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Drones are now claws in the sky, says IAF Chief AP Singh



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LAW & JUSTICE**

NEET paper leak: Lokhande sent to 6-day CBI custody



PAGE 11: BUSINESS
Crude oil futures rise amid fears of disruptions



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GLOBAL**

Ceasefire with Iran is a favour to Pak: Trump



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SPORTS**

Pollard fined for using abusive language for fourth umpire



Bhojshala complex a temple: HC

Relying on ASI report, HC bars Muslims from offering Friday prayers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
 ■ Indore

The Madhya Pradesh High Court on Friday held that the Bhojshala complex in Dhar is a temple dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, quashing a decades-old order of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) that allowed the Muslim community to offer Friday prayers at the site. The court said its decision was based on archaeological and historical evidence, the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) survey report, provisions of the ASI Act and references from the Ayodhya judgment.

The HC also directed the Union Government and the ASI to take a decision regarding the future management and administration of the complex. The HC said evidence related to a Saraswati temple and an ancient Sanskrit education centre had been found at the Bhojshala complex.

The Muslim side, which maintains that the structure is the Kamal Maula Mosque, said it would challenge the verdict in the Supreme Court. Dhar city Qazi Waqar Sadiq said the community respects the HC judgment but would review the order before approaching the SC. Senior advocates Salman Khurshid and Shobha Menon had represented the Muslim side during the hearing.



The pillars and other architectural parts at Bhojshala show they are re-cycled from a variety of buildings WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The Hindu side has already filed a caveat in the SC seeking that no order be passed on any appeal against the HC verdict without hearing them first. Advocate Preeti Jain, represent-

ing the Jain community, also said the Jain side would move the SC. During the hearing, it was argued that remnants of Jain Tirthankara idols linked to the site are currently housed in the British Museum and deserve proper restoration and recognition. Meanwhile, security has been tightened around the Bhojshala complex following the verdict. Barricades have been placed at the main gate and a heavy police force has been deployed in the area. Dhar SP Sachin Sharma said nearly 1,200 police personnel from across the district had been deployed and a 12-layer security arrangement had been put in place. Reserve Police Force and Rapid Action Force personnel have also been kept on alert.

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AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi criticised the verdict, saying it was not in line with constitutional principles. He alleged that, similar to the Babri Masjid case, the ruling favoured one community while affecting the worship rights of another. Owaisi also said such judgments weaken the Places of Worship Act and could encourage challenges to other religious sites.

CONTINUED ON >> P4



An employee operating a fuel dispensing unit at a petrol pump in New Delhi on Friday PANKAJ KUMAR

Prices of petrol, diesel raised by ₹3 a litre

RAJESH KUMAR ■ New Delhi

The Union Government on Friday hiked petrol and diesel prices by ₹3 per litre and CNG by ₹2 per Kg. In Delhi, petrol prices have increased to ₹97.77 per litre from ₹94.77, while diesel rates moved up to ₹90.67 per litre from ₹87.67. In Kolkata, the price of petrol climbed to ₹108.74 while Chennai saw it rise to ₹103.67 per litre. In Mumbai, petrol prices went up to ₹106.68 per litre.

Diesel prices also moved higher across major cities. Mumbai recorded diesel prices at ₹93.14 per litre after a ₹3.11 increase, Kolkata saw rates rise by the same amount to ₹95.13, while Chennai diesel

prices climbed ₹2.86 to ₹95.25 per litre. Additionally, prices of CNG in Delhi-NCR have gone up by ₹2 to ₹79.09 per kg. Earlier, Mahanagar Gas Limited had raised CNG prices by ₹2 in Mumbai region. What remains unclear, however, is whether this is a one-time increase or the beginning of a series of hikes.

The revision is the first in four years. While the immediate impact is visible at fuel stations, and economists say the real effect of rising fuel prices spreads much wider. Over time, it can influence food prices, transport costs, online deliveries and even monthly household spending.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

No trust in US; India our friend: Iran FM Araghchi

ASHOKE RAJ ■ New Delhi

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Friday said Tehran has no trust in the US and stressed that India remains a close and trusted partner of Iran, while addressing a special media briefing in New Delhi on the sidelines of the BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting.



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi addressing a press conference in New Delhi on Friday PTI

When asked whether Iran would support India in meeting its energy needs, Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi told *The Pioneer*, "Iran is ready to supply energy to India, if India is willing to receive it."

The Iranian foreign minister was speaking at a press conference at the Embassy of Iran in New Delhi, against the backdrop of images of the Strait of Hormuz and the Minab 168 exhibition, which commemorates the 168 schoolgirls Iran says were killed during the US-Israeli military strikes on Iran

CONTINUED ON >> P4

Paper setter arrested in NEET leak case

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH
 ■ New Delhi/Mumbai

A retired college professor from Maharashtra's Latur has emerged as the alleged source of the NEET-UG paper leak. Retired Professor PV Kulkarni of Dayanand Science College was arrested in Pune by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on Wednesday night.

Kulkarni, a former member of the NEET paper-setting panel, who



Accused, PV Kulkarni

also translated the chemistry section into Marathi, was brought to Delhi on

early Friday for further interrogation

According to the CBI, Kulkarni had authorised access to the question papers. With the help of another accused, Manisha Waghmare, who the CBI arrested on 14 May 2026, Kulkarni hosted a group of students at his residence in Pune the last week of April 2026, where he dictated the questions, along with their options and correct answers.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

NEET-UG TO BE RE-HELD ON MAY 12

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
 ■ New Delhi

The Union Government on Friday announced dates for the re-examination of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (Undergraduate) (NEET-UG) after it was cancelled on May 12 on allegations of paper leak. The re-test will be held on June 21, Sunday.



Education minister Dharmendra Pradhan in New Delhi PTI

Sources said the decision was taken at a high-level meeting at the Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's residence attended by senior officials of education ministry, National Testing Agency Director General Abhishek Singh, officials from CBSE and other important stakeholder of the examinations system.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

The Bystander



PIONEER IN SHORT

RUPEE HITS RECORD LOW, SLIDES PAST 96

The rupee plunged past the 96-per-dollar mark on Friday before recovering slightly to close at a record low of 95.81 against the US dollar, weighed down by soaring crude oil prices, inflation fears and a stronger greenback. The currency touched an intraday low of 96.14, marking a 50-paise fall from the previous close, before suspected RBI intervention limited losses. The rupee has weakened over 6 per cent this year and nearly 2 per cent in the last six trading sessions amid escalating Iran war risks that pushed Brent crude above \$109 a barrel. A firm dollar, buoyed by strong US retail sales and stable labour market data, further pressured emerging market currencies. Forex traders cited weak capital inflows, high domestic valuations and subdued foreign direct investment as additional concerns.

Gautam Adani pushes to settle US fraud case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
 ■ New Delhi

Industrialist Gautam Adani and nephew Sagar Adani facing charges of civil fraud in the US have agreed pay \$18 million as fine to settle the case, American media reported on Friday. Subject to the court's approval, the charges initiated by Department of Justice (DoJ) and Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) will be dropped.

Adani is accused in the US of defrauding investors. In November 2024, Adani, his



Gautam Adani FILE PHOTO

nephew Sagar Adani, Adani Group's Adani Green Energy and Adani's US firm Azure were caught by US Justice Department for bribing \$215 million dollar to Indian Government officials so his company could win approval to develop India's largest solar power plant.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

PM Modi supports peace in West Asia

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
 ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said India is prepared to extend "all possible support" to restore peace in West Asia, as he held wide-ranging talks with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. The two leaders also signed a series of strategic agreements covering energy, defence, infrastructure and advanced technology.

The UAE additionally announced investments worth \$5 billion in India, further strengthening economic ties between the two countries. PM Modi's visit to the UAE was the first leg of his five-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi PTI

nation tour that will also take him to the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Italy. The PM stayed in the Gulf nation for around two-and-a-half hours before departing for the Netherlands. Addressing concerns over

the escalating conflict in West Asia, the PM condemned recent attacks on the UAE and praised the Gulf nation's restrained response amid rising regional tensions.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

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CM pushes reforms, welfare delivery in review meeting

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Friday directed departments to focus on improving governance, accelerating welfare schemes and ensuring time-bound implementation of development projects across the state. Chairing a high-level review meeting of nodal departments at the Mantralaya in Bhopal, the Chief Minister said the government remains committed to improving the living standards of people and ensuring inclusive development under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Addressing senior officials, including Chief Secretary Anurag Jain, additional chief secretaries, principal secretaries and secretaries, Yadav said departments must identify their shortcomings and challenges and work proactively to resolve them. He stressed that districts and departments lagging in performance should make every possible effort to improve and contribute towards making Madhya Pradesh one of the country's leading states in all sectors.

One of the key issues discussed during the meeting was the implementation of the Swamitva Yojana in rural areas. The Chief Minister directed officials to run a campaign mode programme to ensure villagers receive the benefits of free property registration. He also instructed that, wherever possible, property registration under the scheme should be carried out in the names of women. According to him, the move

would strengthen women socially and economically while also promoting security of land ownership in rural areas.

Yadav further emphasised the need to simplify the process of declaring residential land in villages and directed collectors to complete the process with sensitivity and within fixed timelines. He said better land rights and infrastructure in villages could help reduce migration from rural areas to cities. The Chief Minister also suggested planned development of villages located near urban centres so that amenities such as schools, playgrounds, shops and community halls could be developed in an organised manner.

The review meeting also focused heavily on the Narmada Samagra Mission. Officials informed the Chief Minister that the process of creating a nodal department and special cell for the mission is underway. Yadav said local people at the gram panchayat level should be connected with the campaign and called the Narmada river the "lifeline" of Madhya Pradesh. He directed officials to preserve the origin points of major rivers, including the Narmada origin site at Amarkantak, while ensuring that excessive concrete construction is avoided in ecologically sensitive areas.

To monitor the progress of the mission, the Chief Minister instructed officials from all departments to hold review meetings on the first Monday of every month. He also asked authorities to ensure better arrangements for Narmada Parikrama pilgrims visiting religious sites along the river.

With summer intensifying across the state, Yadav reviewed drinking water arrangements in urban and rural areas and directed officials to conduct regular reviews at gram panchayat and ward levels. He called for public participation in water conservation activities and suggested launching a "Janmabhoomi se Karmabhoomi tak" campaign to encourage citizens to contribute towards improving their villages and localities. Officials from the Public Health Engineering, Urban Development and Rural Development departments informed the meeting that water supply and sewerage management works under the AMRUT-1 and AMRUT-2 schemes are progressing across the state.

The Chief Minister also announced that a joint meeting with the Uttar Pradesh government would be held for the integrated development of Chitrakoot Dham. He directed officials to ensure uninterrupted water flow in the Mandakini river and stressed the importance of promoting religious tourism under the "heritage to development" model. He also reviewed preparations related to Simhashta 2028 in Ujjain, including plans for a new 2,700-metre-long airstrip and airport. Officials informed him that land acquisition for the airport project is currently underway.

In the agriculture sector, Yadav announced a reduction in mandi fee for cotton-producing farmers in Khandwa and Burhanpur from Re 1 to 55 paise to bring it on par with neighbouring Maharashtra.

Neighbour kidnaps and kills 7-year-old girl during wedding

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Gwalior

A seven-year-old girl was allegedly kidnapped and murdered by a neighbour during a wedding function in Madhya Pradesh's Morena district. Police have arrested the accused, who allegedly killed the child to take revenge on her grandfather over a personal grudge.

The incident took place in Ramlal Ka Pura village under Chinnoni police station limits during a "bhat" ceremony at the house of the accused's sister. The victim, identified as Tanu, had attended the function along with her family.

According to police, the accused, Ramdeen Jatav (40), a resident of Itaura village in Kailaras area, suspected that his wife had an affair with Tanu's grandfather, Raghunath

Jatav. Investigators said the accused had developed deep resentment and wanted to "teach him a lesson".

Police said Ramdeen waited for an opportunity during the wedding celebrations. Between 3:30 am and 4 am, while everyone was asleep, he allegedly picked up the child and took her nearly 800 metres away to a deserted area.

Investigators said he tied the girl's hands with a cloth and then crushed her head with a stone. The blood-stained body was later dumped in a cave-like pit to hide the crime.

After committing the murder, the accused allegedly returned to the wedding venue and behaved normally, even pretending to help search for the missing child. The family discovered Tanu was missing in the morning, triggering panic in the village.



Security personnel patrolls at the barricaded historical Iqbal Maidan near Moli Masjid in wake of Muslim activists call for a protest against the assault of a Muslim Youth by Hindu organisation members in the name of love jihad, in Bhopal on Friday.

Harsha Richhariya alleges attempts to stop her discourse

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Ujjain

Former model-turned-sadhvi Harsha Richhariya, now known as Harshanand Giri, has once again come into the spotlight after alleging that some saints attempted to stop her religious discourse and reduce her speaking time during a seven-day spiritual event near Ujjain.

The controversy surfaced during the concluding ceremony of a Devi Pravachan programme held at Lakshimpura village, around 22 km from Ujjain, where Harshanand Giri delivered religious discourses as part of a 108-kundiya yajna organised from May 8.

Addressing devotees from the stage on Thursday, Harshanand Giri claimed that efforts had been made over the

past two to three days to stop her from continuing the discourse programme. She, however, said she remained firm because of the blessings of Goddess Bhagwati.

"Whoever has the blessings of Maa Bhagwati cannot be stopped. No force has the power to stop the path of dharma," she said during her address.

In a video released after the event, Harshanand Giri reiterated the allegations and claimed that the initial three days of the programme proceeded normally. However, she alleged that after the number of devotees, especially women, started increasing, her discourse duration began to be reduced from the fourth day onward.

According to her, some saints

were uncomfortable with the growing popularity of her sermons and did not want her sessions to continue for longer durations. She claimed that despite the opposition, organisers had to expand the pandal twice to accommodate the rising crowd of devotees.

Harshanand Giri described the increasing participation of women and devotees as a reflection of the blessings of Goddess Bhagwati and support for "nari shakti".

The event also drew attention due to activities organised during the concluding ceremony. Members of Karni Sena distributed swords to young women during the programme. Organisers had reportedly planned to distribute 101 swords, but due to limited availability, Harshanand

Giri handed over swords to 11 girls from the stage.

Before the distribution ceremony, she administered an oath to young women, urging them to remain alert against "love jihad", stay committed to family values and Sanatan traditions, and learn skills such as sword fighting, horse riding and weapons training.

Harshanand Giri formally embraced sanyas nearly a month ago at Mauni Teerth Ashram in Ujjain under the guidance of Mahamandaleshwar Swami Sumanand Giri Maharaj of the Panchayati Niranjani Akhara. Following her initiation into sanyas, she adopted the name "Swami Harshanand Giri" and has since been actively delivering spiritual discourses.

FIR registered against HUS president

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

TT Nagar police in Bhopal have registered an FIR against Sanskriti Bachao Manch and Hindu Utsav Samiti president Chandrashekhar Tiwari for allegedly spreading objectionable content on social media that could disturb communal harmony.

According to police, Tiwari had recently shared a video questioning the functioning of Bhopal city Qazi Mushtaq Ali Nadvi. The post allegedly created tension between two communities.

The controversy surfaced after a video of a clash between Bajrang Dal workers and a Muslim youth in Govindpura area went viral.



Hindu devotees celebrate after the Madhya Pradesh High Court declared the Bhojshala premises a temple and upheld the right of Hindus to worship at the site, in Dhar, Madhya Pradesh on Friday.

MP among top states in PM Awas Yojana implementation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has said that Madhya Pradesh has emerged as one of the leading states in the country in the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban), achieving significant progress in providing permanent housing to economically weaker urban families.

The Chief Minister said the state government is committed to fulfilling the vision of ensuring a pucca house for every needy family and has achieved remarkable success in the execution of the housing scheme. More than 10 lakh houses have been sanctioned in Madhya Pradesh under the urban housing scheme, strengthening the state's position among the top-performing states in the country in terms of housing construction and beneficiary support.

Urban Development and Housing Commissioner Sanket Bhandve said Madhya Pradesh has secured the first position in the country in terms of "grounding" of houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban). He said 98.04 percent of the sanctioned houses in the state have completed the grounding stage, reflecting effective implementation, continuous monitoring and time-bound execution of projects.

According to officials, construction of more than 9 lakh houses has already been completed and handed over to eligible beneficiaries across the state. Thousands of urban families have now realised their dream of owning a permanent house through the scheme, leading to improvements in their standard of living, social security and dignity.

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) aims to provide

safe and affordable housing to economically weaker sections, lower-income groups and middle-income urban families. Under the scheme, eligible beneficiaries receive financial assistance for house construction so they can live in permanent homes equipped with basic civic amenities.

Officials said the Madhya Pradesh government's consistent performance at the national level has been driven by effective project monitoring, coordinated implementation and timely completion of construction work. The Urban Development and Housing Department is ensuring that every eligible urban family receives the benefits of the housing scheme without unnecessary delays.

Apart from accelerating housing construction, the scheme has also contributed to the development of urban infrastructure, employment generation and socio-economic empowerment in cities and towns across the state.

Officials said the large-scale housing projects have created work opportunities in construction and related sectors while improving access to better living conditions for beneficiaries.

The state government has reiterated that efforts will continue to ensure quality implementation of the scheme in the coming years so that more urban families can benefit from affordable housing and improved civic infrastructure.

With over 10 lakh houses sanctioned and more than 9 lakh completed, Madhya Pradesh has emerged as one of the strongest performers in the country under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban), showcasing the state's expanding focus on inclusive urban development and welfare-oriented governance.

AI fake photos linked to Class 11 student suicide, alleges family

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

A 17-year-old Class 11 student allegedly died by suicide by hanging herself at her home in Ashoka Garden area of Bhopal on Thursday night. The family has accused two youths of harassing and blackmailing her by threatening to circulate AI-generated obscene images on social media.

The incident triggered protests on Friday, with family members staging a demonstration outside Ashoka Garden police station and demanding immediate action against the accused.

Ashoka Garden TI Sandeep Pawar said no suicide note was recovered from the spot. Statements of family members are being recorded and further action will be taken based on the findings of the investigation.

According to police and family members, the teenager lived with her family in the Ashoka Garden area. Her father runs a garment shop in Bittan Market. She was the eldest daughter in the family.

Relatives alleged that a youth from the Chhola area

and his associate had been harassing the student for a long time. The girl's uncle claimed that the accused downloaded her photographs from social media and used artificial intelligence tools to create obscene edited images.

The family alleged that the accused threatened to make the images viral and defame the girl, while also pressuring her to meet them. They further claimed the youths stalked her while she travelled to and from school.

According to the family, the girl had never met the accused in person and the images were digitally manipulated using photographs taken from her social media accounts.

The family also alleged that the accused had misbehaved with the girl's father earlier, but no police complaint was filed at the time due to fear of social stigma and defamation. Relatives said the girl appeared normal on Thursday night. She reportedly sent her younger sister out to buy some items and allegedly hanged herself using a dupatta in her room during that time.

Monsoon likely in MP next month

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

The southwest monsoon is likely to enter Madhya Pradesh between June 10 and 16, according to the Meteorological Department. Officials said the monsoon is expected to reach Kerala around May 26 before advancing towards central India. In Madhya Pradesh, it may enter through the western districts of Khandwa, Khargone, Barwani and Burhanpur.

The weather department has predicted normal rainfall across most parts of the state this season, with an average rainfall of 30 to 32 inches expected. Bhopal, Vidisha and Sehore may receive above-normal rainfall, while divisions including Indore, Ujjain, Gwalior, Chambal, Jabalpur, Rewa, Shahdol and Sagar are likely to receive normal or below-normal rainfall.

Meanwhile, weather conditions have already started changing across the state. Katni witnessed strong winds and hailstorm on Friday evening.

Rajkumar Khatri leads surprise cleanliness drive in Katara

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Sagar

Sagar Municipal Commissioner and Executive Director of Sagar Smart City Rajkumar Khatri conducted a surprise late-night inspection of Katara Market on Thursday and called upon citizens and civic workers to work together to make Sagar the number one city in cleanliness under the Swachh Bharat Mission and Swachh Survekshan.

Addressing people gathered during the inspection around 10 pm, Khatri said that no aspect of sanitation should be ignored and maintaining cleanliness was a collective responsibility of both the municipal corporation and residents. Accompanied by a team of sanitation workers, Khatri inspected the Teenbatti and Katara Market areas and closely reviewed cleanliness arrangements. He checked food stalls, chaat vendors, sugarcane juice sellers and ice cream parlours operating near the municipal school.

Garbage and unhygienic conditions found around several shops prompted immediate action, with shopkeepers being directed to clean the areas

themselves. Waste was collected in dustbins and loaded into municipal garbage vehicles on the spot.

Civic officials also imposed fines to prevent repeat violations and encourage better sanitation practices.

The municipal corporation collected a total fine of Rs 6,500 from nine traders and shopkeepers for littering and poor cleanliness around their establishments. Khatri also launched an action under the "Kachra Khud Bolega Main Kiska Hoon" campaign, under which waste dumped outside closed shops was inspected to identify the persons responsible for littering.

He appealed to traders not to throw garbage on roads or into drains, stating that blocked drains and roadside waste create inconvenience for citizens and negatively impact the city's cleanliness ranking. Khatri said road sweeping in commercial areas is being carried out multiple times daily and door-to-door garbage collection vehicles are regularly visiting shops. He urged residents to report sanitation-related problems through the Swachhta App or directly to the municipal corporation.

RGPV gets new Vice-Chancellor

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Governor Mangubhai Patel has appointed Prof Alok Sharma, Director of the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITM), Gwalior, as the new Vice-Chancellor of Rajiv Gandhi Pradyogiki Vishwavidyalaya (RGPV). The appointment has been made for a term of four years.

Along with the appointment of the new Vice-Chancellor, the Madhya Pradesh government has also appointed two new members to the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights. Sonam Ninama and advocate Archana Gupta have been named members of the commission.

Earlier, Dr Nivedita Sharma had already been appointed as the chairperson of the commission. With the latest appointments, the commission will now function with a full panel comprising one chairperson and two members. Officials said the appointments are expected to strengthen the functioning of the commission and improve work related to child rights protection, child safety and child welfare across the state.

CM Mohan Yadav hails Bhojshala verdict, seeks social harmony

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Friday welcomed the court verdict in the decades-old Bhojshala dispute in Dhar district and said the judgment had acknowledged the historical and cultural identity of the site associated with Maa Vagdevi and Raja Bhoj.

Reacting to the decision, the Chief Minister said the court had recognised that the site originally belonged to Bhojshala, where Raja Bhoj had established its importance through the worship of Maa Vagdevi. He termed the verdict an important moment for the cultural and spiritual heritage of Madhya Pradesh.

Speaking to media persons, Mohan Yadav said the state government would also make efforts through legal and constitutional means to bring back the idol of Goddess Vagdevi from abroad. He said restoring the idol at its original place would help revive the historical glory and spiritual significance of Bhojshala.

The Chief Minister congratulated the people of the state on the verdict and appealed

to citizens to maintain peace and social harmony while respecting the court's decision. He said India had already witnessed an example of communal harmony and democratic maturity after the Ayodhya temple verdict, and Madhya Pradesh now had an opportunity to set a similar example through mutual understanding and brotherhood.

Mohan Yadav said court decisions related to matters of faith and heritage should be accepted with dignity and responsibility so that they become a medium for social unity rather than conflict. He added that peaceful acceptance of the judgment would strengthen communal harmony in the state.

The Chief Minister also expressed confidence that continuous efforts would be made in the future to preserve and enhance the grandeur, heritage and cultural importance of Bhojshala. He said the state government remains committed to protecting historical and religious sites linked to the rich legacy of Madhya Pradesh.



Madhya Pradesh targets major horticulture expansion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has said that the Madhya Pradesh government is observing 2026 as "Krishak Kalyan Varsh" (Farmer Welfare Year) with a special focus on strengthening agriculture and allied sectors across the state. As part of the initiative, the government has prepared a comprehensive action plan aimed at increasing farmers' income by promoting horticulture cultivation alongside traditional farming practices.

Giving priority to horticulture expansion during the Agriculture Year, the state government has set a target to bring an additional 1 lakh 32 thousand 147 hectares under horticulture cultivation in Madhya Pradesh. The initiative is aimed at encouraging farmers to adopt high-value crops and diversify their

agricultural activities to ensure better and more stable earnings.

According to the action plan prepared by the Department of Horticulture and Food Processing, the proposed expansion includes fruit cultivation across 18 thousand hectares, vegetables across 54 thousand hectares, spice crops across 56 thousand hectares, floriculture across 3 thousand 500 hectares, medicinal crops across 600 hectares and protected cultivation across 47 hectares.

The government believes that horticulture has emerged as a strong alternative for improving the economic condition of farmers in the changing agricultural landscape. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said the concept of Krishak Kalyan Varsh should not remain limited to conventional farming alone, but should also integrate sectors

such as animal husbandry, fisheries, dairy production and horticulture into the mainstream rural economy.

He said the state government is working towards making agriculture multidimensional so that farmers can have income opportunities throughout the year rather than depending only on seasonal crops. In this direction, the Horticulture Department is extending support to farmers through various schemes related to quality planting material, advanced technical training, drip and sprinkler irrigation systems, polyhouses, shade-net facilities and food processing units.

The horticulture sector in Madhya Pradesh has recorded consistent growth in recent years, reflecting increasing farmer participation and the adoption of modern agricultural technologies. Official figures show

that the total area under horticulture crops in the state, which stood at 25 lakh 96 thousand 793 hectares in 2022-23, has increased to 28 lakh 60 thousand 952 hectares in 2025-26.

Similarly, horticulture production in the state has also witnessed substantial growth. Compared to 2022-23, the production of horticulture crops in 2025-26 has increased by nearly 37 lakh 68 thousand 200 metric tonnes. Officials attribute this growth to improved awareness among farmers, better irrigation facilities, use of scientific farming techniques and effective implementation of government schemes.

Agriculture experts believe Madhya Pradesh's geographical diversity and favourable climatic conditions make it highly suitable for horticulture development. Regions such as Malwa, Nimar, Bundelkhand, Mahakaushal and Chambal

have seen rapid growth in the cultivation of fruit, vegetable and spice crops.

Farmers in different parts of the state are increasingly shifting towards crops such as mango, orange, guava, papaya, tomato, onion, garlic, coriander and chilli, which are considered more profitable compared to traditional crops. Experts say horticulture offers better returns per hectare and also generates employment opportunities in rural areas through processing, packaging and transportation activities.

The coordinated implementation of Central and State Government schemes is also strengthening the horticulture-based agricultural model in Madhya Pradesh. The government is making efforts to improve farmers' access to markets, food processing facilities and export opportunities so that they can secure better prices for their produce.



Chief Minister Mohan Yadav inspects the ongoing construction works in view of Simhastha: 2028 at Ramghat in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh on Friday. Pioneer photo



Players in action during a hockey match played between Australia and India Men's U-18 teams at the Udhav Das Mehta (Bhai Ji) SAI Central Centre, in Bhopal on Friday. Pioneer photo

Retired judge, son booked in Twisha suicide case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Police have registered an FIR against retired judge Giribala Singh and her son Samarth Singh in connection with the suicide of 31-year-old Twisha Sharma in Bhopal's Katara Hills area. The case has been filed under charges including murder and harassment for dowry.

ACP Rajneesh Kashyap Kaul said police teams have been formed to trace the accused and raids are being conducted at their residence and other possible hideouts.

Twisha Sharma allegedly died by suicide on the night of May 12 after hanging herself at her matrimonial home in Katara Hills. Her family has

accused her husband and in-laws of mentally harassing her for dowry.

According to the family, injury marks and blue bruises were found on her hands and ears after her death, raising suspicion over the circumstances leading to the incident.

Twisha was originally from Noida and had married Samarth Singh around a year ago. Her brother Harshit Sharma is a Major in the Indian Army.

Family members had reached Katara Hills police station on Wednesday night demanding immediate action against the husband and in-laws. They alleged that police did not listen to them and even closed the main gate of

the police station.

Police, however, maintained that officers were busy recording statements and conducting preliminary investigation at the time. They said legal action could only be initiated after the postmortem report and statements were received.

On Thursday, Twisha's relatives and acquaintances again gathered outside the women's police station carrying placards and demanding strict action against the accused.

