connecting the leadership with inner party organisation.



# Minister flags off Astra Missile for supply to IAF

**PTI ■ HYDERABAD**  
Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt on Sunday flagged off the indigenously developed and manufactured Astra Missiles for supply to the Indian Air Force. The event was held at Bharat Dynamics Limited, Kanchanbagh Unit where BDL CMD Commodore A Madhavarao (Retd) and other senior officials from DRDO, IAF and BDL participated, a release from the BDL said. Astra is a beyond visual range (BVR) air-to-air missile indigenously developed by DRDO and manufactured by BDL for the IAF, it said. "Astra Weapon System is best in its class of weapon systems in the world in the category of air-to-air missiles. The missile has a range of 100 plus km," the

release said. The flag off ceremony marks a significant achievement for BDL, positioning it among a select few companies globally with the capability to manufacture state of the art air-to-air missiles, it said. The Union Minister congratulated BDL on their efforts to realise the production of the indigenously developed missile in line with the Government of India's 'Atmanirbhar' policy. He also appreciated the contribution being made by BDL in enhancing defence exports of the country. Madhavarao said that the focus of BDL is always on 'Make in India' with maximum indigenous content. He stated that BDL is in receipt of several leads from friendly foreign countries for the Astra Weapon System.

# Sabarimala all set for Makaravilakku festival

**PTI ■ PATHANAMTHITTA**  
Sabarimala temple is all set for the Makaravilakku festival on January 15 and all arrangements have been made for the pilgrims to view the 'Makara Jyothi', Travancore Devaswom board (TDB) which manages the hilltop shrine said on Sunday. Addressing the media, TDB president P S Prasanth said a huge rush is expected for the Makaravilakku festival and also to witness the Makara Jyothi on January 15. He said arrangements have been made at the 10 view points in and around Sabarimala for the pilgrims to witness the Makara Jyothi. "All preparations have been completed at Sabarimala for the Makaravilakku festival tomorrow. The devotees should follow the instructions of the police and the fire force," the TDB president said. He added that around 80 lakh biscuits sponsored by the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department will be distributed among the pilgrims, along with medicinal water. Meanwhile, the procession carrying the Thiruvabharanam (sacred ornaments) will reach Sabarimala on January 15 evening. After halting at sever-



al temples on the route and accepting the reception of devotees, the procession would reach Sabarimala where it will be received by the priests and the TDB officials. The priests would adorn the deity with the jewellery prior to the deeparadhana on the day. The Makara Jyothi, which is considered a divine light by devotees, usually flickers across the eastern horizon above Ponnambalamedu, a remote hilltop around eight km from the temple complex, soon after deeparadhana. The lighting of the flame by the

Kerala government, with the support of the Travancore Devaswom Board and forest department, at Ponnambalamedu is a continuation of the practice followed by tribal families who live near the hilltop. Thousands witness this from Sabarimala and the adjacent hills on Makaravilakku festival day. "I'm just here for the journey right now and seeing how much I can progress," Anisimova said. "But, I am happy with the wins, and I really hope that I can build on from it."

# PIL ON DEMOLITION Gauhati HC grants 4 weeks to Assam for updated status report

**PTI ■ GUWAHATI**  
The Gauhati High Court has granted four weeks to the Assam government to file an updated status report in connection with the demolition of houses of people who were accused of setting a police station on fire two years ago. Hearing a PIL, Justice Kaushik Goswami, in an order, said senior government advocate D Nath produced a communication, dated January 10 this year written by the joint secretary to the state government, "wherein it is stated that the one-man enquiry committee had submitted the inquiry report to the government in the Home & Political Department on January 4, 2024". The government counsel sought four weeks to file an updated status report, which the court accepted. "Prayer is allowed. List the matter on February 16, 2024," the court said. The Batadrava Police Station in Nagaon district was set on fire on May 21, 2022 by a mob following the custodial death of a local fish trader, Safikul Islam (39), who was picked up by the police the night before.



A day later, district authorities had bulldozed at least six houses, including that of Islam and his relatives, purportedly in search of weapons and drugs hidden beneath the structures. The Gauhati High Court, which had taken suo motu cognizance, had initially disposed of the matter through an order on January 3, 2023, after the state government had assured of actions against the erring officials. "D Saikia, learned Advocate General, Assam states that a committee consisting of the chief secretary is enquiring into the incidence of bulldozing of the house and appropriate action shall be taken even against the erring officers within a period of 15 days from today," a division bench comprising then chief justice R M Chhaya and Justice Soumitra

Saikia had said. The bench had also directed the state government to compensate persons affected by the demolition. While disposing of the PIL, the court had asked the government to submit a report of the steps before the high court. It had also stated that the case can be revived "merely by filing a note". The matter again came up before the court in August last year, "in pursuance of the note submitted by the aggrieved persons for revival of the PIL, taking recourse to the liberty granted" earlier. "D Nath, learned senior government advocate, Assam prays for and is granted a short opportunity for responding to the submissions made in the revival note," Justice Sumit Phukan Khaund had ruled.

# Soldiers not only vigilant guards, but also symbols of sacrifice: Kalraj

**PTI ■ JAIPUR**  
Rajasthan Governor Kalraj Mishra said on Sunday that soldiers are not only vigilant guards of our country's borders, but they are also symbols of sacrifice and dedication. He called upon everyone to honour the services of ex-servicemen and their families, who have "sacrificed everything" for the nation, and provide every possible support to them. Mishra was addressing a function organised at the Saptashakti Auditorium of the Army on the eighth Armed Forces Ex-Servicemen Day. Recalling the services of first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, Field Marshal K M Cariappa, he said his selfless services will always be remembered. Therefore, an initiative has been taken to celebrate their retirement day as Armed Forces Ex-Servicemen



Day. He also called for effective implementation of schemes for the welfare of soldiers, delivery of ex-servicemen pension and other facilities to them in a timely and convenient manner and working under a well-planned mechanism for their welfare. Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma also participated in the 8th Armed Forces Ex-Servicemen Day celebration organised at Amar Jawan Jyoti

(Janpath) in Jaipur and paid tribute to the bravery, valour and spirit of service to the nation of retired soldiers. In the function organised at the Saptashakti Auditorium, while sharing his memories related to the Army, Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, who is the minister-in-charge for soldiers' welfare, said that effective efforts will be made at all levels to encourage the soldiers. He assured to work at the practical level through the

Sainik Welfare Department for their prosperity. Minister of State Vijay Singh Chaudhary, while remembering the bravery of soldiers, said that soldiers are synonymous with courage and bravery, and everyone should work with determination for the nation by learning from them. Lieutenant General Dhiraj Seth, Commander, South Western Command provided information about the work being done for ex-servicemen. On this occasion, the "brave women", "brave parents" and "bravery" and special medal holders were honoured by the governor, and ministers. Earlier, the governor read out the 'Preamble of the Constitution' and the fundamental duties to everyone. He paid tribute to the ex-servicemen in the Sapta Shakti Sena area by laying a wreath in their memory.

# Welcome criticism from all quarters; will take corrective action where required: CPM

**PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM**  
The ruling CPI(M) in Kerala on Sunday said it welcomes criticism from all quarters and takes corrective action where required. CPI(M) state secretary M V Govindan was responding to reporters' queries regarding the recent pointed critique of authoritarianism in politics by Malayalam literary doyen and Jnanpith laureate M T Vasudevan Nair. Govindan said that Nair actually read out something that he had written back in 2003 when the A K Antony led-UDF government was in power and questioned the media how it could be sure that the writer was referring to Pinarayi Vijayan and the Left government. Delivering the keynote address at a literary festival in Kozhikode on Thursday, MT had taken a dig at politicians, in the presence of Chief Minister Vijayan, stating that power gives way to dominance or authoritarianism at times. He was recalling the legacy of Kerala's well respected legendary Marxist and the first chief minister of the state, EMS



Namboothiripad, when he made the remarks. In his speech, MT had also said politics was stooping to new lows every day and that political activities have become an approved way of attaining power. "Power, at times, gives way to dominance or even authoritarianism. A position in the Assembly, cabinet or Parliament has now become an opportunity to dominate over

others. The theory of identifying power as a better opportunity to serve people has been buried," MT had said. His speech soon went viral on social media platforms as a section of netizens and the opposition Congress-led UDF attributed his sharp references to Vijayan, while the ruling CPI(M) and pro-Left writers and cultural leaders outrightly rejected the notion. On Sunday, another writer, novelist M Mukundan too came out with criticism of politicians saying that "we are living in a time where crowns rule". Speaking at the ongoing literary festival in Kozhikode, Mukundan said that while he believes a drop of blood is more important than any crown, "unfortunately, it is the crown which is getting more powerful each day." "We need to show that the crown can be blown away from the heads wearing it. Ours is a democracy. "So we need to use our votes to show the value of blood and prove that the crown is irrelevant. The elections are round the corner. When the polls come, we can remember this discussion," he said.

# Bee boxes, hedge of medicinal plants on India Bangla border to prevent smuggling

**PTI ■ KOLKATA/NEW DELHI**  
To prevent smuggling of cattle and narcotics, the BSF will now have a second line of deterrence -- a thick hedge of more than 60,000 medicinal plants and 40 bee boxes -- along a three-kilometre fenced stretch of the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal's Nadia district. "Beehives on the fence" was launched in November last year as part of the central government's "Vibrant Village Programme", and according to

officials, it not only aims at preventing cross-border crimes but also generating employment for locals through apiculture and horticulture. The flowering plants will also create an ecosystem for the bees to pollinate, a senior official of the AYUSH department said. This stretch along the border has been named "Arogya Path" (healthy street) and QR codes have been affixed which when scanned will give details about the plants, the official said, requesting anonymity. He added that the "path" doubles

up as a nursery. Villagers of Kadipur in Nadia have been engaged in different works such as planting and watering the fruit-bearing and aromatic medicinal plants, and digging pits to extend the hedge, as part of the first phase of the project. An official of the Border Security Force (BSF) said 40 bee boxes have been fixed on poles of the metal fence over the last two months with the help of the National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB). The board, which comes under



the Union AYUSH Ministry, has committed its resources of experts, manpower and plants for the "unique initiative", the official said and added that more bee boxes have reached the area and these are being installed. The bees in the hives, the BSF feels, will act as a deterrent to cross-border criminals and smugglers who come closer or dare to cut the fence and breach it for smuggling cattle, narcotics, gold, silver and other items. Experts and officials from var-

ious central and state government departments are engaged in the project. Tulsi, Ekangi, Satmuli, Ashwagandha and Aloe Vera are among the plants that will make the hedge. More saplings, around 60,000, are in the process of being sent to the area by the NMPB and the AYUSH ministry, the AYUSH department official said. On creation of employment, the official said through this project, locals can earn through apiculture and horticulture. Commanding Officer (CO) of

the BSF's 32nd Battalion, Sujet Kumar, who devised the initiative, said the enthusiasm of locals and authorities towards the project is unparalleled. "We thought of adding this new dimension of work under the Vibrant Village Programme, which was envisaged by the prime minister, and the BSF wishes to improve the living standards of the people residing in the border area through beekeeping and cultivation of medicinal plants, and using bees for border security work," he said.





www.dailypioneer.com

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

PAPER WITH PASSION

## Vivid contours

### INDIA bloc gathers momentum for LS polls with Kharge as chairperson and Nitish as convener

Just when it seemed that the INDIA bloc was heading towards implosion on account of inflated egos, it has managed to cobble up some semblance of order in the house. A consensus is emerging among the grouping of 28 parties which have joined ranks to take on the Narendra Modi-led BJP in the Lok Sabha elections. In a significant development, the bloc has finalised the name of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge as the Opposition grouping's chairperson and JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar's nomination as the convener is all but sealed. This move marks a crucial step in unifying the Opposition forces and fostering collaboration among their diverse ideologies. The INDIA bloc was formed to transcend political boundaries and work towards the common goal of taking on the BJP's "divisive politics", which has led to hardships for vulnerable sections of society, especially the Scheduled Castes, tribes and 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC). Kharge is a seasoned leader hailing from an OBC background with a wealth of experience. His leadership is expected to provide a steady hand to guide the India bloc through political intricacies. Kharge, known for his strong advocacy for social justice and economic equity, brings a wealth of legislative experience as well to the table. As the INDIA chairperson, he is likely to play a pivotal role in shaping the bloc's policies and strategies, ensuring that they are aligned with the all-party vision of a progressive and harmonious India.



Nitish's appointment, assuming he agrees to the responsibility, adds another dimension to this formidable political alliance. A prominent leader from Bihar, Nitish has a track record of successful governance and administration. Known for his focus on development and governance, his selection underscores the bloc's commitment to effective governance and sustainable development. As the convener, Nitish is expected to play a key role in coordinating the bloc's efforts. His emphasis on inclusive growth and social welfare aligns with its broader goals, fostering a sense of collaboration among the members. While the INDIA bloc represents a promising development in Indian politics, it also faces challenges. The biggest stumbling block is sharing seats, which would be the first challenge for Kharge. His own party is being criticised for high-handedness and selfishness in accommodating regional parties. Building consensus among leaders with differing ideologies and regional interests is no small feat. However, the potential benefits of a united front – efficient governance, improved policy implementation and a stronger voice on the national stage – are significant. The bloc's progress is a promising development for the Opposition. As this alliance gains momentum, it holds the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in the BJP's policies. Thanks to the Opposition, the BJP is now thinking about caste census in a positive manner. The coming months will likely witness the INDIA bloc making significant strides, offering a beacon of hope for a harmonious and prosperous India.

### PICTALK



Young women participate in the kite festival organised to celebrate Makar Sankranti festival, in Bhopal

# Bose's winning goal for Independence



PRAFULL GORADIA

### The INA had won its war on the day Netaji persuaded the Indian prisoners of war in Axis hands to quit their servitude to their British masters and come over to the Azad Hind Fauj

I have read commentaries on, football and hockey matches, where the focus has mostly been on whether goals were scored, by whom and how. Commentaries on these games would seldom mention who dribbled the ball into the 'D', to be converted into a goal by his centre-forward colleague.

If you ask me who scored the goal that won India its independence in August 1947, it was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Strangely, post-independence commentaries do not mention this historic goal, not even those who grew up with me in Kolkata. Most virtually worshipped Netaji for his patriotism and sacrifices, but would not give him substantial credit for scoring the winning goal of Indian independence. Beyond a few who were close to Subhas, others did not walk out of Congress because of Subhas's expulsion from the party in April 1939. Nor was there the scale of protest one would have expected given the stature of Subhas.

What was his fault? Did he harm the Congress? No. His crime, if any, was to get elected as Congress president for a second consecutive year. What he had done, albeit not willingly, was to not have taken Gandhi's consent before contesting for the Congress presidency the second time. Where was the inner-party democracy Jawaharlal Nehru later boasted of? But even he lay low. Subhas Bose concluded that he had no political future left in the Congress. Had he wanted any further progress, he would have to emigrate. Subhas picked Germany as the only likely country he could shift to.

