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Pakistan implodes with Balochistan explosion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ New Delhi/Karachi

Five people, including three Frontier Corps (FC) personnel, were killed and 30 others injured in a terrorist attack by suspected Baloch militants in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province on Sunday. Four terrorists, including the suicide bomber, were killed in counter-operations in Noshki district of the province.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack, and said 90 military personnel had been killed. Earlier last week, in the same province, the BLA militants ambushed the Jaffar Express, carrying 440 passengers, near the mountainous terrain of Gudalar and Piru Kunri in Bolan district on March 11. The militants killed 21 passengers and four paramilitary soldiers before the Army eliminated all 33 terrorists on March 12.

As regards the latest incident, a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a convoy of Paramilitary Frontier Corp (FC) on the Nushki-Dalbandin National Highway; chief of the local police station Zafarullah Sumalani said adding that the initial investigations suggested that it was a suicide attack.

Sumalani also said evidence from the site of the attack suggested that a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into the FC convoy.

Soon after the attack, security forces launched an immediate counter-operation, killing four terrorists, including the suicide bomber, newspaper Express Tribune said.

It also quoted security sources to say that the attack was carried out by militants from the banned BLA.

Claiming that a total of 90 Pakistani military personnel were killed in the attack on their convoy on Sunday, a statement by the BLA said, "The Majeed Brigade, the Fidayee unit of the Baloch Liberation Army, targeted a convoy of the occupying Pakistani military a few hours ago in a VBIED Fidayee attack near Rakhshan Mill on the RCD Highway in Noshki. The convoy consisted of eight buses, one of which was completely destroyed in the explosion."

It added, "Immediately after the attack, the Fateh Squad of the BLA advanced and completely surrounded another bus, systematically eliminating all military personnel on board, bringing the total number of enemy casualties to 90."

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti all condemned the attack and expressed sorrow over the loss of lives.

> Immediately after the attack, the Fateh Squad advanced and surrounded another bus, systematically eliminating all military personnel on board
>
> — BALOCH LIBERATION ARMY

Sharif, in a statement, said, "Such cowardly acts cannot shake our resolve against terrorism." He also directed that the injured be provided with the best possible treatment. "Those who play with the peace of Balochistan would be brought to a tragic end," Bugti said in an official release.

Minister Naqvi condemned the blast and extended condolences to the victims' families and wished a swift recovery for the injured.

Denouncing the attack as an act of brutality, Naqvi emphasised that anti-state elements are attempting to destabilise the country and asserted that such cowardly acts would not shake the nation's resolve, according to a statement shared by the Ministry of Interior on social media.

Balochistan government spokesperson Shahid Rind also condemned the attack "targeting innocents."

Balochistan has witnessed an uptick in terrorist attacks over the past year. Bordering Iran and Afghanistan, Balochistan is home to a long-running violent insurgency.

Baloch insurgent groups frequently carry out attacks targeting security personnel, government projects and the $60 Billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in this oil and mineral-rich province.

In the past, the railway tracks in this area have been attacked by Baloch militants using rockets or remote-controlled bombs, and the BLA claimed responsibility for most of the attacks.

PM bemoans lack of will and wisdom in Islamabad

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that every attempt to foster peace with Pakistan was met with hostility and betrayal and hoped that wisdom would prevail on the leadership in Islamabad to improve bilateral ties. In a podcast with Lex Fridman released on Sunday, Modi recalled that he had specially invited his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif for his swearing-in ceremony in 2014 with the hope that the two countries could turn a new leaf.

"Yet, every noble attempt at fostering peace was met with hostility and betrayal. We sincerely hope that wisdom prevails upon them and they choose the path of peace," the Prime Minister said in his over three-hour interaction. Modi said he believed that even the people of Pakistan long for peace because they also must be tired of living in strife, unrest and relentless terror where even innocent children are killed and countless lives are destroyed. The Prime Minister said his first attempt at improving bilateral relations was a gesture of goodwill.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a podcast with Lex Fridman in New Delhi PTI

"It was a diplomatic gesture unlike any in decades. The very people who once questioned my approach to foreign policy were taken aback when they learned I had invited all SAARC heads of state and our then President Pranab Mukherjee beautifully captured that historic gesture in his memoir," Narendra Modi said.

"This was a testament to how clear and confident India's foreign policy had become. This sent a clear message to the world about India's commitment to peace and harmony, but we didn't get the desired outcome," he said.

To a question on how he now view the 2002 post Godhra riots and its aftermaths, Modi said the discourse was an attempt to create a false narrative and his political opponents in power at the Centre wanted him to be punished but the courts cleared his name. Modi said there were many involved in misinformation to target him. "If you review the data from before 2002, you will see that Gujarat faced frequent riots. Curfews were constantly being imposed somewhere. Communal violence would erupt over trivial issues such as kite flying contests or even bicycle collisions," Modi said.

Modi said the riots in Gujarat in 1969 lasted for more than six months and that was an era when he was nowhere on the political horizon. He said the Godhra train burning incident took place barely three days after he was elected as a legislator of the Gujarat Assembly.

Continued on >> P2

Lashkar Commander killed in Jhelum by security agencies

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A top Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander, wanted by Indian security agencies for several deadly terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, was killed by gunmen in an attack in Pakistan, officials said on Sunday.

Zia-ur-Rehman alias Nadeem alias Abu Qatal alias Qatal Sindhi was gunned down in the Jhelum area of Punjab on Saturday evening. His security guard was also killed, the officials said, quoting information received from the neighbouring country.

Abu Qatal was under heavy protection from the Pakistan Army, with both Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists and plainclothes Pakistani military personnel assigned to his security. The attack took place near Zeenat Hotel, close to Dina Punjab University in the Jhelum area. As Zia-ur-Rehman's convoy was passing through, unknown gunmen launched a barrage of gunfire.

Considered the most trusted handler of LeT founder and 26/11 Mumbai terror attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed, they said 43-year-old Rehman was the main handler of the terror outfit involved in the planning of various attacks in the Poonch-Rajouri region of Jammu and Kashmir.

The officials said Rehman had infiltrated the Jammu region in early 2000 and exfiltrated in 2005. He had a wide network of Over Ground Workers in Poonch and Rajouri through his old contacts, they said.

In the various investigations conducted by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) into the gruesome terror incidents in Poonch-Rajouri region, his involvement was found, officials said.

He was charge-sheeted by the NIA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and other sections for an attack on Hindu minorities in Dhangri Village of Rajouri District in 2023, they added.

Terrorists struck Dhangri village on January 1, 2023, and targeted villagers before fleeing the scene, leaving behind an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). While five people were killed in the firing by terrorists, two others died in the IED explosion the next morning.

Continued on >> P2

Trump orders air strikes on Houthis, 31 dead

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ West Palm Beach (US)

The Houthi rebel-run Health Ministry says the death toll from US strikes on Yemen has climbed to 31, including women and children.

Anees al-Asbahi, a spokesperson for the ministry, said on Sunday that another 101 people were wounded in the overnight strikes. President Donald Trump said he ordered a series of airstrikes on the Houthi-held areas in Yemen on Saturday, promising to use "overwhelming lethal force" until Iranian-backed Houthi rebels cease their attacks on shipping along a vital maritime corridor. The Houthis said at least 18 civilians were killed.

"Our brave Warfighters are right now carrying out aerial attacks on the terrorists' bases, leaders, and missile defences to protect American shipping, air, and naval assets, and to restore Navigational Freedom," Trump said. "No terrorist force will stop US commercial and naval vessels from freely sailing the Waterways of the World." He also warned Iran to stop supporting the rebel group, promising to hold the country "fully accountable" for the actions of its proxy. It comes two weeks after the US leader sent a letter to Iranian leaders offering a path to restarting bilateral talks between the countries on Iran's advancing nuclear programme.

Continued on >> P2

Ram Mandir generates ₹400 crore as tax in five years

BISWAJEET BANERJEE/KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA ■ Ayodhya

The construction of the Ram temple has not only transformed the religious landscape of Ayodhya but has also had a profound impact on the city's economy. Over the past five years, the influx of tourists and devotees has surged tenfold, creating new employment opportunities and significantly boosting local businesses. This rise in religious tourism has also resulted in substantial revenue generation for the government.

Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust General Secretary Champat Rai disclosed that between February 5, 2020 and February 5, 2025, the Ram Mandir Trust contributed approximately ₹400 Crore in taxes to the government. Of this, ₹270 Crore was collected as GST, while the remaining ₹130 Crore came from other tax sources.

In the past year alone, over 16 Crore devotees and tourists visited Ayodhya, with five Crore devotees attending the court of Ramlala following the Pran Pratishtha ceremony.

During an inspection by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) about six months ago, the trust requested an economic analysis of Ayodhya.

From February 5, 2020 to February 28, 2025, the government received ₹396.26 Crore in taxes from the trust, rounded off to ₹400 Crore. The Maha Kumbh 2025 further contributed to the surge, with four to four-and-a-half lakh people arriving in Ayodhya daily for darshan. Around 1.5 Crore people visited Ramlala during this period.

Moreover, ten trains from the Kumbh Mela reached Ayodhya daily, carrying around 4,000 passengers per train. This brought approximately 40,000 to 50,000 visitors to Ayodhya each day.

> In the past year, over 16 Crore devotees and tourists visited Ayodhya. The 944 kg of silver donated by devotees have been converted into 20 kg silver bricks and stored securely in bank lockers

The significant revenue generation from the Ram Mandir has not only enhanced the spiritual experience for devotees but has also strengthened infrastructure development and contributed to the government's revenue collection.

The Uttar Pradesh Rajkiya Nirman Nigam has been awarded a ₹200 crore contract for the construction of the Ram Katha Museum, the trust office, and a rest house.

Continued on >> P2

SpaceX crew arrives for NASA astronauts

Sunita Williams and other astronauts greeting each other after the SpaceX capsule docked with the International Space Station PTI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Cape Canaveral

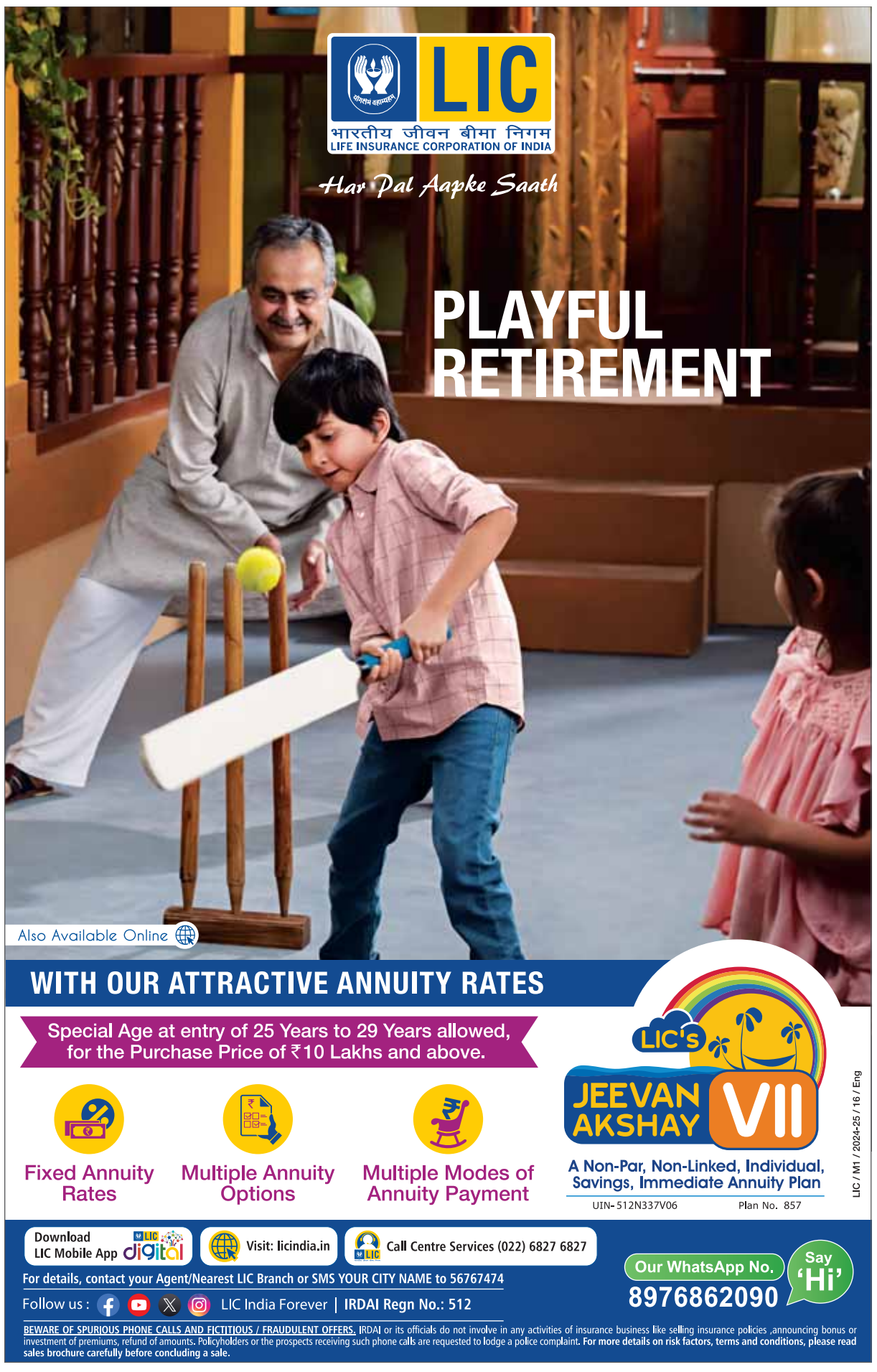
Just over a day after blasting off, a SpaceX crew capsule arrived at the International Space Station on Sunday, delivering the replacements for NASA's two stuck astronauts.

The four newcomers representing the US, Japan and Russia will spend the next few days learning the station's ins and outs from Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams. Then the two will strap into their own SpaceX capsule later this week, one that has been up there since last year, to close out an unexpected extended mission that began last June.

Wilmore and Williams expected to be gone just a week when they launched on Boeing's first astronaut flight. They hit the nine-month mark earlier this month.

The Boeing Starliner capsule encountered so many problems that NASA insisted it come back empty, leaving its test pilots behind to wait for a SpaceX lift.

Wilmore swung open the space station's hatch and then rang the ship's bell as the new arrivals floated in one by one and were greeted with hugs and handshakes. "It was a wonderful day. Great to see our friends arrive," Williams told Mission Control. Weather permitting, the SpaceX capsule carrying Wilmore, Williams and two other astronauts will undock from the space station no earlier than Wednesday and splash down off Florida's coast.



Not Mrityu Kumbh but Mrityunjay Kumbh: CM Yogi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Gorakhpur

Hitting out at his West Bengal counterpart Mamata Banerjee over her remarks criticising the arrangements during the Maha Kumbh, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said Sunday those who had said the "Maha Kumbh of Prayagraj was a 'Mrityu Kumbh' were unable to control disturbance during Holi"

Addressing the oath-taking ceremony of newly-elected office bearers of the Gorakhpur Journalists Press Club in Gorakhpur, he said that "for the first time, people came to the Maha Kumbh from Tamil Nadu".

"People also came from Kerala. The population of Uttar Pradesh is 25 crores, and the Holi concluded peacefully.

But, in West Bengal, a number of disturbances took place during Holi," he said. "And, people who were unable to control the disturbance ('upadrav') during Holi, had said that the Maha Kumbh of Prayagraj was a 'Mrityu Kumbh'.

But, we said that this is not 'Mrityu' (death), it is 'Mrityunjay' (victory over death) It is a Maha Kumbh."

He said that everyday of the Maha Kumbh witnessed 50,000 to 1 lakh people of West Bengal taking part in the 45-day event.

Days after the January 29 stampeded at the Sangam Nose, where the official toll was 30, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had said the Maha Kumbh has turned into a "Mrityu Kumbh" due to such incidents of stampede, claiming the actual toll was suppressed by authorities.

"They have hidden hundreds of bodies to bring down the toll. The Maha Kumbh has turned into a 'Mrityu Kumbh' under the BJP rule," Banerjee said during an address in the West Bengali assembly on February 18.

Two days later, Banerjee said she respects all religions and cultures.

"Who said I do not respect my religion? Remember religion belongs to an individual but festivals are for all. In our country, we have several states and each has different languages, education, way of living, cultures and beliefs. But we respect all cultures and that is why unity in diversity is our philosophy and ideology," she had said, while addressing a programme in Newtown near Kolkata.

CM Yogi Adityanath applies 'gulaal' to cows on the occasion of Holi in Gorakhpur PTI

Racket smuggling stolen mobile phones to Nepal busted in Delhi, one arrested

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Delhi Police has arrested a man involved in a racket that smuggles stolen mobile phones to Nepal, an officer said on Sunday.

The accused, identified as Nadeem (45), a resident of Banbasa in Uttarakhand, was apprehended from ISBT Anand Vihar while attempting to board a bus to Nepal on Saturday, he said. A total of 32 high-end mobile phones, including Apple iPhones and Samsung Galaxy models, were recovered from his possession. According to police officer, Nadeem was working as a courier for the stolen phones. He transported the devices, acquired from snatchers in Delhi, to Nepal.

"A Nepalese bus conductor, Narender Bhat, facilitated Nadeem's operations. Narendar paid him Rs 200 per phone, along with travel expenses. Over the last several months, Nadeem has made multiple trips to Delhi to collect stolen phones from Karol Bagh and nearby areas before smuggling them across the border," said the officer.

A fresh, feeble Western Disturbance is likely to affect the Western Himalayan region from March 19.

Keylong recorded the lowest night temperature of minus 2 degrees Celsius while Dhaulakuan in Sirmaur district was hottest during the day recording a high of 28.3 degree Celsius.

Snow in higher reaches, rain in several parts of HP

Snow-covered ranges after fresh snowfall at Auli in Chamoli district PTI

PRESS TRUT OF INDIA ■ Shimla

Isolated places in higher reaches of Himachal Pradesh received snowfall while moderate rains lashed parts of the state, the Shimla Meteorological office said on Sunday.

The wet spell will continue in the hill state till Friday, barring Tuesday, it said.

Some areas in the state have witnessed snowfall since Saturday evening.

Kothi in Manali received 27.5 cm of snow, Shimla's Khadrala 5 cm, Kinnaur's Kalpa 4 cm and Sangla 3.4 cm while Lahaul and Spiti's Gondla recorded 15 cm of snowfall, Kukumseri 4.8 cm and Keylong 4 cm.

Thunderstorms were observed in Shimla, Jubbarhatti, Kangra, Sundernagar and Kullu's Bhuntar. Shallow fog reduced visibility to about 800 metres in parts of Mandi district, the weather office said.

Several areas in Himachal Pradesh were lashed by rains. Manali recorded 66 mm of rains followed by Bhuntar 46.6 mm, Kasol 44 mm, Seobagh 42 mm, Gohar 36mm, Kothi 34 mm, Baggi 32.1 mm, Katula 30.3 mm, Pandoh and Rohru 30 mm each and Bijahi 26.2 mm.

Ghagas in Bilaspur received 25.6 mm rain, Sundernagar 26.2 mm, Pooh 22.8 mm, Jubbal 21.4 mm, Mandi 18.4 mm, Jogindernagar 18 mm Shillaro 17 mm, Slapper 16.5 mm, Baldwara 16.0 mm and Kufri 15 mm. The Meteorological office has predicted light to moderate rain at few places on Sunday and light rain at isolated places of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur.

Higher reaches of Chamba, Kangra and Kullu will also witness a wet spell from March 17 to 21, barring March 18 when the weather would remain dry, it said.

Ram Mandir generates ₹400 crore as tax in five years

Continued from >> P1 The 944 kilograms (kg) of silver donated by devotees have been converted into 20 kg silver bricks and stored securely in bank lockers. An ERP system has been implemented for error-free financial management after two years of rigorous effort.

Champat Rai also shared the progress of the Ram Mandir construction, stating that 96 percent of the work has been completed. The Ram Lalla temple is expected to be ready by June, while the construction of the Parikrama will continue until October. The Shabri Nishad and Rishi Mandirs are scheduled for completion by May, while the Sheshavatar Mandir will be finished by August. The idol of Saint Tulsidas has already been installed, and its unveiling will take place on Ram Navami, which falls on April 17 this year. By April 30, all the deities' idols will be installed in their respective temples within the Ram Mandir complex.

Seven policemen injured in spate of mob attacks in Bihar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bhagalpur/Madhubani/Nawada

Seven policemen were injured in three incidents of mob attacks in Bihar, officials said on Sunday. These attacks happened in Bhagalpur, Madhubani and Nawada districts on Saturday, and were similar in nature police visiting an area on receiving information about a fight, and getting assaulted by a mob, they said.

Two more such incidents happened in the state in the last five days. While an assistant sub-inspector (ASI) died on Saturday after he was assaulted in Munger district, another policeman of the same rank died in Araria district on Wednesday.

In Bhagalpur's Kahalgaon sub-division, five policemen were injured after being attacked by a mob in the Antichak police station area, officials said.

Among those injured were a sub-inspector, three constables and a chowkidar, they said.

"The incident took place when a police team went to investigate a brawl between two boys, which had escalated. One of the boys hurled stones at the team. Following that, locals also started hurling stones. A police vehicle was damaged," Station House Officer of Antichak Ashutosh Kumar said. "Additional forces were immediately sent to the area and the situation was brought under control," he said.

The injured policemen were taken to the nearest government hospital for treatment, he said.

"The prime accused, however, managed to flee. Local magistrate Sanjeev Choudhary was also present there when the incident happened. Based on the statement given by Choudhary, a case was registered against 24 people," Kumar said.

Five people have been arrested so far, he added.

In Madhubani district, a police team was attacked when it went to the Parsahi area on receiving information about a fight between two groups of people, officials said.

"Initially, a group of people indulged in a scuffle with the policemen. Amid the melee, a policeman was hit by a blunt object on his head. He was immediately rushed to the nearest hospital. He is out of danger at present. Some more policemen sustained minor injuries," a police officer said. A case was registered against 30 people, they said.

Another policeman was injured in a similar attack when he along with some of his colleagues went to Shekodaura in Nawada's Kawakol police station area on getting information about an incident of stone pelting between two groups of people. "A case has been registered and a search is underway for the accused," the district police said in a statement.

Hours before these three incidents, ASI Santosh Kumar Singh succumbed to the injuries that he received after being attacked by a mob in Nandlalpur village in the Mufassil police station area of Munger district.

He was part of a police team that went to the village on Friday after receiving information about a scuffle. He was attacked with a sharp weapon on his head by some men who were drunk. He died at a hospital in Patna on Saturday.

On Wednesday night, when police went to Lakshmipur area in Araria's Phulkaha to make an arrest, a scuffle broke out between the personnel and some locals who were resisting them. Amid this, someone pushed ASI Rajeev Ranjan, who collapsed and later died.

Following the spate of attacks, DGP Vinay Kumar said all police stations have been directed to assess the situation before conducting raids.

Instructions have been issued to always visit spots of investigation with adequate numbers of personnel, he said.

"I must also say that people should maintain the sanctity of the Emergency Response Support System (ERSS) Dial 112. Once a call is received on the number, no time is wasted to reach the spot. The team of Dial 112 comprises not more than three to four personnel. People should not misbehave with them," Kumar told PTI on Saturday.

Attacking the Nitish Kumar government, RJD leader Tejaswhi Yadav claimed the law and order situation has collapsed in the state.

"After the murder of two ASIs in Araria and Munger, several policemen were injured following attacks on them in Bhagalpur, Nawada and other parts of the state... But the chief minister has not even said two words on the martyrdom and courage of these policemen... People of Bihar are suffering due to the current insensitive government," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

"The CM also holds the Home portfolio, but he is least bothered about the collapsed law and order situation of the state. His government has been in power for 20 years. During Nitish Kumar's tenure, a large number of policemen and officers have been murdered," he claimed.

Exposed in Delhi, Kejriwal claiming to be honest in Punjab: Sachdeva

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Sunday said that it is gradually becoming clear that after being rejected in Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal is now afraid of being sidelined from Punjab's politics as well.

That is why he is trying to re-establish himself there.

The Delhi BJP President said that it is unfortunate that after Kejriwal's so-called honesty was exposed in Delhi, he is now repeating the same story in Punjab.

Sachdeva stated that despite being embroiled in numerous scams in Delhi, Kejriwal kept beating the drum of his honesty until the last moment of the February 5, 2025 elections.

However, after 10 years, the people of Delhi, having understood his corruption, ensured his defeat.

Trump orders air strikes on Houthis, 31 dead

Continued from >> P1 Trump has said he will not allow it to become operational. The Houthis reported explosions in their territory Saturday evening, in the capital of Sanaa and the northern province of Saada, the rebels' stronghold on the border with Saudi Arabia, with more airstrikes reported in those areas early Sunday.