The family has accused Samarth Singh of murdering Twisha and attempting to destroy evidence.

Her brother Major Harshit Sharma alleged that family members remained outside the police station until around

midnight on Wednesday, but no police official came forward to speak to them.

The family further alleged that Samarth Singh, who is a lawyer, and his mother, a retired district judge, were using their influence to avoid police action.

Twisha's family had refused to perform her last rites until an FIR was registered in the matter. Following the registration of the case against her husband and mother-in-law, the funeral is now likely to take place on Friday.

The incident has sparked outrage in the city, with relatives alleging prolonged mental harassment and demanding a fair and impartial investigation into the death of the pregnant woman.

Youth arrested for abetting minor girl's suicide

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Balaghat

Hata police in Madhya Pradesh's Balaghat district have arrested a two-year-old youth nearly two-and-a-half months after a minor girl allegedly died by suicide due to mental harassment by him.

The accused has been identified as Rohit Chamalate, son of Ashok Chamalate, a resident of Saletaka village. He was arrested on Friday and later produced before a court, which sent him to judicial custody.

According to police, the accused and the minor girl knew each other and were in regular contact. Rohit allegedly wanted to marry the girl, but the proposal could not materialise because she was a minor. Police said the accused continued to pressure and mentally harass her after that.

Investigators said the girl and the accused had another dispute on February 22, following which the minor allegedly wrote a suicide note and hanged herself at her house.

Hata police station in-charge Avinash Rathore said the girl's death was initially investigated as a suicide case. During the probe, police found that the accused remained in frequent contact with the victim over phone calls and had allegedly been mentally harassing her for a long time.

Police said the suicide note recovered from the spot mentioned harassment by the accused. The note was later sent for handwriting examination, and experts confirmed that the handwriting matched that of the deceased minor.

Fuel price hike hits household budgets, residents express concern

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

The recent increase of Rs 3 per litre in petrol and diesel prices across the country has triggered concern among residents in Madhya Pradesh, with people in Bhopal saying the hike will directly affect household budgets, transport expenses and the prices of essential commodities.

Following the revision, petrol prices in Bhopal have increased from Rs 106.68 per litre to Rs 109.71 per litre, while diesel prices have risen from Rs 91.87 to Rs 94.88 per litre. Similar increases have been recorded in other major cities of the state, including Ujjain, Jabalpur and Gwalior.

The impact of the fuel price hike is already being felt among daily commuters,

transport workers and small business owners in the state capital. Many residents said the increase would put additional pressure on families already dealing with rising inflation and expensive daily necessities.

Sunil, an auto driver from Shivaji Nagar, said the rise in fuel prices has become a major concern for transport workers whose livelihoods depend entirely on daily earnings.

"Auto drivers, taxi operators and transport workers say the hike in fuel prices is reducing their daily earnings. Many worry that higher operating costs will make it difficult to support their families," he said.

According to transport workers, the increase in petrol and diesel prices affects not only fuel expenses

but also maintenance costs and passenger demand. Several auto drivers said they may eventually be forced to increase fares if fuel prices continue to rise.

Shopkeepers and small traders also expressed concern over the likely impact on transportation and delivery costs. JP Sharma, a shopkeeper from Ayodhya Nagar, said rising fuel prices eventually affect the prices of almost every commodity in the market.

"Shopkeepers and small business owners believe that higher transportation and delivery charges will eventually increase the prices of everyday goods, affecting both businesses and consumers," Sharma said.

Business owners said that increased freight and supply costs could lead to higher

prices of vegetables, groceries, milk and other daily-use items in the coming weeks. Many fear that the burden will ultimately fall on consumers, especially middle-class and lower-income families.

Office-goers and salaried employees have also started feeling the pressure of increased travel expenses. Hemant Ratore, a banker from MP Nagar, said daily commuting costs are steadily rising and becoming difficult to manage.

"Daily commuting is becoming increasingly expensive, and the fuel price hike is putting additional pressure on regular travel expenses," he said.

Residents said the impact of rising fuel prices goes beyond vehicle owners and directly affects the overall

cost of living. Many people in Bhopal expressed frustration, saying they are now being forced to plan their travel more carefully and reduce unnecessary trips to manage expenses.

Several citizens also pointed out that whenever petrol and diesel prices rise, transportation costs increase across sectors, leading to inflation in food items, public transport and essential services. They said the burden of fuel inflation is felt most by poor and middle-class families who have limited financial flexibility.

With fuel prices continuing to remain high, residents in the city are hoping for relief measures that could reduce the pressure on household budgets and ease the impact of rising transportation costs.

Summer camp warden arrested for molestation of minor girl

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Indore

A warden at a summer camp in Indore has been arrested for allegedly molesting a 13-year-old girl staying at the hostel during the camp. The incident came to light after the minor informed her family about the alleged misconduct, leading to protests at the campus late on Thursday night.

Rajendra Nagar police have registered a case against the accused, identified as Vinod Sharma, under charges of molestation and relevant sections of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

According to police, the victim had come from Ratlam along with her younger sister to participate in the summer camp, which has been running since May 3. Around 18 girls and 36 boys were staying at separate hostel facilities arranged for the camp.

Rajendra Nagar TI Yashwant Badole said the incident allegedly took place on the

evening of May 13 when the girl went towards the boys' hostel carrying a water bottle after water ran out in the girls' hostel area. Police said the warden allegedly behaved inappropriately with her during that time.

The matter surfaced after the victim later informed her mother about the incident over phone. During discussions among hostel students, some other girls also reportedly complained about the conduct of the warden.

After receiving the information, relatives of the student along with activists associated with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) reached the campus, leading to a tense situation late at night.

Police teams, including women police personnel, immediately reached the hostel and questioned the victim, staff members and camp authorities. According to police, the accused warden fled from the campus before officers arrived. However, he was traced and arrested on Friday morning.

BJP leader among four booked in Morena honey-trap case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Gwalior

A furniture trader from Jaura town in Morena district was allegedly trapped in a honey-trap scheme and blackmailed for Rs 10 lakh by a gang led by a woman who identified herself as a social worker and BJP leader, police said.

Following a complaint filed by the trader, Jaura police registered a case and arrested two male accused, while two women accused, including the alleged mastermind Sonam Kushwah, remain

absconding.

According to police, the complainant, Ramesh alias Pappu Shivhare, a furniture businessman from Ward No. 3 in Jaura, alleged that Sonam Kushwah, along with her associate Meera Kushwah and two male accomplices Gajendra Kushwah and Sachin Kushwah, conspired to trap and extort money from him.

The trader stated that he first came in contact with Sonam Kushwah around three months ago during a community programme held at Shivhare Dharamshala. During the meeting, she allegedly

took his mobile number and shared her own contact number, asking him to answer whenever she called.

According to the complaint, on May 10 Sonam Kushwah called the trader and asked him to come near a school lane close to Manish Petrol Pump, claiming that furniture and air-conditioners were required at a property and requesting him to inspect the site.

The trader alleged that when he reached the location around 7:30 pm, Sonam Kushwah and another woman identified as Meera were already waiting

there in a vehicle. He claimed that after he entered the house, the women overpowered him and shortly afterwards Sachin and Gajendra arrived at the spot in an auto-rickshaw.

The complainant alleged that the four accused forcibly removed his clothes, recorded a video and threatened to make it viral unless he paid Rs 10 lakh. He further alleged that the accused also took away his gold ring and some cash before letting him go. Shocked by the incident, the trader approached Jaura police station and lodged a complaint on May 11, following which a case was registered.

MP Mandi Board meetings now online

Bhopal: Following the appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, the Madhya Pradesh State Agricultural Marketing Board (Mandi Board) has decided to conduct all meetings in online mode.

Managing Director Kumar Purushottam has directed officials to suspend physical meetings and connect officers from remote regions through video conferencing. Departmental inquiries, complaint hearings and official proceedings will also now be conducted online.

Vehicle rallies by BJP leaders trigger political storm in MP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhopal

Several BJP leaders in Madhya Pradesh have come under criticism after organising large vehicle rallies and convoys, despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently urging citizens and party workers to reduce fuel consumption amid global uncertainties and rising concerns linked to the West Asia situation.

The controversy intensified after videos and photographs of massive political processions involving dozens, and in some cases hundreds, of vehicles surfaced from different parts of the state. Opposition parties have accused BJP leaders of ignoring the Prime Minister's public appeal for austerity and fuel conservation.

The latest controversy erupted after newly appointed Madhya Pradesh Textbook

Corporation chairman Saubhagya Singh Thakur travelled from Ujjain to Bhopal in a convoy comprising nearly 50 SUVs and supporter vehicles. The convoy, decorated with flowers and party flags, reportedly stopped multiple times on the way as supporters welcomed the BJP leader at different locations.

Videos of the procession quickly went viral on social media, triggering sharp reactions from political opponents and raising questions about the message being sent by ruling party leaders at a time when citizens are being advised to avoid unnecessary fuel consumption.

The issue gained more traction because just days earlier, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had appealed to people to adopt fuel-saving measures. During a public address, Modi urged citizens to reduce the use of petrol and diesel,

promote carpooling, use public transport wherever possible and continue practices like virtual meetings and work-from-home that became common during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Opposition leaders alleged that BJP functionaries themselves were violating the spirit of the Prime Minister's message by holding extravagant rallies and displaying political strength through long convoys. Congress leaders accused the BJP of practising "double standards" and said austerity should begin with those in power.

The controversy further escalated after another BJP leader in Bhind district reportedly organised a rally involving hundreds of vehicles. Following criticism and internal backlash, the BJP removed district Kisan Morcha president Saijan Singh Yadav from his post. Party sources said the action

was taken because the rally went against the leadership's appeal for restraint and austerity.

Political observers believe the incidents have put the BJP in an uncomfortable position, especially because the Prime Minister's remarks on fuel conservation were widely publicised and projected as part of a larger national effort to reduce unnecessary expenditure and energy use.

Meanwhile, BJP leaders have defended the gatherings, saying enthusiastic supporters voluntarily joined the processions to welcome newly appointed office-bearers and celebrate organisational appointments. Some leaders argued that such rallies are a part of political culture and public mobilisation.

However, the optics of large convoys at a time when common citizens are being urged to conserve fuel have

continued to dominate political discussions in Madhya Pradesh.

The incidents have also sparked debate on social media, with users questioning whether political parties should enforce stricter guidelines on public events and vehicle rallies, particularly when appeals for austerity are being made at the national level.

The issue has once again highlighted the growing culture of political showmanship in Madhya Pradesh, where large convoys and celebratory rallies are often organised to display influence and organisational strength after appointments or political victories. Critics say such events not only contradict public appeals for fuel conservation but also create traffic disruption, increase pollution and send the wrong message at a time when citizens are dealing with rising fuel prices and economic pressures.

Name of Account / Borrower / Guarantor		Demand notice Dt. / Possession Date	Amount Outstanding	Description of Property
Canara Bank, Bairagarh Chichli Branch				
M/s. Santosh Vishwakarma		21.02.2026	₹ 2,45,158/- + Interest & Other Charges	EWS Flat No. 20/203 Gaurav Nagar, Bairagarh Chichli, Kolar Road Tehsil Huzur Distt Bhopal (Developed By M.P. Housing Board & I.D.B Bhopal) Boundaries: East: Compound No. -19/202, West: Flat No. -20/202, North: Block Wall, South: Flat No. -20/204
S/o Balmukund Vishwakarma (Borrower) and Smt. Rajni Vishwakarma W/o Santosh Vishwakarma (Guarantor)		12.05.2026		
Date & Place : Bhopal, 12.05.2026 Authorised Officer, Canara Bank				

Name of Account / Borrower / Guarantor		Description of Property	Amount outstanding as per 12.01.2026
Borrower: M/s Tiwari Enterprises Prop. Mrs. Sapna Tiwari W/o Anoop Tiwari Guarantor: Mr. Anoop Tiwari S/o Mr. Shiv Bodhanlal Tiwari Address 1-Flat No. 76 G-1, Geet Mohini Parisar, J.K. Road, Durgesh Vihar Bhopal 462041. Address 2-Flat No 1-9/406, 4th Floor Gharonda Barral Awslay Yojna Katara Hills Bhopal 462001		Equitable Mortgage of Flat No L-9/406, Block No L-9, Gharonda Barral, Ward No 85, Tehsil Huzur Bhopal measuring 550.37 Sq ft, belonging to Mr. Anoop Tiwari S/o Mr. Shiv Bodhanlal Tiwari & Mrs. Sapna Tiwari W/o Mr. Anoop Tiwari. Boundaries: North-Flat No 407, South, Flat No 405, East- Open Road, West- Open Road	₹ 12,48,315.56/- interest & other charges
Date : 11-05-2026, Place : Bhopal Authorised Officer, Bank of Baroda			



IN FOCUS



People at a stall during the 3rd annual exhibition-cum-sale of Ratnagiri Alphonso mangoes in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

Governance institutions must reinvent themselves: Jitendra

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

Union minister Jitendra Singh on Friday said that administrative training and governance institutions across the country must reinvent themselves and shun stereotype models to remain relevant.

Addressing the concluding session of the National Departmental Summit on "Institutionalising Capacity Building: From Training to Performance-Linked Governance" through virtual mode, he said Mission Karmayogi is steadily moving towards an AI-integrated governance framework linking capacity building, competency development, technology and



public service delivery. The National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building (NPCSCB), popularly known as the Mission Karmayogi, aims to create a competent civil service rooted in the Indian ethos, with a shared understanding of the country's priorities, working in harmony for an effective and efficient public service delivery. Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel, said governance reforms today require transparency, time-line discipline, ease of procedures and optimum use of technology supported

by innovation and human sensitivity.

Referring to governance reforms undertaken in recent years, he said annual grievances received on the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) portal have increased from nearly two lakh in 2014 to more than 25-30 lakh presently, reflecting growing public trust due to improved responsiveness and accountability. Singh also referred to the success of Digital Life Certificates, noting that nearly 10-11 crore certificates have already been generated, enabling pensioners to complete formalities digitally without physical visits.

Totally false: PM Modi on reports of Govt planning to levy tax on foreign travel

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday dismissed reports that the government is considering levying a tax or a cess or a surcharge on foreign travel as "totally false".

The prime minister said this in response to a new report suggesting that the government is considering levying a tax or a cess or a surcharge on foreign travel but no final decision has been taken yet.

"This is totally false. Not an iota of truth in this. There is no question of putting such restrictions on foreign travel. We remain committed to improving 'Ease of Doing Business' and 'Ease of Living' for our people," Modi said in



a post on X. It is rare that the prime minister himself has denied a media report.

The report, quoting sources, claimed that the proposal to levy a cess or a tax or a surcharge on foreign travel is being discussed at the highest levels.

Maharashtra Govt mandates marathi for revenue hearings

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Mumbai

The Maharashtra Government on Friday made the use of Marathi mandatory in hearings as well as in all orders passed by authorities in quasi-judicial proceedings in the revenue department.

Revenue Minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule announced a new standard operating procedure (SoP) for these proceedings.

Authorities issued a 29-page Government resolution laying down procedures for handling quasi-judicial cases filed before revenue officers.

"Under the guidance of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, we intend to make the revenue administration more citizen-centric and dynamic," Bawankule said.

The Government considered earlier directives, recommendations from divisional commissioners, field-level instructions and observations of the Bombay High Court and the Supreme Court while



framing the revised procedures for quasi-judicial functioning, he said.

The new SoP also makes it mandatory for all revenue officers to conduct hearings at least twice a week, preferably on Tuesdays and Fridays, while adjournments will be allowed only once and only for valid reasons.

All interim and final orders will have to be uploaded on the 'e-QJ Court' system and issued only with digital signatures. No order can be passed without hearing both parties and recording proper reasoning. Speaking orders should be issued within a maximum period of eight weeks.

NDMC hands out compassionate jobs, health cards to staff

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Friday distributed appointment letters to 109 people appointed on compassionate grounds and issued medical health cards to 878 contractual employees of the New Delhi Municipal Council. She described the measures as part of the Government's effort to build a more sensitive and transparent administration.

The programme was organised by the NDMC at the NDCC Convention Centre on Jai Singh Road. Delhi Minister Parvesh Sahib Singh, New Delhi MP Bansuri Swaraj, NDMC Chairperson Keshav Chandra, Vice Chairperson Kuljeet Singh Chahal, and other council members attended the event.

Addressing employees and officials, the Chief Minister said the NDMC was not merely a civic institution but a support system for thousands of workers and families serving the nation-



Capital. She said employees working in the NDMC area contributed directly to the image and functioning of Delhi as the country's administrative centre.

The Chief Minister said the compassionate appointments had brought financial and emotional support to 109 families of deceased employees. She added that the initiative was not only about providing jobs, but also about ensuring long-

term stability for affected families. The Chief Minister noted that nearly 90 women were among those who received appointment letters. She expressed confidence that the new recruits would work with dedication in strengthening the vision of a developed Delhi and a developed India.

The Chief Minister said rising medical costs often place severe financial pressure on families and added

that the health cards would provide relief and security during emergencies. Referring to the broader governance approach of the Government, the Chief Minister said the administration was working on the principle of inclusive development and aimed to ensure that employees and citizens received services with dignity and fairness.

Delhi Minister Parvesh Sahib Singh said the initiatives reflected the Government's responsibility towards workers and their families. He said dependents of deceased employees had received an opportunity for financial stability, while contractual employees would no longer have to worry about arranging large amounts of money during medical emergencies.

Singh also recalled the NDMC's earlier decision to regularise around 4,400 temporary employees. He said the measures were being implemented as part of the Government's duty towards society and not for

political gain.

New Delhi MP Bansuri Swaraj described the decisions as humanitarian measures that addressed long-pending demands of employees. She said the approval of compassionate appointments and medical facilities reflected the administration's commitment to employee welfare.

NDMC Chairperson Keshav Chandra said the appointment of 109 dependents demonstrated the council's commitment to supporting families of employees who had spent years serving the organisation. He added that the council wanted to ensure dignity, emotional support, and financial protection for affected families.

Chandra said the medical card scheme covered 878 contractual workers across 38 categories, including engineers, nurses, technical staff, and clerical employees. He described the initiative as an important step towards social security and inclusive welfare.

Political stability driving growth in Northeast: Meghalaya CM

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma on Friday said that political stability and firm leadership have put the Northeast on the path of rapid economic growth, asserting that the region is now ready to absorb large-scale investments.

Speaking at a curtain raiser of the upcoming North East India Infrastructure Summit and Exhibition in New Delhi, Sangma claimed the region remained constrained in the past due to the absence of an enabling political environment. "The overall environment and political situation make the timing perfect," he said, highlighting the growing investor interest in the region.

"In the Northeast, many opportunities that could not be unlocked earlier are now opening up because of the right leadership, political stability and consistent follow-up," Sangma said.

Bhojshala complex a temple: HC

The Bhojshala dispute reached the High Court in 2022 after Ranjana Agnihotri and others, on behalf of a Hindu advocacy group, sought a declaration of the site's religious character and complete worship rights for Hindus. The petition also sought a ban on namaz inside the premises, formation of a trust and return of the Vagdevi idol currently kept in the British Museum.

In 2024, the ASI conducted a 98-day scientific survey of the Bhojshala complex. Later, on January 23, 2026, the SC allowed uninterrupted worship on Vasant Panchami. Regular hearings in the High Court began on April 6 and concluded on May 12 before the verdict was delivered on Friday.

Prices of petrol, diesel raised by ₹3 a litre

When diesel costs more, moving anything costs more. And when moving things costs more, buying things costs more.

The most immediate pressure is on transportation costs. Petrol price hikes increase commuting expenses for people using cars and bikes, while higher diesel prices affect buses, trucking networks and goods transportation across the country. Over time, this can translate into higher auto fares, cab fares and freight charges, especially if elevated fuel prices persist. The impact does not stop with transportation.

Since a large share of India's food supply moves through road transport, higher diesel prices often end up affecting kitchen budgets as well. Vegetables, fruits, milk, grains and packaged products become more expensive to transport, and these additional costs are eventually passed on to consumers. If fuel prices remain elevated for long, food inflation could also worsen.

Public sector oil marketing companies had kept fuel price unchanged for 11 weeks despite a surge in input cost, but passed on part of the increase once operations became financially unsustainable. India consumes about 5 million barrels of oil a day, which allows the current stock to cover around 18 days of demand.

Several opposition parties attacked the Government over the hike in prices of petrol and diesel, warning that the move would worsen inflation and hamper economic growth. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said the public was paying the price for the Modi Government's "mistake". BJP, however, defended the hike, claiming that India managed to shield citizens from the global oil shock for more than two months while implementing only a "limited and calibrated" rise even as several countries witnessed steeper increases.

This is the lowest increase in price as compared to the United States, the United Kingdom, European countries and United Arab Emirates which witnessed steep hikes. Data shows countries such as Myanmar, Malaysia, Pakistan and

the United States have seen petrol prices rise anywhere between 40 per cent and over 89 per cent, while diesel prices in some markets have jumped by more than 100 per cent.

Paper setter arrested in NEET leak case

Students allegedly paid several lakh rupees to attend the sessions where they wrote the questions down in their notebooks. These handwritten notes have been found to match the actual NEET-UG 2026 question paper held on 3 May 2026 exactly. CBI teams have conducted searches at multiple locations across the country and seized several incriminating documents, electronic gadgets, and mobile phones. Detailed forensic and technical analysis of the seized material is currently underway.

The scope of Kulkarni's role remain unclear. The first warning came when a parent reported that 42 chemistry questions in a mock test by a Latur coaching institute matched the actual NEET paper. A 28-member CBI team was then deployed across Latur, known for its coaching factories. On Thursday, an Ayurveda practitioner from Ahilyanagar and a beauty salon owner from Pune were taken in. All attention now turns to Kulkarni, whose role may expose a bigger conspiracy. CCTV footage from two coaching centres has been seized, and digital evidence is under review. The agency has not ruled out the involvement of insiders from the National Testing Agency or public servants. A senior official hinted, "This is not the end. It may be just the beginning."

The probe has confirmed the paper was not just 'guessed' but stolen and monetised as a commercial product. The CBI has charged Kulkarni with conspiracy, cheating, and breach of trust. More arrests are expected as the case expands.

PM Modi supports peace in West Asia

"We condemn the attacks on the UAE," Modi said during his opening remarks at the bilateral meeting. "The way UAE has been targeted is not acceptable, but the way UAE has handled the current situation with restraint is praiseworthy."

The UAE, home to a major US military base, has faced Iranian strikes amid the ongoing US-Israel conflict with Iran that began on February 28.

Highlighting the broader global impact of the conflict, Modi said, "India is ready to extend all possible support to bring peace in West Asia."

The two sides signed strategic collaborations across seven key sectors. In a post on social media, Modi said the agreements in energy, defence, infrastructure, shipping and advanced technology would provide "fresh impetus" to the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. "In another important development, UAE announced investments worth USD 5 billion in India. This will further deepen economic ties," he added.

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According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited signed an agreement with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company to enhance strategic collaboration in energy security, including petroleum reserves and possible cooperation in LNG and LPG storage facilities.

Another agreement focused on long-term LPG supply arrangements aimed at ensuring energy stability and strengthening bilateral energy cooperation. The developments come amid heightened concerns in India over possible disruptions to crude oil and gas supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical maritime route for India's energy imports.

India and the UAE also signed a framework agreement for strategic defence cooperation to strengthen defence manufacturing, technology sharing, innovation and regional security cooperation. Additional agreements included the establishment of a ship repair centre in Gujarat's Vadinar, cooperation in ports and coastal infrastructure, and a skill development arrangement in ship repair.

The two countries also agreed to establish a supercomputer cluster to support India's artificial intelligence ambitions.

The MEA said the UAE's \$5 billion investment commitment would help generate jobs and strengthen markets, underscoring Abu Dhabi's long-term confidence in India's growth story. Apart from strategic and economic issues, discussions between the two leaders also covered the blue economy, fintech, defence cooperation and people-to-people ties.

Concluding the visit, Modi described the discussions as "highly productive."

"Held extensive discussions with my brother, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, on ways to further deepen the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. I am confident that the outcomes of this visit will further strengthen our friendship and contribute to growth and prosperity," he said.

In a special gesture reflecting the significance of the visit, Sheikh Mohamed personally received Modi at the Abu Dhabi airport. The Prime Minister was accorded a ceremonial guard of honour, while his aircraft was escorted by UAE military jets. The visit comes at a time of shifting geopolitical equations in West Asia, with widening differences among Gulf powers over oil production, the Strait of Hormuz blockade and regional alignments involving Israel and Iran. The evolving dynamics involving the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iran are increasingly influencing India's strategic calculations in the region.

No trust in US; India our friend: Iran FM Araghchi

Speaking about the ongoing tensions and negotiations between Tehran and Washington, Araghchi sharply criticised the US and said, "Iran has every reason to not to trust US, American have every reason to trust Iran."

The Iranian foreign minister is in the nation-

Capital to attend the BRICS meeting and expressed gratitude for India's hospitality during his visit. He also highlighted the deep historical and civilisational ties between India and Iran.

"India and Iran are ancient civilisations and friendly countries. We have had very good relations with India," Araghchi said. His remarks come amid renewed uncertainty over diplomatic engagement between Tehran and Washington following recent tensions linked to Iran's nuclear programme and regional security issues.

Araghchi said negotiations with the US will move forward only if Washington demonstrated seriousness and consistency in its diplomatic commitments. He noted that mixed signals from the US administration had further deepened mistrust between the two countries.

The Iranian minister also referred to the tense situation surrounding the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most strategically important oil shipping routes. He described the situation as "very complicated" but maintained that commercial passage through the waterway would continue under certain conditions.

The comments follow recent statements by US President Donald Trump, who urged Iran to quickly reach an agreement and ensure uninterrupted access through the Strait of Hormuz. Trump also reiterated that Iran should not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

Despite the sharp rhetoric, Iranian officials have continued to signal that diplomacy remains possible if economic sanctions and military pressure are reduced. Earlier this year, Araghchi had said that a potential agreement with the US was "within reach" if all sides prioritised diplomacy.

NEET-UG to be re-held on May 12

Addressing a press conference on Wednesday, Pradhan said, after irregularities surfaced last time, the Radhakrishnan Committee was constituted, and its recommendations were implemented. "Despite that, this incident occurred. Therefore, our first step was to cancel the examination. To those creating fear and disturbances, I want to say through you: stay away from the upcoming examination process. Otherwise, they will have to face punishment," he added.

"We did not want any mafia conspiracy or money power to snatch away your seat. We did not want that to happen. That is why we had to take a tough decision. As guardians, as officials entrusted with responsibility, and as a minister, we are all deeply saddened and concerned by what has happened," he said.

Pradhan added that the duration of the re-test has been extended by 15 minutes and the re-examination will be held using the pen-paper model. He further stated that candidates will also get to choose their preferred test cities again and admit cards for the re-test will be issued by June 14. The minister also said NEET-UG will be Computer-Based Test (CBT) from next year as part of reforms in view of allegations of irregularities linked to it.

"CBT mode of exam is comparatively better

than OMR. It is a bit protected. Cybercrime has become a big world in itself. There are challenges, however, we will have to trust the system of our country," he further said.

Sources also said that this time the logistics and security apparatus may be handed over to the paramilitary forces precisely CISF to use the forces as a deterrent for the mafia in the system.

"The examination was conducted on May 3. By May 7, objections were received through the NTA's grievance redressal system stating that certain questions appearing in the alleged 'guess papers' had also appeared in this year's question set. Immediately, discussions were held, and both the NTA and the Government, along with the Higher Education Department, initiated a preliminary inquiry," he said.

Pradhan said the Government has handed over the case to the CBI and expressed confidence in the probe. "CBI has rightly said... no one will be spared. Whether someone is within the NTA or outside it, no one will be spared," he said.

Pradhan said students' future remains the Government's topmost priority, adding that there will be "zero tolerance" for any irregularities found in the conduct of the NEET-UG. Strict action is being taken, he said.

Gautam Adani pushes to settle US fraud case

Adani raised more than \$3 billion in loans and bonds by hiding corruption from lenders and investors, prosecutors said.

The *New York Times* on Friday reported that Adani offered \$10 billion investment in US to avoid bribery charges in the US.

