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## PIONEER IN SHORT

### MANN APPEARS BEFORE AKAL TAKHT

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann appeared before the Akal Takht secretariat on Thursday after being summoned over his alleged remarks on Sikh traditions and tenets. Before presenting himself, Mann offered prayers at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Speaking to reporters later, Mann said he had submitted his clarification to acting Akal Takht *Jathedar* Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargal. The response would be examined in detail before any directions are issued, he said. Mann added that he appeared as a devout Sikh and would abide by any directive of the Akal Takht. Mann was summoned on January 5 for allegedly making comments on *Guru Ki Golak* and for "objectionable activities" involving images of Sikh Gurus and slain militant Jamail Singh Bhindranwale. He dismissed videos cited by the *jathedar* as fake or AI-generated, saying they could be verified by forensic labs. Ahead of the appearance, Mann said a false narrative was being spread on social media that he was challenging the Akal Takht's authority. He reiterated that the Akal Takht was supreme and that he would never defy it. The *jathedar* alleged Mann showed an "anti-Sikh mentality" and made objectionable remarks on *dasvand*.

## I-PAC CASE: FIR AGAINST ED OFFICIALS STAYED

# Larger questions involved, SC says, issues notice to Mamata

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

After more than two hour long fierce arguments, the Supreme Court on Thursday, stayed FIRs against the ED officers and issued notices to Mamata Banerjee and West Bengal officials, terming the matter is very serious. A bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Vipul Pancholi observed that adherence to the rule of law in the country and to allow each organ to function independently, it is necessary to examine the issue so that the offenders are not allowed to be protected under the shield of law-enforcing agencies of a particular State.

The SC also issued notice to West Bengal DGP Rajeev Kumar on the ED's petitions seeking a CBI probe against them for allegedly obstructing raids at I-PAC premises. "Larger questions are involved and have been



The SC also observed that a central agency has no power to interfere with the election work of any party

different places," the bench said.

The SC said a central agency has no power to interfere with the election work of any party. But at the same time, if central agencies are acting bona fide to investigate any serious offence, the question arises whether agencies can be restricted from carrying out duties under the shield of party activity, it said. The matter is posted for further hearing on February 3.

Earlier in the day, the SC said that it was very much disturbed by the commotion at the Calcutta High Court during its hearing in the ED raids case. The Calcutta High Court had adjourned till January 14 the hearing on petitions related to the ED's search and seizure operations at sites linked to political consultancy firm I-PAC, citing unmanageable chaos inside the courtroom.

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# India plans evacuation as Iran closes its air space

ASHOKE RAJ ■ New Delhi

A day ago the Indian Embassy in Iran asked all nationals — including students, pilgrims, businesspersons and tourists — to leave the country using available means, including commercial flights and now New Delhi is drawing up contingency plans to bring back Indian nationals from Iran as the security and political situation there remains volatile, with officials keeping a close watch on developments amid fears of possible US military action, sources familiar with the matter said on Thursday.

Officials estimate that around 10,000 Indians are currently in Iran, a significant proportion of them students enrolled in universities and religious institutions across the country. Any evacuation effort, if activated, is expected to prioritise students, who are considered particularly vulnerable given the uncertainty on the ground. The Indian embassy in Tehran has begun efforts to assess how many Indians wish to return.

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Protesters participate in a demonstration in support of the nationwide mass protests in Iran against the government, in Berlin, Germany

## UN TO MEET ON IRAN CRISIS

**New Delhi:** The United Nations Security Council will hold a meeting on Thursday at the request of the United States to examine the rapidly worsening situation in Iran, where large-scale protests and rising international tensions have drawn global concern. The session follows mounting scrutiny of Tehran's response to demonstrations and speculation over possible U.S.

involvement. Iran has witnessed sweeping protests in recent weeks, marking one of the most serious waves of unrest in years. Human rights organisations claim that thousands have been killed during confrontations between protesters and security forces, as authorities intensify efforts to restore control and silence dissent.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

## The Bystander



### EU CHIEFS TO VISIT INDIA ON R-DAY

European Union leaders Antonio Costa, President of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, will attend India's 77th Republic Day as chief guests from January 25-27. The leaders will co-chair the 16th India-EU Summit on January 27, during which both sides are expected to finalise a long-awaited free trade agreement. Bilateral trade in goods between India and the EU reached \$135 billion in 2023-24, and the pact is expected to deepen economic ties. Beyond trade, the summit will unveil a defence framework pact and adopt a new strategic agenda covering five key areas: security and defence, connectivity and global issues, prosperity, sustainability, and technology and innovation. Defence cooperation will focus on maritime security, cyber defence, and counterterrorism.

### ATHLETES DIE BY SUICIDE IN KERALA

Two teenage girl athletes, both staying at a SAI hostel, were found dead in one of their rooms on Thursday in an apparent suicide pact, the police said. The deceased were identified as Sandra A (18) of Chaliyam Kozhikode district and Vyshnavi V(15) of Muthakkal Thiruvananthapuram district. According to police, Sandra was an athletics trainee studying in Class 12, while Vyshnavi was a kabaddi player and a Class 10 student. The incident came to light around 5am when fellow hostel inmates noticed that the duo had not reported for the morning training session. Police said Vyshnavi was staying in a different room but had spent Wednesday night in Sandra's room. Both were seen by other hostel inmates before 12.30am, police added.

## BRAVING THE CHILL



A man extends his hands towards a makeshift fire to keep himself warm on a cold winter morning, in Gurugram. At 2.9 degrees Celsius, Delhi logged its coldest morning of the season. The bone-chilling conditions weren't confined to the northern region alone. Eastern states of West Bengal and Jharkhand, too, experienced intense cold.

## AI plane ingests baggage container in fog

RAJESH KUMAR ■ New Delhi

In a rare incident of its kind, Air India's newest Airbus A350, operating a Delhi-New York flight with over 250 passengers on board, sustained engine damage after ingesting an improperly secured baggage container while taxiing to its parking bay at Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport amid dense fog on Thursday morning.

The aircraft had to return to Delhi after takeoff due to the sudden closure of Iranian airspace. Then, while taxiing to the parking bay at IGI Airport,



Damaged part of the engine of an Air India A350 aircraft

an improperly secured container was sucked into one of its engines. No one was injured in the incident. Flight-tracking data showed that the aircraft (registration VT-JRB) departed Delhi at 2:36 a.m. And was cruising over Ahmedabad airspace when the closure of airspace came into effect, blocking its planned overflight of Iran - a key corridor for westbound transatlantic flights. With no viable alternate routing available at that stage, the crew took the precautionary decision to turn back to Delhi.

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# Mahayuti set for BMC sweep, exit polls show

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Mumbai

All exit polls predicted a clear sweep for the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) polls, which took place on Thursday, and a defeat of the Shiv Sena (UBT)-Maharashtra Navnirman Sena.

According to *My Axis India* exit polls, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance is poised to win 131-151 seats and garner 42 per cent of vote share in the country's commercial capital. The Shiv Sena (UBT)-MNS-NCP (SP) alliance of Uddhav Thackeray and Raj Thackeray is expected to win 58-68 seats and get a vote share of 32 per cent. The Congress-Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi and Rashtriya Samaj Paksha alliance is expected to win 12-16 seats with a vote per cent of 13 per cent. Others, which comprise independents and small players like NCP, AIMIM, and the left parties, are likely to win 6-12 seats, it said. There are 227 wards in Mumbai.

The *Saam TV* exit polls have predicted that the BJP is likely to win 84 seats, while its alliance partner Shiv Sena could bag 35 seats in Mumbai. Shiv Sena (UBT) and the MNS will get 65 and 10 seats, respectively. NCP (SP), which is part of the Sena



MNS chief Raj Thackeray with party leader and his son Amit Thackeray and other family members, showing his ink-marked finger after casting a vote in the BMC polls in Mumbai

(UBT)-MNS alliance, is likely to get two seats. In Pune, the BJP will be largest party and is expected to win 70 seats, while the NCP could get 55. The NCP (SP), which had tied up with the Ajit Pawar-led NCP, is poised to win 10 seats. The Shiv Sena, which contested the polls independently, could win 12 seats, according to the *Saam TV* exit polls. The Shiv Sena (UBT) and the MNS, which contested polls independently, are

expected to win five and two seats, respectively, in the state's second largest city, while the Congress could see victory in eight wards. In neighbouring Thane, considered to be the stronghold of Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, where the Shiv Sena and BJP contested together, the former is expected to bag 72 seats and its alliance partner 26. The Sena (UBT) and MNS are likely to bag three and two

seats respectively, the *Saam TV* exit polls said. According to the jubilant Data Studio exit polls, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance is likely to win between 127-155 seats in Mumbai. The Shiv Sena (UBT)-MNS-NCP (SP) alliance could win seats in the range of 44-64. The Congress-led alliance could win 16-25 seats. In Pune, it said the BJP could win 79-92 seats, followed by NCP (48-61).

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

# PM Modi calls on the Global South to shape a new world order

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA  
■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said that at a time when the world is undergoing unprecedented transformation, it is also the moment for the Global South to chart new pathways. PM Modi said India is strongly voicing the concerns of the Global South at every global platform and during this he recalled that during its G20 Presidency, India placed the concerns of the Global South at the center of the global agenda.

Speaking at the inaugural session of the 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth (CSPOC) at the Central Hall of Samvidhan Sadan, Parliament

House Complex, Modi highlighted India's effort to ensure that innovations benefit the entire Global South and the Commonwealth countries.

He noted that India is also building open-source technology platforms so that partner nations in the Global South can develop systems similar to those established in India. Highlighting that one of the key objectives of the CSPOC is to explore different ways of promoting knowledge and understanding of parliamentary democracy, Modi stressed that both Speakers and Presiding Officers have a very important role in this effort, as it connects people more closely with the democratic process of their country.

Speaker of the Lok Sabha,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and others during the 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of Commonwealth Countries (CSPOC), at the Parliament House Complex, in New Delhi

Om Birla, Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, Harivansh, President of Inter Parliamentary Union, Dr. Tulia Ackson, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Dr. Christopher Kalila were present among other dignitaries at the event. The CSPOC will be chaired by the Birla and is being attended by 61 Speakers and Presiding Officers of 42 Commonwealth countries and four semi-autonomous Parliaments from different parts of the world.

Warmly welcoming the guests on this special occasion, Modi expressed honour in having them present. He highlighted that the place where everyone was seated holds immense importance in

India's democratic journey. He recalled that in the final years of colonial rule, when India's freedom was certain, the Constituent Assembly met in this very Central Hall to draft the Constitution. The Prime Minister noted that for 75 years after independence, this building served as India's Parliament, where numerous crucial decisions and discussions shaping the nation's future took place. "India has now dedicated this historic place to democracy by naming it the Samvidhan Sadan," an elated Modi said as during his second tenure as PM India got its New Parliament Building adjacent to the existing structure and the functioning started in September 2024.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**





## CM calls on PM Modi, invites him for Gadarwara event

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Dr Mohan Yadav on Thursday met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi and invited him to perform the bhoomi-poojan for the capacity expansion of the NTPC Super Thermal Power Station at Gadarwara in Narsinghpur district, while briefing him on the state's economic initiatives, farm agenda, dairy sector push and anti-Naxal operations.

Dr Yadav informed the prime minister of the organisation of the Abhyudaya Madhya Pradesh Growth Summit, the state's decision to observe 2026 as 'Krishak Kalyan Varsh', progress under the National Dairy Development Board-Sanchi cooperative agreement and the status of operations against left-wing extremism.

Dr Yadav told Prime Minister

Modi that 2026 will be observed as "Krishak Kalyan Varsh" with the objective of "Prosperous Farmers, Prosperous State", following 2025 being celebrated as "Industry and Employment Year". He said a comprehensive calendar of programmes has been prepared for January to November 2026 with clearly defined three-year targets and participation from more than 16 departments. He said the government's 10 key resolutions for the year include promotion of natural and organic farming, setting up food parks and food processing units in regions producing perishable crops, providing subsidies to encourage agri-industries and increasing farmer participation in agricultural value chains. The state is also working towards installing solar pumps in the fields of 30 lakh farmers over the next three years, he said.

On investment promotion, Dr Yadav briefed the prime minister

about the Abhyudaya Madhya Pradesh Growth Summit held on December 25, 2025, in Gwalior to mark the 101st birth anniversary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The summit was inaugurated by Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

During the event, collective bhoomi-poojan was performed for industrial and manufacturing units with proposed investments exceeding Rs 8 lakh crore, and projects including industrial development schemes and road works worth Rs 5,810 crore were inaugurated, he said.

Investment promotion assistance of Rs 725 crore was disbursed to 860 large industrial units across the state through a single-click mechanism.

Dr Yadav also highlighted gains in the dairy sector following the cooperation agreement between the National Dairy Development Board and Sanchi. He said milk procurement prices paid by dairy

unions have increased by Rs 2.50 to Rs 8.50 per litre. A total of 1,394 new milk cooperative societies have been formed and 661 inactive societies revived, including about 150 multipurpose cooperatives.

Milk procurement reached 12 lakh kilograms per day on December 22, 2025, marking a 25 per cent increase over the previous year, he said. The state has set a target of achieving 50 lakh kilograms per day procurement and expanding dairy cooperative coverage to 26,000 villages.

On internal security, Dr Yadav told Modi that Madhya Pradesh has achieved the goal of becoming "Naxal-Free" in line with the national target to eliminate left-wing extremism by March 2026. He said there are now no armed and active Naxals in the state and across the Madhya Pradesh-Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh zone. In 2025, security forces neutralised 10 armed Naxals carry-

ing a combined reward of Rs 1.46 crore, while 13 surrendered along with weapons, he said. Interrogation of surrendered cadres is under way to identify supporters, organisations and funding networks, and to recover hidden caches of cash and arms.

Dr Yadav said focused rehabilitation measures are being implemented to prevent those who surrendered from returning to extremist ideology. For accelerated development in previously affected areas, micro development plans have been prepared for the 100 most-affected villages, covering comprehensive village development, livelihood enhancement and improvement of basic facilities. To integrate youth from formerly affected regions into the mainstream, large-scale sports competitions are being organised in Balaghat on the lines of the Bastar Olympics, he said.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav along with his wife Seema Yadav offers prayer at the Brihaspati temple in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh on Thursday. Pioneer photo

## Bandhavgarh introduces tracking app to curb elephant movement

**Bhopal:** The permanent presence of wild elephants in and around Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve has prompted forest authorities to roll out the 'Gajarakshak' mobile application to monitor their movement and prevent human-wildlife conflict.

The app has been installed on the mobile phones of officers and field staff of the tiger reserve, along with personnel from the Shahdol and Umaria forest divisions and adjoining forest areas. Officials said it is enabling real-time tracking and quicker response to elephant movement.

The system allows information from multiple forest divisions to be pooled on a single platform, improving coordination between teams operating in Bandhavgarh, Shahdol, Umaria and adjoining forest areas.

Field staff update the app whenever elephants are sighted, entering details such as direction of movement, current location, live GPS coordinates and photographs. Once the information is uploaded, instant alerts are sent to all registered users, allowing coordinated monitoring on the ground.

To simplify reporting, a voice recording feature has been added to the app, allowing field and security personnel to share live locations without typing. The feature is aimed at staff who face difficulty operating mobile phones during patrols.

Bandhavgarh Field Director Anupam Sahay said the app is playing a crucial role in tracking wild elephants. He said regular training sessions are being conducted to ensure staff can use it with ease, including recent training in the Panpatha area.

## High Court hears PILs, seeks clarity on Bhagirathpura water deaths

PNS ■ Indore

The Indore Bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court on Thursday resumed hearing a batch of public interest litigations related to the Bhagirathpura incident, in which several residents allegedly died after consuming contaminated water. The matter was heard by a division bench of Justice Vijay Kumar Shukla and Justice Alok Awasthi.

Chief Secretary Anurag Jain and Advocate General Prashant Singh presented the state government's position through video conferencing. The court sought clarity on the number of deaths directly attributable to contaminated water. In response, the Chief Secretary said the government has officially recognised 15 deaths as being caused by polluted water supply, while the remaining

### Court asks state to enumerate deaths linked to contaminated water

deaths were attributed to comorbidities and other medical conditions.

However, he told the court that the state has decided to extend relief to all affected families, irrespective of the medical classification of deaths. Compensation has already been disbursed in 21 cases so far.

The bench directed that the detailed report on deaths and medical findings be shared with all petitioners to ensure transparency. The next hearing has been scheduled for January 19 at 2.30 pm.

During arguments, senior advocates appearing for the

petitioners pointed out that the detailed investigation report had not yet been provided to them. Taking note of the submission, the High Court ordered that copies of the report be supplied to all petitioners.

The Chief Secretary said all previous directions issued by the High Court have been complied with. He added that immediate steps were taken to ensure the supply of safe drinking water, medical treatment for affected residents and suspension of contaminated water distribution. Water is currently being supplied through tankers, tenders have been finalised, and pipeline replacement work is under way.

He further informed the court that disciplinary action has been taken against officials responsible for lapses, including the suspension of an IAS officer serving as Additional

Commissioner, an executive engineer and zonal officers. The municipal commissioner has also been removed and replaced by a senior IAS officer. Concerns were also raised about the quality of medical treatment being provided to affected residents. While the court observed that it cannot direct patients to specific hospitals, it emphasised that proper and effective treatment must be ensured.

The state government also informed the court that a major infrastructure push has begun, including the launch of an Rs 800 crore AMRUT scheme project in Indore, with a focus on ensuring that sewerage and drinking water pipelines do not overlap. Advanced technologies, including robotic mechanisms, are being used to detect leakages and prevent future contamination.

## New BJP mechanism strengthening grassroots connect: Govind Rajput

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Food and Civil Supplies Minister Govind Singh Rajput on Thursday lauded the Bharatiya Janata Party's initiative to strengthen direct communication between party workers and the government, describing it as a far-sighted and effective step.

Speaking to media persons at the BJP State Headquarters, the minister said that under the leadership of BJP state president Hemant Khandelwal, an institutional mechanism has been created to ensure structured and meaningful interaction between party workers and ministers. He said the initiative reflects the party's commitment to grassroots engagement and responsive governance.

Rajput said Chief Minister Dr Mohan Yadav has issued clear

directions for ministers to be present at the party's state office on designated days every month to listen to workers' concerns and public-related issues. He added that the core objective of the initiative is to understand these issues and make sincere efforts towards their resolution.

The minister said the initiative, introduced in the form of a 'Cooperation Cell', has already begun yielding positive outcomes. He noted growing enthusiasm among party workers, with large numbers visiting the BJP state office to raise issues and offer suggestions. Despite ministers' demanding schedules, including official meetings and field visits, the system has brought clarity for party workers regarding access to ministers, he said, adding that the initiative is serving as a strong bridge between the organisation and the government.



Madhya Pradesh State Government contractual and outsourced employees stage a protest over discrepancies in the wages of clerks demanding for regularisation of their jobs including several other demands at the State Mantralaya in Bhopal on Thursday. Pioneer photo

## Dead man 'sold' land, loans forged, students duped: EOW files FIRs

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

The Economic Offences Wing on Thursday registered multiple FIRs across Indore, Jabalpur and Khandwa in connection with major land, banking and education-related scams involving financial irregularities running into several crores of rupees.

In Indore, an FIR has been lodged over the fraudulent sale of 12.66 hectares of land in Gram Sinhasa, where a deceased landowner, Barkatullah, was allegedly shown alive using forged affidavits, fake photographs and manipulated documents. Five sale deeds worth about Rs 1.02 crore were executed in 2010-11 on the basis of the forged records. The accused named in the case include Rubina, Azmatullah, Ilfat Ali and Javed Ali Syed.

In Jabalpur, coloniser Rajneesh Jain and others associated with Shri Balaji Infrastructure have been booked for allegedly encroaching on a 0.12-hectare government drain and green belt in Swastik Villas Colony, valued at around Rs 2.64 crore. The EOW said roads, parks, a gym, a swimming pool and a house were constructed on the encroached land, with the

house sold for Rs 63 lakh. The accused are also alleged to have cheated around 210 plot owners. The case has been registered under Sections 406, 420 and 120B of the IPC.

The EOW, Jabalpur, has also registered a case of loan fraud involving Rs 57 lakh at Canara Bank's Adhartal branch. According to investigators, forged land documents were used to secure housing and business loans in collusion with bank officials, and the EMIs were never repaid. Several private individuals and bank officials, including the then branch manager, have been named under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, and the Prevention of Corruption Act.

Meanwhile, in Khandwa, the EOW, Indore, booked Dr Anil Dharwal, Director of Shri Dadaji Institute of Paramedical Sciences, for allegedly admitting students without mandatory university affiliation, resulting in academic delays of nearly 12 years. He is also accused of falsely claiming scholarships by showing 33 SC/ST students enrolled in longer-duration courses, causing a government loss of Rs 1.65 lakh. All the cases are under investigation.

## Sanskriti Jain stresses revenue recovery

**Bhopal:** Bhopal Municipal Commissioner Sanskriti Jain on Thursday directed officials to accelerate recovery of property tax and other municipal dues and take strict action against defaulters as the financial year draws to a close.

Jain said recovery of property tax, lease rent, water user charges and other outstanding dues must be intensified in the final months of the current financial year.

The commissioner reviewed pending lease rent cases and directed officials to expedite their disposal to ensure prompt recovery. She said firm action should be taken against chronic defaulters to strengthen the corporation's revenue position. Jain also emphasised timely disposal of pending cases and effective implementation of government welfare schemes under the "Sankalp Se Samadhan" campaign. She said all genuinely eligible beneficiaries must be identified and provided benefits without delay, and that applications related to municipal schemes should be received and resolved promptly.

She further directed officials to ensure speedy redressal of complaints received during the weekly "Jal Sunwai" and timely disposal of cases registered on the Chief Minister's Helpline.

## PG student from Assam assaulted at Amarkantak university campus

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

At a time when outrage over the murder of Tripura student Angel Chakma has not yet subsided, another shocking incident of violence against a student from the Northeast has surfaced, this time from Madhya Pradesh.

A postgraduate student from Assam was allegedly assaulted without any provocation inside the campus of Indira Gandhi National Tribal University in Amarkantak, raising serious questions about student safety and accountability on university campuses.

The victim, Hirosh Jyoti Das, who is pursuing an MA in Economics, is currently undergoing treatment at a hospital in Gaurela-Pendra-Marwahi after sustaining injuries to his face, eyes and mouth. The incident occurred in the early hours of January 13, between 3 and 4 am, when the student stepped out of his room to use the washroom.

According to Hirosh, a group of around seven unknown men, who appeared to be intoxicated, forced their way into his room and later confronted him outside. When asked where he was from, Hirosh said he replied that he belonged to Assam. Moments later, one of the men allegedly

threatened him, saying, "You've come here, and you'll die here," before grabbing his hand and launching a brutal assault. Hirosh said he was punched and kicked repeatedly, leaving him bleeding from the mouth, with a blood clot in one eye and swollen lips. He maintained that he had no prior dispute with anyone on campus and did not recognise any of the attackers. The assault only stopped after his roommate rushed to the spot and raised an alarm, forcing the assailants to flee. The injured student was initially taken to the campus dispensary, where first aid was administered, before he was referred to Pendra Hospital due to the seriousness of his injuries. The hospital subsequently informed the police, following which officials from Gaurela Police Station recorded the victim's statement.

Since the incident falls under the jurisdiction of Amarkantak Police Station, the case details and preliminary findings have been forwarded for further investigation. Police officials said the full facts would emerge after the probe is completed.

In the meantime, the university administration has expelled five students with immediate effect after examining CCTV footage and reports submitted by hostel authorities.



Artists take a selfie during the Pongal celebration programme organised by MP State Tourism Development Corporation (MPSTDC) in Bhopal on Thursday. Pioneer photo

## Navodaya students missing in Chhindwara, ragging alleged

**Bhopal:** Two Class 10 students of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya in Chhindwara district have been missing for over 24 hours after fleeing the campus due to alleged ragging by seniors, with CCTV footage showing them jumping over the boundary wall near the boys' hostel.

Police said a special team has been formed and police stations alerted to trace the students. The school administration remained unaware of their

absence for a considerable time, triggering allegations of negligence. The students left handwritten notes saying they were not going to die and would return home on their own once their anger subsided. One note said no attempt should be made to search for them and claimed no teacher was at fault.

On Thursday, the parents reached the campus and accused the administration of

ignoring repeated complaints of ragging. They alleged the boys were harassed for several days, threatened on Sunday and asked to pay Rs 1,000. Amarwara SDM Hemkaran Dhurve and Singodi outpost police visited the school and began inquiries. On the instructions of Chhindwara SP Ajay Pandey, a special team led by the SDOP Amarwara and the Amarwara police station in-charge was constituted.



# CM launches SpaceTech policy, sets mission-mode AI agenda

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Dr Mohan Yadav on Thursday launched the state's SpaceTech Policy-2026 and announced mission-mode implementation of artificial intelligence across governance, industry and social sectors, positioning AI as a core pillar of citizen-centric, efficient administration. Inaugurating the Madhya Pradesh Regional AI Impact Conference-2026 at the Taj Lakefront in Bhopal, Dr Yadav said the state was moving to embed AI across public service delivery and welfare schemes, with a state AI policy to be introduced soon. He flagged significant scope for AI use in mining and healthcare. The chief minister said AI-driven administration, innovation in technology and academia, and mission-mode execution would

support the goal of a developed India by 2047. He said Madhya Pradesh was aligning its initiatives with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's development vision. Dr Yadav also flagged off a mobile "Kaushal Rath" under the AI Literacy Mission to expand awareness and basic training in rural and semi-urban areas. The initiative aims to introduce AI as a foundational skill among students, teachers and government staff. He released the state's SpaceTech Policy-2026, aimed at promoting space-based applications in agriculture, disaster management, water resources and urban planning. The policy provides financial, infrastructure and research support to space-tech start-ups, MSMEs and industry. The policy seeks to position Madhya Pradesh as a future-ready hub in India's emerging space ecosystem and strengthen its role in national space pro-

grammes. Officials said it would also support innovation and private sector participation in space-based services. Several memoranda of understanding were exchanged in Dr Yadav's presence to boost innovation, research and skills. The Science and Technology Department signed agreements with Yungovator (Answer Foundation), the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, Google, NASSCOM, AISECT and Bhashini. The agreements cover AI-based research for climate and sustainability, robotics and innovation in educational institutions, cloud and AI adoption in government departments, establishment of AI centres of excellence, skills development and digital literacy in rural and underserved areas. A separate MoU was signed between IndiaAI and the state's Technical Education, Skill Development and Employment

Department, officials said. Under the IndiaAI Mission, 570 data and AI labs are being set up in tier-2 and tier-3 cities across the country, with 30 planned in Madhya Pradesh. Chief Secretary Anurag Jain said AI adoption would increase administrative efficiency and make decision-making faster, more accurate and citizen-focused. He said the conference was an important step ahead of the India AI Impact Summit-2026 and aimed at strengthening the national AI ecosystem. The top bureaucrat cited digital public infrastructure achievements, including UPI, and said initiatives such as Samagra ID were promoting data-driven and family-centric governance in the state. He underlined the need for industry-academia collaboration and large-scale skilling. Additional Chief Secretary for Science and Technology Sanjay Dubey presented the state's AI

roadmap titled "AI for People, Planet and Progress". He said the roadmap was built on four pillars - infrastructure, data, talent and strategy. Abhishek Singh, Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and CEO of IndiaAI, said India ranked third globally in AI implementation. He said indigenous AI platforms similar to ChatGPT were under development and would be launched ahead of the National AI Summit in February. Singh said 30 AI data labs would be set up in Madhya Pradesh and noted the rapid growth of start-ups in Bhopal and Indore. He said the central government had approved 58 centres of excellence to function as incubation hubs. The conference also featured the Madhya Pradesh Innovation Expo, including an IndiaAI pavilion, a state pavilion and a start-up showcase.