Bose made a daring escape from British captivity on January 7, 1941, travelling through Afghanistan and the Soviet Union to finally reach Germany. His stay, meeting Adolf Hitler and obtaining German support and assistance are the stuff of legend. He then undertook a perilous three-month journey in a German submarine to transfer to a Japanese submarine surfacing off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. A nucleus of the Indian National Army (INA) already formed by Ras Bihari Bose, awaited his command, and



Subhas soon raised the number of soldiers, including a women's battalion, to a total of 50,000 soldiers. The remarkable thing about these INA numbers was the large number of prisoners of war who had formally sworn loyalty to the king and country (Britain). This had never happened before in British history. Such mutinous behaviour was unthinkable and shocked the British leaders of the day. Not that the British had not experienced a mutiny. They had in fact, overcome a serious one in 1857-58—the Sepoy Mutiny. But the mutineers then had not sworn by the English king and country. They were mere employees of a private commercial enterprise, the East India Company. The INA came up to Imphal, with one famous battle between the British Indian army and Subhas Indians taking place on the tennis court of the collector's bungalow. This was the INA's last clash before it retreated towards Singapore in 1944. Netaji and his immediate colleagues like Kayani and Shah Nawaz Khan must have been dejected at the defeat and retreat. They might not have realized that even in their



THE BRITISH THEMSELVES, IN THE SERVICE OF THE JEWEL IN THEIR CROWN, WOULD HAVE NUMBERED NO MORE THAN 50,000 MEN AND WOMEN IN THE ENTIRE SUBCONTINENT. COULD SUCH A SMALL NUMBER POSSIBLY HAVE CONTROLLED A POPULATION OF 40 CRORE PEOPLE?

defeat lay the seeds of triumph. They could not have imagined that the INA had won its war on the day Netaji had persuaded the Indian prisoners of war in Axis hands, to quit their servitude to their British masters and come over to the Azad Hind Fauj (the INA). Thereafter, His Majesty's government could never again trust an Indian soldier who had been sworn in by the king and country. There were several lakh officers, clerks and fighting men of them. The British themselves, in the service of the jewel in their crown, would have numbered no more than 50,000 men and women in the entire subcontinent. Could such a small number possibly have controlled and helped rule a population of 40 crore people? In 1956, Clement Atlee (Prime Minister of Britain during 1945-50), visited Calcutta and stayed with the acting governor of West Bengal, Justice P.B. Chakraborty. At dinner, the Governor enquired of Atlee why the British quit India in such a hurry when they could have hung on for another ten years. Atlee did not agree with this assessment. Instead, he said that Netaji Subhas forming the

INA and their confronting the British had lit a spark. This could have easily happened with the civilian employees as well. How then could we have held on to the levers of governance? No, Mr. Governor, our time was up. It was best to quit gracefully before being kicked out. The former British Prime Minister's unequivocal opinion reveals that it was Netaji Subhas who won independence for India. He scored the winning goal, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi knows only too well and has not only acknowledged but has acted upon it as well. It is befitting that the grand consecration of the Shri Ram Temple at Ayodhya on the coming January 22 falls just a day ahead of Netaji's birthday on January 23rd. Apty, the pran-pratishtha (consecration ceremony) is to be performed by Narendra Modi, who has fulfilled Netaji's clarion call of "Chalo Dilli" by finally giving India's true independence hero his rightful place in history, both figuratively and literally. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### HASINA SWORN IN AS PM AGAIN

Sir — Sheikh Hasina was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the fifth term on Thursday. This comes days after her Awami League secured an overwhelming majority in the general elections, which were boycotted by the main opposition BNP and its allies. President Mohammad Shahabuddin administered the oath of office to the 76-year-old Hasina at a ceremony attended by politicians, foreign diplomats, civil society figures, and senior civil and military officials at the presidential palace. This marks her 12th term as prime minister, the fourth consecutive term, and the fifth overall. Under Hasina's leadership, the governments of India and Bangladesh have worked to strengthen diplomatic ties, and her fifth term as PM is expected to ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific. Jahangir Shaikh | Mumbai

### JOLT TO UDDHAV

Sir — When a party splits, determining the authentic or original faction becomes crucial. In Shiv Sena's case, Maharashtra Speaker Rahul Narwekar asserts the Shinde faction as the true Shiv Sena. Uddhav Thackeray vehemently opposes the Speaker's ruling, labeling it a "murder of democracy." Yet, Uddhav's own political history includes betraying the BJP for an alliance with the Congress, seizing power against the people's mandate. He now faces a taste of his own medicine as Eknath Shinde challenges his leadership. The Speaker rightly emphasizes that the National Executive holds supreme authority, curtailing the Paksha Pramukh's absolute power. Uddhav's failure to demonstrate a convened National Executive Committee meeting supports the verdict favoring the Shinde faction. The Speaker's stance shields the MLAs from disqualification due to defection. Uddhav's claim to Shiv Sena, founded by his father Bal Thackeray, is challenged, emphasizing that the party isn't his personal property. Uddhav's altered

### Misconception about dogs



In a society clouded by the misconception that dogs are potential threats, the heartfelt fondness and affection these animals shower upon humans often go unnoticed. Despite their undeserved reputation dogs demonstrate an incomparable capacity for love and care. Behind the veil of stereotypes, innumerable stories emerge about dogs enriching human lives with unwavering gentleness and loyalty. These

misunderstood creatures, marked as dangerous possess an innate ability to sense human emotions, offering solace in times of adversity. Studies divulge that interactions with dogs can reduce stress and lift one's spirit, exhibiting the therapeutic power integrated into their companionship. From therapy assistance to rescue operations dogs play an essential role in enhancing human well-being. In the often unseen interactions between humans and dogs, an impactful lesson emerges; summons to eliminate prejudgements and embrace the unspoken bonds formed through canine companionship. As we endeavour for a more empathetic society, recognising the overlooked love and care given by these misunderstood dogs becomes a groundbreaking step towards overcoming hindrances and appreciating the pure unconditional endearment they offer. Tanisha Gupta | Ujjain

## UCC: Will it happen before the general elections?

### Despite PM Modi's endorsement, the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code remains uncertain, but some States have taken the initiative



RAJESH K SINGH

The BJP Government in its current tenure is unlikely to implement the Uniform Civil Code – that is, the law applicable to all religious communities in their personal matters like marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption etc. Is. However, after the abrogation of Article 370 and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, UCC is being seen as the last ideological promise that is on the agenda of the BJP and RSS. If we are to believe government and party sources, the party will keep this issue alive and fresh in the political discussion. Hope was further strengthened when Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed the need for UCC in a rally in Bhopal on 28 June 23 and said that a law could be made soon. That's when top officials of the party as well as the government said that the law would require very intensive research and extensive consultation, and thus was unlikely to be implemented until the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. To keep the issue alive, many BJP leaders and government ministers start-



ed making statements on the need for UCC. A private bill introduced by Sunil Kumar Singh, BJP Lok Sabha MP from Jharkhand, listed 'appropriate legislation to implement Uniform Civil Code throughout the country'. However, the Lok Sabha did not show much interest in considering the bill. However, the Sangh Parivar believes that states can implement the UCC on their own, and the Center can wait before initiating discussions for a comprehensive law. Several state BJP governments – Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat – have already initiated efforts to introduce UCC; Assam is going to become the third state in India to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), as announced by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma at a press conference held in Dispur. Following the footsteps of Gujarat and

Uttarakhand, Assam's UCC will be tailored to the specific needs of the state. CM Sarma stressed that the government is actively working to tackle child marriage and is in the process of introducing a bill to ban polygamy in the state. However, Uttar Pradesh which is the poster boy for the BJP Government has not shown any signs of implementing it. "This is not Article 370 or triple talaq, where bills can be brought in hastily... UCC is a complex issue concerning different sections of the society from different castes and communities. This will require much wider consultation and more in-depth research. The Law Commission of India has already started consultations on UCC. It had issued a public notice on June 14 to seek public views on the UCC and its extended deadline for submitting suggestions ended on July 28. There is also a plan to hold consultations in cities. Sangh Parivar has also warned to exercise caution. Earlier this month, RSS-affiliated Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which works among tribals, welcomed

suggestions that tribals should be kept out of the ambit of the law. But over the past two weeks, these meetings have witnessed heated debate over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's move to implement the Uniform Civil Code across India. These protests and these meetings in Jharkhand are now turning into training sessions to organise, oppose and oppose the UCC measure of the Bharatiya Janata Party. It is not just the All India Muslim Personal Law Board; The movement has started in tribal India. More than 100 protests have taken place so far. In early July, more than 30 tribal organizations under the Adivasi Coordination Committee protested in Ranchi, taking out protest marches and staging a sit-in outside the state BJP headquarters. Organisation BJP leader and MP Sushil Kumar Modi has suggested in the parliamentary panel that tribals should be kept out of the UCC in view of Article 371 and Scheduled Areas. (The writer is a senior journalist, views are personal)





## FIRST COLUMN

### DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF

Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not who someone else is today



SAKSHI SETHI

With the advent of the adoption of the so-called Western culture, many of us especially the youth have never developed a relationship with ourselves for it was neither modelled in families nor it was ever encouraged. Moreover, stepping out of the family, popular culture movies, media and literature also made an individual aware that one needs to prioritize building relations with others and not with selves. But having a healthy relationship with self is the cornerstone of happiness and forms the foundation.

Today, perfectionism and self-comparison have been heightened by social media. It has been damaging to one's mental health, as the person is guaranteed to compare self with others who are doing better at something over time. And the loneliness and despair that can lie underneath a bright smile and successful life can be hidden. When an individual struggles with self-comparison, they are actually dealing with envy – which is a universal emotion. It happens when someone wants to have something that others have but can't have due to several factors such as time, money, experience and a lot many.

Though it is inherently normal, too much can cause a person to engage in self-destructive behaviours such as making excessive efforts to change self in ways that will ultimately destroy a person's personal well-being, health and authenticity. Negative self-comparison is essentially a losing game of competing against anyone but yesterday's version of the individual.



Instead of obsessing over ways to change oneself or be like others, one should count upon the blessings that the lord has bestowed upon one; give several reminders to selves that they are beautiful, smart and have wonderful qualities instead of envying or getting the feeling of jealousy. The person must follow the path of admiration for admiration is on the positive end of the comparison spectrum. When an individual admires other people's qualities, they too want to improve themselves. Shifting the focus to taking inspiration from others rather than self-degrading through comparison is a game changer so that the individual can be proud of the fact that they are improving, regardless of how others are doing. Remember, a person should set the standards so that nothing can compete with them.

It does take work, but the person does get there. When people put others into their categories, they greet their confusion with compassion. In learning to cultivate self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-compassion, a person unlocks the opportunity to fully embrace individual beauty and uniqueness.

The mind is powerful and one must use it to their advantage and focus on their journey rather than being in comparison to others. Comparison and negativity bias are hard-wired into the brains as survival mechanisms as they often cripple an individual by moving forward. In conclusion, as we navigate the complexities of modern society influenced by Western culture, it is crucial to recognize the importance of fostering a relationship with oneself. The pervasive emphasis on external validation, fueled by societal norms and amplified by social media, has led many to overlook the significance of internal well-being. The prevalent culture of perfectionism and self-comparison has not only taken a toll on mental health but has also obscured the genuine struggles that individuals may be facing behind seemingly successful facades.

To break free from the damaging cycle of self-comparison, it is essential to shift the focus from external standards to internal growth and self-appreciation. Rather than succumbing to envy, individuals should celebrate their unique qualities, acknowledging that true fulfillment comes from within.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

# Indo-Maldives ties: An emotional tightrope



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

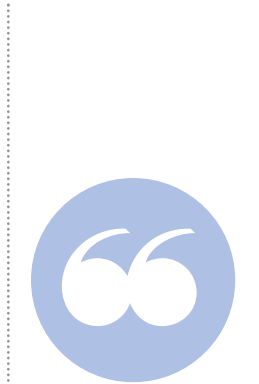
### The Maldives must not let political theatrics erode the core principles that have defined its history, interests and relations with India

The ongoing dispute between a select few individuals in one of the world's behemoth nations and the tiniest sovereign state is a stark illustration of the contemporary diplomatic landscape heavily shaped by media biases and their exaggerated, contentious rhetoric. Unfortunately, a substantial portion of Indian analysts adopted a narrative that further inflamed tensions, giving the Maldivians reasons to amplify their dissent against India. In contrast, astute Maldivian analysts swiftly engaged in damage control, countering the repercussions spurred by the ceaseless prattle of inept politicians. The Maldives' shrewd pragmatism in forging alliances with major powers while safeguarding its autonomy is central to understanding its global approach. Unlike many larger nations in the region, including India, the Maldives evaded British colonization, strategically orchestrating a protectorate agreement in 1887 that preserved its political independence while deferring only on foreign affairs to London. Consequently, Malé never flew the British flag, and no British governor held sway, except during the threat posed by Japan in 1941 when Britain established a naval and air base at Addu Atoll in the southern reaches of the archipelago.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi showcased his strategic response in a brief video highlighting Lakshadweep as an alternative destination to the Maldives, 35 days after meeting the newly elected President of the Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu, on the sidelines of the COP28 summit in Dubai. The subsequent action in this video, not a mere coincidence but rather a calculated response with long-term aims aligned with the evolving policies of the Maldivian administration, echoes Otto von Bismarck's perspective that politics is the art of the possible, the attainable — the art of the next best. On the flip side, there is no cause for jubilation or satisfaction regarding the responses to the video by three young anti-Indian politicians in the Maldives who, a few days ago, exploited their social media platforms, proving in politics, nothing is contemptible. The ensuing disgraceful comments directed at Prime Minister Modi prompted the government to issue clarifications, emphasizing that the statements emanated from individual members of the cabinet and did not reflect the official stance of the government.

President Muizzu, revelling in the triumph of his recent electoral victory, appears to be basking in the dubious glory of long-standing anti-Indian sentiments prevailing in the country. This revelry, however, exposes him as still ensnared in the psychological labyrinth typical of a mere politician. Despite his judicious decision to take swift action against his errant colleagues, suspending Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna, and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid from their positions as deputy ministers in the so-called Youth Ministry, the repercussions of their fervent anti-Indian rhetoric remain unpredictable. The lingering discontent among the populace has the potential to ignite a fresh wave of violence, inevitably causing further harm to the nation.