The industrialist has hired lawyer close to US President Trump to settle the case. The offer was made by the advocate to US Justice Department. "Now, according to several people with knowledge of the case, the Justice Department is planning to drop the charges altogether. The reversal came after the Indian billionaire, Gautam Adani, hired a new legal team led by Robert J Giuffra Jr, one of President Trump's personal lawyers," the report read.

"Giuffra's efforts on Adani's behalf culminated in a previously unreported meeting last month at the Justice Department's headquarters in Washington, according to people familiar with the meeting. Giuffra ticked through about 100 slides outlining why prosecutors lacked basic evidence, as well as the jurisdiction even to bring the case, one of the people said, according to the report.

"Another slide also offered the Government a sweetener: If prosecutors dropped the charges, Adani would be willing to invest \$10 billion in the US economy and create 15,000 jobs, echoing a pledge he made in the wake of Trump's election. While prosecutors later told Giuffra that the \$10 billion investment would play no role in the resolution of the case, his offer received a favorable response from at least one senior Justice Department official at the meeting, according to the people familiar with the meeting," added the *New York Times* report.



Opposition slams Govt over fuel price hike

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Several Opposition parties on Friday attacked the Government over the hike in prices of petrol and diesel, warning that the move would worsen inflation and hamper economic growth.

The BJP, however, defended the hike, claiming that India managed to shield citizens from the global oil shock for more than two months while implementing only a "limited and calibrated" rise even as several countries witnessed steeper increases.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said the public was paying the price for the Modi Government's "mistake" while party chief Mallikarjun Kharge slammed the Government, alleging that the country was facing an economic crisis due to a "leader-

ship crisis, lack of vision and incompetence".

The attack came as petrol and diesel prices were hiked by ₹3 per litre each on Friday, marking the first increase in more than four years, as state-run fuel retailers passed on part of the hit from surging global crude prices triggered by the Iran war.

Alongside, CNG prices in cities like Delhi and Mumbai were raised by ₹2 per kg.

Leading the Opposition attack on the Government, Rahul Gandhi said in a social media post in Hindi, "Galti Modi sarkaar ki, keemat janta chukayegi (The public will pay the price for the Modi Government's mistake)."

"The Rs 3 shock has already arrived, the rest of the 'vasooli (recovery)' will be done in instalments," the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha said.



People refuel their vehicles at a petrol pump in Amrisar PTI

Kharge said it was a Government-made crisis, the consequences of which the people of the country were bearing. "The people of the country must understand that, along with the international fuel crisis, the major reason for the economic crisis in India at this time is the Modi Government's lead-

ership crisis, lack of vision, and rampant incompetence," he alleged.

Kharge said when diesel prices rise, inflation has a cascading effect across the country, adversely affecting everyone - from industries to household budgets and farmers.

Congress general secretary

Jairam Ramesh said, "This is bound to lead to further inflation that is now projected to be close to 6 per cent for this financial year. Growth estimates will be lowered considerably."

At a press conference, Congress leader Randeep Surjewala said the vicious design of the BJP Government was to raise prices every time on the conclusion of elections. Surjewala claimed that the Modi Government's "devious and unrelenting" taxation of fuel over the last 11 years through its "cycle of loot was clearly exposed as it collected ₹43 lakh crore by taxing petrol and diesel, which amounted to ₹1,000 crore every day."

The CPI-M Polit Bureau strongly condemned the Centre for raising petrol, diesel and CNG prices, saying the hike would impose a

greater burden on the people already reeling under inflation, unemployment, stagnant wages and deepening economic distress. It demanded an immediate rollback of the increase and called upon its units to organise protests demanding the withdrawal of the hike.

The CPI also condemned the Government for the hike, saying it would push crores of Indians into deeper economic distress.

"This crisis is the outcome of Prime Minister Modi's disastrous foreign policy... The Modi Government cannot run the country like a recovery agency for crony capitalists and foreign interests. The fuel price hikes must be rolled back immediately," CPI secretary D Raja said, adding that it would raise the cost of transport, food, medicines and every essential commodity.

States Focus



PUNJAB CEO HOLDS MEETING ON SIR WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

Punjab's chief electoral officer (CEO) on Friday held a meeting with the representatives of political parties regarding the SIR of electoral rolls in the state to allay any of their concerns. The party representatives were briefed in detail regarding the entire Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise during the all-party meeting, official sources said. Punjab Assembly polls are due early next year. After the meeting, the representatives of political parties said they expressed their apprehensions regarding large-scale additions or deletions of voters, citing recent examples of West Bengal and Bihar, where assembly polls were held. (PTI)



ASSAM: 23,000 PEOPLE AFFECTED BY URBAN FLOODS

More than 23,000 people have been affected by urban floods in Assam as rains lashed several parts of the state, while the IMD warned of more showers, official sources said on Friday. The Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), in its bulletin, said urban floods have been reported from the three districts of Kamrup (Metropolitan), Sribhumi and Cachar. Four revenue circles and 12 villages have been inundated in these districts, affecting 23,619 people. (PTI)

Rajnath, Naidu lay foundation stone for combat aircraft project in Andhra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Puttaparthi (Andhra Pradesh)

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Friday laid the foundation stone for a ₹16,000 crore combat aircraft infrastructure project in Sri Sathya Sai district. Rajnath Singh said it marks a historic chapter in India's defence history, adding that a new era was starting in Andhra Pradesh.

The two leaders laid the foundation for the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) programme infrastructure. "A new era is starting today in Andhra Pradesh's history, and a historic chapter is being written in India's defence history. Four major projects are starting in today's foundation stone laying ceremony. Beside them, eight



Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, left, during the foundation stone laying ceremony of the AMCA project at Puttaparthi, in Sri Sathya Sai district PTI

drone companies are also starting a drone city in Kurnool," Rajnath Singh said, addressing a public meeting.

Observing that the world is facing many challenges today, he said that during these difficult times, if we can stand with our own strength, then we can defend ourselves powerfully.

However, the Defence Minister noted that India is

still dependent on other countries for its national security, underscoring the importance of the projects starting from today.

Noting that the project in Puttaparthi was being developed by Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA), which is a part of the DRDO, the defence minister said it is developing the fifth-generation AMCA fighter jet.

Govt pushed jewellery sector towards undeclared lockdown: Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Congress on Friday termed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal to defer gold buying for a year a "death warrant" for the jewellery sector and demanded from the Centre an economic package for 3.5 crore people linked to the sector.

Addressing a press conference, Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala accused the Modi Government of pushing the jewellery sector towards an "undeclared lockdown" with the appeal and the subsequent increase in import duty on gold and silver.

He said the sector contributes largely to the exports of the country, and feared the rise in duty from 6 per cent to 15 per cent on gold imports would lead to smuggling and illegal trade.



Randeep Surjewala

Surjewala termed the prime minister's appeal an attack on India's cultural heritage, social customs and religious traditions, as gold forms an integral part of them, and also serves as a safety net for millions of women.

He said that over 90 per cent of India's jewellery trade operates through MSMEs and small jewellers, and nearly 3.5 crore people are dependent on the sector,

including goldsmiths, traders, artisans and workers.

The Congress leader called the advisory "disastrous" and an attack on the livelihoods of backward communities and traditional artisans linked to the manufacture and trade of jewellery.

"We demand that the Modi Government immediately announce a special economic relief package for 3.5 crore goldsmiths, traders, artisans and workers involved in the gold jewellery industry."

"The Government should also consider starting domestic gold mobilisation and recycling and use of idle gold stocks and amend income tax provisions to permit households to lend gold to jewellers of their choice," Surjewala told reporters.

The Congress will protest this "brutality" from Parliament to the streets, he said.

CBI deploys digital forensics in NEET-UG 2026 paper leak

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH
■ New Delhi

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has unleashed a textbook multi-pronged assault on the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak racket, blending old-school raids with cutting-edge digital forensics.

Just days after the exam's cancellation on May 7, following the whistleblower's explosive tip-off and the NTA's intervention, the agency registered an FIR, took over from the Rajasthan Police's Special Operations Group (SOG), and hit the



ground running.

By May 13, five key arrests had been made: three from the Biwal family in Jaipur, one each from Gurugram and Nashik, with raids across 14 locations in multiple States.

The methods deployed reveal a sophisticated playbook tailored for modern exam mafias that thrive on Telegram, WhatsApp, and

instant cash transfers. CBI did not start from scratch. It leveraged SOG's preliminary probe, which had already flagged a handwritten "guess paper" in Sikar matching 135+ questions from the real set.

The agency coordinated seamlessly with state police, absorbing local leads while asserting federal oversight. This hybrid model, State boots on the ground, central firepower, is standard CBI protocol in inter-state crimes, but was executed with unusual speed here. Special teams were dispatched within 48 hours of the FIR, targeting

Nashik (printing hub), Sikar (coaching epicentre), and Gurugram (money trail node).

Raids were clinical as CBI teams swept multiple addresses, seizing mobile phones, laptops, and "incriminating materials" including PDFs of the leaked Physics, Chemistry, and Biology papers. Handwritten originals, scanned by the accused, Dinesh Biwal (father of an aspirant), were traced as the digital genesis point. Deleted chats, a favourite tactic of paper peddlers, are now under forensic recovery.

The agency is explicitly using "extensive technical

and forensic analysis." This phrase, repeated in CBI statements, signals the involvement of the Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL) and possibly cyber cells. These groups focus on metadata extraction, IP tracing, and device imaging.

This is where CBI shines. Investigators are reconstructing payments ranging from ₹20,000 to ₹1 lakh per student to bulk deals of ₹10-12 lakh. Bank accounts linked to intermediaries like Shubham Khairnar (who allegedly bought for ₹10 lakh and resold for ₹15 lakh) are being mapped.

CITU hails regularisation of 13,000 workers in Haryana

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) on Friday hailed the "historic triumph" of municipal and fire department workers in Haryana, following a fortnight-long strike that forced the State administration to concede to a wide range of demands, including regularisation of services and enhanced compensation.

The breakthrough comes after the State's administrative machinery was reportedly paralysed from May 1, culminating in a massive solidarity wave by the All India State Government Employees Federation on May 14.

In a statement, CITU General Secretary Elamaram Kareem extended "revolutionary greetings" to the workers led by the Sarva Karmachary Sangh (SKS). "This resounding triumph is a direct result of the militant leadership and strategic resolve of the SKS, which forced a reluctant administration to its knees," the statement said.

As per the agreement, the Haryana Government has committed to regularis-

ing nearly 13,000 municipal and fire department employees up to the age of 55. Furthermore, the Government has agreed to reinstate approximately 5,000 dismissed workers and withdraw all harassment-related legal actions initiated during the agitation.

A significant highlight of the settlement is the resolution of compensation for the families of fallen firefighters Bhavichand Sharma and Ranbir Singh. Each family will now receive Rs 50 lakh in compensation along with Government jobs, ending what the union described as a "discriminatory delay."

The deal also includes a new pay scale of Rs 25,500 for fire payroll employees and a minimum salary of Rs 15,220 for door-to-door sanitation workers, complete with EPF and ESI benefits. Sewer workers and firemen will also receive a Rs 5,000 monthly risk allowance.

While celebrating the victory, CITU cautioned that it would remain vigilant to ensure the state cabinet honours these commitments in its meeting scheduled before June 30, 2026.

NMCG launches 3D mapping of Ganga from Ballia to Farakka



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) has commissioned a full aerial LiDAR survey and 3D mapping of the Ganga river corridor from Ballia in Uttar Pradesh to Farakka in West Bengal, covering four States and using advanced geospatial technologies to build a "3D digital twin" of the river and its drainage network.

The initiative, launched under the Namami Gange programme of the Ministry of Jal Shakti, will cover stretches of the river flowing through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

The official social media handle of Namami Gange said on Friday, "From Ballia to Farakka, the Ganga is about to be mapped in a way she has never been mapped before."

The mission further said the project will deploy aerial LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) for 3D terrain scanning, manned aircraft for wide corridor coverage, UAVs or drones for close-range precision, photogrammetry for ultra-high-resolution imagery, and geotagged videography. The mapping exercise aims to identify and digitally document drain outfalls, confluence points and floodplains along the river corridor.

"Manned aircraft, drones, geotagged videography, photogrammetry, every tool in the modern geospatial kit, working in tandem to build a 3D digital twin of the river and her drainage network," the post said.

The data generated through the exercise will include 3D LiDAR point clouds of the river corridor, orthorectified aerial imagery, annotated aerial drainage videos, and geotagged drain and confluence datasets.

Kerala: UDF allies discuss Cabinet berths ahead of swearing-in

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Thiruvananthapuram

With the Congress finally picking VD Satheesan as Chief Minister of Kerala post the UDF's electoral win, the alliance on Friday initiated discussions on the sharing of Cabinet berths among alliance partners ahead of the May 18 swearing-in, even as senior leader Ramesh Chennithala continued to express displeasure over being denied the CM post.

On his part, Satheesan met Chennithala in an apparent

move to pacify the senior leader whom he described as "brother." The party's senior leadership also reached out to the sulking Chennithala.

Leaders of UDF allies - the Congress, IUML, Kerala Congress, RSP and other partners - held their first formal post-poll meeting at Cantonment House here after the alliance's thumping Assembly election victory, while Chennithala stayed away from the meeting chaired by Satheesan.

They said discussions with



Kerala Chief Minister-designate VD Satheesan, left, meets outgoing state CM Pinarayi Vijayan ahead of the swearing-in ceremony, at the latter's residence, in Thiruvananthapuram PTI

various UDF leaders would continue on the sharing of Cabinet berths and allocation of portfolios before the respective parties decide on nominees for ministerial berths.

The entire Cabinet of the new Kerala Government will be sworn in on Monday, UDF convener Adoor Prakash said. "It was only a formal UDF meeting. We will meet again on Saturday and make decisions. Preparations for the swearing-in ceremony on Monday are underway," he said.

JJM 2.0: Union Government urges collectors to strengthen governance

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

With Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) 2.0 now extended till 2028 and around 81 per cent rural households having tap water connections, the Centre on Friday asked district collectors to strengthen local governance and ensure the sustainability of rural water supply infrastructure.

The direction was given during the 8th edition of the District Collectors' Peyjal Samvad organised by the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (DDWS) under the Ministry

of Jal Shakti through video conferencing.

Addressing the meeting, DDWS Secretary Ashok KK Meena said the Jal Jeevan Mission has transformed rural water supply since its launch in 2019 by shifting dependence from hand-pumps and common water sources to household tap water connections.

"Despite challenges during the Covid period, the Mission has progressed substantially and has now been extended till December 2028 under JJM 2.0, with around 81 per cent rural households having tap water connections," he said.

"While infrastructure has been created through the joint efforts of the Centre and States, its long-term functionality depends on strong local governance," Meena said.

He said that under JJM 2.0, "in-village infrastructure is to be handed over to gram panchayats, while bulk infrastructure will continue to remain with States".

"Gram panchayats should function as local service providers," he said, stressing that community participation through gram sabhas should be ensured for accountability and transparency.

Shah to chair Central Zonal Council meet on May 19

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Raipur

Union Home Minister Amit Shah will chair the 26th meeting of the Central Zonal Council in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region on May 19, officials said on Friday.

The chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh will take part in the Central Zonal Council meeting, they added.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai chaired a high-level review meeting at Mantralaya Mahanadi Bhawan in Nava Raipur Atal Nagar during the day to assess preparations for the event,



an official release said.

"In the meeting, senior officials presented various issues to be proposed by the State Government for discussion during the council meeting. Sai instructed the administration to ensure

all arrangements for the event are made in a coordinated and efficient manner without any shortcomings," it added.

The role of States under the Central Zonal Council is crucial in achieving the vision

of a developed India, the release quoted Sai as saying.

"The Central Zonal Council is unique as there are no disputes among its member States, which reflects a strong spirit of cooperation and coordination. Zonal councils have emerged as an effective platform for strengthening dialogue, cooperation and coordination among states and between the Centre and states on various issues," he said.

Strong states build a strong nation, the CM said while asserting that zonal councils have been providing new direction to development, administrative coordination and national unity.



States Focus

No information on post-poll violence in Bengal: Suvendu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Kolkata

West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari on Friday said his Government has no information on incidents of post-poll violence as alleged by the Opposition TMC, and asserted that action would be taken after proper verification of such charges. He was responding to the allegations of post-poll violence raised by Leader of the Opposition Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay in the West Bengal Assembly.

Chattopadhyay, speaking during the first session of the newly constituted assembly, alleged that several people had been forced to flee their homes due to violence across the State after the Assembly elections. "Violence has been taking place in several places. Many people are homeless now. The Government should take strict action," the TMC legislator said in the House.

In response, Adhikari said, "We have no information



West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari addresses a press conference at Nabanna in Howrah district, West Bengal PTI

about such incidents...If anyone has been displaced, the police and administration will ensure they are returned home." The CM asserted that those involved in violence would not be spared, and the law would take its course in all genuine cases.

The TMC also staged a walkout for a brief period after BJP legislators raised the "chor chor" (thieves) slogan in the Assembly. The members of the Opposition party were also absent during

the Speaker's election but later returned to the House.

BJP MLA Rathindra Bose was elected unopposed as the Speaker of the West Bengal Assembly, becoming the first legislator from the northern part of the State to hold the chair. After the Speaker's election, Adhikari said the proceedings of the Assembly will be telecast live so that people know what is happening inside the House. He said the House would play a key role in fulfilling the

aspirations of the people and function strictly in accordance with Constitutional principles and established rules. "We will move the assembly forward, keeping the Constitution in mind," the chief minister said.

He also stressed the need for a "strong and constructive Opposition" in the House, reiterating that democratic functioning requires space for dissenting voices.

"We want constructive opposition. The assembly is not a place for clashes. In constitutional terms, the House belongs to the opposition," Adhikari said, adding that speaking time in the House would be shared on a 50-50 basis. The CM also said the Government does not want any legislator to face suspension and stressed the need to maintain decorum in the House.

"We do not want any MLA to be out of the House for long. Language and conduct must remain within democratic limits," he said.

Rathindra Bose elected West Bengal Speaker

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Kolkata

BJP MLA Rathindra Bose was elected unopposed as the Speaker of the 18th West Bengal Assembly on Friday, becoming the first legislator from the northern part of the State to hold the post.

His name was proposed in the House by Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari, following which pro tem Speaker Tapas Roy conducted a voice vote.

Roy declared Bose elected as the Speaker of the Assembly after all 207 BJP legislators extended their support in his favour.

Adhikari had on Thursday announced Bose, the MLA from Cooch Behar Dakshin seat, as the BJP's candidate for the Speaker's post in the newly constituted 18th West Bengal Assembly, while the Opposition TMC decided not to field a nominee. Bose had filed his nomination for the post of Speaker on Thursday.

With the BJP enjoying an overwhelming majority of



207 MLAs in the 294-member House after its emphatic victory in the recent Assembly polls, Bose's elevation was a mere formality. The TMC's decision to stay away from the contest cleared the path for his election without a fight. Bose became the first MLA from north Bengal in post-Independence history to hold the Speaker's chair in the West Bengal Assembly.

The development is being seen as a strategic signal from the BJP Government towards a region that has emerged as one of the BJP's strongest political bastions in the State over the last decade.

3 IPS OFFICERS SUSPENDED OVER MISHANDLING IN RG KAR CASE

The West Bengal Government on Friday suspended three senior IPS officers for their alleged mishandling and dereliction of duty during the initial phase of investigation into the RG Kar hospital rape-murder case, Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari said. Announcing the decision at the state secretariat, Adhikari said the suspension of former Kolkata Police Commissioner Vineet Goyal and ex-deputy commissioners Indira Mukherjee and Abhishek Gupta was ordered in the wake of a departmental probe initiated against them. The chief minister said that the three officers were allegedly involved in the "mishandling" of the case, "offering money to the victim's parents as a bribe" and addressing an "unauthorised press conference" in connection with the gruesome crime, which took place in August, 2024. (PTI)



BIHAR GOVT TRANSFERS IAS OFFICERS IN MAJOR RESHUFFLE

The Bihar Government on Friday undertook an administrative reshuffle by transferring and giving additional charges to several IAS officers posted in various departments. According to a notification issued by the General Administration Department, K Senthil Kumar (IAS-1996 batch), Additional Chief Secretary (ACS) of the Sugarcane Industry Department, has been appointed ACS of the Labour Resources and Migrant Workers Welfare Department. He has also been given additional charge of the Backward Classes and Extremely Backward Classes Welfare Department. Several officials were also relieved of their additional responsibilities. (PTI)

West Bengal Government signs MoU to implement PM SHRI Schools scheme

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Kolkata

The Ministry of Education on Friday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the West Bengal Government to implement the PM SHRI Schools initiative in the State.

The PM SHRI (Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India) scheme is a centrally sponsored initiative launched on September 7, 2022, to upgrade over 14,500 existing Government schools into model institutions that showcase the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.



West Bengal, under the earlier Mamata Banerjee-led TMC Government, had opposed joining the scheme, citing the state's autonomy on education, which often led to funding disputes with the Centre.

Following the change in Government in the State,

the new BJP administration led by Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari decided to implement the initiative.

The MoU to implement the scheme was signed in the presence of School Education and Literacy Secretary Sanjay Kumar between the Department of School Education and Literacy under the Ministry of Education and the West Bengal Government.

The agreement was signed by Additional Secretary Dheeraj Sahu, on behalf of the Centre, and Additional Chief Secretary Binod Kumar representing the State Government.

Ex-TMC minister Ghosh appears before ED in recruitment scam case

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Kolkata

Former West Bengal food minister Rathin Ghosh on Friday appeared before the ED in connection with the alleged civic recruitment scam case after skipping summons on five earlier occasions.

Ghosh reached the ED office at the CGO Complex in Salt Lake around 10 am and said he was unaware of the reason behind the summons. "I do not know why I have been called. I will know once I go inside," he told reporters before entering the office.

During the election period,



Rathin Ghosh

the central agency had summoned him five times, but he did not appear, citing political engagements and campaign-related commitments.

ED officials are expected to question him in connection with the ongoing probe into

allegations of recruitment in civic bodies in exchange for money.

The development comes days after former fire services minister Sujit Bose was arrested by the ED in the same case following prolonged questioning. Bose had also received multiple ED summonses from April 6 onwards, including during the Assembly election period.

He had approached the Calcutta High Court seeking time, citing his involvement in election campaigning.

After the elections, Bose appeared before ED investigators on May 1 and May 11, the day he was arrested.

Arunachal bans foreign travel for ministers, Government officials

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Itanagar

The Arunachal Pradesh Government has rolled out a series of initiatives aimed at reducing unnecessary expenditure and encouraging sustainable practices, following the Prime Minister's appeal for cutting down fuel consumption and spending more wisely in view of the West Asia crisis.

The State Cabinet has announced several key decisions focused on fiscal discipline, digital governance and energy conservation, officials said. The measures include a one-year ban on foreign travel by ministers and Government officials, a 50 per cent reduction in the convoy size of the CM, deputy CM and ministers, and a 'Virtual First' policy for official meetings to slash travel-related costs, they said.

The State Government also resolved to implement "100 per cent e-office and paperless governance across departments by March 2027" to streamline official func-



tioning. The Cabinet also decided that no new vehicles would be procured except for emergency services, the officials said. Government departments and institutions have also been encouraged to promote carpooling and greater use of public transport, they said.

As part of the State's energy conservation strategy, air conditioners in Government offices will now maintain a temperature of 24 degrees Celsius and above. Besides, only 5-star rated energy-efficient products would be considered for government procurement, they said. "The

measures additionally emphasise sustainability and self-reliance, with directives to encourage organic farming practices, minimise edible oil usage in institutions and strengthen the 'Buy Swadeshi, Buy Local' initiative to support locally produced goods," an official said.

Emphasising that the Centre was trying to shield people from the adverse impact of the conflict in West Asia, PM Narendra Modi had on May 10 called for judicious use of fuel, postponement of gold purchases and foreign travel, among other measures, to strengthen the economy.

Kuki and Naga hostages freed by armed groups in Manipur

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Imphal

Thirty-one of the 38 people belonging to the Kuki and Naga communities, who were held hostage by armed groups in Manipur's Kangpokpi and Senapati districts, were released, police said on Friday.

These people were taken to unknown areas after suspected militants shot dead three church leaders and injured four others in



Kangpokpi on Wednesday, while a civilian was gunned down and his wife was wounded in Noney district. "Twelve Naga women from Konsakhul village, who

were held captive by armed militants, were released at Makhn village," a senior officer said.

Four men and ten women of the Kuki community, who were held in captivity in Senapati district, were handed over to security forces late Thursday night, he said. The officer also said, "Two Salesian brothers of Don Bosco, including one from Nagaland, were also released by armed groups at separate locations."

On Thursday evening, three persons, including an 18-year-old woman, belonging to the Kuki community, were handed over to the police teams in the Senapati district, another officer said. "We were blindfolded and our hands tied up. We did not know the exact locations where we were taken to. I could sense that we were taken to hilly areas. No one has assaulted us," said a woman who was released in Kangpokpi district.

BJP slams Karnataka Govt over saffron shawl ban in schools

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

A political row erupted on Friday over the Congress-led Karnataka Government's clarification that saffron shawls would not be allowed in educational institutions, with the BJP alleging that it is pursuing "appeasement and vote-bank politics".

The controversy flared up after Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said on Thursday that saffron shawls

would not be allowed in educational institutions under the State Government's order on religious symbols, while practices already in existence, such as hijab, turbans, rudraksha beads and sacred threads (janeu) would continue to be permitted.

BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla alleged that the Congress Government is pursuing appeasement politics and termed it "Aurangzebi Government". "This Government allows the



Shehzad Poonawalla

wearing of hijab inside institutions, which the Supreme Court and high court had not

allowed. But you cannot wear a 'bhagwa' (saffron) shawl or 'bhagwa' angavastram. This is the mindset of the Siddaramaiah Government," Poonawalla said in a video post on X. He alleged that the Congress Government can go to any extent for appeasement politics and accused the party of "abusing Sanatan" in the past as well.

"They have shown Hindu hatred, from terms like 'bhagwa terror' and 'Hindu terror' to abusing Sanatan.

"We have seen how Congress leaders in Tamil Nadu have abused Sanatan. In Telangana, they said Congress means Muslims. They seek Muslim reservation in the name of vote-bank politics and appeasement," he alleged. Poonawalla further alleged that the Siddaramaiah Government has adopted a discriminatory policy and claimed that it had earlier announced a "Muslim-only budget" and "Muslim colonies".

Drones are now claws in the sky, says IAF Chief AP Singh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Underlining the critical importance of drones and other unmanned aerial systems (UAS) in modern-day warfare, IAF Chief A P Singh on Friday said these systems are no more just eyes in the sky, rather they are now akin to "claws in the sky," being an extension of air power.

Making this point here in his address at a defence seminar on unmanned aerial systems, the IAF chief asserted that in any modern aerial threat, complete domain awareness is the key, and there should be "total coordination" among the three services which will be operating in the same airspace. The seminar was organised by the think-tank Centre for Aerospace Power & Strategic



IAF Chief A P Singh

Studies (CAPSS) and the Indian Military Review (IMR) publication.

"We have seen what happens...if you don't have domain awareness, you don't know where your people are and where others are. We've seen what happened to F-15s in Kuwait. The fratricide part. So we cannot afford to have things

like that," he said, referring to the incident on March 1 in which three US F-15E Strike Eagles went down over Kuwait due to an apparent friendly fire, according to the US CENTCOM.

The drones, UAS and counter-UAS are very relevant today; it is a reality and not something for the future, the IAF chief said. "So, there is no

denying that the battlefield has shifted. We are shifting totally from those very concentrated air power to a sort of decentralised and autonomous way," he added.

The IAF chief underlined that the UAS is an "extension of air power". "So all the rules of air power will apply when you use the UAS, just remember that. And, there are no more eyes in the sky. They are like claws in the sky now. We've seen it in the recent conflicts that have taken place. And we also realised that during Operation Sindoor, and this part cannot be forgotten," he asserted.

"And, when it comes to counter-UAS, it is like a cat-and-mouse game. You develop technology in one field; the counter technology has to develop along with

it. Because that is how the game can be played, otherwise, one side will have total advantage," the IAF chief said. "You can't always have force versus force. It has to be force versus defence and others." He recalled the key role of the Indian Air Force during Operation Sindoor, the decisive military action by India during May last year.

