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## Himanta applauds BJP-UPPL-led council's 3-year endeavours for peace in BTR



**HT Bureau**  
GUWAHATI, Dec 20: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday lauded the BJP-UPPL-led council for fostering three years of peace and development in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). While addressing a meeting to observe the third anniversary of the council at Bijni, Sarma highlighted the absence of violence, attributing the positive transformation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, the state's BJP government, and the current council leadership.

"Peace and progress have replaced violence and insurgency in BTR, thanks to the efforts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, the BJP-led state government, and the current council leadership," Sarma added.

Emphasising the significance of the Bodo Accord, he assured dedicated efforts to fulfill its clauses, stating the council's collaborative work with central and state governments for regional development over the past three years.

"Development necessitates peace, and over the past three years, the council, with support from both the central and state governments, has actively worked towards the region's progress," he added.

Sarma also stated that the current government is committed to safeguard the unique identities of indigenous communities.

He said that as a part of this endeavour, the Directorate of Indigenous & Tribal Faith and Culture has been established, signalling a dedicated effort to uphold and celebrate the rich heritage of the state's native populations.

"The current regime in the state is committed to preserving the cultural identities of the indigenous communities of the state and as part of this aim, the Directorate of Indigenous & Tribal Faith and Culture was established," he added.

Speaking further at the inauguration, the chief minister, said ever since its establishment in 1994 the Bathou Temple at Bagansali has been contributing greatly towards the spiritual uplift of the residents of Kokrajhar area. Referring to Bathou worship (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## School staff barred from further studies sans permission

Violation of rules to attract penalties: Assam Govt



GUWAHATI, Dec 20: The state government has barred teachers and non-teaching staff working in provincialised secondary schools from studying further or obtaining any degree while in service without prior permission of the competent authorities. "Provincialised schools" means those institutes in which the gov-

ernment has taken over all liabilities of a non-government school. The government generally takes over only those institutes that are in remote places or serve a backward community or where there are no government schools.

In a letter to the Inspector of Schools across the state on Tuesday, secondary education director

Mamata Hojai cited an old clause from the Assam Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1965 and to implement it strictly.

Hojai said that it is a violation of service rules if a teaching or non-teaching staff of a provincialised school pursues educational or professional qualifications without permission.

She said, "Departmental proceedings should be immediately initiated against those teaching and non-teaching staff of the provincialised secondary schools who have acquired any academic or professional qualification during the service period without obtaining permission from the appointing authority."

Prima facie if it is found that the incumbent has violated the rule, then penalties prescribed in The Assam Services (Discipline & Appeal) Rules, 1964 may be imposed upon such government servant after following due procedure, she added. (PTI)

## Tripura Motha urges Tripura CM not to allow Dec 25 rally

AGARTALA, Dec 20: Tripura's main opposition party Tripura Motha has requested chief minister Manik Saha not to allow the proposed rally on December 25 demanding delisting of converted tribals from Scheduled Tribe (ST) category.

The rally is being organised by Janjati Suraksha Manch, an RSS-backed body.

"I am writing to you to highlight a crucial matter with regards to peace and harmony in the state. Janajati Suraksha Manch has planned a procession and rally in Agartala on December 25 to press for delisting of converted tribals from ST category," opposition leader Animesh Debbarma wrote to Saha on Tuesday.

"Christmas is widely celebrated by all communities in Tripura. The proposed rally on the day could disrupt the state's peace. Recognising shared apprehensions from all opposition parties, I would request your intervention not to permit the rally in the broader interest of the state," he said. CPI(M) state secretary Jitendra Chowdhury and Tripura (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Cong receives ₹ 2.81 crore within 48 hours of launching crowdfunding campaign

NEW DELHI, Dec 20: The Congress received ₹ 2.81 crore within 48 hours of launching its crowdfunding campaign, with more than 1.13 lakh people donating to the party. The crowdfunding campaign -- "Donate for Desh" -- was launched on Monday by party chief Mallikarjun Kharge with a donation of ₹ 1.38 lakh.

While 80 per cent of the transactions to donate money to the party were through UPI, sources said there were as many as 20,000 cyber attacks on the Congress app.

Most of the cyber attacks were from abroad, they said, adding that there were 1,340 attacks for theft of data too.

More than 1,13,700 people donated in the first 48 hours with a total sum of ₹ 2.81 crore credited to the party, the



sources said.

Thirty-two people, including former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi and senior party leaders, have donated more than Rs 1 lakh.

The sources said the Congress will innovate further to generate more funds for the party ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls by selling merchandise, such as caps signed

by Gandhi, mugs and t-shirts.

Among the states that have made maximum contributions are Maharashtra (₹ 56 lakh), Rajasthan (₹ 26 lakh), Delhi (₹ 20 lakh), Uttar Pradesh (₹ 19 lakh) and Karnataka (₹ 18 lakh). A party leader said a large number of people have donated in Bihar but the amount is small. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## No more 'tarikh-pe-tarikh': Shah

New criminal laws will ensure speedy justice, LS told

NEW DELHI, Dec 20: Overhauling the criminal justice system of the country, the proposed three laws will help deliver speedier justice to the people and ensure there is no "tarikh pe tarikh", home minister Amit Shah asserted in Lok Sabha on Wednesday.

Replying to the debate on the bills, Shah said the existing criminal laws - the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Indian Evidence Act and the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) - were reflective of the colonial mindset with the intention to punish and not impart justice.

Shah said the timeline and financial challenges have been a big barrier to securing justice in the country.

"...justice is not delivered timely...tarikh pe tarikh multi hain (prolonged trial), police blame courts and government, courts blame police, the government holds the police and judiciary responsible...everyone keeps shifting the blame on each other," he said.

"For the poor, the biggest challenge to get

justice is finance...now, we have made many things clear in the new laws...there will be no lingering on," he said.

The three bills, which were later passed in Lok Sabha to replace the colonial-era criminal laws, seek to bring comprehensive changes to the criminal justice system with a human-centric approach and a focus on imparting justice instead of imposing penalties. The home minister said that now an FIR will have to be filed within three days of receiving the complaint and the preliminary enquiry will have to be finished within 14 days.

"Enquiry report will have to be submitted to a magistrate within 24 hours, the filing of charge sheet cannot be delayed for more than 180 days and even if the investigation is still pending, special permission will have to be taken from the court. "The judges will not be able to reserve judgement for more than 45 days. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Two held with morphine worth ₹1cr in Bokajan

**HT Correspondent**  
BOKAJAN, Dec 20: Karbi Anglong Police on Tuesday night recovered morphine weighing 2 kg here at Lahorijan. The opium was found inside a bag of a passenger inside a bus, MN 01 HT 0188, which was coming from Manipur and was destined for Guwahati.

Police also apprehended two people in this connection with the matter, identified as Md Ayush Khan and Md Suruj Khan.

As per the police, the recovered contraband is valued at ₹ 1 crore in the market.

The Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma also appreciated the Karbi Anglong police over their achievement.

"In a late night operation, @karbianglongpol intercepted a bus at Lahorijan and after thorough search 2 packets of morphine weighing 1.910 kg was recovered. Two people, from a neighbouring state, were apprehended in this incident. Well done @assampolice," the CM wrote on micro-blogging site X.

It is worth mentioning that in the month of November, Karbi Anglong police had

recovered 1.652 kg of heroin worth around ₹ 15 crore from a van under Dillai police station. The police while carrying out checking in the evening, recovered 130 plastic cases containing heroin from the door panels of a Tata Winger van bearing registration number AS 01KC 9014, coming from Manipur.

In this connection Mohammad Elias Khan (29) and Mohammad Sirajuddin, both from Manipur were detained. In a similar incident in Lahorijan, the police recovered heroin (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## HT BRIEFS

### Indo-Bangla border

GUWAHATI: BSF director general Nitin Agrawal on Wednesday reviewed security scenario and operational preparedness along the India-Bangladesh boundary, officials said. He visited the international border outposts in riverine areas in Assam's Dhubri district, the Border Security Force said in a statement. Agrawal was briefed by BSF Guwahati frontier inspector general Dinesh Kumar Yadav at the international border between India and Bangladesh, it said. Staff officers also apprised him of operational preparedness, and measures to combat various challenges along the border and discussed remedies to control trans-border crime. The BSF DG along with BSF Additional DG (Eastern Command) Sonali Mishra also visited the Guwahati Frontier headquarters. Senior officials reviewed the current security scenario and operational preparedness along the India-Bangladesh border, the statement said.

### Coronavirus cases

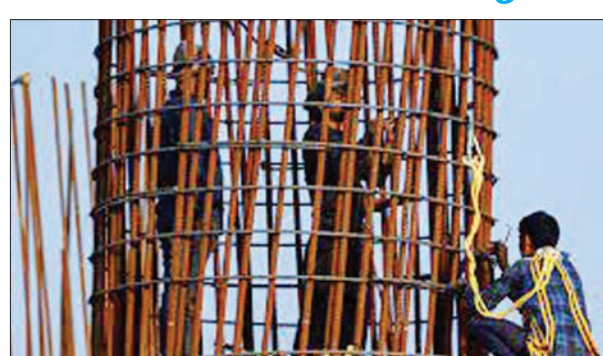
NEW DELHI: India recorded 614 new coronavirus infections, the highest since May 21, while the active cases have increased to 2,311, according to the Union Health Ministry data updated on Wednesday. The death toll was recorded at 5,33,321 with three deaths reported from Kerala in a span of 24 hours, the data updated at 8 am showed. The country's Covid case tally is 4.50 crore (4,50,05,978). The number of people who have recuperated from the disease has increased to 4,44,70,346, and the national recovery rate stands at 98.81 per cent, according to the health ministry's website. The case fatality rate stands at 1.19 per cent. According to the ministry's website, 220.67 crore doses of Covid vaccines have been administered in the country so far.

'At the moment we are looking to bring in 10,000 as per govt approvals'

## Israel to recruit thousands of construction workers from India

JERUSALEM, Dec 20: A team of "selectors" from Israel visited India last week and another senior delegation will leave for India next week to start the process of recruiting thousands of workers to be brought to the country to fill in the acute shortage faced by its construction industry, a senior executive at the Israel Builders Association said on Wednesday.

"We will start the process in Delhi and Chennai next week on December 27. At the moment we are looking to bring in 10,000 as per government approvals and this will scale up to 30,000 in the near future depending on how it goes. It is an ongoing exercise and will





take months," Deputy Director General and Spokesperson for the Israel Builders Association (IBA), Shay Pauzner, told PTI. "The selection starting next week will last 10-15 days," Pauzner said. A delegation led

by Izchak Gurvitz, who heads the IBA's division dealing with workers' issues and the selection team, was in India last week and would be joining CEO Igal Slovick again next week with other members of

the IBA team, he said. Director General of the Ministry of Construction and Housing Yehuda Morgenstern will also be accompanying the delegation leaving for India next week.

During a telephonic conversation with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on Tuesday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "discussed advancing the arrival of foreign workers from India to the State of Israel", the Office of the Prime Minister of Israel said in a statement. "We urgently need more workers. In any case, the government is the one who will decide where the missing workers will come from," (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

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## Bear attack: Equity investors become poorer by ₹ 8.91 lakh crore in single day

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Equity investors became poorer by ₹ 8.91 lakh crore on Wednesday as markets came under a bear attack, with the benchmark Sensex falling almost 931 points after hitting its fresh all-time high level.

Erasing all its early gains, the 30-share BSE Sensex crashed 930.88 points or 1.30 per cent to settle at 70,506.31 points. The index opened higher and later gained 475.88 points or 0.66 per cent to hit its all-time high of 71,913.07 points.

However, broad-based selling pulled down the benchmark to the day's low of 70,302.60 points.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies eroded by ₹ 8,91,729.43 crore to ₹ 3,50,19,998.87 crore.

"Markets were on a record-setting spree for a while and have been in an overbought zone, so hiccups were expected in the form of profit-taking which came to the fore today."



"Redemption was seen across the sectors, and even mid and small-cap stocks came under the grip of a strong bear hammering," Prashanth Tapse, Senior Vice President (Research) at Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

Among the Sensex firms, Tata Steel fell the most by 4.21 per cent. NTPC, Tata Motors, HCL Technologies, Mahindra & Mahindra,

State Bank of India, Power Grid, Tech Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro and JSW Steel also declined.

HDFC Bank emerged as the only gainer from the pack.

In the broader market, the BSE small-cap gauge fell 3.42 per cent and mid-cap index declined 3.12 per cent. All the indices ended lower, with utilities tumbling 4.65 per cent, telecommunication plum-

meting 4.36 per cent, power declining 4.33 per cent, services falling 4.20 per cent, metal (3.57 per cent), commodities (3.51 per cent), industrials (2.85 per cent), capital goods (2.83 per cent) and consumer discretionary (2.55 per cent).

A total of 3,177 stocks declined while 658 advanced and 86 remained unchanged.

"The domestic market saw a sharp and abrupt sell-off in the second half, despite the positive trend in global peers. This is attributable to profit booking from the recent sharp rally stretching valuations of mid- and small-cap stocks. The recent uptick in crude prices prompted investors to book profits," Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services, said.

The BSE benchmark had climbed 122.10 points or 0.17 per cent to settle at 71,437.19 points on Tuesday. The Nifty had gained 34.45 points or 0.16 per cent to 21,453.10 points. (PTI)

## Gold jumps ₹ 300; silver rallies ₹ 800

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Gold price jumped ₹ 300 to ₹ 63,100 per 10 grams in the national capital on Wednesday amid strong cues in international markets, according to HDFC Securities.

The precious metal had closed at ₹ 62,800 per 10 grams in the previous trade.

Silver also rallied ₹ 800 to ₹ 78,500 per kilogram. In its previous close, it had settled at ₹ 77,700 per kg.

In the futures trade, February contract of gold advanced ₹ 112 to ₹ 62,588 per 10 grams on the MCX. Also, March contract of silver bounced ₹ 110 to ₹ 74,934 per kg on the exchange.

In the global markets, gold and silver were quoting higher at USD 2,040 per ounce and USD 24.07 per ounce, respectively.

HDFC Securities' senior analyst of commodities Saumil Gandhi said, "Gold extended their gains as traders maintained bets that the US Federal Reserve will start cutting interest rates by next year, despite pushbacks from central bankers on such expectations." (PTI)

## Margins of North Indian tea gardens to shrink during FY24: ICRA

**KOLKATA, Dec 20:** Leading credit rating firm ICRA said that tea gardens of North India will suffer from shrinkage in the margins due to rise in input costs and wage hike in West Bengal and Assam during the current fiscal.

Margins will also be affected due to low export demand and sluggish rural consumption, ICRA said adding that the outlook for the sector has been revised to negative from stable.

The credit rating firm said that all-India auction prices of the orthodox variety in the first 10 months of calendar year 2023 witnessed a significant decline of around ₹ 51 per kilogram on a year-on-year basis.

The price drop in South India was lower at ₹ seven per kilogram during the same period. ICRA said that the slump in orthodox tea realisation was due to lower export demand, primarily from Iran.

Similarly, the all-India cumulative auction average of CTC vari-

ety also witnessed a decline during the first 10 months of 2023 to the extent of ₹ six per kilogram.

ICRA said that sluggish rural demand along with headwinds in the export markets due to oversupply of Kenyan teas have contributed to the decline.

Sujoy Saha, vice-president and sector head of ICRA, said, "A sharp decline in exports to Iran, Russia and the UAE has impacted tea prices at the auction centres in India."

Direct exports to Iran, which is primarily an orthodox market, have decreased 80 per cent during the first nine months of calendar 2023 on a year-on-year basis, he added.

According to ICRA, all-India production of bulk teas in the first 10 months of 2023 moderated by 22 million kilograms on a year-on-year basis and full-year production is expected to ease by one per cent as compared to calendar 2022. (PTI)

## Rupee settles flat at 83.18 against US dollar



**MUMBAI, Dec 20:** The rupee ended flat at 83.18 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday amid massive selling in equity markets as concerns over oil supplies through the Red Sea route dented investor sentiment.

Forex traders said though the US dollar index below 102 level provided support, the Indian currency was weighed down by foreign fund outflow amid volatile crude oil prices.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.17 and traded between the peak of 83.13 and the lowest level of 83.18 against the dollar. It finally settled at its previous closing level of 83.18 (provisional) against the greenback.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.08 per cent higher at 101.87 on Wednesday.