Images online showed plumes of black smoke over the area of the Sanaa airport complex, which includes a sprawling military facility. The Houthis also reported airstrikes early Sunday on the provinces of Hodeida, Bayda, and Marib.

At least 18 people were killed, including 13 in Sanaa and five in Saada, according to the Houthi-run health ministry. At least 24 others were wounded, including nine in Sanaa and 15 in Saada, it said.

A US official said this was the beginning of air strikes on Houthi targets that are expected to continue. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the press.

Nasruddin Amer, deputy head of the Houthi media office, said the airstrikes won't deter them and they would retaliate against the US.

"Sanaa will remain Gaza's shield and support and will not abandon it no matter the challenges," he added on social media.

Another spokesman, Mohamed Abdulsalam, on X, called Trump's claims that the Houthis threaten international shipping routes "false and misleading".

The airstrikes come a few days after the Houthis said they would resume attacks on Israeli vessels sailing off Yemen in response to Israel's latest blockade on Gaza. They described the warning as affecting the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Arabian Sea.

There have been no Houthi attacks reported since then.

Earlier this month, Israel halted all aid coming into Gaza and warned of "additional consequences" for Hamas if their fragile ceasefire in the war isn't extended as negotiations continue over starting a second phase.

The Houthis had targeted over 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two vessels and killing four sailors, during their campaign targeting military and civilian ships between the start of the war between Israel and Hamas in late 2023 and January of this year, when this ceasefire in Gaza took effect.

The attacks raised the Houthis' profile as they faced economic and other problems at home amid Yemen's decade-long stalemated war that's torn apart the Arab world's poorest nation.

The Houthi media office said the US strikes hit a residential neighbourhood in Sanaa's northern district of Shouab. Residents said at least four airstrikes rocked the Eastern Geraf neighbourhood there, terrifying women and children.

"The explosions were very strong," said Abdallah al-Alffi. "It was like an earthquake."

The Eastern Geraf is home to Houthi-held military facilities and a headquarters for the rebels' political bureau, located in a densely populated area.

The Houthis reported fresh strikes on the southwestern Dhamar province late Saturday. They said the strikes hit the outskirts of the provincial capital, also named Dhamar, and the district of Abs.

The United States, Israel and Britain have previously hit Houthi-held areas in Yemen. Israel's military declined to comment.

However, Saturday's operation was conducted solely by the US, according to a US official. It was the first strike on the Yemen-based Houthis under the second Trump administration.

Such broad-based missile strikes against the Houthis were carried out multiple times by the Biden administration in response to frequent attacks by the Houthis against commercial and military vessels in the region.

The USS Harry S Truman carrier strike group, which includes the carrier, three Navy destroyers and one cruiser, are in the Red Sea and were part of Saturday's mission. The USS Georgia cruise missile submarine has also been operating in the region.

Trump announced the strikes as he spent the day at his Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Florida.

"These relentless assaults have cost the US and World Economy many BILLIONS of Dollars while, at the same time, putting innocent lives at risk," Trump said.

Lashkar Commander killed in Jhelum by security agencies

Continued from >> P1 As many as 14 villagers were injured in the twin attacks. The officials said Rehman is also the mastermind of the Reasi Bus Attack which was orchestrated on the day of the oath-taking ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government on June 9, 2024. In this attack, terrorists killed nine pilgrims and injured 41 by firing on a bus carrying pilgrims to Shiv Khori temple.

He was also involved in the Bhatta-Durian terror incident on April 20, 2023, in which five Army personnel were killed. He is also accused in the Kandi attack on officers and personnel of the 9 Para Special Forces on May 5, 2023. The attack claimed the lives of five personnel, officials said.

They said Rehman, along with Saifullah Sajid Jutt, another Pakistan-based terrorist, was the main handler of terrorists of the outfit operating in the Poonch-Rajouri belt of Jammu and Kashmir.

Born on February 4, 1982, in the Sanghar district of Sindh province of Pakistan, Rehman was in-charge of LeT's Khuiratta dets (small group of terrorists ready to infiltrate) located in Kotli district of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

He was the main link between the LeT cadres and its operators in PoK and Sindh Province of Pakistan, the officials said, adding he was the most trusted handler of Saeed.

On several occasions, the LeT founder tasked Rehman with ensuring control over the dets in PoK, the officials said. Rehman's associates — Riyaz Ahmed alias Abu Qasim and Hanzla Adnan — were killed in separate incidents in Pakistan in September and December 2023.

Over a dozen terrorist commanders of different outfits, including the LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hizbul Mujahideen, have been eliminated by unidentified gunmen in Pakistan and PoK over the last three years.

PM bemoans lack of will and wisdom in Islamabad

Continued from >> P1 "It was a tragedy of unimaginable magnitude, people were burned alive. You can imagine, against the backdrop of incidents like the Kandahar hijacking, the attack on parliament, or even 9/11, and then to have so many people killed and burned alive, you can imagine how tense and volatile the situation was," he said, adding that "nothing should happen, we also wish so. Everyone would wish there should be peace."

Modi, who was the Gujarat Chief Minister at that time, said the big incident at Godhra was the sparking point and violence took place. He said that a fake narrative was spread regarding the Godhra case. "But, the courts investigated the matter thoroughly and found us completely innocent. Those who were truly responsible have faced justice from the courts," he said, adding that his political opponents were in power at the Centre when the violence took place and they were keen to see him punished over the allegations.

"At that time, our political opponents were in power, and naturally they wanted all allegations against us to stick. They wanted to see us punished. Despite their relentless efforts, the judiciary analysed the situation meticulously twice and ultimately found us completely innocent," Modi said. Hesaid the most important thing was that Gujarat, which used to witness violence almost every year, has not seen riots since 2002. "Over the past 22 years, there hasn't been a single major riot in Gujarat. "Gujarat remains completely peaceful," Modi said. He reiterated how "some people" tried to malign his image after the riots but ultimately justice prevailed and the courts cleared his name.

To a question on his relation with RSS, Modi said he feels blessed to have learnt life's values from a "sacred" organisation like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, lauding it for working since 1925 to inspire people to dedicate themselves to the country. He said the RSS gave him the purpose of his life, noting that its different affiliates are involved in numerous fields and with every section of society. A former RSS 'pracharak' himself before moving over to the BJP, Modi said he was drawn to the Hindutva organisation at a young age as he was touched deeply by patriotic songs sung at its 'shakha' near his home in Gujarat.

Whatever one does, one should work for the country, he said, speaking of the RSS' philosophy. "I have not heard if there is any voluntary organisation as big as the RSS." The RSS teaches that the country is supreme and serving people is like serving God, he said. "I feel blessed to have got values from such a sacred organisation," he said. The Hindutva organisation has devoted itself to its cause with the dedication of a seeker while keeping away from attention in its 100 years of journey, said Modi.

RSS inspires people to work for the society, he said, citing extensive work of organisations like Seva Bharti, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh. Another RSS affiliate Vidya Bharti runs nearly 25,000 schools and crores of students have received education at an affordable cost, he said.

The Prime Minister said while leftist unions ask workers to unite so that they can then deal with others, the RSS-inspired labour union asks its workers to unite the world. During his over three-hour interaction, Modi also mentioned Ramakrishna Mission, its founder Swami Vivekananda and its monk Swami Atmasthananda as among those who shaped his spiritual values.

To question on his relationship with US President Donald Trump, Modi said he shares a bond of mutual trust with Trump and they connect well because they believe in putting their respective national interests above everything else. Modi hailed Trump as a man of courage, who took his own decisions, was unwaveringly dedicated to the United States and the same spirit was on display when he was shot at by a gunman on the election campaign trail last year.

The Prime Minister said President Trump appeared far more prepared than before in his second term. "He has a clear roadmap in his mind with well-defined steps, each one designed to lead him toward his goals," said Modi. "I truly believe he has put together a strong, capable group. And with such a strong team, I feel they are fully capable of implementing President Trump's vision," Modi said. He recalled his meetings with Vice President J D Vance, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, Vivek Ramaswamy and Elon Musk.

Modi said he saw the same resilient and determined Trump when he was shot at during the US election campaign. "Even after being shot, he remained unwaveringly dedicated to America. His life was for his nation. This showed his America First spirit, just as I believe in nation first '? India first," the prime minister said. "I stand for India first and that's why we connect so well. These are the things that truly resonate," Modi said.

Rekha inspects drains, orders desilting before monsoon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Desilting and dredging efforts of the Barapulla, Sunehri and Kushak drains that had been started in mission mode by Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena, last monsoons after severe flooding and related complaints by residents, received major fillip today as Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Sunday inspected major drains across the city and directed officials to ensure their desilting before the monsoon.

The Chief Minister was accompanied by Lieutenant Governor Saxena, Public Works Department Minister Parvesh Verma, and other officials. She inspected Barapulla Drain at Outer Ring Road, Barapulla Bridge, Sunheri Pul Drain near Clover Leaf Flyover, Barapulla Drain and Outfall of Sunheri Pul Drain at Lala Lajpat Rai Marg, Kushak Drain near Lala Lajpat Rai Bridge and covered portions of Sunheri Pul Drain at DTC Bus Depot and Dayal Singh College.

Addressing long-standing issues of waterlogging, pollution, and inefficient drainage, the government has rolled out a comprehensive action plan focused on regular cleaning, desilting, and redevelopment of major drains, while also integrating Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) to prevent untreated waste from entering the Yamuna. Advanced technology, inter-agency coordination, and strict monitoring are being leveraged to make this mission a success.

On this occasion, Saxena, stated that to completely eliminate the problem of waterlogging in Delhi, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Public Works Department, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, and all other relevant departments have been directed to clean and improve the drainage system in a time-bound manner before the monsoon. Any delay or negligence will not be tolerated.

"Our priority is to ensure that there is no waterlogging on Delhi's roads this year, allowing citizens to commute without any disruptions. All agencies have been instructed to work in coordination and ensure regular monitoring," he added.

After reviewing the situation, the chief minister blamed the previous AAP government for neglecting the drains, which she said led to waterlogging and sewage overflow on the roads.

"These drains were not taken seriously by the previous governments. When big drains like these are not cleaned, it is obvious that sewage will flow out," the chief minister said. She stressed the urgent need for action to prevent flooding during the rainy season.

Gupta visited the Sunheri, Barapulla and Kushak drains and noted a lack of coordination among the agencies responsible for their maintenance.

She further explained that until the major drains of the city are thoroughly cleaned and their water-carrying capacity is increased, the issue of waterlogging will persist.

The government conducted inspections of six major drains, including the Barapula and Sunehri Pul drains. During the inspection, it was observed that lack of coordination among agencies was a key reason for waterlogging issues.

To address this challenge, the Delhi government has assigned the Flood and Irrigation Department a special responsibility to ensure timely desilting of drains. A dedicated budget has been allocated, and a strict timeline has been set to complete this work efficiently.

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena, CM Rekha Gupta and Cabinet Minister Parvesh Verma during inspection of ongoing work at Sunheri Pul, Kushak and Barapulla drain in New Delhi on Sunday RANJAN DIMRI

Gupta said it is important to prepare in advance. "These drains should be cleaned before monsoon, so that they can carry water during the rains. Nothing happens in a single day," she said.

The Chief Minister assured that all major drains in Delhi will be cleaned before the onset of the monsoon to prevent waterlogging during heavy rains. Additionally, a large-scale mission has been launched to clean smaller drains along roads, with the government making this a priority task.

The Chief Minister emphasised that this will not be just a paperwork formality-feedback will be collected from residents and legislators to verify whether the desilting work has been properly executed. She said that all this cannot be done by sitting in AC rooms and doing press conferences.

The Chief Minister said that Delhi was settled in an unplanned manner and that there is no proper outlet for drains in the city. She also assured that the government will ensure that the people of Delhi do not face any problem due to waterlogging and their aim is the welfare of the people.

She also outlined her government's strategy for ensuring efficient governance. "All ministers have been given missions, and all our MLAs are designated with public works," she said.

The Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said she has ensured that necessary steps will be taken to prevent waterlogging, an issue that affected the city during past monsoons.

PWD Minister Parvesh Sahib Singh reaffirmed the government's commitment, stating that the BJP government in Delhi is taking concrete steps to modernize Delhi's drainage system and restore the Yamuna to its pristine state.

"Transforming Delhi into a cleaner, flood-free city with a rejuvenated Yamuna is our top priority. A clean Yamuna, an efficient drainage network, and a pollution-free city are no longer just aspirations they are becoming reality," he added.

The condition of Delhi's drainage system was a key issue in the recent Assembly elections, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ended the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) decade-long rule. The BJP won 48 out of 70 seats, reducing AAP to just 22, marking a significant political shift in the national capital.

BJP eyes victory in Delhi MCD Mayor elections in April

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

After ending its 27-year-long political exile in Delhi, the BJP is now eyeing on capturing the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) from the AAP in the upcoming mayoral elections in April this year.

The BJP has advantage this time as they have 131 votes in their favour while the majority mark is 132 as per the current equations. The ruling AAP has only 122 votes and the party can reach 131 only if Congress extends support. If successful, this would establish a "triple engine government" in the national capital, with the BJP controlling the central government, the state government, and the civic body.

However, the MCD's tenure has been tumultuous, with both AAP and BJP aggressively poaching rival councillors. Given that the anti-defection law does not apply to MCD councillors, frequent defections have significantly altered the composition of the House.

Ahead of the Assembly polls last month, the BJP upped its representation to 120, while AAP's tally had dropped to 121. Following the Assembly polls, these numbers dropped to 118 for the AAP and 112 for the BJP, with three AAP councillors and eight BJP councillors becoming MLAs. Following the defections of another four AAP councillors to the BJP, the AAP now has 114 councillors to the BJP's 116. Out of the five mayoral elections in a term, the first is reserved for a woman, and the third is designated for a Scheduled Caste (SC) candidate. The mayoral elections are scheduled to take place in April, unless they are delayed due to the 12 vacant seats, which were left unoccupied after their representatives were elected as MLAs in the recently concluded Assembly elections. There are total 250 wards in the MCD out of which 12 are vacant. This includes 11 members (seven BJP and four AAP) who were elected as MLAs in the February 2025 Assembly elections and one member who became an MP in June 2024.

Since election for these vacant seats will he held only after mayoral polls, the current strength of the councillors will be 238. Additionally, 14 MLA from Delhi Assembly will be nominated from Speaker's side who will have voting rights and 10 MPs of Delhi (7 Lok Sabha and 3 Rajya Sabha) will also participate in mayor election. Total strength will be 262 and it required one more than half of the total votes polled for the election to elect the mayor. While the votes of the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha MPs remain unchanged, the shift in power within the Delhi Assembly has altered the voting dynamics in favour of BJP.

Government launches large scale campaign to combat air pollution in national capital

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Delhi government has launched a large-scale campaign to control air pollution and improve the air quality in the capital with focus on reducing dust, managing traffic congestion and enhancing public transport. The Delhi government has also identified 250 points prone to regular traffic jams and directed the concerned agencies to find out solutions.

According to Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said, this campaign includes making the entire Ring Road dust-free, planting trees along roads and dividers, and reducing traffic congestion. After reviewing various solutions, the government has directed all concerned departments to take immediate and effective action. The steps are all aimed at making the national capital cleaner and healthier, according to a statement. Gupta emphasised that making Delhi pollution-free was the city government's top priority. "We are committed to implementing scientific and sustainable solutions to improve air quality and ensure a clean, green and healthy future for Delhi's residents." As part of the plan, the entire Ring Road will undergo regular mechanised sweeping and water sprinkling to prevent dust buildup.

Gupta also ordered strict enforcement of dust control measures at construction sites. To further tackle pollution, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, public works department, Delhi Development Authority and other road-owning agencies have been instructed to plant trees along roads and central verges for creating green belts. The government has also instructed an intensive PUC check to ensure vehicles meet pollution norms.

Addressing the traffic congestion issue a significant contributor to pollution in the city the government has identified 250 major road points prone to regular jams,

> This campaign includes making the entire Ring Road dust-free, planting trees along roads and dividers, and reducing traffic congestion
> — REKHA GUPTA, CHIEF MINISTER

according to the statement. Government departments, alongside the Traffic Police, will investigate the causes and implement improved systems at key intersections to ensure smoother vehicle movement.

According to a survey conducted by the traffic police last year, among the 117 congestion points, the highest number is found in the northern range of Delhi, specifically in the districts of Rohini, North-West, and Outer-North. In Rohini alone, there are 13 spots, including two near the Rohini West metro station, one near the Rithala metro station, and another near a school. These areas experience heavy traffic due to vehicular volume, pedestrian movement, and illegal parking.

In the southern range, there are 22 congestion points, with 12 in south Delhi and 10 in the South-East district. Areas like Yusuf Sarai Market, Andheria Mod, Chirag Dilli flyover, Savitri flyover, and Tara Apartment-Alaknanda Road are frequently congested. Construction activities near the Saket metro station, Sarai Kale Khan, MB Road from Pul Prah Ladpur traffic light to Lal Kuan intersection, and Khadar Puliya also contribute to traffic jams. In a push to strengthen public transport in the city, Gupta also announced the rollout of the Delhi Transport Corporation's route rationalisation plan. The initiative aims to improve bus frequency, reduce travel time and encourage people to shift from private vehicles to public transport. A control room is also being set up for real-time bus monitoring.

"The Delhi government is fully committed to this mission. By developing green corridors, controlling dust, managing traffic better and enhancing public transport, we aim to make Delhi a clean, pollution-free city," the statement quoted Gupta as saying.

Begumpul Namo Bharat station in Meerut nears completion: NCRTC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Begumpul Namo Bharat station in Uttar Pradesh's Meerut, set to be the city's only underground station offering both Namo Bharat and Metro services, is in the final phase of construction.

According to a statement from the National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC), track laying for both the up and down lines has been completed, and finishing work is progressing rapidly.

"Begumpul will be Meerut's only underground station offering both Namo Bharat and Metro services to commuters," the statement said. The station features two tracks with an advanced signaling system to ensure seamless operation of both transit services, it added.

The project marks a pioneering development in India, where two different transit systems will share the same infrastructure, NCRTC said in the statement.

The station will also have four dedicated entry and exit points serving different parts of the city, to enhance commuter accessibility.

Zoo authorities delays Azimganj Sarai's restoration

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Efforts to restore the Mughal-era monument Azimganj Sarai, located inside the National Zoological Park in Delhi, have been delayed due to restrictions imposed by the zoo authorities.

According to an official from the Art, Culture and Language Department (ACL), despite repeated attempts to secure permission for essential repairs, the conservation work remains stalled, leaving the monument in a worsening state.

The zoo authorities have denied the claim, saying they have not received any such proposal. "We have not got any new request or proposal," said an official of the zoo. Declared a protected monument by the Department of Archaeology, Azimganj Sarai dates back to the Mughal period. It was originally built as a large enclosure with stone walls, arched compartments, and octagonal bastions, the ACL official said. He emphasised that years of neglect and lack of upkeep have caused significant structural damage to Azimganj Sarai. Parts of the monument have collapsed, and unchecked vegetation growth has further weakened its remains.

"In 2013, the government entrusted the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) with the conservation of the monument, and the first phase saw the successful restoration of the southwest and northeast sections. However, work on the remaining portions has been stalled for years due to the restrictions imposed by the zoo authorities," the ACL official said. "When the proposal for Phase II was submitted for approval, the then deputy chief minister directed officials to reassess the project," he said.

According to the official, a site inspection confirmed the urgent need for intervention, as the southeast and northwest sections were in a state of disrepair.A technical committee later reviewed the project and requested the Aga Khan Trust for Culture to submit a revised estimate, he said. During an inspection in 2023, officials noted that restrictions imposed by the zoo had made it difficult to clear vegetation from the site, preventing a proper assessment of the required work.

The ACL official said that nearly 80 trees growing over and around the monument has further complicated the process. "Without clearing this, it is impossible to determine the full scope of restoration, including fortifying the walls and stabilising the remaining structure," he said.

The lack of access has also impacted the maintenance of the sections restored in the first phase, he said.

Delhi Assembly to hold two-day orientation program for newly elected members

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Delhi Legislative Assembly will organise a two-day Orientation Program for its newly elected members starting from March 18. The program will be inaugurated by Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, and aims to equip legislators with knowledge of parliamentary procedures, code of conduct, and best governance practices. The event will be held in the Assembly Hall.

The inaugural session will witness the presence of several distinguished dignitaries, including Delhi Assembly Speaker Vijender Gupta, Deputy Speaker Mohan Singh Bisht, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, and Leader of Opposition Atishi. The session will commence with the National Anthem, ceremonial lamp lighting, and a welcome address by the Speaker, followed by addresses from the Chief Minister and the Leader of Opposition, highlighting the significance of legislative competence.

Emphasising the program's importance, Delhi Assembly Speaker Vijender Gupta stated, "This orientation program is a vital initiative to strengthen the legislative capabilities of our MLAs. It will help them understand parliamentary procedures, legislative drafting, and the significance of meaningful debates, enabling them to participate effectively in the Assembly."

The Parliamentary Research and Training Institute for Democracies (PRIDE) will conduct the training sessions, offering insights into parliamentary rules and legislative practices. PRIDE, under the guidance of the Lok Sabha Speaker, organizes training sessions for MPs, legislative staff, and other stakeholders. The two-day program will include expert-led lectures, panel discussions, and interactive sessions focused on good governance, policy-making, and legislative frameworks. These sessions will take place in the Conference Hall near the Chief Minister's office, covering key topics such as constitutional responsibilities, ethical governance, and law-making procedures. The program will conclude on March 19, 2025.

Metro to be used for cargo services, DMRC signs MoU with Blue Dart

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Delhi Metro will soon use its trains to transport cargo during non-peak hours. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) and Blue Dart, a leading express logistics service provider in India, have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for urban logistics service, according to the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC).

Anuj Dayal, DMRC Principal Executive Director, Corporate Communications, in a statement on Sunday said the service is part of a strategic collaboration between DMRC and Blue Dart.

"This innovative initiative, the first of its kind in the entire South Asia Pacific region, reinforces both DMRC and Blue Dart's commitment to environmental stewardship and fostering more sustainable logistics solutions," Dayal said.

Under this collaboration, Blue Dart will transport cargo via metro trains during non-peak hours, utilising available capacity to ensure faster and more reliable movement of time-sensitive shipments. This innovative solution reduces dependency on road transport, thereby easing congestion and curbing vehicular emissions.

At the same time, the DMRC will optimise its resources while reinforcing its commitment to environmentally friendly transport solutions.

Globally, metro systems are increasingly exploring ways to utilise spare capacity to generate revenue while promoting sustainability. For instance, Madrid Metro has initiated a pilot project in collaboration with logistic partners to transport parcels via metro trains, thereby reducing road traffic and pollution.

The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation is actively engaging with Madrid Metro to exchange insights and best practices in urban freight transportation.

By integrating first-mile and last-mile connectivity through metro-enabled logistics solutions and Micro Parcel Hubs, the project enhances supply chain efficiency while alleviating road congestion and urban pollution.

Under this initiative, the DMRC is leveraging its stations and tracks to establish a sustainable urban freight network across Delhi-NCR.

The collaboration highlights the importance of overcoming operational challenges and adopting global best practices to strengthen urban cargo movement. The exchange of expertise and benchmarking will be the key to scaling the project's impact. It also aims to boost operational efficiency, shorten delivery timelines, and support urban freight systems with lower carbon emissions by repurposing metro premises into logistics hubs.

As part of its long-term vision, the DMRC plans to expand this cargo network to additional metro stations, setting new benchmarks in sustainable and seamless freight transportation.

With this pioneering model, the DMRC and Blue Dart will be redefining urban logistics by integrating sustainability with innovation, ensuring a greener and more efficient future for cargo movement in metropolitan areas.

High Court to hear ED's plea challenging Kejriwal's bail

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Delhi High Court (HC) is slated to hear on Monday a plea by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) against the bail granted to former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal in the excise policy-linked money laundering case.

The petition is listed for hearing before Justice Ravinder Dudeja.

The High Court had earlier adjourned the hearing after a request for the same was made by the counsel for the investigating agency.

Kejriwal's counsel had submitted that his bail be maintained as all other accused had already been granted bail in the money laundering case.

₹88 Crore drugs seized in northeast

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 Crore was seized and four members of an international drug cartel were arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Sunday.

Shah also said the drug haul is a testament to the stellar performance of the bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom approach towards investigation and asserted that the Narendra Modi government's crackdown on drugs will continue. "No mercy for drug cartels. Accelerating the Modi govt's march to build a drug-free Bharat, a massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 Crore is seized, and 4 members of the international drug cartel are arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones," he wrote in a social media post.

The home minister expressed his "heartfelt" congratulations to the Narcotics Control Bureau(NCB)for the success. Acting on a tip-off, the officers of NCB Imphal zone carried out an operation on March 13.