Simply seeking attention without a nuanced understanding of the intricate political dynamics within the region and the country offers no tangible benefits for individuals making such inflammatory remarks, either for society or personally. Foreign Affairs Minister Moosa Sameer aptly stated, "The recent remarks against foreign



IN THE MALDIVES, PRIORITISING JUVENILE POLITICAL MENTALITY OVER MATURE DIPLOMATIC SKILLS IS NOT ONLY FOOLHARDY BUT ALSO A PERVERSE DANCE THAT REVELS IN INSTANT GRATIFICATION, INFLECTING UNIMAGINABLE PAIN ON SOCIETY

leaders and our close neighbours are unacceptable and do not reflect the official position of the Government of Maldives. We remain committed to fostering a positive and constructive dialogue with all our partners, especially our neighbours, based on mutual respect and understanding." Following decisive actions, President Muizzu swiftly embarked on a state visit to China, marking the first visit since assuming the presidency, where he reaffirmed the long-delayed Free Trade Agreement initiated in December 2014 and many more. Muizzu, under the banner of "India Out," seeks to reshape the social fabric, leveraging existing political culture. His methods, irrespective of perception, place him on a precarious edge, with the stability of his presidency contingent on the outcomes of the upcoming parliamentary elections. Having solidified his position within the party, Muizzu strategically secures loyalty by distributing governmental positions among senior figures in the PPM and the PNC, even appointing his wife. The lack of anti-defection laws in the Maldives introduces complications, as the repercussions of his juniors' statements could greatly influence whether Muizzu continues to wield power unchecked or experiences a tumultuous political decline. Feeble minds, devoid of strategic principles and ethical conduct, persist in their unabated campaign of animosity against India, shamelessly unleashing their vitriol through various social media channels. This toxic behaviour, although not a recent development, has been an enduring characteristic of these politicians. On the contrary, India has unexpectedly taken these provocations more seriously than the juvenile politicians who, in their recent diatribes against India, never anticipated the sudden surge in popularity. India's strategic response seems

to revolve around globally tarnishing Maldives' reputation, utilizing its own carefully crafted narratives. However, this ploy is destined for a short-lived existence, as an entrenched ideological revolt against India continues to simmer throughout the region. Those fanning the flames of anti-India sentiment perceive India not as a benevolent caretaker in times of need but as a manipulator, underscoring the pivotal role played by strategies and counter-strategies in this ongoing narrative. Acknowledging deep cultural, ethnic, and economic ties between the Maldives and India is crucial. Historical connections are evident in linguistic roots, shared exposure to Hindi music, and a history of educational exchanges. Recent collaborations, notably in healthcare, exemplify India's pivotal role, as seen in the timely supply of Covishield vaccines during the pandemic peak. The Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital stands as a tangible testament to India's enduring assistance, and India remains a primary source of tourists for the Maldives, enhancing the bilateral relationship. Both nations strengthened ties through agreements, including significant financial support for maritime connectivity and credit lines. Despite this positive trajectory, the Maldivian current administration holds diverse sentiments towards India, ranging from nationalist fervour against military presence to concerns about transparency in agreements. Doubts persist over projects like the new police academy and Uthuru Thila Falhu, fueled by baseless rumours. Despite reservations, the overall relationship, which reached new heights in the previous administration, now faces challenges. India's understanding of the internal power dynamics in the Maldives

seems miscalculated, considering its profound strategic and economic interests in the region. The Maldives strategically holds a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC). Its historical context, from British operational bases to Soviet attempts at naval facilities, underscores its significance. India's concerns about the Maldives' strategic location heightened after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, with reports suggesting the potential adversarial use of the Maldives' position in the region.

In the Maldives, prioritizing juvenile political mentality over mature diplomatic skills is not only foolhardy but also a perverse dance that revels in instant gratification, inflicting unimaginable pain on society. This misguided approach exposes a grotesque disparity between intent and justification, rendering any sympathetic validity null. It represents a condemnable manifestation of disregard, turning governmental relations into a mockery. This is not a call for 'India first' or 'India out,' but an impassioned plea for the Maldives to strengthen its sovereignty and prioritize its interests under the banner of 'Maldives First.' The nation must not let political theatrics erode the core principles that have defined its history – true friendship and sovereignty. Vigilance is paramount against separatist forces exploiting public sentiment, as risking the essence that made this sovereign archipelago unique throughout history is not an option. Unfortunately, many countries and leaders in the world are yet to learn from the untold lessons to be learned from Ukrainian President Zelenskyy.

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

# Empowering rural India through digital access

### Common Service Centres are transforming lives in rural India by offering employment opportunities and delivering digital services

In the expansive rural landscapes of India, where digital access was once a distant aspiration, Common Service Centres (CSCs) have emerged as transformative agents. Operated by CSC e-Governance, a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) under the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) of the Government of India, these centers provide a myriad of services to citizens in rural areas. The objective of these centers is to provide the benefits of government schemes by providing e-governance facilities to the people, especially in the villages of the country. Boasting over 500 services, CSCs act as vital information and communication technology access points, seamlessly connecting citizens to digital government



KUMAR GIRISH

resources and business services. **The Success of CSCs:** The impact of CSCs on rural India becomes apparent when examining the statistics. Since their inception, these centers have touched the lives of millions, becoming a beacon of digital inclusion across the country. The success of CSCs transcends mere numbers; it is a narrative of empowerment,

closing the gap between urban and rural areas through digital avenues.

**Tele-Law Scheme:** Among the multitude of services offered by CSCs, the Tele-Law Scheme stands out as a beacon of justice. Department of Justice (DoJ) has entrusted a task to CSC e-Governance Service India Limited for mainstreaming legal information, legal aid, and advice to the marginalized communities through Common Services Center (CSC). Launched in 2017 as a pilot project in the Northeast and Jammu & Kashmir, this initiative aimed to bring legal aid to the doorsteps of marginalized communities. Utilizing video-conferencing infrastructure at CSC centers, citizens can connect with panel



lawyers, seeking advice and assistance. The success of the pilot project led to its expansion in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and subsequently to all aspirational districts across the country. As of April 2023, Tele-Law has reached an impressive 2,50,000 CSCs in 765 districts, providing free legal services to all sections of the community. Real-time data from

the Tele-Law Dashboard showcases its impact, with over 65 lakh cases registered and legal advice extended to more than 64 lakh beneficiaries. **Online Resume Maker:** In the digital age, job hunting has evolved, and CSCs have adapted to this change by introducing the Online Resume Maker tool. This AI-based product,

available on the Digital Seva Portal, empowers individuals to create professional resumes tailored to their skill sets. "The impact of the Online Resume Maker service is evident in its features, providing AI-driven content, a choice of professional templates, and seamless integration with job portals like Rozgar.com. The service not only enhances the job application process but also opens doors to daily job alerts, direct calls from recruiters, and downloadable mobile applications with advanced features," says Sanjay Kumar Rakesh, Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer at CSC e-Governance Services India Limited. **Cultivating Prosperity** The Agriculture Department of CSC e-Governance Services

India Ltd, established in 2019-20, has redefined the landscape of agricultural services in the country. Operating through the CSC eAgri portal, the department has achieved significant milestones, surpassing business turnovers and fostering collaborations with leading agricultural brands. The success of the Agriculture Department is marked by its achievements in FPO network expansion, business growth, brand collaborations, retail portals for VLEs, KVK Crop Healthcare Service, PACS Project, and SEAC Value Chain Organization. Digital transformation, financial transactions, PACS onboarding, and progress in the SEAC project highlight the impact of the CSC eAgri portal on the agricultural sector.

With over 46 lakh transactions and the onboarding of 50,000+ PACS into the CSC network, the department's role in promoting e-governance services and digital agribusiness is commendable. "The journey of Common Service Centres (CSCs) in India continues to be one of sustained growth and innovation. As of the latest data available, the network of CSCs has expanded its reach to even the remotest corners of the country, acting as catalysts for rural development. The commitment to providing over 500 services reflects the adaptability and responsiveness of CSCs to the evolving needs of the population," says Sanjay Kumar Rakesh. (The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)



# Trump, Haley, DeSantis campaign in Iowa

## Trump criticises Ramaswamy

AP ■ DES MOINES (IOWA)



Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley pushed across ice-cold Iowa Saturday to find voters open to an alternative to former President Donald Trump with just two days before the state's caucuses open the Republican primary calendar.

Trump, the heavy front-runner in Monday's caucuses, opted for "tele-rallies" after canceling larger in-person events due to a blizzard blanketing much of the state, but he remained confident as he looks for a big victory to blunt the potential rise of any rival. Shortly after arriving in Des Moines, Trump held a livestreamed town hall-style event hosted by Iowa Attorney General Brenna Bird, one his top Iowa backers. "It's nasty out there," he said of Iowa's icy conditions. He confessed to some worry that weather could dampen turnout Monday but said his supporters will "walk over glass" to support him.

Perhaps more important than the margin of Trump's expected victory is whether either of his remaining top rivals can claim a clear second-place finish and gain momentum as the race moves forward to New Hampshire and other states.

The final Des Moines Register/NBC News poll before the caucuses found Trump maintaining a formidable lead, supported by nearly half of likely caucusgoers com-

pared with 20% for Haley and 16% for DeSantis. Haley, the former U.N. ambassador and South Carolina governor, and DeSantis, the Florida governor, remain locked in a close battle for second. Trump is also viewed more favorably than the other top contenders by likely caucusgoers, at 69% compared with 58% for DeSantis and just 48% for Haley.

Trump's modified schedule gave DeSantis and Haley a

chance to see more voters across the state on Saturday. DeSantis in particular is under great pressure in Iowa given his campaign's heavy bet on a strong finish in the caucuses.

"You're going to pack so much more punch on Monday night than in any other election you'll ever be able to participate in," the Florida governor told about 60 voters at his first event in Council Bluffs, Iowa, on the western edge of the state.

DeSantis is hoping for more voters like Michael Durham, a former Trump supporter who plans to caucus for him Monday night.

"He's just kind of no nonsense," said Durham, a 47-year-old from Council Bluffs. Durham praised DeSantis for opening Florida schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and challenging federal power. "He doesn't make any apologies for the way he thinks."

Other Iowans showed why DeSantis and Haley still have work to do in their respective

final pushes.

Courtney Raines, a teacher, came to hear Haley on Saturday morning and planned to see DeSantis later in the day. "I'd like to know how she's going to handle the border crisis and mitigate the racial divide," said Raines, who expressed concern about divisions in American society.

Americans for Prosperity, the political arm of the conservative Koch Brothers' network, canvassed the state through the winter storm on Haley's behalf. Patti Parlee, a 65-year-old accountant from Urbandale, was among the Iowans visited at home Saturday by AFP. But Parlee said she is choosing between Trump and DeSantis and likely won't decide until Monday night, when she will hear the two candidates' representatives make a pitch at her caucus site. "That's what the caucuses are all about is people get to speak for their candidates," Parlee said. "And we have to keep in mind: This isn't the final election. It goes on

from here." Parlee argued that DeSantis has not gotten fair treatment from political media, while Trump has not been treated fairly by prosecutors who have charged him in four separate criminal cases. She said she loved Trump's policies during his administration but thinks he sometimes acts like a "fifth-grader."

"I almost want to vote DeSantis just to say yes, he should be getting more support than it seems like he is," Parlee said. "I almost want to vote Trump just to say: We know that all this bullshit out there is bullshit." In Des Moines, Trump hit Haley for "working with" the Koch network.

Haley, for her part, was measured in her criticisms of Trump, a reflection of her attempt at broad appeal. That includes Republicans who still have favorable opinions about the former president and independent and moderate Republicans who have soured on Trump and could be wildcards on Monday.

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Former US president Donald Trump for the first time has lashed out at his rival Vivek Ramaswamy, who is most closely aligned with him in the race for the Republican nomination, accusing the Indian-American entrepreneur of engaging in "deceitful campaign tricks".

Trump's remarks came ahead of the Iowa caucuses on Monday, marking the beginning of the long process by which the Republicans and Democrats choose their nominees for the presidential election. The comments come after a series of remarks and posts by Ramaswamy, 38, that have angered Trump and his team. Trump's criticism stemmed from shirts that Ramaswamy's campaign is handing out that say "Save Trump, Vote Vivek" on them. Ramaswamy posted a photo with a group of young men

wearing them after his event in Rock Rapids, Iowa, on Saturday, which caught the former president's attention.

"Vivek started his campaign as a great supporter, 'the best President in generations,' etc. Unfortunately, now all he does is disguise his support in the form of deceitful campaign tricks," Trump, 77, wrote on Truth Social on Saturday.

"Very sly, but a vote for Vivek is a vote for the 'other side' — don't get duped by this. Vote for TRUMP, don't waste your vote! Vivek is not MAGA," he added. Make America Great Again (MAGA) is an American political slogan and movement popularised by Trump during his successful 2016 presidential campaign and is used to refer to Trump's political base. The criticism marks the first time Trump and his team have made direct, public attacks against Ramaswamy.

## 'Migrants drowned near area where US had restricted access'

Brownsville (Texas) (AP): A Texas congressman said on Saturday that three migrants, including two children, drowned while trying to reach the US near the border city of Eagle Pass, where the Biden administration says Texas has begun denying access to Border Patrol agents.

US Representative Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democrat, accused the state of failing to act amid escalating tensions between Texas and the US government over immigration enforcement.

On Friday, the Justice Department told the US Supreme Court that Texas had taken control of an area known as Shelby Park and were not letting Border Patrol agents enter. The park is in Eagle Pass, which is a major crossing point for migrants entering from Mexico and is the centre of Republican Governor Greg Abbott's aggressive attempts to stop illegal crossings, known as Operation Lone Star. Migrants are periodically killed when swept away by currents of the Rio Grande. An Abbott spokesperson referred questions to the Texas Military Department, which did not immediately respond to an e-mail seeking comment on Saturday. Cuellar, whose district include the Texas border, said Mexican authorities alerted Border Patrol of the distressed migrants struggling in the river late on Friday.

He said federal agents attempted to call and relay the information to Texas National Guard members at Shelby Park with no success. Agents then visited the entrance to the park but were turned away, according to the congressman, who said the agents were told a Guard member would be sent to investigate the situation.

"This is a tragedy, and the State bears responsibility," read a statement from Cuellar, who is the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee's subcommittee on Homeland Security.

## Kerry to leave Biden administration

AP ■ WASHINGTON

John Kerry, the US special envoy on climate, is stepping down from the Biden administration in the coming weeks, according to two people familiar with his plans. Kerry, a long-time senator and secretary of state, was tapped shortly after Joe Biden's November 2020 election to take on the new role created specifically to fight climate change on behalf of the administration on the global stage. Kerry's departure plans were first reported on Saturday by Axios. Kerry was one of the leading drafters of the 2015 Paris climate accords and came into the role with significant experience abroad, as secretary of state during the Obama administration and from nearly three decades as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Biden's decision to tap Kerry for the post was seen as one way the incoming president was making good on his campaign pledge to battle cli-

mate change in a more forceful and visible manner than in previous administrations.

"The climate crisis is a universal threat to humankind and we all have a responsibility to deal with it as rapidly as we can," Kerry said during a visit to Beijing last summer, when he met with Vice President Han Zheng on climate matters.

Kerry represented Massachusetts for 28 years in the Senate and was also the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004.

"John Kerry's tireless work to deliver global progress on the climate crisis has been heroic," former Vice-President Al Gore, who has focused primarily on climate in his post-public office life, said in a statement on Saturday.

"He has approached this challenge with bold vision, resolute determination, and the urgency that this crisis demands. For that the US and the whole world owe him a huge debt of gratitude."

## 'Army troops turn Davos into fortress ahead of WEF meet'

PTI ■ DAVOS

As Davos readies to host its Annual talkfest of rich and powerful from across the world, nearly 5,000 army personnel have been deployed to help police and civilian authorities secure this small Alpine resort town. Davos is estimated to have a permanent population of just about 10,000 but is frequented throughout the year by tourists including skiing enthusiasts in ski season, but it is the week of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting when it sees the maximum footfalls with at least 30,000 people in the town.

Given the high-profile nature of the event, beginning Monday, the security is both discreet and visible and comprises snipers, drone jammers, regular frisking and checking and round-the-clock patrol.