Global oil price benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.78 per cent to USD 79.85 per barrel.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex plunged 930.88 points or 1.30 per cent to settle at 70,506.31. The broader NSE Nifty declined 302.95 points or 1.41 per cent to 21,150.15.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the equity market on Tuesday as they offloaded shares worth Rs 601.52 crore, according to exchange data. (PTI)

## Sensex, Nifty go into tailspin; tank over 1 pc

**MUMBAI, Dec 20:** Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty went into a tailspin after hitting their fresh all-time high levels on Wednesday, closing down by over 1 per cent as investors cashed in on the recent rally.

Erasing all its early gains, the 30-share BSE Sensex crashed 930.88 points or 1.30 per cent to settle at 70,506.31.

The index opened higher and later gained 475.88 points or 0.66 per cent to hit its all-time high of 71,913.07. However, across the board selling dragged the barometer down from record highs and it dropped to a low of 70,302.60.

The Nifty fell by 302.95 points or 1.41 per cent to 21,150.15. During the day, it climbed 139.9 points or 0.65 per cent to reach its record high of 21,593.

"The domestic market saw a sharp and abrupt sell-off in the second half, despite the positive trend in global peers. This is attributable to profit booking from the recent sharp rally stretching valuations of mid- and small-cap stocks. The recent uptick in crude prices prompted investors to book profits," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.

All the 30 Sensex shares, except for HDFC Bank, closed in the red. Tata Steel fell the most by 4.21 per cent. NTPC, Tata Motors, HCL Technologies, Mahindra & Mahindra, State Bank of India, Power Grid, Tech Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro and JSW Steel also declined.

HDFC Bank was the only gainer from the pack.

"Markets witnessed a bout of

profit-taking and lost nearly one and a half per cent. After the initial uptick, Nifty hovered in a range in the first half however a sharp cut in the heavyweights across sectors completely turned the tone," said Ajit Mishra, SVP - Technical Research, Religare Broking Ltd.

All the indices ended lower, with utilities tumbling 4.65 per cent, telecommunication plummeting 4.36 per cent, power declining by 4.33 per cent, services falling by 4.20 per cent, metal (3.57 per cent), commodities (3.51 per cent), industrials (2.85 per cent), capital goods (2.83 per cent) and consumer discretionary (2.55 per cent).

A total of 3,177 stocks declined while 658 advanced and 86 remained unchanged.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo

and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory while Shanghai ended lower. European markets were trading mostly lower. The US markets ended in the green on Tuesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude jumped 0.76 per cent to USD 79.83 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 601.52 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

In the broader market, the BSE smallcap gauge fell 3.42 per cent and midcap index declined 3.12 per cent.

The BSE benchmark climbed 122.10 points or 0.17 per cent to settle at 71,437.19 on Tuesday. The Nifty went up by 34.45 points or 0.16 per cent to 21,453.10. (PTI)

## Govt to move SC again to get funds from Sahara Group and repay investors

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The government will approach the Supreme Court again to get more funds from the Sahara Group, as three crore investors have sought a refund of ₹ 80,000 crore stuck with the company's cooperative societies.

The cooperation ministry has launched a portal for investors where they can make an application to get their money stuck with societies, minister of State for Cooperation in Rajya Sabha B L Verma said while replying to a supplementary question.

Verma said three crore investors have registered on the portal seeking their money to the tune of ₹ 80,000 crore back.

"We have started process to refund money back to investors in 45 days. We have got ₹ 5,000 crore... we will go to the apex court again for getting more fund (from Sahara Group) to pay back all investors. Every paisa of investors of Sahara Group will be paid back," Verma told the House, adding that many investors have got their money back.

He assured that all investors going through the process (on the portal) will get their money back.

"We are refunding money to small investors first with amount of ₹ 10,000 each," he said. (PTI)

## Alstom launches digital experience centre in Bengaluru

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** French multinational Alstom on Wednesday launched a digital experience centre in Bengaluru for next-generation signalling solutions development in India.

The centre will be a hub for executing urban, mainline, freight and mining projects, along with integrated cybersecurity, security and telecom, Alstom said in a statement.

With this centre, Alstom has set up its largest signalling lab infrastructure spread over 60,000 sq ft in India, it said.



According to the statement, the dedicated experience centre will support more than 7 million hours of engineering work for Indian and global projects.

Alstom Managing Director Olivier Loison said the rail network in India -- both urban and mainline -- is becoming highly modernised and complex, making it more important to develop advanced signalling solutions to drive safety, efficiency, and improved passenger experience.

"In addition to our excellent manufacturing and engineering capabilities, we are proud to be leading the charter of rail technology innovation with the launch of this centre," he added. (PTI)

## Bharti Airtel applauds Progressive Telecommunications Bill 2023

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** Gopal Vittal, MD & CEO of Bharti Airtel, commended the government for its forward-thinking approach in introducing the Telecommunications Bill 2023 in the Lok Sabha.

Vittal expressed appreciation for the proposed reforms aimed at streamlining India's licensing landscape, emphasising the need for a more cohesive and efficient authorisation-based regime.

Highlighting the significant strides made in spectrum reforms since 2021, Vittal lauded the elimination of SUC for future spectrum assignments and the option for a moratorium on past spectrum dues.

He noted that these reforms, gaining momentum under the proposed bill, would ensure predictability and availability of spectrum, fostering a robust digital infra-

structure and expanding services for the benefit of every Indian.

Vittal also welcomed the proposed reform on Right of Way (RoW), foreseeing an acceleration in the rollout of telecom infrastructure, including 5G. He underscored the importance of enforcing Central RoW rules at the local level, with provisions related to public and private property instilling confidence in the industry for faster deployment.

The restructuring of penalties was identified as another pivotal reform by Vittal. He commended the tiered system of graded penalties proportionate to the breach, coupled with the introduction of a voluntary undertaking and an appeal process within the government. This, he believes, will mitigate litigations and promote more efficient resolution of disputes.

## At ₹ 3.79 lakh cr, public sector enterprises' capex hits 52 pc of budget target by Sept end

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Capital expenditure by central public sector enterprises touched about 52 per cent of the Budget target at ₹ 3.79 lakh crore in the first half of current fiscal, the finance ministry said on Wednesday.

This is higher than the capex by CPSEs in the April-September period of last fiscal. In the first half of previous fiscal, the figure stood at ₹ 2.85 lakh crore or 43 per cent of Budget estimates for 2022-23 fiscal.

"Capital Expenditure

#CAPEX targets by Central Public Sector Enterprises #CPSEs on track with 51.71% of target achieved till September 2023," the finance ministry said in a post on X.

Against estimated expenditure of ₹ 7.33 lakh crore for full 2023-24, ₹ 3.79 lakh crore (approx.) achieved i.e. about 51.71 per cent as on 30th September, 2023, it said.

The full year capex by CPSEs was estimated at ₹ 6.62 lakh crore in 2022-23 fiscal. (PTI)

## Alibaba names CEO Eddie Wu to lead as its growth falters

**HONG KONG, Dec 20:** China's Alibaba Group says its CEO Eddie Wu will head its core e-commerce business, as the company seeks to drive growth and fend off fast-growing online shopping rivals like Pinduoduo.

Wu is replacing Trudy Dai, a longtime Alibaba executive who was one of the founding employees of the company.

Alibaba's chairman Joe Tsai said in an internal letter dated Wednesday that Dai will help set up an asset management company aimed at improving returns on capital and "enhance shareholder value."

The reshuffle came after PDD Holdings Inc., which operates online shopping platform Pinduoduo and U.S.-focused e-commerce site Temu, surpassed Alibaba in market value in the past month. As of Tuesday, PDD's market capitalisation of its U.S.-listed stock was \$199.41 billion. Alibaba's was \$191.75 billion.

Alibaba founder Jack Ma earlier this month praised PDD for having managed to grow bigger than his Hangzhou-based company, which had for years been China's biggest e-commerce player. Alibaba needs a "brand-new strategy" and a change in the firm's organizational principles and systems to a "brand new environment," Tsai said in his letter.

Alibaba's Hong Kong-listed stock rose 3.5% in trading Wednesday following the announcement. The company restructured its businesses in March, splitting them into six units that would eventually raise their own capital and go public. Its cloud unit had been expected to be among the first to hold an initial public offering, but Alibaba later scrapped plans to spin-off the business, citing uncertainties over U.S. export curbs on advanced chips used for artificial intelligence. (AP)

## UK inflation falls by more than anticipated to 2-year low of 3.9 per cent in November

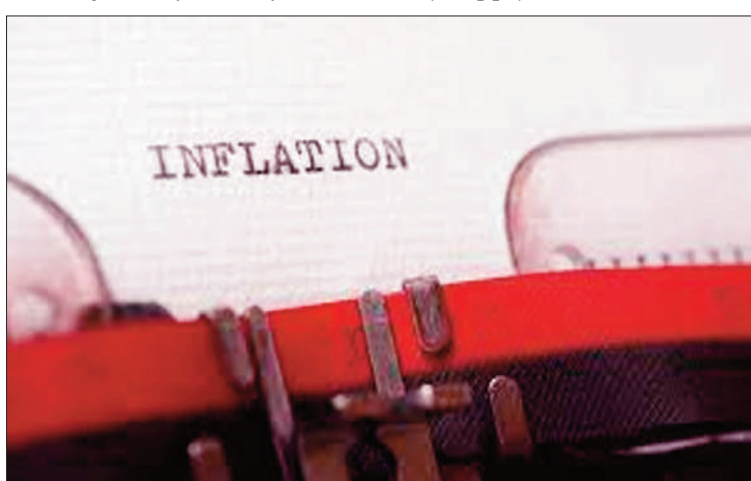
Higher interest rates targeted a surge in inflation, first stoked by supply chain issues during the coronavirus pandemic

**LONDON, Dec 20:** Inflation in the UK as measured by the consumer prices index eased back to its lowest level in more than two years, official figures showed Wednesday, in a development that is likely to bolster speculation that the Bank of England may start cutting interest rates sooner than expected.

The Office for National Statistics said inflation dropped to 3.9 per cent in the year to November, its lowest level since September 2021, from 4.6 per cent the previous month. That decline was bigger than anticipated in financial markets.

The agency said the biggest driver for the fall was a decrease in fuel prices after an increase at the same time last year. Food price inflation also contributed to the decline.

Last week, the Bank of England left its main interest rate at a 15-year high of 5.25 per cent, where it has stood



since August following the end of nearly two years of hikes. Bank Gov. Andrew Bailey said interest rate policy would likely have to remain "restrictive for an extended period of

time."

The Bank of England has managed to get inflation down from a four-decade high of over 11 per cent but still has a way to go to get to its target

of 2 per cent.

Higher interest rates targeted a surge in inflation, first stoked by supply chain issues during the coronavirus pandemic and then Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which pushed up food and energy costs.

While the rate increases have helped in the battle against inflation, the squeeze on consumer spending, primarily through higher mortgage rates, has weighed on growth in the British economy. There are growing worries that rates will stay high for too long, unnecessarily damaging the economy.

Samuel Tombs, chief UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, said November's surprisingly sharp fall in inflation "reinforces the likelihood" that the central bank will begin to reduce interest rates in the first half of 2024, "far earlier than it has been prepared to signal so far." (AP)

## Aiming for bigger market share in premium motorbike segment: TVS Motors

**KOLKATA, Dec 20:** Two and three-wheeler manufacturer TVS Motor is aiming to capture a bigger market share in the premium motorcycle segment, an official of the company said on Wednesday.

The company enjoys the number two position in the premium motorbike segment in India, which is growing at 10 per cent at present, he said. Motorcycles having an engine displacement of 150 cc and above are categorised in the premium segment.

"We enjoy the number two position in the premium segment in the Indian motorcycle market. We aim to have a bigger market share in this category," Vimal Sumbly, head (premium business) of TVS Motor said. Launching the TVS Apache RTR 310 in Kolkata, Sumbly said the company now offers premium motorcycles ranging from 160 cc to 310 cc displacements.

"Our aim is to increase the volume of the premium motorcycle segment in the country. Now premiumisation in the motorcycle segment is taking place at a faster pace with improvement in infrastructure and rise in disposable incomes," he told reporters. The company is now exporting its two-wheelers across all categories to around 55 countries with a global sales volume of one million annually, he added. (PTI)

**RELIABILITY IMPROVEMENT OF S&T GEARS**  
**E-Tender No. SNT-35-LMG-2023-24**  
**Dated: 15-12-2023.** E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **Name of work:** Reliability improvement of S&T gears by replacement of signaling cables, ground connections etc under the jurisdiction of Sr.DSTE/Lumding.  
**Tender Value:** ₹ 1,32,48,700.73.  
**Earnest Money:** ₹ 2,16,300/- **Date & Time of Closing of Tender:** 15.00 hrs. on 08-01-2024 & opening at 15.30 hrs. of 08-01-2024. For details please visit [www.irops.gov.in](http://www.irops.gov.in)  
**DSTE, Lumding**  
**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**  
 Serving Customers With A Smile

**IN THE COURT OF HON'BLE DISTRICT AND SESSIONS JUDGE, SANKARDEV NAGAR, HOJAI**  
 Case No. Misc (P) 13(H)/23  
**GENERAL NOTICE**  
 Whereas, the Sri Sanjay Kumar Gupta, s/o Sri Raghunath Prasad, R/O: Ward No. 13, Kedia Puram Road, VIP Colony, Hojai, P.O. Hojai, P.S. Hojai, Dist. Hojai, Assam, has filed an application before this Court u/s 276 of the Indian Succession Act for grant of Probate in respect of Last WILL Date 15/01/2022 executed by late Smt Janaki Devi.  
 If any person has any objection to the Grant of Probate to the Petitioner of the aforesaid Will of late Smt Janaki Devi, then any person may appear before this court on next date 02/02/2024 And submit his objection if any, failing which the matter will be decided ex-parte.  
 Sd/-  
 District & Sessions Judge  
 Sankardevnagar, Hojai  
 Assam

## AAU concludes honey production training

**HT Correspondent**  
**JORHAT, Dec 20:** The one-and-a-half-month short-term training program on 'Honey Production Technology' conducted by the Directorate of Open and Distance Education at Assam Agricultural University concluded recently. Dr Bidyut Chandan Deka, vice-chancellor of the university, addressed the gathering as the chief guest, urging the trainees to view honey production as a viable business opportunity. He highlighted the importance of innovative thinking to capture the market effectively.

Nodal officer for Open and Distance Education, Pritam Barthakur, delivered the welcome speech, and certificates were awarded to 19 trainees. Dr Mukul Deka, the program coordinator, provided insights into the course, while the event saw the participation of key university officials, including Dr Minal Saikia (director of Research in charge), Dr Manoranjan Neog (director of Extension Education in charge), and Dr Ramani Thakuria (director of Open and Distance Education Courses). The training aimed to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for successful honey production and entrepreneurship in the field.

## BTR govt celebrates 3 glorious years in reign



**HT Correspondent**  
**KOKRAJHAR, Dec 20:** Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma unveiled five flagship missions and initiatives of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) government on the occasion of the grand celebration of three glorious years of the UPPL party-led UPPL-BJP-GSP alliance government in BTR on Wednesday. Notably, the BTR government has successfully completed its three glorious years in its reign since 2020 (December 15) and stated its dedication to extending services of good governance

and massive ushering of sustainable development across the region.

On Wednesday, the BTR government celebrated the peace and tranquility held at BDSA (Bijni District Sports Association) playground in Chirang district. The celebration witnessed a grand gathering, which included the unveiling of five more flagship missions and initiatives, namely Aai Onesai Bithangki, Subungthini Thandwi Bineswar Brahma Bodoland Knowledge Centres, Peoples' Hope Peoples' Plan,

Green Bodoland Mission, and BTR Women's Market. Addressing the gathering,

CM Sarma said that the UPPL party-led UPPL-BJP-GSP alliance government completed its three years in the government and rendered services for bringing healthy welfare and development to society. He extended his warm greetings and congratulations to the CEM Pramod Boro, deputy CEM, and all office bearers of the BTR government on their journey of three years. He said that the BTR government and state governments

are jointly working dedicatedly towards the welfare and uplift of the Bodoland region. He said that the BTR government has now achieved various steps while bringing healthy welfare and development among the citizens of the region.

CEM Boro said that the empowerment and welfare of the people of Bodoland continue to be the sole philosophy of the government of the Bodoland Territorial Region. He informed that during the celebration of '3 Glorious Years of BTR Government', CM Sarma digitally unveiled several flagship missions and initiatives of the Government of BTR aimed at bringing healthy welfare and development. He expressed his hope that the flagship initiatives unveiled by CM are aimed at empowering our women, encouraging participatory development, and sustaining the rich natural heritage of BTR. He added that the BTR government is committed to working for all-round development and welfare of the citizens.