The NCB team intercepted a truck near the Lilong area and recovered 102.39 kg of Methamphetamine tablets from a toolbox in the rear section of the truck, according to an official statement. Two occupants of the truck were arrested, it added. Without delay, the team immediately conducted a follow-up operation and apprehended the suspected receiver of the contraband from the Lilong area, the statement said. A four-wheeler, used for drug trafficking, was also seized and the man was subsequently arrested, it said

Consignment of Methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 crore seized by Narcotics Control Bureau PTI

The suspected source of the contraband is Moreh town in Manipur. Further investigation is underway to nab others involved in the case, the statement said.

In another operation on the same day, officers of the NCB-Guwahati zone intercepted an SUV on the Assam-Mizoram border near Silchar and seized 7.48 kg of Methamphetamine Tablets concealed inside the spare tyre of the vehicle, it said. The occupant of the vehicle was arrested, according to the statement.

The source of the contraband was Moreh and the suspected destination was Karimganj in Assam, the statement said. Further investigation to nab others involved in the case is going on, it said.

Meanwhile, the Narcotics Control Bureau would be taking over the probe from the Mizoram State Excise Department into the seizure of about 46 kg of crystal meth from Brigade Bawngkawn in Aizawl on March 6. In this case, four people involved in the drug syndicate have already been arrested.

The investigation is being taken over by NCB to probe the international and inter-state linkages of the drug trafficking network, the statement said.

The Northeastern region has emerged as one of the most vulnerable areas of India from the point of view of drug trafficking owing to its geographic location, it said. Identifying this vulnerability, the Ministry of Home Affairs augmented the strength of the Narcotics Control Bureau in 2023 to further strengthen the "war against drugs" in the region.

The Narcotics Control Bureau, through its five zonal units and a regional headquarters in the Northeast, has been continuously working against drug traffickers operating in the region, particularly those involved in the trafficking of synthetic drugs such as Methamphetamine tablets, popularly known as YABA, it said.

These tablets pose a threat to not only the young population of the region, but also to the security of the nation as a whole, the statement said.

Seven year jail term for using forged passports

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Anyone found using a forged passport or visa for entering, staying or exiting India will be punished with a jail term of up to seven years and a fine to the extent of ₹10 Lakh if the new immigration bill is approved by Parliament.

The legislation, piloted by the Union Home Ministry, also provides for mandatory reporting of information about foreigners by hotels, universities, other educational institutions, hospitals and nursing homes to enable tracking of overstaying foreigners.

All international airlines and ships will also be required to submit at a port or place in India the passenger and crew manifest, the advance information of passengers and crew on board of such aircraft, vessel or other mode of transport.

"Whoever knowingly uses or supplies a forged or fraudulently obtained passport or other travel document or visa for entering into India or staying in or exiting from India, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than two years, but may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine which shall not be less than one lakh rupees, but may extend to ten lakh rupees," according to the bill introduced in Lok Sabha on March 11.

It also says that any foreigner who enters into any area in India without a valid passport or other travel document, including visa required for such entry in contravention of provisions of the law or of any rule or order given in pursuance thereof, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years with a fine which may extend to five lakh rupees or with both.

The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions, or refuse admission to all or a "specified class" of foreigners. The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 is a comprehensive legislation to regulate all matters relating to foreigners and immigration.

Matters relating to foreigners and immigration are presently administered through four Acts-the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000.

All these laws are now proposed to be repealed.

While the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 consists of several existing provisions in the four Acts proposed to be repealed after simplification and harmonisation, it also has certain new provisions to meet the present-day requirements.

This legislation is in line with the government's policy of simplification of laws, ease of doing business and minimising compliance burden.

It seeks to balance the requirements of national security and related issues of immigration of foreigners with the need to promote economic growth and tourism in the country. However, it is not connected with any matters related with grant of citizenship.

"The Bill will help in tackling the problem of illegal migration into India and facilitate tracking of movement of overstaying foreigners within India.

The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions

It will also help in reducing the compliance burden," an officer said.

While Indian visas of all categories to foreigners can be granted in physical or sticker form by Indian missions or posts located abroad, the Bureau of Immigration (BoI) grants electronic visas under seven categories to people from 167 countries.

Besides, visa-on-arrival is granted by immigration authorities at six designated airports to nationals of three countries - Japan, South Korea and the UAE (only for such UAE nationals who had earlier obtained e-visa or regular or paper visa for India).

The stay and movement of foreigners in India and their exit are regulated by the BoI and state governments and Union Territory administrations.

According to existing laws, all foreigners on long-term (more than 180 days) student, medical, research, employment, missionary and project visas are required to register with the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or the Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) concerned, having jurisdiction over the place where the foreigner intends to stay, within 14 days of arrival. Pakistani nationals are required to register within 24 hours of their arrival.

Other laws that cover foreigners in India include the Citizenship Act, 1955, which regulates acquisition and termination of Indian citizenship as well as acquisition and registration of foreigners as Overseas Citizens of India (OCI).

Jairam Ramesh slams government over air pollution report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Congress on Sunday criticised the government after a world air quality report ranked India as the world's fifth most polluted country, and demanded that all "anti-people" environmental law amendments over the past 10 years be rolled back.

In a statement, Congress General Secretary (Communications) Jairam Ramesh said the Swiss air quality technology company IQAIR has just released its 2024 World Air Quality Report which finds that India is the world's fifth most polluted country.

The Rajya Sabha MP said in his statement that according to the report, India's population-weighted average concentration of fine particulate matter is 50.6 µg/m3 which is 10 times the WHO's annual guideline level of 5 µg/m3.

He claimed that according to the report, 74 of the world's 100 most polluted cities are in India, and national capital New Delhi is the second-most polluted city in the world after Brynihat in Meghalaya.

PIONEER PHOTO

"Among the lesser-known tragedies of the non-biological PM's reign is the rapidly deteriorating air quality nationally and the inattentiveness and policy chaos that has characterised the government's response to it," he said in his statement.

Ramesh cited several studies in the past about air pollution-linked fatalities in the country. In early July 2024, he said, a study published in the prestigious Lancet journal showed that 7.2 percent of all deaths in India are associated with air pollution which comes about 34,000 deaths each year in just 10 cities.

The former environment minister said that around the same time, a study by the Centre for Science and Environment revealed that the government's interventions in pollution control are poorly designed, with the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) largely focused on mitigating road dust rather than industrial, vehicular, and biomass emissions -- the source of PM 2.5 that are the leading causes of mortality.

To make matters worse, in the last five years, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has left more than 75 percent of the Environment Protection Charge (EPC) and Environmental Compensation (EC) funds unspent, he claimed, adding that in total ₹665.75 Crores have been left unutilised.

India to host regional counter terror conclave

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

India will host a two-day conclave of 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping and some of its dialogue partners beginning Wednesday that will focus on firming up a comprehensive strategy to combat the threat of terrorism and extremism. The conclave of the experts working group (EWG) on counter-terrorism under the framework of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) mechanism is also expected to deliberate on the evolving regional security scenario, officials said.

The ADMM-Plus is a platform comprising 10-nation ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and its eight dialogue partners India, China, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the US. The EWG conclave to be held in Delhi will be co-chaired by India and Malaysia.

The defence ministry said here on Sundah delegations from 10 ASEAN members and the bloc's eight dialogue partners along with Timor Leste and ASEAN Secretariat will be participating in the meeting. "India will co-chair the EWG on counter terrorism for the first time," the ministry said. Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh will deliver the keynote address at the opening ceremony of the conclave on Wednesday. It will be the first meeting for activities planned for EWG on counter-terrorism for the ongoing cycle from 2024-2027. "Discussions will focus on evolving a robust and comprehensive strategy designed to tackle the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism," the ministry said.

"The meeting aims to share the on-ground experience of the defence forces of ASEAN and its dialogue partners.

It will lay the foundation for the activities/exercises/seminars/workshop planned for the cycle 2024-2027," it added in a statement.

The ADMM-Plus has been focusing on seven areas of practical cooperation such as countering terrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action and cyber security. EWGs have been established to facilitate cooperation in these areas.

The EWGs are each co-chaired by one ASEAN member state and one dialogue partner following a three-year cycle.

The task of the co-chairs is to lay down the objectives, policy guidelines and directions for the EWG.

Parliamentry committee recommends consolidation of all Ayush drugs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A parliamentary committee has recommended the consolidation of all AYUSH drug related standard-setting processes under a single independent drug controller in alignment with the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, and its associated rules.

To achieve this, the ministry should establish a streamlined and inclusive mechanism that actively involves stakeholders in the development of pharmacopoeial standards, ensuring greater efficiency and uniformity, said the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare in a report presented in the Rajya Sabha this week.

Additionally, the Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine and Homoeopathy (PCIM and H) and Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS) may come together to coordinate and collaborate in this initiative, the committee emphasised in its 165th report on "Demands for Grants 2025-26 (Demand No. 4) of Ministry of Ayush". This will enhance the scientific testing and evaluation of a larger number of ASU&H (Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, and Homoeopathy) drug samples to ensure safety, efficacy, and quality, strengthening the foundation of research and standardisation in the sector.

The committee flagged that the state-wise reach of Arogya Fair/Ayurveda Parv is less compared to the size of India with its 28 states and eight Union Territories.

It recommended that the reach should cover 50 per cent of Indian states in the coming year and eventually all of the country in the near future to propagate the Ayush System for the prevention and treatment of common ailments.

It recommended that the ministry leave no stone unturned in efficiently and effectively implementing the IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) Scheme, thus generating awareness amongst the common masses, especially in rural, urban slum, hilly and tribal areas. The committee also took note of the financial and physical performance made under the international cooperation scheme with respect to budgetary allocation and set objectives. It recommended that going forward communication should be made with first-world countries like the UK and the US for promoting AYUSH among the Indian diaspora as well as their native citizens.

Underlining the potential in promoting AYUSH-related healthcare travel to India, the panel said that the Ministry has to chalk out strategies to vigorously promote the AYUSH system of medicine in international markets, and support investment and exchange of exports to boost Ayush products in the global market.

"The Ayush Ministry should keep the consideration that Ayush Vision@2047 has a target to enhance the contribution of the Ayush Sector up to 7.7 per cent of GDP," it said. It suggested that the strategic course of action viz.

Road shows abroad, CMEs for the foreign audience, familiarisation trips, strategic marketing communication through a professional agency, collateral audio-video content and social media marketing can further be taken up by the Ministry for the achievement of the Mission Objective of the scheme. The committee also recommended that the ministry give equitable impetus to all sub-components of the capacity building and continuing medical education (CME) in Ayush under the Ayurgyan Scheme.

Underlining the vital role of research and innovation in Ayush Drugs for prioritised diseases, the committee recommended collecting data on safety, standardisation and quality control for Ayush products and practices in order to develop evidence-based support on the efficacy of Ayush drugs and therapies.

In order to inculcate scientific aptitude and expertise relating to Ayush systems, the ministry should chalk out a strategy for the development of potential human resources and their management in the Ayush system, the report said.

The committee reiterated its recommendation that the outcome of the research scheme should successfully demonstrate the effectiveness of Ayush systems and the novel technology successfully developed out of such research and development must harness the potential of Ayush in the interest of public health delivery. The committee expressed happiness and welcomed the laying of the foundation of a WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre (GTMC) at Jamnagar, Gujarat and said that increasing collaboration with WHO in the Ayush Sector is significant in the global acceptance of traditional medicine and Ayush healthcare.

Such events will certainly help with the rapid growth of traditional medicine.

PM to inaugurate Raisina Dialogue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Monday here will inaugurate the three-day Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geo-economics that will be joined by delegates from 125 countries.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha are among those attending the 10th edition of the conclave.

In a first, a delegation, including a senior security official, from Taiwan is also attending the deliberations reflecting growing cooperation between the two sides in the last few years, people familiar with the matter said. The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)

It will witness the participation of representatives from about 125 countries including ministers, former heads of state and heads of government, military commanders, captains of industry, technology leaders, academics, journalists, scholars on strategic affairs and experts from leading think tanks, MEA said on Sunday.

Officials said foreign ministers from 20 countries are attending the deliberations. The visit to India of the Ukrainian foreign minister comes as the US is stepping up efforts towards a temporary ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia to end their conflict. New Zealand Prime Minister Luxon will deliver the keynote address at the inaugural session on Monday.

The theme of this edition of the Dialogue is "Kalachakra People, Peace and Planet". Over the course of three days, decision-makers and thought leaders of the world will engage each other across conversations in various formats, over six thematic pillars.

The pillars are: Politics Interrupted: Shifting Sands and Rising Tides, Resolving the Green Trilemma: Who, Where, and How, Digital Planet: Agents, Agencies and Absences, Militant Mercantilism: Trade, Supply Chains and the Exchange Rate Addiction, The Tiger's Tale: Rewriting Development with a New Plan and Investing in Peace: Drivers, Institutions, and Leadership.

In various sessions, the participants will discuss the state of the world and explore opportunities for cooperation on a wide range of contemporary matters.

New Zealand PM Christopher Luxon arrives on five-day visit to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Christopher Luxon on Sunday began a five-day visit to India with a focus on deepening the bilateral trade and economic ties.

On Monday, Luxon will hold wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and will attend the inaugural session of the Raisina Dialogue as the chief guest. Days ahead of the trip, the New Zealand prime minister Christopher Luxor said he will push for a comprehensive economic partnership with India and explore ways to strengthen bilateral security ties.

Luxon is visiting India from March 16 to 20 in his first trip to the country as the prime minister.

He is accompanied by one of the largest delegations a New Zealand prime minister has ever travelled with. The visiting leader was received at the Delhi airport by Union Minister Satya Pal Singh Baghel.

"What I'm looking for is just a much more comprehensive economic partnership and how we'd move that forward, Luxon said last week, adding, "I am determined that we are going to change the trading relationships with India big time."

The New Zealand Prime Minister also described India as an "important" power in the Indo-Pacific.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon being received by MoS SP Singh Baghel upon his arrival, New Delhi PTI

"India is an important power in the Indo-Pacific and I will discuss with Prime Minister Narendra Modi what more we can do together to maintain peace and prosperity in our region," Christopher Luxor said. Christopher Luxon said travelling with a senior business delegation will help increase trade and business opportunities and promote New Zealand as an investment destination. The delegation accompanying the New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxor comprise ministers, senior business leaders, a community delegation of prominent Kiwi Indians and several parliamentarians.

Christopher Luxor will also visit Mumbai from March 19 to 20 before returning to Wellington.

Sambhal's Masjid whitewash begins

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Sambhal

The whitewashing of the historic Jama Masjid in Sambhal district commenced on Sunday morning, following the directives of the High Court. A team of workers began painting the mosque's walls under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), with committee members also present on-site.

The individual assigned the task of whitewashing stated, "A total of eight people are working on the project. We aim to complete the work within a week. Our instructions are limited to whitewashing the mosque, as directed by the ASI."

The painting work had been delayed on Saturday when the ASI team arrived with the painter but had to return after waiting for some time. The ASI team subsequently instructed the Jama Masjid committee to commence the whitewashing on Sunday morning. The High Court, on March 12, ordered the painting and decoration of the mosque, with ASI overseeing the process. Following this directive, the ASI team inspected both the outer and inner premises of the mosque on March 13 and identified the areas requiring whitewashing.

Orders were issued to whitewash the outer part of the mosque.

Labourers whitewash the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid following an Allahabad High Court directive to the ASI to complete the task in Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh PTI

On Saturday, a three-member ASI team, accompanied by three painters, arrived at the mosque and began cleaning some areas. Local arrangements for additional painters and workers were also made.

In light of the court's directive, security has been tightened around the Shahi Jama Masjid area. The High Court formed a three-member committee, including officials from the ASI, a scientific expert, and a local administration representative, to monitor the process and ensure that the mosque's structure remains unharmed. Sambhal's Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP), Shrish Chandra, stated that heavy security arrangements have been implemented. "A sufficient police force has been deployed. Peace will be maintained, and surveillance is being conducted through CCTV and drones," he said.

In a related development, the ASI team removed posters of 74 miscreants that had been affixed to the back wall of the mosque. The posters were removed to facilitate the whitewashing process. The head of the Jama Masjid Committee had opposed the placement of these posters.

The head of the committee remarked that the mosque is traditionally painted and decorated every year during the month of Ramzan. However, this year, the committee had to seek permission, which was initially denied. This prompted the committee to file a petition in the High Court. During the initial hearing, the High Court sent an ASI team to assess the mosque's condition. The ASI report concluded that whitewashing was unnecessary, but cleaning could be done. After the committee presented its argument, the High Court ordered the whitewashing and decoration, with ASI monitoring the process.

The ongoing whitewashing is expected to be completed within a week, restoring the mosque's aesthetic appeal ahead of Ramzan.

TMC to employ I-PAC to identify 'ghost voters'

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee PIONEER PHOTO

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) is likely to employ the services Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) to identify the "ghost voters" ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections.

TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee has told a virtual party meeting attended by several thousand leaders and workers right from the panchayat level that the party was in the process of employing agents and setting up committees at various levels to ensure the identification of fake voters.

The agents would be taken from I-PAC sources said.

In the meeting held on Saturday, Banerjee, who is also the nephew of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee alleged that "BJP has conspired with the Election Commission of India (ECI), to disenfranchise a large number of Bengal's electorate" in which case a large number of voters from BJP ruled other States had been have been allotted the same electoral photo identity card (EPIC) numbers in Bengal "so as to manipulate the 2026 Assembly elections."

The junior Banerjee said that the party rank and file had been alerted of the "nefarious designs of the BJP" after meticulously examining the irregularities in the voters' lists.

"We have chalked out a comprehensive plan to democratically counteract this fraud," he said.

Though he would not directly speak about I-PAC insider sources said that the volunteers of the poll agency would be employed in large numbers and "would be assisted by the party workers down to the booth level to avoid any double cross."

The party would make house-to-house survey of the ID cards of new voters and will appoint booth level agents-1 (BLA-1) in every organisational district.

These agents would coordinate with the district election officers, electoral registration officers, and assistant electoral registration officers of the state administration. Similarly these agents would be assisted by another booth level agent, he said. The leadership was not keeping anything to chances.

"Even you cannot believe any professional agency to the full. Everyone and everything is saleable. So each agent will be shadowed by another agent," a TMC insider said interpreting the tactic of Banerjee who is also the party MP from Diamond Harbour winning the seat by more than 7.5 Lakh votes in 2024.

Earlier, the Chief Minister last month alleged that the BJP had been faking electoral rolls with "ghost voters" from outside states.

Referring to sample surveys done by the party workers from various areas she said how the BJP was registering 20,000-30,000 fake voters in every Assembly seat. "The ECI will conduct the polls by sending central forces. Voters who do not belong to Bengal will come and cast their votes. We will foil your plans. You employed these plans in Maharashtra, Haryana, Delhi but the leaders there failed to catch your trick. But here we will catch the fake voters. Khela Hobe (a new game will be played in Bengal) until we throw you out of the State," she had said.

The BJP leadership however countered the TMC's allegations saying the electoral rolls were prepared by State Government officials and the TMC being the largest party its own members and the government officials should explain the irregularities if there was one.

Dilip Ghosh frontrunner for Bengal BJP chief post

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

There is strong possibility of senior leader and former MP Dilip Ghosh once again getting nominated as Bengal's new BJP president in place of present State party chief Sukanto Majumdar who is presently a Union Minister, insiders say.

Though other names like those of State Opposition Leader Suvendu Adhikari, former MP Locket Chatterjee may also be considered for the post they may lose out to Ghosh, a former State BJP president under whom the saffron party got stupendous success in 2019 parliamentary elections winning 18 out of 42 seats, sources say.

The process of nominating a new State president is likely to be completed before March 27 when Union Home Minister Amit Shah will visit Bengal, sources said.

Adhikari who has of late been pursuing a strong "Sanatani Hinutva" line and has been a strong contender for the top job may however, lose out to Ghosh considering the fact that a large section of the saffron outfit including the "Adi BJP", the ones who were with the party from the beginning and had not come from the Trinamool Congress unlike Adhikari who joined ahead of 2021 Assembly elections - are against him being nominated for the top State job.

"Unlike the TMC our party follows a strong discipline. It is for the national leadership to take a call on the new State party chief. It may retain Sukanto Majumdar or may appoint a new one like Dilip Da (Ghosh) or anyone else, even Locket di (Chatterjee). But things also will depend on what the newly elected district party presidents think," a party leader and a president of one of the district committees said apparently 'forgetting' to mention the name of Adhikari in his list of probables.

When asked about his chances of getting nominated as the State party chief, the BJP leader reminded how "Suvendu da himself has insisted that a person cannot enjoy two posts at one point in time." Adhikari had earlier said that, "like a Chief Minister does not become a State party president an Opposition leader too does not become one. I have plenty of engagements and responsibilities."

On Ghosh's chances of getting nominated once again inside sources said that "the district BJP presidents have a role to play in the nomination of a new State president and as 17 out of 25 newly appointed district presidents are close to him it is likely that they support his cause," adding "the BJP has 42 organisational districts in the State out of which 25 have already received their new presidents. Now there is no impediment to electing a new State president because according to rules more than half of the total number of district presidents have to be elected before you go to appoint a new State party chief."

The saffron leader's statement came at a time when senior BJP leaders were engaged in a core committee meeting on Sunday. When asked to comment on a possible new State chief Sukanto Majumdar before entering the meeting said, "change is a process of development and it continues to take place in a democratic party like ours. So anyone can be a party president, but the party will continue to work as a united group to bring about a change in the next year's Assembly elections."

The minders of saffron politics in Bengal said that the national BJP leadership's decision on the issue could make or break Adhikari's future considering the fact he has hardly enjoyed a smooth chemistry with Ghosh.

In fact the latter held him responsible for shifting his constituency from Midnapore, where he was a sitting MP and which he was confident of winning - to Burdwan Durgapur in 2024 general elections. Though he would not speak in public in private Ghosh held the anti lobby led by Adhikari for his loss.

That Ghosh had a big hand in the selection of new district presidents and that he has a bright chance to be at the helm once again could be a matter of concern for Adhikari insiders said ascribing his hardline Hindutva stance in the State politics to his "sense of insecurity" at the possibility of ascendancy of Ghosh again.

Shah slams Congress for mocking Bodo accord

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kokrajhar

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said the Congress made fun when the BJP-led government signed the Bodo accord, but it brought peace and development in the region.

Addressing the 57th annual conference of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in Assam's Kokrajhar, Shah said the Centre gave ₹1,500 Crore for the development of Bodoland, which has a population of 35 Lakh.

He said 82 per cent of clauses of the Bodo accord has been implemented and the remaining will be done in the next two years. Shah also exhorted the Bodo youths to start preparing for the 2036 Olympics, which is proposed to be held in Ahmedabad.

Bodo youths now carry the tricolour in their hands instead of guns and this has been possible due to the signing of the peace accord in January 2020, Shah said.

AAP convenor Arvind Kejriwal, his wife Sunita and Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann during a visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar PTI

Kejriwal backs Punjab CM

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Chandigarh

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday asserted that Bhagwant Mann would complete his five-year term as the Chief Minister of Punjab, trashing Opposition parties' claims that he would be removed from the post. However, Kejriwal also said drugs and corruption were the biggest problems in Punjab where the AAP under Mann has been in power for the last three years.

Kejriwal and Mann offered prayers at the Golden Temple on the completion of three years of the party's government in the state on Sunday.

Kejriwal, the former Delhi Chief Minister, arrived in Amritsar on Saturday after completing a 10-day Vipassana meditation session in Punjab's Hoshiarpur.

During the Golden Temple visit,

ejriwal was accompanied by his wife Sunita Kejriwal, and AAP leaders, including minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal.

The AAP formed the government in Punjab in 2022 after winning 92 of the total 117 Assembly seats. Speaking to reporters in Amritsar, Kejriwal said, "On March 16, 2022, Mann saab took over as the Punjab Chief Minister. Today we came here to seek the blessings of Guru Maharaj (Almighty). In three years, they (gurus) guided us and gave us the strength to continue serving people."

"Today, the biggest problems in Punjab are drugs and corruption. Three Crore people of Punjab have come together to wage war against drugs and corruption. This is a battle for nyay (justice)," he said.

Kejriwal said they prayed to God to give them strength so that they could continue to serve the people of Punjab.

"We are here to serve the people and not for power," he said. Asked about AAP's political rivals claiming that the Punjab Chief Minister would be changed soon, the party chief asserted, "Mann saab will complete five years, you do not need to worry. He will complete the next five years as well." Last month, Punjab Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa had claimed that 32 AAP MLAs were in touch with him, ready to switch sides. He had also alleged that Mann was in touch with the BJP.

"When Kejriwal decides to remove him (Mann), he will pack his bags and join them (BJP)," Bajwa had alleged.

Meanwhile, Mann told reporters on Sunday that the AAP had pledged to make Punjab a 'rangla Punjab' (prosperous) and his government was working towards fulfilling the promise.

He claimed that 52,000 government jobs have been given to the youth of Punjab.

Mann said a war has begun against drugs and corruption in the state.

Earlier, the chief minister claimed that the work that has been done in the last three years had not been carried out even in the last 70 years.