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav visits an exhibition at Regional Artificial Intelligence Impact Summit-2026, in Bhopal on Thursday.



A girl athlete in action during a long jump event during ongoing MP Khelo Youth Games, at TT Nagar Stadium in Bhopal on Thursday.

## Five of family killed, 9 hurt as pickup van collides with tractor near Berasia

**Bhopal:** Five members of the same family, including three women, were killed and nine others injured when a pickup van carrying passengers collided head-on with a tractor-trolley near Berasia on Wednesday night. The accident occurred around 9 pm as 15 family members from Sironj were travelling to Narmadapuram on Makar Sankranti to immerse the ashes of a deceased relative and take a holy dip in the Narmada. The impact crushed the pickup and threw passengers violently inside the vehicle. The deceased were identified as Mukesh Ahirwar (33), his son Deepak (14), his mother Babri Bai (60), and his cousins Lakshmbai and Haribai. Mukesh's wife Sarju Bai, his

three daughters, cousin Jitendra and four others were injured and admitted to hospital, with some reported to be in a critical condition. Family members said Mukesh's daughter Julie had died about a month ago, and the family was on its way to immerse her ashes. Deepak was the only brother among four sisters. The deaths have cast a pall of gloom over the village. On Thursday afternoon, the last rites of Mukesh, Deepak, Babri Bai and Lakshmbai were performed simultaneously at the cremation ground in Masudi village, while Haribai was cremated in her marital village of Sagda. Officials from Lateri police and the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's office were present.

## 78th Army Day marked with call to uphold legacy

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

The Sudarshan Chakra Corps on Thursday marked the 78th Army Day, paying tribute to soldiers who laid down their lives in the line of duty and reaffirming commitment to the highest traditions of the Indian Army. Army Day is observed annually on January 15 to commemorate Lieutenant General KM Cariappa assuming charge as the first Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army in 1949, succeeding General Sir Francis Butcher, the last British Commander-in-Chief of independent India. The day stands as a solemn occasion to honour the courage, discipline and sacrifice of soldiers who have served the nation with distinction, and to remember those who made the



supreme sacrifice in defence of the country. Lieutenant General Arvind Chauhan, YSM, SM, General Officer Commanding of the Sudarshan Chakra Corps, led the commemorations and addressed officers and troops on the occasion. He exhorted all ranks to uphold the glorious legacy and time-honoured traditions of

the Indian Army, embrace future challenges with determination and pride, and contribute indefatigably to nation building while bringing greater honour and glory to the country. As part of the observances, a wreath-laying ceremony was held at the Dronachal War Memorial to pay homage to martyrs.

## Six accidents, nine deaths in 24 hours across MP

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

A 10-year-old boy was run over by a speeding truck while walking to school in Rewa on Thursday morning, causing a grim 24-hour spell in which nine people were killed in six separate road accidents across Madhya Pradesh. The child was walking with his elder sister in Rathara area when the truck hit him and fled after crashing into the divider. Police have sent the body for post-mortem and launched a search for the driver. In Maihar, two people died in separate crashes on National Highway-30. Pushpendra Pandey of Kartaha was killed when an unidentified vehicle hit his motorcycle at high speed, while another motorcyclist died near Pahadi village

### 10-year-old crushed while walking to school in Rewa

after being struck by a vehicle. A pedestrian was also injured. In Ashoknagar's Shadhora area, a car hit a culvert on Naisarai Road around 11 pm on Wednesday and overturned about 60-70 feet away, killing 25-year-old Vishnu Raghuvanshi. Two others, Madan Prajapati and Pravendra Raghuvanshi, were injured. They were returning to Barkheda after unloading maize at a mandi. In Khandwa, two brothers, Mukesh and Vijay, residents of Jhripa in Burhanpur district, died late Wednesday when their motorcycle collided head-on with a pickup near

Gudikheda on the Amravati State Highway. Police said they were heading to a community programme in Gudikheda village. In Narmadapuram, friends Arvind Kumar of Sonsarkheda and Ramkumar of Bamhori were killed on the spot when their motorcycle collided head-on with a car near Semri Narchand on the Narmadapuram-Pipariya State Highway on Wednesday evening. Sohagpur police registered a case of accidental death. In Guna, a nilgai jumped onto a moving car on the bypass near Do Khamba late Wednesday night, killing a young girl seated with her mother. Her parents were injured and admitted to hospital. The family was travelling to their village to mark Makar Sankranti.

## Prohibitory orders imposed in city as police step up R-Day security

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Police Commissioner Harinarayanchari Mishra on Thursday imposed Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, across the city's urban areas to tighten security and strengthen law and order ahead of Republic Day. The order makes police verification mandatory for tenants, paying guests, domestic workers and employees. Home owners have been directed to furnish details of tenants, employers to submit particulars of household staff, hotel operators to provide records of resident students, and hotels, lodges, guesthouses and resorts to maintain and share guest information in the prescribed format.

Police said Bhopal is considered a sensitive city due to the presence of several VIPs with varying security cover and key government and public installations. The city also witnesses a daily influx of people for education, healthcare, employment and business, which can sometimes be exploited by criminal elements. Officials noted that unverified outsiders occasionally attempt to blend into the population, creating opportunities for thefts, burglaries and other security threats. Concerns were also flagged over elements linked to extremism or illegal immigration using the city's fallout as cover. Non-compliance with the directions will invite action under Section 223 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

## Final-year BCA student found dead at home

**Bhopal:** A 23-year-old final-year BCA student was found dead at his Vallabh Nagar residence late Wednesday night, police said, in an apparent suicide on his birthday. The deceased was identified as Sushil Chaurasia, a student of a private college. Police said he was alone at home as his parents had gone to Ratibad for construction work and his two elder brothers were at their workplaces. In the evening, Sushil called his mother and made an emotional statement indicating distress. She tried to console him. When the family returned late at night, they found him hanging in his room. Police sent the body for a post-mortem, conducted on Thursday. No suicide note was found. His mobile phone has been seized. A case has been registered and investigation is underway.

## AIIMS Bhopal, IIT Indore developing ultra-low radiation 3D X-ray system

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

AIIMS Bhopal and IIT Indore are jointly developing what they describe as the world's first next-generation X-ray system to deliver real-time three-dimensional images at ultra-low radiation doses. According to the two institutions, the portable and cost-effective platform is designed to generate images comparable to conventional CT scans while sharply reducing radiation exposure, improving patient safety and enabling faster diagnosis. The system is also intended to support treatment planning, guide surgeons during procedures and help clinicians assess disease progression. AIIMS Bhopal said the technology has been designed for use in ambulances, emergency and

trauma units, disaster response teams, small clinics, district hospitals and primary health centres, expanding access to advanced imaging in rural and remote areas. IIT Indore researchers said development will begin with maxillofacial imaging before being expanded to full-body applications, with potential use in trauma care, cancer management, orthopaedics and reconstructive surgery. The ultra-low radiation output is expected to remove the need for bulky and expensive CT infrastructure. The project has received national funding under the Indian Council of Medical Research's "First in the World Challenge - 2025" scheme. ICMR has sanctioned up to Rs 8 crore for the complete development of the system and will provide continuous technical guidance.

## Seven sent to jail in Bagsewania burglaries, jewellery recovered

**Bhopal:** Culminating investigations into multiple house burglaries, Bagsewania police on Thursday produced seven accused before a court, which remanded them to judicial custody. The cases relate to burglaries at Gulabi Nagar and Bagmugaliya, where houses were broken into while the families were away. In the Gulabi Nagar case, complainant Vishnu Pareek reported theft of gold and silver ornaments, including ancestral jewellery. In the second case, Vijay Mohan Choudhary reported burglary at his Bagmugaliya

residence while he was in Bihar. Police said the accused broke locks, accessed lockers and decamped with valuables. Gold and silver jewellery worth about Rs 12 lakh was recovered. Two vehicles and a crowbar used in the crimes were also seized. The accused have been identified as Rahul alias Satyam Kewat, Ayush Vishwakarma, Ankush Ahirwar, Vishal Vishwakarma, Vishal Pawar, Krishnakant Soni and Anna Saheb. Police said the jewellery was sold to the latter two, who were arrested for receiving stolen property.

## Harassment trigger leads to stabbing outside Bansal College

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

A youth was brutally assaulted and stabbed outside Bansal College in Kokta area on Thursday afternoon after an altercation linked to an alleged harassment incident, leaving him seriously injured. The injured has been identified as Lucky Ahirwar, a resident of Mandideep. Police sources said Ahirwar came to the college to meet a female student and allegedly pressured her to leave with him against her will, even threatening to throw acid if she refused. When the girl raised an alarm,

students gathered at the spot. The situation escalated after Ahirwar allegedly assaulted the girl, following which enraged students attacked him. He was beaten and stabbed in the stomach, sustaining serious injuries. The attackers fled, leaving him unconscious on the roadside outside the campus. He was rushed to a private hospital by the 108 ambulance service and is undergoing treatment. A video purportedly showing Ahirwar lying injured outside the college has circulated on social media. Police said the clip's authenticity has not yet been verified.

Bilkhiriya police station in-charge Umesh Chauhan said CCTV footage from the college and nearby areas is being examined to identify those involved and legal action will follow. The incident is the second reported case of campus-linked violence in Bhopal in four days. Another video has gone viral showing a student being beaten with sticks and rods inside the Barkatullah University campus. Bagsewania police station in-charge Amit Soni said no written complaint has been received in that case so far and action will be taken once a complaint is lodged.

## 3 undertrials pull off daring jailbreak in Seoni, brought back

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Three undertrial prisoners booked under the POCOS Act escaped from Seoni District Jail late Wednesday by scaling a nearly 20-foot-high boundary wall but were traced by their families and handed back to the authorities on Thursday, officials said. The escape came to light during a routine prisoner count when jail staff found three inmates missing and alerted senior officials, who ordered an immediate search operation. Officials said the three used each other's support to climb the high security wall and flee the jail premises. CCTV cameras installed inside the jail captured the escape, but on-duty security staff failed to notice the incident, raising serious questions about vigilance and security arrangements. The escaped prisoners were identified as Ank

Shriwal and Vishal Brahmanand, both residents of Lakhnawada, and Vishal Chindilal, a resident of Gondia district in Maharashtra. The jail administration lodged an FIR at Dundasivni police station. Police station in-charge Chain Singh Uike said the case was registered on the complaint of the jail superintendent and confirmed that the three men were returned by their families. Sources said the jail authorities contacted the families soon after the escape and sought their cooperation. The families subsequently traced the three men and handed them over, after which they were re-admitted to the jail on Thursday. The jail administration has begun identifying personnel responsible for the lapse and is preparing to initiate departmental action, sources said. Police said a detailed audit into the escape and security failure is underway.

# City's warming climate sharpens ozone and pollution challenge

KISHAN SINGH RANA ■ Bhopal

Ground-level ozone, a toxic air pollutant formed when vehicle emissions react in sunlight, is drawing renewed attention in the state capital as rising temperatures combine with persistent pollution and widespread Vitamin D deficiency. Health experts say that while ground-level ozone is a serious respiratory irritant, air pollution as a whole - including ozone and fine particulate matter - can reduce the amount of UV-B radiation reaching the ground. UV-B, or ultraviolet-B radiation, is the part of sunlight that triggers Vitamin D production in human skin. When pollution absorbs or scatters these rays, the body's ability to synthesise Vitamin D can be impaired. Officials say the primary drivers of deficiency remain reduced sun exposure, indoor lifestyles and long working hours, even as pollution compounds health risks. Since January 10, AQI readings



have stayed above 200, placing the city in the 'poor' category and causing breathing discomfort during prolonged exposure, particularly among children, older adults and people with respiratory conditions. Prabhakar Tiwari, joint director of the National Health Mission, said limited exposure to sunlight is a major factor behind widespread deficiency. "People working in offices, hospitals and closed campuses are affected. Even doctors are suffering from Vitamin D deficiency," Tiwari said. He said air pollution remains a

serious concern but stressed that lifestyle patterns and lack of outdoor activity play a dominant role. Pollution specialists say ground-level ozone forms when nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons from vehicle exhaust react under sunlight, a process that intensifies with higher temperatures. The gas can inflame airways, reduce lung function and cause long-term respiratory damage. Doctors warn that Vitamin D deficiency affects all age groups, though the impact varies. In infants, deficiency can cause

rickets, delayed growth, delayed teething and seizures. Among children, it is linked to bowed legs, stunted growth and frequent infections. Adolescents may develop reduced peak bone mass, bone pain, muscle weakness and higher fracture risk. Adults can suffer from osteomalacia, chronic back pain, muscle fatigue and fractures, with studies also linking deficiency to metabolic and autoimmune disorders. Pregnant women face higher risks of preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, low birth-weight babies and neonatal deficiency. Among the elderly, deficiency contributes to osteoporosis, muscle wasting, falls and fractures. Reports citing Children in India, a publication of the Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, say Vitamin D deficiency affects 24 per cent of adolescents aged 10 to 19, compared with 18 per cent among children aged 5 to 9 and 14 per

cent among those aged 1 to 4. The report cites limited sunlight exposure, diet and environmental factors, including pollution, as contributors. It also found zinc deficiency in 32 per cent of adolescents. Government representatives have acknowledged that air pollution triggers respiratory disease but maintain that there is no official data directly attributing deaths to air pollution. Public health experts say this reflects institutional reluctance rather than the absence of impact. International studies have challenged that position. A Lancet analysis estimated that about 1.7 million deaths in India in 2022 were linked to fossil-fuel air pollution and climate extremes. With north India entering another season of hazardous air and rising temperatures creating favourable conditions for ozone formation, hospitals in Bhopal continue to report a rise in respiratory cases, sharpening focus on pollution control and preventive public health mea-

## NGT raps state over sewage water supply

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

The National Green Tribunal, Central Zone Bench, Bhopal, on Thursday delivered a landmark order, holding that the supply of sewage-contaminated and polluted drinking water in cities across Madhya Pradesh poses a grave threat to public health and amounts to a serious failure of governance. A bench comprising Justice Shiv Kumar Singh (Judicial Member) and Ishwar Singh (Expert Member), while hearing Kamal Kumar Rathi v State of Madhya Pradesh and others (O A No 06/2026), fixed clear accountability on the state government, pollution control authorities and all local bodies for ensuring safe and potable drinking water to citizens. The tribunal took note of submissions made on behalf of the petitioner by senior advocate Harpreet Singh Gupta, assisted by a team of advocates, who argued that water bodies in Bhopal contain alarmingly high levels of faecal coliform bacteria, far exceed-

ing permissible limits. It was contended that leaking and poorly maintained sewage pipelines are contaminating drinking water supply lines, directly endangering public health and violating the right to life. Taking serious note of the allegations, the tribunal constituted a six-member high-level joint committee to assess the ground situation and submit a comprehensive report within six weeks. The committee will include an expert nominated by the Director of IIT Indore, representatives of the Central Pollution Control Board and the Madhya Pradesh Pollution Control Board, and senior officials from the Environment Department, Urban Administration and Development Department, and the Water Resources Department of the Madhya Pradesh government. The MPPCB has been designated as the nodal agency. The tribunal further directed that copies of the order be circulated to all District Collectors and Municipal Commissioners in the state to ensure immediate compliance.

Issuing a series of stringent directions to safeguard drinking water quality, the NGT ordered the creation of a robust Management Information System and a 24/7 mobile application to provide real-time information on water quality, supply schedules and grievance redressal. GIS-based mapping of all drinking water and sewage pipelines has been mandated to identify contamination points. The tribunal also directed compulsory aeration and chlorination of water, regular cleaning of overhead tanks and sumps, urgent repair of leaking pipelines, and removal of all encroachments around water bodies. Rainwater harvesting has been made mandatory for all government and private buildings, with punitive action for non-compliance. Additional directions include the relocation of dairies with more than two cattle outside city limits within four months, a complete ban on idol immersion in drinking water sources, universal metering of water connections, and preparation of regulated tanker supply plans during water shortages. The matter will be heard next on March 30, 2026.



## IN FOCUS



Andre De Grasse, International Event Ambassador for the Tata Mumbai Marathon 2026 at the Gateway of India in Mumbai

PTI

# Mann appears before Akal Takht secretariat

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Amritsar

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann appeared before the Akal Takht secretariat on Thursday after being summoned by the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs for his alleged remarks about Sikh traditions and tenets. Before his appearance at the Akal Takht secretariat, Mann offered prayers at the Golden Temple. Mann later told reporters that he had submitted his clarifications to Akal Takht acting Jathedar Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargaj.

The response will be examined in detail after which directions will be given, he said. Mann added that he appeared before the Akal takht



secretariat as a devout Sikh to offer his clarification and will obey any directive it gives. Jathedar Gargaj had on January 5 summoned Mann for allegedly making comments on 'Guru ki Golak' (a gurdwara donation box) and indulging in "objectionable activities" with the pictures of Sikh gurus and slain militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

# BSP will contest 2027 UP elections alone: Mayawati

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

Lucknow

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) will contest all elections across the country, including the 2027 Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls, on its own, and it would form a Government with a full majority in the state, BSPm chief Mayawati said on Thursday. Addressing a press conference in Lucknow on her 70th birthday, Mayawati said the party had decided that it was "more appropriate" to fight all small and big elections independently and would not enter any kind of alliance with any party.

"There should be no confusion about this. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) will contest the next Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh alone," she said. She, however, added that in the future, if the party became fully convinced that an alliance partner could effectively transfer its votes — particularly of upper castes — to the BSP, a positive decision on contesting elections in alliance could be taken, though she said such a situation would take years to materialise. Mayawati claimed that the people of Uttar Pradesh were once again inclined to bring the BSP back in power in 2027, recalling the party's four previous terms in office. She said party workers were fully engaged to ensure the formation of a BSP Government with a full majority in the next assembly elections.

Attacking the BJP, Congress and other "caste-based parties", she said the BSP would give them a fitting reply and form the party's fifth Government in Uttar Pradesh. The BSP chief also raised concerns over electronic voting machines (EVMs), alleging that manipulation and dishonesty had occurred in past elections, but asserted that her party would continue to contest elections across the country with full strength. She said opposition to EVMs was growing nationwide.

Mayawati accused previous Governments of neglecting BSP founder Kanshi Ram, alleging that national mourning was not declared after his death. She also alleged injustice towards Muslims and other com-



BSP chief Mayawati addressing a press conference marking her 70th birthday, at the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) headquarters in Lucknow

PTI

munities, while asserting that no communal riots occurred during the BSP rule and that all sections, including Yadavs, were taken care of. Further, Mayawati said successive Governments at the Centre and in the state were merely renaming welfare schemes, "originally launched" during the BSP rule, for political gain without delivering real benefits to the people.

The "caste-based parties" were using all means to stall the BSP's movement in the country, she claimed. "Our Government gave due respect to Dalit icons. We installed statues, developed parks and launched schemes in their names. Today, other parties are imitating us.

They speak of Lord Ram but carry a knife under their arm," she said. Paying tribute to Dalit leaders, Mayawati said she would continue to fight for the rights of Dalits as long as she remained alive and healthy. "I will neither bow down nor be intimidated. I will continue to fulfil the responsibility given to me by BSP founder Kanshi Ram," she said.

The BSP chief said her Government had honoured leaders such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Narayana Guru and Chhatrapati Shahu ji Maharaj by installing their statues and alleged that there was a conspiracy to weaken the BSP. Mayawati also claimed that the blueprint for major

infrastructure projects, including expressways in Uttar Pradesh and the upcoming airport in Gautam Buddh Nagar near Delhi, was prepared during the BSP's tenure.

"These projects would have been completed during our rule, but the then Congress-led central Government did not cooperate," she said.

Accusing the previous Samajwadi Party Government and the current BJP Government of failing Dalits and other marginalised sections, Mayawati said people were distressed under both regimes.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister also alleged that the law and order situation under the present Government was no better than during the Samajwadi Party rule.

"In such circumstances, the people of Uttar Pradesh are once again recalling the BSP's four terms in power and have made up their mind to bring the party back to power," she added. Earlier in the day, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav extended birthday greetings to Mayawati.

Mayawati turned 70 on Thursday, with the BSP observing the day across Uttar Pradesh as 'Jan Kalyankari Diwas'.

# Tension grips Ladakh as young girl goes missing

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ Jammu

Ahead of the next round of talks between the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Ladakh representatives, public outrage is mounting over repeated incidents of forced religious conversion through marriage in the region. On Thursday, tension gripped the remote Zaskar region of Ladakh as reports emerged of a second young girl from the area going missing in under a month. The incident has prompted strong reactions from local Buddhist organisations, who have raised serious allegations of kidnapping, psychological manipulation, and forced religious conversion through marriage.

The Zaskar Buddhist Association has formally approached the local administration, demanding immediate action.

President, Zaskar Buddhist Association, Tsering Dorjay, on Thursday submitted a formal representation to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Zaskar, demanding a thorough and impartial investigation by the authorities.

Registration of a First Information Report (FIR), Swift recovery of the missing girl(s) and enactment of stronger anti-conversion legislation to prevent such incidents. Earlier on the eve of the New Year, all business establishments in Leh district remained shut in protest against the kidnapping of a minor girl to Srinagar from Leh district.

Acting swiftly, Ladakh Police recovered the minor girl and handed her over to her family to prevent any flare-up. Local community leaders allege that the dis-



appearances follow a pattern involving coercion and attempts at religious conversion, heightening fears among residents in this predominantly Buddhist valley.

The President of the Zaskar Buddhist Association submitted, "We are writing this letter with extreme urgency and distress to report the kidnapping, abduction / wrongful confinement of a Buddhist girl from Zaskar, namely Stanzin Yangdol, by an unidentified individual who has been missing for the past many days". We have been informed by the parents of the girl that she has been kidnapped by unknown individuals who are wrongfully confining her against her will.

He further wrote, "We respectfully draw your attention to a matter of serious public concern involving the alleged misuse of marriage as a means to fraudulently convert girls belonging to the Buddhist community into another religion.

There are strong and reasonable grounds to believe that, in multiple instances, marriages are being preceded or accompanied by religious conversion of Buddhist girls, not by their free, voluntary, and informed consent, but through deception, coercion, inducement, or misrepresentation".

# Larger questions involved, SC says...

As the hearing commenced, the ED said the West Bengal government's "interference and obstruction" during the probe agency's raids reflects a very shocking pattern. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the ED, told the bench that in the past also, whenever statutory authorities exercised statutory power, Banerjee barged in and interfered.

"It reflects a very shocking pattern," Mehta said while contending that this will only encourage such acts, and the central forces will be demoralised. "The states will feel they can barge in, commit theft, and then sit on a dharna. Let an example be set, officers who were explicitly present there should be suspended," the solicitor general said. Mehta said that there was evidence leading to the conclusion that incriminating material was lying in the I-PAC office.

"Let an example be set, and officers explicitly present there should be suspended. Direct the competent authority to act, and please take cognisance of what is happening. We are here to protect our officers' fundamental rights. We are acting under the law and do not seize for personal gains," he said. Senior advocate Kapil Sibal opposed Mehta's plea and said the case should be heard by the Calcutta High Court first, and proper hierarchy should be followed. He claimed the ED was filing parallel proceedings.

Sibal also referred to the video recording of the raid and said, "It is a blatant lie that all digital devices were taken. Allegation that CM Mamata Banerjee took all devices is a lie, substantiated by ED's own panchnama (search record)." "The last statement in the coal scam was recorded in February 2024; what was ED doing since then? Why so keen in the midst of elections?" he posed.

The ED's plea in the apex court follows events from January 8, when ED's officials faced obstructions during the probe agency's raids at the office of political consultancy firm I-PAC in Salt Lake and the residence of its chief, Pratik Jain, in Kolkata in connection with a coal smuggling case. The probe agency has claimed that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee entered the premises and took away "key" evidence related to the probe.

The Chief Minister has accused the central agency of overreach, while her party, Trinamool Congress, has denied the ED's allegation of "obstructing" its probe. The state's police have registered an FIR against ED officers. Sibal argued that went to the I-PAC premises on January 8 after receiving information that certain unauthorised persons had entered into the office of Pratik Jain, who had been entrusted with TMC's election work. Clarifying that Banerjee did not go to the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) premises as chief minister, senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for her, told a bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Vipul Pancholi that the Trinamool Congress (TMC) supremo went there as chairman of the party.

The Supreme Court flagged concern over the enormous disturbance and commotion in the Calcutta High Court on January 9 on account of an unmanageable crowd which forced it to adjourn the scheduled hearing of cases related to the ED's search and seizure operations at political consultancy firm I-PAC's office. "I have placed on record Whatsapp chats of the law wing of the party in power. This was not spontaneous and they were instructed by the legal cell of the party

to go there," Mehta said. The bench then remarked orally, "Come, everyone? As if it's Jantar Mantar." Mehta said the High Court was converted into Jantar Mantar. "Buses and vehicles were arranged," the SG added. Sibal assured the court that it will not be repeated. "Yesterday, hearing took place. Without any ruckus, ED sought adjournment yesterday," he said.

# India plans evacuation as Iran closes its air space

However, these efforts have been complicated by restrictions on internet access and patchy telecommunications following widespread unrest in Iran. As a result, embassy officials are relying heavily on physical outreach and direct coordination with educational institutions that host Indian students. "The focus right now is on establishing contact and understanding the numbers," a source said, adding that operational decisions would depend on multiple factors, including air-space clearances, aircraft availability, and the evolving security situation. A first evacuation flight could be arranged at short notice if conditions permit, the source said.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has standard procedures in place for emergency evacuations, including the possible use of military aircraft if required. Officials emphasised that preparations do not necessarily indicate an imminent evacuation, but reflect a precautionary approach in light of regional tensions.

On Wednesday, the Indian embassy in Tehran issued an advisory asking Indian students, businesspersons, pilgrims and tourists to consider leaving Iran using available commercial transport options. Separately, the MEA in New Delhi advised Indian citizens to avoid travel to Iran until further notice. Iran has witnessed sustained anti-government protests since late December, triggered by economic distress and inflation, which later broadened into demonstrations against the political system. International reports suggest that the crackdown on protests has resulted in significant casualties, though official figures remain disputed. The unrest has heightened tensions between Tehran and Washington, with US President Donald Trump warning of strong action if Iranian authorities continue to use force against protesters.

Amid these developments, Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi spoke to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Wednesday evening to discuss the situation. The conversation also addressed Araghchi's decision to postpone a scheduled visit to India.

India's position has become more delicate in recent weeks following renewed pressure from the US, including threats of punitive tariffs on countries maintaining trade ties with Iran. For New Delhi, the immediate priority remains the safety of its citizens, particularly students, as uncertainty continues to grip the region.