Among others, State Cabinet Minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma, BTCLA Speaker Katiram Boro, MLAs Lawrence Islary, Jiron Basumatary, Joyanta Basumatary, Ajoy Roy, and BTR EMs were prominent attendees at the event. A multi-community cultural demonstration was also showcased on the occasion.

## MLA Jiran Basumatary attends Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra in Gossaigaon

**HT Correspondent**  
**GOSSAIGAON, Dec 20:** As part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment to developing the nation in every sector through the central government's flagship scheme, a Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra was organised at the premises of Habrubil VCDC office in Gossaigaon on Wednesday.

The Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra was chaired by Jiran Basumatary, MLA Gossaigaon LAC. Addressing the program, Jiran Basumatary emphasized PM Narendra Modi's vision of developing a better nation in the world through the central government's flagship scheme.

He mentioned that to fulfill PM Narendra Modi's commitment among the people, the government has reached every family door-to-door to assess deficiencies and problems. As a consequence, self-help groups have been taught to be self-reliant, ensuring that every person in the country can avail and enjoy the benefits of the flagship schemes announced by the central government, and no beneficiary is deprived of the schemes.

MLA Jiran Basumatary asserted that this scheme taught people to become self-reliant by taking advantage of various loans from

banks and various developmental schemes, including pensions for old men, PM AWAS for the homeless, MGNREGA for the unemployed, free rations, Ayushman in the field of medicine, etc.

Under this flagship scheme, almost 70 percent of the people have been covered under the Jal Jeevan Mission to provide clean water. The deprived ones have been given priority under this scheme, and it has committed to providing a hundred percent of LPG connections among the women beneficiaries, added Jiran Basumatary.

On the other hand, schemes for the betterment of farmers, including Kisan Credit cards, the supply of free seeds to fulfill farmers' dreams, and Swaraj Schemes for women beneficiaries, have already been implemented by the government. Besides, the state government is overseeing the successful implementation of a hundred percent of schemes given by the state as well as the central government by announcing several schemes of its own.

In conclusion, the winning participants of Khel Maharan and Sanskritik Mahasangram were awarded certificates and trophies at the event.

## Concerns raised over construction quality at Chokihola Higher Secondary School



**HT Correspondent**  
**KOILAMATI, Dec 20:** The principal, teaching staff, and members of the School Managing Committee (SMC) at Chokihola Higher Secondary have raised serious concerns regarding the construction quality, accusing contractor Puja Construction, Bokajan, of utilising substandard cement and bricks for the ongoing school building project.

The foundation for the construction was ceremonially laid on December 7, 2023, with the chief executive member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Deputy Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Dr Numal Momin, and local member of Autonomous Council (KAAC), Pobitra Rongpi, gracing the event. The ambitious project, funded under Samagra Siksha, has an estimated budget of ₹ 354.75 lakhs and aims to elevate Chokihola High School to the status of a higher secondary school.

During a site visit by the school principal, Dr Ronjit Ronghang, SMC president Bapuram Rongpi, and teaching staff, alarming observations were made regarding the quality of the bricks being used. Dr Ronghang, while expressing gratitude for the provided school building, raised significant concerns about the contractor's apparent use of low-quality construction materials. In an attempt to address the issue, the principal reportedly contacted the contractor, Puja Construction of Bokajan, via mobile phone. However, instead of addressing the concerns, the contractor allegedly responded with harsh and inappropriate language, exacerbating the tensions surrounding the construction project.

## Margherita Block Congress Committee condemns suspension of 141 Opposition MPs

**HT Correspondent**  
**MARGHERITA, Dec 20:** Margherita Block Congress Committee's vice president, Md Toufik Khan, expressed strong condemnation on Wednesday over the suspension of 141 Members of Parliament from various opposition political parties. The suspension occurred during their protest against the attack on Parliament House on December 13.

Md Toufik Khan, addressing media persons in Margherita, highlighted the significance of Indian democracy as the largest in the world. He regarded the suspension of 141 MPs as a significant threat to the country's democratic values. He highlighted the essential role that the Opposition plays in governing a nation, noting that with the suspension of a total of 49 MPs on December 19, both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha have been left devoid of Opposition representation.

The suspension of MPs, including Pradyut Bordoloi from Nagaon, Abdul Khaleq from Barpeta, and Gaurav Gogoi from Koliabor, by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, has sparked criticism and raised concerns about the functioning of democratic institutions in the country.

## WWF-India conducts training program in Guwahati

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** The UNEP Tide Turners Plastic Challenge, a global initiative addressing single-use plastic issues, has been actively fostering youth leadership in India since 2019. WWF-India serves as the knowledge and implementing partner with UNEP for adapting and executing the challenge in the country. The challenge aims to educate global youth about the impact of plastic pollution, inspiring them to reduce their plastic consumption and motivate others to do the same.

The Tide Turner Plastic Challenge involves participants undertaking three levels of challenges, guiding them through knowledge acquisition, self-reflection, personal and community action, and collaborative advocacy to combat plastic pollution. Targeting a diverse audience, including school eco clubs, individual youth from colleges/universities, and youth from rural, indigenous, and marginalised communities, the initiative plays a pivotal role in driving transformative changes on the ground.

The WWF-India Assam & Arunachal Pradesh State Office organised the Tide Turner Plastic Challenge Teachers' Training Program on Tuesday, at Maharishi



Vidya Mandir Senior Secondary School, Silpukhuri. This training aimed to empower school teachers to lead the Tide Turners Plastic Challenge with their students, fostering impactful action against plastic pollution.

The event commenced with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp by chief guest Lakhon Lal Meena, CBSE RO for the North East region, along with other dignitaries. The training program, led by Archita B Bhattacharyya, state coordinator, WWF-India Assam State Office, included a detailed presentation on Tide Turner's Plastic Challenge. The participants engaged in activities like the 'Circle of Influence', exploring circles of concern, influence, and control.

World's largest youth-led movement on plastic pollution,

TTPC, encourages schools to participate and take up the challenge. The program highlighted the inspiring story of Anusweta Deb, a resident of Hailakandi, and a young Tide Turner Champion. Anusweta innovated a unique life jacket made from plastic bottles, saving lives during floods. The event concluded with participant appreciation and the distribution of TTPC toolkits, posters, and bookmarks.

The Tide Turner Plastic Challenge is open for registration, inviting schools, colleges/universities, and citizens aged 11-35 years to join the movement against plastic pollution. Interested participants can sign up at <https://tide-turners.org/>, selecting WWF-India for group registration and individual registration.

## Biju Phukan Best NGO Award conferred on Aaranyak

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** Aaranyak, one of the country's leading research-based biodiversity conservation organisations in the non-government sector, has been honoured with the Biju Phukan Recognition Award 2023 in the category of Best NGO. The award recognises Aaranyak's diverse initiatives for biodiversity conservation and the facilitation of human well-being in the region. The prestigious award was presented at a glittering function held at Shilpagram on Tuesday evening, attended by an august gathering of Assamese film industry personalities, including acclaimed filmmakers and fans of the late legendary actor Biju Phukan.

Conferred in memory of Late actor Biju Phukan, the award encompasses various categories, honouring individuals and organisations that have made significant contributions to society, culture, and cinema.

Dr Alolika Sinha, executive member of Aaranyak, and Bobby Nath, senior manager - Administration, received the

award on behalf of the organisation, which was established in 1989 as a nature club and has since evolved into one of the country's leading biodiversity conservation organisations. The star-studded event was graced by well-known actors from the Assamese film industry, including Pranjal Saikia, Jatin Bora, Kapil Bora, and Nishita Goswami, among other dignitaries from Assamese cinema. Expressing gratitude, Dr Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, secretary-general and CEO of Aaranyak, stated, "I am really thankful to family members of Late Biju Phukan, who was an iconic actor, social figure of Assam. Aaranyak being conferred with Biju Phukan Award 2023 as a premier environmental NGO is indeed a privilege for all of us. Such recognition further encourages our zeal to contribute towards environment and wildlife conservation in the region. I would take this opportunity to appeal to fraternities associated with film and music industry in Assam to promote environment and wildlife conservation through their domain."

## Trains affected due to infrastructure development

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** In light of pre non-interlocking and non-interlocking works at Changsari and Agthori stations of Rangiya division, several trains are set to be cancelled and diverted. The following adjustments will be made: Train No 05801/05802 (New Bongaigaon - Guwahati - New Bongaigaon) Passenger, scheduled for December 26, 2023, will be cancelled. The following trains will be diverted via New Bongaigaon - Goalpara Town - Kamakhya: Train No 20504 (New Delhi - Dibrugarh) Rajdhani Express, journeys on December 22, 23, and 25, 2023; Train No

15647 (Lokmanya Tilak Terminus - Guwahati) Express, journey on December 22, 2023; Train No 12513 (Secunderabad - Silchar) Express, journey on December 23, 2023; Train No 12551 (SMVT Bengaluru - Kamakhya) Express, journey on December 23, 2023; Train No 15904 (Chandigarh - Dibrugarh) Express, journeys on December 20 and 24, 2023. Train No 05894/05893 (Rangapara North - Rangiya - Rangapara North) Passenger special will be permanently augmented with six sleeper class coaches, effective from December 24, 2023 & December 25, 2023, respectively.

## Villagers trained to coexist with wild elephants



**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** In an effort to foster co-existence between villagers and wild elephants, 61 community members from villages under Charaguwa Grant in Sivasagar, have undergone training on the installation, monitoring, and maintenance of seasonal solar-powered fences. These fences aim to prevent damages caused by herds of wild elephants that frequently visit the villages.

The training was facilitated by Aaranyak, a

premier biodiversity conservation organisation, and the British Asian Trust, with support from the Darwin Initiative (UK Aid). The initiative empowers villagers to mitigate conflicts with wild elephants and encourages peaceful co-existence by using seasonal solar fences.

Seasonal solar-powered fences have proven to be effective in protecting standing crops, lives, and homesteads in areas prone to human-elephant conflict (HEC). The training focused on providing practical skills and knowledge to

the community members, enabling them to use seasonal solar fences as an efficient mitigation tool in HEC-affected regions.

The agrarian community in Charaguwa Grant, Sivasagar, faces challenges from herds of wild elephants, making the need for such mitigation tools crucial to safeguard crops and homes. The training comprised both theoretical and hands-on sessions, covering installation, maintenance, monitoring, and the types of materials required for non-lethal solar-powered fences. A live demonstration of solar fence installation was also conducted during the training.

Aaranyak's expert on solar fences, Anjan Baruah, led the training, assisted by Dibakar Nayak and Rupam Gayari. British Asian Trust officials Belinda Stewart-Cox and Auro Shashwat, along with Aaranyak's senior scientist Dr Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar and senior conservation biologist Dr Alolika Sinha, were present during the training.

Aaranyak and the British Asian Trust, with support from the Darwin Initiative, are actively engaged in promoting human-elephant co-existence in eastern Assam and West Garo Hill district of Meghalaya. The initiative focuses on educating people, enhancing livelihoods, and protecting subsistence livelihoods using seasonal solar-powered fences.

## Zookeeper Training Programme organised for North Eastern zoos



**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** A comprehensive Zookeeper Training Programme was organised for North Eastern Zoos by the Central Zoo Authority, New Delhi, from December 18 to December 20, 2023 at Assam State Zoo, Guwahati. The initiative aimed to enhance the skills and knowledge of zookeepers, focusing on the well-being and care of zoo captives.

A total of 24 dedicated zookeepers from 11 zoos participated in the training programme, representing facilities such as Biological Park, Itanagar; Bijni Deer Park, Kokrajhar; Nagaland Zoological Park, Dimapur; Himalayan Zoological Park, Sikkim; National Zoological Park, New Delhi; Khasi Hills Wildlife Division, Shillong; Sipahijala Zoological Park, Tripura; Namdapha National Park & Tiger Reserve, Mia;

WTI, Manas; CWRC & Assam State Zoo, Guwahati.

The training featured six distinguished resource persons, namely Dr Porag Jyoti Deka, Dr Ditul Barman, Dr G Mahato, Dr Sachin Ranade, Dr Jayaditya Purkayastha, & Dr Panchami Sharma, each an expert in their respective fields. These experts shared their knowledge and insights with the enthusiastic attendees.

The zookeepers were trained on various aspects, including conservation education for all zoo keepers, basic hygiene, and biosecurity protocols in a zoo, basics of captive wildlife husbandry practice, examination of captive animals reporting and ethical health management. Additionally, an overview of snakes in Assam and their captive management was also provided during the programme.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

The meek shall inherit the Earth, but not its mineral rights.  
- J. Paul Getty

China's Evolving Myanmar Strategy

As Myanmar grapples with internal turmoil following the military coup in February 2021, China's stance on the conflict appears to be undergoing a nuanced shift. Initially downplaying the coup as a mere "cabinet reshuffle," China maintained support for the military junta despite Western sanctions and allegations of human rights abuses. In a notable development, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, a coalition of ethnic militias with reported ties to China's security services, executed a significant attack in northern Myanmar, capturing over 200 army bases and vital border crossings. This marked a shift in dynamics, signaling a departure from China's previous unwavering support for the junta. The Alliance's success prompted a surge in assaults by various armed groups, leading to a conflict that now spans two-thirds of the country, displacing hundreds of thousands. The Alliance's objective to eradicate online scam operations along the Myanmar-China border, linked to trafficking and generating billions in revenue, raised concerns for China's security. In November, speculations arose about China reconsidering its stance, coinciding with anti-China protests organized by the junta's backers. However, China swiftly reassured the junta through joint naval drills and diplomatic discussions. On December 14th, a temporary truce was declared, showcasing China's intricate and sometimes contradictory approach to Myanmar.

China's substantial economic ties with Myanmar, including a \$35 billion investment in infrastructure projects, reveal its long-term interests. This initiative aims to provide China with direct access to the Indian Ocean, reducing dependence on the strategic Strait of Malacca. In contrast, India's investment in a road construction project linking Myanmar to northeastern India pales in comparison at \$500 million. China's strategic calculus also considers security concerns, fearing the spill-over of instability along its 2,000-kilometer border with Myanmar. Criminal activities, especially the online scam industry, have become a priority in Chinese foreign policy. The former foreign minister's visit to Myanmar in May highlighted concerns about tens of thousands of Chinese citizens unlawfully transported to Myanmar for engaging in scams, with the military showing reluctance to intervene. China's shifting focus towards ethnic militias, such as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, indicates a pragmatic approach. While not direct proxies, these militias pursue their interests, forming alliances with pro-democracy factions. China, however, intermittently exerts influence, as seen in the recent offensive and subsequent ceasefire facilitated on December 14th.

The complexity of China's Myanmar strategy arises from tensions between long-term economic interests, security concerns, and a desire to prevent Myanmar from aligning with pro-Western democrats. As the conflict unfolds, China's role in facilitating truces and navigating alliances underscores its pragmatic and self-serving approach. In contrast to India and Russia's engagements with the junta, China's extensive investments solidify its support for Myanmar's military. Yet, the evolving dynamics, marked by ethnic militias gaining prominence, highlight the challenges in maintaining a consistent stance. In this intricate geopolitical landscape, China's actions in Myanmar reflect a delicate balancing act, prioritizing both economic interests and security considerations. As the conflict evolves, China's role remains pivotal, shaping the future trajectory of Myanmar and influencing the regional geopolitical balance. In the evolving Myanmar conflict, China's strategic shift, initially supportive of the military junta, is evident. Balancing long-term economic interests, security concerns, and the complexities of regional alliances, China's actions have far-reaching implications. As it navigates this delicate geopolitical landscape, China's influence over ethnic militias and facilitation of truces showcase its pivotal role in shaping Myanmar's future.

The so-called 'high level probe' assured by Minister Pralhad Joshi is nothing but a hoax

By: Sushil Kuttu

So after all the "jalsas" to crown chief ministers of three states — Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, forget Telangana, it is 'Congress' — a probe has been ordered on the Parliament security breach, with the Modi government's Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi telling the country, shamed by a bunch of unemployed nondescripts, that things were on course when it's apparent that nothing about Parliament was or is on course.

Joshi termed it a "high-level probe". Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla had initially labelled the attack of not great significance, but he got to thinking and corrected the significance-quotient from 'Yellow', the colour of the canister-gas sprayed in the Lok Sabha, to 'Orange', which the BJP knows denotes 'desperate'.