In addition to army personnel, there is a huge number of police men and women, support staff running into thousands and then nearly 3,000 world leaders are attend-



Andriy Yermak, front sixth left, Head of the Ukrainian President's Office, Swiss Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis, front seventh right, and other participants pose for a photo during the 4th meeting of the National Security Advisors (NSA) on the peace formula for Ukraine, in Davos, Switzerland, Sunday.

ing this year's summit, and so are over 500 journalists. And there is no less number of tourists, it being a ski season.

Armed forces began their deployment on January 9 itself and they would be here till

January 25, according to Swiss Army. Air Force has also been tasked to monitor and secure the airspace.

Besides, it will use its helicopters to transport people protected under international

law on behalf of the Swiss federal government.

These flights are not to be confused with the private helicopter taxis for business giants, which also will be plenty.

The persons protected under international law mostly include high-ranking officials such as presidents and members of the government of foreign states, who can benefit from VIP transport by the Air Force.

High-ranking members of international organizations such as the UN or the EU also belong to this group of people, including the UN Secretary General and the President of the EU Commission.

More than 200 internationally protected persons, including nearly 300 heads of state and government, are expected for this year's meeting.

The additional costs for security at the WEF Annual Meeting 2024 are estimated at around CHF 9 million (nearly Rs 87 crore). As in previous years, the federal government, together with the WEF

Foundation and its other partners (Canton of Graubunden, commune of Davos), will contribute to the costs of WEF Annual Meeting security measures for the period 2022-2024 as part of a three-tier finance model. There is a cost ceiling of CHF 9 million a year for security. If the cost ceiling should be exceeded due to exceptional circumstances, level-2 of the finance model is applied. The federal government has set aside maximum additional funds of CHF 900,000 to cover such cases for the three annual meetings from 2022 to 2024. If the additional costs exceed this amount, the extra expenditure will be met by the finance partners according to the ratio set under level 1, unless level 3 comes into play.

In the event of exceptional incidents (for example, terrorist attacks, assassination attempts, major threats or clear indications that such acts may be carried out), the federal government will meet 80 per cent of any costs exceeding those under levels 1 and 2.

## 'Singapore not involved in strikes against Houthi rebels'

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Singapore did not take part in military strikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen but is involved in a multinational task force aimed at keeping ships safe in the Red Sea, the Defence Ministry said on Saturday. Singapore troops are taking part in Operation Prosperity Guardian — an international maritime security force formed to respond to attacks on shipping vessels by the Yemeni Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, the Defence Ministry (Mindef) said. "Operation Prosperity Guardian is unrelated to the military strikes against the Houthis," the ministry said in the statement, quoted by The Straits Times.

Tension is growing globally over the Houthi militants targeting merchant vessels in the Red Sea amid the Israel-Hamas conflict. The Iran-

backed rebels have said the attacks are meant to show support for Hamas — a Palestinian armed group — in its war with Israel in the Gaza Strip. The US and the UK have already launched air strikes targeting Houthi positions in Yemen.

In December, the Singapore-flagged Danish container ship Maersk Hanzhou was hit by a Houthi missile in the Red Sea. Two US destroyers responded to its call for help and one of the warships shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles that were being fired towards the vessel.

That same month, the rebel group said it would target all vessels, regardless of nationality, heading to Israel and warned international shipping companies against docking at Israeli ports.

US helicopters directly struck Houthi forces for the

first time on December 31, sinking three boats and killing fighters attempting to board a ship. On Tuesday, the US and the UK shot down 21 missiles and drones in what the two countries described as the biggest Houthi attack so far that directly targeted their warships in the region.

On Friday, the two countries launched air and sea strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen.

The Houthis — an armed rebel movement — have come to control large parts of Yemen over the past decade.

Speaking in Parliament on Tuesday, Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said the attacks by the Houthi rebels resulted in all five of the world's largest shipping companies suspending transit through the Red Sea — the shortest shipping route between Europe and Asia.

## Frederik X is proclaimed new king of Denmark

AP ■ COPENHAGEN

Denmark's prime minister proclaimed Frederik X as king on Sunday after his mother Queen Margrethe II formally signed her abdication, with massive crowds turning out to rejoice in the throne passing from a beloved monarch to her popular son.

Margrethe, 83, is the first Danish monarch to voluntarily relinquish the throne in nearly 900 years. Many thousands of people gathered outside the palace where the royal succession was taking place, the mood jubilant as the Nordic nation experienced in first royal succession in more than a half-century, and one not caused by the death of a monarch.

Wearing a magenta outfit, Margrethe signed her abdication during a meeting with the Danish Cabinet at the



Denmark's newly proclaimed King Frederik and Queen Mary, with Prince Christian, Princess Isabella, Prince Vincent and Princess Josephine, on the balcony of Christiansborg Palace.

Christiansborg Palace, a vast complex in Copenhagen that houses the Royal Reception Rooms and Royal Stables as well as the Danish Parliament, the prime minister's office and the Supreme Court. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen next proclaimed Frederik king from the balcony of the palace before

thousands of people. The abdication document was presented to Margrethe as she sat at a massive table covered in red cloth around which royals and members of the Danish government were seated. Frederik, who was in a ceremonial military uniform adorned with medals, said beside her.

## 5 migrants killed in another tragedy

Paris (AP): Five people were found dead on Sunday in another maritime drama involving migrants trying to cross the dangerous English Channel from northern France, authorities said. The deaths and the rescue of dozens of other people after a migrant boat ran into difficulties in the dark and winter cold again highlighted the perils of migrant crossings from France to Britain.

Drownings, sinkings and other sometimes deadly incidents, often aboard crowded and flimsy boats, are frequent in the busy sea lane. Winter air temperatures have dropped below freezing and the sea is bitterly cold, too.

The boat carrying migrants was spotted early on Sunday in difficulty off a beach in the French coastal village of Wimereux, according to the French maritime authorities for the English Channel and North Sea.

The five dead were recovered from the sea or found washed up along the beach, maritime authorities said in a statement. A French navy helicopter and several rescue vessels were involved in the search.

Rescue services provided help to more than 30 other migrants, maritime authorities said. They included a person found unconscious on the beach and hospitalised in critical condition in the French port of Boulogne-sur-Mer. Another person was treated for severe hypothermia. Maritime authorities said multiple French vessels are operating off the northern coast, because conditions in the Channel have improved after a spell of bad weather, making crossing attempts more likely. Authorities said other coastal surveillance and rescue operations are underway but gave no immediate details. It is "a particularly dangerous sector, particularly in the middle of winter for precarious and overloaded boats," the statement warned.

## Families of Gaza hostages call on govt to bring them home

AP ■ TEL AVIV

The families of hostages held in the Gaza Strip kicked off a 24-hour rally in Tel Aviv on Saturday night, calling on the government to bring their loved ones home after 100 days spent in Hamas captivity. Thousands of people poured into "Hostages Square" in Tel Aviv — a central plaza opposite Israel's Defence Ministry that has served as a gathering point for the campaigners.

Hamas and other Gaza militants captured some 250 people during its deadly October 7 attack on southern Israel, while killing some 1,200 other people — most of them civilians.

More than 100 hostages were released during a temporary truce in November but 132 remain held in Gaza including the remains of about two dozen who died or were

killed. "We were here on day 50 and spoke on this stage. We are not going to speak again in 50 days. It's time to bring them back. Now! Bring them back!" said Ronen Neutra, the father of Omer Neutra, an Israeli soldier who was taken. "They are being held in terrible conditions. They are starving. They are dying."

There has been little visible progress toward a new deal to release hostages. Their families are using the 100-day mark for a new appeal to the government to prioritise bringing home the abductees. Some have said the government has not done enough.

Israel said on Saturday that it had brokered a deal with mediator Qatar to deliver badly needed medicines to the hostages with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross. There was no immediate sign that the

deal was being implemented. Osama Hamdan, a Hamas leader in exile, said on Saturday in Beirut that the group was giving some of the available drugs in Gaza to hostages.

Near the rally in support of the hostages, anti-government demonstrators calling for new elections to be held blocked a major Tel Aviv highway, clashing with police who made arrests and tried to push the crowd back. Other protesters advanced toward Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's private residence in the coastal town of Caesarea, calling for his dismissal from office.

In Tel Aviv, many of the protesters were planning to stay out all night. The crowd listened to a recorded message from French President Emmanuel Macron, and heard from the US ambassador to Israel, Jacob Lew.



With the U.S. Capitol in the background, demonstrators rally during the March on Washington for Gaza at Freedom Plaza in Washington on Saturday.



# PTI candidates were picked with little input: Imran Khan

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's jailed ex-premier Imran Khan has said that his party candidates for the February 8 elections were picked with his "little input" and he was largely unaware of ticket distribution among them.

Khan made these remarks on Saturday after attending court proceedings in the Toshakhana corruption case, according to a report by the Dawn newspaper.

Before the court proceedings began, about two dozen PTI workers and candidates of different constituencies complained to 71-year-old Khan about being denied party tickets. "He told them that the tickets were awarded with his little input and that he was unaware of their distribution. He explained to them that it was not possible for him to make a quick decision on the award of 850 tickets in a brief discussion with party leaders," the paper reported.

Khan also again accused his rival Nawaz Sharif of playing the match "with the umpires of choice".

He said that a certified money launderer returned to Pakistan under the London Plan and was given a safe passage as the courts allegedly appeared to be lenient with his opponents. In response to a question, if he was ready to hold dialogue with certain quarters, the former premier replied that he had been given the option for dialogue 18 months ago, but he had no idea of holding talks "with whom" and "for what".

"The only issue left for discussion is conducting free and fair elections," he added. He expressed concerns over the resignation of two senior judges of the Supreme Court. He believed all attempts being made against PTI's election symbol of "bat" were aimed at debilitating the party before elections, but it will fight till the last ball no matter what happens. Khan's remarks came ahead of a decision of the Supreme Court on Saturday that declared null and void the intra-party polls of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and deprived the party of the 'bat' as election symbol, forcing the party to announce that its nom-

## Another motion seeking delay in polls lands in Pak Senate

Islamabad (PTI): A resolution seeking a delay in the February 8 general election was moved in Pakistan's Senate on Sunday, two days after a similar resolution was submitted in the Parliament's upper house. The resolution, the third of its kind to be moved the Senate, cited cold weather and security concerns for the postponement of the elections, Geo News reported.

Tabled by independent Senator Hilal-ur-Rehman, the resolution said that extreme cold weather and snowfall would create difficulties for citizens to cast votes in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and create challenges for candidates trying to campaign. "In the same way, due to security concerns in the country, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, candidates are facing threats of terrorist attacks while campaigning," it said.

The resolution added that the security issue was also creating obstacles and limiting the participation of candidates in their campaigns, the Dawn newspaper reported. The resolution claimed that due to the increasing "sense of deprivation" and the fear of the province's citizens being left out

inees would contest as independent candidates.

Regarding the article recently published in The Economist, Khan said he had verbally dictated that article to his lawyers and asked them to get more information from his previously recorded interviews.

Sources said the jail administration had intercepted some hand-written notes of Khan that his lawyers were taking out from jail premises but then he took those back. The same was later produced before the judge, who asked lawyers to remove Khan's signatures from the pages before returning those to them.

Meanwhile, during the Toshakhana case proceedings on Saturday, Judge Mohammad Bashir of the accountability

of the electoral process, the date announced for the general election was "unsuitable" for the province, the report said.

It urged the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to delay polls to a date acceptable for all the relevant stakeholders, and that would also help remove hurdles in the way of free and fair elections, the report said. This comes two days after a similar resolution, seeking a three-month delay in the general elections, was tabled by independent Senator Hidayat Ullah on Friday.

Ullah also cited "security challenges" given the rise in terrorist attacks in different parts of the country as the reason for the delay in polls.

Earlier in the month, the Senate passed a non-binding 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 on January 5, received overwhelming support in the upper house of Pakistan's Parliament but was slammed as "unconstitutional" by major political parties.

court recorded the statements of four witnesses. Eight witnesses have testified before the court so far. Further proceeding in this matter has been adjourned till January 15.

Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were indicted in the case on Tuesday which is about the alleged misappropriation of state gifts. According to the case, the former prime minister and his wife received 108 gifts from various heads of state, out of which they kept 58 gifts. They were also undervalued by them while paying a mandatory price to the state.

The gifts included a jewellery set given from the Saudi Crown Prince which the couple retained at a low price instead of depositing it in the Toshakhana.

## Provision changing process of filling minority seats challenged in court

Peshawar (PTI): Two members of the Christian community in Pakistan have challenged in the Peshawar High Court a Constitutional provision that changed the process of filling minority seats in assemblies. Through the petition, Rameez Alam and Anil Masheh said that after 2002 Constitutional amendments in Articles 51 and 106, the members of minority communities on the seats reserved for non-Muslims were elected based on a proportional representation system instead of being directly elected by the minorities.

They said that earlier religious minorities had the power to vote elect their representative and offer themselves for elections. However, due to the impugned amendments, it was changed to an undemocratic system wherein neither the minorities could offer themselves to contest elections, nor vote for their representatives hence the elected people were not true representatives of the community. "The preamble of the Constitution provides for safeguarding of legitimate interests of minorities and this amendment is violative of the preamble of Constitution and hence liable to be struck down to this extent," said the petition.

Numan Mohib Kakakhel, the advocate who filed the writ petition on behalf of the petitioners, said that the petition in the PHC has sought the declaration as null and void the amendments made in articles 51 and 106 and restore the election procedure enforced in the country before 2002. The federal govt, Ministry of Law and Justice and others have been made respondents in the case.

"This is an undemocratic, and unlawful process of electing minority members for the national and provincial assemblies and as such the amendments are against basic human rights," the petition maintained.

# War of words after Taiwan election shows divide over the island's fate

AP ■ TAIPEI (TAIWAN)

A war of words erupted the day after Taiwan's presidential and parliamentary elections, with Taiwan on Sunday accusing China of making "fallacious comments" and China criticising the US for congratulating the winner. The verbal sparring highlighted the seemingly intractable divide over Taiwan's fate, a major flashpoint in US-China relations that risks leading to an actual war in the future. The victory of Lai Ching-te in Saturday's election was a setback for China's efforts to bring Taiwan under its control. His Democratic Progressive Party advocates maintaining the status quo, in which Taiwan governs itself but refrains from declaring formal independence — a move that could trigger a Chinese military response. China, meanwhile, calls for what it terms a "peaceful reunification", but that seems increasingly unrealistic as most Taiwanese have come to oppose becoming part of China.

Taiwan said as much, taking issue with China over its often-repeated line that Taiwan is a domestic Chinese issue. China regards the island of 23 million people as a renegade province and says it should not have its own president or official relations with foreign governments. The Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement on the election that "the Taiwan question is China's internal affair" and "the basic fact that ... Taiwan is part of China will



Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te, also known as William Lai, left, celebrates his victory with running mate Bi-Khim Hsiao in Taipei, Taiwan on Saturday.

not change". Taiwan said that statement "is completely inconsistent with international understanding and the current cross-strait situation. It goes against the expectation of global democratic communities and goes against the will of the people of Taiwan to uphold democratic values. Such clichés are not worth refuting".

The US, in a statement attributed to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, congratulated Lai on his victory and said it looks forward to working with all of Taiwan's leaders "to advance our shared interests and values". It congratulated the people of Taiwan for demonstrating the strength of their democracy, a nod to the Biden administration's efforts to find common ground with

other democracies in the face of China's rise. China's Foreign Ministry said the US statement "sends a gravely wrong signal to the Taiwan independence separatist forces" and goes against a US commitment to maintaining only unofficial ties with Taiwan.