"On 16 March 2022 in Khatkar Kalan, we had pledged to make Punjab a 'Rangla Punjab' (prosperous) again. We are working with good intentions and full honesty to fulfil the promise," he said.

Rift delays UP BJP's district presidents appointments

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Lucknow

After two and a half months of rigorous effort, the Uttar Pradesh Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced district presidents for 69 districts on Sunday. However in 29 districts, the election was postponed at the last moment due to internal opposition, factionalism, and pressure from party leaders.

Notably, the district president could not be appointed in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's parliamentary constituency, Varanasi, state election in-charge Mahendra Nath Pandey's constituency, Chandauli, and Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Maurya's home district, Kaushambi.

Out of the 69 district presidents, 44 are new faces, while 25 have been given a second chance. At least 29 of them belong to dalit and backward castes. However, only five women made it to the list.

The BJP worked tirelessly from Lucknow to Delhi to prepare this team, keeping in mind the upcoming Panchayat elections in 2026 and the Assembly elections in 2027.

The BJP has divided Uttar Pradesh into 98 organisational districts. The election process began in the first week of January, but due to internal opposition and pressure, state election in-charge Mahendra Nath Pandey, state president Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary, and general secretary organisation Dharampal Singh couldn't declare the district presidents in all districts simultaneously.

This situation is unprecedented for the BJP, where the state and national leadership failed to reach a consensus on district president appointments. According to sources, as soon as the appointments were announced, aspirants flocked to Delhi to lodge complaints against those involved in the election process and rival candidates. The central leadership intervened and ordered the postponement of elections in several districts due to the lack of consensus and unresolved caste equations. In Ambedkar Nagar, there is significant opposition to District President Trayambak Tiwari, while in Barabanki, District President Arvind Maurya faces resistance. In Ayodhya, former MP Lallu Singh opposed the reappointment of the current district president and pushed for his close aide to be appointed.

In a surprising move, regional presidents were kept out of the district president appointment process.

Even on the day of the announcement, regional presidents were not informed about the status of district presidents in their respective areas.

Out of 15 organisational districts in the Awadh region, district presidents were announced for only nine. Appointments were deferred in Ayodhya district, Ayodhya Mahanagar, Ambedkar Nagar, Barabanki, Lakhimpur Kheri, and Sitapur. New district presidents were appointed in four districts, while incumbents retained their positions in five. The new faces include Vijay Maurya in Lucknow, Ravi Mishra in Balrampur, Anurag Awasthi in Unnao, and Mishrilal Verma in Shravasti.

Incumbents who retained their positions include Anand Dwivedi in Lucknow Mahanagar, Buddhi Lal Pasi in Rae Bareli, Ajit Singh Chauhan in Hardoi, Brajesh Pandey in Bahraich, and Amar Kishore Kashyap in Gonda.

Mixed results in eastern UP

Elections were postponed in Siddharthnagar and Deoria. In seven out of ten districts, new faces were appointed, while three incumbents retained their posts. The new appointees include Janardan Tiwari in Gorakhpur district, Devesh Srivastava in Gorakhpur Mahanagar, Dhruv Kumar Singh in Azamgarh, Vinod Rajbhar in Lalganj, Neetu Singh in Sant Kabir Nagar, Ramashray Maurya in Mau, and Sanjay Mishra in Ballia. Among them, Azamgarh district president Dhruv Kumar Singh had previously held the position from 2019 to September 2023. Meanwhile, Ashok alias Sanjay Pandey in Maharajganj, Durgesh Rai in Kushinagar, and Vivekanand Mishra in Basti retained their posts.

The BJP's struggle to maintain unity and balance caste equations highlights the internal challenges the party faces ahead of crucial elections in the state.

Naxal-hit village gets mobile tower

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Raipur

A remote village in the Naxal-hit Sukma district of Chhattisgarh has got its first mobile phone tower, officials said on Sunday.

The tower, installed inside a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp in Tekulagudem village on Holi, will provide cellular connectivity to a clutch of villages in the interior region, they said.

Tekulagudem was of the first locations where the paramilitary force established a forward operating base in January last year, to undertake specific anti-Maoist operations and help the local administration usher in development works in the area as part of the Union government's declaration to eliminate Left Wing Extremism (LWE) from the country by March 2026.

"A BSNL mobile tower was erected on March 13 inside the Tekulagudem forward operating base of the CRPF, which is operated by its 150th battalion. This is the first such facility in this area," a senior official in the security establishment said.

"The village is located in the interiors of the Naxal violence-hit Sukma district, and shares a border with Bijapur, another LWE-affected village in the Bastar region," he said. According to another official, the mobile tower will provide the much-needed cellular connectivity to villagers and security personnel in Tekulagudem and the adjoining hamlets of Timmapuram, Jonaguda and Puvarti.

Puvarti is the village of Hidma, the wanted Maoist commander of the first battalion of People's Liberation Guerrilla Army. According to CRPF officials, the BSNL officials travelled from Sukma headquarters and as far as state capital Raipur (around 600 kilometres) for the ceremony to operationalise the mobile tower switches. The villagers were also invited to the event, which came on the eve of Holi. A special camp was held on March 13 to distribute SIM cards to the locals and activate them, they said. The CRPF had established the Tekulagudem forward operating base, under the Jagargunda police station limits, in January 2024. On the day the base was set up, the force lost three of its personnel and 15 personnel were injured, when a fierce encounter broke out as Naxals attacked from multiple directions.

Constable sent to police lines for dancing on Holi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Patna

A constable posted as security guard of RJD leader Tej Pratap Yadav was on Sunday sent to the police lines for dancing in uniform during Holi celebrations at the residence of the former Bihar minister.

According to a statement issued by the office of the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) on Sunday, "Constable, Deepak Kumar, posted as security guard of MLA, Tej Pratap, is sent to police lines for dancing in uniform with immediate effect. Kumar will be replaced by another constable in the security of the MLA."

The RJD leader found himself at the centre of a fresh controversy on Saturday when the constable (posted as his security guard) was commanded by the former Bihar minister to perform a 'thumka' (pelvic thrust) or face suspension.

The lurid drama unfolded at the official residence of Yadav, the elder son of former chief ministers Lalu Prasad and Rabri Devi, during Holi celebrations.

One of the videos of his revelry that has gone viral on social media show the Hasanpur MLA regally seated on a sofa, placed on a make-shift stage, holding a mike.

"Ae sipahi, ae Deepak, abhi ek gana bajaenge jis par tumko thumka lagana padega. Nahin lagaoge to tumko suspend kar denge. Bura na maano Holi hai (Hey constable Deepak. We are going to play a song on which you shall perform a pelvic thrust. If you do not, you will suspended. Don't mind. It's Holi)," Yadav can be heard as saying before a musical band bursts into a devotional song that is often played during the festival of colours in Bihar.The policeman did not seem much offended as although he did not break into a 'thumka', he nonetheless obliged Yadav by hopping a few times with his right arm raised high in the air. In a style reminiscent of the 'kapda faad Holi' that his father used to organise, Yadav tore off clothes of supporters who poured in to greet him, and also drove a scooter on the streets adjoining his house.

Editor's TAKE

From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Mauritius bolsters Indo-Mauritus relations

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent state visit to Mauritius marks a significant step in reinforcing the historical and strategic ties between the two nations. Received with warmth and enthusiasm by Mauritius' Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, Modi's visit underscores the mutual commitment to fostering greater collaboration in infrastructure, defence, economic growth, and cultural exchange.

India and Mauritius share a long-standing relationship shaped by cultural ties, historical connections, and strategic interests. As a major partner in India's Indian Ocean Region (IOR) strategy, Mauritius plays a crucial role in regional stability and economic cooperation. Modi's visit, which comes a decade after his previous trip in 2015, aligns with Mauritius's National Day celebrations, reinforcing the historical linkage between the two nations. Mauritius, strategically positioned in the southern Indian Ocean, has traditionally engaged with global powers such as France and the United States. However, with India's growing strategic influence in the region, New Delhi has solidified its role as Mauritius's leading development partner and security provider. While Mauritius has explored economic ties with China, India remains focused on ensuring fair competition for Indian businesses and safeguarding regional security. One of the most significant outcomes of Modi's visit was the announcement of an upgraded partnership framework—transitioning from the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). This enhanced partnership is designed to promote trade-driven development, capacity-building for sustainable growth, and mutual security, benefiting both India and Mauritius while strengthening regional collaboration.Mauritius holds a key position as the host of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat and is an active participant in the Indian Ocean Commission and the Colombo Security Conclave. This trilateral engagement ensures that Mauritius remains a pivotal player in the broader Indo-Pacific strategy, with India playing an instrumental role in its economic and strategic development. India views Mauritius as a vital neighbour with deep cultural and political ties. The recent political shift in Mauritius, with Ramgoolam's Alliance du Changement securing a decisive victory in the November 2024 general elections, necessitates a recalibration of bilateral relations. While former Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth's administration had closely aligned with India, Ramgoolam's previous tenure saw an exploration of other global partnerships, including closer economic engagements with China.Modi's swift visit following Ramgoolam's return to power signifies India's proactive approach in ensuring Mauritius remains within its strategic fold. This move is particularly important given the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean, where India has faced challenges from external players like China in neighboring Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Modi's visit brought a renewed focus on several key areas of cooperation. India continues to support Mauritius through grants and concessional loans for major infrastructure projects, including the Metro Express, smart cities, and digital connectivity initiatives. The security partnership includes maritime surveillance, joint naval exercises, and enhanced intelligence-sharing to combat transnational threats in the Indian Ocean. Both nations are working on deepening trade relations through preferential trade agreements, investment in fintech, and capacity-building in key economic sectors. Given the significant Indian diaspora in Mauritius, cultural and educational collaborations remain a key pillar in bilateral relations, ensuring the preservation and promotion of shared heritage. Modi's visit to Mauritius marks a renewed commitment to strengthening Indo-Mauritian ties.

Religious supremacism in Pakistan

What began as a tool of political manoeuvering during the Zia-ul-Haq era has now morphed into an all-encompassing force, blurring the lines between faith and performance

E Suresh

Muhammad Ali Jinnah may have wished, "Religion should not be allowed to come into Politics....Religion is merely a matter between man and God", but reality proves that religion is not just allowed, but insisted, in everything that Pakistan does. It is an unleashed genie that is eating the sovereign from within. Hindsight suggests that it was perhaps inevitable given the dalliance with inherent supremacism in the sovereign idea that is predicated on the "land of the pure" ie, Pakistan, the only country in the world to be created in the name of religion.

Pakistan watchers would confirm that religion got truly valorised, accelerated, and institutionalised in the national bloodstream during the Shariaisation years of the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship (1978-88). Geopolitics of the times (read, Afghanistan's Mujaheddin war) aided Zia's regressive project. The byproduct of creating the mujaheddin ecosystem in the '80s subsequently bred the phenomenon of the Taliban (and its various offshoots that were either India-facing or sectarian) and an accompanying air of religious extremism that was amplified by all subsequent governments. No so-called educated, moderate or well-travelled politicians could extricate themselves from the curse of invoking religion, and so even an Oxford-educated, married to a Westerner (Jewish to be precise), and self-proclaimed reformist, ultimately morphed to Taliban Khan ie, Imran Khan.

The surrender to religious fundamentalism was similarly mirrored in the realm of Pakistani cricket. Once the playing ground of flamboyant playboys who played hard and partied even harder with the likes of Imran Khan, Zaheer Abbas, Majid Khan, Asif Iqbal et al, took a U-turn to displayed piety and persona that reflected the nation's obsession with Puritanism. Beyond optics of sporting long beards, praying on pitches, and prefixing all public utterances with religious invocations like "bismillah rahman raheem" (In the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful) and contextualising all situations with "inshaallah" (God willing) etc, — the postured fervour became highly religiously charged.

By itself, faith is perfectly healthy and can give the impetus for living life to the fullest, but when it spills out from a personal or private matter to a public insistence, the danger of enforced religiosity or even proselytisation is usually consequential. It could then distract from the task, in this case, cricket, to be secondary to religious pandering.

Like many of Jinnah's suggestions towards secularism (even if often contradictory), the invisibility of the same is mirrored in the Pakistani dressing room. The '90s saw the sudden advent of Tableeghi Jamaat (Party of Preachers) stressing the 'authentic Islamic lifestyle' that went beyond a private/individual matter and became a matter of team routines. Pakistani cricket also got mired in embarrassing cricketing scandals (e.g., match-fixing), which led to the appropriation and demonstration of religiosity as a means of suggesting otherwise.

Soon accusations of only those who were visibly adherent getting selected saw the 'coincidental' conversion of Christian-born Yuusuf Youhana to a bearded and pious Mohammad Yousuf, diminishment of the career of Danish Kaneria (only Hindu in the squad) etc. But all this turn towards religiousity wasn't helping cricketing results (as was the case in the national narrative on all other fronts). In the moments of rare success against India, it took the Interior Minister to incredulously attribute the same as "Victory of Islam" and say that "Muslims all over the world are rejoicing"!

In another instance a fast bowler, Waqar Yunis said that the sight of watching Rizwan kneeling in namaz "in front of Hindus was very special to him" —basically, the entire country was caught in a vortex and normalisation of bigotry.

BHOPINDER SINGH

Not satisfied with their transformation, Pakistani players took to proselytising foreign players. Ahmed Shezad was infamously caught on camera during a Pak-Sri Lanka telling Tillakaratne Dilshan, "If you are a non-Muslim and you turn Muslim, no matter whatever you do in your life, straight to heaven" and after Dilshan's inaudible retort, Shezad responded, "Then be ready for hell fire" (incidentally, Pakistan lost the match).

Soon the depressing performances on the field led a slew of people like the then President Parvez Musharaf, PCB Chairman Shahryar Khan, coach Bob Woolmer to media manager PJ Mir all call out to curb overt religiosity as it was distracting and leading to poor performance.

Recently, Danish Kaneria who was also one of the many Pakistani players accused of spot-fixing reiterated the discrimination that he faced when he accused, "Shahid Afridi was the main person telling me to convert, and he did a lot of times".

While guilty of corruption, he perhaps was singled out for a harsher treatment vis-à-vis other players, even though he took 261 wickets in Test cricket to just 48 for Shahid Afridi. Danish's career was cut prematurely with no hope for a return. The fourth-highest wicket-taker was on a roll and as he said, "PCB didn't support me because I was Hindu, and I would break all the records. They could not drop me based on my performance. They knew I could break all the records, and Pakistan has never had a Hindu rising through the ranks".

The accusation does not seem unreasonable. To think that there is no excess space, consideration and toxic naturalness for religiosity in the Pakistani dressing room is to live under a rock, and the resultant performance is only collateral.

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

Leaderspeak

"I do have tendencies to kind of go overboard. I have never shied away from that. For a lot of people, it might not have been something that they are able to process. But for me, it always comes from the right place. My competitiveness has not gone down. You can still be aggressive in your mind, but you do not necessarily need to express it out there every now and then out of frustration, which I have. I mean, in the recent past as well, I do not feel great about those things myself."

VIRAT KOHLI, INDIAN CRICKETER

AI-powered LASIK: The future of vision correction

SECOND Opinion

MAHIPAL S SACHDEV

In an era where technology is reshaping healthcare, ophthalmology is experiencing a paradigm shift with artificial intelligence (AI)-driven advancements in vision correction. The latest milestone in this evolution is the integration of FORESIGHT technology with the AMARIS 1050RS laser system—ushering in a new era of unprecedented precision, safety, and speed in LASIK surgery. With the capability to correct vision in under 10 seconds per eye, this innovation is poised to redefine the treatment of refractive errors. Myopia (nearsightedness) is emerging as a global health concern, with projections indicating that nearly half of the world's population could be affected by 2050. As dependence on digital screens increases, the demand for precise, safe, and minimally invasive vision correction solutions has never been greater.

While traditional LASIK surgery remains highly effective, it has continued to evolve to meet these growing demands—leading to the development of AI-assisted laser vision correction. At the core of this breakthrough is FORESIGHT, an AI-driven predictive system that enhances surgical precision. By analysing thousands of data points unique to each eye, FORESIGHT customises laser correction plans, allowing surgeons to predict surgical outcomes before the procedure even begins. This AI integration ensures unmatched accuracy through real-time eye tracking and adaptive treatment planning, minimising potential complications by adjusting treatment based on real-time corneal analysis. The result is a safer, more effective procedure with faster recovery and superior visual outcomes. For the first time in Asia, FORESIGHT is available in India, along with AMARIS 1050RS—the world's fastest and safest refractive surgery technology. With this advancement, cutting-edge vision correction solutions such as CustomEyes and SmartSurf ACE have also been launched. CustomEyes offers a highly personalised approach to LASIK, tailoring treatment to the unique characteristics of each eye for superior results. Meanwhile, SmartSurf ACE provides a completely touch-free, blade-free LASIK experience, enhancing patient comfort and ensuring faster healing. These innovations mark a significant leap forward in refractive surgery, offering patients safer and more effective alternatives to traditional laser vision correction.

While LASIK remains the gold standard for refractive correction, AI-driven solutions are also revolutionising the management of complex corneal conditions like keratoconus. FORESIGHT-powered treatments such as Topography-Guided Removal of Epithelium for Keratoconus (TREK) and Topography-Guided Custom Ablation Treatment (TCAT) are bringing new hope to patients with irregular corneas. These techniques provide customised corneal reshaping for improved vision and reduced dependency on specialised contact lenses. Furthermore, their minimally invasive nature enhances safety and optimises patient outcomes, making them a game-changer in corneal treatment.

The continuous evolution of refractive surgery, driven by AI and next-generation laser technology, is setting new benchmarks in ophthalmology. Centre for Sight has been at the forefront of pioneering refractive techniques, from bringing Small Incision Lenticule Extraction (SMILE) to India to leading clinical trials for Smooth Incision Lenticule Keratomileusis (SILK). Today, with the adoption of AI-enhanced LASIK through FORESIGHT and AMARIS 1050RS, vision correction is entering an era of unparalleled precision and safety. The integration of AI into laser vision correction represents more than just technological progress—it signifies a commitment to patient-centric care. With faster procedures, enhanced safety, and optimised outcomes, individuals suffering from refractive errors now have access to the most advanced solutions available.

As technology continues to evolve, so does the promise of a future where perfect vision is within reach for all. The next decade will witness even greater strides in laser eye surgery, further solidifying technology's role in transforming lives through vision.With myopia on the rise, these advanced LASIK laser correction technologies are set to redefine vision correction by providing safer, faster, and more effective solutions to reduce dependence on glasses or contact lenses.

(The author is an eye surgeon, Chairman, and Medical Director of Centre for Sight. Views expressed are personal)

Letters to the Editor

Festival of Colours or Divisive Tool?

Madam — In a display of outright arrogance, Uttar Pradesh Cabinet Minister and Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal (NISHAD) party president Sanjay Nishad shot his mouth off when he said that "those who have a problem with Holi colours should leave the country." Such a calculated push to divide communities through religious festivals is being increasingly used by BJP leaders.

In fact, another BJP leader had gone a step further, saying that Muslim men should wear tarpaulin hijabs if they wished to avoid Holi colours. And it is all the more regrettable that UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath defended a police officer who told Muslims to stay indoors if they did not wish to be smeared with colours, rather than condemning such open communal bias.

His words further reinforced the idea that India's religious minorities are expected to either assimilate into the dominant narrative or be excluded from public spaces. Holi, the festival of colours, has always been a celebration of joy, togetherness, and the breaking down of social divisions.

However, in recent years, political rhetoric has sought to distort this spirit, turning moments of harmony into flashpoints of communal tension. The increasing use of festivals to push a divisive agenda has exposed the extent to which India's secular fabric is under threat.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

Stuck in space no more

Madam—NASA and SpaceX have launched a joint mission to bring back veteran astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore stranded in the international space station (ISS) and replace them with new crew. What has been originally scheduled to be an odyssey for eight days has now stretched past 285 days. The NASA duo (both 'Butch' and 'Suni' are now household names) has garnered a lot of sympathy around the world. It is a matter of great relief that the countdown to the splashdown off the Florida coast is all set to begin.

The saga of the expedition has shown the risks involved in space travel and exploration. Professional astronauts venture into space and push back the frontiers of science and the boundaries of human knowledge despite being conscious of the fact that human space flight is inherently risky. Technical glitches are always possibilities. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Findings from experiments and research help to broaden our horizons. Imagining ourselves as the astronauts stuck on the remote orbital outpost is an exercise in self-evaluation and an appreciation of their resilience, adaptability, grit, agility, will power and courage.

The pair has rejected the adjectives 'stranded' and 'stuck' to describe their state and maintained that it is all 'fun' for them and they have enjoyed their time in space.

G DAVID MILTON | MARUTHANCODE

Vote for transparency

Madam — Apropos of the headlines 'EPIC Aadhar link on cards' (March 16), the absolute transparency of voter list and complete linking of the remaining 33 Crore Voter ID-Aadhar linking are imperative at the earliest possible. The political controversy on fake voters should be set at rest by eliminating the fake voter IDs.

Rather, a step further, like banks and Income Tax Department, Voter ID should also be linked with the PAN and mobile numbers to rule out any possibility of fake voter ID even in future and new voters should be registered with the multiple linking of Aadhar, PAN and mobile numbers.

In fact, broad based roll reforms should be considered by the Government and the Election Commission barring culprits and corrupt from contesting elections, making it mandatory to exercise franchise to vote and incorporating facility to vote from remote and distant locations through online voting facility for the voters outside their constituencies on the voting day.

The EC should make necessary arrangements for online voting facility from all the district headquarters in the country. The Opposition politics is still around caste and religion divide in the society and is likely to remain so in the distant future too. The aspirational youth of the young country should decide the future of the country.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

LINGUISTIC WAR: INDIA'S THREE LANGUAGE FORMULA UNDER FIRE

The question of language in India has never been limited to mere communication, it has always been an instrument of power, identity, and dominance. Once again, the debate has resurfaced-this time over the central government's three-language formula, which is being perceived as an attempt to impose Hindi, sparking strong opposition from non-Hindi-speaking states, particularly Tamil Nadu. This controversy is not new, the same battle was fought in 1937, 1965, and again in 2020. The fundamental question remains: will India's linguistic diversity be respected, or will the imposition of a single language in the name of majority rule continue?

Tamil Nadu's Opposition is not just emotional but deeply historical. The first attempt to impose Hindi in the Madras Presidency in 1937 led to a fierce resistance spearheaded by leaders like C N Annadurai, who made it clear that Tamil identity could not be suppressed. In 1965, when efforts were made to declare Hindi as the national language, the Dravidian movement labeled it as a manifestation of North Indian dominance, resulting in widespread and violent protests across the state. Today, with the three-language formula being pushed through the New Education Policy, the same old question arises — does India belong only to Hindi speakers? The Central government claims that no language is being imposed, but the reality tells a different story. When exams like UPSC favour Hindi-medium candidates, when Hindi becomes the primary language in Indian Railways and government offices, and when most Digital India portals are accessible only in Hindi and English, it is evident that a systematic strategy is being implemented to establish Hindi as a 'national identity.'

SACHIN TRIPATHI | SATNA

Please send your letter to the letterstopioneer@gmail.com. In not more than 400 words. We appreciate your feedback.