Meantime, in a case similar to shutting the stable doors after the horses had bolted, security has been boosted inside and outside Parliament. Things have been lackadaisical ever since the BJP took charge of India in 2014 and Narendra Modi became Prime Minister. India has always been prone to "reaction" with Modi at the helm, whether it was "Uri", "Pathankot" or "Pulwama". Apparently, this policy suits the Modi regime as it gives the BJP opportunity to reiterate and remind Indians that "Modi Hai Toh Mumkin Hai" after every few months. A Congress leader called the Parliament security breach "another Pulwama" and he was being imaginative. Normally, Congress leaders aren't and not many from the hoi polloi took notice.

The INDI-Alliance should ask itself "Why?" And the opposition MPs shouldn't halt the protests. The demand for a statement from the Union Home Minister should be the Holy Grail for the Opposition. Home Minister Amit Shah shouldn't be allowed to forget that holding the BJP's fort at propaganda-heavy media con-

claves, which keep intruding in current affairs, isn't parliamentary by any stretch of the imagination. The Opposition also asked for a discussion on the breach in both Houses even as it charged the treasury with trying to "suppress its voice". Pralhad Joshi didn't take the bait. After years of managing Parliament, Joshi knows all the tricks of trade that MPs use. "Come and debate," he invited, and that isn't "suppressing voice". Pralhad Joshi will line up a dozen bills to discuss and nothing will be heard or spoken about the Parliament security breach.

Unfortunately, for the Opposition, none of the "breachers" wore saffron, ever. On the contrary, these are people who are distinctly "green" — their involvements restricted to the farmers agitation, the CAA protests and the "wrestlers' uprising" — all giveaways to their ideological affiliations. That said, "Parliament" is the Achilles heel of the Modi government and the Bharatiya Janata Party. Things have been "parliamentarily wrong" for both government and party ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi made histrionics part of the BJP's parliamentary proceedings, right from moving with bag and baggage to the New Parliament Building along with the 'Sengol' to what turned out to be an elaborate initiation ceremony with the Prime Minister flat on his belly. Parliament is not going anywhere. This is the Winter Session and the ruling party is on the back-foot.

Home Minister Amit Shah will be loath to make a statement. The ruling dispensation will instead raise its own smokescreen. Also, what will the BJP gain from a discussion in the House? Except one-liners and chest-thumping. Even otherwise, the Lok Sabha Speaker is the 'Boss' of Parliament and not the Home Minister. The only line of attack is to politicize the issue and not be shy about it. At least journalists will get a story to tell, write and take to town with. (IPA Service)

New resolve to tackle climate change

Though right form the start or even before it started, the vibes from the Dubai Summit were not positive. However, as the jamboree ended, 198 countries announced that they are committed to phase out fossil fuels as they pose the main climate change accelerators.

Ending fossil fuels

The countries agreed to contribute to a transition "away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science."

This could be counted as some progress as just a few years ago it was inconceivable that fossil fuels, which in fact still fulfil almost every country's energy needs to a large extent, will be phased out and might be banned.

However, the announcement doesn't mean anything, as there is no mandate behind it, but it could help build momentum for more action from governments. The Paris climate agreement's commitment that countries would pursue efforts to limit global heating to 1.50C, above pre-industrial levels staged a version of this in 2015.

In fact, the agreement doesn't

underline the urgency required to avoid worsening climate destruction, and it includes language, which may fuel further delay or non-action.

A new culprit identified

While oil and gas companies have not yet committed to producing less fossil fuel, their pledge to cut emissions from their own operations is noteworthy. In the agreement, instead of highlighted the harmful effects of Carbon Dioxide — CO<sub>2</sub>, the delegates were somehow influenced to focus more on Methane-CH<sub>4</sub>.

Methane, an odourless gas is produced by virtually every oil and gas project worldwide. When it is not cost effective to capture it, companies often release methane into the atmosphere via venting or burn it through flaring, which ironically converts it into Carbon Dioxide.

The gas also leaks into the atmosphere from facilities via innumerable small, undetected or unreported leaks in pipelines or other equipment, or through large-scale releases called "super-emitter" events.

Scientists say methane has been responsible for up to 30 percent of global warming since the industrial era began, so the

The Dubai COP28 summit, started a fortnight ago with little promise of any major breakthrough on climate rules. However, the governments and delegates this time proved their critics wrong and the final agreement announced that for the first time the world has agreed to move away from the coal, oil and natural gas that are the principal causes of global warming

Dubai agreement offers a win for the climate, even if the 50 signatories account for less than a third of the industry's total operational emissions.

Oil companies may choose to shut some production because that is the most cost effective answer to the target of zero flaring of methane. Some of the biggest oil companies have already promised zero routine flaring and near-zero methane and a number have shown that big progress can be made on the latter.

Renewable energy

A second COP28 commitment could affect demand for fossil fuels by tripling the world's renewable energy generation capacity to at least 11,000 Gigawatts —GW by 2030.

More than 120 countries signed up to this pledge, which will require a big leap in effort

from what has been done before. It took 12 years from 2010 to 2022 to achieve the last tripling of renewable capacity. This one has to be done in the space of eight years.

This means that meeting the goal will be difficult, but achievable. This is also supported by the fact that solar and wind are now the cheapest sources of new energy generation in most countries, but the growth of renewables is being held back by a range of bureaucratic and regulations bottlenecks that many authorities are struggling to unblock.

Generating more efficient energy

The third COP28 commitment with implications for hydrocarbons is aimed at boosting energy efficiency.

More efficient and smart use of energy is widely referred to as the "first fuel" in clean energy

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Asad Mirza

Lower excise duty boosts India's thriving wine culture to new heights

By: Arun Kumar Shrivastav

The India Wine Awards 2023, now in its fifth edition, recently concluded with an extravagant celebration of the finest wines in the country. Organized by the Sonal Holland Wine Academy in collaboration with ProWine, this prestigious event showcased 219 exceptional wines across various categories, carefully selected from an impressive list of 460 wine and sake nominations.

Recent statistics reveal a significant surge in wine consumption in India. With approximately 10 million regular wine drinkers, the country experienced a remarkable 29% increase in wine consumption in 2022 alone. Furthermore, an India Wine Insider (IWI) report estimates India's wine market value to be at an impressive \$238 million, Forbes said in a report in October 2023.

Leading the way in recognizing this trend is Sonal C Holland,

India's first Master of Wine. She has successfully established the Sonal Holland Wine Academy in India, marking her profound influence on the Indian wine landscape.

The grand event at the Jio World Convention Centre, marked the largest blind-tasting competition of both domestic and international wines ever seen in India. A distinguished panel of 20 expert jury members meticulously evaluated each wine, employing a 100-point scoring system to ensure the winners accurately represented the preferences of Indian consumers.

In a remarkable display of excellence, 79 wines clinched the coveted Gold category, while 110 wines secured the Silver accolade. From this impressive lineup, the wine with the highest score in each category earned the prestigious title of "Best in Show."

In an exciting addition to this year's awards, sake was introduced as a new category, ac-

knowledging its growing popularity in the Indian market. The judging process witnessed intense deliberations, with some categories experiencing two or three-way ties, showcasing the tough competition among the participants. The Winners' Night, a glamorous affair, brought together 600 prominent figures from the wine industry, including luminaries, hospitality leaders, representatives from global trade councils, and winemakers from around the world. The highlight of the evening was the recognition of Rajeev Samant, the founder and CEO of Sula Vineyards, who has played an instrumental role in shaping the Indian wine industry. Samant received the esteemed 'Indian Wine Industry Leader and Champion Award,' presented to him by Sonal C Holland, the founder and chairperson of India Wine Awards.

"As the first and only Master of Wine in India, I've had the opportunity to leverage my knowledge

and global wine market insights to launch initiatives that align with international standards. I'm delighted to have contributed significantly to the growth of India's wine industry, which is now the third largest alcohol beverage market worldwide and the fastest-growing one for wine," stated Sonal.

Apart from an increase in consumption and knowledge, India has witnessed a surge in wine imports. A significant contributing factor has been the reduction in excise duty taxes on imported alcohol, which saw a decrease from 300% to 150% in 2021. Trade agreements with countries like Australia have further lowered import taxes on wine, from 150% to 75%, making imported wines more affordable.

According to Sonal, "Wines from Australia, Chile, Italy, and France are among the top four destinations imported into India. However, wines from New World countries like the US are likely to

transitions because it offers some of the quickest and most cost-effective options for cutting emissions, lowering energy bills and bolstering energy security.

The countries that signed up to the 2030 renewables pledge agreed to collectively double the global average annual rate of energy efficiency improvements from around 2 percent to more than 4 percent every year until 2030.

However, all this could translate into real achievement only when the world leaders who attended COP28 are focused to turn these words into real ground action by creating plans for implementation of the summit's goals.

This certainly leaves much to be desired, given the sway of the oil and petrochemicals giants on various governments, an example of which is the manner in which they have been able to turn the attention from CO<sub>2</sub> to MH4 at the recent summit.

Thus, a resolve coupled with sincere and active policymaking, should pave the way forward but it may also invite political opposition and industry resistance. (The author is a Delhi-based senior political and international affairs commentator)

gain popularity in years to come due to competitive pricing strategies and experiential marketing efforts to gain brand recall and loyalty among Indian consumers."

India boasts its own flourishing wine industry, with a majority of wineries situated in and around Nashik, Maharashtra. The region's altitude of 565 meters (1853 feet) creates a unique climate that enhances wine grape quality. The warm, sunny days result in high sugar and tannin concentrations, while cool nights preserve grape acidity.

The largest player in the Indian wine scene is Sula Vineyards, which not only serves the Indian market but also exports its products globally. Other significant contributors include Grover Zampa Vineyards and Fratelli Wines. International wineries like Chandon-India, a prominent French sparkling wine producer, have also established operations in India. (IPA Service)

A beacon of hope: The International Trading Center DAN (Pangsha) and its transformative potential

By: Dr Aniruddha Babar

Professor: What do you see, Major, looking deep at the vast expanse of mountains spread across?

Major: Challenges, possibilities and victories, Professor. (Major takes a sip of his drink)

Major: And what do you see, Professor?

Professor: (Smiling) Possibilities, challenges, victories, and justice, Major.

Major: (Raises his glass) Cheers to Noklak.

Professor: Cheers, Major.

Five strategic locations along the Indo-Myanmar border — Lungwa, Pangsha, Mimi, Mohe, and Avangkhu — stand poised to become thriving hubs for international trade and commercial activity. Among these, Pangsha, nestled in Noklak district, holds a unique position as a vital gateway to Southeast Asia, aligning seamlessly with the goals of India's "Act East" policy.

Launched in 2014, the Act East policy builds upon the groundwork laid by the earlier "Look East" policy of 1991. Both policies aimed to shift India's economic focus towards the dynamic and rapidly growing economies of Southeast Asia. Pangsha, with its proximity to Myanmar's Sagaing Region, embodies this strategic shift, acting as a critical link for cross-border trade and investment.

The International Trading Center (ITC) at Dan, located within Pangsha, holds the key to unlocking the region's immense economic potential. By facilitating the smooth flow of goods and services across borders, the ITC can attract foreign investment, create job opportunities, and empower local communities to participate directly in the thriving trade ecosystem.

Understanding the interconnectedness of the Pangsha region, its people, and the ITC at Dan is vital for realizing the full potential of the Act East policy. The confluence of strategic location, economic opportunity, cultural exchange, bringing communities together and peace building initiatives positions Pangsha as a critical hub in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. By investing in the development of the ITC, India can unlock a new era of prosperity and collaboration, not only for itself but for the entire region and the local population.

Nestled amidst the rugged terrain of Nagaland, the International Trading Center (ITC) DAN (Pangsha) stands as a silent monument to unrealized potential. Yet, beneath its dormant exterior lies a sleeping giant, ready to awaken and unleash the economic and social prosperity of the region. The untouched beauty of the surrounding landscape masks the untapped opportunities waiting to be explored. With

strategic activation and community engagement, this dormant center could become a catalyst for transformative change, breathing life into the aspirations of Noklak and the broader region, shaping a future characterized by unprecedented growth and fulfillment of its latent promises.

Strategically positioned at the crossroads of India and Myanmar, Noklak, where Dan ITC (26°17'27" N, 95°7'42" E) resides, holds the key to unlocking a vibrant economic corridor. Its proximity to the Naga Self-Administered Zone of Myanmar's Sagaing Region (Lahe Township: 26°19'46"N, 95°26'41"E, Lay Shi Township: 26°25'45"N, 95°13'12"E and Nanyun Township: 26°05'08"N, 95°17'23"E) presents a unique opportunity to forge a pathway of cross-border trade, investment, and collaboration. Further, the long and uncertain path back to peace in Manipur has jeopardized the standing of "Moreh" as the default route for Indo-Myanmar trade, and further underlined the need to develop an alternate to it. This confluence of factors transforms Noklak into a gateway for regional prosperity, with the Dan ITC serving as its beating heart.

However, the current state of the ITC stands in stark contrast to its grand potential. Its dormancy represents a missed opportunity, a slumbering giant awaiting the touch of revival. Reopening its doors is not merely an economic imperative; it is a strategic necessity with far-reaching consequences not just for Noklak and its immediate surroundings, but for India's global ambitions as well. The dormant ITC, if revitalized, could serve as a dynamic catalyst, propelling Noklak onto the international stage, fostering economic growth, and contributing significantly to India's position in the ever-evolving global economic landscape.

Picture a bustling hub of activity at the revitalized Dan International Trading Center, alive with the dynamic exchange of goods between India and Myanmar. In this envisioned scenario, a seamless flow of Indian products enters Myanmar, while Burmese merchandise effortlessly makes its way into Indian markets. This transformed ITC becomes a pivotal conduit, fostering economic growth for both nations and aligning seamlessly with India's ambitious "Act East" policy objectives. Recognizing the strategic significance of Southeast Asia to India's economic trajectory, the Dan ITC transcends its local origins, transforming into a strategic asset with global implications, symbolizing India's expanding influence on the international economic stage.

However, the ITC DAN (Pangsha)'s impact extends far beyond its economic benefits. Its strategic location makes it a catalyst for job creation, offering a viable

alternative to the allure of armed groups. By empowering individuals and families with economic stability, the ITC fosters a sense of self-sufficiency and contributes to the overall socio-economic development of the region. Additionally, the ITC's proximity to local communities fosters an inclusive and equitable distribution of benefits, ensuring that everyone shares in the prosperity it generates.

Furthermore, the Dan ITC presents a unique opportunity to bridge the diplomatic divide and strengthen ties with neighbouring countries, particularly Myanmar. By facilitating seamless cross-border trade and building bridges among the communities in the region, the ITC can lay the foundation of peace in the region, build robust diplomatic relationships and pave the way for deeper collaboration on issues of mutual concern with Myanmar. This fosters a climate of trust and cooperation, contributing to regional stability and long-term peace.

The ITC DAN (Pangsha)'s international reach extends far beyond simply facilitating trade and diplomacy. By aligning with India's strategic priorities, Noklak can become a valuable asset, solidifying India's position on the global stage and furthering its economic and geopolitical interests. This strategic alliance not only benefits the region but also strengthens India's presence on the world map.

However, unlocking the full potential of the ITC DAN requires a focused and comprehensive approach. Infrastructure development, particularly in the areas of road connectivity and trade-related infrastructure, is paramount. Streamlining regulatory frameworks and simplifying bureaucratic procedures are equally crucial to attract investment and facilitate smooth trade operations. Additionally, logistical considerations, such as warehousing and storage facilities, must be addressed to ensure efficient handling of goods and prevent bottlenecks.

By addressing these challenges and harnessing its full potential, the Dan ITC can awaken the sleeping giant within, transforming whole Noklak from a sleepy, remote border district into a thriving center of economic activity, diplomatic engagement and cultural exchange. This transformation, in turn, can pave the path for a brighter future for the entire eastern region, the state of Nagaland and the nation at large characterized by peace, prosperity, and a harmonious relationship with neighboring countries.

Moreover, the benefits extend beyond the borders of Noklak and contribute to a larger narrative of peace and stability. By offering legitimate employment opportunities, particularly among the youth, the Dan ITC can address the issue of insur-

gency that has plagued the region for decades. With a viable alternative to armed groups, the ITC can discourage recruitment and contribute to long-term stability, fostering a peaceful future for generations to come.