"I think we've done reasonably well in Op Sindoor. And why that happened was because there was coordination. Without coordination, without a central agency coordinating it. Without having that IACCS (Integrated Air Command and Control System) become a nerve centre, whether it is counter-UAS or counter-weapon or counter-aircraft, it wouldn't have been possible," he said.

Monsoon likely to hit Kerala early on May 26: Met dept

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The southwest monsoon is expected to set in early over Kerala on May 26, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said in its forecast on Friday. The monsoon, the primary rain-bearing system, normally arrives in Kerala around June 1 and advances northwards to cover other parts of the country.

The onset of monsoon in the state marks the beginning of the southwest monsoon season (June to September). Last year, the onset of the monsoon happened on May 24.

"This year, the southwest monsoon is likely to set in over Kerala on May 26 with a



model error of ± 4 days (could occur four days before or after)," the IMD said.

The weather office also added that conditions were favourable for the monsoon to advance over parts of the South Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands during the next 24 hours.

"The advance of the southwest monsoon over the

Indian mainland is marked by monsoon onset over Kerala and is an important indicator characterising the transition from the hot and dry season to the rainy season," the IMD said.

"As the monsoon progresses northward, relief from scorching summer temperatures is experienced over the areas," it added.

The four-month monsoon season brings almost 70 per cent of the country's annual rainfall. It is critical for agriculture and crops, for the economy as a whole, and to recharge reservoirs and aquifers.

The IMD has said that India might receive below-normal rainfall this year during the monsoon season.

UCC to ensure justice for every citizen, says Assam CM Himanta

TONY DAS ■ Guwahati

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday said the proposed Uniform Civil Code (UCC) will ensure equal application of law for all citizens, with special emphasis on the rights of women and children. He asserted that tribal communities will be kept out of the purview of the UCC to protect their traditions and customs.

"The Uniform Civil Code in Assam will ensure equal application of the rule of law for everyone and guarantee fair rights to all, especially women and children," Sarma said in a post on X. "The Janjatiya Samaj of Assam will not be under the purview of #UCCAssam to protect their customs and traditions," he added, referring to the tribal



Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma visited Batadrava Thaan, the birthplace of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and offered his prayers at the holy site

communities. The first Cabinet meeting of the new Government on Wednesday had approved the implementation of the UCC in the state, with tribals to be kept outside its purview, Sarma had said after the decision.

Sharing two slides on social media on the proposed UCC's

objectives, the CM said it is about "one state, one law", which will ensure a single legal system for marriage, divorce and succession.

Legal marriageable age will be fixed at 18 years for women and 21 years for men, with mandatory reporting of all marriages and live-in rela-

tionships within 60 days. "ST and Adivasi communities fully exempted to preserve customs," Sarma added.

Maintaining that the UCC is to ensure "justice for every citizen", Sarma said it will entail that spouses, children and parents share equal inheritance.

The UCC will have explicit maintenance rights for women in marriages and live-in relationships, and guaranteed legitimacy for all children and mother-focused custody for kids under the age of five years.

There will be provision for strict penalties for false statements to ensure legal records integrity, Sarma added.

The draft of the UCC Bill will be laid in the Assembly on May 26, Sarma said on Wednesday.

Congress slams Maharashtra Government for suppressing Konkan farmers' protest

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Mumbai

The Maharashtra Congress on Friday slammed the BJP-led Mahayuti Government for suppressing a protest march seeking financial assistance for mango and cashew farmers from the Konkan region, asserting that the agitation would continue till their demands are met.

State Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal claimed that even before the march began, the police detained several leaders and activists, including Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana president and former MP Raju Shetty, Rashtriya Samaj Paksha leader Mahadev Jankar, Shiv Sena's Vinayak Raut, and Sena MP Arvind Sawant, among others.

He said that farmers cultivating mango and cashew in Konkan were facing severe hardship and had been agitating for the past three months seeking financial assistance. A protest march was organised



State Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal

from Girgaum Chowpatty in south Mumbai to the official residence of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, 'Varsha', to press for their demands.

"The Congress has extended full support to the farmers' agitation. The Government is trying to suppress the voices of farmers, workers and the Opposition by not allowing

democratic protests and marches," Sapkal alleged.

He said the protesters were demanding ₹5 lakh per hectare compensation for mango farmers and ₹3 lakh per hectare for cashew cultivators.

"The struggle will continue until these demands are met," he said.

Amit Shah to inaugurate Modern Madhur Dairy Plant in Gujarat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Gandhinagar

Union Home and Cooperation Minister Amit Shah is scheduled to inaugurate a newly built, fully automated milk processing and packaging plant of Madhur Dairy at Dashela village in Gandhinagar district on May 17, 2026.

Constructed at an estimated cost of ₹128 crore, the advanced facility has an initial milk processing capacity of 2.5 lakh litres per day, which can be expanded to 5 lakh litres daily as per future demand. With the commissioning of the new plant, Madhur Dairy's overall milk processing and packaging capacity is expected to reach 5 lakh litres per day, strength-



ening its position as one of the leading cooperative dairy unions in Gandhinagar district.

Officials said the expansion will enable the dairy to process the entire milk procurement from local producers while ensuring better returns for farmers and improved availability of quality milk and dairy products for consumers. The project is also expected to

enhance production capabilities for products marketed under the Madhur and Amul brands.

Affiliated with Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, Madhur Dairy has been working to support dairy farmers and supply affordable dairy products since its establishment in 1971. The cooperative began operations with just four milk societies and a daily procurement of around 6,400 litres of milk.

Over the decades, the dairy has recorded steady growth. During 2025-26, average daily milk procurement reportedly reached around 2.76 lakh litres, while annual turnover has risen to nearly ₹628 crore from just ₹7 lakh in its early years.



Assam MLA and former minister Chandra Mohan Patowary took oath as Pro-tem Speaker of 16th Assam Legislative Assembly, administered by the Governor of Assam Laxman Acharya at Lok Bhavan on Friday

Rajasthan CM inaugurates first semiconductor cluster

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Jaipur

Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma on Friday inaugurated the State's first semiconductor cluster at Bhiwadi and said the Government had implemented 35 policies over the past two years to promote investment and create an industry-friendly environment.

Addressing a virtual event from the chief minister's residence, Sharma said the State Government was committed to encouraging investment across sectors and positioning Rajasthan as a major industrial destination.

He said work was progressing on connecting Rajasthan with Delhi through the Regional Rapid Transit System (RTS) via Haryana and on implementing the Yamuna water agreement.

The chief minister also said the Government planned to establish a major industrial area near Bandikui in Alwar district.

Calling the semiconductor cluster a significant achievement, Sharma said Rajasthan was rapidly

advancing in renewable energy, including solar and wind power, as part of efforts to make the state a leader in the energy sector.

The event also marked the inauguration and foundation laying of several projects in Khairthal-Tijara district, including the Elsinia Electronics Complex and a 34 MLD sewage treatment plant, according to a release.

Union ministers Ashwini Vaishnaw and Bhupender Yadav also attended the programme virtually.

Vaishnaw said semiconductor manufacturing had emerged as a critical industry for India and that the country now had 12 semiconductor plants producing chips for various devices.

"Electronics manufacturing in India has increased six-fold over the last 12 years to ₹13 lakh crore, and mobile phones have become the country's top export commodity," Vaishnaw said.

He said the Bhiwadi electronics manufacturing cluster involved an investment of ₹1,200 crore and was expected to generate employment for around 2,500 people.



Gujarat pushes Vehicle Free Day to promote fuel conservation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Gandhinagar

The Gujarat Government has initiated steps to promote fuel conservation and sustainable transport practices by encouraging a weekly "Motor Vehicle-Free Day" across Government offices in the State.

According to official communication issued by Governor Acharya Devvrat, district collectors and municipal commissioners have been urged to encourage Government employees to adopt carpooling, use public transport and reduce dependence on private vehicles.

The move follows Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent appeal for fuel conservation amid rising expenditure on imported petroleum products. Ahead of a recent Cabinet meeting in Gandhinagar, several ministers reportedly arrived at the Secretariat using electric vehicles and shared transportation arrangements as part of the initiative.

In a letter addressed to administrative officials, the Governor highlighted the importance of reducing fuel



Governor Acharya Devvrat

consumption to minimise pressure on the economy and promote environmental awareness among citizens, especially the youth. The communication also mentioned that staff members at Raj Bhavan have resolved to dedicate one day every week to commuting by walking, cycling or public transport. Officials have additionally been encouraged to conduct meetings through video conferencing and promote shared vehicle usage to save fuel.

District administrations and municipal bodies have also reportedly been asked to submit monthly reports detailing fuel-saving measures undertaken in their respective jurisdictions.

Mandaviya reviews India's CWG 2026 preparations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Ahmedabad

Union Youth Affairs and Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya chaired a high-level review meeting to assess India's preparations for the 2026 Commonwealth Games (CWG) scheduled to be held in Glasgow, Scotland.

The meeting focused on strengthening coordination among stakeholders and enhancing support systems for Indian athletes preparing for the international sporting event.

Senior officials from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, representatives of the Indian Olympic Association, including the Chef de Mission for CWG



2026, and officials from the Sports Authority of India participated in the discussions.

Key aspects such as operational planning, athlete training, logistics, welfare measures and coordination mechanisms were reviewed during the meeting. Mandaviya reiterated the

Government's commitment to providing all possible support to Indian athletes to ensure strong performances at the Games.

Discussions also covered preparations for the closing ceremony of the 2026 Commonwealth Games, during which India is expected to officially receive the baton for hosting the 2030 Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Representatives from the Gujarat Government, including Deputy Chief Minister Harsh Sanghavi, also took part in the review meeting and discussed arrangements related to the proposed 2030 Games.

Officials further reviewed inter-ministerial coordination efforts concerning operational and logistical planning for Glasgow 2026. Authorities shared updates on training schedules, deployment of support staff, athlete engagement programmes and contingency planning for the Indian contingent.

Reserved category candidates barred from open seats in Maharashtra

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

The Maharashtra Cabinet has approved a policy that candidates from reserved categories, who avail concessions in competitive examinations such as age relaxation and educational qualification, will not be eligible to claim appointment against open category posts. The decision was taken at

the Cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis on Thursday, a statement issued by the General Administration Department said.

However, the Congress alleged that the move sought the "hidden agenda to dilute reservation", and claimed that the decision was part of a systematic attempt to weaken reservation through indirect means.



The Government said the policy would bring greater clarity regarding the selection of candidates from

reserved categories on merit in the open category and ensure more transparency and consistency in the implementation of reservation.

Under the policy, reserved category candidates who have not availed any concession at any stage of the recruitment process in terms of age, educational qualification, experience or number of attempts allowed in examinations — excluding exam-

ination fee concessions — will be eligible for selection in the open category on the basis of merit.

However, candidates from reserved categories who have availed any relaxation provided by the Government in age, educational qualification, experience or number of examination attempts will continue to be counted against their respective reserved category quotas.

AIADMK factions hold discussions, no solution yet

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Chennai

As the internal rift continues within the AIADMK, party general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami met the new district secretaries at his residence on Friday to discuss the future course of action, even as the rebel group led by SP Velumani and CV Shanmugam also organised a meeting to consider the possibility of moving the court to find a solution.

The AIADMK chief had removed from party posts, senior leaders including Velumani, Shanmugam and C Vijayabaskar in the wake of the rift and cross-voting in the TVK Government's con-



AIADMK, party general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami

ference vote on Wednesday, which the ruling party won comfortably.

At present, Palaniswami has the support of 22 MLAs, while the rebel faction led by Velumani and Shanmugam is backed by 25 AIADMK leg-

islators. Both factions have sought disqualification against the other's MLAs under the anti-defection law over voting during the TVK Government's floor test.

Sources said that during his meeting with supporters,

Palaniswami expressed concern that the Assembly Speaker had yet to announce their elected leader of the legislature party, his deputy and whip.

The former Chief Minister also asked the party cadres, especially the new district secretaries, to stay united to counter the Shanmugam faction.

Valumani's group also said that since the faction has the majority of MLAs, the team is working out to legally "secure" the AIADMK.

Both AIADMK factions have already met the assembly speaker JCD Prabhakar to declare their respective choice of leader of the legislature party, his deputy and whip.

However, sources from the Secretariat said that the speaker was looking into their request and would decide soon.

Meanwhile, the party's Laigudi constituency MLA and a part of the Velumani group, Leema Rose Martin, said that there will be a united AIADMK. "Measures are being taken. Soon we will join".

Former AIADMK minister and senior party leader KC Veeramani said that the party should immediately convene a general council meeting and find out a solution for the poll debacle.

He also stressed that Palaniswami is the party general secretary and "we all stand with him".

DNA matching solves woman's murder mystery

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dehradun

A months-long mystery surrounding skeletal remains recovered from Uttar Pradesh's Hathnikund Barrage has finally been solved, with DNA matching confirming that the victim was a 22-year-old Uttarakhanda woman, who had gone missing last year and was allegedly murdered by a man who was "harassing" her.

The breakthrough came after forensic experts matched the skeletal remains with Riya Kashyap, a resident of the Jeevangarh area in Dehradun's Vikasnagar, bringing closure to a case that had remained unresolved for months. According to police,



a woman's torso was recovered from the Hathnikund Barrage on October 16, 2025. However, due to the highly decomposed condition of the body, investigators were unable to establish the victim's identity at the time.

Kashyap had been missing since September 2025. Her father, Gopal, lodged a complaint on September 7, alleging that Shahbaz, a resident of Dhakrani village, had kidnapped his daughter.

He claimed the accused had been harassing her and was responsible for her disappearance.

A case under Section 140(1) (kidnapping) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) was registered and an investigation launched.

The police said analysis of Call Detail Records (CDR) and CCTV footage led investigators to Shahbaz, who was later arrested. During interrogation, the accused allegedly confessed to the crime and admitted that he knew Kashyap.

Shahbaz told police that he lured the woman to the Kulhar area with the intention of killing her after she refused to have physical relations with him.



Editor's TAKE

BRICS at Delhi: Voice of the Global South

BRICS has emerged as a stronger political voice demanding strategic autonomy and fairer economic. But its real test lies in overcoming internal divisions

As the members of the BRICS nations meet in Delhi, the unease is visible. The founding members – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – represent over 40 per cent of the world's population, while the newly expanded BRICS+ alliance represents approximately 55.6 per cent of the global population. Most of these nations are emerging economies with fragile and vulnerable financial systems. That is the story of the Global South continuously reeling under pressure and facing headwinds from the North, sometimes in the form of tariffs, environmental concerns, uncertainties in the energy market, or pressure to join one bloc or another.

The Delhi Summit is, therefore, not just a formal grouping but a cumulative effort to send a strong message to the West that it must consider the issues confronting these countries and not impose its agenda. BRICS is no longer merely an economic grouping. It was conceptualised in 2001 as an economic forum, and its first summit took place in 2009, but today it is a potent political force. Under India's chairmanship, it has emerged strongly and has been vocal about the issues it wants addressed by the developed nations.

From wars in West Asia and Ukraine to sanctions, energy insecurity and fractured supply chains, BRICS nations are advocating a just global governance system that gives them strategic autonomy and economic equity. The challenge, however, lies in transforming shared grievances into a coherent and credible global agenda. The Delhi summit of the BRICS grouping comes at a moment of profound churn in international politics. The summit's agenda reflects the anxieties of a rapidly fragmenting world. India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, has sharply criticised unilateral sanctions and coercive measures, arguing that "pressure cannot replace diplomacy". His remarks are significant because they underscore India's attempt to maintain strategic autonomy while simultaneously positioning itself as a responsible voice for developing nations.

The BRICS nations are clamouring for reform of the UN Security Council, greater representation for emerging economies in global financial institutions, and protection of sovereign decision-making. Another major concern before the summit is the growing instability in West Asia. Tensions around the Strait of Hormuz have disrupted energy supplies. For developing economies heavily dependent on imported energy, these conflicts are direct economic threats. BRICS leaders are therefore advocating dialogue, ceasefires and diplomatic engagement in conflict zones. However, BRICS is not a cohesive force. The grouping faces several internal challenges. India-China tensions continue to cast a shadow over cooperation, while Russia's direct confrontation with the West makes BRICS's task more difficult. Yet, despite these contradictions, BRICS remains relevant because it reflects a changing global reality.

The old unipolar order is weakening, but a stable multipolar system has not yet emerged. BRICS's credibility will depend on whether it can move beyond rhetoric and remain cohesive so that it can voice its concerns collectively. It must first demonstrate that its diversity is its strength, not its weakness.

Bengal's verdict against the 'Kabuliwala trap'

West Bengal's verdict is more than an electoral transition; it is a correction. The people have not merely voted out a government, but rejected a political culture that romanticised disorder, normalised impunity, and mistook excessive empathy for moral virtue



ABHINAV WALIA

West Bengal has voted: with determination, courage, clarity and finality. In that unmistakable vote lies not merely a political verdict, but a psychological one. The people of Bengal did not simply change a government; they actually repudiated a culture — a culture of decades-long accommodation of lawlessness dressed in the language of compassion, a governance model that protected the predator while rendering the victim invisible.

The new administration inherits both an opportunity and an obligation. What it does next will determine whether Bengal's mandate becomes a turning point or merely an interlude.

Every society carries within it a set of assumptions about crime and punishment; assumptions so deeply embedded that they feel like common sense rather than ideology. In Bengal, that embedded assumption has been what evolutionary thinker Gad Saad might call "suicidal empathy": the systematic prioritisation of empathy for the perpetrator of crime over security for the innocent. It sounds compassionate, but in practice, it is catastrophic.

When empathy becomes reflexive rather than reasoned, when it flows automatically towards the offender and away from the victim, it ceases to be a virtue and becomes what Saad terms an "idea pathogen": a belief system that corrodes a society's rational defences from within and becomes a "psychological trap". A society that mistakes tolerance for criminals as virtue does not grow more humane, but more vulnerable.

Bengal's literary tradition is magnificent. Kabuliwala is a masterpiece of humanist writing — a story that finds paternal tenderness in an unlikely place and asks us to see the full human being behind the frightening exterior. As literature, it is irreplaceable, but as policy, it is lethal.

The Bhadrakol tradition is one of the sub-continent's finest civilisational achievements: cultivated, empathetic, and genuinely humane. It is precisely because of its nobility that it has proven so vulnerable to exploitation — where the stabbing of a neighbour becomes a tragic misunderstanding, where the recidivist becomes a victim of circumstance, and where the actual victim, who could be bleeding, frightened, or even



BENGAL'S VOTERS DID NOT QUEUE IN THE SUMMER HEAT TO BE GIVEN MORE POETRY. THEY CAME FOR SOMETHING OLDER, SIMPLER AND MORE URGENT: THE RIGHT TO WALK HOME SAFELY, TO SLEEP WITHOUT FEAR, AND TO RAISE CHILDREN IN A STATE THAT PROTECTS RATHER THAN POETICISES

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silenced, becomes an afterthought in the moral drama centred on the perpetrator.

This is not compassion. This is "pathological altruism", a concept studied seriously in behavioural psychology, where the very impulse to protect becomes the instrument of harm. The new government in Bengal needs to come out of this "Kabuliwala trap".

The new government need not theorise because evidence prevails regarding what really works in day-to-day administration, and this applies to the international canvas as well.

In early 2026, the Philippines implemented its intensified Safer Cities initiative by prioritising high-visibility policing and swift accountability. This resulted in a marked decrease in serious crime.

Singapore implemented a civilisational model based on the same principle: the rule of law, applied consistently and without sentiment, is the most compassionate gift a government can give its people. Today, it is one of the world's safest and most prosperous societies.

Then there is New York City. Within living memory, Times Square was not a destination; it was a no-go zone. Crime was not an occasional visitor; it was a permanent resident. When the administration prioritised safety, the murder rate fell, the streets returned to their people, and tourism soared. All in all, New York did not become cruel; instead, it became safe.

The upshot is that safety is not a cultural inheritance, but a policy choice.

Bengal has seen its own version of this paralysis. The new government must name it, reject it, and replace it. What Bengal needs is not harshness, but clarity, especially "rational realism": the struggling background of a perpetrator explains his history, but it does not excuse his violence.

Human rights protections exist to shield the innocent, not to provide legal sanctuary for the predator. Swift, certain and visible consequences for crime are not barbarism. They are the highest form of social compassion and a declaration that the law-abiding citizen's right to live without fear matters more than the criminal's right to exploit it.

The new government in Bengal needs, on the one hand, to de-romanticise crime and, on the other, to institutionalise victim-centric justice, thereby restoring the "social contract".

Bengal's voters did not queue in the summer heat to be given more poetry. They came for something older, simpler and more urgent: the right to walk home safely, to sleep without fear, and to raise children in a state that protects rather than poeticises.

To govern is to choose, and the choice before this administration is not between compassion and cruelty; it is between empathy that protects the innocent and empathy that, through its own excess, destroys them.

Bengal's populace has chosen, and governance should now become the echo of that choice.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

PICTALK



A herder with his cattle walk on a dried up land near the Bilawali Pond on a hot summer day, in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. PHOTO: PTI



ASHA IYER KUMAR

2ND OPINION

Artificial intelligence is no longer confined to the edges of innovation; it is steadily becoming part of the everyday rhythm of education. Its presence in school curricula is not loud or disruptive, but quietly influential, shaping how students engage with learning and how educators respond to their needs.

Not only are we seeing new tools; we are also seeing an entirely different experience created through this evolution. The advent of AI has opened up ways to support not only students' academic growth, but also the confidence and well-being that sit at the heart of meaningful learning.

For years, the classroom has been built on a straightforward approach of one teacher, one lesson, one pace. But all learners are different, some move ahead

quickly, while others need more time. AI is starting to close this gap by figuring out when a student is having trouble or is ready to move on, which lets learning adapt to each person's needs. It also changes what teachers do by taking over tasks like grading and keeping track of progress. As classrooms evolve, teachers act as guides and mentors who assist students in interpreting the material rather than instructing them. At the same time, learning remains deeply tied to confidence, motivation, and self-worth. In this context, AI can contribute positively to this system. If implemented correctly, it can facilitate learning through timely feedback, personalised instructions, and early detection of disinterest, among other ways. It can support both performance and well-being. Nonetheless, the story has another side to it?

The fear is that students will reach for AI and thoughtlessly use it as a shortcut, skipping the thinking and questioning that leads to learning? Therefore, schools should teach students how to use AI rather than how to access it, with the goal of turning out critical thinkers rather than efficient problem solvers?

Then there are questions of ethics, which are becoming increasingly important?

How else is student data being used?

Are these systems fair for all learners?

Are we teaching children how to use technology? These are not technical questions alone, they're deeply human ones. And they must be part of the conversation in every school that chooses to embrace AI.

The real impact lies in how thoughtfully schools integrate AI. The priority should be on building AI literacy rather than simply teaching its usage, while ensuring that teachers are equipped and trained alongside students.

Education has never been just about facts. At its heart, education is an experience rooted in relationship-building and mentorship. AI cannot replace that, and it shouldn't try to. What it can do is strengthen it.

When AI is used in the classroom in a thoughtful way, it can make learning spaces more flexible and welcoming to all students, recognising and accepting the different experiences of each one. It gives teachers more time to help students become more curious, confident, and able to express themselves. Maybe this is the real power of AI in the classroom: making it truly inclusive to everyone.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

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HYDROGEN BUSES MARK SHIFT TOWARDS GREEN URBAN TRANSPORT

This refers to "Metro to launch hydrogen-powered buses in Central Vista area" (May 15). The move marks a significant step towards cleaner and more sustainable urban mobility. Hydrogen fuel offers several advantages, including zero tailpipe carbon emissions, quieter operation, and faster refuelling compared to battery-electric buses. It can also reduce India's dependence on imported crude oil and strongly supports the country's National Green Hydrogen Mission.

However, several challenges and safety concerns remain. Hydrogen is highly flammable and requires storage under extremely high pressure or at cryogenic temperatures. The country presently lacks adequate hydrogen refuelling infrastructure, while accidental leaks could pose safety risks. Therefore, strict

safety measures such as leak-detection systems, proper ventilation, and fire-resistant materials are essential to build public confidence.

The economic aspect is equally important. According to NITI Aayog, green hydrogen produced through electrolysis currently costs around ₹500-600 per kilogram, making it far more expensive than conventional fuels. At present, operating a hydrogen-powered bus costs nearly twice as much as running a diesel bus.

Despite these hurdles, hydrogen-powered buses represent a futuristic and environmentally responsible transport solution. Their long-term success will depend upon reducing production costs, expanding infrastructure, and ensuring uncompromising safety standards.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

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

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The compulsion to raise oil prices

This refers to the news report, "Petrol, diesel prices hiked by ₹3 across India" (May 15). One commendable aspect of the Modi Government's tenure has been its restraint in increasing fuel prices since 2022. However, amid the ongoing tensions and conflict in West Asia, crude oil prices have risen sharply in the international market. The current increase in fuel prices is not due to India's policies, but rather the instability created by oil-producing and conflict-ridden regions, which has disrupted global energy markets.

Major public sector oil companies such as Indian Oil Corporation, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited and Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited must balance international demand, supply and trade realities while determining domestic fuel prices.

Sustaining prolonged losses would adversely affect both the national economy and the finances of individual States.

In these circumstances, the Government has been compelled to raise petrol and diesel prices by ₹3.25 per litre. However, rising inflation will inevitably burden common citizens. People should therefore increasingly adopt alternatives such as carpooling and greater use of public transport.

Colonial shadow over TN

Go and look at the Speaker's Chair inside the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. There is an inscription on it: "Gifted by Lord Willingdon, Governor of Madras Presidency, and Lady Willingdon on March 6, 1922." That chair has remained inside the Tamil Nadu Assembly for 103 years.

Congress sat in it. DMK sat in it. AIADMK sat in it. TVK sits in it. Every single MLA who rises to speak addresses that chair. Every word spoken in that House is directed towards a colonial gift.

Not one government in 78 years of Independence thought to change it. Not one Speaker raised the question. This is institutional inertia married to psychological colonisation. The British left the building, but never left the mind.

Now look at the new Tamil Nadu Chief Minister as temperatures touch 45 degrees. He walked into the Assembly in a black suit, white shirt and black trousers - the full colonial uniform. The veshti, the traditional attire symbolising Tamil identity and dignity, was absent. A leader's words are theatre; his choices are autobiography.

Seventy-eight years after Independence, much still remains unchanged.

Steadfast approach for women's rights

In Indian tradition, women have long been regarded as the foundation of Shakti, creation and leadership. Today, this philosophy has increasingly taken the shape of concrete policy, wherein women are viewed not merely as beneficiaries, but as the vanguard of development.

In recent years, it has become evident that when provided access to opportunities, resources and participation in decision-making, women scale new heights in every sphere. From the armed forces to start-ups, and from sports to science and research, the daughters of our nation are creating new milestones through their talent and perseverance.

This transformation is not merely symbolic, but the direct outcome of policy priorities that have placed women's participation and leadership at their core. The effort to translate women's reservation into reality is also an integral part of this broader vision. Despite not receiving the required support in Parliament, the Government of India remains steadfast in its commitment to securing women their rightful entitlements.

However, rights must go beyond policy and legal guarantees. Self-respect and dignity for women should remain the foremost priority of society.



From whistles to whispers!

The responsibility before the new government led by actor-turned-politician Vijay



RAVIKUMAR CHOCKALINGAM

As the newly formed government led by actor-turned-politician Vijay begins its tenure, Tamil Nadu faces a test greater than an electoral upset. The real question is whether a politics built on adoration can mature into one grounded in fiscal discipline, social repair, public safety and long-term development.

Tamil Nadu enters this new chapter with enormous strengths, but also with visible fatigue. For decades, the state has been shaped by parties that built enduring welfare legacies yet gradually allowed those achievements to harden into entitlement politics, fiscal strain and a culture of reduced accountability. That accumulated exhaustion created the opening for a new force to disrupt a deeply entrenched establishment.

The rise of a new government led by actor-turned-politician Vijay is therefore not merely a story of celebrity crossing into politics. It is also a reflection of public impatience with an old order that had grown too comfortable with habit, symbolism and transactional politics. When people begin to feel that governments can distribute benefits but not renew trust, disruption stops looking risky and becomes necessary. Yet electoral change by itself is not democratic fulfilment. It is only the beginning of a more serious obligation. A government formed on the strength of public enthusiasm must now show that it can govern with restraint, competence and moral clarity. The whistles of victory are fleeting and cannot overshadow the burden of power and the enormous responsibility that comes with it. That burden is heavier when the margins are narrow. A slim majority is still a valid democratic mandate, but it is also a reminder that nearly half the political community may remain unconvinced, anxious or opposed. In such a moment, triumphalism is dangerous. The new government must treat victory not as a license for excess, but as a call for humility, consultation and steady administration. It must listen more carefully, govern more inclusively and avoid the temptation to confuse electoral arithmetic with moral unanimity.