The global race for resources in the Arctic

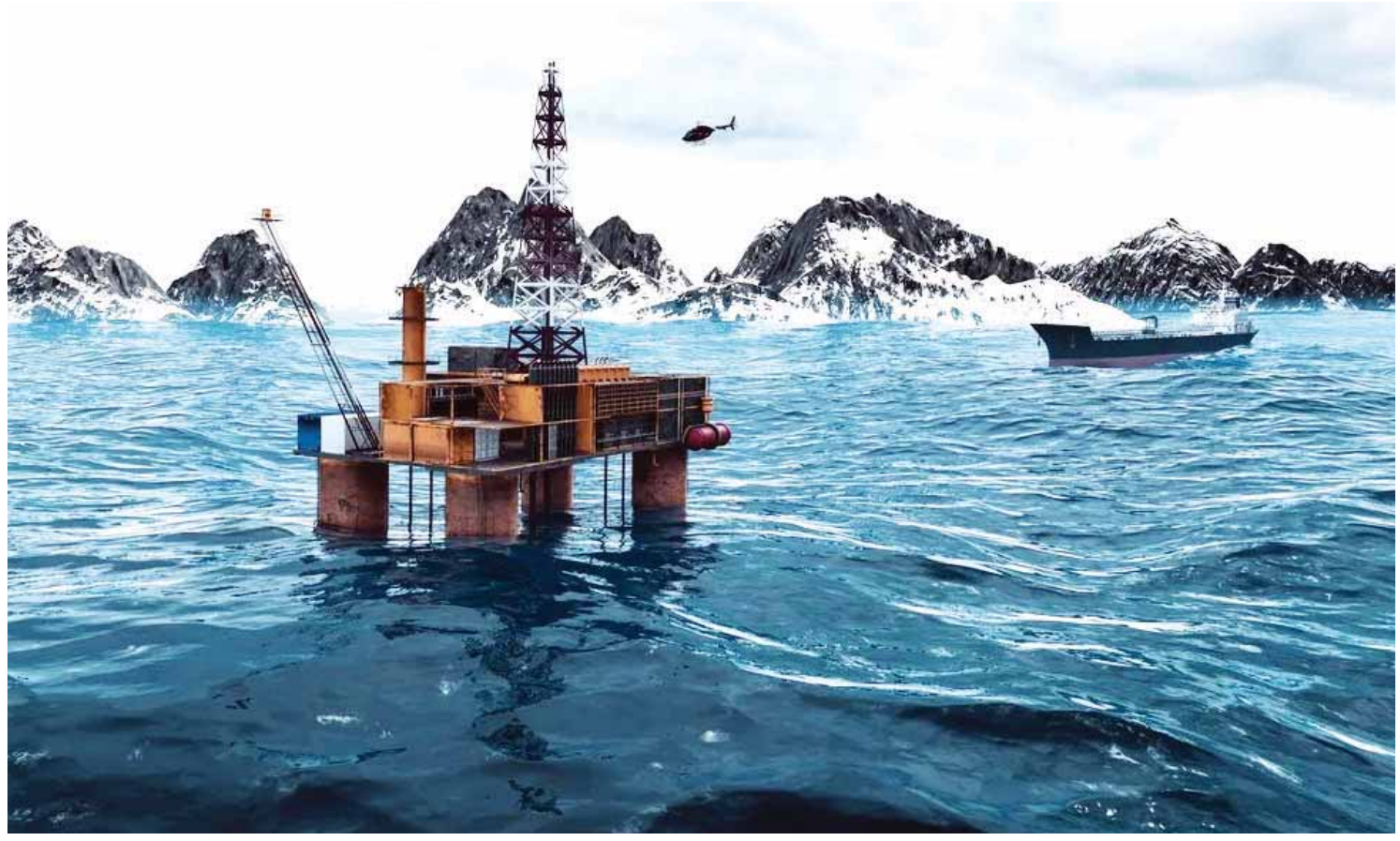
The Arctic is emerging as a critical frontier in the race for mineral wealth, fossil fuels, and geopolitical dominance. As ice continues to melt at alarming rates, new trade routes are opening, intensifying competition among global powers

FIRST Column

There has been increasing competition and conflict in the Arctic region for the exploitation of mineral wealth and fossil fuels. It has environmental consequences such as pollution, habitat destruction, impacts on wildlife and indigenous communities. In the warming world, the melting of ice in the Arctic Sea has been opening many new routes for trade in the region and the use of high-fuel oil in ship propulsion is becoming increasingly common. Diesel vehicles, open biomass burning and the use of high-fuel oil for engine propulsion in shipping are the largest global sources of black carbon, which consists of pure carbon in many linkages and is produced by incomplete combustion of fossil fuel and biomass by wildfires.

It can generate sufficient energy only next to carbon dioxide and Its proximity around ice/ snow sheets and glaciers of Arctic and Antarctica regions can extend the period of snow melting and can result in environmental catastrophes caused by the melting of glaciers and the rise in sea level. Eventually, it contributes to the warming of the planet.

South of the treeless Arctic region, we have the world's largest forests known as boreal forests covering large portions of Alaska, Canada, Scandinavia and Siberia. These forests have stored huge quantities of carbon and have protected the planet from further warming. Forests are rich in biodiversity and house numerous species of mammals, fish, plants of coniferous and broad leaved species, insects and birds. Studies have revealed that the warming of Arctic and Antarctic regions is three to four times higher than that of equatorial and tropical regions. Boreal forests are thus experiencing more warming than the global average, which in turn is adversely impacting its growth and regeneration.



BK SINGH

The northern part of the forests is slowly expanding towards the Arctic region where ice has melted. Studies in Alaska's Brooks Range have also found that spruce trees have grown and established north of the tree line. Once inaccessible, the southern part has been kept open for commercial logging. The Anthropogenic pressure and wildfires have been causing the degradation of forests considerably. The gain in northern boreal forests is far too low as compared to the loss in the south.

Nearly 15 Million hectares of Canadian forests, constituting approximately four per cent of the geographical area of the country burned in 2023 and researchers found that it released 2371 megatons of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This caused a jump in Canada's ranking of global emissions from 11th in 2022 to fourth in 2023, behind China, the US and India. The new trade routes due to melting ice in the Arctic are seen as an opportunity, which in turn boosts the use of high-fuel oil in ship propulsion causing further warming.

Portuguese-flagged Solong cargo ship collided recently with MV Stena Immaculate in the North Sea off eastern England setting both vessels ablaze and despite great firefighting efforts, it took two days to control the blaze. It caused oil leakage and such incidents have severe environmental consequences, especially threatening aquatic biodiversity.

Ever since February 24, 2022, Russian aggression in Ukraine began, decade-long cooperation between Russia and other Arctic countries on biology and nature conservation has been paused. The suspension of data across the boundary has made it difficult to understand how wildlife and ecosystems are changing during unprecedented warming. 2023 has been the warmest year recorded on the planet and 2024 has further broken this record and registered an average rise in global temperature by 1.56 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial temperature.

Data are also not available to find the impact of permafrost thaw that contains two and half times more carbon than what is already available in the atmosphere.

> TRUMP ALSO REPEATEDLY BROUGHT OUT THAT THE US HAS PROVIDED $350 BILLION WORTH OF DEFENCE EQUIPMENT DURING THE LAST THREE YEARS TO COUNTER RUSSIAN AGGRESSION, HOW UKRAINE WOULD PAY IT BACK?

The critical and rare earth minerals have applications in over 200 high-tech consumer products namely electric and hybrid vehicles, computer hard drives, flat screen monitors and TVs, cellular telephones, and defence applications like electronic displays, guidance systems, lasers, submarines, radars sonar systems etc. The quantity used in some of the applications is insignificant, yet it is critical for the functioning of the technology. The magnets made have a relatively insignificant volume of the element as compared to the volume of the product but it is needed for the functioning of spindle motors, and voice coils of desktops and laptops.

Neodymium magnets are made of Neodymium, iron and boron which have the highest strength and can withstand 230 degrees Celsius temperature. Magnets are used in automobiles, computer hard disks and digital cameras. Lanthanum is used for digital and cell phone cameras and also in petroleum refining and steel making. Erbium is used in optical fibre and laser repeaters. Cerium is used in water purifiers and its alloys with other elements are useful for making catalytic converters. Europium, Terbium and Yttrium are used in phosphors that emit luminescence.

The traditional mining of these elements was labour-intensive; with lower wages and duly relaxed environmental laws, China proceeded and developed the infrastructure for extraction and processing of the minerals in a big way leaving the US far behind. China built mines to magnet industries and high-tech countries like the US and Japan had to depend on it. The territorial conflict between China and Japan in 2010 led to China using it as a weapon and putting an embargo on the sale of the minerals to Japan. China dominated the supply chain and even today major chunk of these elements mined outside China also continue to be shipped back to China for separation, refining and magnet production. To bring the US back to dominate the supply chain of rare and critical minerals Donald Trump in his second term as US President has moved to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America, expressed taking over the Panama Canal from Panama and purchasing Greenland from Denmark for strategic reasons.

He has also vowed to end Russian aggression in Ukraine and stop the years-old war early. US Vice President D Vance asked why Ukraine was not thanking the US for billions of dollars in tax-payer-funded aid. Trump also repeatedly brought out that the US has provided $350 Billion worth of defence equipment during the last three years to counter Russian aggression, how Ukraine would pay it back? Though Ukraine President Zelensky was initially hesitant, he has come forward to sign the rare earth deal with the US to pay back the military aid already provided by the Biden administration. Greenland has voted for the central right democratic party vocal against Trump.

The Arctic island holds large reserves of critical and rare earth minerals. It is also home to a US airbase and straddles a strategic route to the North Atlantic. Though Greenland wants independence, Trump has been outspoken about his desire to control the island. In his address to Congress recently he said, "he thought US is going to get Greenland one way or the other."

In an exclusive conversation with NATO's Secretary General recently, Trump reiterated that Greenland would be annexed to the US. It is an island of 56,000 people, whose ancestors were colonized 300 years ago by Denmark. Since 2009, the island has been on the path to independence and Denmark controls only foreign and defence policies. Trump has an eye on Greenland's oil and rare earth resources.

All these moves in the Trump 2.0 regime are to gain the upper hand in supply chain dominance of rare earth minerals. Russia is also expanding exploration and extraction of oil and gas in Western Siberia and opening new trade routes by cutting the ice, yet to melt in the Ocean. The race in the Arctic region will surge greenhouse gas emissions at an unprecedented scale.

(Writer is a retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of forest force, Karnataka. Views expressed are personal)

Maha Kumbh: Sacred togetherness in the world's largest gathering

The Maha Kumbh Mela, a pilgrimage that draws over 450 Million people, is often hailed as the world's largest human gathering. Yet, beneath its spiritual significance lies a sociological marvel-a transient civilisation where hierarchies dissolve, altruism flourishes, and time itself seems to bend. This grand spiritual event holds immense religious significance, attracting not only devotees from across India but also pilgrims from around the world. Maha Kumbh is considered the ultimate confluence of all major Hindu rituals and traditions.

At first glance, the Kumbh Mela may appear to be a ritualistic pilgrimage, a momentary pause where millions immerse themselves in the holy rivers to wash away sins and attain spiritual liberation. However, beyond this sacred act lies a deep-seated cultural narrative. The event is an ancient ritual encapsulating centuries of collective memory, myths, and legends-a continuous reminder of India's quest for meaning in a chaotic world. Sociologists observe that the act of congregating at the confluence of sacred rivers transforms personal spirituality into a communal experience-a shared ritual of rebirth and renewal that transcends individual belief systems.

The suspension of social stratification

The Maha Kumbh Mela functions as a dynamic arena where India's social fabric is both displayed and redefined. In the temporary cities that spring up along the riverbanks, traditional hierarchies are simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed. The festival becomes a melting pot where age-old caste distinctions, regional identities, and modern socio-economic divides are momentarily blurred. Here, the paths of the pious ascetic, the devout seeker, and the curious traveler intersect.

Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "liminality"—a transitional phase where societal norms are suspended-finds vivid expression at the Kumbh. For weeks, the mela transforms into a liminal space where caste, class, and creed merge. A CEO and a farmer bathe in the same waters, a Dalit and a Brahmin share meals in community kitchens (langars). Turner termed this egalitarian bonding communitas, a temporary but transformative unity. In this sacred space, the rigid hierarchies of everyday India dissolve, revealing a latent potential for radical equality.

The Kumbh Mela also offers a unique opportunity to meet various saint groups, such as the Naga Babas, Moni Babas, Kabootar Babas, and Manchan Wale Babas. Observing their daily routines, including their methods of prayer, deep meditation, and spiritual discourses, provides insight into the diverse spiritual practices within Hinduism. The mela is a place where everyone is immersed in a sense of collective unity.

The Gift Economy: Altruism as Social Currency

Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift economy-where exchanges foster social bonds-comes to life at the Kumbh. Volunteers serve millions of free meals, ascetics offer blessings without expectation, and strangers share resources. This is not mere charity but a ritualised reaffirmation of interdependence. The mela's economy operates on trust rather than transactions, challenging modern capitalism's transactional ethos. In a world fractured by inequality, the Kumbh models a society where giving is sacred.

At the Kumbh Mela, people enthusiastically extend help-offering water, food, or prasad from saints. Receiving prasad through the Ganga is considered a divine blessing. This culture of generosity fosters an environment devoid of bias, where individuals unite in a shared spirit of giving.

BABITA CHAUDHARY

A living tapestry of India's soul

Émile Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence"—the electric energy of communal rituals-pulsates through the Kumbh. The synchronised bathing rites, devotional chants, and grand processions generate a transcendent solidarity. Pilgrims shed individual identities to become part of a cosmic whole, mirroring Durkheim's idea that religion is society worshiping itself. This collective energy is not just spiritual, it acts as a social glue, bridging the divides of a diverse nation.

To reach the Kumbh, pilgrims walk for miles, yet their faith and devotion energise them, making fatigue an afterthought. Wrapped in saffron, a color symbolising peace and devotion, they forget their individual identities and merge into a harmonious collective.

Cyclical Time and Social Renewal

The Kumbh's 12-year cycle mirrors India's ancient rhythms of renewal. Unlike linear time, which progresses toward an uncertain future, the Kumbh's cyclicality offers a ritualised "reset." Communities fragmented by modernity reunite, and generational stories are retold. This periodicity is not nostalgia but a sociological balm, healing temporal fractures and reaffirming continuity in a rapidly changing world.

Beyond its religious significance, the Kumbh Mela is a space where societal renewal unfolds daily. As millions journey to the sacred waters, they seek not just personal salvation but also a symbolic cleansing of societal ills. The sheer scale of the event demands meticulous coordination and cooperation-elements that mirror the broader workings of democracy in action. In a country characterised by its diversity and complexity, the Kumbh Mela serves as a microcosm of India's pluralistic society, where order emerges from chaos through an intricate balance of tradition and modern administrative ingenuity.

Gender and Quiet Subversions

Historically, both men and women have held esteemed positions in Hindu traditions. In the Vedic period, religious ceremonies were considered incomplete without the participation of women. Even in Hindu worship, the names of goddesses are inseparably linked with deities, such as Lakshmi-Ganesh, Sita-Ram, and Radha-Krishna. Just as men uphold Hindu traditions, women play an equally vital role in preserving and practicing them at the grassroots level.

This devotion is clearly visible in the Maha Kumbh of 2025, where women have participated with great enthusiasm alongside men. Female religious leaders have taken part in rituals such as the Shahi Snan and Akhara processions with the same fervor as their male counterparts. Pilgrims have sought blessings not only from male saints but also from female Mahatmas, demonstrating a shift from traditional social barriers. The high number of participants in the Kumbh can also be attributed to the active involvement of women, symbolising their empowerment and societal progress.

Conclusion

The event culminates on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri, dedicated to Lord Shiva, who shares equal reverence with Goddess Parvati. The Maha Kumbh Mela is not just a religious festival-it is a celebration of faith, equality, and the timeless spiritual essence of India.

The true miracle of the Kumbh Mela is not its sheer scale but its social vision-a blueprint for harmony in a divided world. It serves as a reminder that societies can momentarily choose cooperation over competition, shared purpose over self-interest. As climate crises and polarization threaten global stability, the Kumbh's ephemeral utopia whispers: "Another world is possible, even if only for 42 days."

The Kumbh Mela is more than a pilgrimage; it is India's subconscious dreaming aloud. In its chaos, we find order, in its transience, permanence. To study it is to glimpse the soul of a civilisation-not in its temples, but in its people's capacity to imagine, however briefly, a society built on sacred togetherness.

(The author is an assistant professor Maitreyi college University of Delhi. She works on gender issues. Views expressed are personal)

The five causes of action in the Bhagavad Gita

We all wish to be in control. Yet, we fail miserably because control is never truly in our hands. Lord Krishna explains in the Bhagavad Gita:

"The place of action, the doer, various instruments, different efforts, and the fifth-providence-are the five factors of action." (Bhagavad Gita 18.14)

The Lord further states:

"Whatever action a person initiates through body, speech, and mind, these five are its causes." (18.15)

Are we not constantly engaged in actions through our bodies, speech, and minds? Speech and mind are mentioned separately because our words have a profound impact on our lives. Speech is not just another sense-it can shape outcomes significantly. For example, consider an accident where both parties are at fault. If they apologise, the matter is resolved amicably. However, if they resort to harsh words, a fight ensues. Similarly, our thoughts operate on a subtler level than our physical senses, yet they wield immense influence over our lives.

AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

The five causes of action

What are these five causes?

1.The Place of Action (Circumstances):

Our circumstances significantly impact our actions, yet we have no control over them. Are we in a scorching summer in Delhi or a freezing winter in Toronto? Are we raising a newborn in a nuclear family or a joint family? Such external factors shape our experiences, but they remain beyond our control.

2. The Doer (The Individual):

While we assume we are in control, the truth is that our nature governs us. Are we truly in command of our emotions and reactions? Hardly. In the same accident scenario, an aggressive person will likely escalate the situation, while a calm individual will seek resolution. Our inherent nature dictates our responses, often beyond our conscious control.

3. The Instruments (Resources Used):

The tools we have at our disposal also play a role. A person with a modern smartphone can communicate and function more efficiently than someone with an outdated or non-existent device. The availability and quality of resources impact our actions.

4. The Effort (Personal Endeavor):

Even our efforts are influenced by factors beyond our control. Our health, energy levels, and circumstances determine how much effort we can put in. While we may wish to exert ourselves fully, our limitations often dictate otherwise.

5. Providence (Divine Will):

This is the most decisive factor, and it is entirely beyond human control. Our past karmas (actions) shape our present outcomes. Success and failure are not solely determined by our present efforts but are deeply intertwined with the results of past actions (karmaphalas).

Are we in control?

Not at all. Control ultimately rests with God. Let's examine God's role in the five causes:

"Circumstances are under God's control, as He is the Creator of all situations.

"The Doer (soul), though possessing free will, is bound by past karmas and thus remains under divine governance.

"Instruments and resources originate from God, as He is the ultimate source of everything.

"Efforts are permitted by God, as He determines what we are able to do.

"Providence is part of God's justice, ensuring the consequences of past actions unfold accordingly.

The path forward

Understanding that God is the ultimate controller should inspire us to seek His guidance and refuge. As Lord Krishna advises:

"In all respects, take shelter in Me alone. By My mercy, you will attain supreme peace and the eternal abode." (Bhagavad Gita 18.62)

By surrendering to God's will, we can find true peace and liberation, rather than struggling to control the uncontrollable.

Conclusion

In our quest for control, we often overlook the deeper truth—true control lies with God. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that our actions are shaped by five factors: circumstances, the doer, instruments, effort, and providence. While we may influence some aspects, ultimate control remains beyond us.

Recognizing this should not lead to helplessness but to surrender and faith. Instead of resisting the inevitable, we can align ourselves with divine wisdom. By cultivating awareness of our nature, utilising our resources wisely, and making sincere efforts, we can act with greater clarity. However, accepting divine providence helps us navigate life with peace, rather than frustration.

As Lord Krishna assures, taking refuge in Him leads to supreme peace (Bhagavad Gita 18.62). True liberation lies not in control but in surrender—trusting that God's will is perfect and that every experience serves a higher purpose.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher. Views expressed are personal)

59 dead, 150 hurt in North Macedonia nightclub fire

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kocani

A massive fire tore through a nightclub in North Macedonia's eastern town of Kocani early Sunday, killing 59 people and injuring 155, authorities said. The blaze broke out around 2:30 am during a concert by a local pop group at Club Pulse, Interior Minister Panche Toshkovski told reporters.

He said 39 of the dead had so far been identified. He said, following an initial assessment, pyrotechnics likely caused the roof to catch fire. Videos showed chaos inside the club, with young people running through the smoke as the musicians urged people to escape as quickly as possible.

As relatives gathered outside hospitals to await news, Kocani resident Dragi Stojanov was informed that his 21-year-old son Tomce had died in the fire. "He was my only child. I don't need my life anymore," he said. "One hundred and fifty families have been devastated."

Officials said the injured have been taken to hospitals around the country, including the capital, Skopje, many with severe burns. The effort was being assisted by multiple volunteer organisations.

Health Minister Arben Taravari said 118 people have been hospitalised, adding that he had received offers of assistance from neighbouring countries, including Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia.

"All our capabilities have been put to use, in a maximum effort to save as many lives as possible of the young people involved in this tragedy," Taravari told reporters, at times looking visibly shaken. This is the worst tragedy in recent memory to befall the landlocked nation, whose population is less than 2 million.

President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova visited burn victims at a hospital in Skopje and spoke to parents waiting outside the building. "It's terrible... hard to believe how this happened," she said, her voice halting with emotion. "We must give these young people courage to continue."

In an online post, Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski wrote: "This is a difficult and very sad day for Macedonia. The loss of so many young lives is irreparable, and the pain of the families, loved ones and friends is immeasurable." Family members gathered in front of hospitals and city offices in Kocani, some 115 kilometres east of Skopje, begging authorities for more information. The club was in an old building that was previously a carpet warehouse and has been running for several years, according to local media MKD. The fire caused the roof of the single-story building to partially collapse, revealing the charred remains of wooden beams and debris. Police cordoned off the site and sent in evidence gathering teams in an operation also involving state prosecutors.

A state prosecutor, Ljubco Kocevski, said several people were being questioned by police but gave no further details and stressed that the cause of the blaze was still being investigated. Interior ministry officials said authorities would investigate the venue's licensing and safety provisions, adding that the government had a "moral responsibility" to help prosecute anyone responsible. Police have arrested one man already, but didn't provide details on the person's involvement.

As they awoke to news of the overnight tragedy, the country's immediate neighbours and leaders from further afield in Europe sent condolences. The European Union's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, posted on X that she was "deeply saddened" and said the 27-nation bloc "shares the grief and pain of the people of North Macedonia."

North Macedonia is a candidate for EU membership. Condolences also poured in from politicians across the region, including Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "I wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. Ukraine mourns alongside our (North) Macedonian friends on this sad day," Zelenskyy wrote on X. Pyrotechnics have often been the cause of deadly fires in nightclubs, including the one at the Colectiv club in Bucharest, Romania, in 2015 in which 64 people died.

Police officers investigate a nightclub after a massive fire in the town of Kocani, North Macedonia, on Sunday PTI

B'desh HC upholds 20 students' death penalty for lynching university mate

Dhaka (PTI): The High Court on Sunday upheld a trial court verdict handing down the death penalty to 20 students of an elite university here for beating to death a fellow second-year student over his alleged political affiliation in 2019.

Court officials said the two-judge bench of Justice AKM Asaduzzaman and Justice Syed Enayet Hossain pronounced the verdict simultaneously wrapping up the hearing on the mandatory death reference and convicts' appeals against the lower court judgment. All the convicts, students of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), belonged to the now disbanded Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League.

They lynched Abrar Fahad, a second-year student of BUET's electrical and electronics department on October 7, 2019 over a Facebook post by him criticising the government. Fahad's battered body was found in his university dormitory the next morning. Investigations later found that he was beaten to death with a cricket bat and other blunt objects for almost six hours by 25 fellow students. Both the BUET and BCL immediately expelled these students after Fahad's murder.

A Dhaka court sentenced to death the 20 convicts on December 8, 2021 when Awami League was in power. Apart from upholding the death penalty for 20 students, "the court also upheld the life term imprisonment for other five convicts, who too were BUET students," Attorney General M Asaduzzaman said.

Fahad's father told reporters after the High Court verdict: "We are satisfied with the High Court's ruling. However, the verdict must be implemented swiftly."

His brother Faiyaz said, "We did not expect to receive such a swift verdict from the High Court. We are satisfied with this ruling, although there are still many legal procedures remaining." Defence lawyer Azizur Rahman Dulu said the verdict disappointed him and added: "We will appeal to the Appellate Division, hoping to receive justice there." The convicts were tried in person but one of the death row inmates in the case, Muntasir Al Jamie, had fled a high-security prison at suburban Kashimur Central Jail last year.

Russia, Ukraine trade overnight aerial attacks

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ kyiv

Russia and Ukraine traded heavy aerial blows overnight, with both sides on Saturday reporting more than 100 enemy drones over their respective territories. The attacks comes less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with US envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine. Putin told a press conference on Thursday that he supported a truce in principle but set out a host of details that need to be clarified before it is agreed. Kyiv has already endorsed the truce proposal, although Ukrainian officials have publicly raised doubts as to whether Moscow will commit to such a deal.

Speaking to reporters in Kyiv on Saturday, after virtual talks between Western allies hosted by UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Zelenskyy voiced Ukraine's support for the 30-day full ceasefire proposal to discuss a longer-term peace plan, but said Russia would attempt to derail talks with conditions and "buts".

Starmer has told allies to "keep the pressure" on Putin to back a ceasefire in Ukraine, hailing Ukraine as the "party of peace". Starmer said Putin will "sooner or later" have to "come to the table".

In a statement earlier on Saturday, Zelenskyy had accused Moscow of building up forces along the border. "The build up of Russian forces indicates that Moscow intends to keep ignoring diplomacy. It is clear that Russia is prolonging the war," he said. However, Zelenskyy stressed that if Russia did not agree with the US proposal there would be "specific, harsh and straightforward" response from the administration of US President Donald Trump.

He also said that Kyiv's troops were maintaining their presence in Russia's Kursk region after Trump said Friday that "thousands" of Ukrainian troops had been surrounded by the Russian military.

"The operation of our forces in the designated areas of the Kursk region continues," Zelenskyy said. "Our troops continue to hold back Russian and North Korean groupings in the Kursk region. There is no encirclement of our troops."

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke Saturday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In the call, they discussed next steps to follow up on recent meetings in Saudi Arabia and agreed to continue working towards restoring communication between the United States and Russia, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said in a statement.

Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Russia had launched a barrage of 178 drones and two ballistic missiles over the country overnight. The attack was a mixture of Shahed-type drones and imitation drones designed to confuse air defences. Some 130 drones were shot down, while 38 more failed to reach their targets.

Russia attacked energy facilities, causing significant damage, striking energy infrastructure in the Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa regions, Ukraine's private energy company DTEK said in a statement on Saturday. Some residents were left without electricity. "The damage is significant. Energy workers are already working on the ground. We are doing everything possible to restore power to homes as soon as possible," the energy firm said.

Falling drone debris in Russia's Volgograd region sparked a fire in the Krasnoarmeysky district of the city, close to a Lukoil oil refinery, according to Gov. Andrei Bocharov, who provided no further details. Nearby airports temporarily halted flights, local media outlets reported. No casualties were reported.

The Volgograd refinery has been targeted by Kyiv's forces on several occasions since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than three years ago, most recently in a drone attack on February 15.

Massive storm leaves at least 32 dead in US

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Piedmont

Violent tornadoes and high winds decimated homes, wiped out schools and toppled semitractor-trailers as a monster storm that killed at least 32 people ripped its way across the central and southern US.

Missouri resident Dakota Henderson said he and others rescuing trapped neighbours found five bodies scattered in the debris Friday night outside what remained of his aunt's house in hard-hit Wayne County. Scattered twisters killed at least a dozen people in the state, authorities said. "It was a very rough deal last night," Henderson said Saturday not far from the splintered home from which he said they rescued his aunt through a window of the only room left standing. "It's really disturbing for what happened to the people, the casualties last night."

Coroner Jim Akers of nearby Butler County described the "unrecognizable home" where one man was killed as "just a debris field."

"The floor was upside down," he said. "We were walking on walls."

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves announced six people died in three counties and three more people were missing late Saturday as storms moved further east into Alabama, where damaged homes and impassable roads were reported. Officials confirmed three deaths in Arkansas, where Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders declared a state of emergency.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp also declared an emergency in anticipation of the storm's shift eastward. Early Sunday morning, the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency used its social media accounts to repost a National Weather Service tornado watch for parts of southeast Georgia.

In response to the watch, which warns of isolated tornadoes and hail and gusts of 50 to 70 mph, Kemp posted a note saying his family was "praying for all those impacted by this storm system and those still in its path."

"We will continue to work closely with state and local officials to respond to damage and assess any needs following this weather event," Kemp wrote. Dust storms spurred by the system's early high winds claimed almost a dozen lives on Friday. Eight people died in a Kansas highway pile-up involving at least 50 vehicles, according to the state highway patrol. Authorities said three people also were killed in car crashes during a dust storm in Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle.

The extreme weather conditions were forecast to impact an area that is home to more than 100 million people, with winds threatening blizzard conditions in colder northern areas and fanning the wildfire risk in warmer, drier places to the south.

Evacuations were ordered in some Oklahoma communities as more than 130 fires were reported across the state and nearly 300 homes were damaged or destroyed. Governor Kevin Stitt said at a Saturday news conference that some 689 square kilometers had burned, sharing that he lost a home of his own on a ranch northeast of Oklahoma City.

To the north, the National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for parts of far western Minnesota and far eastern South Dakota starting early Saturday. Snow accumulations of 3 to 6 inches were expected, with up to a foot possible. Winds were expected to cause whiteout conditions. Still, experts said it's not unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

Significant tornadoes continued late Saturday, with the region at highest risk stretching from eastern Louisiana and Mississippi through Alabama, western Georgia and the Florida panhandle, the Storm Prediction Center said.

Bailey Dillon, 24, and her fiance, Caleb Barnes, watched from their front porch in Tylertown, Mississippi, as a massive twister struck an area about half a mile (0.8 kilometer) away near Paradise Ranch RV Park.

They drove over afterward to see if anyone needed help and recorded video of snapped trees, leveled buildings and overturned vehicles. "The amount of damage was catastrophic," Dillon said. "It was a large amount of cabins, RVs, campers that were just flipped over. Everything was destroyed."

Paradise Ranch said via Facebook that all staff and guests were safe and accounted for, but Dillon said the damage extended beyond the RV park itself.

"Homes and everything were destroyed all around it," she said. "Schools and buildings are just completely gone." Some images from the extreme weather went viral online.

Tad Peters and his father, Richard Peters, had pulled over to fuel up their pickup truck in Rolla, Missouri, on Friday night when they heard tornado sirens and saw other motorists fleeing the interstate to park. "Whoa, is this coming? Oh, it's here. It's here," Tad Peters can be heard saying on a video. "Look at all that debris. Ohhh. My God, we are in a torn ..." His father then rolled up the window.

The two were headed to Indiana for a weightlifting competition but decided to return home to Norman, Oklahoma, about six hours away, where they then encountered wildfire.

A vehicle sits in front of a damaged home and debris from a severe storm on Saturday in Wayne County PTI

French-British blueprint doesn't foresee deploying 'mass' of soldiers in Ukraine, says Macron

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron has fleshed out some possible missions that could be undertaken by a military support force for Ukraine that Paris and London are working to put together with other nations, in a so-called "coalition of the willing" that could deploy after any ceasefire with Russia.

Speaking to French media ahead of an online summit that the UK hosted on Saturday, Macron said the French-British blueprint doesn't aim to deploy a "mass" of soldiers in Ukraine and instead envisages stationing troop contingents in key locations.

Macron's office said Sunday that it couldn't provide a recording of the French leader's exchange with reporters from regional French newspapers on Friday night. But according to La Dépêche du Midi and Le Parisien, the French president spoke of participating nations each deploying several thousand troops to "key points" in Ukraine. Their missions could include providing training and supporting Ukrainian defences, to demonstrate long-term support for Kyiv, the reports quoted Macron as saying.

Macron added that the proposed contingents from countries that are members of the NATO alliance would serve as "a guarantee of security" for Ukraine and that "several European nations, and also non-European, have expressed their willingness to join such an effort when it is confirmed," La Dépêche reported.

Le Parisien cited Macron as saying that Moscow's agreement wasn't needed for such deployment. "Ukraine is sovereign. If it asks for Allied forces to be on its territory, it's not up to Russia to accept or not," he said.

Following Saturday's two-hour virtual meeting, Starmer challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin to sign up to a ceasefire in its war against Ukraine if he is serious about peace, and said allies will keep increasing the pressure on the Kremlin, including by moving planning for a peacekeeping force to an "operational phase".

Around 30 leaders were involved in the call, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and leaders from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as officials from NATO and the European Union.

It was the second such meeting in two weeks, meant to help Ukraine face a change of approach by the US following the return of President Donald Trump, as well as gauging support for any future possible peacekeeping mission. Many more countries were involved this time than the previous meeting on March 2. According to Starmer, military planners will convene again in the UK on Thursday to progress practical plans to support Ukraine's future security.

Over 1 lakh people join protest rally in Belgrade against Serbia prez, govt

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Belgrade

At least one lakh people descended on Belgrade on Saturday for a mass rally seen as a culmination of months-long protests against Serbia's populist President Aleksandar Vucic and his government.

Large crowds of flag-waving protesters clogged the downtown area of the capital despite occasional rain, with people hardly able to move and many stuck hundreds of metres away from the planned protest venue. Following apparent sporadic incidents between protesters and the police, university students — who have been leading the peaceful protests for the past four months — abruptly called for an end to the demonstration on Saturday, saying they no longer can guarantee safety at the rally.

Most of the protesters dispersed, but thousands remained on the streets as tensions surged. Police said the crowd reached 1.07, lakh people at the peak of the protest. Serbian independent media described the rally as the biggest ever in the country, saying the numbers were much higher. All public transport in Belgrade was cancelled as protesters streamed into the city from various directions. The rally was part of a nationwide anti-corruption movement that erupted after a concrete canopy collapsed at a train station in Serbia's north in November, killing 15 people.

Almost daily demonstrations that started in response to the tragedy have shaken Vucic's firm grip on power in Serbia like never before in the past 13 years in charge. Many in Serbia blamed the crash on rampant government corruption, negligence and disrespect of construction safety regulations, demanding accountability for the victims.

Saturday's rally was dubbed "15 for 15", referring to the date of the protest and the number of people killed in the city of Novi Sad on November 1. The crowds fell silent for 15 minutes in the evening to honour the victims.

Ahead of the demonstration, Vucic repeatedly warned of alleged plans for unrest while threatening arrests and harsh sentences for any incidents.

A deafening sound of whistles, drums and vuvuzelas filled the air on Saturday. Some protesters carried banners that read, "He's Finished!" Crowds chanted "Pump it Up," a slogan adopted during past four months of student-led protests.

"I expect that this will shake his authority and that Vucic will realise that people are no longer for him," Milenko Kovacevic, a protester, said.

The massive rally is not the endgame in a struggle for a more democratic Serbia, Dejan Simic, another protester, said. "This is just the beginning of the end, a process which I hope will end soon," he said.

Protesting university students have been a key force of the anti-graft movement with their call for justice. Students' determination has struck a chord among the citizens who are disillusioned with politicians and have lost faith in the state institutions.

Hundreds of police deployed in city: On Friday evening, tens of thousands of people staged a joyous welcome for the students who have been marching or cycling for days from across Serbia toward Belgrade. Interior Minister Ivica Dacic told state RTS broadcaster that 13 people were detained overnight. He said police detained six opposition activists for allegedly plotting to stage a coup and stir unrest.

By Saturday morning, people were assembling in various parts of the city as they marched toward the centre. The entire downtown zone was flooded with people hours before the scheduled start of the gathering. Reflecting the tensions, police said they arrested a man who rammed his car into protesters in a Belgrade suburb, injuring three people. Hundreds of police officers were deployed inside and around government buildings and in front of the presidential palace.

Many railway and bus links toward Belgrade have been cancelled, in an apparent effort to prevent people from attending the rally. The transport company said the cancellation was made "for security reasons". Several reporters from neighbouring Croatia as well as Slovenia have been turned back from Serbia's border under explanation that their presence at the rally "represents a security risk".

Vucic claims West is backing protests: Vucic has rejected earlier proposals for a transitional government that would prepare an early election. Fuelling fears of clashes, Vucic's supporters have been camping in central Belgrade in front of his headquarters.

Judge stalls Trump's 18th-century law to speed deportations

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

A federal judge on Saturday barred the administration of President Donald Trump from deportations under an 18th-century law that Trump invoked just hours earlier asserting the United States was being invaded by a Venezuelan gang and that he had new powers to remove its members from the country.

James E Boasberg, chief judge for the US District Court for the District of Columbia, said he needed to issue his order immediately because the government was already flying migrants it claimed were newly deportable under Trump's proclamation to El Salvador and Honduras to be incarcerated there. El Salvador already agreed this week to take up to 300 migrants that the Trump administration designated as gang members. "I do not believe I can wait any longer and am required to act," Boasberg said during a Saturday evening hearing in a lawsuit brought by the ACLU and Democracy Forward. "A brief delay in their removal does not cause the government any harm," he added, noting they remain in government custody but ordering that any planes in the air be turned around. The ruling came hours after Trump claimed the Venezuelan gang, Tren de Aragua, was invading the United States and invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, a sweeping wartime authority that allows the president broader leeway on policy and executive action to speed up mass deportations. The act has only been used three times before in US history, all during wars. Its most recent application was during World War II, when it was used to incarcerate Germans and Italians as well as for the mass internment of Japanese-American civilians.

In a proclamation released just over an hour before Boasberg's hearing, Trump contended that Tren de Aragua was effectively at war with the United States.

"Over the years, Venezuelan national and local authorities have ceded ever-greater control over their territories to transnational criminal organisations, including TdA," Trump's statement reads. "The result is a hybrid criminal state that is perpetrating an invasion of and predatory incursion into the United States, and which poses a substantial danger to the United States."

The order could let the administration deport any migrant it identifies as a member of the gang without going through regular immigration proceedings, and also could remove other protections under criminal law for people the government targeted. The Tren de Aragua gang originated in a prison in the South American country and accompanied an exodus of millions of Venezuelans, the overwhelming majority of whom were seeking better living conditions after their nation's economy came undone last decade. Trump and his allies have turned the gang into the face of the alleged threat posed by immigrants living in the US illegally and formally designated it a "foreign terrorist organisation" last month.

Authorities in several countries have reported arrests of Tren de Aragua members, even as Venezuela's government claims to have eliminated the criminal organisation. The government said Trump actually signed the order on Friday night. Immigration lawyers noticed the federal government suddenly moving to deport Venezuelans who they would not otherwise have the legal right to expel from the country, and scrambled to file lawsuits to block what they believed was a pending proclamation.

Boasberg issued an initial order at 9:20 am on Saturday blocking the Trump administration from deporting five Venezuelans named as plaintiffs in the ACLU suit who were being detained by the government and believed they were about to be deported. The Trump administration appealed that order, contending that halting a presidential act before it has been announced would cripple the executive branch.

If the order were allowed to stand, "district courts would have licence to enjoin virtually any urgent national-security action just upon receipt of a complaint," the Justice Department wrote in its appeal.

Boasberg then scheduled the afternoon hearing on whether to expand his order to all people who could be targeted under Trump's declaration.

Deputy Assistant Attorney General Drew Ensign contended that the president had broad latitude to identify threats to the country and act under the 1798 law. He noted the US Supreme Court allowed President Harry Truman to continue to hold a German citizen in 1948, three years after World War II ended, under the measure. "This would cut very deeply into the prerogatives of the president," Ensign said of an injunction.

But Lee Gelernt of the ACLU noted the law has only been invoked three times before and contended that Trump did not have the authority to use it against a criminal gang rather than a recognised state. Boasberg said that precedent on the question seemed tricky but that the ACLU had a reasonable chance of success on those arguments, and so the order was merited.

Boasberg halted deportations for those in custody for up to 14 days, and scheduled a Friday hearing in the case.

The flurry of litigation shows the significance of Trump's declaration, the latest step by the administration to expand presidential power. Ensign argued that, as part of its reaction to the September 11, 2001 attack, Congress had given the president power to delegate "transnational" organisations threats on the level of recognised states. And Gelernt warned that the Trump administration could simply issue a new proclamation to use the Alien Enemies Act against another migrant gang, like MS-13, which has long been one of Trump's favourite targets.

Prez signs order to gut staff at Voice of America, other US-funded media orgs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

President Donald Trump's administration on Saturday began making deep cuts to Voice of America and other government-run, pro-democracy programming, with the organisation's director saying all VOA employees have been put on leave.

On Friday night, shortly after Congress passed its latest funding bill, Trump directed his administration to reduce the functions of several agencies to the minimum required by law. That included the US Agency for Global Media, which houses Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Asia and Radio Marti, which beams Spanish-language news into Cuba. On Saturday morning, Kari Lake, the failed Arizona gubernatorial and US Senate candidate whom Trump named a senior adviser to the agency, posted on X that employees should check their email. That coincided with notices going out placing Voice of America staff on paid administrative leave.

"For the first time in 83 years, the storied Voice of America is being silenced," Michael Abramowitz, the organisation's director, said in a statement. He added that "virtually" the entire 1300-person staff was placed on leave.

"VOA promotes freedom and democracy around the world by telling America's story and by providing objective and balanced news and information, especially for those living under tyranny," Abramowitz said. One reporter, who spoke under the condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the press, said: "We expected something like this to happen, and it just happened to be today."

The press advocacy group Reporters Without Borders said it "condemns this decision as a departure from the US's historic role as a defender of free information and calls on the US government to restore VOA and urges Congress and the international community to take action against this unprecedented move".

The Agency for Global Media also sent notices terminating grants to Radio Free Asia and other programming run by the agency. Voice of America transmits United States domestic news into other countries, often translated into local languages. Radio Free Asia, Europe and Marti beam news into countries with authoritarian regimes in those regions like China, North Korea and Russia.

"The cancellation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's grant agreement would be a massive gift to America's enemies," said the network's President and CEO, Stephen Capus, in a statement.

Combined, the networks reach an estimated 427 million people. They date back to the Cold War and are part of a network of government-funded organisations trying to extend US influence and combat authoritarianism that includes USAID, another agency targeted by Trump.

The reduction is a dramatic blow at a staple of post-Cold War order that has long had bipartisan support. Voice of America's directors have included Dick Carlson, the father of conservative commentator Tucker Carlson. Thomas Kent, former president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, said that Trump's intentions for the agencies are still foggy. Without these news sources, it will be that much harder for the country to get its messages to the world, he said. "Without the international broadcasting, the image of the United States and the Trump administration will be in the hands of others, including the administration's opponents, (and) countries and people who consider the United States an enemy," said Kent, an international consultant on media ethics.

A video posted on X by Lake on Saturday talked about cost-cutting measures, not mentioning the employees and the mission of Voice of America. Her video was made at a building leased by VOA that Lake described as a waste of money. She said she would try to break the agency's 15-year lease on the building.

"We're doing everything we can to cancel contracts that can be cancelled, save more, downsize and make sure there's no misuse of your dollars," she said.

The letter places employees on administrative leave and says staff would continue to receive pay and benefits "until otherwise notified". It ordered employees not to use Agency for Global Media facilities and return equipment like phones and computers. The Trump administration has already made other steps to assert its authority over Voice of America, and this week cancelled contracts that allowed VOA to use material from independent news organisations, such as The Associated Press. The administration has also banned the AP from press pools that cover the president and moved to take charge of what news organisations are members of the pools, and the FCC is investigating news organisations like CBS.

Trump's order requiring reductions also includes several other, lesser-known government agencies such as the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, a nonpartisan think tank, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund.

Carney seeks alliances in Europe as he deals with Donald Trump

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Ottawa

New Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney is heading to Paris and London on Monday to seek alliances as he deals with US President Donald Trump's attacks on Canada's sovereignty and economy.

Carney is purposely making his first foreign trip to the capital cities of the two countries that shaped Canada's early existence. At his swearing-in ceremony on Friday, Carney noted the country was built on the bedrock of three peoples, French, English and Indigenous, and said Canada is fundamentally different from America and will "never, ever, in any way shape or form, be part of the United States".

"The Trump factor is the reason for the trip. The Trump factor towers over everything else Carney must deal with," said Nelson Wiseman, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto.

The 59-year-old former central banker will meet with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Monday and later travel to London to sit down with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer in an effort to diversify trade and perhaps coordinate a response to Trump's tariffs.

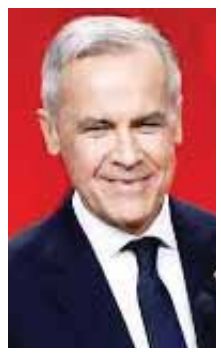
He will also meet with King Charles III, the head of state in Canada. The trip to England is a bit a homecoming, as Carney is a former governor of the Bank of England, the first noncitizen to be named to the role in the bank's 300-plus-year history. Carney then travels to the edge of Canada's Arctic to "reaffirm Canada's Arctic security and sovereignty" before returning to Ottawa where he's expected to call an election within days.

Carney has said he's ready to meet with Trump if he shows respect for Canadian sovereignty. He said he doesn't plan to visit Washington at the moment but hopes to have a phone call with the president soon.

Sweeping tariffs of 25% and Trump's talk of making Canada the 51st US state have infuriated Canadians, and many are avoiding buying American goods when they can. Carney's government is reviewing the purchase of US-made F-35 fighter jets in light of Trump's trade war.

The governing Liberal Party had appeared poised for a historic election defeat this year until Trump declared economic war and repeatedly has said Canada should become the 51st state. Now the party and its new leader could come out on top. Robert Bothwell, a professor of Canadian history and international relations at the University of Toronto, said Carney is wise not to visit Trump.

"There's no point in going to Washington," Bothwell said. "As (former Prime Minister Justin) Trudeau's treatment shows, all that results in is a crude attempt by Trump to humiliate his guests. Nor can you have a rational conversation with someone who simply sits there and repeats disproven lies."



Bothwell said that Trump demands respect, "but it's often a one-way street, asking others to set aside their self-respect to bend to his will." Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal, said it is absolutely essential that Canada diversify trade amidst the ongoing trade war with the United States. More than 75% of Canada's exports go to the US. Béland said Arctic sovereignty is also a key issue for Canada.

"President Trump's aggressive talk about both Canada and Greenland and the apparent rapprochement between Russia, a strong Arctic power, and the United States under Trump have increased anxieties about our control over this remote yet highly strategic region," Béland said.

China delivers 2nd of 8 modern submarines to Pakistan navy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Beijing

China has delivered a second new submarine, equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and sensors, to Pakistan as part of its efforts to beef up the navy of its all-weather ally to back its growing presence in the Arabian Sea and India's backyard - the Indian Ocean.

The Hangor-class submarine, which is part of the eight such submarines to Pakistan in a deal with around USD five billion, was launched in Wuhan, China's Hubei Province, official media here reported on Sunday. This is in addition to four modern naval frigates China supplied to Pakistan in the last few years as part of its efforts to boost the naval strength of Pakistan, amid the Chinese navy's steady expansion in the Arabian Sea, where it is developing the Gwadar port in Balochistan, and the Indian Ocean.

A Chinese expert told the state-run Global Times that the new submarine has a strong comprehensive combat capability to become a mainstay for the Pakistan Navy. Under an agreement, Pakistan will acquire eight Hangor-class submarines from China. Four of them will be built in China, while the remaining will be constructed in Karachi under a transfer of technology program, the Pakistan Navy said in a press release.

The submarines will be fitted with cutting-edge weapons and sensors, enabling them to engage targets at standoff ranges.

Zhang Junshe, a Chinese military affairs expert, told the Global Times that Hangor-class submarines possess strong underwater combat capabilities and are equipped with an air-independent propulsion system that will give the boat strong, sustained stealth capability, manoeuvrability and endurance. Its firepower includes torpedoes, anti-ship missiles and mine-laying capabilities, along with advanced underwater detection systems, he said.

According to a recent report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China has supplied 81 per cent of Pakistan's advanced military systems in the past five years, making Pakistan its biggest arms importer.

Pakistan's military acquisitions amounted to 63 per cent of China's total arms exports, with a total value of USD 5.28 billion in the last five years. Pakistan bought more advanced and diverse systems from China from 2020 to 2024, such as long-range reconnaissance drones and Type 054A guided-missile frigates, the SIPRI report said. Some of Pakistan's key orders in the past five years include the country's first spy ship, the Rizwan, more than 600 VT-4 battle tanks, and 36 J-10CE 4.5-generation fighters, according to the SIPRI database. China supplied the first delivery of multirole J-10CE fighter jets to Pakistan Air Force in 2022, adding to its JF-17 fighters jointly manufactured by both countries.

The fourth-generation JF-17 was jointly developed by Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, including the Block III version featuring an active electronically scanned array radar, which was inducted by the Pakistan Air Force in 2023.

Song Zhongping, a military commentator and former instructor of the Chinese military, told the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post that China might also export its fifth-generation fighter jet, the J-35 the stealth multirole fighter, "if Pakistan requests it".

16 people killed as ordnance from Syria's 13-year conflict explodes

Damascus (PTI): Ordnance from Syria's 13-year conflict exploded in the coastal city of Lattakia, collapsing a building and killing more than a dozen people, the Syrian Civil Defence said on Sunday.

The paramedic group, known as the White Helmets, said it worked overnight, searching through debris and recovered 16 bodies, including five women and five children, and that 18 others were injured.

The group and residents said the explosion occurred in a metal scrap storage space on the ground floor of the four-story building. The United Nations said in February that about a hundred have been killed from exploding ordnance during the last 13 years, adding that since the ouster of Bashar Assad in December, over 1,400 unexploded devices across Syria have been safely disposed of and 138 minefields and contaminated areas identified in Idleb, Aleppo, Hama, Deir-ez-Zor and Lattakia. Lattakia, a key port city, and Syria's coastal province recently witnessed a surge in violence, after gunmen loyal to Assad ambushed a security patrol.

Pope to miss Angelus delivery at St Peter's Square fifth time

Rome (PTI): Pope Francis continues his recovery from double pneumonia at Rome's Gemelli hospital with the Vatican expected to issue the traditional Sunday Angelus prayer as a written text for the fifth straight week. The pope typically delivers the Angelus from a window overlooking St Peter's Square to the gathered faithful, who have grown more numerous due to the Jubilee year that Francis inaugurated in December.

Along with a stop at St Peter's to seek indulgences by walking through the basilica's Holy Door, pilgrims are now also adding a stop at Gemelli, a 15-minute train ride from the Vatican. Doctors this week said the 88-year-old pontiff was no longer in critical, life-threatening condition, but have continued to emphasize that his condition remained complex due to his age, lack of mobility and the loss of part of a lung as a young man. Still, they are issuing fewer medical bulletins as the pontiff has been on an upward trajectory. An X-ray this week confirmed that the infection was clearing. Francis has not been seen publicly since he was admitted to the hospital February 14 after a bout of bronchitis that made it difficult for him to speak. Doctors soon added a diagnosis of double pneumonia and a polymicrobial (bacterial, viral and fungal) infection.