However, recognizing the potential is only the first step. Addressing challenges such as infrastructure limitations, bureaucratic hurdles, and logistical considerations is crucial for ensuring the success of the ITC and maximizing its impact. By proactively overcoming these obstacles, India can transform Pangsha region from a promising crossroads into a thriving center of trade, culture, and opportunity, forging a brighter future for all stakeholders involved. Understanding the interconnectedness of the Pangsha region, its people, and the ITC at Dan is vital for realizing the full potential of the Act East policy. The confluence of strategic location, economic opportunity, cultural exchange, and peacebuilding initiatives positions Pangsha region as a critical hub in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. By investing in the development of the region and harnessing the potential of the ITC, India can unlock a new era of prosperity and collaboration, not only for itself but for the entire region.

In conclusion, the Dan International Trading Center emerges as more than just a facility; it stands as a beacon of hope, not only for Noklak but for the broader aspirations of Nagaland and beyond. The unlocking of its immense potential signifies a transformative force that can constructively reshape the entire region. The ITC has the power to catalyze economic growth by becoming a nucleus for cross-border trade, not just at a local level but on an international scale, forging economic alliances and collaborations.

Beyond the economic realm, the center becomes a hub for cultural exchange, bridging communities across borders and fostering a rich tapestry of understanding. This exchange not only contributes to the socio-cultural fabric but also plays a crucial role in building trust and cooperation, essential elements for sustainable peace and stability. As a strategic engine of growth, the Dan ITC is poised to propel Noklak and India onto the world stage, highlighting the region's potential and contributing significantly to the nation's global economic footprint. In essence, the ITC goes beyond being a trading center; it stands as a symbol of progress, unity, and a promising future for Noklak and the surrounding regions, solidifying its significance as a key player in the dynamic landscape of international trade and economic development. (The author is an academician in the Department of Political Science, Tetso College, Nagaland)

# A year of Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework: How far have we come?

By: Vibha Varshney

A year has passed since the ambitious Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) was adopted at the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) 15th Conference of Parties (CoP15).

A deadline of 2030 was set for meeting the 23 targets, but so far, progress has been slow. Despite multiple meetings over the year, most decisions have been deferred to CoP16 to be held in Colombia next year.

The Framework furthers the overall agenda of the CBD that strives to ensure that biodiversity is protected, used sustainably and that the benefits accrued from its use are shared equitably with the communities that have protected it for centuries.

In November, CBD's 12th Ad Hoc Open-ended Inter-Sessional Working Group on Article 8 (j) and Related Provisions of the Convention, tasked with developing a new work programme for Article 8 (j) and ensuring that it is in sync with KMGBF, agreed the languages of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLC) need to be preserved to ensure intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices.

Delegates discussed how IPLCs need to be involved in the proposed permanent subsidiary body under Article 8 (j). A permanent subsidiary body on indigenous issues was also discussed.

However, discussions were inconclusive and decisions were deferred to CoP16. Despite the clear role of IPLCs in the basic role of CBD, they have been on the sidelines since the Convention entered into force in 1993. KMGBF has changed this - 7 of the 23 targets specifically mention IPLCs and the need to protect their rights.

Article 8 (j) mandates that each country respects, preserves and maintains the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities. The secretariat has identified four indicators to ensure the involvement of IPLCs. These include linguistic diversity and numbers of speakers of indigenous languages; land-use change and land tenure in the traditional territories of indigenous and local communities; practice of traditional occupations; and the degree to which traditional knowledge and practices are respected. There was only partial agreements on these and these too



would be further discussed over the coming year.

Delegates agreed that IPLCs should receive funds directly to implement projects. It is pertinent here to mention that Global Environment Facility (GEF) has earmarked as much as 20 per cent of the funds available under the newly established Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF) to be available to IPLCs.

The first tranche of the fund is likely to be disbursed after the council meeting to ensure that the first projects under the new fund can be launched ahead of CBD's CoP16. The first work programme of GBFF is likely to be finalised at the June 2024 GEF Council meeting.

The first meeting of the CBD's Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Benefit-sharing from the Use of Digital Sequence Information on Genetic Resources, also took place in November. The aim was to develop and put in place a multilateral mechanism for the sharing of benefits from the use of digital sequence information.

Digital sequence information includes components of the biological resource such as its nucleic acid sequence data or its protein sequence data. The group will meet again in Montreal, Canada, in August 2024, to finalise recommendations for consideration and adoption at the CoP16.

The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA-25) met for the first time after the adoption of the Framework in October. The Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Indicators updated delegates on progress and proposed that instead of simple binary indicators, categorical indicators could be created so that countries could provide a more nuanced report on progress.

Final indicators would be consid-

ered at SBSTTA-26 in May 2024 and these too will be finalised at CoP16.

## Synergies galore

Through the year, KMGBF was discussed at meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) too. These, along with the CBD, were put in place at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio Janeiro with the hope of protecting the planet.

At the recently concluded UNFCCC's CoP28, 18 countries endorsed the Joint Statement on Climate, Nature and People which places nature at the center of climate action. The 'Nationally Determined Contributions - National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAP) Ministerial' held on December 9, 2023 highlighted that the revised NBSAPs to be submitted in 2024 as part of the KMGBF and the new NDCs to be submitted in 2025 at UNFCCC's COP30 should keep the correlation in mind.

In March, UNCCD published a brief on the shared agenda of restoration and resilience. The brief identifies where and how synergies between commitments on biodiversity and land can enhance implementation at global and national levels, increasing the impact of limited finance and delivering multiple benefits. It stresses that preventing the degradation of ecosystems and rehabilitating degraded land are cost-effective responses that can safeguard biodiversity.

Other than the work of these two sister organisations, deliberation on the Framework happened in many other fora.

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), which has a multilateral system for benefit

sharing for the use of agricultural commodities, has decided to follow discussions under the CBD on digital sequence information (DSI). The 10th Session of the Governing Body, in November, decided that Working Group meetings will be organised over the next year on benefit sharing on DSI/genetic sequence data along with payment structure and rates.

In July, at the 19th session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture in Rome, Italy, delegates deliberated on three matters: A review of work on biodiversity, nutrition and human health; access and benefit-sharing for food and agriculture; and digital sequence information for food and agriculture. Members discussed overlaps between the commission's work with that of KMGBF. Specifically in the case of DSI, it was decided that the commission would continue monitoring developments in other fora and participate where relevant.

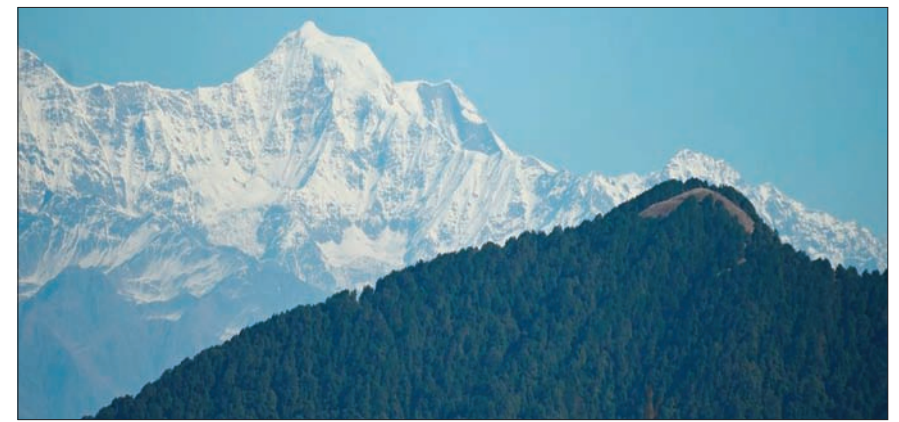
In June, UN members formally adopted the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty to safeguard life in the ocean in the High Seas. The Treaty would enhance the work on Target 3 of KMGBF, which proposes actions to protect at least 30 per cent of land and seas by 2030. The BBNJ Treaty was opened for signing and ratification at the UN General Assembly on September 20 and would enter force only after 60 members ratified it.

The World Health Organization has also looked into the question of access to pathogens and sharing of benefits derived from their use (such as vaccines and drugs) in its pandemic agreement. The draft text of the agreement was discussed at the seventh meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) which ended on December 6, 2023. The governments discussed a multilateral system for access and benefit sharing. The INB recommended that subgroups continue to hold informal discussions and propose new text by January 15, 2024 for consideration at the eighth meeting to be held from February 19 - March 1, 2024.

With all decisions deferred to 2024 and later, it is not clear how the deadlines on targets and goals of KMGBF will be met. The first global review of progress in the implementation of the KMGBF is scheduled during COP17, sometime in 2026. This leaves very little time for successful implementation and for ensuring that the world is on the correct course. (Courtesy: Down To Earth)

# Water droplets from remnants of ancient Ocean found in Himalayan mineral deposits

By: Niladry Sarkar



In the Kumaon mountains in the central sector of Uttarakhand's Himalayas, a team of scientists from the Indian Institute of Science and Japan's Niigata University have unearthed water droplets trapped in mineral deposits. These droplets could be remnants of an ancient ocean that existed around 500-700 million years ago, say the scientists, and that they could enhance the understanding of how complex life forms evolved on Earth.

In their paper, published in the journal Precambrian Research in September, three scientists from Centre for Earth Sciences of the Indian Institute of Science and two from Niigata University wrote that they had discovered mineral deposits in the Kumaon mountains, in a region also known as the Lesser Himalayas, that contained marine carbonates from a sea of the Neoproterozoic era, estimated to have existed between 1 billion and 540 million years ago.

The team found sparry magnesites, which are stratigraphically associated with dolomite, a kind of limestone that is rich in magnesium carbonate and calcium carbonate and stromatolite, which is a sedimentary rock formed by microbial organisms. But the deposits the researchers found had lower amounts of calcium and higher amounts of magnesium, suggesting a different origin and environment of precipitation, the researchers wrote in their paper.

"In present-day environmental conditions, precipitating magnesium carbonate in the oceans is difficult. However, during the Neoproterozoic era, extreme environmental and climatic factors favoured magnesium carbonate precipitation because the calcium input in the oceans was significantly low due to the freezing of rivers," said Professor Sajeev Krishnan of the Centre for Earth Sciences, one of the corresponding authors of the paper.

The research team is hopeful their findings will bring more researchers to the Himalayas to uncover more about the evolution of complex life forms on Earth.

"Our contribution may attract other research groups towards the Himalayan mountain range for experimenting on carbonate/past ocean chemistry, the evolution of cyanobacteria, Snowball Earth glaciation and related Earth's Oxygenation Events," said Prakash Chandra Arya, a PhD student at the Indian Institute of Science and the first author of the paper.

## The evolution of complex life forms

The researchers stated that the development of sparry magnesites in the Kumaon mountains took place approximately 750-580 million years ago during the Snowball Earth glaciation period when Earth was covered by thick ice sheets.

"This led to changes in sedimentation rates, ocean chemistry and the response of life to these events," Arya said. "Low calcium input during that period provided photosynthesising cyanobacteria with the opportunity to rapidly evolve and expand, as other microorganisms would hardly survive in such conditions." Samridhi Jain, a PhD scholar at the Indian Institutes of Technology Bombay who studies single-celled organisms called foraminifera, explained these phenomena in detail.

"During the Snowball Earth glaciation period, the thick ice sheets performed the albedo effect; that is, they reflected more sunlight leading to reduced solar insulation and less heating of the Earth's atmosphere," she said.

"The thick ice sheets and their albedo effect restricted the flow of rivers into oceans. As a result, the flow of riverine nutrients that are important for the growth of complex life forms were reduced in the ocean. However, the photosynthesising cyanobacteria, also known as blue-green algae, flourished even with less nutrients," she added.

These evolving communities of cyanobacteria generated a large amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, causing the Neoproterozoic Oxygenation Event, also known as the Second Great Oxygenation Event, which occurred from 630-551 million years ago, after Snowball Earth glaciation.

It is thought that the increased oxygen in the atmosphere during the Second Oxygenation Event led to the rapid evolution of complex life forms from simple unicellular or small multicellular forms, the paper stated. This event, known as Cambrian Explosion, is believed to have happened between 541 million and approximately 530 million years ago at the end of Neoproterozoic and the beginning of Cambrian era.

"We know very little about our past oceans, where the first life forms originated and evolved. We don't know much about whether the past oceans were more acidic or basic, warmer or colder, more nutrient-rich or deficient, and how different their chemical and isotopic composition was compared to the present oceans," Arya said. "The ocean water trapped in magnesite crystals can provide insights into these aspects, and this information can be used for future climate modeling."

Their findings highlighted a likely "a chain reaction" of one Earth process triggering another. The team demonstrated how a climatic event would have altered ocean and sediment chemistry, resulting in rapid proliferation of cyanobacteria, which, in turn, increased the oxygen levels in the atmosphere and laid the foundation for the evolution of complex life forms.

## The Himalayas in evolution

The research team affirmed that the Himalayas were a prime location to explore various Earth processes, including continental-continental collision, orogeny, tectonic deformation, seismic activity and climate variations, which are extensively recorded and visible in this region. The Kumaon Lesser Himalayas are recognised as one of India's notable Precambrian basins.

"We were interested in understanding the collisional dynamics of the Indian and Eurasian plates, which can only be done in the Himalayas," Arya said on being asked why they chose the Himalayas for their research. "The region has a revealing stratigraphy and has nicely exposed sparry magnesite in the eastern side of Kumaon."

The researchers further stated that there was once a vast ocean once where the Himalayas now stand. "Before the Indian plate collided with the Eurasian plate, there was an ocean named Tethys," the first author of the paper stated (Tethys is also the name of the Greek goddess of freshwater).

Even though a significant part of the Himalayas is dominated by rocks (limestone and dolomite) that were formed exclusively in a marine setting, the ocean water trapped in the magnesite crystals was not from the Himalayas' current geographical location. This is because approximately 600 million years ago, the Indian plate was situated in a different location than it is today.

The team of scientists is hopeful their findings will attract other research groups to the Himalayan mountain range and aid our understanding of ancient oceans, which is restricted due to tectonic activities that have since destroyed them. The chemical and isotopic compositions of these oceans are largely a mystery, with only indirect signatures available, they wrote in their paper.

Jain, the PhD scholar from IIT Bombay, echoed the same and advocated for further research on past oceans. She said, "Studying preserved ocean chemistry from the magnesites can provide important insights into past environmental conditions, making it possible to understand the history of oxygenation."

Studying these oxygenation events, she said, is crucial to understanding the evolution of multicellular life, including humans, from multicellular eukaryotes - unicellular organisms whose cells contain a membrane-bound nucleus.

On being asked how their findings are important and applicable to other regions on Earth, Arya said, "Sparry magnesites from different geological periods are exposed in various parts of the world, particularly in Europe, North America and South America. Despite the differences in time scale, we believe that certain key chemical and biological responses will be reflected in their results." (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

# Hydrogen makes itself at home

By: Hugh Davies

Among a cluster of new homes on the northern outskirts of Melbourne, there is one house that stands apart. Not that you'd know it by looking from the outside. Hy-Home, unveiled this year by the Australian Gas Infrastructure Group, is Australia's first hydrogen-powered home.

The demonstration house in Wollert is equipped with hydrogen-powered hot water systems, heating, cooktop and barbecue; some of the first 100% hydrogen-compatible appliances to be developed for the domestic market.

The partners which built HyHome recognise what others, including billionaire mining magnate Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest, have: hydrogen has the potential to revolutionise the way we power our economy.

While the hydrogen for HyHome is supplied by on-site gas tanks, the pipe fittings match those that would connect to the gas network. The project therefore serves as an accurate proof of concept for how future homes could run on a 100% hydrogen gas network.

Hydrogen is a cleaner fuel than natural gas because the combustion of hydrogen in air produces heat and water vapour, a carbon-neutral process, as opposed to the combustion of natural gas, which produces carbon dioxide.

Blending hydrogen into the existing natural gas mix, or the use of pure hydrogen in the gas network, reduces the amount of natural gas needed which can help cut carbon dioxide emissions in tricky to decarbonise sectors such as heating or industrial manufacturing processes.

The Australian Government's National Hydrogen Strategy has identified the use of hydrogen in gas networks as a priority area for research, trials and demonstration projects. The testing of hydrogen blending projects taking place across Australia includes energy company ATCO supplying a 2-10% (by volume) hydrogen gas blend to 2,700 gas network connections in Western Australia and the Australian Gas Infrastructure Group supplying 4,000 properties in Adelaide with a 5% hydrogen gas blend.