A peaceful transition of power matters so deeply. In every healthy democracy, the transfer of authority must be orderly, dignified and free from vendetta, instability or street-level intimidation. The maturity of a democratic culture is tested not only in the casting of votes, but in the conduct that follows the verdict. The chosen leader leads everyone, more so the ones who did not vote in favor. This is especially important in Tamil Nadu, a state with a strong political memory and an emotionally charged public sphere. Cadres who were trained in loyalty and mobilisation must now learn the harder discipline of democratic responsibility.

The failures of earlier governments must also teach lessons for future. The establishment did not fail because it did nothing. It failed because it increasingly blurred the line between welfare and dependency, governance and patronage, compassion and convenience. For too long, elections risked becoming contests of distribution rather than contests of vision. That approach may produce applause, but it also deepens fiscal pressure and weakens the culture of citizenship. A state cannot indefinitely promise more, borrow more and postpone structural correction without eventually narrowing its future choices.

The contradiction is perhaps sharpest in the social sphere. Governments spoke the language of family welfare while remaining comfortable with revenue models and public conditions that often contributed to social distress. They announced safety, but too many women still experienced fear in transit and indifference in systems meant to protect them. They celebrated youth, but too often failed to build clear bridges from education to dignity, work and civic belonging.

This is where the new government will be tested. It must prove that change means more than a change of face. It must show that governance can move from spectacle to seriousness, from distribution to capability, from patronage to public purpose. That requires political courage, the courage to speak honestly about debt, to reform without cruelty, to protect the vulnerable without manufacturing dependency and to invest in long-term systems rather than short-term applause. If this means, revisiting promises surrounding freebies and focusing on stronger fiscally responsible welfare schemes, people will understand with reason. Freebies are defensible during floods, droughts and pandemics. They are an ethical response to sudden vulnerability.



The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

THE WHISTLES ARE LOUD TODAY. BUT WHEN THEY FADE, WHAT MUST REMAIN IS THE ABILITY TO HEAR THE WHISPERS, THE ANXIETIES OF FAMILIES, THE FEARS OF WOMEN, THE FRUSTRATION OF YOUTH, THE BURDENS OF WORKERS AND THE QUIET EXPECTATIONS OF THOSE WHOSE FAITH IN DEMOCRACY RESTS NOT ON RHETORIC, BUT ON RESULTS

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But when they become the central grammar of governance, they risk turning relief into dependency and citizenship into clientele. A good government does not merely distribute. It enables. It teaches people how to fish rather than ensuring they remain in line for the next packet of food.

As a psychiatrist working in addition, I have witnessed the far-reaching consequences of drug and alcohol use on individuals and families. It is imperative for governments to recognize the pervasive impact of Drug and alcohol use on the welfare of families and wellbeing of young adults. It is a force multiplier of poverty, domestic violence, school dropout, depression, accidents and lost labor productivity. A state cannot claim to protect families while growing comfortable with revenue streams that help break them. Nor can it address narcotics and synthetic drug use through police action alone. Tamil Nadu needs a public health led addiction policy, systematic de-addiction programs linked to government health systems, school-based prevention programs, stronger anti-trafficking enforcement and abolition of liquor availability around schools, colleges and labor settlements. This need not mean theatrical overnight prohibition. India's own history shows that abrupt prohibition without preparation can fuel bootlegging and illicit harm. But a phased path toward partial, and eventually wider, alcohol restriction linked to rehabilitation, alternative livelihoods and behavioral health would be a far more serious legacy than allowing the state to remain dependent on intoxication for revenue.

Tamil Nadu does not also need endless emotional mobilization. There is a rich legacy of social and economic development, thanks to progressive policies of previous governments going back decades. However, populism expanded faster than reform, political theatre often outran institutional repair and the difficult work of preparing Tamil Nadu for its next stage of development was repeatedly postponed. Today, it needs administrative depth. It needs safer streets, stronger schools, better public transport, genuine women's safety, economic opportunity for youth and a fiscal framework that does not mortgage the future to sustain the present. Tamil Nadu already has a formal women's policy focused on violence-free homes, safe mobility, equal wages and economic access, and the TNWESafe programme seeks to link women's employment, safety and health through a large-scale policy platform, but policy architecture alone is not enough. The real test is whether a schoolgirl can commute safely, whether a working woman can return home without fear, and whether survivors encounter dignity rather than indifference in police stations and hospitals. Tamil Nadu can well be in the race to become the safest state in India to be a girl. That would require measurable district-wise scorecards on crimes against women and children, better street lighting, safer transport, fast-tracked investigations, one-stop crisis support, and stronger integration of schooling, social welfare and mental health systems.

The new government also calls for transcendence from rulers and supporters. Fans have become cadres, and it's time for them to become model citizens. Citizens must insist that leadership be judged not by charisma, mythology or emotional loyalty, but by outcomes, whether families feel safer, whether public money is spent more wisely, whether institutions become fairer and whether opportunity reaches those who stand far from the stage.

The whistles are loud today. But when they fade, what must remain is the ability to hear the whispers, the anxieties of families, the fears of women, the frustration of youth, the burdens of workers and the quiet expectations of those whose faith in democracy rests not on rhetoric, but on results. A new generation of politicians may have earned this moment, but they have very little time to grow into power, for the consequences of inexperience in public office are measured not in headlines, but in human lives.

Sanatan: Tradition loudly possessed, quietly unread



ACHARYA PRASHANT

The word "Sanatan" means eternal. It is now among the most fiercely contested words in Indian public life, invoked to denounce, defend and mobilise, with an urgency that might suggest the arguers possess some acquaintance with the tradition the word names. The urgency disguises a near-universal absence of that acquaintance. Its label is loudly possessed, while its philosophical core is quietly unread. A label offers identity without the cost of inquiry; the tradition's core offers inquiry without the comfort of a pre-settled identity.

When Udhayanidhi Stalin declared that Sanatan Dharma was like dengue and malaria, to be eradicated and not merely opposed, the response unfolded with perfect predictability. Critics attacked a version of Sanatan Dharma that bears little resemblance to what

the term philosophically denotes. Defenders rushed to protect a version they have largely never read. The actual philosophical tradition sat untouched by either side, as irrelevant to the noise as a library to a riot outside its doors.

The critics have genuine grievances. Caste discrimination, patriarchy and the ritual exploitation of the vulnerable are real, documented and still operative. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's long campaign against them represents one of modern India's more serious engagements with social oppression. The criticism arises from lived experience. Warranted indignation, however, is not the same as accurate targeting. The social evils that animated Periyar did not arise from the philosophical core of Sanatan Dharma. They arose from the ego's capacity to commandeer any available language in service of exploitation. The exploiter and the tradition the exploiter has hijacked are not the same thing. The social evils were committed in its name, not in its spirit; to discard the tradition on this basis is to throw away the antidote because the poison was administered in the same bottle.

What does Sanatan Dharma actually mean? The root "dharma" denotes the fundamental obligation one owes to one's own existence. "Sanatan" denotes that which holds true irrespective of time, place or circumstance. What qualifies as eternal in this sense? Ritual varies by village, belief by century, and custom by caste and region - all contingent. What remains constant across all times, geographies, genders and religious affiliations is the inner human condition: restlessness, fear, bondage to desire, and the persistent sense that something essential is missing. This condition belongs, as the tradition diagnoses, to the structure of the ego that has not yet turned to examine itself. The dharma that arises from this eternal condition is equally universal: to move, through honest inquiry, from bondage towards understanding. It is not a religion in the conventional sense, but a description of the ego's most fundamental predicament and of what it owes itself in response.

The tradition distinguishes sharply between Shrutis — the Vedas and Upanishads — and Smritis, which includes the Manusmriti and the Puranas. The texts containing caste hierarchies and patriarchal injunctions belong overwhelmingly to the Smriti category, composed between one thousand and fifteen hundred years ago, far more recent than the Vedic core they claim to elaborate. Sanatan Dharma, properly understood, is Vedantic. The lived tradition did not consistently honour this hierarchy. Yet the canonical core's method — inquiry rather than acceptance — dissolves caste readings on the tradition's own terms. The Vajrasuchi Upanishad makes this explicit: caste belongs only to the ego, which is to say it is the ego's construction, not a feature of any reality the ego did not itself produce.

Three categorically distinct things are routinely conflated. Sanatan Dharma is a philosophical orientation directed towards liberation from inner bondage, indifferent to creed and community. Hinduism, as the Supreme Court of India has rightly observed, is a vast and internally inconsistent collection of belief systems held together largely by geographical provenance. Hindutva is a political ideology, barely a century old, that seeks to define national identity through cultural markers whose roots lie largely in the Mughal and British periods. When critics attack Sanatan Dharma and mean practised Hinduism, they target a real problem under the wrong name. When defenders protect Sanatan Dharma and mean Hindutva, they mount a real defence of the wrong object.

The central word of Sanatan Dharma is not belief but jigyasa — the hunger to know. The tradition tells the seeker that received beliefs, accumulated from family, culture and community, are themselves the primary obstacle to liberation. A true Sanatani is not someone who believes more intensely; he is someone who examines his own beliefs more rigorously than anyone else's. By the criterion the tradition itself provides, a Muslim who sincerely inquires into the nature of his own inner bondage qualifies as a Sanatani under the tradition's own definition. Conversely, the person who recites mantras without inquiry and wears religious identity as scaffolding for the ego does not qualify, regardless of the label claimed.

The most pointed irony of this controversy is that Periyar, the figure critics invoke, was animated throughout his life by a refusal to accept received authority, a rage against exploitation disguised in sacred language, and a commitment to rational inquiry over hereditary belief. Within the framework of Sanatan Dharma properly understood, this disposition is not antithetical to the tradition; it is, in the most precise sense, the tradition itself. Annihilation of Caste is not a rejection of inquiry; it is a sustained accusation that the practised tradition refused to apply inquiry to itself. BR Ambedkar was operating against its institutional capture, and that operation was itself an exercise of the method. The label belongs to the egos that fight over labels. The method remains available to anyone willing to undertake it.

Sanatan Dharma is among the most rigorous philosophical traditions humanity has produced. That its foundational texts now sit largely unread, while superstition and communal aggression are carried out in their name, is not the fault of the tradition. It is the fault of those who invoke its name while fleeing from its demands.

The question that should trouble everyone involved — defender and critic alike — is this: what exactly were you fighting over?



Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life

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India asserts its maritime power to ensure energy shipping



ANIL BHAT

Following a major escalation in the US-Iran conflict since February-March 2026, along with strict controls imposed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Navy, under Operation Urga Suraksha (energy protection), began maintaining a high-alert deployment in the Gulf of Oman and the northern Arabian Sea to secure Indian commercial shipping passing through the vicinity of the Strait of Hormuz.

While Iran's theocratic leadership has maintained relations with India based on historic ties and a strategic partnership centred around the development of Chabahar Port, the IRGC has pursued its own agenda, which has included targeting Indian or India-bound merchant ships and tankers — perhaps not every time, but often enough. On December 8, 2025, the IRGC forcefully detained 16 Indian crew members aboard the merchant tanker MT Valiant Roar in the Gulf over alleged fuel smuggling. While ten of these sailors were initially moved to a prison in Bandar Abbas, the eight who remained on board were subsequently released in February 2026. By early 2026, 348 other Indian citizens from Iran had also returned home.

All this and more has been coordinated by India's Ministries of External Affairs (MEA), Ports, Shipping

and Waterways (MoPSW), through the Directorate General of Shipping (DGS), Defence (MoD), Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG), Information and Broadcasting (MIB), Indian missions in the region and, on the waters, a powerful flotilla of the Indian Navy.

By March 20, 2026, the IRGC had established a designated "safe corridor" closer to the Iranian coastline and warned against any deviation. Indian officials coordinated with regional authorities to facilitate the passage of Indian ships through this area. Despite a temporary and fragile ceasefire in early April, the area remained a high-risk zone, partly owing to reports of unrecorded mines laid by the IRGC and its offensive actions, including firing at ships, thereby necessitating close-protection escorts for critical fuel imports.

Following an incident on April 18, 2026, when IRGC personnel fired upon two Indian-linked vessels, India summoned the Iranian envoy in New Delhi on the same day to demand safe and uninterrupted passage for Indian ships. Iran maintained that "Indian friends" were in safe hands, even while conducting strict monitoring and allowing only selected vessels to pass.

The Indian Navy significantly enhanced its maritime posture by deploying two aircraft carrier battle groups, led by INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya. Operating together in the Persian Gulf, they amounted to a formidable force for sea control, with over 35 aircraft, numerous warships and submarines, thereby highlighting India's commitment to security in the Indian Ocean region,



clearly projecting power and strengthening maritime diplomacy.

This move, combined with New Delhi's high-level diplomatic pressure on Iran, proved effective against the IRGC and resulted in Indian-flagged vessels being allowed passage through the highly volatile region where shipping from other nations faced severe restrictions. In early May 2026, the Indian Government decisively asserted maritime rights and informed Tehran that no special permission or "protection fees" were required for Indian vessels, which would move under active guidance from the Indian Navy. A significant outcome of these actions was that over 14 (another version places the figure at 22) India-bound ships carrying energy cargo were escorted through the Strait of Hormuz with the assistance of the Indian Navy.

The Indian Navy has reportedly received praise for its effective, independent and proactive security operations, as well as for being a rapid-response security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. By successfully tackling piracy and maritime threats — such as the MV Lila Norfolk, FV Al Naeemi, FV Iman (all in January 2024), and the MV Ruen hijacking in

March 2024, to name a few — while utilising advanced surveillance and ensuring open, rules-based sea lanes, the Indian Navy has come to be recognised as a force that guarantees stability and safeguards regional interests. Its task forces continue securing Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and conducting daring rescue missions for commercial vessels targeted in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. By hosting the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2026 in February, India showcased its growing indigenous shipbuilding capabilities and strong international partnerships, with participation from 75 nations, making it one of the largest maritime engagements in the region. Also in February, the Indian Navy assumed command of the 47-nation Combined Task Force 154 to focus on training and maritime security — an indicator of growing trust in India's professional expertise.

India has also increasingly come to be viewed as a nation that maintains its security role independently rather than formally joining US-led coalitions, a significant aspect of its foreign policy.

The US Navy, on the other hand, has reportedly faced operational challenges in the Red Sea. One major report indicated that the USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group encountered significant difficulties during its deployment there. Reports also cited multiple F/A-18 Super Hornets lost in 2025-26, with some incidents involving jets going overboard due to failed landings and hangar accidents. These losses occurred during a high-tempo campaign against Houthi forces in Yemen. Investigations into these incidents reportedly

pointed towards training gaps, equipment failures and intense operational pressure.

On April 9, 2026, the US Navy confirmed that a highly advanced and expensive MQ-4C Triton high-altitude, long-endurance (HALE) surveillance drone had been lost over the Persian Gulf. Each unit is estimated to cost between \$200 million and \$240 million. The drone disappeared near the Strait of Hormuz after sending an in-flight emergency signal. The US Naval Safety Command classified the incident as a "Class A mishap", indicating that the drone was destroyed and that the loss exceeded \$2.5 million.

The incident occurred amid rising tensions in the region involving Iran. While some reports speculated about possible interception or electronic warfare interference, official reports at the time stated that the drone had "crashed", with no injuries to personnel. This was the first known operational loss of an MQ-4C Triton, considered a major financial and strategic setback, as only about 20 of these drones were reportedly in service as of 2025. The incident followed a series of reported drone losses in the region, bringing the total value of lost or damaged aerial assets to over \$700 million at the time. Despite such massive losses and the suffering of millions of innocent people, the US President appears to have no plans for peace.

The writer is a VSM (Retd), a strategic affairs analyst and former spokesperson, Defence Ministry and Indian Army

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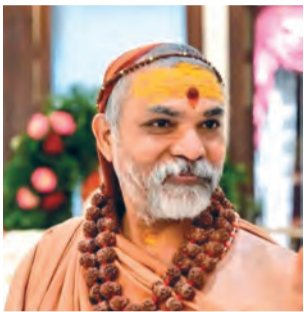
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Order Order

HC rejects contempt against Swami Avimukteshwaranand

The Allahabad High Court on Friday rejected the contempt application filed against Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati and his disciple Mukundanand Brahmachari, seeking punitive action over alleged disobedience of court order. Ashutosh Brahmachari Maharaj had filed the petition alleging violation of court order passed while granting anticipatory bail to Avimukteshwaranand in a POCSE case registered at Prayagraj. Rejecting the application, Justice Dinesh Pathak observed that the applicant could file for cancellation of anticipatory bail granted by the court, if he is violating bail conditions.



In the contempt application it was alleged that despite the order of High Court, Avimukteshwaranand is holding several meetings and is making statements in violation of High Court order. Earlier, Justice Rohit Ranjan Agarwal had recused himself from hearing the contempt petition saying that he does not want to hear the matter. After this, the chief justice nominated Justice Pathak to hear the matter. (PTI)

Bail to group of men held over Ganga iftar row

The Allahabad High Court on Friday granted bail to a group of men accused of consuming non-vegetarian food during an iftar party on a boat in the Ganga in Varanasi and throwing the leftover waste into the river. Justice Rajiv Lochan Shukla passed the order while hearing the bail application filed by the accused, and fixed May 18 for hearing the pleas of some other accused in the case.



Earlier, the High Court had granted one week time to the state Government's counsel to file a counter affidavit. In the bail application, the counsel for the accused claimed that his clients were falsely implicated in the case, and that they were not named in the FIR. The FIR was lodged on March 16 based on a complaint filed by Rajat Jaiswal, the president of the Varanasi chapter of the BJP Yuva Morcha, claiming that the incident hurt the sentiments of the Hindus. According to the complaint, the accused broke their Ramzan fast on a boat in the Ganga on March 15, ate meat, and threw the leftover waste into the "holy" river. (PTI)

Won't pass order in favour of mining lease holders for now, says SC on Aravalli row

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday said it won't pass any order in favour of mining lease holders for now as it has been getting "quite disturbing" feedback regarding mining in the Aravalli hills and range.



The apex court said there were specific ecological issues and in February it had asked the environment ministry and other stakeholders to suggest names of domain experts for a panel to define the Aravalli hills and ranges. "We will not hear this

matter in a piecemeal (manner). We will not permit any activity unless we are fully satisfied," a bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi said after

the matter, listed for hearing on Friday, was mentioned. The top court is hearing a suo motu case titled "In Re: Definition of Aravalli hills and ranges and ancillary issue".

SC seeks rationalisation of airfares, asks Centre to provide relief to people

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday said there should be some rationalisation of airfares and asked the Centre to provide relief to flyers.

Mehta said the Government was not disputing the problem and is treating the issue as non-adversarial and considering all aspects. The bench was hearing a plea filed by social activist S Laxminarayana, who sought a robust and independent regulator that ensures transparency and passenger protection across the civil aviation sector and regulatory guidelines to control the "unpredictable fluctuations" in airfare and ancillary charges imposed by private airlines in India. Senior advocate Ravindra

Srivastava, appearing for Laxminarayana submitted that rules are already there under the Aircraft Act of 1937 but the problem is that they were not followed. Mehta agreed that old rules are in place but new ones being formulated under the Bharatiya Vayuyan Adhiniyam of 2024 that came into effect in January, 2025. Srivastava



said till the new rules are framed, the old rules will continue and it says that if the DGCA is satisfied that in a particular situation, the airlines are indulging in charging predatory or excessive fares, it will issue directions. "They are not issuing any directions. The rules are there, the power is there but it is a case of non-exercise of

powers," he submitted. The bench asked Srivastava to reply to the counter-affidavit filed by the Centre and recorded the solicitor general's submission that consultation process for formulation of rules under the new regime is going on. The bench posted the matter for hearing on July 13. On April 30, the top court pulled up the Centre for not filing its affidavit on a petition which sought regulatory guidelines to control the "unpredictable fluctuations" in airfare and ancillary charges imposed by private airlines in India. It had asked the Centre to file an affidavit giving reasons for why the affidavit has not been filed and why further time was sought for it.



NEET paper leak: Lokhande sent to 6-day CBI custody

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A Delhi court on Friday sent NEET paper leak case accused Dhananjay Nivrutti Lokhande to six days' CBI custody, saying the agency needed to unearth the entire conspiracy, identify and arrest others, recover evidence and prevent tampering of evidence.

Special CBI judge Ajay Gupta was hearing the federal agency's plea seeking six days' custodial interrogation of Lokhande, who had been arrested from Ahilyanagar in Maharashtra, and brought to the court on a transit remand. "Allegedly, there is a larger conspiracy angle present in

this case; the investigation is at its very initial stage, and the custody of the accused Dhananjay Nivrutti Lokhande has been sought to unearth the entire conspiracy as well as arrest all the other active members of this organised paper leak gang and also for the recovery of all the relevant incriminating material," Judge Gupta said.

He noted that, according to Special Public Prosecutor Neetu Singh, Lokhande's custody was required to prevent further tampering with the evidence, as some of the accused persons had already deleted the incriminating data from their mobile phones.



"Therefore the CBI seeking six days' police custody remand of the accused is hereby allowed, and he is remanded to police custody for six days, subject to his

medical examination," the judge said.

Five more accused, Yash Yadav, Mangilal Khatik, Vikash Biwal, Dinesh Biwal and Shubham Khairnar, were

earlier remanded to CBI custody on Thursday till May 20. The court cited CBI's submission that the NEET 2026 exam was conducted on May 3, but before the scheduled date, a paper containing a substantial number of questions, which also appeared in the exam, was leaked and circulated in an organised manner for monetary gain.

It said that a fact-finding inquiry was conducted by the Special Operations Group (SOG), Rajasthan, which reportedly confirmed the authenticity of certain leaked questions. "It has been submitted that until now, six accused persons, namely, Yash Yadav, Mangilal Khatik, Vikash Biwal,

Dinesh Biwal, Shubham Madhukar Khairnar and Dhananjay Nivrutti Lokhande, have been arrested and, allegedly, they are part of the organised gang who, in conspiracy with each other, leaked and circulated the confidential NEET examination paper 2026 for monetary gain," the court said.

On Lokhande's role, the court noted that according to the probe, he was known to Shubham.

It said that after receiving the material from another accused, he transmitted it to Shubham, and that there had been banking transactions of around ₹6 lakh between them.

Delhi court orders OpIndia to remove articles on journalist Swati Chaturvedi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A Delhi court directed the website OpIndia to remove two articles, published around six years ago, about journalist Swati Chaturvedi, holding that the continued circulation of the pieces could cause "serious and irreparable injury" to her professional reputation while the defamation suit remains

shows" that Chaturvedi was involved in "running extortion rackets" as alleged in the impugned articles. Court observed that because Chaturvedi is a journalist and public commentator, her "professional reputation and credibility are of paramount importance."

"...The plaintiff shall suffer irreparable loss and injury in case the impugned articles



pending, Meenu Kaushik, district judge, Patiala House Court in an order dated May 13 noted that the "source articles" produced by the defendants did not prima facie support the claims made against Chaturvedi and accepted her argument that many allegedly defamatory statements could not be linked to material available in the public domain.

According to Chaturvedi, the articles described her as "delusional", accused her of plagiarism and fabrication, and alleged that she ran "extortion rackets".

The court made sharp observation regarding one of the most serious allegations. It said the material filed by OpIndia "prima facie nowhere

continued to be in public domain as the same may continue to cause harm to the reputation of the plaintiff." It said while directing OpIndia to remove/block the impugned articles during the pendency of the suit/till further orders.

In their defence, OpIndia had argued that any injunction would amount to a restriction on free speech and relied on legal precedents cautioning courts against prior restraint on media publications. However, the court held that temporarily taking down the articles would not prejudice the defendants because they remain free to establish the truth of their claims during trial. Journalist Chaturvedi is represented by advocate Akshat Gupta.

SC to hear cases online on Mondays, Fridays

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday decided to hear cases exclusively through video conference on Mondays and Fridays, and judges "unanimously resolved" to encourage car-pooling arrangements amongst themselves in order to ensure optimum fuel utilisation.

The move came following a call by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on cutting down avoidable expenditure due to the ongoing West Asia crisis.

"Matters listed on miscellaneous days (ie, on Mondays, Fridays, or such other days as declared to be

miscellaneous), and matters listed during the Court's partial working days, shall be heard by video-conferencing only.

"The Registry shall ensure that links for the video-conferencing are sent in a timely manner, stable video-conferencing facilities are maintained and timely technical assistance facilities are extended so as to avoid any inconvenience to the Hon'ble Court," a circular issued said.

The communication from the apex court also said that till further orders, up to 50 per cent of staff in each branch or section of the registry are permitted to work from home (WFH) for up to



two days every week, provided that the remaining staff remain available in the office to ensure uninterrupted functioning.

The Registrar concerned shall ensure that a weekly roster is prepared before

the commencement of the week. Staff who are permitted to work from home are directed to remain available on the telephone and be ready to attend office, in case of requirement, at any time.

HC seeks ED's reply on Al-Falah University chairman's bail plea

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Delhi High Court on Friday sought the stand of the Enforcement Directorate on a regular bail application by Al-Falah University group chairman Jawad Ahmed Siddiqui in a money laundering case.

Justice Saurabh Banerjee issued notice to the agency, asking it to file its response.

While the court listed the main bail plea for hearing in July, it said it would hear Siddiqui's plea for interim bail at the end of this month.

The trial court had rejected Siddiqui's bail application on May 2.

Siddiqui was arrested for his alleged involvement in a money laundering case



linked to the generation of illicit funds from the fees paid by students at his educational institution in Faridabad.

He was arrested on November 18, 2025 in the case registered by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

The ED probe in the case stems from two FIRs by the

Delhi Police Crime Branch alleging that Al Falah University falsely projected NAAC accreditation and UGC recognition to mislead students and parents.

The agency has alleged the university generated ₹415.10 crore between 2018 and 2025 and that funds collected from students were diverted for personal use.

SC ALLOWS REMISSION OF MADHUMITA SHUKLA MURDER CASE CONVICT

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Observing that reformation should be the focus of the State and not retribution, the Supreme Court on Friday allowed a plea seeking premature release of one of the convicts in the 2003 murder case of 26-year-old poet Madhumita Shukla.

A bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan set aside the order of the Ministry of Home Affairs dated July 9, 2025, rejecting the



Uttarakhand Government's recommendation for premature release of convict Rohit Chaturvedi. The top court noted that Chaturvedi has spent 22 years in jail without remission.

"Crime is one thing, reformation is different. The focus of the State should be reformation, not retribution," the bench observed. The apex court noted that Chaturvedi is already out on bail and need not surrender. Shukla was shot dead on May 9, 2003, in Lucknow's Paper Mill Colony while she was pregnant.

Some unemployed 'youngsters like cockroaches' become media, activists; attack system, says CJI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Likening some unemployed youngsters to cockroaches, Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant on Friday said they go on to "become" media, social media, and RTI activists and start attacking the system.

The comments came while a bench of CJI Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi was pulling up a lawyer for "pursuing" a senior advocate designation. It said there were already "parasites" in society who attack the system and asked the petitioner whether he wanted to join hands with them. "The entire world may be eligible to become senior (advocate), but at least



you are not entitled," the bench told the petitioner lawyer.

A visibly anguished CJI observed that if the Delhi High Court would confer senior advocate designation upon the petitioner, the apex court would

set that aside seeing his professional conduct. The CJI also referred to the kind of language used by the petitioner on Facebook.

"There are already parasites of society who attack the system and you want to join hands with them?" he said.

"There are youngsters like cockroaches, who don't get any employment or have any place in profession. Some of them become media, some of them become social media, RTI activists and other activists and they start attacking everyone," he said.

The bench also asked the petitioner whether he did not have any other litigation.

Unnao rape case: SC asks HC to decide Sengar plea afresh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday set aside a Delhi High Court order suspending the life sentence of former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the 2017 Unnao rape case and asked it to decide the plea afresh.