Lai's victory means the Democratic Progressive Party will continue to hold the presidency for a third four-year term, following eight years under President Tsai Ing-wen. But he won a three-way race for president with 40 per cent of the vote, less than the clear majority Tsai won in 2020. He will take office in May.

The Democratic Progressive Party lost its majority in the legislature, finishing with one seat fewer than the

Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party. Neither holds a majority, giving the Taiwan People's Party — a relatively new force that won eight of the 113 seats — a possible swing vote on legislation. A statement from the Taiwan Affairs Office in China said that the results showed that the Democratic Progressive Party does not represent mainstream public opinion on the island.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry, in its response, called on China "to respect the election results, face reality and give up its oppression against Taiwan". The Chinese military regularly sends fighter jets and warships into the skies and waters near Taiwan. Any conflict could draw in the United States, which officially doesn't support Taiwan's independence but opposes any attempt to change the status quo by force.

Meanwhile, former US national security adviser Stephen Hadley and former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg arrived in Taipei on Sunday for post-election meetings with political leaders.

It was unclear how China would react, as it seeks to nurture a recent improvement in its troubled ties with the US while also maintaining a firm and unwavering position on Taiwan. They two will have meetings on Monday, the American Institute in Taiwan, the de-facto US embassy, said in a news release. The institute said the US government had asked Hadley and Steinberg "to travel in their private capacity to Taiwan".

# Muizzu's party loses Male mayoral poll

PTI ■ MALE

In a setback to Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu, the pro-India opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has secured a landslide victory in the capital Male's Mayoral election. The MDP candidate, Adam Azim, has been elected as the new mayor of Male, a post held by Muizzu till recently. Muizzu resigned from the position to contest the presidential elections last year.

The Maldives media reported Azim's win as a "landslide" and "victory by a large

margin". The MDP is headed by pro-India former president Mohammad Solih, who was defeated by Muizzu, a pro-China leader, in the presidential elections. With 41 boxes counted, Azim has taken a huge lead with 5,303 votes. His rival Aishath Azima Sha Moor of Muizzu's People's National Congress (PNC) got 3,301 votes, Maldives' Sun Online news portal reported.

The poll on Saturday was marked by a low turnout, according to reports. The Mayoral election victory is expected to revive the political

fortunes of the MDP, which still holds a majority in the Parliament. Muizzu, who returned to Male on Saturday after a five-day state visit to China, congratulated Azim and pledged to cooperate with the Male City Council and the Mayor. Azim said that his victory was a victory for all residents of Male. Speaking to Mihaaru News, Azim expressed gratitude towards those who supported him and voted for him in the election. He also thanked MDP's leadership and campaign teams.

The Mayoral polls were

held in the backdrop of derogatory comments posted by three deputy ministers of the Muizzu government against Prime Minister Narendra Modi leading to a diplomatic row with India. During his high-profile visit to China, Muizzu sought to align Maldives closer to Beijing. Muizzu suspended the three ministers after their social media postings, which stirred concern in India and calls for a boycott by Indian tourists who ranked highest in numbers followed by Russia. Chinese tourists figured third.

# North Korea fires ballistic missile towards sea

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korea fired a ballistic missile toward the sea on Sunday, its first missile launch in about a month, its neighbors said. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the launch occurred Sunday but gave no further details like how far the weapon flew.

Japan's Defense Ministry also said it detected a possible ballistic missile launch by North Korea but gave no other details. It is the North's first missile launch since it test-fired its Hwasong-18 solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missile, the North's most advanced weapon, on Dec 18. The Hwasong-18 is designed to strike the mainland US.

Sunday's launch came days after North Korea fired a barrage of artillery shells near the tense sea border with South Korea, prompting South Korea to conduct similar firing exercises in the same area. In recent



days, North Korea has also been escalating its warlike rhetoric against its rivals. Earlier this week, leader Kim Jong Un called South Korea "our principal enemy" and threatened to annihilate it if provoked.

Experts say Kim will likely further raise animosities by test-firing more missiles to try to raise the stakes in the stand-

off with his rivals and influence the results of South Korea's parliamentary elections in April and the US presidential election in November.

In a key ruling party meeting in late December, Kim vowed to expand his nuclear arsenal and launch additional spy satellites to cope with what he called US-led confrontational moves.

# Convicted Russian ex-mayor cuts jail time short, to fight in Ukraine

Moscow (AP): A disgraced former Russian mayor convicted over bribery had his prison sentence cut short after signing a contract to fight with Russia's military in Ukraine, local media reported on Sunday.

Oleg Gumenyuk, who served as mayor of the far eastern city and cultural hub of Vladivostok between 2018 and 2021, was convicted last year of accepting bribes worth 38 million roubles (about USD 432,000) and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. However, he was released after agreeing to bear arms and fight as part of his country's military operation in Ukraine that started nearly two years ago, his lawyer Andrei Kitaev told Russian news outlet Kommersant.

He said that the politician's whereabouts were unknown, but that Gumenyuk was instructed to report to his military unit on December 22. Local officials for the Federal Penitentiary Service in the Primorsky region where the former mayor was

held did not confirm the reports. Photos circulating on social media show a man resembling Gumenyuk carrying a gun while being surrounded by other servicemen. Russia has gone to extraordinary lengths to replenish its troops in Ukraine, including deploying thousands of prisoners directly from the country's jails. Inmates who sign up for six months on the frontline are pardoned upon their return.

It's not the first time that authorities have used such a tactic, with the Soviet Union employing "prisoner battalions" during World War II. Also on Sunday, shelling continued with a Russian attack on the Ukrainian city of Kherson, injuring six people, the region's military administration on Sunday. Four firefighters were also hurt after a drone hit a fire station in the wider Kherson region. Meanwhile, a Ukrainian drone strike injured one at the Russian border village of Tetkino, Kursk region governor Roman Starovoyt said on social media.

# Kishida visits quake-hit region

AP ■ TOKYO

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited Sunday the country's north-central region of Noto for the first time since the deadly January 1 earthquakes to alleviate growing concern about slow relief work and the spread of diseases in evacuation centres.

The magnitude 7.6 earthquake left 220 dead and 26 others still missing while injuring hundreds. More than 20,000 people, many of whom had their homes damaged or destroyed, are taking refuge at about 400 school gymnasiums, community centers and other makeshift facilities, according to the Fire and Disaster Management Agency report. Road damage has hampered rescue efforts, and though relief supplies have reached most regions affected by the quake, hundreds of people in isolated areas are getting little support. Additionally, in the hard-hit towns of Noto, Wajima and Suzu, elderly residents account for half their



Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, right, talks with evacuees at an evacuation center in Suzu, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan Sunday.

population, and many are facing growing risks of deteriorating health, officials and experts say. Kishida, in his disaster-response uniform, visited a junior high school that has turned into an evacuation center in Wajima where officials showed him the evacuees' severe living conditions. They also spoke about the potential

risk of spreading infectious diseases, such as influenza, COVID-19 and stomach flu due to the lack of running water.

The prime minister said he takes the evacuee's conditions seriously and promised support. "We will do everything we can so that you can have hope for the future," he said.

# SL police to persist with drug bust

Colombo (PTI): Sri Lanka police on Sunday said that they would launch a new phase of the controversial drug bust operation despite concerns raised by the UN Human Rights chief over its fairness. Police said they were targeting 42,248 suspects identified criminals. "All police stations must work 24 hours a day for the next one month to arrest 42,248 suspects and bring them to justice," a statement said.

On Saturday, the UN Human Rights body slammed Sri Lanka police's ongoing operation to curb the narcotics menace and called on the government to reassess strategy with a human rights-based approach. "We are very concerned that authorities in Sri Lanka are adopting a heavily security-based response

to the country's drugs problem...A staggering 29,000 people have reportedly been arrested on drug-related matters since December 17, with allegations that some have been subjected to ill-treatment and torture," a statement issued in Geneva on Saturday by Volker Turk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said. Operation 'Yukthiya' (the Sinhala term for 'justice') was launched on December 17 with a June 30 deadline to end the drug menace plaguing the island nation and arrest all the drug dealers. He said the Security forces have reportedly conducted raids without search warrants, detaining suspected drug sellers and users, with hundreds sent to military-run rehabilitation centres.

# Japanese flight returns to airport with crack on cockpit window

Tokyo (AP): An All Nippon Airways domestic flight turned back to Japan's northern airport of Sapporo after a crack was found on the cockpit window, according to the airline and media reports. ANA Flight 1182 was en route to Toyama airport in central Japan on Saturday but had to return to the New Chitose airport for repairs, the airline said. There were no reports of injuries among the 65 people on board. The crack was found on one of the cockpit windows and the cause is under investigation, according to local media reports. The plane involved is a Boeing 737-800 — a different model from the Boeing 737 Max 9 jet that is under investigation by the US Federal Aviation Administration.

# Ram bhakts hold music show in Washington DC

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

A week ahead of the grand consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, Ram Bhakts held car rallies in 21 cities across the US with the enthusiastic participants in the national capital organising an innovative Tesla Car musical show dedicated to Lord Ram.

Over 100 Ram Bhakts, each owning a Tesla Car, gathered at Shri Bhaktha Anjaneya Temple in Frederick City — a Maryland suburb of Washington DC — on Saturday night. They used one of the key features of Tesla cars wherein the headlights and speakers of these Tesla cars synced with a popular number dedicated to Lord Ram.

Introduced in 2022, the light-flashing-set-to-music feature is available in certain categories of its models with the par-

ticular software update. According to the organisers of the Tesla Music Show, Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, more than 200 Tesla Car owners had registered for the event and they had to turn on a significantly large number of them.

Drone pictures taken by the event organisers showed that these Tesla Cars created a "RAM" by placing these cars in such a way.

"Today we had the Tesla Ram Bhagwan musical event on the occasion of the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. We are grateful to the generation of Hindus over the last 500 years to have struggled for the Ram Temple in Ayodhya," said Mahendra Sapa, president of the DC chapter of VHP America, organisers of the Tesla musical event here. "The Tesla light show is just the beginning of the



celebration of the Ram Temple inauguration," said Animesh Shukla, one of the volunteer organisers. VHPA plans to organise similar light shows on January 20, he said.

VHP America, which is leading the Ram temple celebrations in the US, on Saturday held car rallies in as many as 21 cities: Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Carmel (Indiana), Cary and Charlotte in North Carolina, Chicago, Denver

play the message of the Shri Ram Janam Bhumi Mandir (Temple) Consecration Ceremony scheduled for January 22, 2024. This momentous event, awaited by the Hindu community for over 25 generations (495 years), will be celebrated with unprecedented enthusiasm," a media release said.

The billboards have already been unveiled in Texas, Illinois, New York, New Jersey, and Georgia. Additionally, Arizona and the State of Missouri are set to join this visual celebration starting on Monday, January 15. "The resounding message conveyed by these billboards is that Hindu Americans are elated and joyously participating in this once-in-a-lifetime event. Their emotions overflow as they eagerly await the auspicious day of the consecration ceremony," the statement said.



# India electronics exports to US jump over two fold in nine months: ICEA

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Electronics exports from India to the US jumped over two-fold year-on-year to USD 6.6 billion during January-September 2023, industry body ICEA has said. India Cellular and Electronics Association Chairman Pankaj Mahindroo told PTI that this is an all-time high electronics export from India, while the share of electronics imported from China into the US market has declined. "Recent data highlights a notable surge in India's electronics exports to the US, which increased by approximately 253 per cent to an estimated USD 6.6 billion in the current year (January-September), compared to an estimated USD 2.6 billion in the same period last year,"

Mohindroo said. According to data shared by ICEA, India's electronics exports to the US increased by more than 300 per cent from an estimated USD 1.3 billion in 2018 to an estimated USD 4.5 billion in 2022. The bilateral electronics trade between India and the US has also seen an impressive rise of 84 per cent, with the current estimate standing at USD 9 billion during January-September 2023 from an estimated USD 4.9 billion in the same period preceding fiscal. In August 2023, ICEA launched the Indo-US Task Force for Electronics with a mission to increase the bilateral electronics trade from USD 8.4 billion in the last fiscal to an ambitious USD 100 billion in a decade. "The Indo-US Task Force for Electronics is not just about



numbers. It's about setting a precedent. With the current trade estimated at USD 9 billion in 9 months, we have seen good improvement. Our goal now is to capitalise on this momentum and significantly elevate our position in the US electronics market," Indo-US Task Force on Electronics Chairman RS Sharma said. The share of electronics imports from China into the US has decreased from an estimated 46 per cent in 2018 to an estimated 24 per cent in January-September 2023. 2018 was the year when 25 per cent

tariffs on many Chinese goods were imposed by the US. These are famously known as the 'Trump Tariffs'. Meanwhile, Vietnam and Taiwan have experienced the most significant rise among exporting countries from 2018 to 2022, their exports to the US soared 420 per cent and 239 per cent, respectively. Mohindroo said the US has really walked the talk on this critical geopolitical issue by diversifying supply chains. "The surge in India's electronics exports to the US highlights our potential in the global electronics market. This strategic partnership has the profound potential to shape the global electronics trade. A particularly promising area is smartphone exports, where we see the potential for 5x growth in the next 3-5 years," he said.

# 'India withstood geopolitical shocks; will navigate future uncertainties too'

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The Indian economy has withstood all geopolitical shocks in the last couple of years and it will also be able to navigate the uncertainties that lie ahead, RBI Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) member Jayanth R Varma said on Sunday. Varma further said he expects a benign outcome in 2024 where inflation comes down and growth remains robust.

"The Indian economy has withstood all these shocks (Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas war, rising oil prices, Houthi attacks) in the last couple of years, and I do not believe that the geopolitical situation will be significantly worse in coming months than what we experienced in the recent past," he told PTI in an interview.

Moreover, Varma, a professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, said the continued slowdown in China has led to sharply reduced demand for energy and other commodities, and this too has ameliorated the adverse effects of supply shock.

"On the whole, I have a great deal of confidence that India will be able to navigate the uncertainties that lie ahead," he said. India's economy is projected to grow by 7.3 per cent in the current fiscal, higher than 7.2 per cent in 2022-23. As per the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) World Economic Outlook, the global growth is estimated to decelerate from 3.5 per cent in 2022 to 3 per cent in 2023 and further to 2.9 per cent in 2024.

The situation around the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial shipping route connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, has escalated due to recent attacks by Yemen-based Houthi militants. Due to these attacks, the ship-



pers are taking consignments through the Cape of Good Hope, resulting in delays of almost 14 days and also higher freight and insurance costs. The Red Sea route is also crucial for energy shipments. Also, on his outlook on inflation for 2024, the eminent economist said he expects a benign outcome where inflation trends down and growth remains robust.

"I expect inflation to trend downward towards the target (apart from transient food price spikes)," he said.

According to him, food price shocks last year have taken the form of transient spikes that have been quickly corrected. Most importantly, these spikes have not led to any disanchoring of inflationary expectations, and, this has prevented a generalization of food price inflation. "I think this would be the case in 2024 as well," Varma said.