Currently, 41 countries have hydrogen strategies to help reach net zero targets by 2050. Globally, governments and industry are pursuing hydrogen blending with serious intent. In the UK, the HyDeploy partnership at Keele University successfully supplied 668 houses, a school, several small businesses, and a church in a town in northern England with just a 20% hydrogen blend for a year. The project has further successfully trialled using a 20% hydrogen blend at an industrial scale, supplying an energy-intensive glass factory and Unilever's manufacturing plant in the northwest of England. There are, however, several challenges in blending hydrogen into the gas network.

**Allocating an in-demand resource:** Hydrogen is in hot demand. For hydrogen blending to



have a positive effect on reducing emissions, green hydrogen, produced via the electrolysis of water, should be used as opposed to grey or brown hydrogen, produced from fossil fuels.

Green hydrogen is currently expensive to produce. It requires renewable electricity and lots of clean water, both resources in high demand. Low-emissions hydrogen currently accounts for less than 1% of all hydrogen production and use, according to the International Energy Agency. There is an argument that blending hydrogen with natural gas is an inefficient use of an expensive resource, potentially "greenwashing" the continued use of natural gas when the focus could be on transitioning to electric technology such as heat pumps.

**Getting it into the home:** Hydrogen has a lower volumetric energy density than natural gas. This means a larger volume of hydrogen is required compared to natural gas for the same energy output. The Australian Hydrogen Centre reports that a 100% hydrogen network would reduce network capacity by 13%, though it adds this wouldn't impact supply.

Hydrogen is also incompatible with certain metals, with potential embrittlement leading to fractures in pipes and storage tanks which can lead to gas leaks. The government-owned Evoenergy and the Canberra Institute of Technology have shown at their testing facility in Canberra that 100% green hydrogen is compatible with current Australian Capital Territory gas network pipes and fittings.

The facility also measured the performance of everyday household gas appliances when run on hydrogen gas, showing that modern cooktops can safely use a 20% hydrogen blend. Hydrogen blends much higher than this would require the replacement of existing gas appliances.

One approach is to phase in 'hydrogen ready appliances', allowing consumers the continued use of natural gas until the gas network switches to hydrogen.

**Safety:** Like natural gas, hydrogen is a clear, colourless and odourless. Odorants are added to natural gas so leaks can be easily detected by its distinctive smell. Odourising hydrogen with this same smell or a new smell will be important for hydrogen's use in the home.

Hydrogen is easier to ignite than natural gas

owing to its much larger range of flammable concentrations in the air and a lower ignition energy. This sounds concerning but with appropriate engineering controls to prevent leaks and mandatory safety measures, such as ventilation and gas detectors; hydrogen in these applications is no more dangerous than natural gas.

In fact, some of hydrogen's properties make it a safer alternative. It is non-toxic and 14 times lighter than air, so in the event of an open air leak it would rise and dissipate very quickly.

A less-known fact about hydrogen is that it is considered an indirect greenhouse gas. Hydrogen reacts with molecules in the atmosphere which leads to the prolonged lifetime of certain greenhouse gases, such as methane.

**Public opinion:** Hydrogen's misleading reputation as a dangerous, highly explosive gas, famously demonstrated by the Hindenburg disaster, is gradually being revised. The success of long-term trials such as Hydrogen Park, in South Australia, which has been safely providing residents in Adelaide with a 5% hydrogen blend for over two years, should instil public confidence that hydrogen can be used at scale in the gas network and in our homes.

Interestingly, a study has shown that people believe hydrogen's property of burning with a near-invisible flame would severely disrupt their cooking practices but largely not affect home heating.

## Does hydrogen have a home in the gas network?

Australia is moving forward with hydrogen blending as new projects - such as Hydrogen Park Gladstone and HyP Murray Valley, which will deliver a 10% hydrogen blend to 700 households in Queensland and to the gas network of Albury and Wodonga in 2024 - continue to receive funding.

However, the reality remains that this transition will take time and the gas network that we rely on heavily will likely be part of the energy system for many years to come, perhaps forever.

During this time of transition blending green hydrogen into the natural gas mix could provide a quick fix solution that would play a small but important role in decarbonising the gas network and reducing our household emissions. (Courtesy: The Wire)

## Top Hamas leader arrives in Cairo for talks on the war in Gaza in another sign of group's resilience

**DEIR AL-BALAH, Dec 20:** Hamas' top leader arrived in Cairo on Wednesday for talks on the war in Gaza, where the militant group is putting up stiff resistance after more than 10 weeks of heavy Israeli bombardment and fierce urban combat that has killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians.

The visit by Ismail Haniyeh came a day after Hamas fired rockets that set off air raid sirens in central Israel, a show of strength during a war that has devastated much of northern Gaza and driven some 1.9 million Palestinians — nearly 85 per cent of the population — from their homes.

Israel has called on the rest of the world to blacklist Hamas as a terrorist organization, saying it must be eradicated in the wake of its October 7 rampage across southern Israel that triggered the war. But the sides have recently re-launched indirect talks, mediated by Egypt and Qatar, aimed at instituting another cease-fire and freeing more hostages captured in that attack in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Despite a flurry of activity by high-level officials in recent days, the two sides appeared to be far from an agreement, Hamas said in a statement that Haniyeh would discuss the war with Egyptian officials, without providing more details.

Egypt, along with Qatar — where Haniyeh is believed to be based — helped mediate a week-long cease-fire in November in which Hamas freed over 100 hostages in exchange for Israel's release of 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said on Tuesday that Israeli forces were entering Hamas' tunnel net-

work in northern Gaza as part of a "final clearing" of militants from the region. The densely built urban north — including Gaza City, the territory's largest — has seen ferocious fighting, with Palestinian health officials reporting dozens of people killed in bombardment in recent days.

Gallant said that in southern Gaza, operations will take "months," including the military's assault on Khan Younis, the enclave's second-largest city. "We will not stop until we reach our goals," he said.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said on Tuesday the death toll since the start of the war had risen to more than 19,600. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths.

Hamas and other militants abducted some 240 people in the October 7 attack. They are still holding an estimated 129 captives after most of the rest, mainly

women and children, were released last month.

Israel's military says 131 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. Israel says it has killed some

7,000 militants, without providing evidence, and blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying it uses them as human shields when it fights in residential areas.

UN Security Council members are negotiating an Arab-sponsored resolution to halt the fighting in some way to allow for an increase in desperately needed humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza. A vote on the resolution, first scheduled for Monday, was pushed back again until Wednesday as talks continued in the hopes of getting the US to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution after it vetoed an earlier cease-fire call. (AP)



## US flies a bomber for joint drills with SKorea, Japan after North's long-range missile launch

**SEOUL, Dec 20:** The United States flew a long-range bomber for joint drills with South Korea and Japan on Wednesday in a show of force against North Korea, days after the North performed its first intercontinental ballistic missile test in five months.

The trilateral training off South Korea's southern island of Jeju was meant to strengthen the countries' joint response against North Korean nuclear threats, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

The exercise involved a B-1B bomber and South Korean and Japanese fighter jets, the statement said. It said the B-1B's flyover is the 13th time that a US bomber has been temporarily deployed near and over the Korean Peninsula this year. A B-1B is capable of carrying a large conventional weapons payload. North Korea has previously called the bomber's deployment a proof of US hostility and had reacted with missile tests.

North Korea on Monday launched a Hwasong-18 ICBM into the sea in a drill it said was meant as a warning over the US and South Korea's confrontational steps. North Korea cited a recent US-South Korean meeting to discuss their nuclear deterrence plans.

The US, South Korea and Japan slammed the launch as a provocation, noting it violated multiple UN Security Council resolutions that ban any ballistic activities by the North. The Hwasong-18, a solid-fuelled missile, is the North's newest and most advanced ICBM. Its built-in solid propellant makes launches harder to detect than liquid-fuelled missiles, which must be fuelled for liftoffs. Monday's launch is the Hwasong-18's third firing this year.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said the launch showed how North Korea could respond if the United States were to make "a wrong decision against it." But many foreign experts say the North still has technological obstacles to overcome to possess functioning nuclear-armed ICBM that can hit the continental US.

This year alone, North Korea has conducted about 100 ballistic missile tests in what outside experts call a bid to modernise its nuclear arsenal and win greater US concessions.

In response, the US and South Korea expanded their military drills, strengthened security cooperation with Japan and increased the temporary deployment of powerful US military assets such as bombers and nuclear-powered submarines in South Korea.

Despite its torrid run of ballistic missile tests, North Korea has avoided new international sanctions as China and Russia, both permanent members of the UN Security Council, stymied any council responses to the North's testing activities. In an emergency UN Security Council meeting Tuesday over the North's ICBM launch, North Korean and Russian diplomats clashed with US, South Korean and other diplomats. (AP)

## The JN.1 variant has been reported in the USA, China, Singapore and India WHO terms Covid strain JN.1 'variant of interest'

**GENEVA, Dec 20:** The World Health Organisation has classified COVID-19 strain JN.1 as a separate "variant of interest" given its rapidly increasing spread but said that it poses a "low" global public health risk.

The JN.1 variant was previously classified as a variant of interest (VOI) as part of the BA.2.86 sublineages, the parent lineage that is classified as a VOI, the world body said on Tuesday. However, in recent weeks, JN.1 continues to be reported in multiple countries, and its prevalence has rapidly increased globally.

India has also reported its first case of the JN.1 variant. It now represents the vast majority of BA.2.86 descendant lineages reported to the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID),

according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). "Due to its rapidly increasing spread, WHO is classifying JN.1 as a separate variant of interest (VOI) from the parent lineage BA.2.86," the global health body said in a post on X.

The WHO evaluated the additional global public health risk posed by JN.1 as "low, based on the available yet limited evidence," but warned, "It is anticipated that this variant may cause an increase in SARS-CoV-2 cases amid a surge of infections of other viral and bacterial infections, espe-

cially in countries entering the winter season."

The JN.1 variant has been reported in the USA, China, Singapore and India, according to India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Seven cases of the variant have been reported from China. The strain has caused an uptick of cases in various countries, including Singapore, which reported a 75 per cent jump with 56,043 cases last week, according to its Ministry of Health (MOH). The vast majority of the growing cases in the city-



state are infected by the JN.1 variant, the ministry said.

The first JN.1 case in India was detected in a sample taken from a 79-year-old woman in Kerala with mild symptoms on December 8.

Earlier, a traveller from Tamil Nadu's Tiruchirappalli district was found to be infected with the JN.1 variant in Singapore.

Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Wednesday reviewed the preparedness of health facilities and impressed upon the states to be alert and increase surveillance.

Assuring the states of receiving all support from the Centre, he said, "We need to be on the alert but there is no need to panic." In a letter to states and union territories, Union Health Secretary Sud-

# US court disqualifies Donald Trump from presidency over Jan 6 insurrection

**WASHINGTON, Dec 20:** The Colorado Supreme Court has ruled that Donald Trump cannot run for president next year in the state because of his role in the attack on the US Capitol in 2021 and ordered the exclusion of his name from the state's Republican presidential primary ballot.

The disqualification of the 77-year-old former president on Tuesday was based on the Constitution's 14th Amendment, which says officials who take an oath to support the US Constitution are banned from future office if they "engaged in insurrection." Trump is currently the front-runner in the Republican Party's nomination process for the race for the White House in 2024. Trump's campaign has vowed to appeal against the "flawed" ruling by the Supreme Court of Colorado in the US Supreme Court.

The Colorado Supreme Court upheld a trial judge's decision that Trump engaged in the January 6, 2021, insurrection and also overturned her conclusion that the ban does not apply to the presidency.

The landmark decision from the divided top state court marks the first time a court has found Trump ineligible to return to the White House due to his conduct surrounding the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, CBS News reported. Never before has a court determined that a presidential candidate is disqualified under the Civil War-era provision clause, it said.

The state high court stayed its ruling until January 4 — a day before the deadline for



the state secretary to certify the candidates for Colorado's March 5 primary election. The 4-3 ruling by the seven-member Colorado Supreme Court does not apply outside of the state.

"President Trump's direct and express efforts, over several months, exhorting his supporters to march to the Capitol to prevent what he falsely characterised as an alleged fraud on the people of this country were indisputably overt and voluntary," the justices wrote.

"Moreover," they wrote, "the evidence amply showed that President Trump undertook all these actions to aid and further a common unlawful purpose that he himself conceived and set in motion: prevent Congress from certifying the 2020 presidential election and stop the peaceful transfer of power." "[W]e conclude that because President Trump is disqualified from holding the

office of President under Section Three, it would be a wrongful act under the Election Code for the Secretary to list President Trump as a candidate on the presidential primary ballot," the ruling stated.

The ruling follows a months-long challenge in the state to the former president's ballot eligibility under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which deems former officeholders ineligible from running again if they took an oath to support the Constitution and then engaged in "insurrection or rebellion" against the US.

The ruling also denied Trump's appeal on 11 issues and found that his actions on January 6, including a speech outside the White House that morning, were not protected by the First Amendment free speech protections, ABC News reported.

Trump has denied wrongdoing regarding the January 6 insurrection and has decried the 14th Amendment lawsuits as an abuse of the legal process. He is under federal and state indictment in connection with his attempts to overturn the 2020 election won by Joe Biden, a Democrat, and he has pleaded not guilty.

Trump has attacked the Colorado 14th Amendment challenge — and similar such lawsuits against him around the country — as baseless and anti-democratic. A Trump spokesman has vowed an appeal and said that the campaign has already begun fundraising off of the decision.

"The Colorado Supreme Court issued a completely flawed decision tonight .... We

have full confidence that the US Supreme Court will quickly rule in our favour and finally put an end to these unAmerican lawsuits," spokesman Steven Cheung said in a statement, according to US media reports.

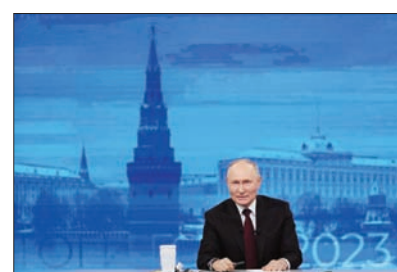
Representatives for President Biden's re-election campaign declined to comment on the Colorado ruling. But a senior Democrat affiliated with the campaign told CBS News that the decision would help Democrats by supporting their argument that the US Capitol riot was an attempted insurrection.

Indian-American presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy came out in support of Trump on Wednesday. Taking to social media platform X, the 38-year-old biotech entrepreneur pledged to withdraw from the Colorado Republican party primary ballot until Trump is allowed to be on the ballot.

Trump lost the state of Colorado by a wide margin in the 2020 presidential election. But if courts in more competitive states followed suit on Tuesday's ruling, Trump's White House bid in 2024 could face serious problems.

Trump has so far faced multiple 14th Amendment challenges in various states. Lawsuits citing the 14th Amendment were dismissed by nine courts: in Michigan, by the district court in Colorado — leading to the appeals battle there — and by the Minnesota Supreme Court, a district court in Washington and federal courts in Arizona, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Florida, the reports said. (PTI)

## Putin ratchets up military pressure on Ukraine as he expects Western support for Kyiv to dwindle



**MOSCOW, Dec 20:** After blunting Ukraine's counteroffensive from the summer, Russia is building up its resources for a new stage of the war over the winter, which could involve trying to extend its gains in the east and deal significant blows to the country's vital infrastructure.

Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to be hoping that relentless military pressure, combined with changing Western political dynamics and a global focus on the Israeli-Hamas war, will drain support for Ukraine in the nearly 2-year-old war and force Kyiv to yield to Moscow's demands.

"As far as the Russian leadership is concerned, the confrontation with the West has reached a turning point: The Ukrainian counteroffensive has failed, Russia is more confident than ever, and the cracks in Western solidarity are spreading," said Tatiana Stanovaya, senior fellow with Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, in a recent analysis.

An aid package for Ukraine has stalled in the US Congress as Republicans insist on linking any more money to US-Mexico border security changes opposed by Democrats. The European Union last week failed to agree on a USD 54 billion package in financial help that Ukraine desperately needs.

## EU claims a migration deal breakthrough after years of talks

**BRUSSELS, Dec 20:** European Union (EU) negotiators on Wednesday clinched a deal on the main elements of an overhaul of the bloc's outdated asylum rules, paving the way for a definitive agreement to be reached before EU-wide elections in June.

Envoys from member countries, the bloc's parliament and the executive branch, the European Commission, "reached a deal on the core political elements" of the Pact on Asylum and Mi-

gration, the EU's Spanish presidency said in a statement after a night of negotiations.