A bench comprising Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi also asked the High Court to make endeavours to decide the main plea of Sengar against his conviction and life imprisonment in the case within two months.

It further said that if it was not possible for the High Court to decide the main



plea expeditiously, then it should pass an order on a plea of Sengar seeking the suspension of the life term in the case before the start of the summer vacation there.

The bench, which had earlier set aside the HC order granting bail to Sengar after a huge public uproar over the issue, said that it did not express any opinion on the merits of the case and the

High Court could proceed with it afresh.

The CJI also asked the HC to decide afresh issues like whether an MLA can be treated as a public servant for being prosecuted under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

Earlier, the top court had deferred to the first week of May the hearing on a petition filed by the CBI challenging the suspension of life imprisonment of the former MLA in the rape case.

On December 29 last year, the top court stayed the Delhi High Court order suspending Sengar's life sentence and said he shall not be released from custody.



PSU banks write-offs to multi-year lows in FY26

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ May

Loan write-offs by public sector banks declined to multi-year lows in the fiscal year 2025-26 on the back of lower slippages and better recoveries.

As per an analysis of bank earnings by PTI, most banks including Bank of Baroda, Union Bank of India, Punjab National Bank, Central Bank of India, Indian Overseas Bank, and Indian Bank had write-offs which were the lowest in up to eight years.

Bank of Baroda reported ₹6,330 crore write-offs in FY26, lowest since FY18, Bank of India reported ₹5,735 crore write-off lowest since FY16, and Indian Bank reported

₹6,695 crore write-off lowest since FY19, while Indian Overseas Bank's write-off stood at ₹1,189 crore in FY26, which was also a multi-year low, the data compiled from banks' investor presentations showed.

Central Bank of India reported a regular and technical write-off of ₹1,718 crore in FY26, lowest since FY22.

Banks typically write off loans when there is little chance of recovery through usual channels, and need to make 100 per cent provisions on such debt.

Loan write-offs help banks clean up their balance sheets and show lower non-performing assets (NPA) on their books. However, lenders insist that recovery efforts continue



even after a write-off, which leads to a write-back of the provisions made earlier and bolsters profits.

Sachin Sachdeva, vice president, sector head — financial sector ratings at ICRA said write-offs in the PSBs have been declining over the past few years and the same can

be attributed primarily to lower incremental slippages and healthy recoveries.

"Fresh non-performing advances (NPA) formation has declined steadily, and the existing pool of legacy stressed assets continues to shrink. Besides, PSBs have also strengthened their provi-

sion coverage ratios (PCR) significantly, thereby reducing the need for write-offs. Recoveries have also improved and the banks are looking at more resolution led asset quality management over balance sheet clean-up through write-offs," Sachdeva added.

Meanwhile, asset quality of public sector banks improved significantly during financial year 2025-26, with gross NPA ratio declining to 1.93 per cent and net NPA ratio to 0.39 per cent as on March 31 2026, reflecting historically low levels of stressed assets, according to the Ministry of Finance release published on Tuesday.

Further, each state-owned lender maintained provision-

ing coverage ratio of above 90 per cent, indicating prudent provisioning practices, improved underwriting standards, effective risk management mechanisms and strengthened balance sheet resilience, release added.

Fresh slippages continued to decline during the financial year 2025-26, with slippage ratio reducing to 0.7 per cent. Total recoveries, including recoveries from written-off accounts, stood at ₹86,971 crore, reflecting improved recovery mechanisms and better credit discipline across PSBs, Ministry of Finance said.

Improved asset quality, healthy credit expansion and higher income contributed to improved profitability of PSBs during FY 2025-26.

US team likely to visit India next month for trade talks

The US team is expected to visit India next month for trade talks, though no dates have been finalised yet, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said on Friday.

The Indian side visited Washington, DC, in April for an in-person round of meetings with their US counterparts to finalise the details of the interim pact and take forward the negotiations under the broader bilateral trade agreement (BTA).

"We expect the US team to visit soon... not this month... may be next month," he told reporters here.

He said India is engaged with the US on trade deal and it would be signed at an opportune time.

He also said that India is engaged with the US on section 301 investigations.

India and the US issued a joint statement on February 7 finalising a framework for an interim trade agreement regarding reciprocal and mutually beneficial trade. The framework reaffirmed the countries' commitment to the broader India-US Bilateral Trade Agreement negotiations. (PTI)



Fuel price hike due to global energy crisis: Minister

Union Minister G Kishan Reddy on Friday said the fuel price hike was unavoidable due to the global energy crisis and urged people to understand the circumstances behind the increase.

Responding to the fuel price hike by state-owned oil companies, he also alleged that opposition parties were trying to "provoke people."

"The Government led by PM Narendra Modi ji took this step under unavoidable circumstances. No domestic issue is responsible for this. Countries and people across the world have been affected by the energy crisis," Union Minister of Coal and Mines told reporters here.

He alleged that some parties were trying to incite people and spread misinformation about the issue.

Reddy appealed to the public to understand the inevitability of the price hike. Although it was expected that the West Asia conflict would ease and fuel transportation would improve, crude oil shipments are still not reaching the country smoothly, he said. (PTI)



Crude oil futures rise amid fears of disruptions

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

Crude oil prices rose more than 3 per cent to ₹10,073 per barrel in futures trade on Friday, tracking sharp gains in global benchmarks amid concerns over supply disruptions triggered by the US-Iran war.

On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), crude oil for May delivery gained ₹349, or 3.59 per cent, to ₹10,073 per barrel in a business turnover of 9,898 lots.

Similarly, the July contract also advanced ₹344, or 3.68 per cent, to ₹9,694 per barrel in 9,315 lots.

Analysts said fears of tighter global supplies and continued disruptions around the Strait of Hormuz supported crude



oil prices. Global benchmarks also rallied sharply, with Brent oil for the July contract gaining \$3.54, or 3.35 per cent, to \$109.26 per barrel, while West Texas Intermediate (WTI) for June delivery rose nearly 4 per cent to \$105 per barrel in New York.

"Crude oil prices gained steam on Friday, with Brent

climbing to \$108 per barrel and WTI trading near \$105, headed for weekly gains of more than 6 per cent, fuelled by deepening concerns over supply disruptions linked to the ongoing US-Iran conflict," Kaynat Chainwala, AVP Commodity Research, Kotak Securities, said.

Forex reserves jump by \$6.295b

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Mumbai

India's forex reserves jumped by \$6.295 billion to \$696.988 billion during the week ended May 8, the Reserve Bank said on Friday.

The overall reserves had dropped by \$7.794 billion to \$690.693 billion in the previous reporting week.

The forex kitty had expanded to an all-time high of \$728.494 billion during the week ended February 27 this year, before the onset of the West Asia crisis, which led to several weeks of drop, as the rupee came under pressure and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had to intervene in the forex market through dollar sales.

For the week ended May 8, foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, increased by \$562 million to \$552.387 billion, the central bank's data showed.

Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effects of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units, such as the euro, pound, and yen, held in the foreign exchange reserves.



Value of gold reserves jumped by \$5.637 billion to \$120.853 billion during the week, the RBI said.

The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were up by \$84 million to \$18.873 billion, the apex bank said.

India's reserve position with the IMF was also up by \$12 million to \$4.875 billion at the end of the reporting week, according to the apex bank's data.

Stock markets close lower on weak rupee, inflation doubts

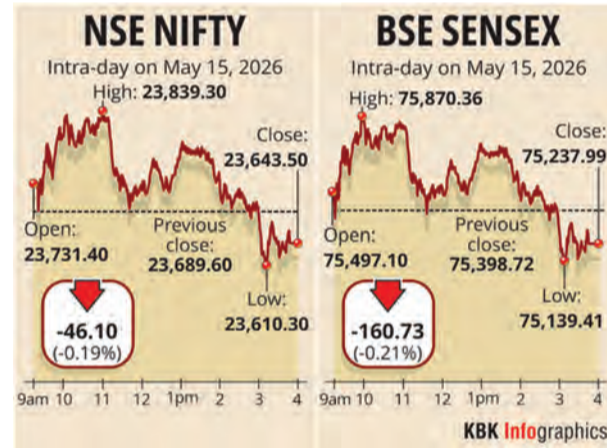
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Mumbai

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty surrendered early gains to close lower on Friday due to selling in metal, oil & gas and PSU bank shares and caution among investors amid surging crude oil prices.

The 30-share BSE Sensex dropped 160.73 points, or 0.21 per cent, to settle at 75,237.99, after swinging between gains and losses during the session. The benchmark had rallied nearly 470 points in early trade before losing momentum.

The 50-share NSE Nifty settled lower by 46.10 points, or 0.19 per cent, at 23,643.50, snapping its two-day gaining

streak. Tata Steel, State Bank of India, Eternal, Reliance Industries, UltraTech Cement, Mahindra & Mahindra, Bharat Electronics Ltd, Larsen & Toubro, Trent, Axis Bank and Asian Paints were the major laggards among Sensex stocks. On the other hand, Infosys, Tech Mahindra, PowerGrid, Adani Ports, Maruti Suzuki India, Bharti Airtel, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Hindustan Unilever, and Sun Pharmaceuticals were major winners. "Investors have turned cautious post the recent relief rally, with rising bond yields, a weaker rupee, and fresh fuel price hikes reviving inflation concerns," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Ltd, said.



Favourable valuations and a solid Q4 earnings print are cushioning the downside. Focus has shifted to potential

fiscal and monetary measures to defend the rupee and stabilise the Balance of Payment, he added.

Rupee hits record low of 96.14/USD

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Mumbai

The Indian rupee crashed below the 96/\$mark on Friday before closing at an all-time low of 95.86 (provisional) against the US dollar as elevated crude oil prices and inflation concerns added to the downside pressure on the rupee.

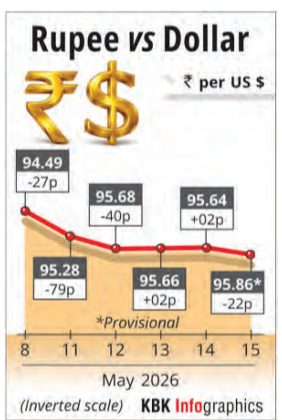
Rupee has registered over 6 per cent losses so far this year, and in the past six trading sessions, it has depreciated nearly 2 per cent as Iran war risk escalation pushed crude oil prices higher. The dollar index moved northwards after strong US retail sales and stable labour market data reduced expectations of aggressive Federal Reserve rate cuts.

Forex traders said global uncertainties, relatively high valuations, and the lack of AI-led investment opportunities have weighed on capital flows.

Moreover, weak net FDI inflows are likely to exert pressure on the balance of payments, while rising crude oil prices stoke inflation worries.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 95.86, then slumped to a record low of 96.14 in intraday trade, registering a fall of 50 paise from its previous close.

The USD/INR pair finally



settled at 95.86 (provisional) against the US dollar, registering a fall of 22 paise from its previous close, helped by likely RBI intervention.

On Thursday, the rupee weakened to a fresh record low of 95.96 before closing with a marginal gain of 2 paise at 95.64 against the US dollar.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading at 99.15, higher by 0.34 per cent.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading up 3.14 per cent at \$109.04 per barrel in futures trade.

On the domestic equity market front, Sensex fell 160.73 points to settle at 75,237.99, while Nifty declined 46.10 points to 23,643.50.

India, UK hope to resolve steel issue, implement CETA soon: Commerce Secy



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

India and the UK are working on a "unique and creative solution" to address issues arising from Britain's recent steel safeguard measure so that the proposed Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) can be operationalised at an early date, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said on Friday.

The two countries, on July 24, 2025, signed the agreement. "We are very near to operationalising that. There are a few sticking points, as you are aware, the UK has come ahead with a steel measure recently, which was not factored in while negotiating the India-UK deal. We are working together to find a unique, creative solution around the steel measure also so that we can operationalise the India-UK CETA at an early date," he told reporters here.

From July 1, 2026, the UK will limit tariff-free steel imports, reducing overall quota volumes by 60 per cent compared to the steel safeguard measure. Any imports above these levels will then face a 50 per cent tariff.

Exports clock 5-month high growth of 13.48 per cent in April

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

Exports rose by 13.78 per cent to \$43.56 billion in April, the highest monthly outbound shipments in more than four years, driven by petroleum products amid a surge in crude oil prices, but trade deficit widened to a three-month high of \$28.38 billion due to an uptick in imports.

Imports grew by 10 per cent year-on-year to a six-month high of \$71.94 billion in April, inflating the trade deficit. The gap between imports and exports, or trade deficit, was \$27.1 billion in April 2025 and \$20.67 billion in March 2026. Commerce

Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said that despite global geopolitical tensions, the country's exports are registering healthy growth. Exports grew at the fastest pace in five months in April.

"The positive growth in value may also have some contribution from the price because prices of many things are going up so that may have some positive impact," he told reporters here.

The key drivers of exports include electronic goods (40.31 per cent), meat and dairy (48 per cent), petroleum products (34.66 per cent), engineering items (8.76 per cent), and pharmaceuticals (7.12 per cent). Electronic



exports rose to \$5.17 billion, while shipments of petroleum products were worth \$9.6 billion in April. Brent crude oil prices have risen by \$11.47, or nearly 12 per cent, to \$107.51 per barrel on May

15 from \$96.04 per barrel on March 16, 2026. At its peak, Brent crude had surged by \$30.37, or about 32 per cent, to \$126.41 per barrel on April 30 compared with the March 16 level.

Diversification of exports in new markets has also helped shipments record the highest growth rate in five months in April. Healthy growth has been registered in destinations such as Singapore, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Australia, and Vietnam.

However, the country's merchandise exports to the West Asian region declined 28 per cent to \$4.16 billion last month against \$5.78 billion in April 2025.

Imports from the region also declined by 31.64 per cent to \$10.47 billion in April from \$15.32 billion in the year-ago period.

Sugar export ban will trigger price crash, hurt factories, argue industry experts

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar

Sugar industry experts have slammed the Centre's sudden decision to ban sugar exports, warning that the move will trigger a domestic price crash, inflate debts of factories, and impact cultivators.

India has announced a ban on sugar export till September 30 this year to enhance domestic availability and contain prices. Banning exports of a commodity helps prevent price rise amid inflation concerns and uncertainty caused by the West Asia conflict.

Bhairavnath Thombre, president of the West Indian Sugar Mills Association, warned that domestic prices



have already begun to slide, and the sugar factories will find it difficult to clear their Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) dues.

"When the Government's sudden ban on exports till September 30 will tarnish the image of Indian sugar factories in the global market," he said.

He said that India exports sugar to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal and Arab countries,

and the ban will endanger businesses that have already negotiated deals with these countries.

"Factories in Maharashtra have a Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) debt of nearly ₹1,550 crore, while the dues are around ₹12,000 crore nationally. The area under sugarcane cultivation may not decrease, but cultivators will not earn enough from their yield," Thombre said. He noted that if the Government has banned sugar exports, it should increase the procurement of sugar-based ethanol.

The Government should increase ethanol use in petrol to 30 per cent from the current 20 per cent. This will increase ethanol procurement from the sugar factories, he said.

OMCs, paint stocks slide after fuel price hike

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

Shares of oil marketing companies and paint manufacturers declined up to 3 per cent in early trade on Friday after petrol and diesel prices were increased by ₹3 per litre across the country.

The fuel price hike, the first in more than four years, amid mounting losses suffered by fuel retailers due to elevated global crude oil prices.

On the BSE, shares of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd declined 2.71 per cent, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd dipped 2.39 per cent, Indian Oil Corporation fell 1.85 per cent.

The stock of paint manufacturers, which use crude-linked derivatives as key raw materials, also traded lower.



Indigo Paints declined 1.36 per cent, Asian Paints slipped 0.42 per cent, and Berger Paints India fell 0.14 per cent.

Analysts said the modest increase in retail fuel prices failed to fully offset concerns around elevated crude costs and put pressure on market margins.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 1.23 per cent to \$107.02 per barrel.

"The sharp increase in petrol, diesel, and CNG prices reflects the direct impact of the escalating West Asia energy crisis and supply disruptions around the Strait of Hormuz," Ajit Mishra' SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

With global crude oil prices surging from nearly \$69 in February to above \$120 per barrel and current-

ly at \$107 mark, oil marketing companies were under mounting pressure due to rising input costs and shrinking marketing margins, he added.

Energy prices globally shot up after the US-Israeli attack on Iran on February 28, and the subsequent retaliation by Tehran effectively shut down the Strait of Hormuz - the sea lane through which a fifth of the world's oil and gas transits.

Crude oil, the input raw material for making petrol and diesel, surged above \$120 per barrel during the peak of the West Asia conflict, as opposed to the \$70-72 range before the conflict.

Though prices have moderated in recent weeks, they continue to remain elevated around \$104-110 per barrel range, keeping pressure on state-owned fuel retailers.



FROM THE WORLD

UK
11 Far Right extremists blocked

Eleven foreign far-right extremists have been blocked from entering the UK ahead of massive protest rallies planned for the weekend, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said on Friday. One of those barred from the UK is US-based extremist Valentina Gomez, accused of using "inflammatory and dehumanising rhetoric" about Muslim communities. Starmer also took to social media with a video appeal for the British public to "fight for the soul of the country" as thousands are expected to converge upon central London on Saturday. There will also be a pro-Palestine counter-protest joined by Stand Up to Racism against the backdrop of what the Metropolitan Police has described as an security operation. "We're in a fight for the soul of this country, and the United Kingdom march this weekend is a stark reminder of exactly what we are up against," said Starmer.

AUSTRALIA
Neo-Nazi group banned

Australia identified a neo-Nazi network as the second organization being banned under its new law criminalising hate groups and support for them. The group, formerly known as the National Socialist Network and sometimes called White Australia, said it would disband after the Government in January passed the law allowing certain organisations to be banned. The law was in response to the antisemitic attack on a Hanukkah celebration at Sydney's Bondi Beach in December in which 15 people were killed. The National Socialist Network "changed their name, but didn't change the fact that they were still an organization and were still engaging in the same sort of behavior that met the thresholds for this legislation," Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke told reporters in Canberra on Friday. The new law allowed for hate groups that didn't otherwise fit Australia's definition of a terrorist organisation to be banned.

China to buy 200 Boeing planes, deal may expand, says Trump

RIO YAMAT/BILL BARROW
On Board Air Force One

Aircraft manufacturer Boeing will make its first major sale to China in nearly a decade with an order for 200 planes, President Donald Trump told reporters on Air Force One on Friday, a deal he said had been made during his summit with China's President Xi Jinping this week and that could grow to as many as 750 planes.

The White House has not released details of the deal, and the company itself has not commented. Boeing CEO Kelly Ortberg had joined Trump for the trip to Beijing, one of a large group of CEOs seeking to sell products and services to China. For Boeing,



President Donald Trump talking with China's President Xi Jinping at the Zhongnanhai leadership compound

the deal would mark a significant breakthrough in a market that was once central to its long-term growth.

Trump also said the deal would benefit General Electric, which he said would supply 400 to 450 engines. General Electric did not immediately comment on

the agreement. Last month, Ortberg signalled confidence that any broader US-China agreement would include aircraft purchases, telling investors he expected Trump's meeting with Xi to be a "meaningful opportunity" for Boeing. Ortberg took over in 2024, a calamitous

year for Boeing as it came under intensifying scrutiny over production and quality failures and faced mounting financial pressure. In January 2024, a panel known as a door plug blew off a 737 Max shortly after takeoff from Portland, Oregon, renewing scrutiny of Boeing's manufacturing practices.

Months later, the US Justice Department revived a criminal case against Boeing tied to the two fatal Max crashes, although prosecutors later reached an agreement with Boeing to dismiss the case, committing the company to an additional \$1.1 billion in fines, compensation for victims' families and internal safety and quality improvements. (PTI)

Ceasefire with Iran is a favour to Pak: Trump

SAGAR KULKARNI
Washington

US President Donald Trump on Friday said he agreed to a ceasefire with Iran as a "favour" to Pakistan and ruled out any further bombing of the Persian Gulf nation, with which it has been at odds for several decades.

The US and Israel's war on Iran started on February 28, and attacks have been paused since April 8, when the warring sides agreed to a ceasefire brokered by Pakistan. "We did the ceasefire as a request from another nation. I would have really benefited from it, but we did it as a favour to



Pakistan. They are terrific people, the Field Marshal and the Prime Minister," Trump told reporters on Air Force One while returning from China to the US. Trump reiterated his

resolve not to allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons and to make them give up the enriched uranium Tehran has accumulated over the years.

He said the Iranian negotiators were claiming that their nuclear facilities were damaged in the American air strikes and that they were not in a position to retrieve the nuclear fuel.

"They came up with a terrible secret. They said that they can't remove it because they don't have the technology to remove it. They don't have the time and the practice," Trump said in response to questions on Iran. Trump said Chinese

President Xi Jinping was also in favour of opening up the Strait of Hormuz, which is a key trade route for 20 per cent of the global oil supplies. US Vice President JD Vance led a team of negotiators for the first-ever direct face-to-face talks with Iranian leaders in Islamabad on April 11-12, which got the warring nations into prolonged negotiations to end the decades-long hostilities.

The US has been insisting that Iran give a clear commitment to end its uranium enrichment programme in exchange for the lifting of sanctions and the release of billions in frozen Iranian funds. (PTI)

Italian expert joins Maldives search after fatal dive accident

GIADA ZAMPANO
Rome

An Italian expert joined police divers and rescue vessels for searches in the Maldives on Friday, a day after five Italian divers were killed in a scuba accident, authorities said.

Italy's Foreign Ministry said the five divers "apparently died while attempting to explore caves at a depth of 50 metres (164 feet)" on Thursday. It said the circumstances of their death remain under investigation. Maldivian authorities said they launched a major rescue operation after the incident on Thursday, deploying boats, aircraft and dive teams to search the area. One diver was found dead in a deep underwater cave, with the body recovered from nearly



60 metres (200 feet) below the surface, the Maldives National Defence Force said in statement.

The remaining four divers were believed to be inside the same cave, and additional teams and specialized equipment were being sent for what officials described as a dangerous, high-risk operation. The Italian foreign ministry did not provide informa-

tion on the recovery of bodies. It said an Italian expert was assisting the coast guard and Maldivian vessels in the search operation on Friday.

It said officials planned a dive to evaluate access to an underwater cave in the Vaavu Atoll, where the accident occurred, but rough weather conditions could delay the recovery. (AP)

FICCI delegation engages Chinese industry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Shanghai

The Consulate General of India in Shanghai hosted a high-level interaction with a delegation from Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) led by FICCI President Anant Goenka on 15 May 2026, bringing together leading Indian industry representatives and prominent Chinese business leaders to explore opportunities for strengthening bilateral economic cooperation.

In his keynote address, Consul General Pratik Mathur highlighted the achievements of India's ongoing economic transformation under the Government of India's vision of Viksit Bharat and Atmanirbhar Bharat. He emphasised that India's policy focus on resilient supply chains, ease of doing



Personnel of the Indian Navy and Royal Malaysian Navy posing for a photograph onboard INS Sagardhwani during the ship's visit to Port Klang, Malaysia

UK Government faces weeks of uncertainty over the PM future

DANICA KIRKA
London

Britain's Government faces a prolonged period of uncertainty after a week of maneuvering within the governing Labour Party failed to oust Prime Minister Keir Starmer but started the clock on a leadership contest that could last well into the summer.

Although Starmer vowed to fight on after a bruising week in which one Cabinet member resigned, dozens of lawmakers called for the prime minister to quit and his new policy proposals were largely ignored, some observers believe it's only a matter of time before he steps aside.

The message of the past week "is that Labour seems to have made up its mind that Keir Starmer is going to have to go," said Tim Bale, a professor of politics at Queen Mary



University of London. Former Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner announced she had cleared up a tax issue that forced her to resign from the Cabinet last year, thus freeing her up as well. (AP)

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1.	For Verka Head Office, Chandigarh Hiring of Swift Dzire car (AC) or equivalent vehicle along with driver to be provided on hire basis.	01 No.
2.	For Verka Branch Sales Office, Delhi Hiring of commercial vehicles for supply of Verka milk products and other material from products store of Milkfed branch sales office delhi at 5751, Verka House, Dush Bandhu Gupta Road, Dev Nagar Karol Bagh delhi-110005 upto 500kg, 750 kg, 1250 kg, 1700 kg, 3500 kg, 4500 kg, 6000 kg & 10,000 kg for supply of Verka Milk Products from Milkfed Branch Sales Office to different station of Delhi/NCR area.	Annual initially & may be extended for another equal period
3.	For Verka Jalandhar Dairy a) Disposal of unserviceable scrap material/Vehicles one time basis. b) Design supply installation & Commissioning of 2 no's of gas cum oil fired package boiler capacity (1x6) TPH & (1x8) TPH along with allied civil works and dismantling of existing two numbers of 5TPH oil fired boilers. c) Supply installation & Commissioning of 160 No's of batteries for 300*2 KVA UPS of powder plant. d) Hiring of passenger vehicles for following sections:- procurement, marketing, accounts/ admin, sale depot, quality assurance w.e.f. 01.07.2026 to 30.06.2027. Car (Swift Dzire, Toyota Etios or Equivalent or Sub Compact SUV).	Annual/As per site 01 Job 01 Job No's of vehicles may be increased or decreased 09 No's
4.	For Verka Ludhiana Dairy a) Transportation of LSHS/HPS (Heavy Petroleum Stock) from Panipat /Mathura Refinery to Verka Ludhiana Dairy. b) Hiring of Vehicles :- i. Tempo for Cattle feed/ milk products/technical services. ii. Tempo for transportation of Milk through cans. iii. Jeep Ganger Type. c) Outsourcing of operation and maintenance activities of boiler and air-heater section.	Annual 02 No's 04 No's 01 No's One Job
5.	For Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy Hiring of car (Bolero, swift dzire, Toyota Etios or Equivalent) required for procurement activities.	01 No.
6.	For Verka Sangrur Dairy i. Wash/Shutter/Vehicles painting in the areas of District- Sangrur, Barnala & Malerkotla. ii. Supply of flex banners, flex boards, glow sign boards, vinyl sticker, vinyl with eco solvent printing, sun board and one way vision etc. in the areas of District-Sangrur, Barnala & Malerkotla.	Annual Annual
7.	For Verka Amritsar Dairy Hiring of insulated Single portion road milk tankers for the transportation of Milk from BMC/MCC.	Two year/ 03 No's
8.	For Verka Cattle Feed Plant, Bhatiana (Khanna) a) Transportation of finished Cattle feed, Mineral feed mixture and UML to various station of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan. Capacity an average per day, (Qty, increase/ decrease as per demand. b) Auction of Unserviceable Material.	Annual/ 02-05 trucks of 5MTs/6MTs 08-10 trucks of 10MTs to 12MTs 04-06 trucks of 13MTs to 16MTs 06-08 trucks of 18 MTs and above 18 MTs 01 No.

NOTE:
1. For complete details regarding above tender (NIT), please visit our website i.e. www.verka.coop & e Tendering portal i.e. eproc.punjab.gov.in.
2. Corrigendum, if any, will be uploaded on website only.

10/18/12/2026-27/11512 General Manager (Purchase)

FBI issues \$2,00,000 reward for ex-US spy in Iran

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Washington

The FBI is offering a \$200,000 reward for information leading to capture and prosecution of a former US Air Force counterintelligence specialist who defected to Iran in 2013 and was later charged with revealing classified information to the Tehran Government.

Monica Elfriede Witt, who is in her 40s, was indicted by a federal grand jury in February 2019 on charges of espionage, including transmitting national defence information to the Government of Iran. She remains at large. Witt "allegedly betrayed her oath to the Constitution more than a decade ago by defecting to Iran and providing the Iranian regime



National Defence Information and likely continues to support their nefarious activities," Daniel Wierzbicki, special agent in charge of the FBI Washington Field Office's Counterintelligence and Cyber Division, said in a news release Wednesday.

US official briefs nuclear industry delegation ahead of India visit

SAGAR KULKARNI
Washington

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright briefed a delegation of senior executives from the American nuclear industry scheduled to visit India next week to explore areas of cooperation after New Delhi opened up the tightly-controlled sector for private players.

A 20-member US executive nuclear industry delegation will interact with Government officials and private sector leaders keen to explore opportunities in the civil nuclear sector available since the enactment of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) law in December last year.