Francis has not been seen publicly since he was admitted to the hospital February 14 after a bout of bronchitis that made it difficult for him to speak

The first three weeks of his hospitalization were marked by a rollercoaster of setbacks, including respiratory crises, mild kidney failure and a severe coughing fit.

Doctors in the most recent medical update on Saturday said they were working to reduce the pope's nighttime reliance on the non-invasive ventilation mask, which will allow his lungs to work more.

Doctors underlined that while the pope's condition is stable, he still requires hospitalization for both physical and respiratory therapy, which are "showing further gradual improvements", the Vatican said Saturday in the first medical update in three days. The next update won't be issued until the middle of next week, the Vatican said.

Facts, not fear: Inside Mexico's pioneering drug harm reduction programmes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mexico City

Under warm strobe lights and pulsing house beats, a recent festival in Mexico City offered more than music, food and booze. Amidst the usual festival fare, a booth provided free, anonymous drug testing. The initiative, known as "Checa tu Sustancia" (Check Your Substance), is one of several recent efforts by Mexican civil society to reduce risk among people taking drugs.

Spearheaded by the Instituto RIA, a Mexico-based drug policy research and advocacy organisation, it aims to address drug use from a public health and social justice perspective, rather than a security one. In a well-lit corner of the festival, members of the Instituto RIA used reagents and laboratory porcelain plates to test substances that some of the partygoers planned to use and recorded the data.

Their analysis uses colour changes to indicate what's in the drug: It can reveal the presence of adulterants but not their exact proportion. They also offered test strips that can detect the presence of fentanyl and nasal sprays of naloxone, a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdose. Also available were informational flyers detailing the effects of various psychoactive substances and what to do to reduce the risks associated with using them, including simple but critical measures like staying hydrated and eating well.

While some partygoers seemed wary of the initiative, others approached it with curiosity. "(There is) amazement, but also a little bit of fear, because there is a whole context of criminalisation," said social psychology student Jessica Reyes Moreno, 27, a volunteer with Checa tu Sustancia.

When unexpected substances are detected, users receive detailed information on what they are, about their risks, potential interactions with other substances and dosage adjustments, empowering them to make informed choices.

Harm reduction vs. abstinence: When people understand that the focus is not on prohibiting but on offering information and safe, non-judgmental spaces where they can be heard, trust is built, said Reyes Moreno. "I think it's information we should have. Because (drug use) is taboo, and if we're uninformed, we can overdose," said a 34-year-old Mexican partygoer, who requested anonymity due to his use of illicit substances.

He said he feels there isn't enough information about illegal drugs in Mexico, and when there is, it's either confusing or all stigma. "It's just Don't do it,' but there's no such thing as If you do it, take this precaution.'" The "don't do it" approach sees abstinence as the solution. In contrast, harm reduction, as defined by Harm Reduction International, aims to minimize the negative health, social and legal effects of substance use by working with people without judgment or requiring them to stop using drugs.

The approach focuses more on people — and their communities — than on the substance. "We never say, you shouldn't consume this,'" said Zara Snapp, a political scientist and director of the Instituto RIA. "The best way to reduce your risks is not to consume at all. But if you have made the decision to consume, we want you to have as much information as possible so you can take care of yourself."

Choose to be happy: The prohibitionist, hardline approach of the war on drugs in Mexico has led to the perception of the user as someone who is necessarily associated with drug trafficking or criminal activities. Earlier this year, Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum unveiled her government's latest anti-drug campaign, "Stay away from drugs. Fentanyl kills", which centres on the synthetic opioid responsible in its deadliest year for more than 70,000 overdose deaths each year in the US — now down to an estimated 52,000 deaths a year.

Aimed at young Mexicans, the campaign frames drug use as a public health issue, but some of the videos and glowing neon billboards show scenarios in which death and loneliness (drug use) are contrasted with life and family (not using drugs). They read, "Choose to be happy".

"It's not that if I use drugs I won't be happy, or if I stop using drugs I'll be happy," said Lilia Pacheco, operational director of PrevenCasa AC, a Tijuana-based organisation that runs harm-reduction initiatives for opioid users, mostly deportees from the United States who report that they started using in that country.

"How can we say that to someone who is using because they are cold, hungry or in withdrawal?" she said.

Mexico's health department did not immediately respond to inquiries regarding concerns that its latest campaign stigmatizes drug use. Dr Carlos Magis, a professor at Mexico's National Autonomous University's medical school and member of a working group on opioids, said that stigma poses serious challenges. He cited examples of health workers refusing treatment without abstinence, limited access to naloxone or the scarcity of public methadone clinics.

Breaking down fear and social isolation: A recent report by the Mexican Observatory of Mental Health and Drug Use, found that between 2013 and 2024, 5,901 people in Mexico were treated for emergencies related to opioid use, with it trending up.

PrevenCasa reduces harm not by asking users to stop using, but by showing that their lives matter by providing them with safe injection equipment, showers, toiletries and social events like Friday movie nights. "These interventions improve quality of life, unlike a sign that says fentanyl kills you,'" said Pacheco. "The right to health should be universal."

Both Pacheco and Snapp emphasized that collective care is at the heart of harm reduction efforts. Whether practised in the facilities of organisations working on the border or at electronic music festivals, the goal is to break down social isolation and fear in concrete ways.

Chhattisgarh plans to double state GDP

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Raipur

Chhattisgarh plans to double the state's gross domestic product (GSDP) to ₹10 Lakh Crore in five years, combining the state's rich resources with progressive policies to bolster economic growth and development, its Finance Minister OP Choudhary said. The state's new industrial policy that incentivised employment creation has already drawn investment commitments of more than ₹1 Lakh crore in the last 15 months, he said.

Semiconductors manufacturing, data centres, IT services, pharmaceuticals as well as medical tourism are the focus areas, he said. The power surplus state is also eyeing renewable energy, particularly solar, as it has abundant sunlight through the year, the minister said, adding that a few opportunities in hydel power are also being explored. "We have a focus on clean energy. We have a focus on sustainability. Sustainable development will sustain in the long term," he said. While it looks at boosting manufacturing, the state is tapping other areas such as ayurveda and medical tourism as well as using its vast natural resources as a draw for tourism.

"We want to develop Raipur as a wedding destination. Our secondary sector is already very strong. We are focusing on the tertiary sector and the labour-intensive sector so that we can give employment to our youth." The state is focusing on infrastructure development, urban transport modernisation, digital connectivity and education and skill development to pivot a path to economic progress.

Aligned with the vision of making India a developed nation by 2047, no state should lag behind in the race for development, he said. "As a state government, we have to worry about this. And it is our duty to contribute to the development of the country. And when the country becomes a developed nation, Chhattisgarh should not lag behind. The 3 crore people of this state should not lag behind," he said.

> We have a focus on clean energy. We have a focus on sustainability. Sustainable development will sustain in the long term
>
> — OP CHOUDHARY, CHHATTISGARH FINANCE MINISTER

Chhattisgarh has prepared a vision document to become a developed state by 2047. In the medium term, "We have set a very important goal of doubling the GDP of Chhattisgarh to ₹10 Lakh crore within 5 years," he said. "For that, including inflation, we need a growth rate of 14 per cent. This is a very important goal. But I am confident that we will be able to do this. It is a very ambitious target." The state government led by Chief Minister Vishnudeo Sai feels creating a skilled human resource base is important and is linking education with vocational skills and training to equip students with employable skills.

This month, P Choudhary presented the Chhattisgarh government's Budget for the fiscal year 2025-26, totalling ₹1.65 Lakh crore, with a focus on economic revival, infrastructure development, and social welfare. While last year's Budget focused on theme GYAN (Gareeb, Yuva, Annadata & Nari), this year's Budget aims to drive progress in the state under the theme of GYAN ke liye 'GATI' to build on the progress made so far, he said discussing the focus of this year's budget.

"In GATI, G stands for good governance, A for accelerating infrastructure, T for technology and I for industrial growth," he said. Last year's Budget centred around inclusive development. But for inclusive growth, economic development is equally important, he said. With enhanced allocations, the budget aims to boost infrastructure, industrial development, and regional connectivity, creating an environment that attracts both public and private investments.

The bureaucrat-turned-politician said improving tax through governance is his government's first strategy.

"Secondly, I have talked about speed in this budget. We will focus on infrastructure and industrial growth and ensure rapid economic growth. When there is economic growth, the revenue collection will increase automatically," he said. "So, governance and economic growth, these two pillars are our focus." At the same time, the state government is working aggressively on social welfare schemes, targeted at women, tribals and the underprivileged.

"Alongside, to ensure rapid economic growth, we are focusing on infrastructure and industrial growth," he said, adding that his budget is targeting a 18 per cent growth in infrastructure spending on roads, irrigation projects and such other areas with a multiplier effect.

"We want to develop 1 lakh hectare of agricultural land," he said, pointing out that the state has also introduced a new industrial policy. "We have increased the industry subsidy by 3 times". Choudhary said the state government is targeting to complete a survey on Chhattisgarh's first metro rail project this year. Besides, it is looking to boost air connectivity with airports and aerodromes at major cities of the state.

On its rich mineral resources, he said the state government stands for sustainable and environment-friendly exploitation of resources while ensuring proper rehabilitation of those affected by the mining activities. Besides coal and iron ore, the state is blessed with critical minerals like lithium which is very important for EVs, he said. "We are also focusing on diversification. We are focusing on labour-intensive manufacturing such as textiles, semiconductors, data processing, data centres, pharmaceuticals and medical facilities. We have a clear vision for industrial development," he said.

India, New Zealand announce resumption of FTA talks

Union Minister Piyush Goyal and New Zealand's Todd McClay during a meeting PTI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

After a gap of about ten years, India and New Zealand on Sunday announced resumption of negotiations for a proposed free trade agreement to boost economic ties.

India and New Zealand began negotiating the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in April 2010 to boost trade in goods, services, and investment. However, after nine rounds of discussions, the talks stalled in 2015. "The two nations are pleased to announce the launch of negotiations for a comprehensive and mutually beneficial India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations," the commerce ministry said.

The announcement was made after the meeting of Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Todd McClay, New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment.

Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon is here on a four-day visit from March 16.

"The India-New Zealand FTA negotiations aim to achieve balanced outcomes that enhance supply chain integration and improve market access," it said.

"With bilateral trade continuing to grow steadily, surpassing $1 billion during April-January 2025, the FTA negotiations aim to unlock new avenues for businesses and consumers, fostering mutual growth and prosperity of our nations," Goyal said in a post on X.

Artificial Intelligence driving force in modern markets, says CCI chief

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Artificial intelligence is a driving force in modern markets that also has the potential to enable collusion, including algorithmic discrimination under the garb of dynamic pricing, Competition Commission of India (CCI) chief Ravneet Kaur said on Sunday.

She also emphasised the need to adopt a forward-looking approach as well as trust-based regulations.

Delivering the special address at the 10th National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in the national capital, Kaur said Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a driving force in modern markets. AI shapes pricing strategies, decision-making, and operational efficiencies across industries but also presents risks, she noted. CCI Chairperson said, AI can enable new forms of collusion such as "cartels without human communication, price coordination without explicit agreements, and algorithmic discrimination under the garb of dynamic pricing".

The fair trade regulator is already conducting a study on AI and competition.

While mentioning that traditional enforcement models, built on adversarial approaches, are no longer sufficient in addressing evolving market complexities, Kaur said the future demands a more collaborative regulatory strategy.

"Today's competitive landscape is defined by platform economies, network effects, and algorithm-driven decision-making," the CCI chief said and added that market power today is about data control, network effects, and platform reach. The goal is to balance innovation with competition, ensuring fair and open markets, she noted. At the conference, organised by the CCI, Union Minister of State for Corporate Affairs Harsh Malhotra pitched for real time monitoring of markets to ensure fair competition. Since the enforcement of the Competition Act, 2002, CCI has received over 1,300 antitrust cases and out of them, 1,180 cases have been disposed of.

Competition Commission of India (CCI) Chairperson Ravneet Kaur speaks at CCIs 10th National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in New Delhi PTI

Last year, the regulator received 42 antitrust cases and prima facie violations were found in 8 cases, leading to detailed investigations.

As many as 19 cases were closed at the prima facie stage due to no violation, and 15 cases are pending at various stages of inquiry. In 2024, the watchdog received 128 combination notices and 126 cases were disposed of, Kaur said, adding that in 2 cases, approvals were granted with remedies to safeguard competition.

India should seek reciprocal concessions from EU: GTRI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India should seek reciprocal concessions from the European Union (EU) under the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in the medical devices sector to promote its exports, economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said on Sunday.

India charges zero to 10 per cent tariffs on most medical devices and a duty cut by India on medical devices without addressing EUs regulatory challenges will result in low exports but large scale imports from EU.

"To achieve a fair trade deal, India must demand reciprocity. India should cut tariff on medical devices only if the EU reduces its non-tariff barriers," the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said.

The ongoing India-EU FTA negotiations on medical devices are asymmetrical. While the EU demands zero tariffs on medical devices from India, it maintains high regulatory barriers that hinder Indian exports difficult in the EU markets, it added.

GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said the EU customs duty rates are zero, but market entry costs are substantial because of the stringent regulatory framework.

"Exporting to EU has become more difficult as it replaced the Medical Device Directives (EU-MDD) with the more stringent Medical Device Rules (EU-MDR)," he said.

Citing an example, he said the new certification and regulatory expenses amount to 60,000-300,000 euro annually for market access of 100,000-3.75 million euro.

"Certification approval time increased from the earlier 4-8 months to 2-3 years now. Shortage of notified bodies and auditors in the EU is leading to high certification costs," Srivastava said.

On account of this, Indian exporters are withdrawing from the EU market or limiting product offerings as high entry and certification costs make market participation financially unsustainable, he noted.

Moreover, he said the lack of Indian participation in the Medical Device Single Audit Program (MDSAP) limits the acceptance of Indian devices in key regulated markets.

MDSAP allows medical device manufacturers to be audited only once for compliance with regulatory requirements in multiple markets, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, and the United States.

To facilitate exports in EU and other major markets, India needs to undertake the reforms like seeking MRAs (mutual recognition agreements) with the EU, USA, and other regulated markets based on ISO (International Organization for Standardization) harmonised standards.

Indian medical devices sector is steadily growing and helping India cut its reliance on imports.

In 2024, India's global exports were $2.3 Billion while imports were $4.7 Billion.

EU remains an important market with exports of $580 Million and imports of $1.15 billion.

Digital competition law after due process, says Union Minister Harsh Malhotra

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The digital competition law will be brought out after following the due process, Union Minister Harsh Malhotra said on Sunday. More than 100 suggestions have been received on the draft Digital Competition Bill (DCB), which was put out for public consultations by the corporate affairs ministry last year.

Malhotra, the Minister of State for Corporate Affairs, said the report from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) on the bill is awaited. "We are not in a hurry (on bringing the digital competition law) (we will follow) due process," the minister said.

Speaking at the National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in the national capital, he also said the best practices with respect to digital markets in other jurisdictions like Japan, Australia, and Europe can be looked at and how they can fit into the Indian market. He also called for real-time monitoring and analysing of markers for fair competition.

The DCB has proposed certain ex-ante provisions to ensure proactive monitoring of the behaviour of large digital enterprises and curb possible practices. Currently, the Competition Act primarily envisages an 'ex-post' framework of intervention, wherein the CCI intervenes after the occurrence of anti-competitive conduct.

Mcap of five of top-10 most valued firms declines ₹93k crore

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The combined market capitalisation of five of the top-10 most valued firms declined by ₹93,357.52 Crore, with IT giants Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services taking the biggest hit, in line with a weak trend in domestic equities. Last week, the BSE Sensex benchmark declined 503.67 points or 0.68 per cent, and the NSE Nifty fell 155.3 points or 0.69 per cent. The stock markets were closed on Friday on the occasion of Holi festival.

Meanwhile, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India and Reliance Industries saw a decline in their market valuations.

In contrast, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, ITC, Bajaj Finance and Bharti Airtel posted gains. The five firms together added ₹49,833.62 Crore in their market capitalisation. The market capitalisation (mcap) of Infosys dropped by ₹44,226.62 Crore to ₹6,55,820.48 Crore.

The Mumbai-based TCS' valuation tumbled by ₹35,800.98 Crore to ₹12,70,798.97 Crore and slipped to the third place among the country's 10-most valuable companies chart.

Hindustan Unilever's market valuation depreciated by ₹6,567.11 Crore to ₹5,11,235.81 Crore. State Bank of India's mcap decreased by ₹4,462.31 Crore to ₹6,49,489.22 Crore, and that of Reliance Industries' went lower by ₹2,300.50 Crore, taking its market capitalisation to ₹16,88,028.20 Crore. However, ICICI Bank's valuation surged by ₹25,459.16 Crore to ₹8,83,202.19 Crore.

Sugar production declines 16 per cent to 23.71 Million tonnes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India's sugar production has declined by 16.13 per cent to 23.71 Million tonnes so far in the ongoing 2024-25 season, creating challenges for government policies which were formulated based on higher initial projections, cooperative body NFCSF said on Sunday.

The National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories (NFCSF) expressed concern over the "ambiguity" in sugar production numbers as the 2024-25 sugarcane crushing season (October-September) nears its end with significantly lower output than initially projected.

Sugar production estimates have been repeatedly revised downward since the season began, creating challenges for government policies which were formulated based on an initial projection of 33.3 Million tonnes, the industry body said in a statement.

> The entire sugar industry in Maharashtra has found itself in huge financial trouble this year. It is very difficult to correlate expenses of 365 days
>
> — HARSHVARDHAN PATIL, NFCSF PRESIDENT

"One section of the industry submitted an estimate of 33.3 million tonnes of sugar production to the central government. Based on that, the central government started formulating its policies," NFCSF said. The central government had permitted exports of 1 million tonnes of sugar in January 2025 based on the initial production estimate, but now faces a supply-demand mismatch as actual production figures trend lower.

According to NFCSF data, production in Maharashtra, India's largest sugar producer, fell to 7.86 Million tonnes till March 15 of the current season, from 10.04 Million tonnes a year ago.

Output in Uttar Pradesh, the country's second largest producer, decreased to 8.09 million tonnes from 8.85 Million tonnes, while Karnataka's production declined to 3.91 Million tonnes from 4.95 Million tonnes in the same period.

NFCSF President Harshvardhan Patil said the crushing season across most states would conclude by March-end, while Uttar Pradesh mills would operate until mid-April. Patil expressed concern over the shortened crushing period, particularly in Maharashtra where the season lasted only 83 days against the economically viable duration of 140-150 days. "The entire sugar industry in Maharashtra has found itself in huge financial trouble this year. It is very difficult to correlate expenses of 365 days and load it on an 83-day season," Patil said.

Major sugarcane growing states faced multiple challenges this season. The Co-0238 variety in Uttar Pradesh suffered heavy infestation of "Red Rot" disease and "Top Shoot Borer" pests, while standing cane in Maharashtra and Karnataka experienced premature flowering, resulting in stunted growth and reduced sugar yields. NFCSF has projected the country's total sugar output to be lower at 25.9 million tonnes in the ongoing 2024-25 season, compared to 31.9 million tonnes in the previous season. Despite current challenges, NFCSF Managing Director Prakash Naiknaware expressed optimism about the 2025-26 season, citing increased plantings due to satisfactory rainfall in 2024 and favorable weather predictions.

"If that happens, the availability of sugarcane and sugar production will be much better not only in the ensuing 2025-26 season but may also extend into 2026-27," Naiknaware said.

Indian corporate houses remain positive for hiring persons with disabilities

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kolkata

Indian companies are ramping up hiring of persons with disabilities (PwDs), seeing it as both a "social imperative" and a "strategic business advantage" amid growing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments, stakeholders said. Onboarding such people in Indian corporate houses has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years, they said.

Indian companies, ranging from the steel and mining sectors to the insurance segment are focusing on workplace accessibility to onboard PwDs in their job rolls. Future Generali India Insurance Company MD and CEO Anup Rau said the insurer has achieved the milestone of one per cent of its workforce comprising of PwDs.

"The commitment to ensuring at least one per cent PwDs of our workforce is rooted in our belief that inclusion is not just a box to tick or a policy to implement it's a responsibility to create a meaningful change," Rau said. In the last one year, the insurer's PwD workforce has increased from 16 to 41 employees across 16 regional branches, and nearly 22 per cent of the PwD hires are women, he said.

"In FY'23 it was stated that only seven of the Nifty 50 companies had over one per cent PwD employees, with four out of them being in the public sector space. This stark reality underscores the urgent need for corporate leadership in championing inclusion," Rau said.

Vedanta Chief Human Resource Officer Madhu Srivastava said the group has taken a slew of steps to enhance workplace accessibility such as ramps and dedicated walkways for easy mobility, braille-enabled elevators to support visually impaired employees and text-to-speech software for better digital accessibility, and ensure a seamless experience for individuals with disabilities.

"Currently, we employ over 50 individuals from the PwD community in front-end roles and continue to expand our efforts in this space. Additionally, we have onboarded interns with disabilities to provide them with hands-on exposure to the dynamic environment of a global natural resources conglomerate like ours," Srivastava said.

> Currently, we employ over 50 individuals from the PwD community in front-end roles and continue to expand our efforts in this space
>
> — MADHU SRIVASTAVA, VEDANTA CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCE OFFICER

While the group's core operations in mining and smelting present certain challenges in integrating PwDs into technical roles, it remains "committed to identifying opportunities that provide them with meaningful exposure and upskilling," the Vedanta official said. "Embracing workplace diversity, including hiring persons with disabilities, is not just a social imperative it is a strategic business advantage," she said.

Tata Steel spokesperson said the company employs 100+ PwD employees across functions. In an emailed response, the spokesperson said, "Over the past 2-3 years, the number of PwD employees at Tata Steel has steadily increased. We have made significant strides in our hiring practices and have actively sought to create a more inclusive environment."

The steelmaker's official also said including people with disabilities in the workforce strengthens businesses by fostering diverse perspectives and boosting creativity and innovation. With environmental, social and governance-focused hiring and government incentives like tax benefits for PWD employment, the share of such employees in the formal workforce is expected to double by 2030, human resources investment platform First Meridian Global Services and Innovsource CEO Manmeet Singh said.

Large corporations and startups alike are "prioritising diversity, especially in sectors like IT, retail, and BFSI, where remote and hybrid work models enable greater participation," Singh said.

"Despite reports that India has over 7 Crore persons with disabilities (PWDs), and their employability rate remains at just 0.4 per cent, hiring of PWDs in India has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years," he said.

Atlanta-based Global technology & digital talent solutions provider NLB Services CEO Sachin Alug said integrating persons with disability, although a focus area, is gaining momentum slowly in India Inc.

"Today, culture plays a major role in determining the brand identity of a company and how it is perceived by partners, customers, employees and the entire business ecosystem. In order to build a diversity-oriented culture, businesses are striving to employ a diverse workforce," Alug said. However, there is a flip side to the story. Leading HR service provider Randstad India'-Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Study: 'Embracing All Abilities', revealed that talents with special abilities are employed majorly at junior and middle levels (29.84 per cent and 23.27 per cent, respectively), while their representation is relatively lower at senior and management roles.

Adaptation to Seasonal Changes

Due to changing weather patterns and increased exposure to environmental toxins, our skin and hair confront particular challenges when the seasons changes

Due to changing weather patterns and increased exposure to environmental toxins, our skin and hair confront particular challenges when the seasons change, especially during this time of the year. To properly handle these changes, we must modify our skincare and hair care regimens. These professional tips and advice can help you keep your skin and hair healthy throughout these periods.

Understanding Seasonal Impacts

A change in the weather frequently occurs over the holiday season, increasing humidity and exposing people to toxins from things like fireworks. The health of both skin and hair may be negatively impacted by these variables.

The change in weather, paired with makeup, pollutants, and erratic schedules, can take a toll on your skin, leaving it dull and tired. Excessive sweating and increased oil production can cause acne, clogged pores, and sunburns.

Skincare Adjustments

- **Gentle Cleansing:** With increased exposure to pollutants, it's essential to cleanse your skin thoroughly to remove impurities. Use a gentle cleanser twice daily to prevent clogged pores and breakouts.
- **Antioxidant Protection:** Pollutants can lead to free radical damage, causing premature aging. Incorporate antioxidant-rich serums into your routine to combat this effect.
- **Moisturization:** Despite the humidity, maintaining skin hydration is crucial. Opt for lightweight, non-comedogenic moisturizers to keep your skin supple without clogging pores.
- **Sun Protection:** Even during festive seasons, applying a broad-spectrum sunscreen is vital to shield your skin from harmful UV rays and prevent premature aging, sunburns, hyperpigmentation, and long-term skin damage.
- **Cleansing is crucial:** Use a gentle cleanser twice daily and apply an antioxidant-rich serum to protect your skin from free radical damage. Moisturizing and using a broad-spectrum sunscreen, even indoors, is essential.