The pact was touted as the answer to the EU's migration woes when it was made public in September 2020. The bloc's old rules collapsed in 2015 after well over 1 million people arrived in Europe without authorisation. Most were fleeing war in Syria or Iraq.

But little progress was made on the pact as the member states bickered over which country should take charge of migrants when they arrive and whether other countries should be obligated to help.

The presidency said negotiators had bridged differences on elements like the screening of migrants arriving without authorisation, the ways that their biometric data is used, the rules that determine which EU countries should handle asylum applications and the procedures for doing so.

In recent years, as hope for reforms languished, the EU focused on outsourcing the

cut Ukrainian supply lines.

That battle has evolved into a gruesome grind for both parties and has been compared to the fighting for Bakhmut, the war's longest and bloodiest battle that ended with Russia capturing it in May.

The Kremlin and the Russian Defense Ministry are silent about specific plans, but some Russian war bloggers say Moscow could launch a massive offensive of its own to forge deep into Ukrainian territory.

Others warn, however, that the Russian military lacks resources for any such big push, saying that would require many more troops and weapons, exposing it to the same risks that doomed initial Russian attempts to capture Kyiv and other cities in the northeast at the start of the war.

In that botched attack, Russian armoured convoys stretched along highways leading to the capital, becoming easy prey for Ukrainian drones and artillery. Such setbacks forced the Kremlin to switch to a defensive strategy along the front line.

Putin is eager to show battlefield gains as he faces reelection in March. He said last week that Russia has 617,000 fighters in Ukraine, a number that many war bloggers see as far short of the kind of massive force needed to strike deep into Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says his ground forces number about 600,000. Western observers are emphasizing the need for Ukraine to build fortified defences like Russia has done to counter any potential big offensive by Moscow.

"Ukrainians have painfully few reserves," warned Mark Galeotti, head of Mayak Intelligence consultancy and a senior associate fellow at Royal United Services Institute in London. (AP)

## Australia and New Zealand leaders seek closer defence ties

**CANBERRA, Dec 20:** Australia and New Zealand leaders agreed on Wednesday to seek closer defence ties as the latter considers sharing advanced military technologies with the United States and Britain through the so-called AUKUS partnership.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon made Australia the destination of his first overseas visit since forming a coalition government following his election in October. Luxon said he and his Australian counterpart, Anthony Albanese, agreed at their meeting in Sydney the two countries' defence and foreign ministers would meet in early 2024 to ensure their plans were "aligned and coordinated."

"We know we're facing a more challenging and complex world. Close security and defence relationships we have with our only ally, Australia, is very foundational for New Zealand," Luxon told reporters. "New Zealand is committed to doing our share of the heavy lifting in the alliance and I'm determined that New Zealand will continue to be alongside Australia as we seek to advance our shared interests and our common values," Luxon added.

The United States and Britain have agreed to

provide Australia with a fleet of submarines powered by US nuclear technology under the AUKUS agreement to counter a growing military threat to the region posed by China. AUKUS is an acronym for Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Luxon said New Zealand was interested in becoming involved in AUKUS Pillar 2: a commitment between the three partners to develop and share advanced military capabilities, including artificial intelligence, electronic warfare and hypersonics.

"We'll work our way through that over the course of next year as we understand it more and think about what the opportunities may be for us," Luxon said. "AUKUS is a very important element in ensuring we've got stability and peace in the region."

Albanese said there were opportunities for greater cooperation between the two countries' militaries, particularly in interoperability.

"The more that we cooperate, the better the benefit for both of our countries," Albanese said.

New Zealand has banned nuclear-powered ships from using its ports since 1984. Luxon said his country's nuclear-free status was "not negotiable." (AP)

# Bodies of 87 Kuki Zo victims laid to rest in Churachandpur

## Thousands paid tribute to departed souls



**IMPHAL, Dec 20:** The bodies of 87 Kuki Zo victims of ethnic violence were laid to rest in Manipur's Churachandpur district headquarters on Wednesday, officials said.

Forty-one of the bodies were airlifted from different mortuaries in Imphal on December 14 while 46 were from Churachandpur district hospital, they said.

Thousands of people turned up to pay their final respects to the departed souls amid prohibitory orders.

A condolence service was organised at Tuibuong followed by the mass burial amid restrictions imposed under section 144 CrPC after a violent clash on Monday

night over the burial left around 30 injured.

Earlier on December 15, nineteen violence victims were laid to rest in Kangpokpi district.

Ethnic clashes broke out in Manipur on May 3 after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts of the state to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur's population and live mostly in the Imphal valley. Tribals comprising of Nagas and Kukis constitute little more than 40 per cent and reside in the hill districts. (PTI)

## Prohibitory orders imposed in Pasighat after 'lock-down' call in colleges

**ITANAGAR, Dec 20:** Prohibitory orders under Section 144 CrPC were imposed at Pasighat, the headquarters of East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, on Wednesday following an 'indefinite lock-down' call given by an organisation against two colleges in the district.

The organisation, Adi Baane Ke-bang Youth Wing (ABKYW), gave the call from Wednesday to press for its demand that most of the appointments in the College of Horticulture and Forestry (CHF) and the College of Agriculture (CoA) be made from the state's scheduled tribe community.

Apprehending law and order issues and public disturbance in the college campuses, district magistrate Tayi Taggu on Wednesday passed the orders prohibiting gathering of five or more people and carrying arms in the entire Pasighat town.

The ABKYW has been demanding, among others, 80 per cent job reservation for Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe in group A and B posts and 100 per cent reservation in group C and D posts.

On December 13, the ABKYW gave an ultimatum of seven days to the authorities to resolve the issue. The "lock-down" was announced after the expiry of one week.

The ABKYW staged an eight-hour dharna at CHF and CoA campuses on December 4. (PTI)

## Tripura ready to welcome PPP offer for setting up medical colleges: CM Saha

**AGARTALA, Dec 20:** Tripura chief minister Manik Saha said that his government is ready to welcome any suitable and viable public-private partnership (PPP) initiative in setting up medical colleges in the northeastern state.

His remark comes after the chief minister held a meeting with a delegation of NITI Aayog led by its senior member V K Saraswat at his residence on Tuesday evening.

Currently, the state has two medical colleges, the Agartala Government Medical College, and another society-run Tripura Medical College.

Besides, a government-run dental college opened in the current academic session.

"Today, I had a meeting with a delegation of NITI Aayog where an intensive discussion took place on different issues. They proposed setting up a medical college under the PPP model. I told them that we are receiving such proposals, but the government wants a suitable and viable offer," he told reporters.

Saha said many people from the state visit Maharaja Bir Bikram

Airport here to go outside the state for medical purposes because they want 'branded' hospitals to get modern treatment.

"If we can set up a medical college with all modern facilities under the PPP model, they will stay back and get treatment here which will be cost-effective. If any offer with a viable PPP model comes, the government will surely welcome it," he said.

Claiming that the NITI Aayog is happy with the state's performance in various growth parameters, the chief minister said he highlighted the trade barriers on export to Bangladesh.

"There is a ban on exporting rubber-based products to Bangladesh because they want raw rubber sheets. Besides, Dhaka charges exorbitant duty on tea exports, which is a stumbling block to trade with the neighbouring country. The NITI Aayog delegation gave a patient hearing on our issues," he said.

The NITI Aayog also made some proposals to strengthen the state's economy and the government will surely work on these, he added. (PTI)



## Conference on export development of fruits, vegetables held in Pasighat

**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** The Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) organised an awareness conference on 'Export Development of High Value Fruits and Vegetables from Arunachal Pradesh' at Pasighat on Wednesday.

The conference was organised by ICC with support from the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) under the Union ministry of commerce in association with the Arunachal Pradesh government.

Md Ashraf Kamal from APEDA explained to participants about the numerous subsidy linked schemes of the organisation. He said that APEDA gives subsidy for mainly three purposes, namely infrastructure development, quality development and marketing development.

"Infrastructure development comprises of integrated pack house, refrigerated vans and food processing machinery. On the other hand quality development helps the exporters in getting subsidy for different certificates like NPOP, GAP and the laboratory testing etc," said Md Ashraf Kamal.

He also informed about the various

marketing assistance given by APEDA like, participation in national and international buyer-seller meets, national and international exhibitions etc. He also informed the crowd that APEDA is establishing a food testing laboratory in collaboration with Assam Agricultural University in Guwahati.

Opang Moy, district agriculture officer informed that the state is providing an enabling ecosystem for growth and investment in horticulture sector.

"Through implementation of flagship programmes like Atma Nirbhar Bagwani and Plantation Yojana and other CSS schemes, area expansions of horticulture crops are being taken up to improve the production capacity of the state. The state is a major contributor to the country's kiwi and large cardamom productions. In recent years farmers of the state have taken high value crops like walnut, persimmon and avocado," Opang Moy said.

He stressed upon extension programs on marketing aspects on a sustained basis, need based training to farmers, entrepreneurs and holistic development of all crucial

components of horticulture value chain.

East Siang district horticulture department AR Ering said, "The time has come to make a roadmap for developing the state in the horticulture arena. Farmers should buy good quality planting material only from certified sources. Farmers should adopt science based cultivation for better quality to capture the global market"

Eringh also urged the farmers to find out the cost benefit ratio before going for any cultivation. She mentioned that Arunachal Pradesh has become the highest Kiwi producing state in the country.

Takali Tamuk of Kishan Morcha said that the central government has formed the FPO and FPCs after much deliberation, but very few of them are following the government norms, resulting in failure.

Ojim Menju of Pasighat Organic Producer Company said that the international marketing needs a lot of certifications for which the Arunachal Pradesh government has empanelled a lot of agencies. Now the farmers need to follow these guidelines to make their ventures a success.

## BRO restores Lachen-Munsithang road connectivity in Sikkim

**GANGTOK, Dec 20:** The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has restored road connectivity between Lachen and Munsithang in North Sikkim more than two months after it was destroyed in a flash flood in Teesta River, according to an official release on Wednesday. The restoration work required formation-cutting between Chungthang and Seema for more than 3 km over an average height of 10-12 metres in hard rock, the release said. Undeterred by the challenge, the BRO employed heavy machinery and blasting equipment to execute the task of successfully restoring connectivity for light vehicles between Lachen and Munsithang. North Sikkim had suffered a massive destruction of road infrastructure due to a flash flood in Teesta River triggered by a cloud burst on the glacial South Lhonak Lake on October 4.

The flood had destroyed several bridges and 20-25 km of road network in North Sikkim, severely curtailing road connectivity between Mangan and Chungthang. Launching restoration work on a war footing a week after the flash flood, the BRO successfully restored connectivity to the Dzongu region by constructing two Bailey bridges over River Teesta. (PTI)

## Meghalaya CM inaugurates power sub-station in West Garo Hills

**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** Meghalaya chief minister Conrad Sangma on Wednesday inaugurated the Phulbari Grid Sub-Station at Chibinang in West Garo Hills District under the North Eastern Region Power System Improvement Project (NERPSIP) Scheme. Speaking on the occasion, Sangma said that the people of the plain areas in West Garo Hills district have suffered immensely for years due to insufficient supply of power and low voltage, especially during the peak summer when overall power consumption increases.

"I am glad to inaugurate the Phulbari Grid Sub-Station, which will effectively address the power sufficiency problem in the area to a great extent. I dedicate the project to the people of the plain areas. They have suffered for years due to shortage of power supply," said

the CM. Meghalaya deputy chief minister Prestone Tynsong, Tura MP Agatha Kongkal Sangma, state taxation minister A T Mondal, state soil and water conservation minister Marcuise N Marak and other senior party members of NPP were also present on the occasion.

On the other hand, the Meghalaya CM also inspected the ongoing construction of the longest bridge connecting Dhubri in Assam to Phulbari in Meghalaya over the Brahmaputra river.

Once this bridge is constructed, it will cut down the travelling time from Phulbari to Dhubri.

"Apart from minimising the travelling time between Phulbari and Dhubri, the new bridge will be a huge economic boon for the two states. We are looking forward to its construction," said Sangma.

## NDPP-BJP alliance returns to power, women legislators in Nagaland in 2023

**KOHIMA, Dec 20:** The ruling NDPP-BJP alliance returned to power in Nagaland in this year's assembly polls, which also saw the election of two women candidates to the House for the first time in the northeastern state's history.

The state also saw the assembly unanimously passing the Municipal bill seeking to reserve 33 per cent of seats in urban local bodies (ULB) for women, paving the way for civic polls in the state after two decades.

The People's Democratic Alliance (PDA) of the NDPP and the BJP won the Nagaland assembly elections held on February 27 by winning 37 seats in the 60-member House, with Neiphiu Rio becoming the chief minister of the tribal-dominated state for the fifth consecutive term, making him the longest-serving CM of the state.

The alliance bettered its performance from the previous election, when the regional party had won 18 seats while the saffron party had bagged 12 constituencies.

In this year's assembly polls, two women candidates, Hekhani Jakhlu and Salhouuonuo Kruse of the ruling Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) were greenhorn, but they defeated sitting MLAs in Western Angami and Dimapur-III seats respectively. The Republican Party of India (Athawale) and Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) opened



their accounts in the Christian-dominated state by winning two constituencies and one seat respectively in the assembly elections.

All the political parties in the state, including seven NCP legislators and four Independent MLAs, extended unconditional support to the NDPP-BJP dispensation, making it an all-party government for the third time in the state.

The solution to the decades-old Naga political issue, which every political party pronounces as its top priority before every election, went backstage as the

state government was yet to form any political affairs committee (PAC) to facilitate negotiating parties to conclude the peace talks. The Centre has been holding separate negotiations with NSCN-IM since 1997 and the Working Committee of Naga National Political Group (NNPG), comprising at least seven groups, since 2017 to conclude the peace talks.

Eight years have passed since the signing of the Framework Agreement on August 3, 2015 with the NSCN-IM and another six years have gone by following

the signing of Agreed Position on November 17, 2017 with WC NNPGs.

With no significant development in the political negotiations between the Centre and the Naga groups, another year is coming to an end with no solution to the Naga political issue.

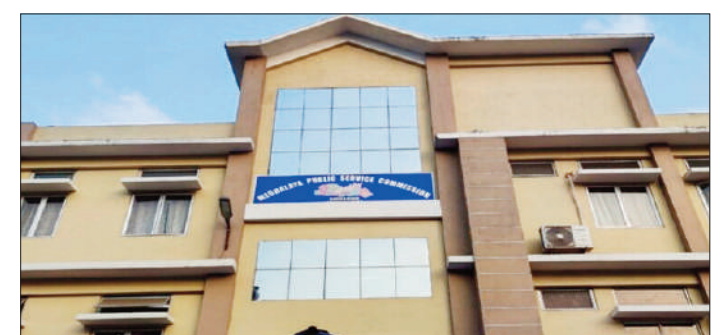
The Nagaland Assembly on November 9 unanimously passed a bill seeking to reserve 33 per cent of seats in urban local bodies (ULB) for women, resolving a contentious issue and paving the way for municipal elections in the state after two decades.

The CM has said that the apex tribal bodies, which had earlier opposed such a reservation, accepted it and the State Election Commission (SEC) will soon announce the dates for municipal polls.

ULB elections in the northeastern state have been long overdue, with the last civic polls having been held in 2004. Since then, elections were not conducted first due to the unresolved Naga peace talks and then on the issue of 33 per cent reservation for women which the tribal bodies had opposed, asserting it infringes upon the special rights of Nagaland guaranteed under Article 371(A) of the Constitution.

The 10-day Hornbill Festival, the annual tourism promotional event of the state, saw an overall footfall of 1,54,057 visitors, an increase of 13,758 from the previous year. (PTI)

## 'Backward classes' removed from MPSC regulations



**SHILLONG, Dec 20:** The Meghalaya government has decided to remove the word 'backward classes' from the Meghalaya Public Service Commission Regulations.

The decision to amend the regulations was approved by the state cabinet chaired by chief minister Conrad K Sangma recently.

"There is no reservation for 'backward classes' in our state. Hence, the word being there in the (MPSC) rules is actually not serving any purpose. Therefore, the decision was taken that there is no need for the particular word to be there and we have removed it," Sangma said while interacting with the media.

The cabinet also approved the amendment of the service rules of the Meghalaya Civil Defense and Home Guards.

Sangma said that about 300-400 posts are lying vacant in the state at present.