Noting that globally, the inflation surge was the result of excessively loose pandemic-era monetary policy followed by multiple supply shocks, he said neither of these factors operate today. Varma pointed out that the monetary policy is now restrictive, supply shocks have dissipated and prices of energy and commodities have corrected.

According to the latest government data, retail inflation rose at the fastest pace in four months in December 2023 at 5.69 per cent, on account of an increase in prices of vegetables, pulses, and spices.

The Reserve Bank of India has been tasked by the government to ensure retail inflation remains at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on either side.

When asked if the government needs to make a more realistic assessment of its medium-term fiscal deficit target, he said India has been on the path of fiscal consolidation in the post COVID period, and this has to be partially offset by the monetary policy to avoid adverse growth outcomes.

On what the global outlook means for India as over 50 countries are due to hold elections in 2024, Varma opined that the actions of different countries are driven more by their self-interest than the personality of their leaders.

"As such, I am not too worried about electoral outcomes in the rest of the world," he said, adding that moreover, it is only in a few of the elections that there is a serious risk of the emergence of political leaderships with drastically different agendas.



# ONGC makes back to back gas discoveries in Mahanadi basin block

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

State-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has made two significant back-to-back natural gas discoveries in a Mahanadi basin deepwater block in the Bay of Bengal as its calculated game plan of venturing into high-risk deep water exploration starts yielding results. The firm made the discoveries in the block MN-DWHP-2018/1, which it had won in the third round of auction under the open acreage licensing policy in 2019, two sources with direct knowledge of the development said.

Significantly, the discoveries have been made in an area, which previously was classified as a 'no-go' area because of national security interests.

The first discovery, named Uktal, is in 714 metres of water depth and flowed more than 3 lakh cubic metres per day of gas during initial testing, they said, adding the other find is at a water depth of 1,110 metres. ONGC has notified the discoveries to upstream regulator Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH) and is now doing pool size and commercial viability assessments, they said.

For a nation that imports roughly half of its gas needs, finding new reserves augurs well for its energy security, India is targeting raising the share of natural gas in its energy basket to 15 per cent by 2030 from the current 6.3 per cent and more domestic production will aid that. Gas is being seen as a transition fuel in India's journey towards net zero carbon emission by 2070. As the country pivots away from polluting fossil fuels, natural gas with a lower carbon footprint is seen as a bridge fuel.

Natural gas extracted from below ground or sea-surface is used to generate electricity, make fertilisers or turn into CNG to use as fuel in automobiles and piped to household kitchens for cooking purposes. Greater use of natural gas will replace coal in power generation and liquid fuels in industries. Sources said ONGC was able to fast-track exploration after the government freed almost one lakh square kilometres of area from restrictions for exploring and producing oil and gas. This area was called a 'no-go' area as it was either in the path of missile testing or on a satellite launch route. Restrictions on more than 98 per cent of the 'no-go' areas were removed in 2022, allowing for energy companies to send vessels and drillships to find oil and gas. ONGC acquired 1,432.14 sq km of 3D seismic data in MN-DWHP-2018/1 block (Mahanadi deep-water) and spud well MNDW181H-B-1 in August last year.

The first of its kind under the open acreage licensing policy (OALP) regime, the well has been drilled by the mighty drillship West Polaris. Sources said these exploration successes in Mahanadi offshore will catalyse opening up new exploration fronts, attracting more investments. ONGC had last year inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with French energy giant TotalEnergies to establish a framework for the exchange of information on deepwater offshore acreage, especially in the Mahanadi and Andaman basins. This was to enable Total to make a decision on participating in ONGC acreage, bringing its superior technical strengths in deepwater exploration and production.

# WeLead to Credible India: Indian lounges dominate Davos promenade

**PTI ■ DAVOS**

About a dozen Indian lounges have dominated the main Promenade street of Davos as the snowcapped resort town readies for the five-day World Economic Forum Annual Meeting beginning Monday.

Adorning the event are WeLead Lounge - set up to showcase women leadership, India Engagement Centre, pavilions by Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Karnataka, and IT majors like Wipro, Infosys, TCS and HCLTech showcasing power of AI and technology. And this time, in addition to

Indian tea, coffee, 'samosas' and 'kachoris', there will also be Indian liquor flying off the shelves during 'Spirit of India Hour' on two evenings at a few bars, restaurants and lounges. In all, 60-70 lounges and pavilions have been set up by governments and corporates from across the world, of which about a dozen are Indian ones. Indian participation is also significant with three union ministers, as many chief ministers and a large number of officials and CEOs expected to speak over the next five days. Apex industry chamber CII has also planned a big campaign this time.

The Indian industry's presence at Davos has been conceptualized with the theme of 'Credible India' to showcase and spotlight India's impressive economic achievements and its future potential as a significant contributor to global growth. While the India Lounge has moved to a new place, CII has set up the CII Indian Business Hub and the industry body will also host several breakfast and lunch sessions, fireside chats and panel discussions. CII has also initiated the 'Spirit of India Hour' which would take place at four locations to showcase Indian wine and spirits.

# Budget: Pharma industry seeks incentives for R&D, conducive policies

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The pharma industry has sought fiscal incentives to promote research and development (R&D) in the sector, as it is likely to reach USD 400-450 billion market size by 2047. In a statement, Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance Secretary General Sudarshan Jain said there is a high risk, long gestation period and low success rate in research, and therefore, there is a need for continuous investments.

"The budget 2024-25 should outline conducive policies that

provide benefits in terms of both direct and indirect taxes and also facilitate ease of doing business for the pharma companies," Jain noted.

The interim Budget is scheduled to be presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1.

Jain said the domestic pharma industry is at the cusp of change. "The Indian pharma sector aims to achieve USD 120-130 billion by 2030 and USD 400-450 billion by 2047. To achieve this vision, the Union Budget 2024-25 should accelerate the pace of innovation and R&D," he added.

The announcement of the Promotion of Research & Innovation Program (PRIP) Scheme in 2023 was a positive step to spur innovation, he stated.

Healthcare industry body NATHEALTH said it is advocating for an increase in healthcare spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP and the rationalisation of the GST framework. "Additionally, we aim to enhance the medical value travel segment by addressing the MAT credit issue and strengthening the healthcare value chain, which is essential for driving economic

growth and creating new job opportunities," NATHEALTH MD and CEO Ashutosh Raghuvanshi said.

A key focus should be on building local capabilities to deliver healthcare services even in the most remote regions, alongside the localisation of the healthcare value chain, he added.

"We expect the interim Union Budget 2024-25 to unveil a roadmap for addressing long-term infrastructure financing, increasing the number of medical and nursing colleges, and fiscal reforms in the health insurance sector," Narayana Health

Executive Vice Chairman Viren Shetty said.

Metropolis Healthcare MD Ameera Shah sought a zero per cent GST on diagnostic services and refunds for GST paid on inputs.

Recognising that 60 per cent of India's diagnostics are reliant on imports, it becomes paramount for the government to rationalise import tariffs on healthcare products, she added.

Roche Diagnostics India MD Rishabh Gupta said prioritising access to affordable and accurate diagnostics can transform India's healthcare system.



# Centre, State, exporters to discuss ways to boost exports

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The Centre, state governments and industry representatives will meet on January 16 to discuss ways to boost the country's exports, an official said.

Issues which are expected to figure in the meeting include rupee payment challenges, need of global shipping, and challenges being faced by traders on account of the Red Sea crisis, and uncertain global economic situation due to the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel-Hamas conflict.

The meeting will be chaired by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal. They all are members of the Board of Trade (BoT).

"There are over 135 members of BoT. It is meeting on January 16 at Bharat Mandapam," the official said.

Headed by the minister, the board includes participants from various states, Union Territories, and senior officials from the public and private sectors. In the meeting, representatives of export promotion councils present their views on the export sector.

The board provides an opportunity to have regular discussions and consultations with trade and industry and advise the government on policy measures on foreign trade.

It also provides a platform for state governments and Union Territories to articulate their perspective on trade policy and also for the central government to apprise them about international developments affecting India's trade potential and opportunities.

Cumulatively, the country's merchandise exports in April-November 2023-24 contracted by 6.51 per cent to USD 278.8 billion. Imports were also down by 8.67 per cent to USD 445.15 billion in the eight-month period due to a fall in oil imports.

# Reliance seeks minimum USD 10 for coal seam gas

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Reliance Industries Ltd is seeking a minimum USD 10 rate for the gas it plans to produce from coal seams, as it altered its pricing formula to reflect the changed energy scenario.

Reliance has sought bids from users for 0.90 million standard cubic metres per day of gas it will produce from coal-bed methane (CBM) block SP (West)\_CBM-2001/1 in Madhya Pradesh, according to a tender floated by the company.

Users have been asked to quote a premium they are willing to pay over and above 12.67 per cent of the Dated Brent crude

oil price.

Gas price shall be higher than 12.67 per cent of Dated Brent plus premium 'V'; or the government-declared monthly price for conventional gas. The government-mandated price for January is USD 7.82 per mmBtu.

Reliance has set the starting bid price of 'V' at USD 0.50 per million British thermal units - bidders have to quote 'V' higher than USD 0.50.

At the current Brent crude oil price of USD 78 per barrel, the minimum gas price comes to USD 10 per mmBtu (12.67 per cent of USD 78 is USD 9.88 per mmBtu. Added to this is a minimum premium of USD 0.50, which takes the gas price to

about USD 10.4 per mmBtu).

E-auction is planned for January 31, the tender document showed. The contract duration is for 1 to 2 years beginning April 1.

The pricing Reliance is seeking is modified from the March 2022 auction. In that auction, it had sought bids at a premium over the base of 13.2 per cent of Brent crude oil price.

In March 2022, Reliance sold 0.65 mmscmd of CBM at a USD 8.28 per mmBtu premium over the prevailing Brent crude oil price. Brent oil was trading above USD 115 per barrel at that time. It has now slipped to USD 78 a barrel.

Earlier this month, state-owned Oil and Natural Gas

Corporation (ONGC) sought a premium over the government-dictated gas price of USD 7.82 per mmBtu for the gas it plans to produce from a CBM block in Jharkhand.

ONGC sought bids from users for the sale of 0.05 mmscmd of gas from the North Karanpura coal-bed methane (CBM) block in Jharkhand for three years. Users have been asked to quote a premium they are willing to pay over and above the monthly domestic natural gas price that the Oil Ministry's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC) notifies, the tender document showed.

PPAC every month declares a price for the majority of domestically produced natural gas.

This price is 10 per cent of the monthly average of the basket of crude oil that India imports. For the month of January, this price comes to USD 7.82 per million British thermal units. This price in the ONGC tender has been marked as a reserve gas price.

While the government sets prices for two-thirds of the gas produced in the country, CBM gas enjoys pricing freedom where sellers are allowed to discover the market rate.

Gas extracted from below ground is used to produce electricity, make fertilisers or turned into CNG for sale to automobiles and piped to household kitchens for cooking purposes.

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The government will take a decision after September on the existing import management system on certain IT hardware products such as laptops and tablets after evaluating the import data, which is monitoring, an official said.

In October last year, India put in place an import management system under which importers of these products have to seek authorisation from the government.

The system is aimed at monitoring shipments of laptops, tablets and computers into the country without hurting market supply or creating a cumbersome licensing regime.

The importers are allowed to apply for multiple authorisations and those authorisations would be valid up to September 30, 2024. The authorisations will be issued for any number of consignments for imports till

# Post September decision on import management system for laptops, tablets after evaluating data

September next year. About the post-September 2024 scenario, the official said: "We are monitoring the imports, we are looking at the data. So whatever that data will throw, further steps will be based on that."

On November 1, 2023, the government cleared 110 of the total 111 applications, including those of Apple, Dell and Lenovo, which sought permission for imports of these IT hardware products worth nearly USD 10 billion, on the first day of implementation of the new system.

"The government has already given authorisations for imports more than what it used to be imported annually. So which are the companies, what kind of

supplies are coming, that has to be looked into before taking a decision," the official added.

India is also promoting domestic manufacturing of these goods and has taken several steps such as rolling out a production linked incentive (PLI) scheme for large scale electronics manufacturing.

The remarks assume significance as the US on January 12 during the Trade Policy Forum (TPF) meeting raised the issue of India's new import requirements for computers, tablets, and asked New Delhi to ensure that the current online system and related policies do not restrict trade in the sector. When asked about the discus-



sion on the issue with the US, the official said India informed them that this is just an import monitoring system.

"We have told them that we are not against imports but if certain

imports are coming from countries which may jeopardise our security, we will have to look at that," the official added.

India has also conveyed its willingness to continue engaging on

the issue with the US and other interested stakeholders. The US side urged India to ensure that the end-to-end online system currently in operation and related policies do not restrict trade going forward.

Commenting on the issue, economic think tank GTRI said that the case for local laptop manufacturing in India is compelling as China dominates the personal computer and laptop market with an impressive 81 per cent share, amounting to a staggering USD 130 billion (as of 2022 data).

"Such over dependence on one country poses future supply risk as Covid has demonstrated. In this context, India's efforts to

bolster local production of mobile phones, laptops, etc are in the right direction. However, India must avoid incentivising superficial shell assembly companies," Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) Co-Founder Ajay Srivastava said.

On these grounds, the US must support and not oppose India's import restrictions on laptops, he added.

Trade expert and Hi-Tech Gears Chairman Deep Kapuria said that the 14th US-India Trade Policy Forum was held at the most opportune time when India's short to medium and long term economic goals are well articulated.

"To become the third largest economy of the world in the next five years and achieve an export target of USD 1 trillion each for goods and services by 2030, India needs to build closer trade and economic ties with the US, the world's largest economy," he said.



# FIH defends decision to legalise betting in hockey

PTI ■ RANCHI

The International Hockey Federation (FIH) on Sunday defended its decision to partner with Sweden-based betting firm Spring Media for a four-year cycle, stating that it is a vehicle to generate funds for the development of the game.

The FIH recently partnered with Spring Media to offer fans a betting package that includes all its events, representing more than 1,300 matches across four years. While many in the fraternity raised eyebrows following the move, the FIH backed its decision, saying that legal betting is the way forward in the world of sport.

"We have signed with a legal betting entity, so there is no question at all of integrity. It's completely legal and controlled."

"And of course, when it comes to integrity and of the hockey members in general, not only linked to betting but every type of behaviour, the FIH has an

integrity code in place and has an integrity unit since couple of years," a top FIH official told PTI on the sidelines of the Women's Olympic Qualifier here.

"Of course, it is a move to bring in some funds. We like all sports pretty much need resources to be able to fulfil our mission, which is to develop the sport and make way for some financial resources. It's a partnership and it's an additional way to get resources which is very usual in the world of sport."

Asked when the partnership is starting, the official said: "It is starting now because things are already in place for the qualifiers." India have been the FIH's top market in the last decade or so in terms of sponsorships and monetary benefits, and the world body official stressed that the country will continue to hold its significance despite the sport spreading its wings to other parts of the world.

"India is very important for us. In India the history of the game is unique. You are a huge mar-



ket in terms of population, visibility etc, etc. Clearly for us India is like a partner for us," he said. "It's very clear that we will continue to come regularly to India, we will definitely organise other events in India.