The SHANTI Act replaced the Atomic Energy Act of 1964 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage (CNLD) Act of 2010. The CNLD Act had tougher liability provisions on nuclear suppliers, which global companies found to be an impediment to exploring the Indian market.

The US nuclear industry delegation is travelling to India as part of an initiative by the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum and the Nuclear Energy Institute. "USISPF and the Nuclear Energy Institute (@NEI) were honoured to welcome the US Secretary of Energy



US Energy Secretary Chris Wright

@SecretaryWright for a briefing with members of the US Executive Nuclear Industry Delegation ahead of their visit to India," the USISPF said in a social media post.

The US industry delegation is expected to explore joint project opportunities with the Indian private sector in civil nuclear energy.

"India's ambition to scale nuclear capacity to 100 GW by 2047, combined with the opening of the sector to private players, presents a major commercial opportunity for US firms," Shaswat Kumar, Fellow, Centre for Strategic and International Studies said. He said recent 10 CFR Part 810 authorisations to Holtec, Clean Core Thorium and Flowserve signal renewed momentum in bilateral nuclear cooperation.

"Going forward, realising this potential will hinge on parallel action - faster export approvals from the US and, in India, progress on reprocess-

ing infrastructure and addressing end use verification concerns," Kumar said.

After the India-US civil nuclear agreement was signed in 2008, two sites

Chhayamithi Virdi in Gujarat and Kovvada in Andhra Pradesh were allotted to US companies to establish 1000 MW nuclear power plants.

India and the US are also exploring cooperation in small modular reactors (SMRs), which are billed as the future of nuclear power due to ease of deployment, particularly by repurposing sites of coal-based power plants.

"Legislations like the SHANTI Act and EO14299 have led to a revival of dialogue on nuclear energy in both India and the US. We can expect more opportunities for private companies from the two countries to collaborate in this sector," said Abhik Sengupta, a programme officer with a Washington-based industry body. (PTI)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER, PWD
JALUKBARI TERRITORIAL ROAD DIVISION, FANCY BAZAR, GUWAHATI-01

PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDERS

Executive Engineer PWD, Jalukbari Territorial Road Division, Fancy Bazar, Ghy-01, on behalf of Governor of Assam invites bid for 80 (Eighty) Nos of works in F2 Form under SOPD-G for 2025-26 in Kamrup District of Assam amounting to 548.422 L (approx.) in Jalukbari LAC under Kamrup District. Details may be seen in the office of the undersigned from 18.05.2026 during office hours.

Sd/-
Executive Engineer PWD
Jalukbari Territorial Road Division,
Fancy Bazar, Ghy-01

DIPR/CF/PIO/133/16-MAY-26

New Ebola outbreak in Congo kills 65

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Kinshasa

Africa CDC, the continent's top public health body, on Friday confirmed a new Ebola outbreak in Congo's remote Ituri province, with 246 suspected cases and 65 deaths recorded so far.

The deaths and suspected cases have been recorded mainly in the Mongwalu and Rwampara health zones, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said in a statement.

The Ebola virus is highly contagious and can be contracted through bodily fluids such as vomit, blood, or semen. The disease it causes is rare, but severe and often fatal.

"Four deaths have been reported among laboratory-confirmed cases. Suspected cases have also been reported in Bunia, pending confirmation," the agency said, referring to the

capital of Ituri province, near the border with Uganda. It said preliminary laboratory results have detected the Ebola virus in 13 of 20 samples tested.

The latest outbreak comes around five months after Congo's last Ebola outbreak was declared over after 43 deaths. Ituri is in a remote eastern part of Congo characterised by poor road networks, and is more than 1,000 kilometres from the nation's capital of Kinshasa.

Africa CDC said it is concerned about the risk of further spread due to intense population movement, mining-related mobility in Mongwalu, insecurity in affected areas, gaps in contact listing and control challenges.

The proximity of affected areas to Uganda and South Sudan also raises concerns, it said. The agency said it is convening an urgent high-level coordination meeting



Friday with health authorities from Congo, Uganda and South Sudan, together with key partners including UN agencies and other countries. "The meeting will focus on immediate response priorities, cross-

border coordination, surveillance, laboratory support, infection prevention and control, risk communication, safe and dignified burials, and resource mobilisation," it said. This is the 17th outbreak in Congo

since the disease first emerged in the country in 1976. An Ebola outbreak from 2014 to 2016 also killed more than 11,000 people. The new outbreak will create more worry for the Central African country, which has been battling various armed groups in the east, including the M23 rebel group, which launched a rapid assault in January last year and has since occupied key cities.

Ituri in particular is also battling violence from the Allied Democratic Force, an Islamic State-linked militant group which has killed dozens there and in other parts of the east.

Congo, Africa's second-largest country by land area, often faces logistical challenges in responding to disease outbreaks. During last year's outbreak, which lasted three months, the World Health Organisation initially faced significant challenges in delivering vaccines due to limited access and scarce funds.

Ituri in particular is also battling violence from the Allied Democratic Force, an Islamic State-linked militant group which has killed dozens there and in other parts of the east.

Congo, Africa's second-largest country by land area, often faces logistical challenges in responding to disease outbreaks. During last year's outbreak, which lasted three months, the World Health Organisation initially faced significant challenges in delivering vaccines due to limited access and scarce funds.

Indonesia's first panda cub is healthy ahead his public debut



EDNA TARIGAN
Cisarua(Indonesia)

The first giant panda born in Indonesia squirmed as veterinarians checked his hearing and eyesight and confirmed the furry cub was growing and healthy Friday before his public debut later this month. Satrio Wiratama, nicknamed "Rio," can walk on his own, climbs on his mother and has started eating bamboo shoots. He has grown to 10 kilograms (22 pounds) at 169 days old.

Veterinarians are monitoring his development to determine how well he might adapt to the crowds when he debuts at Indonesian Safari Park outside the capital, Jakarta. "What's important to note is that all of Rio's senses are active; he has the ability to

understand the environment, assess the situation, adapt to more people, and hear sounds, even in certain levels of noise. We will train him gradually," said Bongot Huaso Mulia, a veterinarian who monitors Rio's progress.

His growth in some ways is faster than average, especially his teeth, according to Mulia. Rio was born November 27 to his mother, Hu Chun, and a male panda, Cai Tao, who are both 15 years old. The pair arrived in Indonesia in 2017 on a 10-year conservation partnership with China. They live in an enclosure built for them at the park about 70 kilometres (43 miles) from the capital in Cisarua, West Java province. The two adult pandas have a large fan base in Indonesia. (AP)

Indian arrested at Sri Lanka airport with cocaine worth LKR 108 million



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Colombo

A 60-year-old Indian national was arrested on Friday with cocaine worth 108 million Sri Lankan rupees at the Colombo airport, officials said.

The suspect, a geologist by profession, arrived from Uganda via Doha on a Qatar Airways flight, said airport narcotics officials.

He was concealing more than 2 kilograms of drugs in his luggage. "During a thorough examination of the checked baggage of the passenger, customs officers uncovered approximately 2.15 kilograms of cocaine, meticulously concealed inside the luggage," an official statement said.

It added that the estimated street value of the seized cocaine is approximately 108 million Sri Lankan rupees (approximately \$332,000).

Death toll in attack on Kyiv apartment now stands at 24

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Friday that a Russian missile attack on a Kyiv apartment building the previous day killed 24 people, including what local officials said were three teenagers.

Emergency workers finished digging through the building's rubble after more than a day, Zelenskyy said on X. The cruise missile hit the nine-story corner block during what the Ukrainian air force said was Russia's biggest barrage of the country since its all-out invasion. The assault mostly tar-



getted the Ukrainian capital, where 48 people were wounded, including two children, Zelenskyy said. Russia hammered Ukraine with large-scale

aerial attacks in the days following a May 9-11 ceasefire that US President Donald Trump said he asked Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin to

observe. Fighting went on over those 72 hours, although reportedly on a lesser scale.

This week's attacks ran counter to recent suggestions from Trump and Putin that the war, now in its fifth year, is close to ending.

Zelenskyy said Thursday that Moscow had launched more than 1,560 drones against Ukrainian population centres since Wednesday. In all, some 180 sites across the country were damaged, including more than 50 residential buildings, he said.

Previously, the biggest Russian drone attack was from the evening of March

23 to the evening of March 24 when Moscow's forces fired nearly 1,000 drones and missiles at Ukraine.

Ukraine has also built up significant long-range capabilities, and Russia's Defense Ministry said Friday that air defences downed 355 drones overnight in one of the largest Ukrainian drone attacks of the war.

Several airports suspended flights overnight because of the attacks. Also, a Ukrainian drone attack on Ryazan, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) south-east of Moscow, killed four people, including a child, Ryazan Governor Pavel Malkov said.

Pak: 9 militants, 4 army official killed in gunfire

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Peshawar

Nine suspected militants and four security officials were killed in a gunfire in Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region, district officials said.

The incident took place late Thursday night in Bajaur district. According to officials, a group of militants launched attacks in the areas of Meena and Inayat Kalay, but security forces "responded effectively". While nine attackers - all of them suspected militants - were killed on the



post, several others sustained injuries. The area was later cordoned off and a search operation was launched

to track the remaining militants. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has claimed responsibility for the attack. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

region in northwest Pakistan has faced recurring unrest over the years driven by militant violence, cross-border movement of fighters from Afghanistan and repeated military operations. Its mountainous terrain and porous frontier add to the challenges for security forces. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has seen a surge in terrorist attacks in the past year. According to the Annual Security Report 2025 from the Centre for Research and Security Studies, total fatalities rose from 1,620 in 2024 to 2,331 in 2025.

INDIA'S ENVOY IN BEIJING DISCUSSES BILATERAL TIES WITH CHINESE



Vikram Doraiswami
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Beijing

India's new envoy to China Vikram Doraiswami has held an introductory meeting with Director General of China's Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Hou Yanqi, discussing developments concerning the border and bilateral relations.

"The two sides had a productive exchange of views on developments related to the India-China border areas and reviewed the positive momentum in bilateral relations," the Embassy of India in Beijing said in a post on X on Thursday. "Both sides agreed to leverage established mechanisms to implement the vision of the two leaders towards a stable and mutually beneficial relationship," it added.

Doraiswami, a 1992-batch Indian Foreign Service officer, took charge earlier this month and presented his credentials to the Chinese Foreign Ministry on May 8.

Sri Lankan court orders arrests in bank fraud case



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Colombo

A Sri Lankan court has ordered more arrests in the National Development Bank (NDB) case involving \$42 million fraud, days after four staff members were arrested and sent to remand.

The chief magistrate's court on Thursday ordered the arrest of more employees of the NDB in what is being termed as one of Sri Lanka's biggest bank frauds.

Four employees of the NDB were arrested early in May after the fraud was detected in April at the publicly quoted bank. The

Central Bank, which has supervisory control of banks, said that customers' deposits and individual account balances have not been affected by the fraud.

The NDB's capital and liquidity levels remain solid, the Central Bank has assured.

The court ordered that anyone who had violated the Central Bank's regulatory guidelines must be arrested. A CID team of the police is investigating the case with support from the Central Bank. The staff members were suspected of having misused internal suspense accounts to do fraudulent transfers of the LKR 13.2 billion.

Norway backs cancelled missile deal with Malaysia

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Kuala Lumpur(Malaysia)

Norway's foreign ministry affirmed Friday it has revoked export licenses tied to a naval missile system for Malaysia, saying sales of its most sensitive defence technologies are now restricted to allies and closest partners.

The move blocked delivery of the Naval Strike Missile system and launcher components intended for Malaysia's littoral combat ship programme, prompting sharp protests from Kuala Lumpur. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim warned it could damage confidence in European defence suppliers. Norway's foreign ministry said in reply to Associated Press queries that



the Government has strengthened oversight on defence technology in response to major shifts in the security landscape in Europe and globally in recent

years. "Exports of some of the most sensitive Norwegian-developed defence technologies will be limited to our allies and closest partners," it said. "It

is regrettable that this affects Malaysia." Malaysia inked a deal for the NSM anti-ship missile system in 2018 with Norway's Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace AS. The missiles were intended to arm Malaysia's new class of littoral combat ships under a broader naval modernisation program. Anwar said Thursday he raised Malaysia's strong protest during a phone call with Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre.

He said Oslo's move would hurt Malaysia's operational readiness and cast doubt on the reliability of European defence partners if signed agreements could be reversed unilaterally. Contracts are "not confet-

ti to be scattered in so capricious a manner," Anwar said. "If European defence suppliers reserve the right to renege with impunity, their value as strategic partners flies out the window."

The Norway foreign ministry said Støre had explained Norway's decision to Anwar during their call. Despite the curbs, it said Norway "greatly values its relationship with Malaysia" and looked forward to continued cooperation and constructive dialogue with Malaysian authorities.

Malaysia has already paid 95 per cent of the contract value and is now examining legal options and possible compensation claims over the cancelled delivery.

Palestinians in Gaza mark anniversary of 1948 mass expulsion, say today's catastrophe is worse

JULIA FRANKEL/
WAFAA SHURAF
Deir al-Balah

Blink and you might miss the few stone walls that are all that's left of the village that Yusuf Abu Hamam's family was forced to flee when he was an infant in 1948.

The village, al-Joura, was demolished by the Israeli military at the time. It has since vanished under neighbourhoods of the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon and the grounds of a national park.

The neighbourhood where Abu Hamam's family ended up - and where he spent most of his life - now lies also largely in ruins. Buildings in the Shati Camp in the north-

ern Gaza Strip have been razed and wrecked by Israeli bombardment and demolitions during the past 2 and a half years of war.

On Friday, Abu Hamam and millions of Palestinians mark the 78th anniversary of the Nakba, Arabic for "catastrophe," referring to the mass expulsion and flight of some 750,000 Palestinians from what is now Israel during the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

It's the third commemoration of the Nakba since the war in Gaza began. The 78-year-old Abu Hamam, one of a dwindling number of Nakba survivors, says the current war is an even greater catastrophe. More than six



A tent camp for displaced Palestinians stretches among the ruins of buildings destroyed during the Israel Hamas war in Gaza City

months after an October ceasefire, he and the rest of Gaza's more than 2 million people are now crammed into less than half of the 25-mile-long strip along the Mediterranean coast, surrounded by an Israeli-controlled zone encompassing the rest of the territory.

"There is no country left," Abu Hamam said, speaking next to his home, which was heavily damaged by Israeli shelling earlier in the war. "A square kilometre and a half extending from the sea, this is what we are living in... It's indescribable, unbearable."

For Palestinians, the Nakba meant the loss of most of their homeland. Some 80 per cent of the Palestinians who

lived in the area that became Israel were driven from their homes by forces of the nascent state before and during the war.

The fighting began when Arab armies attacked following Israel's establishment as a home for Jews in the wake of the Holocaust. Palestinians who remained behind hold Israeli citizenship. After the war, Israel refused to allow Palestinian refugees to return to ensure a Jewish majority within its borders.

Palestinians became a seemingly permanent refugee community that now numbers some 6 million, with most living in refugee camps in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Lebanon,

Syria, Jordan and Gaza.

Around 530 Palestinian villages in what became Israel were destroyed, according to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics. Abu Hamam's birth village was one of them. Al-Joura was seized by the Israeli military as it advanced against Egyptian forces in November 1948.

Soldiers were ordered to destroy every home in al-Joura and neighbouring villages to ensure their Palestinian populations couldn't come back, according to military archives cited by Israeli historian Benny Morris. Refugees swelled the population of the tiny patch of territory along the southern coast that became the Gaza Strip. (AP)



PROSPECT

CD Foundation celebrated its 11th Annual Day

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

CD Foundation celebrated its 11th Annual Day in New Delhi with a "Coffee Morning with Multiple Countries" event focused on diplomacy, tourism, wellness, and international collaboration.

The CD Foundation and Entrepreneur Club World & Us, in partnership with TajSurajkund Resort & Spa, organised the program.

Academic collaboration came from the Department of Continuing Education & Extension, University of Delhi.

Supporting partners included Drillcon Infrastructure Pvt Ltd and



Perfume Point. Sumita Das, Prasun Chatterjee, and Kazem Samandari, the Executive Chairman & Co-Founder of L'Opéra India, unveiled the initiative.

Speaking at the event, DrPrasun Chatterjee called the initiative "extremely relevant in today's world, where conversations around longevity, quality of life, and elderly wellbeing are becoming increasingly important globally."

Raay Neo Pharma launches operations in Lucknow

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Raay Neo Pharma, a next-generation pharmaceutical company, has officially launched operations in Lucknow.

"Lucknow is an important healthcare hub not only for Uttar Pradesh, but for a much larger patient ecosystem across this geography. The region continues to see growing healthcare needs, particularly around chronic disease management, affordability and continuity of treatment. At Raay Neo Pharma, our focus is to build strong partnerships with doctors and healthcare stakeholders while ensuring access to quality medicines across emerging markets," said Amit Patni, Founder, Raay Neo Pharma, addressing a press conference.

Positioning Lucknow as a centre of its North India strategy, the firm aims to leverage the city's role as a leading medical and referral hub for Uttar Pradesh and neighbouring states.

With patients from tier-II and tier-III markets across the region depending on cities like Lucknow for advanced medical care, the company sees strong

opportunities to strengthen healthcare access and treatment continuity.

This belt represents one of the country's largest and fastest-growing healthcare markets, driven by rising incidences of chronic and lifestyle-related diseases, increasing healthcare awareness and growing demand for reliable treatment options.

Raay Neo Pharma aims to address these needs by building robust distribution networks, dependable doctor partnerships and consistent medicine availability across emerging healthcare markets.

The company is introducing a portfolio of more than 90 formulations spanning acute and chronic therapies, along with a growing pipeline of advanced products under development.

Founded by Amit Patni, Raay Neo Pharma draws on a legacy of business expertise across technology, manufacturing, healthcare infrastructure and finance.

This cross-sector experience underpins the company's approach to building a modern, agile and ethically driven pharmaceutical business focused on long-term healthcare impact.

Wide open Build-Operate-Transfer (Toll) for NH projects, MoRTH Secy



MoRTH Secretary V Umshankar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

In an effort to attract greater private investments into the highway and expressway sectors, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has widened the bidders' scope by modifying the bidding conditions for Build-Operate-Transfer (Toll) projects.

The new changes mark a paradigm shift ever since the sector was opened to private players in the early 2000s. "So far, only highway developers and construction companies were eligible to bid for such projects, but now the government has allowed venture capital, private equity, infrastructure and pension funds to bid for highway projects under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model," said MoRTH Secretary V Umshankar.

Under a modified request for proposal (RFP) framework issued by MoRTH, institutional investors can now directly bid for BOT projects under the public-private partnership (PPP) model. BOT projects involve financ-



ing, constructing and operating highways over concession periods that typically range between 20 and 30 years, making them more exposed to construction and execution risks.

"Bidder may be a natural person, private entity, govt-owned entity, AIF, FIF or any combination of them with a formal intent to enter into a joint bidding agreement to form a consortium," Umshankar told The Pioneer about the modified bidding document notified by the highways ministry on April 29, 2026. Highway builders and construction companies will, however, continue to bid for such projects as well.

The document also establishes separate criteria for evaluating bids submitted by alternative funds and traditional highway developers. Highway construction firms will qualify based on both technical and financial capacity. Funds must meet a financial capacity threshold

set at twice the prescribed level for eligibility.

"The new proforma has separated financial eligibility from construction capability, which has always been a demand from large financial investors who were previously deterred by technical qualification requirements. Under the new framework, institutional investors will primarily be assessed on their financial strength," Umshankar said.

The second part, construction-related expertise, has to be fulfilled later through engineering partners or concessionaires appointed after the project is awarded, MoRTH project engineers said.

The move comes after four NH projects worth nearly Rs 22,000 crore have reportedly failed to attract bidders under the BOT model. The new relaxed norms aim to revive private investment and significantly widen the pool of eligible bidders.

According to the updated

RFP document, bidders can include private entities, government-owned firms, Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs), foreign investment funds, natural persons, or consortia formed through joint bidding agreements. Importantly, the ministry has separated financial eligibility from construction capability — a key demand from large financial investors who were previously deterred by technical qualification requirements.

MoRTH officials said the change will make BOT projects more attractive to long-term capital providers seeking infrastructure exposure in India without directly taking on execution responsibilities.

India's national highway network is currently developed through multiple execution models, including EPC (Engineering, Procurement and Construction), Hybrid Annuity Model (HAM), BOT, INVIT structures and TOT projects.

Silent killer strikes young India, experts warn at Delhi hypertension meet

ABHINAV KUMAR JHA
New Delhi

Hypertension creeps into young lives shaped by stress, long hours, poor sleep, and little time for exercise, often causing harm before it is noticed. Ahead of World Hypertension Day 2026, a major health conference in Delhi saw doctors, policy-makers, and public experts warn that this condition is no longer confined to the elderly. Hypertension is now spreading rapidly among young Indians.

At the "Illness to Wellness Conference on Transforming Hypertension Care" in New Delhi, speakers emphasised the urgent need to shift from treatment-only healthcare to prevention and long-term wellness strategies. The event was organised by the Illness to Wellness Foundation with The Pioneer as media partner and FICCI as association partner.

The conference focused on the growing burden of hypertension in India and the urgent need to shift health-

care systems from treatment-driven approaches to prevention, screening, and long-term wellness strategies.

In a video message, Union Minister of State for Ayush and Health and Family Welfare Prataprao Jadhav said changing lifestyles and neglect of physical and mental well-being were contributing to a sharp rise in hypertension among younger people. Calling hypertension a "silent killer," the minister said the condition often develops without symptoms and can eventually trigger serious complications such as strokes and heart attacks.

Rajesh Bhusan, former Union Health Secretary and Chairperson of the Governing Council of the Illness to Wellness Foundation, said hypertension was no longer confined to urban India. "We often assume this is only a metropolitan problem because we live in cities. But hypertension is equally prevalent in rural India," he said, stressing that delayed diagnosis remains one of the biggest barriers to treatment.



Left to Right: Prof. Rakesh Yadav, Anil Rajput, Rajesh Bhusan, Dr Ripen Gupta, Dr Sanjeev Singh

Finmin grants approval to emirates NBD Bank to buy 74% stake in RBL Bank

PIONEER NEWS ■ New Delhi



The Finance Ministry has granted approval to Dubai-based Emirates NBD Bank (PSC) for acquisition of up to 74 per cent stake in RBL Bank.

Emirates NBD Bank has informed that it has received a letter from Department of Financial Services dated May 14, 2026 approving its proposed acquisition in RBL Bank, a regulatory filing said on Friday.

The approval for investment in excess of 49 per cent and up to 74 per cent of the total paid-up equity share capital of RBL Bank was approved, RBL Bank said.

The approval came a day before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to the UAE. The proposed investment by Emirates NBD Bank in RBL Bank by way of a preferential issue of equity shares remains subject to completion of the customary conditions, it said.

Last month, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) accorded approval to Emirates NBD Bank to acquire up to 74 per cent stake in RBL Bank.

Air India receives new Boeing 787-9 aircraft



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Air India has received another tailor-made Boeing 787-9 aircraft, which landed in the national capital on Friday.

The loss-making airline, which is in the middle of an ambitious transformation plan, is expanding its fleet and this is the second tailor-made Boeing 787-9 aircraft taken by the carrier after privatisation in January 2022.

"The second made-for-Air India Boeing 787-9, bearing registration mark VT-AWB, just touched down in Delhi after a non-stop flight from Charleston, United States.

"This brand-new aircraft sporting Air India's new livery is a part of our effort to upgrade our wide-body fleet and deliver a world-class premium experience to our guests on long-haul routes," the airline said in a post on X on Friday.

Air India has 33 Boeing 787s or Dreamliners in its fleet of over 190 planes. Apart from the 26 legacy Boeing 787-8s, there are 7 Boeing 787-9s, including 6 from Vistara and the first tailor-made plane that was inducted in January this year.

राष्ट्रीय प्रौद्योगिकी संस्थान, कुरुक्षेत्र
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY KURUKSHETRA,
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Phone: (01744) 233233, 233234 E-mail: deanestate@nitkkr.ac.in
Website: http://www.nitkkr.ac.in

Advt.No./9-10/2026

NOTICE INVITING TENDER

NIT Kurukshetra invites sealed tenders from the interested firms for leasing out various Shops and food clusters in the Institute premises for a period of two years on monthly rental basis. Interested firms/food chains are requested to submit their tender document as per the terms and conditions, which can be downloaded from the Institute website www.nitkkr.ac.in. The last date for submission of tender is **28.05.2026 upto 03.00 PM.**

Sd/-
Registrar In-Charge

No. E-788083/97

NOTICE INVITING E-TENDER

The Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha, Assam invites bids for the following building works from registered appropriate class of contractor under PWD (Building), Assam having experience of similar nature of work in Assam.

Details of the bid may be seen at e-procurement portal i.e. www.assamtenders.gov.in and also in the office of the undersigned during office hours from 15-05-2026 (1100 hours) to 06-06-2026 (1400 hours). The bidders must be enrolled in www.assamtenders.gov.in

Name of work	Approximate value of work (in lakh)	Time of completion (in days)	Tender fee	Earnest Money Deposit	
				General category	Reserved category
Repairing & Renovation works for Project Management Unit of Assam School Education & Adolescent Wellbeing Project under World Bank at O/o The Mission Director, Samagra Shiksha, Assam, Kahilpara, Guwahati-19	67.23913	30	1345	134478	67239

Note:

- Online mode of submission for both technical and financial bid is mandatory.
- A hard copy of the technical bid submitted online is also to be submitted at the office of the undersigned on or before 06-06-2026 up to 1400 hours for evaluation purpose. For any discrepancy between the online bid and the hard copy of the bid, the online bid will govern and will be considered for evaluation.
- Along with the hard copy of the technical bid, the following documents must also be submitted on or before 06-06-2026 up to 1400 hrs :-
 - Original Power of Attorney for signing the bid, if any.
 - Copy of bid security/ EMD submitted online at www.assamtenders.gov.in.
 - Copy of tender fee submitted online at www.assamtenders.gov.in.

Sl. No.	Schedule	Start Date	Start Time	End Date	End Time
1	Publishing Date	15-05-2026	0900	06-06-2026	1400
2	Tender Download	15-05-2026	0930	06-06-2026	1400
3	Pre bid meeting	22-05-2026	1500	-	-
4	Bid Submission Date	15-05-2026	1000	06-06-2026	1400
5	Technical Bid Opening Date (Cover-1)	06-06-2026	1500	-	-
6	Financial Bid Opening Date (Cover-2)	Will be intimated later			

4. Bidders are advised to scan their original technical papers at a resolution of 100 dpi (in colour mode) in ".pdf" format for multiple pages with maximum file size of 25 MB. If the file size exceeds 25 MB, the bidders are advised to create multiple files and upload the same in "Upload Additional Document" stage.

5. In the event of date of bid opening being a holiday, the activities will take place on the next working day.

6. All the interested bidders are requested to read the bid document carefully before submission of their bid.

Sd/-Mission Director,
Samagra Shiksha Assam
Kahilpara, Guwahati-19

DIPR/CF/PIO/130/16-MAY-26

DAILY SUDOKU

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

HOW TO SOLVE IT

Sudoku is a logic puzzle where you fill a 9x9 grid so that numbers 1 to 9 appear once in every row, column, and 3x3 box, using elimination and logical deduction—no maths involved.