The situation in the country has taken a turn for the worse, with weeks-long protests showing no signs of slowing down. On Tuesday, US President Donald Trump called upon protesters to take over their institutions, urging them not to back down. Without providing further details, he said that help was on the way.

US President Donald Trump said he had been informed that the violence in Iran had subsided, but stressed that military options remain under consideration in response to Tehran's handling of the protests.

## FROM PAGE - 1

Human Rights organisations estimate that more than 2,400 people have died during a sweeping security crackdown launched by Iranian authorities to quell demonstrations that spread across the country.

Trump made the remarks on Wednesday as the United States and the United Kingdom scaled back staffing levels at the Al-Udeid air base in Qatar. US officials described the move as a precaution, according to media report.

Amid rising regional tensions, Iran briefly shut its airspace overnight, disrupting commercial aviation. Several airlines subsequently announced plans to divert flights away from Iranian airspace.

The aircraft had barely settled into its climb when the route ahead vanished from the map.

On Thursday morning, as tensions rose thousands of kilometres away, Indian skies felt the ripple. Iran's sudden decision to shut its airspace triggered by internal unrest and an escalating standoff with the United States sent commercial flights scrambling for alternatives. Some turned back. Others never left the ground.

At Delhi airport, passengers bound for New York watched departure boards flicker from on time to cancelled. Two Air India flights were recalled midair, their crews forced to abandon west-bound paths that usually cut cleanly across Iran. With Pakistan's airspace already closed, the detours left little room for fuel calculations or second chances. Airlines warned of delays and disruptions, asking travellers to check their flight status before leaving home. Behind the scenes, costs mounted as planes were pushed onto longer, fuel-heavy routes over unfamiliar corridors. For some destinations, rerouting simply wasn't possible.

IndiGo's services to Central Asia, Europe and Turkey were also hit, while SpiceJet echoed similar concerns. Each airline spoke of safety first, but the uncertainty lingered: an invisible reminder of how quickly distant conflicts can intrude into ordinary journeys. By nightfall, the airspace remained shut, and the skies over Iran stayed quiet. On the ground in India, however, the effects were unmistakable: delayed reunions, altered plans, and the uneasy sense that global tensions were no longer far away, but flying alongside.

# UN to meet on Iran crisis

Against this backdrop, Washington has begun pulling out some personnel from U.S. military installations across the Middle East as a precautionary measure. According to Reuters, a senior Iranian official said Tehran had cautioned neighbouring states that any U.S. attack on Iran would prompt strikes on American bases located on their soil. U.S. President Donald Trump has stepped up his rhetoric, encouraging Iranians to continue demonstrating and warning of severe consequences should executions of protesters take place. At the same time, he has signalled restraint, indicating that his administration is closely monitoring developments while keeping its options open.

Tehran has firmly denied allegations that it intends to carry out executions, insisting that such claims are unfounded. Iranian leaders have also accused Washington of fuelling unrest and interfering in the country's internal affairs, formally raising these concerns with the United Nations and reaffirming their commitment to defending national sovereignty.

Reactions from the international community remain divided. Several regional players, including Turkey, have urged calm and rejected the idea

of foreign military action, calling instead for dialogue and diplomatic solutions. Western countries, however, have strongly criticised Iran's handling of the protests and indicated they may consider further steps, including additional sanctions. As the Security Council prepares to deliberate, the situation in Iran continues to command international attention, with fears that prolonged unrest and escalating rhetoric could have far-reaching consequences for the wider region.

# AI plane ingests baggage container in fog

The incident highlights ongoing concerns about airside safety at some Indian airports, where vehicles or unattended baggage containers have previously collided with aircraft. The airline stated that the aircraft has been grounded for a thorough investigation, and there may be potential disruptions on select routes operated by the A350 aircraft. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has launched a probe into the incident to ascertain how a foreign object got lodged inside the engine.

"Air India confirms that Flight AI101, operating from Delhi to New York (JFK), was forced to return to Delhi shortly after takeoff due to the unexpected closure of Iranian airspace, which impacted its planned route. Upon landing in Delhi, the aircraft encountered a foreign object while taxiing in dense fog, resulting in damage to the right engine," the airline said in a statement. It, however, did not identify the "foreign object". Sources said the foreign object was an improperly secured baggage container. "The aircraft was safely positioned at the designated parking stand, ensuring the safety of all passengers and crew on board," the airline said in a statement.

A civil aviation ministry spokesperson said that Air India A350 aircraft VT-JRB while operating flight AI101 (Delhi-New York, JFK) was involved in Air turn back due to Iranian Airspace closure. Aircraft landed safely at Runway 28, Delhi. During taxi to apron, at taxiway N/N4 junction No.2 engine ingested a cargo container causing substantial damage to No.2 engine. The incident occurred around 05:25 IST".

Engine ingestion refers to an incident in which a jet engine draws in a foreign object — such as baggage containers, tools, debris or birds - instead of clean air. Unverified videos and pictures showed damage to the aircraft's right-side engine. The aircraft has been grounded for repairs, adding to Air India's widebody aircraft shortage, with one of its six A350s currently out of service. Providing more details based on the preliminary probe, a DGCA official said the area near bay 242 was designated for Air Mauritius GSE parking. When the BWFS (Bird Worldwide Flight Services) tug was transporting a few containers to this area, one of the wheels of the container dolly came off, and a container toppled onto the taxiway. The equipment operator noticed Air India aircraft taxiing in, and the equipment operator vacated the spot with the remaining dollies and containers. However, the container which fell was left behind, and it got ingested in the aircraft engine, the official said.

The video/images available on social media, allegedly shows the plane on the runway and the people working on it. Also, the visible marks near the engine area point out the place where the impact occurred when the container hit the plane. The whole episode has again thrown light on the

necessity for rigorous ground-handling standards to be observed at all times, particularly in situations with very poor visibility like heavy fog. The authorities concerned are likely to go through the safety measures to ensure that no such things happen again.

Back in December 2015, an Air India technician was sucked into an aircraft engine at the Mumbai airport. Jet engines operate with immense suction, especially at low speeds during taxiing or take-off. Any object entering the engine can damage or bend fan blades or cause hidden structural stress to internal components. The engine often has to be shut down and inspected or replaced.

# PM Modi calls on the Global South to shape...

On the occasion the PM noted that the Indian Parliament has already been undertaking such initiatives. The Prime Minister emphasized that through study tours, customized training programmes, and internships, citizens have been given opportunities to understand Parliament more closely. He further highlighted that India has begun using AI to translate debates and House proceedings in real time into regional languages.

Underscoring that he has had the opportunity to visit more than 20 member countries associated with the Commonwealth, Modi highlighted that he has also had the privilege of addressing several Parliaments. PM stated that due to this spirit of welfare, 25 crore people have come out of poverty in recent years. He asserted, "In India, democracy delivers".

Referring to the Lok Sabha elections held in 2024, Modi who became minister for third straight time, underlined that they were the largest democratic exercise in human history. "Nearly 980 million citizens were registered to vote, a number larger than the population of some continents. There were more than 8,000 candidates and over 700 political parties contesting, and the elections also witnessed record participation by women voters," he mentioned.

PM delightedly shared that the President of India (Droupadi Murmu, is a woman, and the Chief Minister of Delhi (Rekha Gupta), the city where the conference is being held, is also a woman. He remarked that Indian democracy is rich in diversity where hundreds of languages are spoken, there are over 900 television channels across different languages, and thousands of newspapers and periodicals published.

# Mahayuti set for BMC sweep, exit polls show

The Shiv Sena could win eight-eleven seats, NCP (SP) (four-six), Shiv Sena (UBT) (four to five) MNS (zero-two), Congress (11-14). In Thane, the Shiv Sena is expected to win seats in the range of 69-76, the BJP could bag 26-30 seats, Sena UBT (zero-two), MNS (zero to one), NCP (SP) (12-16) and NCP (six-eight) and Congress (one-two), according to the Jubilant Data Studio exit polls. As per the JVC exit polls, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance could win 138 seats and bag vote share in the range of 42-45 per cent in the metropolis. The Shiv Sena (UBT)-MNS-NCP (SP) alliance could win 59 seats and get vote share in the range of 34-37 per cent. The Congress-led alliance could win 23 seats and get a vote share of 13-15 per cent.





## BJP turns more communal when it is weak: Akhilesh



Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday alleged that the BJP becomes more communal whenever it is politically weak and accused its leaders of surviving only on allegations. Yadav was addressing party leaders and workers from various districts at the SP state headquarters in Lucknow.

## West Bengal's demography entering a dangerous phase:BJP

BJP national spokesperson Pradeep Bhandari has claimed that West Bengal's demography is entering a "dangerous phase" in several districts of the State with growth rate of Hindu population declining every passing decade. In a video posted on his official social media handle on Tuesday, Bhandari claimed that the rate of decline of Hindu population in border districts of West Bengal is "directly proportional" to the rate of increase of "illegal infiltrating activities" in those districts.



## Congress leader booked for threatening municipal officer



Congress leader Rajeev Gowda has been booked for threatening the Shidlaghatta Municipal Commissioner Amrutha Gowda over the removal of his banner from a busy junction in the town in Karnataka's Chikkaballapura district.

## DMK alliance hurtling towards collapse: Palaniswami

AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami on Thursday said that "DMK-led alliance is heading towards a collapse" with the Congress is "all set to slip away" from the ruling coalition ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections. Addressing a Thai Pongal outreach event in his home district of Salem, the Leader of the Opposition claimed that there was a growing friction between the two long-term allies over power-sharing and seat-negotiations and he termed this as a sign of the "DMK's weakening hold on the state".



# Om Birla warns of tech misuse, AI threats at Commonwealth meet

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla on Thursday said while emerging technology has increased efficiency, its misuse has also presented serious challenges such as misinformation, cybercrimes and social disharmony caused by it, and called for effective solutions to counter the threat posed to democracies across the world.

He also said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership is giving decisive resolutions to global challenges at a time when the world is looking at him for leadership.

Addressing the 28th conference of speakers and presiding officers of Commonwealth in the historic Central Hall of Samvidhan Sadan (the old Parliament building), the Speaker said in India's over seven-decade-long parliamentary journey, democracy has been strengthened through people-centric policies and welfare-focused legislations.

Addressing the gathering in the presence of the prime minister and Rajya Sabha Deputy Chair Hariwansh, Birla said today the world is under-



PM Narendra Modi, right, and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla during the 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of Commonwealth Countries (CSPOC), at the Samvidhan Sadan in New Delhi on Thursday

going an unprecedented technological transformation. Artificial intelligence (AI) and social media have increased the efficiency and effectiveness of democratic institutions, he said.

"However, their misuse has also presented us with serious challenges such as misinformation, cybercrimes and social division. It is our collective responsibility to seriously consider these challenges and find appropriate

solutions," Birla said.

Ethical AI and authentic and accountable social media, the Speaker said, are the need of the hour. "I hope that this conference will have in-depth discussions on this important global issue and that concrete policy decisions will be taken so that we can develop a roadmap for the ideal use of AI and social media in democratic institutions," he said.

He underscored that

neutral and impartial electoral system has ensured participative democracy for all eligible citizens.

Birla said the collective efforts of Parliament and Government have ensured the repeal of several (over 1500 till date) unwanted and obsolete laws and enactment of new welfare-focused legislations. He said the enactment of such laws and policies help India in becoming a self-reliant and developed country.

Rajya Sabha Deputy Chair Hariwansh asserted that Indian parliamentary system draws its strength from the age-old tradition of dialogue, debate and dissent — values which are central to a true democracy. He said the presence of delegates from across the globe reflects India's philosophy that the world is one family. Hariwansh said the meet is an opportunity to collectively reflect upon evolving challenges and exchange best practices. He reminded that presiding officers have the responsibility to uphold the dignity of legislatures, ensuring fairness in proceedings and safeguarding democratic norms.

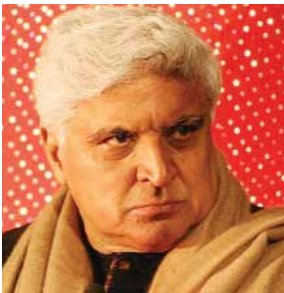
## Secularism a way of life, says Javed Akhtar

MANIK GUPTA ■ Jaipur

Secularism can't be taught through crash courses, it's a "way of life" that comes naturally, lyricist-writer Javed Akhtar said at the inaugural day of the 19th Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) on Thursday. Akhtar said secularism, in recent times, has been reduced to a "four-letter word" but secular values do not take root through formal instruction or theoretical lessons. "Secularism should be a way of life because everyone around you is living like this, and then it comes to you automatically. If one day you are given a lecture and you remember points A, B and C after listening to it, that is fake, that is artificial. It can hardly last.

"But if it is your way of life — the way you have seen your elders, the people you respect and admire, living — then it comes within you," he said, addressing a packed audience in his session, titled "Javed Akhtar: Points of View". Reflecting on his childhood, Akhtar, who is an atheist, said he was raised in a household of agnostics and atheists where religion rarely entered daily life.

The only family members he ever saw praying were his



maternal grandparents. He recounted a personal anecdote about his grandmother, an illiterate woman, but who possessed a sensibility that he wished "even one-tenth of today's leaders had".

During Akhtar's childhood, when his grandfather tried to persuade him to memorize religious verses by offering 50 paise — no less than a "fortune" for him at the time — his grandmother angrily intervened, insisting that no one had the right to impose religion on another.

"That was the end of my religious education. Yes, that time, I was not very happy with her because I lost the opportunity to earn 50 paise. But in retrospect, I think of her as a woman who could not even write her name, (but) she had this sensibility. I wish our leaders had one-tenth of this sensibility," he explained. Akhtar often had his audience in splits with his

trademark wit. When session moderator Warisha Farasat introduced him as someone whose writing carries the best traits of literary greats including Shailendra, Shakeel Badayuni, and his father, Jan Nisar Akhtar, he quipped, "I have nothing of my own." Moments later, when, in a brief pause between questions, Farasat requested that he recite a poem, Akhtar shot back without batting an eyelid, "You can't think of the next question?" — sending the audience into peals of laughter. Akhtar also challenged the notion that the younger generation today is uniquely flawed, observing that such complaints have existed since time immemorial: "The golden era is never the present era."

"You can find it on Google. Even Aristotle was very unhappy with the younger generation. Around 360 or 350 years before Christ, it was written that the younger generation had no concentration. They had no manners. They were completely spoiled. This complaint has always existed," he added. He argued that times keep changing, bringing a mix of both good and bad. To illustrate his point,

he spoke about the film industry today, which, like other fields, is often criticised for not being what it once was.

"Today things in the film industry are much more streamlined than ever... I remember when I was an assistant director and first joined the film industry, the position of assistant director was so disrespectful. What was our job? Bring madam's shoes quickly. Where is the hero's coat? Where is the jacket? We used to do all this. We used to say, 'I am an assistant director.'"

"Today's assistants, however, are on first-name terms with the stars. I get scared when I see them. The assistant director is calling the hero by his name, we could never have imagined that." The five-day literary festival will host more than 350 celebrated authors and scholars including Booker Prize winner Banu Mushtaq, Chess legend Vishwanathan Anand, British actor and author Stephen Fry and former diplomat-writer Gopal Krishna Gandhi, Sahitya Akademi Award-winner Anuradha Roy, veteran film critic Bhawana Somaaya, and celebrated authors Manu Joseph, Ruchir Joshi, and KR Meera. (PTI)

## Six killed in house fire in Himachal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Shimla

Six people, including three children, were charred to death and another sustained burn injuries in a fire that broke out in a village in Nauradhar area of Himachal Pradesh's Sirmour district, officials said on Thursday.

Preliminary probe suggests that the fire broke out in the 'chula' — traditional Indian stove — of a house in Talangna village late on Wednesday night, sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) Sangrah told the PTI over the phone. Talangna is a remote village not connected by road in Sangrah subdivision, and by the time the villagers spotted the fire and rushed to help, the blaze had already caused extensive damage to the old wooden house.

Six bodies have been recovered — two of them were said to be from Rajgarh in Sirmour



while four were from Nerva area of Shimla district, the SDM said, adding that he was on his way to the spot.

The deceased included the daughter and son-in-law of the owner of the house who had come for Boda Tyohar celebrations. Three children were among the dead.

Boda Tyohar is the biggest annual festival of three lakh Hattree tribes of Sirmour district in which daughters visit their parent's house.

Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu has expressed grief over the fire incident and directed the district

administration to carry out a thorough investigation into the cause of the incident and to ensure that all possible assistance is extended to the bereaved families at the earliest. Union Health Minister and BJP National President JP Nadda, Leader of Opposition Jai Ram Thakur and State BJP chief Rajiv Bindal have also expressed grief over the fire incident. Congress State chief and MLA from Shri Renukaji assembly segment Vinay Kumar has expressed sadness over the incident and directed authorities to provide immediate relief.

## UGC panel proposes a counsellor for every 100-500 students

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

A UGC panel has proposed specific counsellor-to-student ratios, one for every 500 students in larger institutions and one for every 100 in smaller ones, and to hold periodic awareness programmes on stress and anxiety to bolster student-support systems, according to officials.

The recommendations have been made in the University Grants Commission (UGC) panel's draft guidelines, UGC Guidelines on Uniform Policy on Mental Health and Well-Being for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), for colleges and universities. "The HEIs shall establish a dedicated Mental Health and Well-being Centre with all required physical infrastructure. The infrastructure will include dedicated



rooms/spaces that will provide privacy while making or waiting for appointments," as per the recommendations. Also suggesting that periodic awareness programmes on stress and anxiety be held.

"The Centres will have facilities for documentation of sessions held, which will be coded or anonymised for storage. Clinical records may be destroyed as per the rules of the HEIs after a period of

one year after the student graduates, as per norms," as per the recommendations.

"Data related to service utilisation may be stored. Contact details for the Centre need to be visibly displayed throughout the campus and the details available on the website as well," the recommendations said.

The UGC formed the committee, headed by Rajinder K Dhamija, the director of the Institute of Human

Behaviour and Allied Sciences (IHBAS), Delhi, after the Supreme Court's July 25, 2025 directions on framing a uniform mental health policy for India's higher educational institutes.

Under the draft norms, the UGC has been entrusted with a central role in monitoring and supporting the implementation of a uniform mental health policy in all HEIs. The UGC will track progress through a dedicated portal, 'MANASSETU', collecting annual reports and feedback to assess whether the objectives, such as improving student well-being and reducing attrition or loss of life, are being met.

"The UGC will also support continuous capacity-building initiatives, recognise evidence-based interventions, and collaborate with the National Research Foundation (NRF), ICMR, ICSSR, and WHO, among

others, to develop effective strategies and interventions," the recommendations said.

"By reviewing policies annually and identifying challenges in their adoption, the UGC will also ensure that mental health policies translate into tangible outcomes on the ground. Each HEI is expected to establish a dedicated Mental Health & Well-being Centre (MHWBC), with appropriate infrastructure to provide private and accessible services," the recommendations said.

The draft guidelines urge HEIs to develop strong "readiness and crisis management mechanisms" to safeguard student mental health.

"Under suicide prevention infrastructure, peers, faculty, and staff should be trained to recognise signs of distress in behaviour and communication, such as abrupt changes in interaction, behaviour or class attendance," it said.

## New UGC regulations mandates equity committees

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

The Government has notified new regulations mandating all higher education institutions to form "equity committees" to look into discrimination complaints and promote equity, according to officials.

The University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, mandated that these committees must include members of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), persons with disabilities, and women. A draft of the regulations was made public for feedback in February last year. The document was issued after the Supreme Court told the UGC to submit the new regulations while hearing a plea by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadv, questioning the implementation of the 2012 UGC regulations.

"Every HEI shall establish an Equal Opportunity Centre to oversee the effective implementation of policies and



programmes for disadvantaged groups; to provide guidance and counselling regarding academic, financial, social and other matters; and to enhance the diversity within the campus.

"Provided that if a college does not have at least five faculty members to establish the Equal Opportunity Centre, the functions of the centre of the college shall be performed by the Equal Opportunity Centre of the university to which the college is affiliated," the notification read.

The Centre shall coordinate with civil society, local media, police, district admin-

istration, nongovernment organisations, faculty members, staff, and parents to realise the objective of these regulations.

"The Equal Opportunity Centre shall coordinate with the District Legal Services Authority and the State Legal Services Authority concerned to achieve the objectives of these regulations in general and to provide legal aid in deserving cases."

"The Executive Council or the Governing Body or the Management Committee of the Higher Education Institution, as the case may be, shall nominate a regular professor or a senior faculty

member who has an innate interest in the welfare of disadvantaged social groups as Coordinator of the centre," it read. The Equal Opportunity Centre shall have an Equity Committee constituted by the head of the institution to manage the functioning of the centre and to enquire into discrimination complaints.

The regulations have mandated that the committee must have representation of OBCs, PwDs, SCs, STs, and women. The term of its members shall be for two years, and the term of the special invitees shall be one year. "Every HEI shall also constitute a smaller body to be known as 'Equity Squads' with such representation as is considered necessary for maintaining vigil and preventing any discrimination on the campus," the regulations said.

Vemula, a PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, died by suicide in 2016, allegedly after being subjected to caste-based harassment. Tadv, a resident doctor at Topiwala National Medical College and BYL Nair Hospital, killed herself in 2019, allegedly after facing casteist slurs from her seniors.

## 52 Naxalites surrender in Chhattisgarh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Bijapur (Chhattisgarh)

As many as 52 Naxalites, 49 of them carrying a collective bounty of over ₹1.41 crore, surrendered before the police in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district on Thursday, a senior official said.

The surrendered cadres, including 21 women, were active in the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee (DKSZC), Andhra-Odisha Border division and Bhamragarh area committee (Maharashtra) of Maoists, they said. They turned themselves in before senior police and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) officials here under the "Poona" Margem (from rehabilitation to social reintegration) initiative, Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar Yadav said.

According to the official, the cadres also said that they were impressed by the State Government's surrender and rehabilitation policy. Of them, Lakshu Karam, alias Anil (32), a divisional committee



member, and platoon party committee members Laxmi Madvi (28) and Chinni Sodhi, alias Shanti (28), carried a reward of ₹8 lakh each, he said.

Thirteen other cadres carried a bounty of ₹5 lakh each, 19 cadres ₹2 lakh each and 14 cadres ₹1 lakh each, he said, adding that 49 of the 52 surrendered Naxalites carried a combined bounty of ₹1.41 crore.

All the surrendered Naxalites will be provided an immediate assistance of ₹50,000 each and rehabil-

itated as per the Government's policy, he added. On Wednesday, 29 Naxalites surrendered in the neighbouring Sukma district. Earlier, 63 Naxalites surrendered in the neighbouring Dantewada district on January 8, while 26 cadres shunned violence and joined the mainstream in Sukma on January 7.

More than 1,500 Naxalites surrendered in the State in 2025. The Centre has resolved to eliminate Naxalism from the country by March 31 this

## ICG SHIP INTERCEPTS PAKISTANI FISHING BOAT

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

An Indian Coast Guard ship patrolling in the Arabian Sea has intercepted a Pakistani fishing boat after it was found inside Indian waters, officials said on Thursday.

A total of nine crew members were found on the boat, Al-Madina, they said. The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) ship sighted the Pakistani fishing boat inside Indian waters near the International Maritime Boundary Line on January 14, a senior Coast Guard official said. On being challenged, the boat "attempted to flee" towards the Pakistan side, but the ICG intercepted it and boarded the boat in Indian waters, the official said, adding that it was a "swift and precise night operation".

The boat is being towed to Porbandar in Gujarat by the ICG ship for "thorough rummaging and joint interrogation" by relevant agencies, the official said.



■ States Focus ■



### NO FRIENDS, NO ENEMIES: OMAR ON MAHARASHTRA CIVIC POLLS

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday said Maharashtra has entered an era of “strange relations” where friends become enemies and enemies become friends. Abdullah visited the state amid polling for 29 municipal corporations. Referring to the two rival factions of the Nationalist Congress Party coming together in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad and post-election tie-ups of BJP, Congress and AIMIM councillors in Ambernath and Akot, he commented that the political environment had become “strange”. “There were no friends, no enemies. Friends became enemies and enemies became friends. And strange relations were formed,” he said, speaking to reporters after visiting the Indian Institute of Creative Technologies (IICT) here.



### SABARIMALA CHIEF PRIEST HELD IN SECOND GOLD LOSS CASE

Sabarimala chief priest Kandararu Rajeevaru was arrested on Thursday in a second case related to the loss of gold from the hill shrine, police officials said. Rajeevaru is currently lodged at the Thiruvananthapuram Special Sub Jail in connection with the case relating to the loss of gold from the Sreekovil (sanctum sanctorum) doorframe. After obtaining permission from the Kollam Vigilance Court, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) reached the jail and recorded his arrest in another case related to the loss of gold from the Dwarapalaka (guardian deity) plates, officials said. The investigation team will soon file an application before the court seeking the custody of Rajeevaru.

## PM to attend event marking a decade of ‘Startup India’

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will participate in a programme marking a decade of the Startup India initiative on Friday and interact with members of India’s vibrant startup ecosystem.

Startup India was launched on January 16, 2016, as a transformative national programme to nurture innova-

tion, promote entrepreneurship and enable investment-driven growth, with the objective of making India a nation of job creators rather than job seekers.

On the occasion of National Startup Day, Prime Minister Modi will interact with members of India’s vibrant startup ecosystem, an official statement said. Select startup representatives will share insights from their entrepre-

## Adi Shankaracharya established Indian identity, says Amit Shah

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Ahmedabad

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said Adi Shankaracharya established Indian identity and ensured that the banner of Sanatana Dharma fluttered high in all directions.

Addressing a gathering after launching Shankaracharya’s ‘Granthavali’ in Gujarati, Shah expressed confidence that the complete works of the 8th-century scholar of Advaita Vedanta, published in 15 volumes, will help youth from

Gujarat delve into them and leave an impact on their lives and work.

“You will find the solutions to all the questions that existed in society of that time in these texts,” Shah said.

Referring to Shankaracharya, he said very few people can accomplish so much in such a short lifetime. Shankaracharya travelled extensively across the country on foot, and in a way, he played the role of a walking university, said Shah.

“He didn’t just travel on foot; he established India’s

## Indigenisation a strategic necessity: Army chief

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Jaipur

Given the fast-changing warfare techniques all over the world, the Indian Army is moving forward as a future-ready force and underscored the need for indigenous equipment, calling it a “strategic necessity,” Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi said here on Thursday.

“The Indian Army is moving forward as a future-ready force, possessing well-trained soldiers, modern equipment, and multi-domain operational capabilities. Technology is being used to make the soldier even more capable,” he told reporters in Jaipur after the Army Day parade. He said that there has been a clear shift in the Indian Army’s thinking in the last few years.

Operation Sindoor established a “new normal” according to the Army chief. “It demonstrated the Indian Army’s ability to respond with speed, coordination

and precision. The operation reflected a mature and confident force, capable of safeguarding national interests through measured, firm and responsible action,” he said. “We are not just addressing current challenges but also preparing for future wars. New structures are being created in this direction, which are being equipped and trained according to future needs,” he said. He said that new units like the Bhairav Battalion and Shakti Baan Regiment have been raised.