"At the moment the Odisha government is there from India (as sponsor). We also have Nagra for watchhockey, they are based in Switzerland, this company of betting is based in Sweden. We have interest in get-

ting funds from all over the world." He said the world body is also exploring other countries to increase its financial might. "From many countries, the funds are coming from the NOCs (National Olympic

Committees), from the governments, it's very much kind of a public funding. In some countries there are some private funding, broadcasting rights, some sponsors as well," he said.

"For us coming to India is fantastic, you can see from the attendance of last night as well as today. In India you have the guarantee of crowd, there is a historical passion for the game here. And kudos to Hockey India, because events here are fantastically organised."

"But we are also playing in other countries, we would like to extend the number of countries where we are playing. For example, Oman, the qualifiers are going on there now. They are replacing Pakistan as hosts. They are organising the Hockey 5s World Cup as well."

"We were in Chile and Malaysia some months ago for the junior World Cup. We want to increase the number of hosting countries. It is in the interest of the development of the game," he signed off.



## Sinner wins opener at Australian Open

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Jannik Sinner had the Carota Boys in the crowd and red-white-and-green flags flying in Rod Laver Arena Sunday, helping Italy's Davis Cup star feel right at home in the opening match on the center court at the first 15-day Australian Open. Sinner had a 6-4, 7-5, 6-3 first-round win over No. 59-ranked Botic van de Zandschulp, needing 2 1/2 hours to complete his first win since a memorable November when he twice beat Novak Djokovic and won the Davis Cup.

"Means a lot to me to start off with a win," fourth-seeded Sinner said in a post-match TV interview as a half-dozen fans dressed in carrot costumes cheered from the stands. "Physically I feel good. I'm here in good shape. I think I can be happy for today."

Sinner said he was surprised to see the Carota Boys in the crowd. "It's nice to see them in the stands," he said. "They are getting more famous than I am, slowly. Maybe this support gives me in the key moments this extra belief, maybe. Who knows? Let's see how it goes here. But I'm happy that they are here."

Another Italian, Matteo Arnaldi, beat Adam Walton 7-6 (5), 6-2, 6-4 in the first round. The first match to go the full five sets was won by Francisco Cerundolo, the 22nd-seeded Argentinian edging out Australian Sweeney 3-6, 6-3, 6-4, 2-6, 6-2.

Marin Cilic, the runner-up in 2018, was beaten 6-1, 2-6, 6-2, 7-5 by Fabian Marozsan of Hungary. The season's first major is being played over 15 days - the first round is split over three days - and starting on a Sunday for the time.

Women's eighth seed Maria Sakkari admitted her relief after she beat No. Hibino of Japan 6-4, 6-1, her first Grand Slam win since last year's Australian Open. "I lost three first rounds in my last three Grand Slams," she said. "For me, it was a very difficult match today emotionally. I'm happy I managed to do the job right and play a good second

set."

Also advancing were 2021 U.S. Open finalist Leylah Fernandez, who beat 17-year-old Sara Bejlek 7-6 (5), 6-2 and No. 9 Barbora Krejickova, who rallied from a set and a break down to beat Mai Hontama 2-6, 6-4, 6-3.

"It wasn't a perfect match, but I'm just glad that I was able to fight through some of the tough moments that I encountered in the first set and just kept fighting," said Fernandez, who had a first-round loss at last year's U.S. Open. "I think it was a good first round, get a feel of the court, get a feel of the tournament, and I can just improve from there."

Teenager Brenda Fruhvirtova recorded her first Grand Slam win, the 16-year-old Czech beating Anna Bogdan of Romania 2-6, 6-4, 6-3.

No. 28 Lesia Tsurenko had a 3-6, 7-5, 6-3 comeback win over Lucia Bronzetti and Russian qualifier Maria Timofeeva ousted veteran Frenchwoman Alize Cornet, 6-2, 6-4. Cornet was appearing in her 68th consecutive Grand Slam event, a women's record.

Novak Djokovic was set to open his bid for a record 25th Grand Slam title in the night session on Rod Laver Arena. He's on a 28-match winning streak at Melbourne Park.

The 10-time Australian Open champion's first-round match is against Dino Prizmic, who won the junior title at last year's French Open.

Aryna Sabalenka was scheduled to start her title defense against Ella Seidel in the last match of the day on the main show court. Caroline Wozniacki, the 2018 champion, was returning to the Australian Open for the first time in four years and set to take on Magda Linette, a semifinalist last year.

Andre Agassi, who won the last of his four Australian titles in 2003, joined Evonne Goolagong Cawley to carry the trophies into the tennis complex before play began on the first of the tournament's three Sundays. Tournament organizers are honoring Goolagong Cawley on the 50th anniversary of the first of her four Australian Open titles in 1974.

## Anisimova comeback on track

AP ■ MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA)

An extended break from tennis has already done Amanda Anisimova some good at the Australian Open, where she reached the second round of a Grand Slam event for the first time since Wimbledon in 2022. Anisimova beat 13th-seeded Liudmila Samsonova 6-3, 6-4 on Sunday to advance in just her second tournament back.

A teenager on the rise in 2019 when she beat reigning champion Simona Halep to reach the French Open semi-finals, Anisimova played her first match since May last week in Auckland after taking a break from tennis, citing burnout.

"The most important thing is that I feel a lot more refreshed. I'm enjoying practising. I'm enjoying every second that I'm out there," she said. "Even when I was down today, I was still just enjoying the challenge."

At the time she started her break last year, Anisimova said tennis had "become unbearable" and she had to prioritize her mental well-being.

That meant missing the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open, following first-round exits at the 2022 US Open and the 2023 Australian Open.

In her comeback in Auckland, Anisimova lost 6-0, 6-1 to Marie Bouzkova in the second round after beating Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in the first round. Two wins in three matches have the 22-year-old American feeling more positive.

"I'm just happy with how I feel

Reaches the 2nd round in Australian Open



coming back. I feel like I was very burned out while I was playing (in early 2023), and that really wasn't a nice feeling," she said. "Being able to just reset is really nice." She will next meet either Nadia

Podoroska or Tamara Zidanec. "I'm just here for the journey right now and seeing how much I can progress," Anisimova said. "But, I am happy with the wins, and I really hope that I can build on from it."

## Wozniacki into 2nd round in her first Australian Open since becoming a mom

AP ■ MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA)

Caroline Wozniacki advanced to the second round in her first Australian Open since becoming a mom when 20th-seeded Magda Linette retired in the second set of their Sunday night match.

Wozniacki was leading 6-2, 2-0 on Margaret Court Arena when Linette, a 2023 semifinalist, was treated by the trainer and decided she could not continue.

Wozniacki won the 2018 Australian Open for her breakthrough major title. She retired in 2020 and had two children before returning to the tour last year in time for the US Open. She will next play Maria Timofeeva, a 20-year-old qualifier who had a 6-2, 6-4 win over Alize Cornet, ending the French veteran's record 68th consecutive Grand Slam event.

Meanwhile, an extended break from tennis has already done Amanda Anisimova some good at the Australian Open, where she reached the second round of a Grand Slam event for the first time since Wimbledon in 2022. Anisimova beat 13th-seeded Liudmila Samsonova 6-3, 6-4 on Sunday to advance in just her second tournament back.

A teenager on the rise in 2019 when she beat reigning champion Simona Halep to reach the French Open semi-finals, Anisimova played her first match since May last week in Auckland after taking a break



from tennis, citing burnout. "The most important thing is that I feel a lot more refreshed. I'm enjoying practising. I'm enjoying every second that I'm out there," she said. "Even when I was down today, I was still just enjoying the challenge."

At the time she started her break last year, Anisimova said tennis had "become unbearable" and she had to prioritize her mental well-being. That meant missing the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open, following first-round exits at the 2022 US Open and the 2023 Australian Open.

In her comeback in Auckland, Anisimova lost 6-0, 6-1 to Marie Bouzkova in the second round

after beating Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in the first round.

Two wins in three matches have the 22-year-old American feeling more positive.

"I'm just happy with how I feel coming back. I feel like I was very burned out while I was playing (in early 2023), and that really wasn't a nice feeling," she said. "Being able to just reset is really nice."

She will next meet either Nadia Podoroska or Tamara Zidanec. "I'm just here for the journey right now and seeing how much I can progress," Anisimova said. "But, I am happy with the wins, and I really hope that I can build on from it."



## Japan hold mighty Germany in FIH Women Olympic Qualifier

PTI ■ RANCHI

A resolute Japan played out of their skin to hold world No. 5 Germany to a 1-1 draw in their second Pool A match of the FIH Women's Olympic Qualifier here on Sunday.

The Germans controlled the proceedings for a major part of the match, earning as many as 15 penalty corners, but failed to break Japan's defence led by goalkeeper Eika Nakamura. Nakamura was brilliant under the goal as she came up with some brilliant saves to keep Germany at bay.

Lisa Nolte (30th minute) scored for Germany from a field effort, while Miyu Hasegawa (45th) equalised for Japan. The game was about Germany's relentless attacks and Japan's defending.

In the first quarter itself, Germany secured as many as four penalty corners but they were up against a determined Nakamura in front of Japan goal, as she did not put a foot wrong in the match, or else the score-

line could have been different. In the 16th minute, Germany secured another penalty corner but Nakamura made a triple save to deny the opponents any inroads.

By the end of half-time, Germany earned as many as 13 penalty corners but they failed to break Japan's defence. Japan's coach Jude Menezes lauded his side's valiant defending display.

"We needed to defend well against a strong side like Germany and I am proud of the way the girls executed the plans. It was a superb effort from the defensive line," Menezes, a former India goalkeeper, said. Despite the draw, Germany are atop Pool A with four points from two games, while Japan are in second place with similar points but have an inferior goal difference.

Japan will take on Chile in their final pool match on Tuesday, while Germany will be up against Czech Republic with the top two teams from the pool progressing to the semifinals.

## We are hungrier, want to go one better at India Open: Satwik, Chirag

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty are "more hungry" after a runner-up finish at the Malaysia Open Super 1000 and would look to go one better at next week's India Open as they aim to claim their first silverware of the new season.

The Indian pair's dream run at the Malaysia Open ended with a narrow 21-9 18-21 17-21 loss in the men's doubles final to world No. 1 Chinese Liang Wei keng and Wang Chang here on Sunday.

The Asian Games gold medallists will be one of the top contenders for the India Open Super 750 crown beginning on Tuesday at the IG Stadium in New Delhi.

"We want to do well in our home country next week, so we don't want to relax with this, we are more hungry and next week also we want to do well in front our home crowd," Satwik said after finishing second best at the first event of the year. Chirag added: "We obviously could



have played a lot better towards the end. I think what's important is to look at the positives also, we have played some good badminton here but we are not done yet. India Open is coming up next week and we want to go one better."

Satwik and Chirag, the Asian Games gold medallists, squandered an opening game advantage and an 11-7 lead in the decider to lose the summit clash.

It was a fourth defeat for the Indian pair against Liang, 23, and 22-year-old

Wang, having lost three of their last four meetings -- all in 2023. The only time Satwik and Chirag had emerged victorious was during their title-winning run at Korea Open Super 500 last year. "Till we retire we will be playing against them for a long time. It is always tough fight against them. We are happy with what we wanted to achieve, we are happy we could go deep into the tournament," Satwik said. "I feel it is still not my 100 per cent, there is something inside me, I am not satisfied."

"In few other tournaments, I felt I was 100 per cent but here we played finals but still I felt like we played 60-70 per cent. So, if we can play our 100 per cent then we would like to see what happens against them." Satwik and Chirag have been the most successful Indian players in the circuit last year, having won the Asian Games gold, titles in Asian Championship, Indonesian Super 1000, Korea Super 500 and Swiss Open Super 300. They also reached the finals of China Masters Super 750 in November last year.



## Indian shooters pick up more gold in Jakarta

PTI ■ JAKARTA

Indian shooters continued to hit the bulls-eye in the Asia Olympic Qualifiers here on Sunday, with Yogesh Singh winning the men's 25m individual standard pistol gold before combining with Amit Kumar and Om Prakash to claim the team event.

At the Olympic qualifiers for shotgun discipline in Kuwait City, at least two women trap shooters were favourably placed after day one of qualification, to make the top six finals cut on Monday.

Yogesh shot 572 to clinch the standard pistol gold and then partnered with Amit (565) and Prakash (553) for the team gold in the event, bringing India's overall podium finishes to a whopping 32, including 14 gold and 10 silver. It marks the country's most successful outing in the continental tournament. In the shotgun qualifications, which began with the men's and women's trap, Shreyasi Singh was lying second with a score of 71 after the first 75 targets. Bhavya Tripathi was also in the top six with 68 after the first three rounds. Manisha Keer was 11th with 65. The trap final round of qualification and the finals are slated for Monday, offering two Paris Olympic quotas each. India have the opportunity to secure one quota from each event.

## India beat NZ 3-1 to keep alive Paris Olympics hopes

PTI ■ RANCHI

India on Sunday rose from the ashes to tame New Zealand 3-1 with a spirited performance in their second pool match of the FIH Women's Olympic Qualifier to keep alive their hopes of securing a ticket to Paris Games.

The Indians, who dropped a rung to seventh in the world rankings released on Saturday, did not have the best of starts in the tournament, losing to lower-ranked United States 0-1 in their opening Pool B match.

In contrast, New Zealand registered an easy 3-0 win over Italy on Saturday. But it was complete turnover from the Indians on Sunday.

Leaving behind the USA disappointment, the Indians produced all-round hockey on Sunday and used every corner of the turf to build their attacks with short and crisp passes.

This was what India's chief coach Janneke Schopman pointed after USA match and the girls seemed to have attentively listened to the Dutch, which was evident from the team's much-improved performance on Sunday. Salima Tete had a brilliant game and was involved in most of the Indian attacks with her quick runs and dribbling abilities.

India took the lead with their first attack within 41 seconds of the match through a field effort.

Sangita scored from close range after she was set up by Salima Tete, who broke through New Zealand defence from the right flank with a brilliant run. Stunned by the goal, the Black Sticks responded instantly and secured a penalty corner two minutes later but wasted the chance.

India earned their first PC in the 8th minute but Deepika's hit was blocked by a New Zealand defender. The ball fell in front of Baljeet Kaur's stick standing near the goal but she failed to get past Black Sticks goalkeeper Grace O'Hanlon.

The Indians' ploy to fall back a bit after the early lead backfired as New Zealand secured another penalty corner soon

and Hull this time converted the chance with a grounded shot to draw level.

But New Zealand's leveller seemed to have woken up the home team who pressed hard and secured back-to-back penalty corners, the second of which was perfectly slammed into the net by Neha in the 12th minute.

The Indians continued their attacking intent and earned their fourth penalty corner soon but failed to capitalise on the opportunity.

But a minute from the first quarter, India tripled their lead through Neha. It was Jyoti who set up the goal, cutting inside the circle from the right side to pass it on to Neha, who did the rest.