SOLUTION (15.5.26)

8	7	4	9	6	2	5	1	3
1	6	3	7	8	5	9	2	4
2	5	9	1	4	3	8	7	6
4	8	7	2	9	1	3	6	5
3	2	6	4	5	7	1	9	8
5	9	1	6	3	8	7	4	2
6	3	2	8	7	9	4	5	1
9	1	8	5	2	4	6	3	7
7	4	5	3	1	6	2	8	9

DOUBLE CROSSWORD
SATURDAY | MAY 16, 2026

1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30
31	32	33	34	35	36

ACROSS

- Be quiet and keep warm (4,2)
- There's no sole way to relax (6)
- Naval fier? (4)
- Disperse a shaky cast having an unsuccessful winter (7)
- Give a share of an atoll, possibly (5)
- Wat a rebel! (5)
- Port is a capital place for some frigates (4)
- Writer of effortless poetry (3)
- An intoxicating trumpet piece (3)
- Love in sin, say (5)
- Go for a drive, maybe starting tomorrow (5)

DOWN

- Go after a cash prize out of turn (6)
- Follower of a cause (6)
- Point raised in talking to doctors (3)
- Show unwelcome interest in spoon bending (5)
- Is left to regret being excluded from the side, perhaps (7)
- How hard I am on little Ronnie! (4)
- Pronounced the sweet of the week? (6)
- Rugby Union name for Australian football (5)
- In short, it's of graphic significance (5)
- Did Adam have one? (5)
- A leg man is no criminal! (5)
- Thanks a million for the hat! (3)
- Group of listeners (3)
- Could be a taller part of a tomato plant (7)
- Put on to perform before closing down (23)
- Criticise a fool for some falling (6)
- Fancy a whiskey, but not with her! (4)
- The extent of one's knowledge? (6)
- Posh seasoning? (5)
- Open a bottle before a girl's nuptial announcement (5)
- Help a girl up (3)
- Speak harshly of something coarse of its kind (4)
- Not backing him up, wouldn't do for the chairman (5)
- Being filthy is serious, at the end of the day (5)
- Not much of a grin, perhaps (5)
- Left in sadness, Scrooge-like (7)
- Here, there's a Green place out Lewisham way (6)
- Outer aspect of a building with an advert in front (6)
- Lordly old soldier? (6)
- He pulls himself backwards (5)
- Laid up with a bad face! (4)
- Not exactly La Mer, nevertheless the sea! (3)

SOLUTION (15.5.26)

ACROSS	20. Thesis	DOWN	16. Grim-y
1. Speed	22. Foam	2. Purs-ive	18. Grain
8. Ri-n-se	24. Oil	3. Effect	19. Miter-L-y
9. Founder	25. Rivalry	4. Dal	21. Hitter
10. Dr-ift	26. De-Men	5. Snog	(green)
11. Sound	27. Chair	6. R esid ue	22. Fac ad e
12. Robin	28. Malts	7. Iron	23. Archer
13. Punch-up	29. Allered	8. Sundae	25. Rosier
15. Sing	30. Tri-L-y	12. RU-Les	26. Dial
17. Heat	31. Derry	13. Photo	26. (the) Med
18. Gutter		14. Navel	
19. Met-re		15. Stool	



BRIEFLY

World Cup releases official song



The World Cup – officially – has an official song. Shakira and Nigerian singer-songwriter Burna Boy have combined to release “Dai Dai,” FIFA said in a statement Friday. “Dai Dai brings together the global sounds and energy of Shakira and Burna Boy in a vibrant celebration of football, culture and unity,” FIFA said. In early May, Colombian singer Shakira foreshadowed Friday’s news by sharing a minute-long teaser clip of a new song, writing on social media: “From Maracana Stadium, here is ‘Dai Dai,’ the FIFA World Cup Official Song 2026.” FIFA said royalties from the song, which is available on major streaming platforms, will support the FIFA Global Citizen Education Fund. On Thursday, FIFA announced that the final on July 19 in New Jersey will feature a star-studded halftime show headlined by Madonna, Shakira and boy band BTS. (AP)

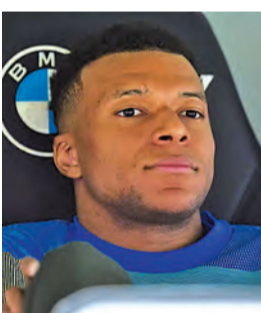
Ancelotti extends Brazil deal to 2030 World Cup

Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti has extended his contract with the team until the 2030 World Cup. The 66-year-old Italian coach, who took over in May 2025, had already hinted the extension was likely and confirmed the deal in a video published by the Brazilian soccer confederation, CBF, on Thursday. The announcement comes shortly before Ancelotti reveals his Brazil squad for the upcoming World Cup on Monday. “I arrived in Brazil a year ago. From the first minute, I understood what football means to this country. For a year, we have been working to take the Brazilian national team back to the top of the world. But the CBF and I want more,” Ancelotti said. “More victories, more time, more work. We are very happy to announce that we will continue together for another four years. We will go together until the 2030 World Cup.” The former Real Madrid and AC Milan coach has had a troubled spell in Brazil so far, with many injured players and doubts as to whether his team can be a serious contender for the title at the tournament in North America. Under Ancelotti, Brazil has five wins, three losses and two draws in 10 games. Ancelotti replaced Dorival Junior last year after some lackluster performances and had to scramble quickly to complete South American qualifying for the World Cup. (AP)



Mbappe says coach made him the team’s 4th-choice striker

Kylian Mbappe said after not starting in Real Madrid’s Spanish league soccer match against Oviedo on Thursday that coach Alvaro Arbeloa told him that he is the team’s fourth-choice striker. Arbeloa appeared to be caught by surprise by Mbappe’s words and said he never told him that. He said he doesn’t know why Mbappe felt like that. Mbappe, who had been nursing a left hamstring injury, said he was ready to play from the start against Oviedo but Arbeloa decided not to use him. “I’m 100 per cent fine,” Mbappe said. “I didn’t play because the coach told me I’m the fourth striker in the squad behind (Franco) Mastantuono, Vini (Vinicius Junior) and Gonzalo (Garcia). I accept it. I was ready to start, it was his decision. You can’t be angry with the coach, you always have to respect the opinion of the coach. I’ll keep working hard and wait to be the starter.” Arbeloa later said he never told Mbappe he was the fourth striker in the squad. (AP)



Israeli minister criticizes Yamal for waving Palestinian flag



Israel’s defense minister has criticized Barcelona’s teenage star Lamine Yamal for his waving of a Palestinian flag during celebrations of the Spanish league title win, saying the act “incites hate.” “Lamine Yamal chose to incite hate against Israel while our soldiers combat the terrorist organization Hamas, an organization that massacred, raped and burned Jewish children, women and the elderly on Oct. 7, (2023)” minister Israel Katz wrote on X on Thursday. The 18-year-old Yamal waved a large Palestinian flag from an open-top bus during a victory parade by Barcelona’s team through the city on Monday. The parade drew some 750,000 people to celebrate the league title clinched the previous day, local authorities said. Yamal, who is Muslim, posted pictures of him holding the flag on his Instagram account.

Mexico City braces for FIFA World Cup

CARLOS RODRIGUEZ ■ Mexico City

Mexico City, the most populous city in North America, is a vibrant, bustling metropolis that blends rich history with modern culture. Whether you are marveling at ancient ruins or enjoying contemporary art, there is a palpable energy in the air and it will be present during the World Cup this summer.

With a metropolitan area of some 23.1 million people, traffic congestion is quite intense during rush hours, especially in the area near Azteca stadium. The city has pollution issues that could also be a problem for fans with respiratory conditions. Remember, too, that the city is at an altitude over 7,300 feet (2,240 meters), which may require some acclimatization for visitors.



Landmarks/places to see

Zocalo: One of the largest city squares in the world at some 14 acres (5.5 hectares), it is surrounded by the Metropolitan Cathedral and the National Palace. It’s a hub of activity and a great place to soak in the city’s history. It has been a gathering place for centuries.

Chapultepec Park:

This massive park houses museums, a zoo and beautiful lakes. It’s perfect for leisurely walks and outdoor fun. The park is more than twice the size than New York’s Central Park, covering nearly 2,000 acres (800 hectares).

Teotihuacan:

Located outside

the city, this ancient Mesoamerican city features the famous Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon. A must-visit for history enthusiasts.

Food scene in Mexico City: Mexico City’s culinary scene is a world-class, diverse and vibrant experience, blending traditional street food with innovative high-end dining. Street tacos and stalls offer authentic flavors throughout the city, while neighborhoods like Roma and Condesa feature renowned establishments, including Michelin-starred spots.

Fan zones: Mexico City plans to have 18 public venues that will broadcast World Cup matches free of charge, with no alcohol sales and a variety of cultural and sporting activities.

Seven of these venues will operate throughout the 39 days of the tournament, broadcasting all

104 matches, while the remaining 11 will screen games featuring the Mexican national team and other highlights.

Transportation options: The fastest way to get to the World Cup stadium is public transportation. The Metro Line 2 takes you to the Taxquena station where you need to change to the light rail to the Estadio Azteca station. You can also use the Metro Line 3 to the Universidad station and an electric bus will get you to the stadium. There are park-and-ride options at designated venues.

Stadium tips: Although the stadium was renovated for the World Cup, the improvements didn’t fix many problems, including the internet, which remains intermittent and can be problematic since cash payments are no longer accepted. (AP)

Saudi Arabia continues its soccer push with World Cup deal

JAMES ROBSON ■ Manchester

Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund may have pulled back from golf, but on Thursday it deepened its investment in soccer by becoming an “official tournament supporter” of the World Cup.

The kingdom’s public investment fund (PIF) announced this month that it was pulling the plug on future funding for LIV Golf, raising questions about its long-term plans for other sports after its enormous spending in recent years.

But in announcing the partnership, it said sport was a “priority sector.”

The value of the deal, which covers North America and Asia, was not disclosed, but it further strengthens ties between Saudi Arabia and world soccer’s governing body.

The oil-rich kingdom has



won the rights to host the 2034 edition of the World Cup and PIF was a commercial partner for last year’s Club World Cup.

The PIF-owned SURJ Sports Investment also owns a stake online streamer DAZN, which broadcast

the Club World Cup.

According to FIFA accounts, television broadcasting rights had contributed “the lion’s share” of its annual revenue in 2025, worth more than \$1 billion.

Soccer has been a major focus for Saudi Arabia as it

looks to move away from its heavy reliance on oil and look to other revenue-generating sectors.

That has included enticing some of the sport’s biggest stars like Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar and Karim Benzema to its domestic league and buying Premier League club Newcastle. Winning the right to host the World Cup is its stand-out achievement so far.

Investment in other sports includes hosting a number of world championship boxing matches, Formula One racing and tennis.

The launch of the contentious LIV Golf tour in 2022 was a major disruptor for the sport, luring top players like Bryson DeChambeau, Phil Mickelson, Brooks Koepka and Dustin Johnson away from the PGA. LIV Golf’s spending is expected to exceed \$6 billion by the end of the year. (AP)

Jannik Sinner breaks Masters record

ANDREW DAMPF ■ Rome

Jannik Sinner is two victories away from becoming the first home male player to win the Italian Open in half a century. And it doesn’t seem like anybody can stop him — either in Rome or at the French Open that starts in 10 days.

The top-ranked Sinner landed shots on the lines repeatedly in a 6-2, 6-4 triumph over No. 14 Andrey Rublev to reach the semifinals Thursday and move past Novak Djokovic with a record 32nd consecutive victory in Masters 1000 events — the biggest tournaments outside the Grand Slams.

“I don’t play for records. I play just for my own story. And obviously at the same time it means a lot to me,” Sinner said.

The last Italian man to raise the singles trophy on the red clay of the Foro Italico was Adriano Panatta in 1976. Panatta will present the title to this year’s champion on Sunday, with Italian President Sergio Mattarella also slated to attend the final. “It’s a special tournament for me,” Sinner said. Sinner’s semifinal opponent will be 2023 Rome champion Daniil Medvedev, who came back to beat Spanish qualifier Martin Landaluce 1-6, 6-4, 7-5. The other semifinal will feature Casper Ruud of Norway against Luciano



Darder, an Argentine-born Italian.

Huge partisan support: With nearly everyone inside the 10,500-seat Campo Centrale cheering for Sinner, many supporters wore hats and T-shirts in orange — his theme color.

One group of fans held up a sign that said, “Sinner, Faccè Sogna” — “Sinner, Make us dream.”

Sinner lost last year’s final in Rome to Carlos Alcaraz, who is now sidelined due to a right wrist injury, while Jasmine Paolini in 2025 became the first Italian woman to raise the trophy in 40 years.

Sinner broke serve in the opening game for a third straight match and never lost control against Rublev, who was once ranked as high as No. 5. Rublev noticed there were “many points where he played really well or close to the line or in a line. But he’s No. 1 and it’s normal. You need to force him to miss and it takes a lot of focus to be able to play at that level.”

Sinner had only one brief lapse when Rublev broke him late in the second set. “It was a bit breezy, a bit windy, so it was very tough conditions,” Sinner said. “I felt we both didn’t play at our best today.” (AP)

Mbappe among players jeered by Real Madrid fans

TALES AZZONI ■ Madrid

Real Madrid fans made their discontentment known Thursday by jeering players at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium before a 2-0 win over already relegated Oviedo. Kylian Mbappe came on as a substitute after an injury layoff and was booed by part of the crowd, as was Vinicius Junior earlier. “I’ve being booed before in my career,” Mbappe said. “It’s part of it. Sometimes they are not happy.”

A couple of banners against president Florentino Perez were held up briefly before being removed by security officials. Perez saluted some of the fans, but at one point he appeared to get into an verbal altercation with some of the team’s supporters near the VIP tribunes, according to Spanish media reports.

The match capped a chaotic week for Madrid, which started with an altercation between players in training that led the club to fine Federico Valverde and Aurelien Tchouameni 500,000 euros (\$589,000) each. Then came the loss to Barcelona in the clasico on Sunday that allowed its rival to clinch the league title, and on Tuesday Perez called for new elections



after saying he was the victim of an “organised campaign” to unseat him.

An edgy Perez confronted journalists and made widespread accusations in a hastily scheduled news conference.

Madrid has endured two straight seasons without winning a major title. It was eliminated by Bayern Munich in the quarterfinals of the Champions League, was ousted by second-division club Albacete in the Copa del Rey and lost the Spanish Super Cup final to Barcelona.

Garcia put Madrid ahead in the 43rd minute and Jude Bellingham sealed the win in the 79th after

an assist by Mbappe, who replaced Garcia in the 68th.

In the fight against relegation, Girona moved out of the drop zone after a 1-1 draw with eighth-place Real Sociedad at home. Cristhian Stuani scored a second-half equalizer for Girona.

Conference League finalist Rayo Vallecano, sitting in 11th place, drew 1-1 at 13th-place Valencia.

Barcelona’s hopes of reaching the 100-point mark ended Wednesday with a 1-0 loss at Alaves. The Catalan club clinched its second straight league title on Sunday with a 2-0 win over rival Real Madrid at home. (AP)

Sahith Theegala opens with strong first round at PGA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Newtown Square (US)

India-American Sahith Theegala produced a composed two-under-par 68 to place himself firmly in contention at the close of a demanding first round at the 2026 PGA Championship at Aronimink Golf Club here.

On a day when scoring proved difficult and several elite names faltered, Theegala’s disciplined opening round stood out well.

The leaderboard is crowded and dangerous. Defending champion and world number one Scottie Scheffler finished among a seven-way tie for the lead at three-under 67, joined by Martin Kaymer, Min Woo Lee, Stephan Jaeger, Ryo Hisatsune, Alex Smalley and rising South African star Aldrich Potgieter.

Theegala balanced creativity with restraint in a round that had one bogey and three birdies and was among the better iron



players in the field.

For the first time in a men’s major, four players of Indian heritage — Theegala, Akshay Bhatia, Aaron Rai and Sudarshan Yellamaraju — are competing together in the same field.

Among them, Theegala, entered the week carrying perhaps the highest expectations. The California-born golfer of Telugu heritage has become one of the PGA Tour’s most popular personalities because of his fearless style and authenticity.

Since turning profession-

al in 2020, he has steadily matured into a genuine contender in elite events, highlighted by his breakthrough PGA Tour victory at the 2023 Fortinet Championship and several high other finishes.

Theegala, who is sponsored by India’s Hero MotoCorp, said, “It’s a major championship. It’s been a while since I’ve been healthy for once, so it’s nice to get kicked around a lot. Like I said, tomorrow’s the new day. Who knows, it might kick me really bad.”



SAMUEL PETREQUIN ■ Paris

France coach Didier Deschamps assembled a squad with formidable attacking talent for the World Cup and rewarded goalkeeper Robin Riser with a call-up for the showcase tournament on Thursday following his breakthrough season.

Risser, who plays for Lens, has been one of the revelations of the French league season and won the award for the best goalkeeper earlier this

week. He played a big role in making Lens the second-best defense in Ligue 1 and was selected by Deschamps in a No. 3 role behind Mike Maignan and Brice Samba. “I’m full of pride, it’s something incredible,” Riser told broadcaster TF1. “I can’t find the words. It’s just extraordinary. It was one of my dreams.”

France is looking for a third World Cup title and is among the favorites for the event taking place from June 11-July 19 in Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

France has been drawn in Group I and will take on Senegal, Iraq and Norway during the group stage.

Deschamps is gifted with an impressive attacking reservoir including Kylian Mbappe, Ballon d’Or winner Ousmane Dembele, rising star Desire Doue, Michael Olise, Rayan Cherki and Maghnes Aklouch.

He also called up Crystal Palace forward Jean-Philippe Mateta, who was preferred to Randal Kolo Muani in his 26-man list. The Tottenham striker had been a late addition to France’s previous World Cup squad four years ago. Kolo Muani scored a goal against Morocco in the semifinals and came close of becoming a national hero in the final before France lost to Argentina in a penalty shootout. (AP)



Tough pill to swallow: Shreyas Iyer

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Dharamsala

Calling the fifth straight loss a "tough pill to swallow", captain Shreyas Iyer admitted that Punjab Kings were outplayed by Tilak Varma, whose mature 75-run unbeaten knock guided Mumbai Indians to a six-wicket win in a crucial IPL clash here on Thursday.

"Well, absolutely a tough pill to swallow, but I don't want to pinpoint at any situation over here because it was a great game of cricket. Well fought game," Iyer said after the defeat severely dented Punjab's playoff hopes.

Praising Tilak's match-winning effort, the Punjab skipper said, "He played amazing, he was selecting his shots pretty well, and he maneuvered the field nicely, so credit to him."

Iyer also credited Azmatullah Omarzai (38 off 17 balls) for reviving Punjab's



innings after a sluggish start.

"Certainly, at a point, we were looking at around 170 to 180, and from there on, he simply changed the momentum towards us. Getting those scoops of sixes, and from 16th or 17th over, from there on, we gained the momentum and getting to 200 was a commendable performance for him," he said.

Despite the setback, Iyer remained optimistic ahead of Punjab's remaining matches.

"Definitely excited for the next opportunity. It's an afternoon game, and we've got to win two out of two. It's going to be an exciting two games. Can't wait to play them," he added, referring to the upcoming clash against Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Sunday at the same venue.

Player of the Match Tilak said his international exposure has helped him improve his finishing abilities in pressure chases.

"To be honest, I do like to finish games, but having played the WC and some international games, I've come to know how to finish the games," he said.

The left-hander admitted the pitch was trickier than expected.

"We didn't expect the wicket to be like this, the ball was slow and low, it wasn't easy to play shots. We saw how PBKS struggled in the first 15 overs, then Azamatullah and Vishnu Vinod took them to a good score."

Tilak said he consciously planned to take the chase deep before accelerating.

"I thought I would take the game deep. I spoke to the coach at the second break; I just needed one big over and I could finish the game."

He also praised Will Jacks (25 net off out off 10 balls) for supporting him during the chase.

Super Chess Classic: Praggnanandhaa draws with Alireza Firouzja in opener

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Bucharest (Romania)

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa survived a small scare before settling for a draw with Alireza Firouzja of France in the first round of the Super Chess Classics, the first Classical event of the Grand Chess Tour, here on Thursday.

It turned out to be an exciting affair after a dull Queen's gambit declined by Firouzja as black. As many as three minor pieces changed hands early and it looked like the game was headed towards a dull draw when Praggnanandhaa went for the complexities by allowing black to have connected passed pawns on the queen side in exchange for a strong center.

The Iranian-turned-French found some excellent resources in the middle game and was able to nearly rip apart the Indian's king



side but the position was so complicated that it was nearly impossible to find all the best moves for the human brain.

An error on move 35 led to a level rook and pawns endgame even though Praggnanandhaa was still a pawn less and the draw was a just result thereafter.

The longest game of the day lasted 60 moves. Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France drew with Dutchman Anish Giri in the other keenly contested

game wherein the latter had a slight pull according to the machine. The Catalan opening as white did not yield much for the French GM and a few exchanges led to a dynamically balanced middle game. Giri might have had some chances but decided to play it safe and drew with repetition after 32 moves.

World Championship challenger Jakovik Sidorov could do little with his black pieces against Romanian Deac Bogdan-Daniel.

Pollard fined for using abusive language for fourth umpire



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Dharamsala

Mumbai Indians' batting coach Kieron Pollard has been fined 15 percent of his applicable match fee for breaching the IPL's code of conduct by using abusive language for the fourth umpire.

The incident took place during MI's match against Punjab Kings here on Thursday night, in which the former emerged winners by six wickets in a last-ball thriller in the hill town.

"Kieron Pollard, Batting Coach, Mumbai Indians has been fined 15 per cent of his applicable match fee and accumulated one demerit point for breaching Level 1 of the IPL's Code of Conduct for Players and Team Officials," the IPL said in a press release issued on Friday morning.

"Pollard was found to have breached article 2.3 of the IPL's Code of Conduct, which relates to 'use of an audible obscenity during a match'." The incident occurred in the 19th over of the second innings when Pollard used abusive language towards the fourth umpire, "it said in the release.

Pollard admitted to the offence and accepted the sanction imposed by match referee, Pankaj Dharami.

Pollard, the former big-hitting all-rounder from the West Indies and a longtime associate of MI, had been fined in the past, too, for breaching the IPL's code of conduct.

Fed Cup in Ranchi to serve as selection trial

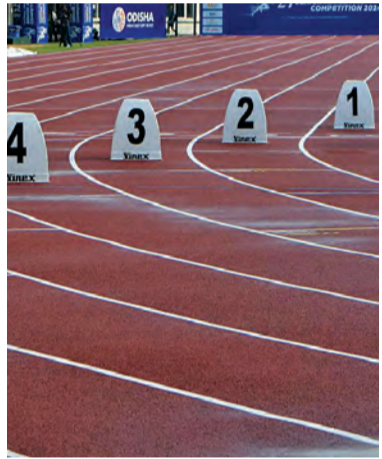
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA New Delhi

The Federation Cup National Senior Athletics Competition, to be held from May 22 to 25 in Ranchi, will also serve as the selection trial for the upcoming inaugural edition of the Asian U23 Athletics Championships.

Athletes between the age of 20 to 22 as on December 31, 2026 are eligible for selection as per Asian Athletics Association guidelines, the national federation said. The continental meet will be held in Ordos, China from July 9 to 12. The Ranchi event is also important as it will be the last domestic track and field meet for the athletes to book tickets for the Glasgow Commonwealth Games, to be held from July 23 to August 2.

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) has announced the qualification standard for the the Asian U23 Athletics Championships. Most of the qualifying marks of the different events have been kept below the junior national records.

The AFI qualifying marks: Men: 100m: 10.52 secs, 200m: 21.30 secs, 400m: 47.20 secs, 800m: 1:49.00 secs, 1500m: 3:49.00 secs, 5,000m: 14:22.00 secs, 10,000m: 30:00.00, 3000m steeplechase: 8:58.00, 110mH: 13.84 secs, 400m hurdle: 50.29 secs, high jump: 2.12m, pole vault: 5.20m, long jump: 7.90m, triple jump: 16.00m,



shot put: 17.67m, discus throw: 54.00m, hammer throw: 60.00m, javelin throw: 74.00m, decathlon: 6905 points.

Women: 100m: 11.75 secs, 200m: 23.84 secs, 400m: 53.62 secs, 800m: 2:11.00 secs, 1500m: 4:20.00 secs, 5,000m: 16:20.00 secs, 10,000m: 35:00.00 secs, 3000m steeplechase: 10:20.00 secs, 100m hurdles: 13.73 secs, 400m hurdles: 59.50 secs, high jump: 1.75m, pole vault: 4.00m, long jump: 6.30m, triple jump: 13.00m, shot put: 14.50m, discus throw: 50.73m, hammer throw: 55.00m, javelin throw: 50.00m, heptathlon: 5208 points.

We have not been able to handle pressure, admits PBKS assistant coach Brad Haddin

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Dharamsala

Punjab Kings assistant coach Brad Haddin admitted that his side has struggled to cope with pressure after it suffered a fifth successive defeat to continue a stunning mid-season slump in the ongoing Indian Premier League.

PBKS' latest loss came against Mumbai Indians, who emerged winners by six wickets in a last-ball thriller in the hill town on Thursday night.

It was a far cry from the seven-match unbeaten streak that PBKS enjoyed earlier in the season. The latest setback has left PBKS with a must-win scenario in their remaining two games to stay in playoff contention.

"We have just not been able to handle pressure in the last few defeats. We have not played our best cricket when we need to, which has been disappointing," Haddin said in the post-match press conference.

"We are as disappointed as you guys are with the way we



started the tournament and where we are now. There is no hiding that we've got to play better."

PBKS appeared to be in control while defending 200 before an unbeaten 75 off 33 balls from Tilak Varma took MI home in the closing stages.

Reflecting on the defeat, Haddin said his side had done enough to stay alive in the contest until the final overs.

"I thought we did really well to get to the total we did. We felt like we were in control of the game to the last three overs. It took a pretty special knock from Tilak to get Mumbai home," he said.

PBKS' bowling has emerged

as a major concern this season, with the side conceding runs at an economy rate of 10.77 — the worst among all teams — while also possessing the second-worst bowling average.

Despite the poor numbers, Haddin backed his bowling unit and pointed to the changing nature of T20 cricket, where totals once considered match-winning are no longer safe.

"What you do see in this tournament now is some unbelievable power. Two hundred used to be a really, really good score. And now it is a score that teams are not intimidated by. We have just

got to find a way," he said.

"The results are hurting the change rooms. We were beaten by a really good innings. We are going to take what we did well out of tonight and take that over into our preparation for next day and have a look at what things we can improve on."

The former Australia wicket-keeper also dismissed speculation about discord inside the PBKS dressing room amid the team's poor run.

"The dressing room has been good. Whatever the external noise is, that is part of playing professional sport. We have just got to find a way to win a cricket game.

Inconsistent KKR fight to stay alive as GT eye top-two finish



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Kolkata

Back home after nearly a month on the road and with their campaign hanging by a thread, Kolkata Knight Riders will look to stay alive in the IPL when they face a rampaging Gujarat Titans side

chasing a top-two finish, here on Saturday.

It has been another inconsistent and underwhelming season for KKR under veteran Ajinkya Rahane, whose appointment as captain itself had raised questions after the franchise finished a disappointing eighth under him

last year. KKR had to wait till their seventh match (halfway stage) of the season to register their first win and have looked far from a settled side throughout the campaign, with questionable team selections and batting-order hurting their rhythm. Their brief revival, which brought four consecutive wins starting with the victory over Rajasthan Royals in their last home match on April 19, ended with a defeat to Royal Challengers Bengaluru after sloppy fielding and a batting masterclass by Virat Kohli. KKR now

have three matches remaining and can reach a maximum of 15 points if they win all of them, but

even that may not guarantee a playoff berth as qualification would then depend on other results.

Approach remaining games with more fearless attitude, Boucher tells PBKS



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Dharamsala

Former South Africa wicket-keeper-batter Mark Boucher believes a mental reset and adopting a fearless approach in the remaining matches could help Punjab Kings rediscover momentum heading into the business end of the IPL.

PBKS lost their fifth straight game in the ongoing season here on Thursday, going

that mindset could actually help them." He added that adopting a fearless approach would also help the side.

"If they approach the remaining games with a more fearless attitude and feel like they have nothing to lose, it might free them up mentally," Boucher said.

"The IPL is a tournament where momentum can shift very quickly. Punjab Kings now need to reset mentally and focus purely on playing their best cricket in the matches ahead."

Boucher said Punjab had shown the right intent in the field but failed to capitalise during crucial phases of the match. "In games like these, small moments make a huge difference. Punjab Kings actually showed good intent and intensity in the field, and you could sense the desperation to stay in the contest," Boucher said.

"But at key stages, things didn't quite go their way. Some of the fine margins,

like edges running away or execution under pressure, proved costly." Former India leg-spinner Piyush Chawla said Punjab's bowling, particularly their overseas pace attack, had become a major weakness.

down to Mumbai Indians by six wickets. Speaking on JioHotstar's 'Google Search AI Mode Match Centre Live', Boucher said, "Punjab Kings have found themselves in a difficult position after a series of close defeats, especially considering the strong start they had to the season. "Sometimes, constantly thinking about the top four and qualification scenarios can add extra pressure, and perhaps stepping away from

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