“This reflects the creation of an agile, responsive, and mission-oriented Army, aligned with future challenges,” he said.

He said that today’s parade showcased a beautiful blend of tradition and transformation. “The Nepal Army Band reflected our strong ties, while the new units demonstrated the Army’s emerging strength,” he said.

“The Indian Army is fully prepared at all times for any



Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Upendra Dwivedi addresses the media after the 78th Army Day Parade celebration, in Jaipur, Rajasthan PTI

kind of attack. We are fully prepared for future warfare. We demonstrated this in the parade. Such preparations will continue to increase in the coming days,” he said, adding that the Indian Army will continue to adapt itself with time and will bring about the necessary changes.

He said that with the display of ‘Made in India’ equipment, the parade

reflected that the foundation of transformation is self-reliance.

“The Indian Army needs equipment in the future that is designed and developed in India. Indigenisation is not just a goal; today, it has become a strategic necessity,” he said.

General Dwivedi said that special emphasis is being placed on resources that are useful for both military and

## CM Nitish attends Chirag’s Makar Sankranti feast

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA <**  
■ Ahmedabad

At least four persons, including children, lost their lives in separate incidents involving kites across Gujarat during the Uttarayan festival, with the State recording a sharp rise in emergency cases, officials said on Thursday. Three deaths were caused by kite strings, while one was due to electrocution. The fatal incidents were reported from Bharuch, Anand, Aravalli and Vadodara districts.

In Bharuch district’s Pilundra village, Rahul Parmar (35) died on the spot after his throat was slit due to a kite string while he was riding a motorcycle, an official from Vedach police



Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, left, Union Minister and Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) chief Chirag Paswan and others during the traditional ‘Dahi Chura Bhoj’ feast organised on Makar Sankranti at the BJP office, in Patna PTI

station said.

An eight-year-old boy died after suffering critical neck injuries from a kite string in Anand district. The child was travelling on a motorcycle,

reported from the Aravalli district, where 17-year-old Tirth Patel died at the scene after his neck was severely injured by a kite string on Wednesday.

In Vadodara district, a 33-year-old man died of electrocution while attempting to retrieve a kite from an electric pole in the Waghodia area. Superintendent of SSG Hospital Dr Ranjan Iyer identified the deceased as Shankar Rathva.

On Wednesday, 108 Emergency Medical Services handled 5,897 emergency medical cases across Gujarat, marking a 33 per cent increase compared to a normal day, during the Uttarayan festivities, according to an official release.



### 4 killed across Gujarat in kite-flying accidents

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA <**  
■ Ahmedabad

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In Bharuch district’s Pilundra village, Rahul Parmar (35) died on the spot after his throat was slit due to a kite string while he was riding a motorcycle, an official from Vedach police station said.

An eight-year-old boy died after suffering critical neck injuries from a kite string in Anand district. The child was travelling on a motorcycle, sitting on the fuel tank, with his father from Badalpur to Ralaj at the time. He was taken to multiple hospitals but could not be saved, they said.

A similar incident was reported from the Aravalli district, where 17-year-old

Tirth Patel died at the scene after his neck was severely injured by a kite string on Wednesday.

In Vadodara district, a 33-year-old man died of electrocution while attempting to retrieve a kite from an electric pole in the Waghodia area. Superintendent of SSG Hospital Dr Ranjan Iyer identified the deceased as Shankar Rathva.

On Wednesday, 108 Emergency Medical Services handled 5,897 emergency medical cases across Gujarat, marking a 33 per cent increase compared to a normal day, during the Uttarayan festivities, according to an official release.

Non-vehicular trauma cases surged by 171 per cent, largely attributed to kite flying, rooftop falls, physical assaults, and electrocution incidents. Vehicular trauma cases also rose sharply by 118.7 per cent, driven by increased festive travel and roadside distractions, it said.

The release also said that Ahmedabad district recorded the highest number of emergency calls, with 1,176 cases reported on Uttarayan, compared to an average of 833 calls on normal days.

## BJP terms SC observations in I-PAC case a ‘serious indictment’ of Mamata

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

The BJP on Thursday termed the Supreme Court’s observations on the ED’s petition alleging obstructions during raids at I-PAC premises a “serious indictment” of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her Government, alleging that she used the state machinery to shield those accused of coal smuggling and money laundering.

Banerjee is completely exposed and defeated today both in the court of public opinion and in the court of law, the BJP said, stressing that there is now no justification for her to remain in the post of chief minister.

It came after the top court described the Enforcement



Directorate’s (ED) allegation that Banerjee caused “obstruction” in its probe as “very serious” and agreed to examine whether a state’s law-enforcing agencies can interfere with any central agency’s investigation into any serious offence.

The top court stayed the FIR filed in West Bengal against ED officials who raided the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) office and the residence of its director, Pratik Jain, on January 8.

## Scientific temper, selfless service key to ‘Viksit Bharat’: President

**NEWS SERVICE** ■ Amritsar

The next two decades are very important in making ‘Viksit Bharat’, President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday said, noting that the future of India depends on young people who possess a scientific temper, act responsibly and serve selflessly.

While addressing the convocation ceremony of the Guru Nanak Dev University here, she urged the higher education institutions to inculcate these values in their students. She also urged young students to ensure that whatever profession they choose, their contribution should strengthen the nation and reinforce human values.

During her address, the president also touched upon the drug problem and said that the youngsters of Punjab have been affected the most in recent years.

This problem is impacting not only health but also the social, economic, and moral fabric of society, she said. “A lasting solution to this problem is essential for a healthy society. In this context, the role of

educational institutions like Guru Nanak Dev University is crucial. All stakeholders of this university should make every possible effort to guide the youth in the right direction,” she said.

Addressing the students in the gathering, the president advised them to remember that education is not merely a means of livelihood. It is also a means of serving society and the nation.

She said that they owe a debt to society, which has contributed to their education. Making efforts to uplift those who have been left behind in the development journey can be one of the ways of repaying the debts. The president said that after completing formal education, students will embark on their journeys in different directions.

Some will serve in the Government or private sector, others will pursue higher education or research, while many will establish their own ventures or build their careers in teaching, she said.

While each field requires different types of qualifications and skills,



President Droupadi Murmu speaks during the 50th annual convocation ceremony of Guru Nanak Dev University, in Amritsar PTI

some qualities are equally essential and helpful for progress in every field, she added.

“These are - a continuous desire and inclination to learn; firm adherence to moral values, integrity, and honesty, even in adverse and difficult circumstances; the courage to embrace change; the determination to learn from failures and move forward; a spirit of teamwork

and collaboration; disciplined use of time and resources; and using knowledge and abilities not for individual gain, but for the greater good of society and the nation,” she said. The president stated that these qualities will not only make them a good professional but also a responsible citizen.

She said that in the last decade, India has made remarkable progress

in the fields of technology development and entrepreneurship culture.

“Today, numerous entrepreneurial opportunities from Agriculture to AI and from defence to space are available to young people. Our higher education institutions can further accelerate this progress by promoting research, strengthening industry-academia collaboration, and encouraging socially relevant innovations,” she said.

The president was happy to note that Guru Nanak Dev University was established during the 500th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev and his teachings and values are the guiding principles of the university. She also said that Guru Nanak Dev taught us that women should be given equal rights in society.

During her address, the President was happy to note that Guru Nanak Dev University is striving for women’s empowerment in accordance with the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev, which is evident in the dominance of female students among those receiving degrees and medals at the convocation ceremony.





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 **Order Order**

## SC stays Madras HC’s eviction order against TN’s SASTRA University



The Supreme Court on Thursday stayed a Madras High Court direction ordering the eviction of Shanmugha Arts, Science, Technology & Research Academy (SASTRA) from Government land in Thanjavur, saying the Tamil Nadu Government should not make a dispute of a “prestige issue.”

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vijay Bishnoi asked the State Government, represented by senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi, to set up a high-powered committee of three senior state officials to consider SASTRA’s representation and accord the institution a hearing before deciding the issue in four weeks.

Asking the state to act “sensitively” while dealing with public educational institutions, the bench said till the time the representation is decided by the panel, the functioning of the institution should not be hindered.

The bench, however, noted that the encroachment on public land cannot be encouraged. The present case involved a public educational institution performing a welfare function and not a commercial enterprise, it said, adding that a welfare state must take into account the role played by such institutions in furthering public interest.

## SC tells *Jana Nayagan* film producer to return to HC for order on CBFC clearance

The release of Vijay-starrer *Jana Nayagan* has been pushed further with the Supreme Court on Thursday dismissing the producer’s plea for a censor certificate and asking them to go back to the Madras High Court for relief on January 20. KVN Productions LLP had challenged an interim order of the Madras High Court that stayed a single-judge direction to grant censor board clearance to the Tamil movie, which was slated for a Pongal release on January 9 and is billed to be Vijay’s last before his full-fledged entry into politics.

A bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and Augustine George Masih questioned the pace at which the case was dealt with in the Madras High Court and asked the film producers to approach the division bench for relief on January 20.

It said the Madras High Court must decide the plea on January 20 itself after senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, appearing for the producers, said a film is a perishable item, and it would cause “serious injury” if adjudication of the dispute is delayed.

## Karti moves Delhi HC against framing of charges in Chinese visa case

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

Congress MP Karti Chidambaram on Thursday moved the Delhi High Court challenging the framing of charges of corruption and conspiracy against him in the alleged Chinese visa scam case probed by the CBI. The petition, which was listed before Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma, will be taken up by the high court on January 19.

In October 2024, the CBI had filed a chargesheet against Karti Chidambaram and others in connection with alleged bribery in facilitating visas of Chinese nationals for a power company, Talwandi Sabo Power Limited (TSPL), in 2011, when his father, P Chidambaram, was the Union home minister. On December 23, 2025, a trial court ordered the framing of charges for criminal conspiracy and corruption against Karti Chidambaram and six others in the case.

It had said “prima facie” there was sufficient material to frame charges against Karti Chidambaram for the substantive offence under IPC Sections 120 B (criminal conspiracy) and under sections 8 (taking gratification, in order, by corrupt or illegal means, to influence a public servant) and 9 (taking gratification, for exercise of personal influence with public servant) of



Karti Chidambaram

the Prevention of Corruption (PC) Act. In his petition before the high court, the Lok Sabha MP from Sivaganga said the trial court did not apply its judicial mind to the material and documents on record as it completely ignored documents, evidence and statements of witnesses which show absence of criminality.

The petition said there was neither any bribe or conspiracy, as alleged by the investigating agency.

“There must be evidence of money or the equivalent being demanded by the accused, payment thereof and acceptance by the accused. The Ld. (Learned) Trial Court has incorrectly observed that the Petitioner demanded Rs 50 Lacs for the work. There is not even an allegation, let alone evidence

(direct or circumstantial) of any demand being made by the Petitioner,” said the plea filed through lawyer Akshat Gupta.

“The Ld. Trial Court failed to appreciate that ‘re-use’ of visas was already an existing practice, and there was no requirement for any conspiracy to receive a routine administrative clarification,” it added.

The CBI had filed the chargesheet after two years of probe into its FIR registered in 2022, where it had alleged that the Punjab-based TSPL was setting up a 1980 MW thermal power plant and the work was outsourced to Chinese company Shandong Electric Power Construction Corp (SEPCO).

The project was running behind schedule, and the company was allegedly facing the prospect of a penalty. The CBI FIR, which contained findings of the investigating officer who undertook the preliminary inquiry, alleged that an executive of TSPL approached Karti Chidambaram through his “close associate/front man” S Bhaskararaman.

In its chargesheet, besides Karti Chidambaram, the CBI has named his alleged close associate and chartered accountant, S Bhaskararaman, TSPL, a subsidiary of Vedanta, and Mumbai-based Bell Tools, through which bribes were allegedly routed.



## Panel to examine digital arrest issues: MHA tells SC

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on Thursday informed the Supreme Court that it had formed a high-level committee to examine issues regarding digital arrest scam cases.

Digital arrest is a growing form of cybercrime in which fraudsters pose as law enforcement, court officials or personnel from Government agencies to intimidate victims through audio and video calls. They hold the victims hostage and put pressure on them to pay money.

Earlier in December last year, the apex court had asked the CBI to carry out a unified pan-India probe into digital arrest scam cases. It had passed the directions in a suo motu case registered on the complaint of an elderly couple from Haryana.

It had also sought the views of various Union Ministries, including the MHA, on how to deal with cybercrime cases.



The MHA submitted that a high-level inter-departmental committee under the chairmanship of the special secretary (internal security) had been constituted to comprehensively examine digital arrest cases. It said the committee’s mandate was to examine real-time issues faced by enforcement agen-

cies, consider the amicus curiae’s (friend of the court) recommendations and court directions, identify relevant legislations, rules, circulars and implementation gaps, suggest corrective measures and provide inputs for further directions. According to the submissions, the members of the committee comprise

officers from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Law and Justice, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), National Investigation Agency (NIA),

## Two journalists get bail after arrest for ‘defamatory content’

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Hyderabad

A city court on Thursday granted bail to two journalists of a Telugu TV news channel, who were arrested in connection with a case related to alleged broadcast of defamatory content against a woman IAS officer.

The journalists were arrested on Wednesday over a case registered against certain Telugu news channels for allegedly telecasting allegations against the officer.

The police, after interrogating both the accused, seized material, and produced them before the Judicial Magistrate for judicial custody. After hearing the arguments and counter

arguments, the court in the early hours of Thursday rejected their remand and granted bail on furnishing two sureties of ₹20,000 each, the advocates representing the journalists told mediapersons. The court further directed the accused to surrender their passports.

The FIR was registered under relevant Sections of the BNS, IT Act, and Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 at Central Crime Station (CCS), on January 10 following a complaint by the Telangana IAS Officers’ Association accusing certain channels of “publishing and telecasting false, fabricated and baseless content” on the officer. A Special Investigation

Team (SIT) comprising eight officers was constituted to investigate the case.

During the course of the investigation, based on information received, the team apprehended two accused — a senior reporter and an input editor on January 14, Hyderabad Commissioner of Police VC Sajjanar said.

The Commissioner further said the input editor, who was detained by the RGI Airport Immigration Authority while attempting to travel to Bangkok, was handed over to police.

The BRS and the BJP had hit out at the Congress Government in Telangana over the arrests of the journalists and demanded their immediate release.

## Can decide citizenship for registration as voters: EC tells SC

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

The Election Commission on Thursday told the Supreme Court that it could determine citizenship only to the extent of registration as a voter and could not deport anyone or decide if a person has a visa to stay in India.

Vehement submissions to this effect were made by senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi on behalf of the poll panel before a bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi.

The bench resumed final hearings on a batch of petitions that challenged the EC’s SIR exercise in several states, including Bihar, raising constitutional questions on the scope of the poll panel’s

powers, citizenship, and the right to vote.

At the outset of the proceedings, Dwivedi referred to Article 326 of the Constitution to support the decision of the EC to undertake special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls and said it provides for elections based on adult suffrage.

He submitted that adult suffrage, in its constitutional sense, consists of three distinct elements, all of which must be satisfied at the stage of registration.

“Unless these three conditions are satisfied, one will not be entitled to be registered as a voter,” Dwivedi argued, adding that if a person is found, upon proper reasoning, not to be a citizen and is still included in the rolls, it



would “go against the grain of the Constitution.” The lawyer relied on Section 16 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, to contend that

Parliament has made it explicit that only citizens are entitled to be registered as electors. Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for peti-

## Trustworthy dying declaration, in absence of strong proof of motive, not fatal to prosecution case: SC

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Thursday said that direct evidence in the form of a credible and trustworthy dying declaration in the absence of strong proof of motive is not fatal to the prosecution case.

A bench of justices BV Nagarathna and R Mahadevan, which overturned the acquittal of Chaman Lal accused of murdering his wife Saro Devi by pouring kerosene on her and putting her on fire, said that motive assumes significance, primarily in cases based on circumstantial evidence.

The top court upheld the trial court judgement which convicted him of murder charges and set aside the Himachal Pradesh High Court order acquitting him by doubting the dying declaration.

The high court had doubted the dying declaration on two grounds — an alleged inconsistency with respect to the time at which

the statement was recorded, and a doubt as to whether tehsildar-cum-executive magistrate of Chamba district himself recorded the statement or merely dictated it.

The top court said in its opinion neither ground taken by the high court is sustainable.

“Motive assumes significance, primarily in cases based on circumstantial evidence. Where there is direct evidence in the form of a credible and trustworthy dying declaration, the absence of strong proof of motive is not fatal to the prosecution case,” the bench said.

It said in the present case, the evidence on record discloses that the respondent (Chaman Lal) subjected the deceased (wife) to frequent quarrels, humiliation and verbal abuse, including branding her a “Kanjri” (woman of bad character) and repeatedly asking her to leave the matrimonial home.

Justice Mahadevan, who penned the verdict on behalf of the bench, said the dying

declaration itself refers to persistent matrimonial discord and ill-treatment thereby furnishing a plausible background for the commission of the offence.

“In any event, the prosecution is not required to establish motive with mathematical precision and failure to conclusively prove motive does not weaken an otherwise reliable and cogent case,” the top court said.

It said upon an overall appraisal of the evidence, we are satisfied that the dying declaration of Saro Devi is voluntary, truthful and reliable.

“It was recorded by a competent authority at a time when the deceased was conscious, oriented and capable of making a statement. The minor discrepancies highlighted by the high court do not create any dent in the credibility of the dying declaration.

Therefore, the prosecution has proved beyond reasonable doubt that the respondent committed the offence punishable under Section

302 IPC,” the bench said. It held that the trial court correctly relied upon the dying declaration and the surrounding circumstances to record the conviction of the respondent while the high court erred in discarding this crucial piece of evidence on speculative and hyper-technical grounds and in placing undue reliance on the testimonies of hostile and defence witnesses.

The top court allowed the appeal filed by the state Government and directed the accused to surrender forthwith to undergo the remaining sentence, failing which the trial Court shall take appropriate steps in accordance with law.

The case of the prosecution is that on December 7, 2009, Chaman Lal allegedly poured kerosene on Saro Devi at their residence situated in village Rampur of district Chamba in Himachal Pradesh and set her on fire by lighting a matchstick.

She was rushed to hospital but later succumbed to severe burn injuries.



Tushar Mehta

lawyers were making submissions during the hearing on ED’s plea regarding the raids at the I-PAC office, a bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Vipul Pancholi reminded them of a circular issued by Chief Justice of India Surya

Kant regarding adherence to the schedule.

At this juncture, Mehta said, “The CJJ should also issue a circular. Lawyers who are appearing in cases should not discuss them on public forums like press conferences.”

Sibal responded to this, saying a circular should also be issued for ED officials not to leak details to journalists of their liking.

He said the solicitor general seems to be “very upset with my programme as he mentions this in every hearing”.

“I am entitled to discuss the cases,” Sibal said.

“This is not the place for this,” the bench said.

Sibal runs a YouTube channel called “Dil Se with Kapil Sibal”, where he hosts discussions on important societal issues.





Editor's  
TAKE

## Why Maharashtra's civic polls matter

From Mumbai's battle over the 'Marathi manoos' and redevelopment, the civic polls have become a referendum on who controls Maharashtra and how

Municipal elections are generally a low-key affair, as the stakes are local. Though political parties fight with vigour, people's enthusiasm is usually limited. But not in Maharashtra, where civic polls are gathering national headlines thanks to the vitriolic campaigns and high-voltage drama on streets. These elections are not just about who would control the local bodies but the whole of Maharashtra. It has touched upon larger issues of identity, alliances, and the direction of Maharashtra's urban development.

Another reason for the noise this election is creating, is that these polls come after a long hiatus – nearly eight years. People are voting to restore democratic control over institutions that directly affect their daily lives – water supply, roads, transport, and waste management – a bid to streamline urban planning.

Over these years, infrastructure has crumbled due to a lack of accountability and bureaucratic control over infra projects, which has left major cities like Mumbai and Pune clamouring for an overhaul.

Politically, these polls are testing the mettle of competing alliances. The ruling Mahayuti and a fragmented opposition are harping on sharp rhetoric. In cities like Pune, the personal rivalries of Ajit Pawar and Devendra Fadnis are in the open. Mumbai is indeed the place where the key battles are being fought with vigour.

The campaigns have gone beyond promises to upgrade local bodies – to questions of identity. The revival of the Marathi 'manoos' plank, triggered by the controversy over Hindi as a third mandatory language in schools, has placed linguistic and cultural identity at the heart of the contest. For the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the MNS, the election has become a question of Marathi pride and political relevance. For the ruling alliance, the counter-narrative has focused on unity and development.

This emphasis on identity reflects a deeper anxiety: the fragmentation of the Marathi vote. Once a consolidated political force, it is now divided among several parties. These polls are an attempt – especially by the Sena (UBT)-MNS combine – to reconsolidate this vote for this election and the Assembly elections as well.

Adding another layer to the campaign is the entry of big business into political discourse. Gautam Adani's name, particularly in relation to the Dharavi redevelopment project, is another highlight of these elections. Opposition leaders have sought to frame the election as a choice between people-centric urban renewal and corporate-driven development termed "Adanistan". The ruling alliance, in turn, has accused its critics of opportunism and hypocrisy.

These polls will decide whether identity politics regains dominance, whether development remains the central plank, or whether voters demand a more accountable, governance-focused politics.

In Maharashtra's metros, the civic ballot has become a referendum on two divergent approaches to governance and how people view the future of Maharashtra – shaped by local satraps or by the leaders based in New Delhi.

# Trump, Venezuela, and the crumbling states

The recent Venezuela episode is not merely a story of American overreach or Trump's audacity; it is a mirror held up to societies that build politics around 'big men', fragile institutions, and ideological absolutism



NILANTHA  
ILANGAMUWA

It is all too easy to criticise President Trump, American foreign policy, and its hypocritical authorities, because they are highly visible. Forget the moral and ethical jargon that hangs over every discussion; the most striking aspect is that President Trump is unapologetically blunt about what he will do, why he did it, and what he intends to achieve – unlike so many leaders of the United States who recite ethical rationales and moralistic rhetoric even as they drop bombs and loot. Trump exposes the raw mechanics of American power with gargantuan ambition; whether this turns into enduring success or spectacular failure is another matter entirely. But to comprehend the Trump phenomenon, we must confront it, not merely argue over its consequences. Like any imperial superpower, the United States has never been truly ethical or morally upright, because power itself refuses to be shackled by ethics or morality. History's paradoxical arc, from Babylon to the contemporary epoch, teaches us that might and strategic interest invariably outmuscle moral imperatives. Trump may be revitalising a 250-year-old strategy, one rehearsed by many empires before, without a clearly articulated alternative.

What have we produced in the name of socialism when the "big man" vanquishes his rivals or succumbs to the inevitable pull of mortality? In every instance, once the charismatic founder departs, he is succeeded by a coterie of robbers and oppressors. We are often unwilling to look in the mirror and ask what sort of system we have created, and what sort of society we truly require.

The so-called extrication of Nicolás Maduro - labelled a kidnapping in the media and decried as such by Maduro himself – is full of contradiction and ethical collision. Top US legal minds, Jack Goldsmith, the Learned Hand Professor of Law at Harvard and former Assistant Attorney General heading the Office of Legal Counsel, and Bob Bauer, Professor of Practice and Distinguished Scholar at New York University School of Law and former White House Counsel to President Barack Obama, have pointed out that, in terms of domestic legal jurisdiction, the President's power in this instance prevails, much as George HW Bush's invasion of Panama and the capture of Manuel Noriega did in 1989, or as US courts applied the Ker-Frisbie doctrine to uphold jurisdiction irrespective of how a defendant was apprehended. Maduro's defenders first called it kidnapping, then reframed it as the status of a prisoner of war. The fundamental contradiction here is stark: how can a sitting president, presumably holding legitimate power in his own state, be cut down by an American executive acting at will? Trump was never engaged in nation-building; he was there to do business and wield power as a form of profit and influence. Whether one



THE TRUMP  
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WHATEVER ONE'S  
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MORAL COMPASS,  
HE HAS PULLED  
BACK THE CURTAIN  
ON POWER'S TRUE  
NATURE

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finds this justifiable or reprehensible, it is precisely what President Trump intended. His leadership of American power never hid its transactional essence.

Behind this operation lie years of build-up, rehearsal, and escalating pressure. Maduro was reportedly offered an exit to a third country, perhaps Turkey, to spend his remaining years, but he refused, demanding control of his nation's oil and rejecting any concession that would tarnish his hold on authority. Instead, he clung to power even as the world around him crumbled. The collapse of Venezuela's institutions was vividly illustrated in 2017 when Luisa Ortega Díaz, who had served as Prosecutor General of Venezuela for a decade, broke with Maduro's government and denounced constitutional overreach and human rights abuses. She was forcibly removed from office, threatened, and ultimately forced into exile.

This pattern – a charismatic founder followed by deterioration into kleptocracy – is not unique to Venezuela. Consider Salvador Allende, whose democratic socialist experiment in Chile was strangled by internal sabotage and external interference, culminating in his death amid bombardment and political turmoil. In Cuba, Fidel Castro, a revolutionary of formidable strategic acumen, was not deposed by internal moral failure but by relentless external pressure – the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and decades of embargo that forced him into Soviet patronage and militarised survival. These are not simple narratives of socialism's collapse; they are stories of geopolitical extraction and the endurance of power structures that devour even their own progenitors.

It is here that we confront the deeper analytic kernel. Socialist or leftist leaders were often coherent in their critique of capitalist domination and imperial interference, but the systems they built were highly personalised and lacked the institutional resilience necessary for succession. Critical thinkers like Leszek Krakowski warned that attempts to institute socialist

systems without robust legal, ethical, and cultural foundations would inevitably succumb to authoritarianism or stagnation, precisely because they failed to create mechanisms for self-critique and renewal. In this context, Trump's Venezuela strategy is both blisteringly candid and ruthlessly strategic. He has signalled that the United States will direct Venezuela's oil reserves towards American interests, a move that Russia, China, and others condemned as a violation of sovereignty and international law. Some see the operation as a reassertion of American power in its "backyard"; others view it as a dangerous precedent that erodes the rule of international law. But to frame this debate solely around Trump is to miss a more profound reckoning: our own. We in the Global South have been complicit in romanticising the myth of an external villain while ignoring the internal rot of our governance systems, institutional weakness, and the penchant for personalised power that decays into predation once the strongman exits the stage.

Even the most revolutionary leaders, exalted as paragons of resistance, reveal an ugly truth through their successors: systems built around personalities, without accountability, internal checks, and vibrant civil liberties, are destined for decay. We may decry external intervention – and rightly so - but external actors exploit the very vulnerabilities that internal malfunctions create.

The Trump operation in Venezuela challenges the conventional moral binary. Trump did not mask his strategic intent; he wielded power in the most unabashed terms the world has seen in recent decades. Whatever one's view of Trump's moral compass, he has pulled back the curtain on power's true nature. The saga of

Venezuela is not merely Trump's problem or America's imperial overreach; it is a mirror for all societies that have failed to cultivate governance structures robust enough to withstand the departure of strong leaders without descending into kleptocracy, repression, and systemic collapse. This is the fate awaiting any country where "big men" rule with iron fists, often arriving far sooner than expected. Change cannot come until those inside the system confront the fact that the problem is theirs to fix.