# WHEN CRICKET MEETS TENNIS

**PTI ■ INDORE**  
Indian cricket icon Virat Kohli on Sunday opened up about the mutual admiration he shares with Serbian tennis legend Novak Djokovic in a heart-warming tale of cross-sport camaraderie. It all started when Kohli reached out to the record 24-time Major champion on social media with a simple greeting. But to his surprise, the tennis maestro had already messaged him, marking the beginning of their friendship. "I got in touch with Novak very organically, I was just looking at his profile once on Instagram and I just happened to press the message button. I thought I'll just say hello, maybe," Kohli revealed on BCCI Twitter ahead of his T20 comeback against Afghanistan at Indore. "And then I saw a message from him on my DM already. I never opened it myself. So, first time I saw my own messages myself, I saw, he messaged me himself. And I was like, let me just check if it's a fake account or some-

thing like that. "But then I checked it again and it was legitimate. And then, yeah, we got talking. We keep exchanging messages every now and then. I congratulated him for all his amazing achievements." The two athletes quickly found common ground, regularly exchanging congratulatory messages on their respective achievements. They both are also epitome of supreme fitness allowing them to excel even in their mid 30s. Djokovic also congratulated Kohli on his 50th ODI century, by posting an Instagram story, a gesture that resonated deeply with the Indian cricketer great. "When I got my 50th century recently, he put out a story and he sent me a very nice message as well. So, there's been a mutual admiration, respect. "It's really nice to connect with global athletes who are, you know, excelling at a high level. And I think, collectively, what I think about it is sending out a message of inspiration to the next generation in a way. "I have a lot of respect for him, his

## KOHLI AND NOVAK MUTUAL ADMIRATION CLUB



journey, his passion for fitness, something that I dearly follow myself and believe in a lot. So there's a lot to connect on. "Hopefully if he comes to India soon, I happen to be in a country where he is playing. I will definitely catch up with him and just chill out and maybe have a cup of coffee."

Kohli's message for Djokovic came hours after the 36-year-old tennis told the Sony Sports Network that they both are "text buddies". "Virat Kohli and I have been texting a bit for a few years. We never got a chance to meet in person, but it was really an honour and a privilege to hear him speak nicely about me. "I obviously admire all of his career and achievements. I started to play cricket, but I'm not very good at it. But I have a task to perfect my cricket skills before I come to India, and don't embarrass myself, when I'm there," Djokovic said. Djokovic's only visit to India came in 2014 when he visited New Delhi for the now defunct International Tennis Premier League. The 36-year-old hopes to revisit the country with which he feels strongly connected to. "I've felt that for many years (connection). I visited India only once around 10 or 11 years ago for a two-day exhibition event in New Delhi. It was a brief stay, and I hope to return soon to explore the country's rich history, culture, and spirituality," he added.

Kohli also extended his best wishes to Djokovic for the Australian Open where the Serb will look for a record-extending 25th Grand Slam. Ahead of the Australian Open, Djokovic was seen playing an exhibition match with Aussie batter Steve Smith. Kohli saw that clip and was also tempted to play with the Serb. "I saw that clip of him and Steve playing a bit of cricket and tennis. I think he's way better at swinging the bat than probably we are at swinging that racket. Steve did pretty well to return his serve. "So I was a bit tempted. I was like, you know when you play cricket and you have hand-eye coordination, you're very tempted with racket sports. "You feel like, I can do this. But I've seen games live, tennis matches, and I know how fast those serves are, so I probably don't have a chance to touch that. "But yeah, it'll be nice to probably do that with him as well. And hopefully, it's probably the only thing I can teach him is how to hold a cricket bat," Kohli added.

## Chappell slams abysmal pace of play in Test cricket

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The T20 boom has threatened the existence of Test cricket but what is also hurting the red-ball game is the "abysmal pace of play", reckons Australian great Ian Chappell. In a column for ESPNcricinfo, Chappell blamed the batters for wasting too much time in the middle. "The pace of play in Test cricket is abysmal. It's slowing every day and nothing is being done to improve matters. "On the one hand Ben Stokes genuinely strives to improve the entertainment quotient of Test cricket but he's being undermined by the administrators' lack of initiative," he wrote before asking some pertinent questions. "Why are batters allowed to meet mid-pitch during overs to discuss who knows what without penalty? Why aren't batters informed that etiquette requires them to be in their stance at the crease when a bowler is ready to deliver? "Heat extremes excepted, why allow drinks at times outside of the regular break? Why do glove changes occur so often? Surely this is superstition more than need. Why aren't boundaries sig-



nalled only for balls that hit the rope rather than allowing pointless replays that look at the whereabouts of a fielder's feet or hands?" he asked. The DRS also has also contributed to the slow pace of the game, feels Chappell. "Have administrators heard how players shouldn't argue with an umpire? Then why do those same administrators encourage arguing with an umpire by allowing players to review decisions? The number of tactical reviews is growing out of hand and replays are taking too much time. "How come players are allowed to charge at umpires while they are appealing, without any recrimination? I was appalled to see Australian players indulging



## Shaun announces retirement from professional cricket

**PTI ■ SYDNEY**  
Australian cricketer Shaun Marsh on Sunday announced his retirement from professional cricket, with the Melbourne Renegades' fixture against Sydney Thunder in the Big Bash League on Wednesday being his last assignment. He joins former Australian skipper Aaron Finch into retirement. "I have loved playing for the Renegades. I've met some great people over the last five years, and the friendships I've made will last a lifetime," Marsh, 40, said in a statement to the Renegades. "To the Renegades' coaches and staff and everyone behind the scenes, thank you for backing me in from the start and over my final years. It's made my job a little easier out in the middle." Despite starting the season late

## New Zealand beats Pakistan by 21 runs in T20

**AP ■ HAMILTON (NEW ZEALAND)**  
New Zealand overcame the loss of its captain in an innings that faltered late to beat Pakistan by 21 runs in the second Twenty20 International Sunday, taking a 2-0 lead in the five-match series. The Black Caps failed to build on the foundation of the first half of its innings, making 194 for eight batting first after being 111 for one at the end of 10 overs. The batting slump followed captain Kane Williamson retiring hurt after 10 overs with a tight hamstring. Pakistan also stumbled in the second half of its innings and was bowled out for 173 in the 20th over. Williamson is making a managed return from a serious knee injury and New Zealand would fear any setback to his rehabilitation. But, while he didn't field, Williamson was still padded up and apparently prepared to bat at the end of the New Zealand innings. Finn Allen's 74 from 41 balls set a cracking pace early on in the New Zealand innings. Allen put on 59 in 5.1 overs with Devon Conway (20) for the first wicket and 52 in 4.9 overs with Williamson before the Kiwi captain retired hurt on 26.



The innings began to falter at that point and New Zealand lost three for 35 between the 11th and 16th overs. Allen was out at 137 for two, then Daryl Mitchell fell at 147 and Mark Chapman followed at 157 as the innings began to trend sharply downwards. Mitchell Santner made a bright 25 before being wastefully run out as New Zealand lost its last seven wickets for 55 runs. "It was a good surface which we've come to expect here at Sedden Park and the way Finn Allen and the boys at the top set it up was very pleasing," New Zealand's stand-in captain Tim Southee said. "But Pakistan

## RANJI TROPHY

### Haryana humble defending champions Saurashtra

**PTI ■ RAJKOT**  
Haryana humbled defending champions Saurashtra in their own backyard by four wickets in a low-scoring Ranji Trophy game here on Sunday. Resuming day three at 148 for six, Saurashtra stretched their second innings to 220 all out with the help of skipper Jaydev Unadkat (23) and Parth Bhut (47), setting a 166-run target for Haryana. Haryana did experience some anxious moments before getting home in the final session, having lost three quick wickets. Ashok Menaria (58 not out) anchored



the chase with Rahul Tewatia (10 not out) staying with him at the other end. Saurashtra let the game slip away from them on the opening day when they were bundled out for 145 with Jayant Yadav taking a five-wicket haul. Haryana had made 200 in their first innings with Saurashtra doing well to dismiss the opposition after the visitors made a strong start. The game was dominated by spinners including Jayant and Nishant Sindhu from Haryana. From the hosts' side, veteran Dharmendrasinh Jadeja, Parth Bhut and Yuvraj Singh Jadeja were the main wicket takers. Cheteshwar Pujara made 49 and 43 in his two innings. It was the first defeat of the season for Saurashtra who had got three points against Jharkhand in their opening game of the season. For Haryana, it was a timely result as they had to share a point each with Rajasthan in their opening game in which only 42 overs could be bowled due to bad light. **BRIEF SCORES:** Saurashtra 145 and 220 in 78.3 overs (Cheteshwar Pujara 43, Arpit Vasavada 45, Parth Bhut 47; Nishant Sindhu 5/84). Haryana

200 in 67 overs and 168/6 in 59.1 overs (Ashok Menaria 58 not out; Dharmendrasinh Jadeja 4/58). Haryana won by four wickets. **IN PUNE: Jharkhand** 1st innings: 403 all out Maharashtra 1st innings: 543 all out in 132 overs (Kedar Jadhav 182, Pavan Shah 136, Ankit Bawne 114 not out). **IN DELHI: Services** 1st innings: 466/4 declared in 161.2 overs (Anshul Gupta 149, Ravi Chauhan 107, Rajat Paliwal 108 not out) Rajasthan 1st innings: 131/9 in 59 overs (Shubham Sharma 36; Arjun Sharma 3/32, Poonia Poonia 2/21).

### Bhatt takes six wickets as Baroda thrash Puducherry

**PTI ■ VADODARA**  
Exploiting helpful conditions, veteran left-arm spinner Bhargav Bhatt returned a six-wicket haul to lead Baroda to a comprehensive 98-run win over Puducherry in their Ranji Trophy Group D match, here on Sunday. The 33-year-old bowler, who had taken a fiver in the first innings, totalled 11 wickets for the match, his fourth 10-wicket haul in first-class cricket. Baroda, led by Vishnu Solanki, after setting Puducherry 218-run target for victory, dismissed the opponents for 119 in 35.1 overs on day 3 of the tournament, with Bhatt (6/46) doing the maximum damage. He was assisted by young leg-spinner Mahesh Pithiya, who made full use of the conditions to grab four second-innings wickets as the two slow bowlers made merry taking all 10 wickets. The day started with the match evenly poised. Baroda were tottering at 128 for 7. Their innings folded soon for 154 with Kinit Patel (28) emerging the highest scorer. However, the 218 Baroda scored on day 1 and the way their slow bowlers dismissed Puducherry for 155 to take a handy 63-run first-innings lead, gave them enough cushion to defend the 218-run target. Bhatt, after his fine 5/49 in his first innings, came back to demolish Puducherry in the second essay. The left-right combination of Bhatt and Pithiya did not allow the Puducherry batters to settle down even as the deteriorating day 3 pitch did its job. Gaurav Yadav was the only Puducherry batter to get past 30 with Bhatt returning a superb economy rate of 2.55 in his 18 overs. **BRIEF SCORES:** IN VADODARA: Baroda 218 and 154 in 48.5 overs (Sagar Udeshi 6/70, Jay Pande 2/26) beat Puducherry 155 and 119 in 35.1 overs (Gaurav Yadav 32; Bhargav Bhatt 6/46, Mahesh Pithiya 4/49) by 98 runs. **IN INDORE: Odisha** 498 in 170.2 overs (Subhranshu Senapati 277, Harshit Rathod 60 not out). Madhya Pradesh 246/6 in 80.3 overs (Harsh Gawli 137 not out; Sunil Rod 3/76). **INDHARAMSALA: Uttarakhand** 238 and 227 in 71.5 overs (Aditya Tare 79; Abhishek Kumar 5/43). Himachal Pradesh 271 and 39/6 in 12.1 overs (Deepak Dhopola 5/16).

### Mulani 9 wickets haul propels Mumbai to brink of win against Andhra

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
Left-arm spinner Shams Mulani claimed a stellar nine-wicket haul to put Mumbai on the brink of a big win against Andhra in their Ranji Trophy Group B fixture here on Sunday. Mulani wreaked havoc on Andhra's batting lineup, scalping an impressive 6/65 wickets in the first innings to help Mumbai shoot out Andhra for 184 in 72 overs. Forced to bat again, Andhra were reduced to 17/3 in the second essay inside the first hour with Mulani accounting for two of the top-three en route to his figures of 3/63. The 26-year-old's ability to extract turn and maintain control over the proceedings left Andhra struggling to stage a fightback as they found themselves tottering at 166/5 following-on. Veteran Hanuma Vihari showed



some resilience with a resolute 101-ball 46 but seamer Royston Dias accounted for him. Andhra's battle revolved around Shaik Rasheed who remained unbeaten on 52 (103b) in company with their bowling hero Nitish Reddy (22 batting). The Ricky Bhui-led side need to score 47 more to avoid an innings defeat and make Mumbai bat again. **RANA LIFTS UP HOPE VS BENGAL:** Nitish Rana led from the front with an unbeaten 47 (43b) after Samarth Singh (54) and Aryan Juyal (42) failed to convert their starts to give home side Uttar Pradesh a glimmer of hope after their first innings setback against Bengal at the Kanpur Green Park. His aggressive yet composed knock, marked by five boundaries and two sixes, played a key role in guiding UP to 178/4 in their second essay, a crucial 50-run lead going into the final day. Bengal, who are desperate for a

win after managing just one-point against Andhra in their Ranji opener, found solace in pacer Mohammed Kaif who was their lone contributor with 3/72. The younger brother of India speedster Mohammed Shami, Kaif had claimed 4/14 in UP's 60 allout in the first innings. Kaif dismissed Samarth Singh (54), Aryan Juyal (42), and Priyam Garg (12) in UP's top-four to bolster Bengal's hopes. Under fading lights, UP lost Garg and Karna Sharma (4) in successive overs but Rana held the fort with Akashdeep Nath (11 batting from 30b) as the match is poised for a tantalising final day. **CHHATTISGARH ON TOP VS BIHAR:** In Patna, Rishabh Tiwari's magnificent 138 and Ashutosh Singh's unbeaten 134 gave Chhattisgarh a commanding 221-run first innings lead after the away side declared for 329/2. Facing a significant deficit, Bihar's second innings showed some signs of resilience. Sharman Nigrodh's 60 and Babul Kumar's 52 laid the foundation, and the team reached 144/3 at the end of Day 3. Chhattisgarh's Jivesh Butte, Gagandeep Singh and Sourabh Majumdar claimed a wicket each, but Bihar displayed determination to narrow the deficit to 77 runs. The spotlight will be on Bihar's middle order to stage a comeback in what promises to be an intriguing final day. **BRIEF SCORES:** IN MUMBAI: Mumbai 395. Andhra 184; 72 overs (Prasanth Kumar 73, Uppara Girinath 34 not out; Shams Mulani 6/65, Dhawal Kulkarni 3/38) and following on 164/5; 51 overs (Shaik Rasheed 52 batting, Hanuma Vihari 46; Mulani 3/63). Andhra trail by 47 runs. **IN KANPUR: Uttar Pradesh** 60 and 178/4; 52 overs (Samarth Singh 54, Nitish Rana 47 batting, Aryan Juyal 42; Mohammed Kaif 3/72). Bengal 188. UP lead by 50 runs. **IN PATNA: Bihar** 108 and 144/3; 40 overs (Sharman Nigrodh 60, Babul Kumar 52). Chhattisgarh 329/2 declared; 83 overs (Rishabh Tiwari 138, Ashutosh Singh 134 not out). Bihar trail by 77 runs. **IN GUWAHATI: Kerala** 419; Assam 231/7; 62 overs (Riyan Parag 116; Basil Thampi 4/69). Assam trail by 188 runs.