Hair Care Adjustments

- **Protective Measures:** Exposure to pollutants can make hair dry and brittle. Using leave-in conditioners or oils can create a protective barrier for the hair and scalp.
- **Gentle Handling:** Avoid excessive heat styling and frequent shampooing during festive periods to prevent further dryness and damage.
- **Regular Trimming:** Keeping hair ends healthy through regular trims can prevent split ends and maintain hair vitality.

Similarly, hair tends to become dry and brittle due to pollutants. Using leave-in conditioners or oils can create a protective barrier for the hair and scalp.

Holistic Care

Beyond topical treatments, overall wellness plays a significant role in skin and hair health.

- **Hydration:** Drinking plenty of water helps maintain skin elasticity and hair strength.
- Balanced Diet: Consuming a diet rich in vitamins and minerals supports overall skin and hair health.
- **Adequate Rest:** Proper sleep allows the body to repair and rejuvenate, reflecting positively on skin and hair.

If you eat a well-balanced diet, drink plenty of water, and get plenty of rest, it will automatically show on your skin and hair. Maintaining their health requires modifying your skincare and hair care regimens to coincide with seasonal shifts and celebratory events.

— BY DR KARUNA MALHOTRA, AESTHETIC PHYSICIAN & COSMETOLOGIST

SEASONAL CHANGE

Indian summers (March–June) bring intense heat and humidity, leading to various skin and hair concerns. Excessive sweating and increased oil production can cause acne, clogged pores, and sunburns. Prolonged sun exposure also results in tanning, dehydration, and pigmentation. Skin tends to become dull and sensitive, requiring lightweight, oil-free moisturizers, sunscreen, and regular hydration. Hair also suffers in summer, becoming greasy, frizzy, and prone to dandruff due to sweat and humidity. The scalp may feel itchy, and excessive washing can strip natural oils, leading to dryness and breakage. UV exposure can further weaken hair, causing color fading and split ends. To combat these issues, it is essential to use mild, sulfate-free shampoos, hydrating hair masks, and protective hairstyles. Drinking plenty of water, maintaining a balanced diet, and using cooling skincare ingredients like aloe vera and cucumber help keep skin and hair fresh, healthy, and nourished during summer.

Understanding Seasonal Impacts

A change in the weather frequently occurs over the holiday season, increasing humidity and exposing people to toxins from things like fireworks. The health of both skin and hair may be negatively impacted by these variables.

The change in weather, paired with makeup, pollutants, and erratic schedules, can take a toll on your skin, leaving it dull and tired.

The change in weather, paired with makeup, pollutants, and erratic schedules, can take a toll on your skin, leaving it dull and tired.

Survivors Join Hands to Stop TB

Before 2025 *World TB Day*, I spent a day accompanying TB-affected street activists (TASA) in Delhi, women who assist homeless women and female migrant workers in finding TB services. It was an intense experience, connecting with women battling gender inequalities and surviving. Homelessness or migrant status significantly increases TB risk and gender-based suffering.

TB and Gender Inequalities Affect Both: Career and the Person Being Cared For

I recall a powerful encounter with a TB-affected woman supporting others through treatment. Her story highlights the importance of advocacy and community support for homeless women, empowering them to act against TB and assert their rights. As Samantha Power said, "All advocacy is, at its core, an exercise in empathy."

Empathy Binds Women to Stop TB

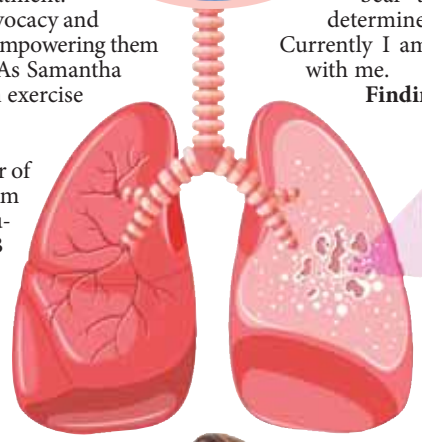
Jyoti's story is one of resilience. Daughter of a vegetable vendor, she graduated from Delhi University and is pursuing further education while working. She experienced TB firsthand when her sister suffered from it in 2019, navigating misdiagnosis and expensive treatment.

"We spent INR 1.5 lakh (about USD 1721) on her treatment with borrowed money. But we could save her life, and she was cured of TB."

Never Say Die Attitude

Jyoti faced immense challenges, particularly after her mother's death in 2022. Despite financial hardship, she began working while continuing her education, determined to fulfill her mother's dream.

"When she was gone, our lives were broken. We are now slowly coming to terms with her loss. Right after completing my class 12, I started working in a call centre as our financial condition was not good. My father had said that if I wanted to study, I would have to bear the expenses myself. But come what may, I was determined to fulfil my mother's dream of becoming a teacher. Currently I am the sole bread winner of the family," Jyoti shared with me.



THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE SUPPORT

Reena, living in a threatened Delhi slum, was diagnosed with TB in 2010, interrupting her treatment due to neglect. After 14 years, her symptoms returned severely in June 2024. Fortunately, she met Jyoti, a TASA with Humana People to People India, during a "Saheli Support Group" meeting.

Jyoti recognised Reena's symptoms and took her to government clinics. Despite initial negative test results, Jyoti persisted, securing a positive diagnosis and initiating treatment. She also helped Reena access financial support through the "Nikshay Poshan Yojna."

Finding Light in Helping Others

Jyoti became a TASA in August 2024, surveying areas, organising health camps, and assisting with government procedures. She helps people obtain essential documents and encourages them to take control of their lives.

"We TASAs do survey work in our allotted areas, looking for homeless people with TB symptoms and also asking the people about their needs. We hold health camps to mobilise the homeless persons of our area. In these health camps, doctors do free health checkups and provide free medicines. We also help people navigate the hospital system (and other government systems). We help them get their identity cards and other documents made, without which they cannot avail the existing government facilities.

— By Shobha Shukla (The author is the award-winning founding Managing Editor and Executive Director of Citizen News Service)

SAHELI SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS

Weekly Saheli Support Group meetings educate women on TB and other health issues, fostering empowerment and knowledge sharing. They address challenges like unequal wages and discrimination, encouraging women to advocate for their rights.

"These meetings have yielded good results by way of general empowerment and knowledge sharing among the homeless and migrant women. They are now capable of getting birth certificate, Aadhar unique identification card, etc, made themselves without any help," she added.

Jyoti finds immense satisfaction in helping vulnerable women. Her message is clear: respect and support all lives, regardless of education or economic status.

"I get a lot of gratification by deploying my skills as a social worker with Human People to People India" said Jyoti. Jyoti's message to all women is: "One must be educated, but we must respect even those who are not educated.

The Need for Early Detection and Prevention

With nearly 2 lakh new cases of kidney failure diagnosed annually in India, Chronic Kidney Disease is a growing health concern, writes ABHI SINGHAL

Nearly 210000 new cases of kidney failure are diagnosed annually in India highlighting the growing burden of Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD). A research paper 'Journey of a Patient with CKD in India' published by Kidney 360, a Nephrology Journal reveals that CKD is often diagnosed late in India. This delay stems from a lack of awareness and the absence of noticeable symptoms particularly with higher incidences of interstitial nephritis and CKD of unknown origin.

Our kidneys the silent workhorses of the body play an important role in filtering waste and maintaining overall health. *World Kidney Day* observed on March 12th every year, serves as a crucial reminder of their importance and the need to combat the growing prevalence of kidney disease.

Recently marking this significant day medical professionals highlighted the critical need for proactive kidney care. **Dr Vikas Agarwal**, Director & HOD - Robotic Urology, Kidney Transplant, Uro Oncology, Andrology & Male Infertility Kidney Transplant, *Akash Healthcare* speaking on the occasion emphasised that kidney health through exercise, hydration, and a vegetarian diet while avoiding junk food and preservatives. Early signs include swelling and fatigue, but routine kidney function and urine tests ensure early detection, especially for diabetics and hypertensives.

Dr Vikas Agarwal said, "If you talk about Indian transplant numbers, it goes around fifteen thousand per year, and most of them are living-related donors. If we talk about kidney health, we need to exercise daily, have a routine walk, and drink a lot of water to stay hydrated. We should decrease the amount of salt and sugar in our diet, consume more vegetarian food, and avoid junk food and preservatives.

Early Signs - If we talk about the early signs of kidney issues, swelling may occur, such as feeling your ring becoming tight or experiencing swelling in your legs, hands, or fingers. Other signs include early tiredness, low energy, and urine-related issues like frothy urine or microscopic abnormalities in a urine test.

Precautions - Diet and hydration play a crucial role in preventing kidney diseases. Proper hydration helps flush out waste and excess salt, reducing the risk of kidney stones and ensuring proper kidney function. A vegetarian diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables helps prevent kidney disease, while junk food, soft drinks like Coca-Cola, and alcohol should be avoided.

Most kidney diseases are diagnosed late due to a lack of awareness. Since we have two kidneys, they continue functioning until more than 50% of their capacity is lost, leading to late symptoms. The best way to detect kidney disease early is through a kidney function test and a urine routine test. Otherwise, symptoms appear only when significant damage has occurred, such as swelling around the eyes or extreme fatigue."

McLaren's Lando Norris wins Australian Grand Prix

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Melbourne

McLaren's Lando Norris has won a chaotic rain-affected Australian Grand Prix, his first at Albert Park, with the Brit just managing to stay ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen following a third safety car late in Sunday's race.

Lewis Hamilton had a miserable Ferrari debut. The seven-time champion finished 10th and was annoyed by constant radio messages from his pit team.

Norris started the season-opening race, Melbourne's first wet race since 2010, from pole position. But, while he initially came under increasing pressure from Piastri, who set a series of fastest laps until his papaya team told him to hold position, the Australian spun at the penultimate corner on lap 44 as the rain intensified and dropped down the order.

A late race fightback helped Piastri recover to take ninth place including passing Hamilton on the final lap and two championship points. Verstappen finished 0.895 of a second behind Norris after starting from third on the grid, and took advantage of Piastri's misfortune and the final safety car and tire stops. Mercedes' George Russell closed out the top-three.

"I knew I had a good pace, but I made one mistake in turn six and he got me in the DRS and the DRS around here is probably like a second or something so that allowed it to keep staying within that second," said Norris, who scored McLaren's 12th win in Australia to steal the outright record from Ferrari.

"I know what I'm capable of, I know what I can do, but obviously it's just round one, so we need to go and do it again next weekend and then continue from there. A long season ahead, we've just got to keep our head down and keep pushing."

Williams endured a mix bag, with Alex Albon securing his best result since Abu Dhabi 2020, and new recruit Carlos Sainz who won here last year driving for Ferrari out at the final turn on the opening lap.

Mercedes was thrilled to get two cars in the top five, with Russell onto the podium, his first since winning in Las Vegas last year. Rookie Andrea Kimi Antonelli, who replaced Hamilton at the silver squad, showed his class with a superb fightback drive from 16th on the grid, following his Q1 exit, to finish fifth.

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll also made the best of the chaotic conditions to move up from 13th to sixth, ahead of Sauber's Nico Hülkenberg, bringing home eight points in what has been a difficult weekend for the green team with its car uncompetitive in dry running.

Ferrari is the most successful constructor at the Australian Grand Prix, with 11 wins since its first in 1987, but it will leave Melbourne disappointed with just five points to show after Charles Leclerc finished eighth and Hamilton 10th.

The Scuderia was seen as a potential championship challenger ahead of the season start and has plenty of work to do ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix next week. The Melbourne race had a thrilling start with Racing Bull's Isack Hadjar out on the formation lap, and Alpine's Jack Doohan joined Sainz in crashing out on the opening lap.

There were just 14 finishers, after Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso hit the turn eight barriers on lap 34, while Red Bull's Liam Lawson and Sauber's Gabriel Bortoleto went into the barriers and out of the race 10 laps from home in the treacherously wet conditions.

New Zealand beat Pakistan by nine wickets

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Christchurch

A new era for Pakistan white ball cricket got off to a rough start on Sunday with a nine wicket loss to New Zealand in the first of five Twenty20 internationals. First time captain Salman Ali Agha-led a new look team into the match which followed Pakistan's poor performance at home in the 50-overs Champions Trophy and began its buildup to the 2026 T20 World Cup.

The Pakistan batting crumbled against the New Zealand pace attack and the tourists were all out for 91 in 18.4 overs, its fifth-lowest total in T20 internationals. New Zealand easily ran down that total, reaching 92-1 from 10.1 overs with Tim Seifert making 44 from 29 balls and Finn Allen 29 from 17.

Tim Robinson was 18 not out and took two runs from the first ball of the 11th over to complete the win. "It was obviously difficult and we weren't up to the mark," Ali Agha said. "They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right areas and there was swing and seam for them as well. "But out batting wasn't up to the mark. We have won day before the next game and we will try to gather ourselves and be better in the next game."

Pakistan was in trouble from the start with the new opening pair of Mohammad Haris and Hasan Nawaz, stepping in for the veterans Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam, both dismissed without scoring in the first eight balls of the match.

> They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right areas and there was swing and seam for them as well
>
> – SALMAN ALI AGHA, PAKISTAN CAPTAIN

A fully fit Kyle Jamieson took 3-8 and Jacob Duffy 4-14 as Pakistan stumbled to 14-4 at the end of the six over powerplay. Jamieson and Duffy produced pace, bounce and swing on a brownish pitch at Hagley Oval and the Pakistan batters had no early response.

"It was really nice to be back on home soil," said Jamieson who bowled 18 dot balls. "We had some pretty favorable conditions which I'm sure me and (Duffy) would take most places around the country. "It was nice to have those and just try to cash in as much as we could."

Salman and Khushdil Shah gave the Pakistan innings some impetus when they took 14 runs from the 10th over bowled by Ish Sodhi and 15 from the 11th bowled by Michael Bracewell to lift Pakistan from 28-4 after nine overs to 57-5 after 11. The Pakistan batters looked more at home against the spinners

But Duffy returned to dismiss Khushdil for 32 and the rest followed quickly with only three batters reaching three figures.

Seifert put New Zealand on course to a comfortable win, taking 12 runs from the third over and 14 runs off the fifth as New Zealand reached 43-1 in the power play. Allen, unusually subdued, scored only nine runs in the first six overs.

New Zealand was 90-1 after 10 overs, needing only 2 runs to win, when the umpires unaccountably called for drinks.

Bayern held to 1-1 draw at Union Berlin

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Munich

A mistake by young goalkeeper Jonas Urbig meant Bayern Munich dropped points for the second Bundesliga game in a row with a 1-1 draw at Union Berlin.

Bayern seemed on course for victory when Leroy Sané scored in the 75th minute after Bayern had struggled to break through Union's deep defensive line, but Urbig's error eight minutes later proved costly.

Urbig came off his line to deal with a deflected cross which looped high into the air, but he could only palm it to Union striker Benedict Hollerbach, who hit it in low to level the score.

Bayern's lead in the Bundesliga over Bayer Leverkusen increased to nine points, but Leverkusen could cut the gap to six with a win Sunday over Stuttgart. Union is 13th.

"We're not happy with the result but it wasn't a bad performance," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said.

While Bayern has been strong in the Champions League, beating Leverkusen 5-0 over two legs to reach the quarterfinals, its Bundesliga form has dipped. The draw with Union follows a 3-2 loss last week against Bochum.

The 21-year-old Urbig played both of those games because first-choice goalkeeper Manuel Neuer tore a calf muscle when celebrating a goal in the first leg against Leverkusen last week.

Leipzig punishes wasteful DortmundDortmund's disappointing Bundesliga season took another turn for the worse with plenty of missed chances in a 2-0 loss at Leipzig that left the club 11th in the 18-team league.

Three days after beating Lille to reach the Champions League quarterfinals, Dortmund looked a different team in a loss which dealt another blow to its hopes of qualifying for any European competition next year.

Xavi Simons made the difference for Leipzig, scoring on a rebound in the 18th minute and setting up Loïs Openda to volley in the second goal in the 48th.

Dortmund came alive after that and racked up 26 total shots in the game, but a mix of strong goalkeeping by Leipzig's Peter Gulacsi, poor finishing and bad luck three shots hit the crossbar or post prevented a comeback.

It was the fourth loss in six Bundesliga games since coach Niko Kovac took charge last month, and he could face more problems after midfielder Marcel Sabitzer went off with a potentially serious knee injury. Leipzig moved up to fifth after its first Bundesliga win in more than a month and only its third victory in 11 league games since the new year.

Champions League-chasing Mainz clings onMainz earned a 2-2 draw with Freiburg despite a first-half red card but its efforts to qualify for the Champions League for the first time were still dented. Third-place Mainz twice took the lead with goals from Jonathan Burkardt and Andreas Hanche-Olsen and ended Freiburg's run of not having conceded in six games but Freiburg leveled each time. Mainz had Dominik Kohr sent off just before halftime for a foul as the last defender.

Early wickets of Shafali, Lanning turned match for us: Edwards

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

Mumbai Indians head coach Charlotte Edwards said the early wickets of Delhi Capitals' skipper Meg Lanning and opener Shafali Verma helped her team win the Women's Premier League final here.

Lanning (13) and Shafali (4) departed with just 17 runs on the board as DC ended up at 141 for nine while chasing 150. "150, we knew we were a little bit light, but in a final, it's always worth a little bit more. Shafali didn't come out like she normally does, and I knew straightaway that potentially we were in with a chance, because if we could get her wicket," Edwards said in the post-match press conference on Saturday night.

Edwards said the Capitals were a bit cagey in their chase, and it made things easier for her side. "It probably fell in our hands a little bit that we were a bit short, and potentially they went about it a bit slower than they normally do.

"The opening partnership of Lanning and Shafali has been our curse over the last few years, if I'm honest, so I was really pleased to see the back of those two batters early. It was a real team performance," she added.

Edwards lauded MI skipper Harmanpreet Kaur for making an important 66 off 44 balls that led her side to a competitive total.

"She's been really calm. She's deeply competitive, so clearly she wanted to win another title here, and she did everything in her power to do that with the innings she played. She's great around the group, she brings out the best in our young players, and works brilliantly with all our overseas and experienced players," she said. Edwards also praised all-rounders Nat-Sciver Brunt and Hayley Matthews for making heavy contributions throughout the tournament.

Brunt was the highest run-getter in the WPL 2025 with 523 runs and Hayley shared the top wicket-taker spot with teammate Amelie Kerr, taking 18 wickets apiece.

"I think Hayley's been exceptional, and Nat Sciver-Brunt has been absolutely amazing, and to have that kind of experience around Harman, I think it really frees her up to play the way that she's played," she said.

The former England skipper also patted MI players for maintaining intensity despite playing four matches inside six days.

"To play four games in six days, yeah, I mean, it's been fantastic to see how the players have backed those performances up, and to come out here on the big stage and still give that energy to the performance, you know, I'm truly proud," she said.

Having family around helps player to recover from on-field disappointments, says Kohli

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bengaluru

Star batter Virat Kohli supported the presence of players' families on tours, saying he would always prefer having personal support around him to deal with tough and intense days on the field, instead of sulking alone in his hotel room. A BCCI directive which was issued after India's 1-3 Test series defeat against Australia had curtailed the family time of players for no longer than 14 days on tours exceeding 45 days.

The wife, children or girlfriends of players could be with them for a maximum of one week on shorter tours.

"The role of family is very difficult to explain to people…how grounding it is to just come back to your family every time you have something which is intense, which happens on the outside," said Kohli during RCB's Innovation Lab summit which concluded here on Saturday.

"I don't think people have an understanding of what value it brings." Kohli said having the family around would help a player to recover from on-field disappointments that much quicker. "I don't want to go to my room and just sit alone and sulk. I want to be able to be normal. Then you can really treat your game as something that is a responsibility. "Not in a vague sense, but in a very real way that you finish your commitment and then you come back to your house, you're with family, and absolutely normalcy in your house and normal family life goes on.

"So, for me, that is absolutely a day of immense pleasure. I won't miss any opportunities to go out and spend time with my family whenever I can," said Kohli. The 36-year-old was "disappointed" because people with no real connection with such issues have been involved in such discussions.

"I feel quite disappointed about that because it's like people who have no control over what's going on are brought into conversations and put out at the forefront of that, 'oh, maybe they need to be kept away'. "And if you ask any player, do you want your family to be around you all the time? You'll be like, yes," he said.

"Support system from the team's point of view wasn't tough. Convincing my mom what I was doing was way harder. She was very disappointed in the fact that I wasn't eating any parathas and I was looking weak on the field," he said.

Jack Draper knocks off Carlos Alcaraz to reach BNP Paribas open final

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Indian Wells

Jack Draper toppled two-time defending champion Carlos Alcaraz 6-1, 0-6, 6-4 to reach the BNP Paribas Open final. The 13th-seeded Draper will face 12th-seeded Holger Rune on Sunday. Rune beat fifth-seeded Daniil Medvedev 7-6, 6-4 in the first semifinal for his 150th tour-level victory.

In the women's final Sunday, top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka will play 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva. They won semi-final matches Friday night in chilly conditions.

Draper ended Alcaraz's 16-match winning streak in the ATP Masters 1000 event in the California desert. The 23-year-old English left-hander set to break into the top 10 in the world for the first time Monday won last year in Vienna and Stuttgart for his lone tour titles. He's 2-3 against Alcaraz. Alcaraz, seeded second, missed a chance to become the youngest player to win three consecutive singles titles at any ATP Tour event and just the third to do it at Indian Wells. The 21-year-old Spanish star won in Rotterdam in February for his 17th ATP Tour title.

The 21-year-old Rune, from Denmark, snapped a seven-match losing streak in semifinals. He's 2-2 against Medvedev.

Real Madrid 2-1 win over Villarreal in Spanish League

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Barcelona

After a slow start to his Real Madrid career, Kylian Mbappe has already surpassed one of the club greats.

Mbappe scored twice in Madrid's 2-1 comeback win over Villarreal on Saturday to take his tally to 31 goals in all competitions this season one more than Brazil striker Ronaldo managed in his first campaign at the club. It also helped Madrid open up a three-point lead atop the Spanish league over Barcelona, which has played two games less.

Long gone are the scoring troubles Mbappé endured in his first months at Madrid. Having surpassed Ronaldo's tally from 2002-03, the former Paris Saint-Germain player is now closing in on the 33 goals that Cristiano Ronaldo scored in his first season with Madrid in 2009-10.

"They are legends who marked eras with the club," Mbappé said about the two Ronaldos. "If I score more goals than Ronaldo and Cristiano it doesn't mean that I am better, just that my first season is better. Scoring goals is important, but it is even more so if we win La Liga, the Champions League and the Copa del Rey."

His double at fifth-placed Villarreal took Mbappe's La Liga tally to 20 goals, only one fewer than Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski in the domestic competition. Leading the comebackVillarreal made it a pulsating game as it attacked in waves with Alex Baena and Nicolas Pepe helping create a series of chances. Thibaut Courtois made three good stops for Madrid to deny Pepe, Ayoze Pérez, and Pape Gueye in the first half.

But Villarreal paid at the other end where Mbappé ruthlessly exploited the holes in the Yellow Submarine's defense.

"Mbappé didn't participate much, but he was lethal," Villarreal coach Marcelino Toral said.

A one-handed save by Courtois to deny Ayoze led to a corner kick that resulted in Villarreal's eight-minute opener. Juan Foyth swept home a ball that fell to him inside the six-yard box after it had ricocheted off players in a packed area.

AC Milan beat Como 2-1 in Serie A

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Milan

Christian Pulisic scored again to help AC Milan earn another comeback victory in Serie A with a 2-1 home win over Como. Tijjani Reijnders set up Pulisic's second-half equalizer before netting the winner himself in the 75th minute. It was Pulisic's third goal in two matches, taking the United States international to nine goals in Serie A and 15 in all competitions this campaign equaling his tally from his first season at Milan.

Milan moved up to seventh, five points below fourth-placed Juventus. Como remained seven points above the relegation zone. Pulisic's two goals last weekend helped Milan fight back to win 3-2 at Lecce and end a three-match losing streak.

It again went behind on Saturday, when Lucas Da Cunha drilled into the bottom left corner from the edge of the area in the 33rd minute. The Milan fans jeered loudly at halftime and it almost got worse for them four minutes after the restart but Da Cunha's second goal of the night was ruled out for offside.

Instead it was Milan which leveled four minute later. Rafael Leão and Álex Jiménez combined on the left before picking out Reijnders, who delicately dinked the ball over the top for Pulisic to sweep into the far bottom corner from a tight angle.

Reijnders also clipped the top of the crossbar before scoring the winner in the 75th minute, slotting home after being sent through on goal by a backheeled pass by Tammy Abraham. Como substitute Dele Alli's return to soccer lasted just nine minutes as he was shown a straight red card late on for a foul on Ruben Loftus-Cheek, shortly after coming off the bench for his first appearance in two years.

Lengthy goal wait endedMonza captain Armando Izzo scored his first goal in more than two years but it wasn't enough to secure a win as the last-place team drew 1-1 against fellow struggler Parma.

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