If there is any hope for societies shackled by personalist rule and ideological absolutism, it lies not in lamentation over external actors, but in the rigorous undertaking of internal reform - in building institutions that endure beyond any individual, in cultivating a civic culture that tolerates dissent, and in recognising that sovereign pride without systemic resilience is a path to ruin. Only then will societies possess the capacity to demand accountability from powers both near and distant, and only then will they be worthy interlocutors in the global arena where sovereignty, justice, and power intersect in the most unforgiving ways.

The Pioneer  
SINCE 1865

## Why modern life forgets the art of rest and stability



RAJYOGI BRAHMA  
KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION  
THE PIONEER

Most of us would agree that we are living life at a dizzying speed. There is a mad rush everywhere, from dawn to dusk – in public places, at home, and in our daily lives. People hurry to grab seats in public transport, jostle through crowds, and break queues to claim what they believe is rightfully theirs. This pervasive 'me first' approach, born out of a near-total absence of patience, lies at the root of many social problems, including the alarming rise in stampede-related deaths across the country.

The youth today wish to taste everything too soon and chase success at any cost. Working overtime, sacrificing sleep, and stretching themselves beyond healthy limits do not trouble them, as long as the rewards seem immediate. Health is willingly put at stake in the belief that one

must make hay while the sun of youth shines. Stability no longer appeals; instead, there is a craving for bigger, faster leaps. This high-speed lifestyle provides a certain thrill. Loud music, spicy food, fast cars and extroverted personalities dominate their preferences. The powerful virtual universe of showbiz, media and the cosmetic industry further reinforces the idea that youth and speed are the ultimate currencies.

Children now behave like wannabe youths, while the elderly struggle to appear young. Society has little patience for the slow, the tired or the old, rendering them increasingly invisible. There is a widespread perception that one cannot be noticed unless one is constantly running.

Walking, both literally and metaphorically, has gone out of fashion, and those who choose it risk being labelled outdated or unenthusiastic. Most people today manipulate their lifestyles to cope with this universal time deficit. The working class, neck-deep in professional commitments, find little time to cook or spend with family. Eating out, relying on ready-to-eat food, or hurriedly gulping meals has become routine. Even nourishment is sacrificed at the altar of speed.

This 'hurry up' mindset has seeped so deeply into society that consistency itself has suffered. Politicians abandon ideologies with ease, and defections have become commonplace. Employees change loyalties without hesitation.

Relationships are entered and exited in haste, contributing to rising divorce rates, broken families and the growing number of old-age homes – all symptoms of a use-and-throw culture.

Ironically, even attempts to escape this frenzy are noisy. Breaks are filled with screens, loud entertainment and relentless socialising. Silence is almost absent, leaving the mind and body little opportunity to heal. Emotional breakdowns, lifestyle diseases and mental fatigue are the inevitable consequences of living perpetually in the fast lane.

The greatest tragedy of such a life is that it robs us of our ability to turn inward and make peace with ourselves. There is no time to pause, reflect or reassess direction. We run simply because others are running. By constantly gulping instant coffee, we forget the joy of slowly savouring a home-brewed cup.

True growth - spiritual and emotional – begins when we slow down. Rest is not weakness; it is wisdom. It is the courage to stop, to say 'no', and to recognise that we are not indispensable. Only then can we reconnect with our inner selves and choose a life that values depth over speed.

So what are we waiting for? It is time to begin the process of change – now.

The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist

The Pioneer  
SINCE 1865

## IRAN UNREST SIGNALS POWER SHIFT OR STRATEGIC MANIPULATION

Apropos 'tectonic shift in people's power or a power play?' published on 15 January, this response reflects the gravity of Iran's current domestic crisis, marked by widespread unrest and deep economic distress. Rising inflation, increasing unemployment, and the sharp fall of the Iranian rial have made life extremely difficult for ordinary citizens.

Instead of addressing these issues, the authorities have relied on security crackdowns and communication restrictions, further fuelling public anger.

Iran has stated that it is prepared for both war and negotiations.

In this context, the United States and Israel must avoid exploiting Iran's internal turmoil, as any miscalculation could

escalate into a wider regional conflict. Iran's military capabilities are well recognised in the Middle East, and further provocation risks destabilising an already volatile region.

The protests and violence have claimed thousands of lives and caused significant destruction. Constructive engagement with dissenting voices and meaningful political and economic reforms are essential to restore stability.

For India, the situation poses strategic concerns. While reduced oil imports limit economic impact, New Delhi would find it difficult to support US military action against Iran.

The most serious concern remains the safety of nearly eight to nine million Indians living and working in the region.

BAL GOVIND | NAINITAL

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com.  
In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Mohalla clinics and healthcare policy

The recent dedication of 81 new Ayushman Arogya Mandirs by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta has raised an important question: what will happen to the *Mohalla* Clinics established by the previous AAP government? These clinics were created as neighbourhood-level health facilities offering free consultations, medicines, and basic diagnostic services. The Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, introduced under the Centre's Ayushman Bharat scheme, promise wider services such as preventive health screenings, maternal and child care, chronic disease monitoring, and linkage with digital health records. While this expansion appears beneficial, there is clear overlap. Delhi already operates over 500 *Mohalla* Clinics, while 319 Ayushman Mandirs are functional, with a target of 1,100 centres.

Running two parallel systems risks duplication, confusion, and wasteful expenditure of public funds. Both models suffer from shortages of doctors, pharmacists, and support staff. It would have been more practical and economical to upgrade existing *Mohalla* Clinics by integrating them into the national framework. Unfortunately, this reflects a tendency to discard earlier initiatives for political rebranding rather than strengthening public health infrastructure.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

### Risks behind ten minute deliveries

The promise of ten-minute deliveries carries serious safety concerns for delivery riders. When riders wear uniforms or carry bags advertising ultra-fast delivery, the pressure to meet unrealistic timelines can encourage risky behaviour on busy roads. Recognising this danger, companies such as Blinkit, Zepto, and Swiggy Instamart removed prominent ten-minute delivery claims following discussions with the Labour Ministry.

This step has eased pressure on gig workers, many of whom had raised concerns about accidents, health risks, and declining incomes. The issue gained national attention after gig workers staged a strike on New Year's Eve in 2025, highlighting the unsafe conditions created by extreme delivery expectations. Although companies claim that riders are not shown countdown timers and that faster deliveries depend on proximity rather than speed, public perception still places riders under pressure. Human life is far more valuable than commercial experiments designed for competitive branding. Quick commerce should focus on safety, fair wages, and sustainable working conditions. The decision to step back from the ten-minute delivery model is a welcome relief for gig workers and a reminder that profit should never come at the cost of lives.

JAYANTHY SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

### Saluting India's brave army

On the occasion of Army Day, the people of India pay heartfelt tribute to the Indian Army, the nation's steadfast shield and symbol of courage, sacrifice, and selfless service. Army Day commemorates the historic moment in 1949 when General KM Cariappa assumed charge as the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the Army, marking a defining step in independent India's military leadership.

On this day, we bow in gratitude to our soldiers, veterans, ex-servicemen, and their families, who continue to serve the nation with unwavering dedication. The Indian Army safeguards India's sovereignty by protecting its borders across some of the world's most challenging terrains.

It also plays a vital role in maintaining internal security and providing crucial assistance during natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

We remain forever indebted to the Army's indomitable courage, exemplary discipline, and spirit of supreme sacrifice.

Many brave soldiers have laid down their lives in the line of duty, ensuring that the nation remains safe and secure. The Indian Army stands as the strongest pillar of our national security. Jai Hind.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI



# India's migration moment: Overhauling policy framework

India's emigration regime continues to rest largely on the Emigration Act, 1983 — a law crafted for a different economic era, when overseas employment was concentrated in West Asia and recruitment was mediated almost entirely through physical agents and paper contracts



AS MITTAL

As India rapidly expands its network of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) — now spanning more than 50 countries, including the recently concluded pact with New Zealand on December 22, 2025 — a quiet but consequential opportunity is unfolding. Beyond goods and services, these agreements are opening pathways for India to position itself as a reliable supplier of high-end professionals and semi-skilled workers to ageing economies grappling with acute labour shortages.

From healthcare workers and technicians to IT professionals and skilled trades, demand for India's youthful workforce is rising across the developed world. Demography is firmly in India's favour. What is not, however, is its migration policy framework. The real constraint today is not excessive mobility, but inadequate governance.

## A Policy Framework Frozen in the 1980s

India's emigration regime continues to rest largely on the Emigration Act, 1983 — a law crafted for a different economic era, when overseas employment was concentrated in West Asia and recruitment was mediated almost entirely through physical agents and paper contracts. The Act mandates emigration clearance through a limited number of Protector of Emigrants offices for workers classified as Emigration Check Required, largely those with lower educational qualifications or travelling to select destinations.

While the intent was worker protection, four decades on the outcome is a system that is cumbersome, unevenly enforced, and poorly aligned with modern labour markets. India today seeks to treat labour mobility as an economic asset-exporting skills, earning remittances, and integrating into global supply chains. Yet its legal architecture remains fragmented and control-oriented, treating migrants as administrative risks rather than economic contributors.

Recruitment channels have diversified, digital hiring platforms have emerged, and



INDIAN STUDENTS ABROAD INCREASED FROM ABOUT 13.35 LAKH IN 2023 TO NEARLY 13.8 LAKH IN 2025

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informal brokers continue to operate in the shadows. The regulatory framework, however, has not kept pace with these realities.

## Migration Policy Without a Strategy

Recent efforts to consolidate migration-related laws through the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025 may strengthen monitoring, security, and enforcement. But border management alone does not constitute a migration strategy.

Outbound labour migration is overseen by the India Centre for Migration under the Ministry of External Affairs, supported by grievance portals such as MADAD and Samadhan, and training programmes for workers and officials. These are useful administrative tools, but they operate in silos. What India lacks

is a coherent national migration framework that integrates overseas mobility, skill certification, bilateral labour agreements, and enforceable worker protections into a single policy logic.

Internal migration is treated even more diffusely. Welfare initiatives such as One Nation One Ration Card, PMAY, and Affordable Rental Housing Complexes provide partial relief, but they do not substitute for a rights-based internal migration policy grounded in social security portability and labour protections.

## Exporting Labour in a Closed-Citizenship World

India is now the world's largest source of international migrants, with an estimated global diaspora of 35.4 million, including 15.8 million Indian citizens and 19.6 million persons of Indian origin.

Advanced economies facing demographic decline increasingly depend on migrant labour, yet remain reluctant to extend long-term political or citizenship rights. This contradiction is most visible in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and in hubs such as Singapore and Japan, where migrant workers power economies without social or political identity.

The risks are mounting. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, 3,258 Indian nationals were deported by the United States in 2025 alone — the highest annual figure so far, compared to 2,042 in 2019. Student migration has also surged. Indian students abroad increased from about 13.35 lakh in 2023 to nearly 13.8 lakh in 2025, making India the largest source country for universities in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and Germany. This largely self-financed migration exposes households to signif-

icant financial and emotional risk, yet policy oversight remains thin.

## Remittances Cannot Substitute Reform

Remittances have masked policy gaps. India has remained the world's largest recipient for over a decade, with inflows crossing \$135 billion in 2024-25 for the third consecutive year above the \$100-billion mark. These flows support household consumption and strengthen the balance of payments, but they cannot indefinitely compensate for weak governance.

Migration persists because economic incentives are overwhelming. According to the International Organization for Migration, the India-US, India-UAE, and India-Saudi Arabia corridors are among the world's largest. Men constitute about 65 per cent of India's external migrants.

Multilateral frameworks such as the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services offer only broad principles. In practice, bilateral labour agreements determine access, rights, and protections—and here India's coverage and enforcement remain uneven.

## The Way Forward

India stands at a critical juncture. As FTAs expand and ageing economies look to India's workforce, migration must be treated as an economic enabler, not an administrative inconvenience.

India's migration framework is failing not because people move, but because institutions have failed to adapt to mobility. This requires a decisive shift from control to protection, and from fragmented schemes to enforceable rights. A credible national migration policy must integrate global mobility, align domestic skill certification with overseas demand, and ensure full portability of social security for migrants. Less-skilled and less-educated workers—those most vulnerable to exploitation—must receive the strongest institutional support, not the greatest bureaucratic burden.

Updating four-decade-old laws is no longer optional. If India's demographic dividend is to pay off, mobility must be governed with foresight, dignity, and economic logic. The cost of delay will not be borne by institutions, but by millions of Indians who move-across borders-in search of work and opportunity.

# Startups: A boon for bold, jugaad and innovative India's economic growth



T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN

India is a country well known for its excellence in calculated investments, innovation, and infrastructure. It has been a decade since the startup policy was successfully launched on January 16, 2016. Indian startups are slow, smart, and steady growth ventures which have climbed the ladder of stunning and striking success by turning Indian problem statements into scalable and affordable solutions for the common citizen. Indian youth startups have turned unsolvable and unrealistic problems into real-time, realistic, and usable solutions which millions of Indian youths had been dreaming of for several decades. Indian startups have turned action plans into actionable, viable, feasible, and customised solutions. This includes the present era of Industry 4.0 / 5.0 / emerging 6.0 digital transformation technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, semiconductor chips, quantum technologies, unmanned aerial vehicles, 5G, and the emerging hyperloop of the present decade.

India's National Education Policy 2020 has been developing holistic framework models and a structured approach in the Indian education system through experiential learning, skill development, integration of emerging technologies, soft skills, business model building, and academia-industry collaboration. This, in turn, builds strong and structured startup capabilities among youngsters. Indian universities and higher educational institutions have been offering courses such as idea-to-business models, entrepreneurship, IP management, and how to create smart business plans within course curricula, which paves the way for students to develop startup skills while they are in education. MOOC platforms such as NPTEL and SWAYAM have been revolutionising startup education through digital learning courses on entrepreneurship. Startup India has kick-started free online courses on Artificial Intelligence, financial literacy, digital marketing, and intellectual property, which have facilitated youngsters and startups in building strong foundational startup skills.

## Indian Startups: A Jugaad for Building Innovative India

Startup culture has been deeply rooted among young schoolchildren in India through initiatives such as Atal Tinkering Labs, enabling students to work on think-tank problems in school lab-

oratories. The infrastructure created in schools helps students build grassroots innovative models through experiential and project-based learning using 3D printing, the Internet of Things (IoT), unmanned aerial vehicle technologies, and many more. India's youth innovation competitions such as DST INSPIRE MANAK, Smart India Hackathons, MSME hackathons, DRDO's iDEX Innovation Challenge, and the World Skills Competition have helped build scalable models which youngsters have been striving to develop. Additionally, Government of India-supported bootcamps and cohort training programmes have trained youth to follow a structured framework for converting micro ideas into calculated and scalable product models.

Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), an iconic government initiative to Fund the Unfunded, and organisations such as SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India) have provided confidence and handholding support to young startups and Indian MSMEs. Initiatives such as Swavalambini have empowered female undergraduates to launch ventures, forming the basis of livelihood and self-reliance among them.

India has built extensive Digital Public Infrastructure, including startup incubators, research, and innovation parks across the nation, such as Atal Incubation Centres (AICs), MSME Incubation Centres, STPI (Software Technology Parks of India) incubation centres, BioNest, and several state-run centres to boost startup culture among youth.

India's startup culture is encouraging the power of Nari Shakti, which enabled women students in Kerala to build the nation's first women-engineered satellite launched by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The Indian youth startup mantra is Jugaad innovation. Indian agriculture has been redefined by startups and jugaad innovators such as Niyo FarmTech, which developed frugal technologies like Neo Solar and Bahubali models affordable for marginal farming communities. These innovations help reduce the burden of traditional heavy backpack spraying systems.

Indian startups such as Skyroot Aerospace have created a dream of space innovation in the country, paving the way for advanced aerospace systems and encouraging ventures to enter the private space sector. These achievements highlight not only the power of India's technological infrastructure but also the strength of youth taking calculated risks and making smart investments, thereby building strong foundations for future generations.

## Indian Startups: Fiction to Facts

India has achieved landmark success by developing home-grown semiconductor chips such as Vikram 32 and the recently introduced DHRUV64, a 64-bit microprocessor. Quantum



startups such as QNu Labs have developed Quantum Random Number Generators, demonstrating the power of the three Ts — Technology, Talent, and Temperament — among Indian youth. These products are listed on the MSMEs GeM portal, adding value to supply-chain commerce and boosting the economy. The dreams of Indian youth are no longer confined to childhood television fiction.

The IIT Madras-incubated startup TuTr Hyperloop, a student-run venture, has developed India's first indigenous hyperloop technology, marking a historic achievement in transportation technology. NeoMotion, another IIT Madras-incubated startup, has developed innovative and socially inclusive wheelchairs, giving mobility and dignity to persons with physical disabilities.

The DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, has recognised startup Ramuka Global Services Pvt. Ltd, which, in collaboration with CSIR-CRRI, developed ECOFIX, a sustainable solution for pothole repair. Biocon, a women-led innovative and integrated pharmaceutical venture, has been building foundational blocks for pharmaceutical development while promoting young startup innovators through smart investments.

## Way Forward for Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat

India's vibrant startup culture stands as a defining icon for the nation. Indian startups have been transforming initiatives into impactful results. India's startup ecosystem has given wings to the dreams of youth to fly to greater heights. It has built resilience and confidence among young minds, grooming them to convert dreams into real-world products, thereby adding stepping stones and milestones towards Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat @2047.

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KANCHETI MRUNALINI

For decades, the story of Indian agriculture has been one of intensive growth, but this progress has come at a hidden cost to our most precious resource: the soil. Today, as we face the dual challenges of a growing population and a changing climate, the 'more is better' approach to chemical fertilisers is hitting a wall. To ensure our long-term food security, India must pivot towards Integrated Nutrient Management (INM)—a holistic strategy that marries modern science with traditional wisdom to restore our land's vitality.

## The Crisis Beneath Our Feet

Indian agriculture is characterised by small and marginal landholdings and a heavy reliance on nitrogenous chemical fertilisers. Years of imbalance use and continuous monocropping have led to severe soil degradation. We are now seeing 'multi-nutrient deficiencies', where soils are desperately short of secondary and micronutrients such as sulphur, zinc, and boron. When soil health declines, so does 'factor productivity'—meaning farmers have to apply more fertiliser just to achieve the same yield they once obtained with less. This cycle increases production costs and leaves crops more vulnerable to erratic rainfall and droughts, which are becoming more frequent under Indian climatic conditions.

## What Is Integrated Nutrient Management?

Integrated Nutrient Management does not advocate abandoning chemical fertilisers. Instead, it promotes their judicious use alongside organic and biological inputs, creating a balanced nutrient regime for the soil. INM includes:

- Chemical fertilisers, applied in precise doses based on soil requirements
- Organic manures, such as farmyard manure (FYM), compost, vermicompost, and green manures
- Bio-fertilisers, including beneficial microorganisms like Rhizobium, Azotobacter, and mycorrhizae that fix nitrogen and mobilise phosphorus
- Crop residues, recycled back into the soil to enhance organic matter

## The Pillars of Soil Health

To understand why INM works, we must examine the three pillars of soil health: physical, chemical, and biological.

Physical: INM improves soil structure and water-holding capacity. For a farmer in a rainfed region, this means the soil acts like a sponge, retaining moisture for longer during dry spells.

Chemical: It balances pH levels and ensures that

macro — and micronutrients are available to plant roots rather than being locked in the soil or washed away.

Biological: Perhaps most importantly, INM stimulates microbial diversity and earthworm populations. These 'tiny engineers' are critical for nutrient cycling and sustaining productivity in intensive systems such as rice-wheat or sugarcane belts.

## Best Practices for the Indian Farmer

Moving INM from the laboratory to the field requires practical, site-specific strategies. National initiatives such as the Soil Health Card Scheme are already providing a roadmap by recommending fertiliser applications based on actual soil tests rather than guesswork. Key management practices include the split application of nitrogen to match critical crop growth stages and the use of slow-release options such as neem-coated urea. Simple, low-cost tools such as the Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) in rice help farmers decide exactly when to apply urea, reducing waste and environmental run-off. Furthermore, integrating legumes into cropping systems can naturally enhance nitrogen fixation, benefiting overall system productivity.

## Field-Level Impact and Economic Gains

The relevance of INM is most visible at the farm level. Long-term field experiments across India show that the integrated use of fertilisers and organics sustains higher yields than chemical fertilisers alone.

For the average farmer, the benefits are tangible:

- Lower costs: Partial substitution of expensive chemicals with on-farm organic resources reduces dependence on external inputs.
- Resilience: Improved root growth and soil tillage make crops more 'climate-resilient', helping them withstand drought stress.
- Quality: The inclusion of micronutrients such as zinc and iron leads to visible improvements in both crop yield and produce quality.

## A Sustainable Path Forward

Beyond the individual farm, INM aligns with India's national priorities for environmental sustainability. By minimising nutrient losses through leaching and volatilisation, this approach reduces environmental pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. As we look towards the future of Indian agriculture, it is clear that we cannot continue to 'mine' our soils indefinitely.

Integrated Nutrient Management provides a scalable, farmer-centric pathway that ensures farming systems remain viable for generations to come. It is time to treat soil not merely as dirt, but as a living system that requires a balanced, sustainable diet to feed the nation.

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FROM THE WORLD

BULGARIA

Protest demanding fair election

Thousands protest in Bulgaria to call for fair vote as country seems headed to early election

Thousands of people braved freezing weather to protest in Bulgaria's, calling for a fair election as the Balkan country appears to be headed to its eighth vote in the last five years. The demonstration in Sofia came after last month's protests, which were sparked by attempts by the governing coalition to introduce a budget that Bulgarians, already struggling with rising prices, feared would add to their woes. The Government later withdrew the contentious 2026 budget plan, but the protesters' demands had expanded to include calls for the government to step down. Protesters insisted on a fair election free of vote manipulation, vote buying and falsification of results as in previous campaigns.

USA

Ex-lawmaker jailed for abuse

A former Republican lawmaker in South Carolina was sentenced Wednesday to 17 1/2 years in prison for sending hundreds of videos of children being sexually abused to people across the country on social media around the same time he was advocating for laws meant to protect kids. "He claimed to be their advocate by sponsoring bills in the legislature, but he was their abuser with videos that will live on forever," the judge said. RJ May had sought a shorter sentence, saying he was addicted to pornography and screens. He apologized briefly to the victims in a 15-minute statement to the court. He said he began watching adult pornography when testosterone treatments increased his sex drive, and then sought out more extreme videos when he was lonely at night.

European troops arrive in Greenland

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Nuuk

Troops from several European countries, including France, Germany, Norway and Sweden, are arriving in Greenland to help boost the Arctic island's security after talks between representatives of Denmark, Greenland and the US on Wednesday highlighted "fundamental disagreement" between the Trump administration and European allies.

"The first French military elements are already en route" and "others will follow," French President Emmanuel Macron announced Wednesday, as French authorities said about 15 French soldiers from the mountain infantry unit were already in Nuuk for a military exercise.

Germany will deploy a reconnaissance team of 13 personnel to Greenland on Thursday, its Defense Ministry said. Denmark announced it would increase its military presence in Greenland, with NATO allies joining them, just as the Danish and Greenlandic foreign ministers met with White House representatives on Wednesday in Washington to discuss US President Donald Trump's intentions to take over the island in order to tap its mineral resources and protect the security of the Arctic region amid rising Russian and Chinese interest.

Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, flanked by his Greenlandic counterpart Vivian Motzfeldt, said Wednesday that a "fundamental disagreement" over Greenland remains with Trump after they held highly anticipated



Greenland Foreign Minister Vivian Motzfeldt and Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen arriving on Capitol Hill to meet with members of the Senate Arctic Caucus in Washington

talks at the White House with Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Rasmussen added that it remains "clear that the president has this wish of conquering over Greenland."

"We really need it," Trump told media in the Oval Office after the meeting. "If we don't go in, Russia is going to go in and China is going to go in. And there's not a thing Denmark can do about it, but we can do everything about it." Trump said he had not yet been briefed about the contents of the White House meeting when he made his remarks. In Greenland's capital, Nuuk, local residents told The

Associated Press they were glad the first meeting between Greenlandic, Danish and American officials had taken place but suggested it left more questions than answers.

Several people said they viewed Denmark's decision to send more troops, and promises of support from other NATO allies, as protection against possible US military action. But European military officials have not suggested the goal is to deter a US move against the island. Maya Martinsen, 21, agreed and said it was "comforting to know that the Nordic countries are sending reinforcements" because Greenland is a part of Denmark and NATO. The dispute,

she said, is not about "national security" but rather about "the oils and minerals that we have that are untouched."

More troops, more talks

In Copenhagen, Danish Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen announced a stepped-up military presence in the Arctic "in close cooperation with our allies," calling it a necessity in a security environment in which "no one can predict what will happen tomorrow."

"This means that from today and in the coming time there will be an increased military presence in and around Greenland of aircraft, ships and soldiers, including from other

Russia expels British diplomat for spying

VINAY SHUKLA ■ Moscow

Russia on Thursday expelled a British diplomat suspected of spying after FSB counter-intelligence established his links with UK secret services.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) stated that Gareth Samuel Davies, a secretary at the British Embassy in Moscow, is working for the UK secret services.

UK's Charged Affaires in Moscow, Danae Dholakia, was summoned to launch a formal protest and demand the suspected spy's departure from Russia within two weeks. In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said, "Moscow will not tolerate activities of undeclared agents of British special services on Russian territory."

The Russian Government has a zero-tolerance policy



UK Charge d'Affaires to Russia, Danae Dholakia arriving at the Russia's Foreign Ministry in Moscow

on matters of national security, it said. Dholakia was summoned to Smolenskaya Square (MFA) to inform her that Russia's competent authorities had obtained information indicating that one of the embassy's diplo-

matic employees was affiliated with British intelligence services. "In view of this, and in accordance with Article 9 of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the accreditation of this individual is being

revoked," the ministry said. "He is required to leave the Russian Federation within a two-week period." In view of past cases of expulsions and counter-expulsions, the MFA warned that Russia will retaliate symmetrically if the UK takes measures to escalate the situation following the exposure of the British intelligence officer working undercover in Russia. "A warning has been issued that if London escalates the situation, the Russian side will retaliate," Russian MFA said in the press note posted on its site. Russia had expelled two British diplomats based in Moscow in 2025.

State-run TASS had quoted a statement by FSB to report that in March last year, Russia had stripped two UK diplomats of accreditation based on signs of intelligence activity. (PTT)

Another construction crane collapse in Thailand, kills 2

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Nakhon Ratchasima

A construction crane collapsed onto an elevated road near Bangkok, killing two people on Thursday, a day after another crane fell on a moving passenger train in northeastern Thailand and killed 32 people.

The work on an extension of the Rama 2 Road expressway — a major artery leading from Bangkok — has become notorious for construction accidents, some of them fatal. The crane collapsed at part of the road project in Samut Sakhon province, trapping two vehi-



Construction crane collapsed on the Rama 2 Road elevated expressway

cles in the wreckage, according to the Government's Public Relations Department. Transport Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn said on

Thai TV Channel 7 that two people had died. It was unclear if anyone else had been trapped in the wreckage. There was uncertainty about the number of victims

because the site is still considered too dangerous for search teams to enter, said Suchart Tongteng, a rescue worker with the Ruamkatanyu Foundation. "At this moment, we still can't say whether another collapse could happen," he said, citing dangling steel plates. "That's why there are no rescue personnel inside the scene, only teams conducting on-site safety assessments."

At the site of Wednesday's train derailment, the search for survivors ended, Nakhon Ratchasima Gov. Anuphong Suksonnit said. Three passengers listed as missing

were presumed to have gotten off the train earlier, but that was still being investigated.

Officials believed 171 people had been aboard the train's three carriages, which were being removed from the scene Thursday. The crane that fell, crushing part of the train, was a launching gantry crane, a mobile piece of equipment often used in building elevated roadways.

Police were still collecting evidence and interviewing witnesses and have not pressed charges, provincial Police Chief Narongsak Promta told reporters. (PTT)

HRW urges Sri Lanka to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Colombo

A US-based leading human rights organisation has urged Sri Lanka to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the island nation's decades-long civil war.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Wednesday also said that a recent UN report about sexual violence, primarily by security forces, against Tamil civilians during the civil war was another step forward in the struggle for accountability for crimes under international law.

The UN report, titled "We lost everything — even hope for justice", follows a decade of monitoring and reporting by the UN Human Rights Office, and extensive consultations with survivors, local experts on gender-



Meenakshi Ganguly, Deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch

based violence, civil society and others.

The report, issued on Tuesday, found that sexual violence was "part of a deliberate, widespread, and systematic pattern of violations" by state security forces, and "may amount to war crimes

and crimes against humanity." "While the appalling rape and murder of Tamil women by Sri Lankan soldiers at the war's end has long been known, the UN report shows that systematic sexual abuse was ignored, concealed, and even justified

by Sri Lankan Governments unwilling to punish those responsible," Meenakshi Ganguly, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said.

"Sri Lanka's international partners need to step up their efforts to promote accountability for war crimes in Sri Lanka," Ganguly added.

The HRW says that successive Sri Lankan Governments have failed to credibly investigate and prosecute international crimes related to the 26-year civil war between Government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The current Government, which came to office in 2024 promising justice, has made no apparent progress, while victims and survivors continue to suffer long-term harm, the HRW said.

There are significant legal and institutional obstacles to justice, including a 20-year

statute of limitations in sexual violence cases and the fact that Sri Lankan law does not recognise the rape of men.

Some survivors who attempted to register complaints described humiliating or intimidating experiences with the police and court authorities. "Survivors cannot be expected to seek protection from the very entity they fear," one respondent told the UN.

"Sri Lanka is obligated under international law to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and until it does, foreign Governments need to do more to press for accountability," Ganguly said. "That means providing support for legal processes, better vetting of military personnel for peacekeeping missions, and concerted efforts to bring criminal cases

abroad under universal jurisdiction."

The LTTE had run a military campaign for a separate Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern provinces of the island nation for nearly 30 years before its collapse in 2009 after the Sri Lankan Army killed its supreme leader V Prabhakaran. The UN report has asked the Lankan Government to take immediate and concrete steps to publicly acknowledge past sexual violence committed by State forces and others, and to issue a formal apology.

The Government should also implement survivor-centred reforms across the security sector, judiciary and the legal framework, establish an independent prosecution office, and ensure access to psychological and social support, the UN report added.

British columbia ends drug decriminalisation pilot

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Victoria

Canada's Pacific coast province of British Columbia is ending its three-year experiment in decriminalising possession of small amounts of drugs. British Columbia Health Minister Josie Osborne announced Wednesday the province is not seeking an extension of its agreement with Canada's federal health agency that allowed the decriminalisation of small amounts of drugs for personal possession.

Osborne said the goal of the three-year pilot project slated to end January 31 was to make it easier for people to come forward and seek help, but it "hasn't delivered the results" officials hoped for. Oregon's first-in-the-

2 terrorists killed in Pakistan's KP



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Peshawar

At least two terrorists were killed by the police during an intense gunfire after a police check post was attacked in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Thursday.

Unknown armed militants attacked the check post in Dera Ismail Khan district, which was successfully foiled due to a timely and effective response by the police, an official said. An intense exchange of gunfire ensued, during which two terrorists were killed by the police.

According to the official, the assailants opened sudden fire on the check post, prompting police personnel to retaliate immediately. One police constable was injured in the attack. District Police Officer Sajjad Ahmed Sahibzada reached the spot to assess the situation. Additional contingents of senior police officers were deployed, and security in the area was further tightened.

NASA sends 4 astronauts back to Earth in first medical evacuation

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Cape Canaveral

An astronaut in need of doctors' care departed the International Space Station with three crewmates on Wednesday in NASA's first medical evacuation.

The four returning astronauts — from the US, Russia and Japan — are aiming for an early Thursday morning splashdown in the Pacific near San Diego with SpaceX. The decision cuts short their mission by over a month.

"Our timing of this departure is unexpected," NASA astronaut Zena Cardman said before the return trip, "but what was not surprising to me was how well this crew came together as a family to help each other and just take care of each other." Officials refused to identify the astronaut who needed care last week and would not divulge the health concerns.

The ailing astronaut is "stable, safe and well cared for," outgoing space station commander Mike Fincke said earlier this week via social media. "This was a deliberate decision to allow the right medical evaluations to happen on the ground, where the full range of diagnostic capability exists." Launched in August, Cardman, Fincke, Japan's Kimiya Yui and Russia's Oleg Platonov should have remained on the space station until late February. But on January 7, NASA abruptly canceled the next day's spacewalk by Cardman and Fincke and later



Roscosmos cosmonaut Oleg Platonov, NASA astronauts Mike Fincke, Zena Cardman and Kimiya Yui in Calif

announced the crew's early return. Officials said the health problem was unrelated to spacewalk preparations or other station operations, but offered no other details, citing medical privacy. They stressed it was not an emergency situation.

NASA said it would stick to the same entry and splashdown procedures at flight's end, with the usual assortment of medical experts aboard the recovery ship in the Pacific. It was another middle-of-the-night crew return for SpaceX, coming less than 11 hours after undocking from the space station. NASA said it was not yet known how quickly all four would be flown from California to Houston, home to Johnson Space Center and the base for astronauts. One US and two Russian astronauts remain aboard the orbiting lab, just 1 1/2 months into an eight-month mission that began with a Soyuz rocket liftoff from Kazakhstan. NASA and SpaceX are working to move

up the launch of a fresh four-person crew from Florida, currently targeted for mid-February.

Computer modeling predicted a medical evacuation from the space station every three years, but NASA hasn't had one in its 65 years of human spaceflight. The Russians have not been as fortunate. In 1985, Soviet cosmonaut Vladimir Vasyutin came down with a serious infection or related illness aboard his country's Salyut 7 space station, prompting an early return. A few other Soviet cosmonauts encountered less serious health issues that shortened their flights.

It was the first spaceflight for Cardman, a 38, biologist and polar explorer who missed out on spacewalking, as well as Platonov, 39, a former fighter pilot with the Russian Air Force who had to wait a few extra years to get to space because of an undisclosed health issue. Cardman should have launched last year.



Josie Osborne

United States experiment with drug decriminalisation ended in 2004, when possessing small amounts of hard drugs will once again become a crime. Oregon voted in 2020 to decriminalise.

British Columbia's decriminalisation project began in January 2023, after Health Canada granted the province an exemption under the federal Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.



# Iran’s nationwide protests smothered

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Dubai

The nationwide protests challenging Iran’s theocracy appeared increasingly smothered on Thursday, a week on from authorities shutting the country off from the world and escalating a bloody crackdown that activists say killed at least 2,615 people.

In Iran’s capital, Tehran, witnesses say recent mornings saw no new signs of bonfires lit the night before or debris in the streets. The sound of gunfire, which had been intense for several nights, has faded.

Meanwhile, Iranian state media announces wave after wave of arrests by authorities, targeting those it calls “terrorists” and also apparently looking for Starlink satellite internet dishes, the only way to get videos and images out to the internet.

“Since January 8, we saw a full-fledged war and anybody who was in the gathering since then is a criminal,” said



Protesters participating in a demonstration in support of the nationwide mass protests in Iran against the Government in Berlin, Germany

AP

Justice Minister Amin Hossein Rahimi, according to a report Wednesday from the judiciary’s Mizan news agency.

But as Iran tries to assert control at home, it faces challenges abroad. The Islamic

Republic shut down its airspace for hours early Thursday morning without explanation, something it has done in previous rounds of attacks between it and Israel, as well as during the 12-day

war in June. The US also took steps to move some personnel from Qatar’s Al Udeid Air Base while also warning diplomats in Kuwait to stay away from military bases with American troops sta-

tioned there.

## Iran protests spark reaction abroad

The Videos of demonstrations broadly have stopped coming out of Iran, likely signalling the slowdown of their pace under the heavy security force presence in major cities. But in the meantime, protests against Iran have been held around the world as global attention has focused on the crackdown. The UN Security Council scheduled an emergency meeting on Iran at the request of the United States on Thursday afternoon.

China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi has spoken with his counterpart in Iran, who said the situation was “now stable,” China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

Abbas Araghchi said “he hoped China will play a greater role in regional peace and stability” during the talks, according to the statement from the ministry. “China opposes imposing its

will on other countries, and opposes a return to the law of the jungle,” Wang said.

“China believes that the Iranian government and people will unite, overcome difficulties, maintain national stability, and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests,” he added.

“China hopes all parties will cherish peace, exercise restraint, and resolve differences through dialogue. China is willing to play a constructive role in this regard.”

“We are against military intervention in Iran,” Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told journalists in Istanbul on Thursday. “Iran must address its own internal problems... They must address their problems with the region and in global terms through diplomacy so that certain structural problems that cause economic problems can be addressed.”

Ankara and Tehran enjoy warm relations despite often holding divergent interests in the region.

## UK’s Conservative Party leader sacks chief rival



ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ London

Britain’s Conservative Party, which governed the country from 2010 until it suffered its worst-ever electoral defeat two years ago, was plunged into fresh turmoil on Thursday after its leader sacked the man widely seen as her greatest rival for apparently plotting to defect from the party.

Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch said on X that she sacked the party’s justice spokesperson Robert Jenrick due to “irrefutable evidence that he was plotting in secret to defect” from the party.

Badenoch also ejected Jenrick from the party’s ranks in Parliament and suspended his party membership.

“The British public are tired of political psychodrama and so am I,” she said. “They saw too much of it in the last Government, they’re seeing too much of it in this Government. I will not repeat those mistakes.”

Though Badenoch did not specify which party Jenrick was planning to switch to, Nigel Farage, leader of the hard-right Reform UK party, said he had “of course” had conversations with him.

## Nepali Congress holds first CWC meeting

SHIRISH B PRADHAN ■ Kathmandu

The newly formed Central Working Committee of the Nepali Congress on Thursday decided at its first meeting to move forward through overall reforms in the party organisation ahead of the March 5 general elections. The oldest and the largest party of the country, the Nepali Congress on Wednesday formally split as negotiations between the two factions, one led by general secretaries Gagan Thapa and Bishwo Prakash Sharma, and the other by party president Sher Bahadur Deuba, failed to reach an agreement over party reforms. The Nepali Congress’ newly formed Central Working Committee (CWC) first meeting was chaired by 49-year-old Thapa, who was unanimously elected as the president of the party at a Special General Convention held here over the weekend.

“The party’s CWC meeting has decided to move forward to take part in the upcoming general elections scheduled for March 5 through overall reforms in the party organisation and adopting measures for rectifying past mistakes and weaknesses,” party spokesperson Devraj Challes told a media briefing.

The party has decided to form an election manifesto committee, chaired by party president Thapa, which would “draft a manifesto incorporating a concrete vision of nation building task along with plans, programmes and strategies keeping with the sentiment of the younger generation people,” he pointed out.

Similarly, an election mobilisation committee headed by vice chairman Bishwo Prakash Sharma will be formed to mobilise party cadres in all the constituencies across the country during the general election, Chalise said. Earlier, on the conclusion of the Special General Convention held in



Gagan Thapa

Kathmandu from January 11 to 14, the Gagan Thapa-led Nepali Congress announced a 167 member CWC, including 13 office-bearers and Dev Raj Chalise as the spokesperson, on Wednesday night.

A total of 133 members and office bearers of the party have been elected during the Special General Convention while the remaining 33 members and a treasurer will be nominated by the party president later. On Wednesday, a last minute call by Thapa and Sharma for Deuba to resign from the post of party president was rejected leading to the splitting of the party.

Thapa and Sharma had argued that it was necessary to address the demands raised by the Gen Z youths and to revamp the party organisation before the election. The general elections in Nepal were necessitated after KP Sharma Oli resigned on September 9 following violent protests by the youth-led Gen Z group against his Government over corruption and a ban on social media. Sushila Karki, 73, became the interim prime minister on September 12 and on her recommendation, the President dissolved the House of Representatives and announced the election date, March 5. (PTI)

## Human Rights Watch warns on failure to deliver justice in Syria

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Beirut

Human Rights Watch on Thursday criticised the Syrian Government for what it says is the lack of accountability on perpetrators of sectarian violence and killings on all sides in clashes between Government-backed armed Bedouin clans and Druze militias in a southern province in July that killed hundreds of civilians.

In its report, the rights group said it documented 86 “apparently unlawful killings” of civilians in Sweida province, of which 67 were Druze and 19 were Bedouin.

Human Rights Watch said it interviewed eyewitnesses and survivors, who said that Government forces destroyed civilian property and committed summary killings.

They said the armed Bedouin groups backed by the Government looted homes and kidnapped people, while Druze militias attacked and detained Bedouin civilians in a series of revenge raids.

The clashes in the southern province of Sweida marked another setback for President Ahmad al-Sharaa, who has been struggling to assert his Government’s full authority across the war-torn country and appeal to Syria’s minorities, which are largely skeptical of his Islamist-led rule.



**NORTH CENTRAL RAILWAY**

No. JHS/Commercial/e-Auction/2025/165

Date : 09.01.2026

**E-Auction Notice**

On Behalf of The President Of India, The Divisional Railway Manager, (Commercial) Jhansi invites e-auction as per categories given as under:-

Category : PAY & USE	Catalogue No. : JHS-SAN 26-01
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Asset Details : Manning of Deluxe Pay & Use Toilet on O & M basis Railway Station Jhansi Division i.e. 1. NSG-3 : CKTD • ADDITIONAL FACILITY 1. AVMs for hot and cold beverages. 2. Mini clock Room. 3. Provision for shoe polishing. 4. Supply of News paper and Magazines at printed rates.

Auction Start : 20.01.2026 at 10:00 hrs	Auction End : 20.01.2026 at 10:30 hrs
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Note : Prospective bidders are requested to visit e-Auction Leasing module on IREPS website ([www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in)). The Lot-wise details are available therein under the above mentioned Catalogue Number.

77/26 (C)

 @ CPONCR  North central railways  @cpnrcrly  CPONCR  [www.ncr.indianrailways.gov.in](http://www.ncr.indianrailways.gov.in)



Regd Office: ESAF Bhovan  
Mannuthy, Thrissur - 680 651, Kerala

**POSSESSION NOTICE (Rule 8(1))**

Whereas the undersigned being the Authorised Officer of ESAF SMALL FINANCE BANK LTD., appointed under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002, and in exercise of powers conferred under Section 13(12) of the said Act, read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, issued a Demand Notice u/s 13(2) on the date mentioned against each of the respective borrowers, mortgagor/s guarantor/s to repay the amounts as mentioned against each accounts within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notices.

The Borrowers/Mortgagors/Guarantors, having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the Borrowers/Mortgagors/ Guarantors and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on the under Section 13(4) of the said Act read with Rule 8 of the said Rules on the dates mentioned in each account. The Borrowers/Mortgagors/Guarantors in particular and the public in general, is hereby cautioned not to deal with the properties and any dealings with the properties will be subject to the charge of the ESAF Small Finance Bank Ltd.

The Borrowers/Mortgagors/Guarantors' attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Sl. No.1	LOAN ACCOUNT NO & BRANCH: 7123000003435 - Dindori
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**NAME AND ADDRESS OF THE BORROWER/ CO-BORROWER(S)/ GUARANTOR(S):**  
(1) Piyush Sharma, S/o. Pushpkant Sharma, Ward No.6, Dindori, Mariana Islands, Madhya Pradesh-481980. (2) Aishwarya Sharma, D/o Pushpkant Sharma, House No. 57, Ward No.6, Dindori, Mariana Islands, Madhya Pradesh-481980.

**DATE OF DEMAND NOTICE: 20.06.2025** | **POSSESSION TAKEN DATE: 13.01.2026**

**OUTSTANDING AMOUNT:** (as on 14-06-2025) **Rs. 6,18,528.70/-** (Rupees Six Lakhs Eight Thousand Five Hundred Twenty-Eight and Seventy paise only) and Interest accrued, future interest & other charges.

**DESCRIPTION OF SECURED ASSETS / IMMOVABLE PROPERTY(S):** All that piece and parcel of land and property measuring 0.020 hect. i.e. 40x46=1840 Sq.ft./ 171 Sq.Mtr.together with all improvements therein including building constructed and/or to be constructed situated in Deoria Mai village, Patwari Haika No.44, Revenue Inspector circle, Dindori Tehsil, Dindori, District, as per Sale Deed No: MP/128772022A1608367 issued by Sub- Registrar office, Dindori in the name of Piyush Sharma. **Boundaries: On the North:** Land of Dr. Nanhe Singh, **On the South:** Proposed road, **On the East:** House of Babita Gawale, **On the West:** Land of Kamlesh Tiwari.

Date: 14.01.2026	Authorized Officer
Place: Dindori	ESAF SMALL FINANCE BANK LTD.



**बैंक ऑफ महाराष्ट्र**  
**Bank of Maharashtra**  
भारत सरकार का उपक्रम

Zonal Office Chhindwara  
Rameshwaram Complex 1st floor, Lalbagh,  
Chhindwara - 480001

Head Office : Lokmangal,  
1501, Shivajinagar Pune-5

**PUBLIC NOTICE FOR SALE**

**E-Auction Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8 (6) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.**

Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower/s and Guarantor/s that the below described immovable properties mortgaged/charged to the Bank of Maharashtra, the possession of which have been taken by the Authorised Officer of Bank of Maharashtra, will be sold on “As is where is”, “As is what is”, and “Whatever there is” & “WITHOUT RECOURSE BASIS” on 17.02.2026, for recovery of the balance due to the Bank of Maharashtra from the Borrower (s) and Guarantor(s) as mentioned in the table. Details of the Borrower/s and Guarantor/s, amount due, Short description of the immovable property and encumbrances known thereon, possession type, reserve price and the earnest money deposit are also given as under-

Name & Address of Borrower / Guarantor	Outstanding Dues for Recovery of which Property are being sold	Description of properties	Date of Auction	Reserve Price
				EMD Amount
				Bid Increase Amount
Branch: Chhindwara Borrower:- M/S Crazy Village Resort and Fun Park Prop. Ashish Sahu Address : Ward No 29, Near Gauri Mata Mandir, Purvi Budhwari Bazar , Chhindwara -480001	Rs. 80,96,326.00/- (Rs Eighty Lakh Ninety-Six Thousand Three Hundred Twenty-Six Rupees only) and plus unapplied interest w.e.f 27.01.2025 plus other charges and expenses	<b>Property No 1.</b> – Located at Ranjangaon , Khasra No 686 , area 1.686 Hect. B No 245/2, P H No 33 , RNM Singodi , Tehsil – Amarwada , District Chhindwara <b>Bounded as:-</b> North - land of Shabnam, South - land of Mohammad Fatyab, East - land of Shabnam, West - Land of Jogeshwar <b>Property No 2</b> - Located at Ranjangaon , Khasra No 690 , area 0.778 Hect. B No 245/2, P H No 33 , RNM Singodi , Tehsil – Amarwada , District Chhindwara <b>Bounded as:-</b> North - Govt Land, South - land of Mikail Ahmad, East - Govt Land Under Water, West - Govt Land Under Water <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs.1,19,92,515.00
				Rs. 11,99,252.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Waraseoni Borrower:- Mr. Kuwarsingh Tekam s/o Mr. Rajesingh Tekam and Mrs. Khemanbai Tekam w/o Mr.Kuwarsingh Tekam Address : Village Pujaritola , Pathri, Tehsil Lalburra , Balaghat ( M P ) -481331	Rs. 21,48,594 (Rupees Twenty One Lakh Fourty Eight Thousand Five Hundred Ninety Four only) plus unapplied interest + Penal Interest @ 2 % + Other Expenses w.e.f 30/05/2024	All Pieces and Parcels of residential property (house) situated at kh.no.207/2/2, Ph no.17/52 area admeasuring 0.018 hectare i.e, 1962 sq ft i.e. 182.34 Square Meter at village pujari tola, Pathari, tehsil- Lalburra Dist.- Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh- 481331 <b>Owned by Mrs.Khemanbai Tekam w/o Kuwarsingh Tekam</b> <b>Bounded as:-</b> North- land of seller, East- land of Dipsingh Warkade, West- land of Sonibai, South- Kachcha rasta <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs. 24,30,000.00
				Rs. 2,43,000.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Chhindwara Borrower: M/S PATNI CEMENTS Proprietor: Mrs. Sarita Patni W/o Mr. Nirlop Kumar Patni Address : Ward No 32, Besides Kabra Paints, Near Jain Mandir, Golganj, Chhindwara -480001	Rs.42,55,537.00/- (Rupees Forty Two Lakh Fifty Five Thousand Five Hundred Thirty Seven Only) plus interest thereon and other expenses w.e.f. 23/12/2023	All pieces and Parcels of Property Located at Kukda Jagat, B No 62, P H No 11, KH No 168/136 Ward no 10, Sidhi Vinayak Ward, Chhindwara, Sub Registrar- Chhindwara, admeasuring 1500 sqft <b>Owned by: Mrs. Sarita Patni W/o Mr. Nirlop Kumar Patni</b> <b>Bounded as:-</b> North - Prachna Chandel House, South - Road, East - Plot of Suryavanshi, West - Road <b>Possession: Actual</b>	17.02.2025	Rs. 21,87,000.00
				Rs. 2,18,700.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Balaghat Borrower:- 1). M/S Maa Janki Jewellers Proprietor : Mr. Ramkishore Rangire S/o Munnalal Rangire Address : Village- Netra, Post Linga, Tehsil and District Balaghat –481001 Guarantor : 1.) Mr. Prem Lal Rangire S/o Maniklal Rangire Address: Village- Netra, Post Linga, Tehsil and District Balaghat -481001	Rs. 26,04,948.00/- (Rs Twenty Six lakh Four Thousand nine Hundred Forty Eight Only Plus Unapplied Interest from 31.03.2022	All pieces and parcels of Residential Building Village- Netra, Post Linga, Registration District Balaghat , Sub District Balaghat admeasuring 0.122 Hec/13239.61 Sq Fts , PH No 19/63 , Bearing Survey No 88/1/G <b>Owned By Mr. Ramkishore Rangire S/o Munnalal Rangire</b> <b>Bounded As Follows:</b> East: Abadi Land, West : Road, North : Open Land, South : Ancestral Property <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs. 51,30,000.00
				Rs. 5,13,000.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Chhindwara Borrower: GDM Traders Prop. Mr. Ankit Viswakarma S/o Rajesh Vishwakarma Address : Ward No 1 , Bus Stand , Main Road Chand , Tehsil Chand, District Chhindwara-480001 Guarantor: Smt. Manju Bai Viswakarma W/o Rajesh Viswakarma Address: Ward No 1 , Bus Stand , Main Road Chand , Tehsil Chand, District Chhindwara-480001	Rs. 28,79,533.06 (Rs Twenty Eight Lakh Seventy Nine Thousand Five Hundred Thirty Three Plus Unapplied Interest and Other Charges w.e.f. 29.11.2023	All Pieces and Parcels of the property Located at B No. 80, P.H. No, 30, Kh No 433/14, Vikla Road Chand, tehsil- Chand, Dist – Chhindwara, <b>Owned by Mrs. Manju Bai W/o Mr Rajesh Vishwakarma admeasuring 4000 sqft</b> <b>Boundaries:</b> North – land of Ruplal Jain, South - Road, East – Land of Ruplal Jain, West - Plot of hari Narayan <b>This property is owned by Mrs. Manju Bai W/o Mr Rajesh Vishwakarma</b> <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs. 56,37,744.00
				Rs. 5,63,775.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Chhindwara Borrower: MATHURA MALTI EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY CHHINDWARA Guarantors : 1.Adiitya Dehriya s/o Mathura Prasad dehariya (President) 2. Sharad Singh D/o Harendra bahadur Singh (Secretary) 3. Janvi Singh W/o- d/o harendra bahadur Singh (Treasurer) Malti Mathura Dehriya W/o Mathura Prasad dehariya (Joint Secretary) 4. Malti Mathura Dehriya W/o Mathura Prasad dehariya (Joint Secretary) 5. Harendra Bahadur Singh S/o Haribhajan Singh (Member) 6. Manish Raj Shrinivas S/o Narayan Prasad (Member)	Rs. 4805983.00/-(Rupees Forty Eight Lakh Five Thousand Nine Hundred Eighty Three Plus Interest w.e.f 22.05.2023 and Other Expenses	All those pieces & parcel of property with construction & fixture there being & lying at Vill maharani laxmibai ward, jhanda Tq chhindwara Dist. Chhindwara Khasra No 179/1 & 179/3 B No 208 P H No 24, Area known as 0.030 hec and 0.047 hec total 0.077 hec area Admeasuring 0.077 hec , <b>Bounded as-</b> North - CC ROAD, South :- LAND OF ANJUMAN, East :- HOUSE OF DALCHAND, West:- HOUSE OF SUNITA <b>Owner of Property :- Shri Aditya Dehariya</b> <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs. 20,79,000.00
				Rs. 2,07,900.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Seoni Borrower: 1.Mr Shashin Chourasia S/o Santosh Chourasia Address : Sanjay Colony, Hanuman Colony Tehsil Chhapara , Dist Seoni MP 480884 2. Mrs. Archana Chourasia W/o Shashin Chourasia Address : Sanjay Colony, Hanuman Colony Tehsil Chhapara , Dist Seoni MP 480884	Rs. 11,32,652.29 /- (Rupees Eleven Lakh Thirty Two Thousand Six Hundred Fifty Two Rupees and Twenty Nine Paise Only) plus Unapplied interest plus other expenses w.e.f. 19.05.2025	All pieces and parcels of Kh No 49/23, Ph No 56/104 (Sheerdiwan) Flat No 404, Fourth Floor in " Shree Apartment ", Mouza SheerDiwan RIC Dunda Seoni, District Seoni, MP 480661 <b>Owned By Mr. Shashin Chourasia S/o Santosh Chourasia</b> <b>Bounded as</b> - North : - Lift and Passage, South : - Flat No 405, East :- Open Space, West : - Passage <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs. 15,30,000.00
				Rs. 1,53,000.00
				Rs. 25,000/-
Branch: Palari Borrower: M/S Sunshine Group Address: Village -Chandi , Tehsil- Chapara, Dist - Seoni-480991 Partners and Guarantors : 1) MR. Shashin Chourasia So Santosh Chourasia Address : Sanjay Colony, Hanuman Colony, Chhapara, Dist Seoni MP PIN 480884 2)Mr. Joginder Singh S/o Rai Singh Address: 16/507, Jaijalpur Gali, Jharoda Kalan, South West Delhi PIN 110072	Rs. 1,05,30,847.00/- (Rupees One Crore Five Lakh Thirty Thousand Eight Hundred Forty Seven Only) plus Unrecovered interest	All pieces and Parcels of commercial diverted Property and construction thereon at Khasra 60/2/2, 60/2/3 Admeasuring Area 0.45 Hectare Located at Village Chandi P C Anjaniya , R I Circle Chhapara Tehsil Chhapara District Seoni (M P) <b>Owned by: Mr. Shashin Chourasia S/o Santosh Chourasia &amp; Mr. Joginder Singh S/o Rai Singh</b> <b>Bounded as</b> :- North - Land of Nasrulla Khan S/o Babu Khan, South - Land of Nasrulla Khan S/o Babu Khan, East - Govt Road, West - Land of Dami Lal S/o Chote Lal <b>Possession: Symbolic</b>	17.02.2025	Rs.1,27,35,000.00
				Rs.12,73,500.00
				Rs. 25,000/-

Inspection of Properties by bidder: 08.02.2026 to 12.02.2026 between 10:00 am. and 5:00 pm

Last Date & Time for Submission of Bid application/KYC documents/EMD etc. 16.02.2026 up to 04.00pm

Date & time of E-auction with auto extention for 5 minutes-17.02.2026 between 11.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.

The auction sale will be On-line E-Auction / Bidding through website <https://baanknet.com>, email: [support.baanknet@psballiance.com](mailto:support.baanknet@psballiance.com). Mob.- 8102622141 The intending Bidders / Purchasers are requested to register on portal using their mobile number and email id. Please take note that the registration and KYC approval etc take 2-3 working days. For detail terms and conditions of sale please refer to the link provided in <https://bankofmaharashtra.in/asset-for-sales-search> and <https://baanknet.com>. Also prospective bidders may contact the authorized officials **Laxman Dambare - 9766105717**

Date: 16/01/2026

Authorised Officer, Bank of Maharashtra

## THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

### CHANGE OF NAME

I, hitherto Known as JEETENDRA SINGH S/O SURESH R/O Goren Birunga, Post: Itawali, Morana, Madhya Pradesh-476221 have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as JITENDRA SINGH.

### Change of Name

I Gaurav Agarwal S/O Arun Gupta R/O H.No. 104, Aradhana Nagar, Kotra Sultanabad, Bhopal. I state that my father's name in my passport is Arun Agarwal and mother's name is Santosh Rani whereas their correct name is Arun Gupta and Santosh Rani Gupta respectively, which is mentioned in their own passports, hence in my passport also my parent's name should be mentioned as Arun Gupta and Santosh Rani Gupta respectively.



# BCB removes Najmul from key post after players revolt

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Dhaka

The Bangladesh Cricket Board was forced to sack its finance committee chairman Najmul Islam on Thursday after senior players of the national team revolted against him for making derogatory comments against them.

Toss was delayed in Thursday's Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) game between Naokhali Express and Chattogram Royals here after neither of the two teams showed up at the venue and players of both teams were unified in their demand for immediate removal of Najmul.

Under player and public pressure, BCB was forced to act and removed Najmul as chairman of the board's finance committee. It is unclear if he remains a BCB director. "The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) wishes to inform that, following a review of recent developments and in the best interest of the organisation, the BCB President has decided to release Mr. Najmul Islam from his responsibilities as Chairman of the Finance Committee with immediate effect," said the BCB in a statement.

"Until further notice, the BCB President will assume the role of Acting Chairman of the Finance Committee. The BCB reiterates that the interests of the cricketers remain its highest priority. The Board remains fully committed to upholding the honour and dignity of all



players under its jurisdiction," it added.

The furore started after Najmul, while reiterating Bangladesh's refusal to travel to India for next month's T20 World Cup on account of "security worries", rejected concerns surrounding players' remuneration should the country withdraw.

He stated that the players would not be compensated as they have not justified the support so far, having failed to win a single ICC event. The statement caused an outrage with CWAB calling for his immediate ouster from BCB.

The BCB had also show-caused Najmul.

"The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) reiterates its regret over the recent objectionable comments made by a member of the Board.

"The BCB acknowledges the concern caused by the remarks and wishes to reaffirm its commitment to professionalism, respect for cricketers and the values that nurture the game of cricket," the BCB stated in a press release earlier on Thursday.

"...The Board has already initiated formal disciplinary

proceedings against the Board member concerned. A show-cause letter has been issued, and the individual has been instructed to submit a written response within 48 hours," it added.

Bangladesh are refusing to tour India, citing security concerns after pacer Mustafizur Rahman was dropped from the IPL on BCCI's instructions for unspecified "developments all around".

The BCB is still in talks with the ICC to figure a way out after the world body showed reluctance to shift Bangladesh's four games in India to Sri Lanka.

Najmul had earlier described former captain Tamim Iqbal as an "agent of India" after he called for a restrained handling of the standoff with India, warning that decisions taken today would have impact 10 years down the line.

The CWAB had condemned that statement from Najmul. Bangladesh Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto has also urged for a pragmatic approach and also revealed that the players are under immense stress due to the current circumstances.

"We have been discussing with the BCB for many issues but didn't get any solution. We are now hopeless. Cricketers are playing the game for pride. We told him to say sorry but he became more desperate. He can't make such comment.

"They are taking long time to solve women's team matters. Without evidence, nine players were omitted from BPL for alleged corruption in BPL.

"There is also less facilities for women's players," CWAB president Mohammad Mithun said before action was taken against Najmul.

Senior all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz said: "We always say that cricket board is our guardian. But something like this came from one of them is really disappointing. Cricket board is run by ICC and sponsor incomes. We give the highest tax 25-30 percent."

Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto and current T20 captain Litton Das too expressed their views on the controversial matter.

"As a player whether its male or female, they need to get paid better. We have good money and the BCB needs to use that properly," said Litton. "We always say about gender equality and the women need to feel safe. I think the matter should have solved as soon as possible but the dates are just get delayed.

"The women's team also achieved some serious achievements. We want to solve the issue as early as possible," opined Shanto.

## Preparing on dusty wickets helped me: Daryl Mitchell

DEVARCHIT VARMA ■ Rajkot

Batting mainstay Daryl Mitchell said preparing at New Zealand Cricket's specially designed pitch marquee facility at Lincoln helped him master the spin-friendly tracks in the sub-continent. Trailing by only one rating point to super star batter Virat Kohli in the ICC rankings for ODI batters, Mitchell has been in a red-hot form against India in their backyard, having notched up scores of 130, 134, 84 and 131 not out in the last four outings. The 34-year-old Mitchell produced a splendid 117-ball 131 not out here on Wednesday to defy India, powering New Zealand's series-levelling seven-wicket win in the second ODI.

"There's been plenty, plenty mornings in the marquee down in the South Island in Lincoln on some prepared dusty wickets to try and find ways to come up with game plans in this part



of the world," Mitchell told reporters. "That's the stuff that a lot of people don't see... the work that you put in, away from the shiny lights and the TV, but it's always nice I guess when you get the rewards from that.

"I just love playing for my country, I love travelling the world and playing international cricket and I am very lucky to do that across all three formats," Mitchell added. The pitch marquee facility at Lincoln help New Zealand players to recreate specific conditions ahead of any given tour, and allow them to train even during the winters.

## Surprised how easily New Zealand got across the line: Gavaskar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Former captain Sunil Gavaskar says he was quite surprised by how easily New Zealand upstaged India in the second ODI in Rajkot and denied the home team freedom to experiment with its combination in the third and final game on Sunday.

Daryl Mitchell's unbeaten 131-run knock powered New Zealand to a series-levelling win in the second ODI in Rajkot as the visitors chased a 285-run target with seven wickets to spare. The series-decider will be played in Indore. "I was surprised by how easily New Zealand got across the line because, before they started batting, everyone thought India would be able to make use of the slowness of the pitch," Gavaskar said on JioHotstar's 'Amul Cricket



Live'. "With their (New Zealand) bowlers, not just the spinners, but all of them, using the slowness of the surface well, it felt like India would be able to restrict New Zealand to around 260 or 270. I thought that would have been an easy win for India," he said.

Gavaskar was full of praise for the composed manner in which Mitchell combined with Will Young (87) to stitch a 162-run partnership that took the game away from India.

## Punjab to take on Saurashtra in VHT semis

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Bengaluru

Punjab will head into the Vijay Hazare Trophy semifinal against Saurashtra here on Friday brimming with confidence after surviving a nail-biting one-run victory over domestic powerhouse Mumbai in their final group match. That thrilling win has set the tone for the rest of their campaign as was evident in the manner in which Punjab demolished Madhya Pradesh in the quarterfinal. Now, a young and determined Saurashtra side stands in their way.

With charismatic India opener Abhishek Sharma unlikely to feature, wicket-keeper-batter Prabhsimran Singh is expected to lead the side, having already steered Punjab to a commanding 183-run triumph over Madhya Pradesh, underpinned by a colossal 345-run total.

Harnoor Singh, Prabhsimran Singh, Anmolpreet Singh, and Nehal Wadhwa all struck impressive half-centuries to turn the contest decisively in Punjab's favour, and a similar batting performance could prove pivotal in steering them



towards the final.

The bowling, spearheaded by right-arm pacer Gurnoor Brar, played a crucial role in skittling the opposition for a meagre total, wrapping up the innings with nearly 19 overs to spare.

As Punjab chase their maiden Vijay Hazare Trophy title, they will rely on skipper Prabhsimran's experience, having been one of the

team's leading run-scorers with four half-centuries, including his most recent effort in Tuesday's quarterfinal against Madhya Pradesh.

With a deep batting lineup and a roster of destructive hitters, including Harnoor Singh, Anmolpreet Singh, Naman Poonia, Nehal Wadhwa, and Ramandeep Singh, Punjab have the firepower to go all the way.



# बहनों का आत्मसम्मान बना मध्यप्रदेश की सशक्त पहचान



नरेन्द्र मोदी, प्रधानमंत्री

## 1.25 करोड़ से अधिक लाड़ली बहनों को ₹1836 करोड़

## 29 लाख बहनों को गैस सिलेंडर रीफिलिंग के लिये ₹90 करोड़ से अधिक की राशि का अंतरण

### विभिन्न विकास कार्यों का भूमिपूजन एवं लोकार्पण

मुख्यमंत्री

# डॉ. मोहन यादव

द्वारा

16 जनवरी, 2026 | अपराह्न 2:00 बजे

माखन नगर, जिला नर्मदापुरम



अब तक लाड़ली बहनों को ₹50,468 करोड़ की राशि अंतरित

डॉ. मोहन यादव का अभ्युदय मध्यप्रदेश

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(D-11187/25)

आयोजन: मध्य प्रदेश सरकार, नर्मदापुरम







# X implements tech measures to bar Grok’s violative content

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Microblogging platform X has implemented technological measures to prevent Grok from allowing the generation of images of real people in revealing clothing in jurisdictions where it is illegal, after it faced a heavy backlash over obscene deepfakes generated by the AI chatbot.

This restriction applies to all users, including paid subscribers, X said in a post on its official ‘Safety’ handle.

Further, image creation and the ability to edit images via the Grok account on the X platform are now only available to paid subscribers. This, it said, adds an extra layer of protection by helping to ensure that individuals who attempt to abuse the Grok account to violate the law or platform’s policies can be held accountable.

“We now geoblock the ability of all users to generate images of real people in bikinis, underwear, and similar attire via the Grok account and in Grok in X in those jurisdictions where it’s illegal,” the post said.

X said it has implemented technological measures to prevent the Grok account from allowing the editing of images of real people in revealing clothing, such as bikinis.

“This restriction applies to all

users, including paid subscribers,” it added. X asserted that this does not change its existing safety protocol that all AI prompts and generated content posted to X must strictly adhere to its stipulated rules.

“However content is created or whether users are free or paid subscribers, our Safety team are working around the clock to add additional safeguards, take swift and decisive action to remove violating and illegal content, permanently suspend accounts where appropriate, and collaborate with local Governments and law enforcement as necessary,” X said.

X said it remains committed to providing a safe platform for everyone and continues to have zero tolerance for any forms of child sexual exploitation, non-consensual nudity, and unwanted sexual content.

“We take action to remove high-priority violative content, including Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and non-consensual nudity, taking appropriate action against accounts that violate our X rules,” the post said.

It added: “We also report accounts seeking Child Sexual Exploitation materials to law enforcement authorities as necessary.” X recently admitted its mistake and removed about 3,500 pieces of content and deleted over



600 accounts after the IT Ministry raised concerns over obscene content linked to Elon Musk-backed AI chatbot Grok.

X has assured authorities it would comply with Indian laws.

There has been mounting pressure on Grok from Governments worldwide, including India, as regulators intensify scrutiny of the generative AI engine over content moderation, data safety and non-consensual sexually-explicit images that have flooded X over the last few days. On January 2, the IT Ministry had pulled up X and

directed it to immediately remove all vulgar, obscene and unlawful content generated by Grok or force action under the law.

In that directive, the ministry asked the US-based social media firm to submit a detailed action taken report (ATR) spelling out specific technical and organisational measures adopted or proposed in relation to the Grok application; the role and oversight exercised by the Chief Compliance Officer; actions taken against offending content, users and accounts; as well as mechanisms

to ensure compliance with the mandatory reporting requirement under Indian laws.

The IT Ministry’s missive had noted that Grok AI, developed by X and integrated on the platform, is being misused by users to create fake accounts to host, generate, publish or share obscene images or videos of women in a derogatory or vulgar manner.

“Importantly, this is not limited to creation of fake accounts but also targets women who host or publish their images or videos, through prompts, image manip-

ulation and synthetic outputs,” the ministry had said, asserting that such conduct reflects a serious failure of platform-level safeguards and enforcement mechanisms, and amounts to gross misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in violation of stipulated laws.

The Government had made it clear to X that compliance with the IT Act and rules is not optional, and that the statutory exemptions under section 79 of the IT Act (which deals with safe harbour and immunity from liability for online intermediaries) are conditional upon strict observance of due diligence obligations.

The Government warned X in clear terms that any failure to observe due diligence obligations shall result in the loss of the exemption from liability (under section 79 of the IT Act), and that the platform will also be liable for consequential action under other laws, including the IT Act and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

It asked X to enforce user terms of service and AI usage restrictions, including ensuring strong deterrent measures such as suspension, termination and other enforcement actions against violating users and accounts.

X was also asked to remove or disable access “without delay” to all content already generated or disseminated in violation of

applicable laws, in strict compliance with the timelines prescribed under the IT Rules, 2021, without, as such, vitiating the evidence.

The initial response by X to the notice, though detailed, was seen as a mere reiteration by the platform that it respects Indian laws and stipulated guidelines, and that India is a big market for the platform. In its response, X also outlined the strict content takedown policies it abides by when it comes to misleading posts, and those related to non-consensual sexualised images.

Although that reply was long and detailed, the IT Ministry was of the opinion that it “missed” key information including takedown details and specific action that has been taken on Grok AI obscene content issue, and to prevent it in future.

The response fell short of expectation, prompting the Government to toughen its stance and ask for more details, including specific action taken on obscene content linked to its Grok AI and measures to prevent a repeat in future. X had then accepted its mistake, and told the Government that it will comply with Indian laws and regulations, sources said.

Apart from India, the UK and EU too have mounted pressure X over Grok deepfake image issue.

## India, Israel share vision for sustainable food security: Minister

HARINDER MISHRA  
■ Jerusalem



Israel’s Minister of Agriculture and Food Security, Avi Dichter, has said that his country and India share a “true vision for sustainable food security” as both plan to expand their partnership in land-based agriculture to water agriculture.

Dichter was referring to a Letter of Intent (LoI) signed on Wednesday by India and Israel to deepen cooperation between the two countries in the fields of agriculture, fisheries, and the blue economy as he said the signing marks a significant step in expanding professional relations between the two countries.

“Just as in land-based agriculture, we are continuing the important partnership with India in water agriculture as well. Israel and India see eye to eye on a true vision for sustainable food security,” the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture

and Food Security quoted Dichter as saying on Wednesday. “This important LoI continues the previous agreement signed between the countries last April, and deals with promoting the agricultural partnership between the countries,” he said.

Union Minister for Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying Rajiv Ranjan Singh and Dichter on Wednesday signed the Letter of Intent on the sidelines of the three day ‘Second Global Summit on Blue Food Security Sea the Future 2026’ in Israel’s southern

coastal city of Eilat. Blue foods are derived from aquatic animals, plants, or algae that are caught or cultivated in freshwater and marine environments.

“The signing marks a significant step in expanding professional relations between Israel and India, and lays the groundwork for research, technological, and economic cooperation, with an emphasis on innovation, sustainability, and strengthening food security in both countries,” the statement said.

Sources here said Israeli innovation is also at the center of this initiative: the cooperation will include smart management of water resources through advanced Israeli water-saving technologies, alongside encouraging connections and collaborations between startups from Israel and India in the fields of water agriculture and fisheries. “These steps are intended to promote innovation and

strengthen the blue economy, while positioning Israel as a leading player in water technology development,” they said.

Singh also participated in the Global Ministerial Panel Discussion on Food Security and the Blue Economy at the summit where he highlighted the significant achievements of India’s fisheries sector. Singh’s participation in the global event underscores the growing strategic and economic engagement between India and Israel, official sources here said.

It also reflects the shared commitment of both countries to deepen bilateral cooperation in the field of fisheries and aquaculture, they said. The visit reinforces the longstanding partnership between India and Israel, strengthens collaboration in fisheries and aquaculture, and creates new pathways for collaboration in areas of mutual interest, they added.

## Global clean fuel needs to quadruple investment by 2030: WEF

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Global clean fuel investment will need to quadruple from nearly \$25 billion at present to over \$100 billion annually by 2030 to meet clean energy targets, a new study said on Thursday.

Clean fuels can strengthen energy security and economic development goals, stimulating two to three times more jobs than conventional fuel sectors while diversifying national energy supplies, the World Economic Forum report said.

The white paper, prepared in collaboration with Bain and Company, highlighted

the potential of the clean fuel sector to stimulate job growth and diversify energy supply, and set out policy, business and financing measures that can turn global goals into credible, economically viable projects.

Clean fuels — mainly liquid or gaseous fuels, ranging from biofuels to hydrogen derivatives and lower-carbon fossil fuels — are emerging as a key component of the energy transition, offering countries a way to strengthen energy security, support industrial and rural jobs and cut emissions in transport and industry.

With liquid and gaseous fuels providing 56 per cent of global energy today, the



report titled ‘Fuelling the Future: How Business, Finance and Policy can Accelerate the Clean Fuels Market’, underlined how clean fuel investment can build on and strengthen existing systems and infrastructure, and unlock sustainable economic growth.

While clean fuels currently make up just over 1 per cent of global clean energy

investment, ambition is growing, reflected in initiatives such as the ‘Belem 4x’ pledge to quadruple production and use by 2035, put forward by Italy, Japan, India and Brazil ahead of COP30 and now endorsed by more than 25 countries.

The report said that achieving this ambition will require coordinated action across policy, finance and industry

to bring forward a larger pipeline of viable projects that deliver returns to investors and long-term value to national economies.

“The case for clean fuels is strong, but a reality check is needed to turn ambitions into investable projects. At least USD 100 billion in annual investments are needed by 2030 to deliver on global clean fuel ambitions,” it said. Current investments are nearly USD 25 billion per year, or just above 1 per cent of total investment for clean energy. At this rate, with only 10 per cent of announced new capacity for 2030 past investment decisions, the market will fall short of its targets, the WEF said.

Despite growing interest, many clean fuel projects still struggle to advance due to high upfront costs, uncertain demand, fragmented value chains and uneven regional policy environments.

Addressing these barriers will require predictable, performance-based policies, well-designed public-private risk-sharing mechanisms and closer collaboration across value chains to better align supply and demand, according to the report.

These approaches will be essential to help more projects reach the investment stage and to build a stable pipeline of commercially viable, regionally tailored opportunities, it added.

## Germany’s economy hints at growth after 2 years of shrinkage

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Frankfurt

Germany’s troubled economy returned to modest growth last year after two years of falling output, official figures showed, as hopes rise that Government spending on bridges, rail lines and defense may help end years of stagnation.

The expansion in gross domestic product of 0.2 per cent for 2025 was fuelled by stronger consumer and Government spending while exports sagged under the weight of more restrictive US trade policy under President Donald Trump, the German Federal Statistical Office said on Thursday.

That follows shrinkage of 0.5 per cent in 2024 and 0.9 per cent in 2023. “Germany’s export business faced strong headwinds owing to higher US tariffs, the appreciation of the euro and increased competition from China,” statistical office head Ruth Brand said in a statement accompanying the statistical release. Expectations have risen for Germany to finally see stronger growth this year as the Government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz implements plans to increase spending on infrastructure to make up for years of underinvestment.

Meanwhile defense spending is rising due to a perceived higher level of

threat from Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Germany has endured a period of extended stagnation following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher energy costs following the war in Ukraine and increasing competition from China in key German



specialties such as autos and industrial machinery have held back an economy that is heavily focused on exports.

Then came Trump’s imposition of higher tariffs, or import taxes, on goods from the European Union. The slow growth has also exposed long-term structural issues such as excessive bureaucracy and lack of skilled labour.

A stronger euro has also made exports less competitive on price.

A group of leading economists has predicted 0.9 per cent growth for this year but said that forecast could be at risk if the increase in Government spending is unleashed more slowly than expected.

## Niti Aayog backs convergence of govt schemes for MSMEs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Government think tank NITI Aayog on Thursday pitched for convergence of the government schemes to unlock greater efficiency in the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) sector.

The Aayog in a report has suggested creation of a centralised portal for MSMEs and convergence of Cluster Development Schemes and skill development programmes.

The report ‘Achieving Efficiencies in MSME Sector through Convergence of Schemes’, also called for creation of a dedicated marketing wing with domestic and international components to streamline the MSME marketing support.

The domestic wing would facilitate MSME participation in national exhibitions, trade fairs, and buyer-seller meets, while the international wing would support global market access through overseas trade fairs, B2B events, and buyer-seller meets, the report said.

“There is need of empowering MSMEs by streamlining scheme implementation, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination, and enhancing service delivery,” it said.

The report also recommended integrating Scheme For Promoting



Innovation, Rural Industry and Entrepreneurship (ASPIRE) into MSME Innovative as a special category for agro-rural enterprises.

“Existing ASPIRE funds can continue, while future MSME Innovative budgets earmark a share for agro-rural incubators. This integration broadens access to advanced incubation without restricting,” it said.

The report was launched by NITI Aayog member Arvind Virmani.

It recommended a two-pronged approach to convergence, comprising information convergence and process convergence.

“Information convergence focuses on integrating Government-generated data at the central and State levels

to improve coordination, enable informed decision-making, and strengthen governance outcomes.

“Process convergence aims at aligning and unifying schemes to reduce redundancies, streamline operations, and improve service delivery. This includes merging similar schemes, combining common components, and fostering collaboration across ministries and states to create a cohesive MSME support ecosystem,” the report said.

It presented a detailed blueprint to improve outcomes for MSMEs by streamlining scheme implementation, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination, and enhancing the delivery of financial, skill, marketing,

and innovation support. It evaluated existing Government of India schemes and programmes for the MSME sector, assesses the current level of convergence among them, and identifies best practices from central, State, and international experiences.

Based on this assessment, the report offered actionable recommendations to unlock convergence opportunities and undertake corrective measures to improve efficiency, outreach, and impact of MSME schemes.

The ministry of MSME administers 18 schemes spanning critical support areas such as credit assistance, skill development, marketing support, innovation and R&D, technology and quality upgradation, and infrastructure development.

While these initiatives have played a significant role in MSME growth, overlapping objectives and fragmented implementation across ministries often lead to duplication, inefficiencies, and limited outreach.

The report underscored that effective convergence and rationalisation of schemes can simplify access for beneficiaries, ensure better translation of resources into outputs and outcomes, and reduce duplication and confusion, thereby amplifying overall impact.

## India AI push: Google announces market access programme

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Google on Thursday unveiled its Market Access Programme, an initiative to help startups overcome challenges in accessing global markets, as the tech giant also announced new additions to its Gemma open model family.

Google, last year, announced a record USD 15-billion investment that would go into building an AI infrastructure hub in Andhra Pradesh.

According to the company, the latest launches support its ongoing investments in India’s physical AI infrastructure, including the Global AI Hub in Visakhapatnam, which provides a 1-gigawatt foundation powered by green energy and the company’s advanced AI chips, to ensure Indian startups have access to high-performance compute.



Google said the Market Access Program, would help Indian startups strengthen their go-to-market efforts, shortening the journey from local pilots to global scale.

It also announced new additions to its Gemma open model family, tuned to help startups build population-scale and production-ready AI applications.

“MedGemma 1.5 addresses the growing demand for advanced healthcare AI, enabling startups to work with high-dimensional medical imaging at scale,” the release said.

FunctionGemma, on the

other hand, is a lightweight model optimised for function calling, and supports the next generation of on-device, agent-based systems, allowing AI applications to take secure, reliable action locally.

These models expand the building blocks available to developers creating real-world, deployable solutions.

On the Market Access Programme, Google said the initiative is aimed at AI-first startups that have moved beyond the prototype phase and are ready to scale responsibly.





## PROSPECT

### ITPO Chairman releases book on successful participation tips in trade shows



"Trade shows are imperatives for socio-economic progress of a country. India has the 26th place in the world in this sector. Integrating the economy, we should have more exhibition and convention centers such as 'Bharat Mandapam' in each State to catalyse trade promotion efforts of "emerging India" indicated the Chairman, ITPO Jawed Ashraf, IFS while releasing an exclusive book on participation management of trade fairs titled: "Vyapar Melon Men Bhaagidari Ko Kaise Safal Banayen?" at New Delhi World Book Fair 2026 on January 14, 2026 at Lekhak Manch, Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.

Written by an erudite scholar in events and ex-ITPO senior official, Shri Deepak Kumar Jain and Associate Professor Dr Veena Jain, the book has a huge significance for promotion of MSMEs and Start ups, the book is a sincere effort to catalyze India's mission of 'Viksit Bharat@2047'. ITPO Chief complimented the authors.

Present on the occasion were Lt Col Harsh Kondilya, OSD, ITPO, Shri Sushil Swatrantra the publisher, SN Bharti, General Manager, ITPO etc.

Welcome address was delivered by Shri Sanjay Vashistha, Senior Manager, ITPO while 'Vote of Thanks' was proposed by the publisher. The book launch function will be attended by senior Government officials, exhibitors and media.

### Pinkathon will be held on March 8 at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium



Zyudus Pinkathon has announced its return to Delhi for the eighth edition of the women's run, marking a significant homecoming for one of the platform's most engaged cities.

The announcement in Delhi, signals Pinkathon's continued expansion in the 2025-26 season, following a Mumbai edition that brought together over 5,300 women and set a world record for the maximum number of visually impaired women running together.

Returning to the capital after six and half years, the Zyudus Pinkathon Delhi will feature race categories from 3 km, Lifelong 5 km, and 10 km to ultradistances of 50 km, 75 km, 100 km, and 100 km relay. Milind Soman, Founder, Pinkathon, said, "Delhi has always been an important part of Pinkathon's story, and coming back for the eighth edition feels like picking up a conversation that never really stopped.

Quoted on the occasion, Dr Sharvil Patel, Managing Director said, "With the Easiest Exam campaign, we seek to empower women with the knowledge that a simple 3-minute self-examination each month can make a life-saving difference.

## Himanta distributes entrepreneurship funds to women in Karbi Anglong

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Guwahati

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday launched the distribution of entrepreneurship fund cheques of ₹10,000 each to 14,884 women entrepreneurs of Amri Legislative Assembly Constituency in West Karbi Anglong district and 24,660 women entrepreneurs of Diphu Legislative Assembly Constituency in Karbi Anglong district under the Chief Minister's Women Entrepreneurship Mission.

With this, a total of 19,80,259 women across 82 Legislative Assembly Constituencies of the State have so far received entrepreneurship funds under the scheme.

On the occasion, addressing two separate public meetings held at Cherdihun Aklam Playground, Baithalango in Amri Constituency and at Karbi People's Hall, Taralango in Diphu Constituency, the Chief Minister conveyed his Bhogali Bihu greetings to the people.

He said that the State Government has launched the Chief Minister's Women Entrepreneurship Mission, covering 32 lakh women associated with self-help groups across Assam.

Stating that the primary



objective of the scheme is to make every woman a Lakhpati Baideo, he said that more than eight lakh women in the State have already succeeded in earning over ₹1 lakh annually and have attained the status of Lakhpati Baideo.

The Chief Minister said that in the Amri Legislative Assembly Constituency alone, 272 women have already achieved the status of Lakhpati Baideo.

In the Diphu Legislative Assembly Constituency, 685 women have achieved the status of Lakhpati Baideo.

At the entrepreneurship fund cheque distribution programme held for Amri Constituency, Karbi King Longsing Ronghang, Chief Executive Member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Tuliram Ronghang, MP Amarsing Tisso, MLA Rupsing Teron, and State

Mission Director of the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission Kuntalmani Sharma Bordoloi, among other dignitaries, were present.

At the meeting held for Diphu Constituency, Minister for Sports and Youth Welfare and other departments Nandita Gorlosa, Chief Executive Member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Tuliram Ronghang, MP Amarsing Tisso, MLAs Bidyasing Englang and Darsing Ronghang, former MP Horen Sing Bey, several Executive Members of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, State Mission Director of the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission Kuntalmani Sharma Bordoloi, District Commissioner Aranyak Saikia, senior officials and beneficiary women of self-help groups were present.

## Army Day run in Bagra village gets enthusiastic participation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Itanagar

Marking the spirit of courage, unity and service on Army Day, the Indian Army organised an Army Day Run at Bagra Village, Along (Aalo), in close coordination with the District Administration and the local community. The event drew enthusiastic participation from residents of the region and became a vibrant celebration of national pride and collective spirit.

Conducted under the inspiring theme "Run with Honour, Finish with Pride", the run aimed to promote physical fitness, healthy living and a sense of togetherness among the people. Participants from all walks of life, including youth, elders and local residents, joined the run with great enthusiasm, reflecting strong community involvement and deep respect for the Armed Forces.

Beyond a sporting event, the Army Day Run emerged as a meaningful platform to



further strengthen civil-military bonds in this remote region.

The shared participation of soldiers and civilians highlighted mutual trust, cooperation and the enduring relationship between the Indian Army and the people of Arunachal Pradesh.

The event also encouraged the youth to adopt an active lifestyle while imbibing values of discipline, perseverance and national pride.

Through such people-centric initiatives, the Indian Army continues to extend its role beyond security, contributing actively to

social harmony, community engagement and nation-building. The Army Day Run at Bagra Village stood as a testament to the Army's commitment to walking alongside the people, celebrating unity, and nurturing a strong and resilient society in the border regions of the country.

## Bank officers' union demands proper security arrangements for its staff

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Concerned over safety and security, bank officers' union AIBOC, on Thursday called upon the Election Commission of India, the State Election authorities, and the Department of Financial Services to ensure protection to its staff involved in Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

Raising serious safety concerns, AIBOC referred to an incident in Farakka where micro observers were allegedly attacked by miscreants, resulting in injuries to officers.

"This incident is illustrative, and more such incidents are poised to occur in an antagonised atmosphere where bank officers, as micro observers, are exposed to personal risk in an unprotected and dogmatic environment. Notwithstanding this precarious situation, additional officers, including lady officers, are being deployed afresh as micro observers, which further heightens the seriousness of the concern," AIBOC said in a statement.

There was no police protection at the site and held the Election Commission responsible for ensuring the safety of deputed officials, it said. All India Bank Officers'

Confederation (AIBOC) expressed grave concern over the deployment of bank officers as Electoral Roll Micro Observers (ERMOS) for the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process in West Bengal, saying the prolonged engagement is disrupting critical banking operations.

The union said the deployment from December 26, 2025, to February 14, 2026, coincides with the crucial quarter-end and year-end period, adversely affecting regulatory compliance, accounting closures, audit-related work and achievement of statutory and business targets.

The organisation, which represents around 3.25 lakh bank officers, warned that diversion of officers from core banking duties would directly impact customer service and implementation of government-sponsored schemes.

AIBOC demanded that such non-banking engagements be duly accounted for in business parameters either through monetisation or appropriate adjustment of key benchmarks so that PSBs and their employees are not unfairly assessed or penalised. Reiterating that bank officers have always cooperated with lawful public duties in the national interest, AIBOC said the scale, timing and dura-

tion of the deployment were now materially impairing essential banking functions and exposing banks to avoidable operational and compliance risks. The union also objected to officers being compelled to travel long distances for training and postings largely at their own expense, citing inadequate logistical support from the state election authorities.

It also demanded safeguards, including clear reimbursement rules, insurance coverage, safety protocols, protection of training and examination schedules, and rationalisation of appraisal and performance benchmarks for affected officers.

AIBOC further alleged discriminatory treatment, claiming that West Bengal was the only state where public sector bank officers were being extensively engaged for the SIR process, while private sector bank staff were kept out. The union sought immediate intervention by the Election Commission of India and the Department of Financial Services to stop or substantially curtail such non-banking deployments during the critical period, in line with Election Commission guidelines that mandate minimal requisitioning of bank personnel.

## Powergrid unveils synthetic ester oil-filled transformer



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Gurugram

Power Grid Corporation of India Limited (POWERGRID) a Maharatna PSU under Ministry of Power inaugurated nation's first 315 MVA, 400/220/33 kV synthetic ester oil-filled power transformer at its Bhiwadi Sub-station, marking a significant technological milestone in India's transmission sector.

The facility was inaugurated by Dr RK Tyagi, Chairman and Managing Director, in the presence of G Ravisankar, Director (Finance), Naveen Srivastava,

Director (Operations), Burra Vamsi Rama Mohan, Director (Projects), Naveen Kumar, Chief Vigilance Officer, Shiv Tapasya Paswan, Independent Director, Alok Sharma, Executive Director (NR-II), along with other senior executives from POWERGRID's Corporate Office.

The newly commissioned transformer employs synthetic ester insulating oil, a next-generation, biodegradable and fire-safe alternative to conventional mineral oil.

With a capacity of 315 MVA, the transformer is designed to efficiently

handle high load conditions while reducing environmental risk, aligning with global best practices in green transmission technologies.

As of 31st December 2025, POWERGRID has commissioned and is operating 287 Sub-Stations and more than 1,81,894 ckm transmission lines and 5,94,016 MVA of transformation capacity.

With the adoption of the latest technological tools and techniques, enhanced use of automation and digital solutions, POWERGRID has been able to maintain an average transmission system availability of more than 99.84 per cent.

## Assam CM inaugurates solar power project at Khudigaon

TONY DAS  
■ Guwahati

Powering Assam's green future and making a major clean-energy milestone, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday inaugurated a 70 MW solar power project at Khudigaon in Bilasipara.

Built at a cost of over ₹350 crore, the project will generate 141 million units of electricity annually while reducing nearly 1.15 lakh tonnes of carbon emissions. The implementing agency will operate and maintain the project for a period of 25 years.

Speaking on the occasion, Chief Minister Sarma said that as a fallout of a series of steps taken by the State



Government, Assam's solar capacity now stands at 680 MW. He said that with more projects in the pipeline, the State is steadily moving towards its goal of 2,000 MW of renewable power and greater energy self-reliance.

The Chief Minister also said

that a power purchase agreement has already been signed between APDCL and SGEL (SJVN Green Energy Limited) for the purchase of electricity generated from the project at a tariff of ₹3.92 per unit.

The project will be con-

structed by SJVN Green Energy Limited, a subsidiary of SJVN, a Navratna public sector undertaking under the Ministry of Power, Government of India, on 1,000 bighas of land allotted to the Assam Power Distribution Company Limited.

Chief Minister Sarma said that the project has been completed in a record time. He stated that the project will significantly contribute towards making Assam self-reliant in the green power sector.

He also said that there was virtually no solar power generation in the State earlier, whereas with the commissioning of this 70 MW project, the total solar power gener-

ation capacity in Assam has now increased to 680 MW.

He further informed that another 50 MW solar power project is under construction at Borsola in Sonitpur district and is planned to be inaugurated by April.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by Minister Power etc Prasanta Phukan, Additional Chief Secretary to the Chief Minister KK Dwivedi, Managing Director APDCL Rakesh Kumar, Mission Director Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission Kuntal Moni Sarma Bordoloi, District Commissioner Dhubri Nabadeep Pathak, District Commissioner Kokrajhar Pankaj Chakravarty, senior officials of SJVN Limited, and other distinguished guests.

## Tata Power bags LEED certification for 6 more buildings

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited (Tata Power-DDL), which powers over 7 million people in north Delhi, has clinched the top Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum certification for six more office buildings under the LEED v4.1 EBOM rating system.

The honoured facilities include the Learning and Development Centre (CENPEID), Rani Bagh Protection Office, and four key district offices. These

sites met stringent benchmarks set by the US Green Building Council (USGBC) and verified by Green Business Certification Inc. (GBCI) for energy efficiency, water conservation, sustainable practices, indoor air quality, and design innovation.

LEED Platinum, the highest accolade from USGBC/GBCI, underscores Tata Power-DDL's push for eco-friendly operations.

This takes the utility's tally to 10 LEED Platinum-certified existing buildings. It builds on their 2022 feat, when the corporate office and three others



earned the same honour.

The certifications highlight Tata Power-DDL's commitment to green infrastructure

amid rising demands for sustainable energy in the Capital. The certification was granted after a rigorous eval-

uation of Tata Power-DDL's green building practices, which include energy-efficient LED lighting and HVAC systems, optimised use of natural resources and water conservation measures, and enhanced indoor environmental quality and occupant comfort.

The operations and maintenance of these offices of the discom were evaluated on key sustainability metrics such as energy savings, water conservation, and carbon footprint, and were found to be in compliance with global standards.



BRIEFLY

FIFA gets 500 million ticket requests for World Cup



FIFA said Wednesday it has received more than 500 million ticket requests for this year's World Cup.

Soccer's organising body said outside the host United States, Mexico and Canada, the most requests were made by fans residing in Germany, England, Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Argentina and Colombia.

FIFA is asking for up to \$8,680 per ticket. After criticism, FIFA said last month it will offer \$60 tickets for every game to the 48 national federations in the tournament, and the federations will decide how to distribute them to their fans who attended their previous games. It said the most-requested match in the third sales phase, which ran from Dec. 11 through Tuesday, was Colombia vs. Portugal on June 27 at Miami Gardens, Florida; followed by Mexico vs. South Korea on June 18 at Guadalajara, Mexico; the final on July 19 at East Rutherford, New Jersey; the opener between Mexico and South Africa on June 11 at Mexico City; and a second-round match on July 2 at Toronto. FIFA said it will notify people about their ticket applications no earlier than February 5 and will allocate them randomly for matches in which demand exceeds availability.

Amateur beats Sinner, turns millionaire



A little-known local amateur player beat Jannik Sinner and went on to make himself a millionaire in Australian dollars after winning the 1 Point Slam on Wednesday at the Australian Open's pre-tournament event.

It was a life-changing day for Jordan Smith in the Rod Laver Arena, with the event including top-ranked Carlos Alcaraz. All the matches lasted just one single point in a knockout bracket that included men and women, professionals and amateurs, plus celebrities like Taiwanese pop star Jay Chou, who was knocked out without hitting the ball after an ace from Petar Jovic.

Smith emerged in triumph from a state qualifying event to get the winner-take-all prize of 1 million Australian dollars, or around \$670,000.

The Australian won on the third stroke of the final when Joanna Garland, the women's No. 117 from Taiwan, sent a two-handed backhand wide.

Neeraj off to Potchefstroom for pre-season training

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Two-time Olympic medal-winning Indian javelin throw star Neeraj Chopra has begun his pre-season training in his preferred South African base of Potchefstroom after the Sports Ministry's Mission Olympic Cell (MOC) approved a 32-day camp for him under new coach Jai Chaudhary.

Chopra parted ways with Czech legend Jan Zelezny as his coach last week, deciding to partner with Chaudhary, who was his formative coach and trains javelin throwers in Panipat, which is the superstar's home town.

The 28-year-old will stay in Potchefstroom, a major training base for javelin throwers from across the world, till February 5 and the total sanctioned assistance for him stands at Rs

11.80 lakh, a source in the Sports Authority of India (SAI) told PTI.

Mission Olympic Cell, which decides on the financial and logistical assistance to elite athletes in the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), met here on Wednesday.

Chopra's support team at the training camp also includes his long-time physiotherapist Ishaan Marwaha.

"The focused training block is aimed at sharpening his physical conditioning, strength, and technical consistency ahead of marquee events lined up this year, including the Asian Games and the Commonwealth Games," the source said.

"According to the approved proposal, the financial assistance will cover his training camp expenses, local logistics, gym and training ground access, airport transfers, and out-of-pocket allowances," he



added. The affable Haryana-man was hampered by an adductor muscle niggle last year even though he managed to breach the long-awaited 90m mark in the Doha Diamond League. But a major disappointment for him was the eighth-place finish at the Tokyo World Championships in

September last after which he decided to take a break to address his fitness issues.

He was the defending champion in Tokyo but was in clear discomfort throughout the competition. Chopra is expected to begin his 2026 season at the Doha Diamond League in May.

**Other proposals:** A total of ₹1.40 crore was approved for proposals from athletes cutting across disciplines in the 167th meeting of the MOC.

"This includes Sachin Yadav's request for specialised javelin throw equipment at the Jawahar Lal Nehru Stadium in Delhi," the source

said. Yadav had hit the headlines with a fourth place finish at the World Championships last year, outperforming Chopra in his very first outing at the showpiece.

The MOC is next expected to meet in mid-February and according to well-placed sources, a rigorous review of the existing list of core and developmental group athletes would be undertaken at this meet. "The meeting on Wednesday was held online and though a review was to be done in this one itself but we decided that a review of athletes should be done in an in-person meeting.

So, that's why the February meeting would be significant," the source said. The number of core group athletes currently stands at 118, comprising 57 able-bodied and 61 para-athletes.

Real Madrid ousted from Copa del Rey

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Madrid

Alvaro Arbeloa got off to a dismal start as the new coach of Real Madrid, seeing his team lose to second-division club Albacete 3-2 and drop out of the Copa del Rey in the round of 16 on Wednesday.

Jefte Betancor scored the game-winning goal four minutes into stoppage time to send Albacete to the quarterfinals. Gonzalo Garcia had also scored in added time for Madrid to even the match at 2-2. Madrid struggled from the start in the debut of Arbeloa, the club's former B-team coach who on Monday was picked to replace Xabi Alonso following a tumultuous eight-month stint at the helm.

"At this club, even a draw is bad, a tragedy, imagine a defeat like this, especially against a lower-division opponent," Arbeloa said. "If anyone is responsible, it's me, as I'm the one who made the decisions regarding the lineup, how we wanted to play, and the substitutions. I can only thank the players for the welcome they gave me and help them recover physically and mentally." Arbeloa used a few B-team players as expected, but he drew some criticism for resting many of his top stars, including Kylian Mbappé, Jude Bellingham, Thibaut Courtois and Rodrygo. Vinicius Júnior



started, but was mostly ineffective as Madrid had difficulty creating scoring opportunities. Arbeloa said he had "no regrets" about his squad choice. "I was convinced that the squad was the right one," Arbeloa said. "It was a great team, the starting lineup and the bench. I have a very talented squad and it's not easy for them to do everything I've asked of them in just one day with a new coach. I feel ultimately responsible."

Veteran defender Dani Carvajal, who entered the game in the second half, said Madrid fans deserved an apology after the team's performance. "We are not going through our best moment," he said. "Everyone has to give a lot more." Albacete sits in 17th-place in the 22-team

second-division standings. It hadn't won in five consecutive games in all competitions. The hosts had gotten on the board first with Javier Villar scoring with a header off a corner kick in the 42nd and Franco Mastantuono equalised from close range three minutes into first-half stoppage time. Betancor put Albacete back in front in the 82nd with a shot from inside the area after the Madrid defense failed to fully clear a cross into the box.

"It's the greatest thing in football and it happened today," Betancor said. "I'm so happy for my team, everyone worked like crazy. I'm very, very happy."

Madrid was coming off a 3-2 loss to Barcelona in the final of the Spanish Super

Cup in Saudi Arabia. It trails Barcelona by four points at the halfway point in the Spanish league, and sits in seventh place in the league phase of the Champions League. Madrid's next match is at home on Saturday against Levante in the Spanish league.

Like Alonso, the 42-year-old Arbeloa played several years for Madrid. He has been with the club for 20 years, having coached many of its youth squads.

As a player, Arbeloa helped Madrid win eight titles from 2009-16, including two European Cups and one Spanish league. He also helped Spain win the 2010 World Cup and the 2008 and 2012 European Championships.

Pogba's World Cup dream fades as injuries take toll

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Monaco

Paul Pogba is still hoping to play at this year's World Cup, but it's not looking good for the former France star.

The 32-year-old midfielder, whose former clubs include Manchester United and Juventus, joined Monaco on a two-year contract last summer in a bid to relaunch a career derailed by injuries and a doping ban.

Pogba has been hampered by a left calf injury he sustained during training and which has kept him sidelined for a month.

That injury was the latest in a series of physical issues and Pogba has only played about 30 minutes since making his Monaco debut at the end of November. "The programme and the plan for Paul is not working the way we expected in the beginning," Monaco CEO Thiago Scuro said on Wednesday. "He is very disturbed by the fact that he is struggling ... (he wants) to be more available, to increase the minutes on the pitch."

Pogba wept when he signed his contract with Monaco, which has been underperforming this season and lags in ninth place in the Ligue 1 standings, already 17 points behind leader Lens.

**A shorter stay?** Scuro said he still hopes Pogba will return to competition and be able to make an impact soon, but



hinted at unspecified clauses in his contract that could lead to a shorter stay at the Riviera club. "If it does not work, for sure the parties can sit down in the summer and try to have another discussion, where do we go?" he said. "It's not the moment to have this discussion because we are engaged on trying to find the solution and bring him back."

In 2016, Pogba became the then-most expensive soccer player in history when he returned to United from Juventus for a fee of 105 million euros (then \$116 million).

**World Cup winner:** Pogba has played 91 times for France and scored 11 goals. He stood out among Europe's very best midfielders with an assured technique, strong physique and stamina, astute passing and an ability to fill a number of roles in midfield.

His last appearance for Les Bleus came nearly four years ago in a friendly match against South Africa, but a lingering knee injury ruled him out of the 2022 World Cup.

Tottenham signs Conor Gallagher, Paratici announces departure

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ London

Conor Gallagher returned to English soccer by signing for Tottenham from Atletico Madrid on Wednesday for a reported 40 million euros (\$46.5 million), in a move that could ignite his hopes of playing at the World Cup.

The 25-year-old midfielder left Chelsea for Tottenham in the summer of 2024, mainly to help his boyhood club comply with the Premier League's more strictly applied financial rules. He returns to the Premier League to one of Chelsea's fiercest rivals, Tottenham.

"I'm so happy and excited to be here, taking the next step in my career at an amazing club," Gallagher said. "I wanted to be a Spurs player and thankfully the club felt the same. It was very easy, it happened very quickly and I'm ready to get on the pitch."

Spurs did not reveal the length of his deal, but it is reportedly until 2031.



Also Wednesday, Tottenham said Fabio Paratici will leave his role as co-sporting director at the end of the winter transfer window.

Paratici returned to the team in October, 2½ years after his departure amid a false accounting trial at former club Juventus.

He will join Fiorentina in his native Italy on Feb. 2, saying in a Tottenham statement: "I have loved my time at the club, however this opportunity, together with the need to be based in my homeland, has led me to this decision."

**England ambitions:** If Gallagher impresses in the second half of the season, he could force his way into

England's World Cup plans. His last appearance for the national team was against Senegal in June. He wasn't in England coach Thomas Tuchel's squad for games in September, October and November, so is looking to impress the German ahead of the World Cup being held in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Tottenham moved for Gallagher — amid reported interest from fellow Premier League team Aston Villa — while it has big injury problems in its midfield. Rodrigo Bentancur recently joined a list of absentees already including James Maddison, Dejan Kulusevski and Mohammed Kudus.

"Conor is a top midfielder, who we have worked tirelessly to add to our squad," Spurs coach Thomas Frank said. "He is still young, so has plenty of room for improvement, but also has huge experience across the Premier League, La Liga and with the England national team."

Arsenal beats Chelsea 3-2 in English League Cup semifinals

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ London

Arsenal scored two goals off errors by goalkeeper Robert Sanchez to set up a 3-2 win at Chelsea in the first leg of the English League Cup semifinals on Wednesday.

A corner sailed over Sanchez in the seventh minute, allowing Ben White to head into an unguarded net, before the Spanish keeper let a low cross squirm through his grasp to gift Viktor Gyokeres a tap-in in the 49th.

Substitute Alejandro Garnacho pulled a goal back but Martin Zubimendi restored Arsenal's two-goal cushion by slotting home a finish in the 70th.

Garnacho's second goal — in the 83rd — gave Chelsea a lifeline ahead of the second leg on Feb. 3 at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium.

Still, Mikel Arteta's team is the favorite to advance to the March 22 final at Wembley Stadium in what is shaping up to be a banner season for the Gunners, who lead the



Premier League by six points and top the Champions League standings. Liam Rosenior, taking charge of his first home match as Chelsea's new coach, refused to criticize Sanchez for his mistakes. "I said to him before the game and I made this really clear — when my

players make mistakes, I'm accountable. That's on me," Rosenior said. "I'll stay positive with him, as I will all the group. My job is to help them, not to blame them."

**City ahead:** In the other semi-final matchup, Manchester City won 2-0 at Newcastle in the first leg on Tuesday. Their

second match is on Feb. 4. It means the most likely title match is City vs. Arsenal, the top two in the league. That would be a rematch of the 2018 final — the last one Arsenal reached in the League Cup — which City won 3-0.

**Rosenior's home debut:** Rosenior was hired last week on a 6-year deal and won in the FA Cup over the weekend. That was away, against a second-division opponent in Charlton Athletic, so this was Rosenior's first real test and Arsenal could have left Stamford Bridge in a commanding position.

Instead, Garnacho's late goal gives hope to Chelsea, which was without Reece James, Cole Palmer and Malo Gusto as they manage injuries and Moises Caicedo through suspension.

"I love the energy of my team, we kept going until the end," Rosenior said. "Frustrated with the manner we conceded the goals but a lot of positive aspects to the

performance considering the players we had out today."

White said Arsenal allowed Chelsea to apply pressure in the second half. "Not up to our standards really," he said.

**Set-piece kings:** Rosenior insisted Monday that Arsenal shouldn't be labeled as "Set Piece FC" — a reference to the team's prowess in dead-ball situations — but the opener came from that route.

Sanchez came for the ball that was swung in by Declan Rice but it flew over him, while Chelsea striker Joao Pedro inexplicably failed to jump and attempt to clear. It left White with a simple task to head home. That was Arsenal's 24th goal from a set piece in all competitions this season, according to the BBC, with 18 coming from corners.

That was a sloppy mistake by Sanchez, but his second was worse. White's ball across the face of the six-yard box should easily have been gathered by the goalkeeper but it went through his arms as he dived.

Bayern beats Cologne, sets record after smoke stops play in Bundesliga

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Munich

There was plenty of smoke, but Bayern Munich needed time to show some fire.

In a game held up for 10 minutes because flare smoke covered the field, 17-year-old Lennart Karl's fourth Bundesliga goal of a break-out season helped Bayern to a 3-1 win at Cologne in the Bundesliga on Wednesday.

With 17 games of 34 played, that meant Bayern matched the previous Bundesliga points record of 47 at the halfway stage set by



Pep Guardiola's Bayern of 2013-14 and surpassed it on goal difference, +53 to +35. Bayern's win restored its 11-point lead over second-place Borussia Dortmund.

Still, it wasn't the sort of spectacular dominance seen Sunday in Bayern's 8-1 win over Wolfsburg. Cologne fans' vast pyrotechnic display before kickoff produced thick

smoke which drifted over the field before the referee stopped the game in the fourth minute, leaving the players to kick the ball around while it cleared.

Cologne was fired up, too. Only quick reactions from Manuel Neuer stopped 19-year-old Said El Mala giving Cologne the lead on a quick break in the second minute.

Linton Maina put Cologne ahead in the 41st, snatching the ball off Serge Gnabry deep inside his own half and surging down the field to score a spectacular solo goal as Bayern's defense was slow

to react. Gnabry hit back a few minutes later with a different kind of special goal, a trick shot from a narrow angle which bounced off the ground and over the goalkeeper. After Bayern struggled to break down the Cologne defense, an intricate short corner routine did the trick, allowing Kim Min-jae to head his team ahead in the 71st. Karl's clinical first-time finish made it 3-1 in the 84th off a pass from Luis Diaz.

Leipzig back in action: Leipzig showed its set-piece skills as it made a belated start to 2026 with a 2-0 win over

Freiburg thanks to headers from Willi Orban and Romulo.

Leipzig's first game of the new year Saturday at St. Pauli was called off because of safety concerns over snow and ice at the stadium. It's in third place, 15 points off leader Bayern. Andrej Kramaric had a hat trick by halftime as Hoffenheim beat Borussia Muenchengladbach 5-1 to boost its hopes of Champions League qualification in fifth. Reeling from the 8-1 loss to Bayern, its worst in the Bundesliga, Wolfsburg responded with a 2-1 win over relegation-threatened St.

Sam Coffey joins City to bolster WSL title bid

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Manchester

United States midfielder Sam Coffey joined Manchester City from the Portland Thorns on Wednesday, signing a 3 1/2-year contract. The transfer fee was reportedly worth more than \$800,000.

Coffey, who won Olympic gold and the SheBelieves Cup with the US National team, was described by City as one of the best players in the world. "Sam is playing at the top of her game, and I think



her decision to come here shows the incredible progress we've made as a club and the ambitions we have moving forward," City director of football Therese Sjogran said.