"There was a move to fill up these posts like we are doing in other departments like education, health and police. In case of home guards and civil defense also, the department has asked for certain amendments in the education qualification to bring it at par with that in the police department. Hence, the requirement in the case of home guards and civil defense was slightly higher in comparison to the police," said the CM.

"Hence, they have requested that it be made at par with what is there in the police. The cabinet has agreed to the particular decision so that they can go ahead with their recruitment process," he said. (NNN)

## Khandu seeks blessings from Dalai Lama at Bodh Gaya

Arunachal CM in Bodh Gaya to attend Buddhist scholars' meet, over 2000 Buddhist monks to partake in meet

**ITANAGAR, Dec 20:** Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu on Wednesday attended the Buddhist scholars' meet at Bodh Gaya in Bihar and sought the blessings of Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama.

The chief minister also invited the Dalai Lama to visit the northeastern state.

"Blessed to have received audience with His Holiness the 14th @DalaiLama today at Bodhgaya, Bihar," Khandu said on X, formerly Twitter.

The chief minister also said he was privileged to be invited by organisers of the International Sangha Forum in Bodh Gaya and to attend the historic meeting of Buddhist scholars from all around the world.

"Sought his blessings for welfare of all. Engaging discussions on compassion, peace, and humanity's welfare ensued. Invited His Holiness to visit



Arunachal Pradesh," Khandu said on the microblogging site.

During the inaugural day of the event, the attendees received invaluable teachings on 'Boddhicitta' (awakening of mind).

"Received invaluable teachings on Boddhicitta - purging evils within us through compassion. Boddhicitta's

essence lies in a kind heart willing to aid others and refrain from causing harm. Imagine being a good swimmer on a beach; helping someone drowning symbolizes this essence. An inspiring and enlightening experience," Khandu said.

Over 2,000 monks from the Buddhist traditions around the world have been invited to the four-day programme.

On the first three days of the conference, Buddhist scholars from different traditions will discuss the role of Buddhism in the 21st century.

On Tuesday, Khandu visited the Mahabodhi Temple and offered prayers to Lord Buddha.

"Known as the 'Great Awakening Temple', it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment. I am grateful to the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee for their warm welcome and felicitations," Khandu added. (PTI)

No.KOK/BLDG/Tech-40/Pt-IV/2018-19/4254

### SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Date 16-12-2023

Separate sealed tenders affixing Non-refundable Court fee stamp of Rs.8.25 (Rupees eight & paise twenty five) only with a validity period of 180 (One hundred eighty) days which will subsequently be converted and drawn up in the printed F-2 Form are invited from the intending Registered contractors of class-I (ABC) and II category of the Assam PWD (Bldg.) for submitting tender for the works stated below. The tenders will be received by the undersigned up-to 1-30 pm of 22-12-2023 and will be opened on the same date and place at 2-00Pm.

Sl. No.	Name of work	(Approx.) Estimated value of work	Earnest money 2% for GNL & 1% for ST/SC/ OBC/MOBC	Cost of tender document	Time of completion
1	Cutting & Cleaning of Jungles and Creepers around the BTC Secretariat Complex, Bodfo Nwgor, Kokrajhar	Rs.10,29,000.00	Rs. 20600/- & Rs. 10300/-	Rs.1000/-	2 (two) month.
2	Repair and Renovation of Water Supply System and Plantation at DLR&S Office, Kokrajhar	Rs.4,70,279.00	Rs. 9500/- & Rs. 4800/-	Rs. 500/-	1 (one) month

Detailed NIT may be seen in all working days in the office of the undersigned. Tender paper will be issued to the contractor or their authorized agent up-to 1-30 pm in all working days from 21-12-2023 to 22-12-2023 in the office of the undersigned on payment in the form of Banker cheque/Demand draft duly pledged in favour of the Principal Secretary, BTC. The contractor should submit up-to date Registration Certificate of contractor, latest clearance certificate of Income Tax and GST etc. along with the tender paper. In case the office is remain closed/bandh for any circumstances on tender paper issuing/ receiving/opening date, then the same will be received/opened in the next working days.

Sd/- Executive Engineer, PWD,  
Kokrajhar District & Chirang District  
Territorial Building Division, Kokrajhar

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/977

# Need to be alert but no need to panic: Mandaviya

## Review meeting amid rise in Covid cases

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Amid an uptick in Covid-19 cases in the country, Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya Wednesday reviewed the preparedness of health facilities and stressed on being alert against emerging strains of coronavirus.

Chairing the high-level review meeting with states, he reiterated that Covid was not over yet and requested the states to monitor emerging Covid-19 cases, symptoms and case severity to plan appropriate public health response.

He assured the states of all support from the Centre and stressed the need for collective efforts between the Centre and the states to deal with the emerging situation in the spirit of the "whole-of-government" approach.

"We need to be on the alert but there is no need to panic," the Union health minister said.

Underlining the challenge posed by the rise in Covid cases in some countries such as China, Brazil, Germany and the United States, Mandaviya noted the importance of being prepared and remaining alert against new and emerging strains of Covid-19, especially



ahead of the upcoming festivities.

He directed officials to strengthen the surveillance system for whole genome sequencing of positive case samples to track the variants through the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG) network and ensure timely detection of newer variants.

This would facilitate in taking appropriate public health measures in a timely manner, the minister noted. At the meeting, states and UTs were requested to ramp up testing and refer a large number of

Covid positive samples and that of pneumonia-like illnesses to INSACOG Genome Sequencing Laboratories (IGSLs) daily to track new variants, if any.

Mandaviya urged all states to remain alert, increase surveillance and ensure adequate stock of medicines, oxygen cylinders and concentrators, ventilators and vaccines.

He told officials to undertake mock drills every three months at both the central and state levels to assess the functionality of PSA

plants, oxygen concentrators, cylinders and ventilators, and encourage the sharing of best practices.

The Union health minister asked states to raise awareness among people on respiratory hygiene and ensure the dissemination of factually correct information and counter fake news to mitigate any panic. He urged the states to share information on cases, tests and positivity in real time on the Covid portal to enable timely monitoring and prompt public health measures.

Union health secretary Sudhanshu Pant briefed Mandaviya about the Covid-19 situation both domestically and globally.

The meeting was informed that while active Covid cases in India were significantly low compared to the global scenario, there has been a steep rise in active cases. It was also noted that 92.8 per cent of the cases were in home isolation.

There has been no increase in the hospitalisation rates due to Covid-19-19. The cases that are hospitalized are due to other medical conditions and Covid-19 is an incidental finding, the meeting was

informed.

A rise in daily positivity rate has been observed in a few states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Karnataka.

On the new JN.1 variant of SARS-CoV-2, the meeting was told that the variant was under intense scientific scrutiny, but not a cause of immediate concern. No clustering of cases has been observed in India due to JN.1.

Dr V K Paul, member (health) of NITI Aayog reiterated the need for a "whole-of-government" approach to tackle the challenges posed by the surge in Covid cases and the emergence of a new variant. He said the scientific community in India was closely investigating the new variant but stressed the need for states to ramp up testing and strengthen their surveillance systems.

Dr Rajiv Bahl, secretary, Department of Health Research and DG, ICMR said that ICMR was working on genome sequencing of the new JN.1 variant. He urged states to monitor the Covid-19 scenario and increase RT-PCR tests but noted that there is no cause for panic. (PTI)

# Mamata meets Modi over

## pending central funds for WB



**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and demanded the release of pending central funds to the state. She said the prime minister proposed that officials from the state and the Centre can sit together and clear the issues.

Speaking to the media after the meeting in the Parliament complex along with nine party MPs, Banerjee said 155 central teams have already visited West Bengal and the state government has given clarification on issues raised by the Centre.

The Centre and the West Bengal government have been involved in a tug-of-war over the release of funds to the state, with the TMC even holding a protest led by its general secretary Abhishek Banerjee in the national capital in October. The BJP has accused the TMC government of siphoning off central funds meant for Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna and MGNREGA.

Talking about the pending MGNREGA funds for the state, Banerjee said it is mandatory under the Constitution to pay the workers. "We didn't even get a penny for 100 days of work (under MGNREGA) in the budget for 2022-23. Funds for Awas Yojna have been stopped, rural development schemes have been shut, and the health mission programme has also been shut. We are also not getting funds under the Finance Commission," Banerjee alleged.

"Our officials have given all the clarification they asked for. PM has said a joint meeting will be held by the Centre and state officials. I said we have given clarification 155 times. We can do that once again, they can decide the formula. In a federal structure, the central government has a share and the state also has a share," she said.

"It is not right to stop the money for poor people," Banerjee said, adding that the Centre owed nearly ₹ 1.16 lakh crore to the state under various centrally sponsored schemes and pending claims for natural disasters over the past years.

The pending dues include MGNREGA payment to the tune of nearly ₹ 6911 crore - ₹ 3732 crore against wage liability and ₹ 3179 crore against non-wage liabilities; central share for 11,01,731 houses sanctioned under PM Awas Yojana which has not been released; and fund under National Health Mission by the Union Ministry of health and family welfare.

A memorandum was submitted to the prime minister, which said despite the legacy of a burden of nearly ₹ 2 lakh crore of debt of the previous regime and even after repaying a staggering amount of ₹ 5 lakh crore towards debt and interest (debt of ₹ 1.98 lakh crore and interest ₹ 3.23 lakh crore), West Bengal has achieved unprecedented progress during 2011-2023 period.

Banerjee said in the memorandum that the GDP of West Bengal during the last 12 years has increased from ₹ 4.60 lakh crore in 2010-11 to ₹ 15.54 lakh crore in 2022-23, an increase of 3.37 times.

"This reflects the remarkable progress made by the state in all sectors. There has also been a marked improvement in all fiscal parameters achieved by way of implementation of far-reaching reforms in financial and revenue administration," the TMC chief said.

"Despite our excellent all-round performance in all areas, we are not getting our share of resources from the central pool that rightfully belongs to the people of the state. Depriving the people of Bengal of their rightful claim on development funds has pushed millions into untold misery and poverty," she said.

She also flagged a "disturbing and unwelcome development" where several central ministries have made the use of "unilaterally decided name, logo and colour schemes" for buildings mandatory for getting funds under centrally sponsored schemes.

"It is also important to note that the logo being imposed resembles more to the symbol of the ruling party at the Centre, rather than the logo of the Government of India," she said. (PTI)

# BJP stages walkout in

## Himachal Assembly over closure of stone crushers

**DHARAMSHALA, Dec 20:** Dissatisfied with the reply of the state government on the closure of stone crushers, the opposition on Wednesday staged a walkout in the Himachal Pradesh Assembly.

Frayed tempers were seen as heated exchanges ensued between the treasury and opposition benches. Intervening in the matter, Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu explained the reasons for closing the stone crushers.

As soon as Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania called for the next question, the BJP members accused the government of giving incomplete information, started raising slogans and staged a walkout. Sukhu said that the government was planning to mop up revenue of ₹ 5 crore from mining and proposed to amend the existing mining policy as it was allegedly causing a loss of revenue.

During the monsoon, a decision was taken to close 128 stone crushers in Beas basin but there was no revenue loss as closure of stone crushers during the rainy season till September 15 was a normal practice, he claimed.

Referring to the increase in the rate of grit and sand, Sukhu said that the government was considering adding the cost of sand and stones in the cost of construction.

Bikram Singh Thakur and Bipin Singh Parmar (both BJP), dubbed the decision of the government as "anti-people". They alleged that it not only compelled the people to pay higher prices, but also rendered 1,600 people jobless.

Replying to the main question of Bipin Singh Parmar and Hoshiyar Singh, the industries minister said that mining is not permitted in the basins of rivers and their tributaries during the rainy season till September 15, and mining activities are allowed thereafter, and only the operation of stone crusher was stopped.

He said that most of the labourers working in stone crushers are from other states and only a few

are from Himachal Pradesh, and they would go back to work after the operations are resumed.

Talking to media persons after the walkout, Leader of the Opposition Jai Ram Thakur said that the reply of the industries minister was ridiculous and the chief minister deviated from the main issue. The government closed over 100 stone crushers in Beas and Sutlej basin and later said that 90 crushers were in order and our question as to why these 90 crushers were closed, remained unanswered.

During the monsoon, 12,000 houses were damaged and the affected people are unable to construct the houses as the rates of sand and stone have gone up, Thakur said.

He further alleged the ministers are expressing different views on the issue of mining. While one minister has said that mining was responsible for the damage, another maintained that mining alone was not the cause of damage, and he advised the government to speak in one tone on the issue.

He also contested the claim of the government that most of the workers engaged in stone crushers were from other states and asserted that a "huge majority" of workers were Himachalis. We staged the walkout as the reply of the government was not satisfactory and an opportunity to ask more questions was not given, he added.

Before the start of the session, BJP leaders carrying small baskets of cow dung on their heads, led by the Jai Ram Thakur lodged protest against alleged non-fulfilment of poll guarantees by the Congress government in the Assembly campus at Tapovan in Dharamshala.

The BJP legislators raised slogans "Sukhu bhai Sukhu Bhai, dus guarantee kithe pai" (Sukhu brother, where are the ten guarantees?) and said that cheating with farmers would not be tolerated and the state government has to buy cow dung for ₹ 2 per kg as promised. (PTI)

# Dhankhar's mimicry row

## Not meant to be disrespectful, we respect all: Mamata

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee Wednesday played down the issue of Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar's mimicry by her party's MP, saying it was not meant to be disrespectful. In the eye of the storm over the mimicry row, Trinamool Congress MP Kalyan Banerjee also said that he never had any intention to hurt or disrespect Dhankhar.

Asked about the mimicry row, Mamata Banerjee said, "We respect everyone. It was not disrespectful. It was just politically, casually... You would not even have known it if Rahul ji had not recorded it."

The West Bengal chief minister was in the Parliament complex on Wednesday to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi over pending central funds for the state. Kalyan Banerjee said that he did not intend to hurt anyone but did not offer any apology for the mimicry act which has been described by Dhankhar as an insult to the post of vice-president, the farmers and his own community.

"Mimicry is not an offence, they (BJP) are trying to change the main issue which is whether suspension of opposition MPs was right," the TMC MP said and claimed that even Prime Minister Narendra Modi has done it in the past. "Did not have any intention at all to hurt anyone, including the Vice President. Have respect for constitutional positions," he said on Wednesday. Kalyan Banerjee said that he might have some differences with Dhankhar over a few issues but he meant no disrespect for him. He noted that Dhankhar had been a governor of his home state West Bengal and like him a lawyer. With 141 opposition MPs suspended from Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha for disrupting proceedings, many of them held a protest at Parliament's main entrance for lawmakers on Tuesday.

During the protest, Kalyan Banerjee mimicked Dhankhar's mannerisms amid cheers from his colleagues. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was seen shooting a video of the act with his mobile phone. (PTI)

# Travesty of parliamentary democracy:

## Tharoor on suspension of MPs

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Slamming the government over the suspension of over 140 MPs, Congress leader Shashi Tharoor on Wednesday claimed that a "dubious record" had been created as in no country had so many lawmakers been suspended together and alleged that parliamentary democracy has been "betrayed and reduced to a travesty".

Speaking with reporters after participating in the opposition protest over the suspension of MPs, Tharoor, who was himself suspended on Tuesday, said that with the suspension of so many opposition MPs, the history of parliamentary democracy has been "besmirched" in our country. What has been seen in the country in the last few days is a "travesty of parliamentary democracy", he said. "I did a bit of research, never in the entire history of Parliamentary democracy has any Parliament in any country in the world ever suspended or expelled 150 people. That is the dubious record being set in our Parliament this week," he said.

Everyone understands that the basic principle of parliamentary democracy is the accountability of the council of ministers to Parliament, Tharoor said. "When Parliament is in session, on anything that happens, the government's duty is to come to Parliament and discuss it with them before going out," he said. "When the opposition called for a discussion on the security breach and requested that the home minister should come and speak to Parliament, as you all

know the home minister did not come, he was giving statements outside to the media, he was giving press interviews, but he was not prepared to speak inside Parliament. This is why the opposition protested and I must say that the reaction has been disproportionate to the actual offense of protesting," Tharoor asserted.

The protest was for a very democratic parliamentary reason which is to have the home minister come and initiate a discussion, the Thiruvananthapuram MP said. As many as 49 more opposition lawmakers were suspended from Lok Sabha on Tuesday for unruly behaviour, taking the total number of MPs facing action in both Houses of Parliament to 141 and prompting the INDIA coalition to announce nationwide anti-government protests on Friday.

Tharoor stressed that the opposition had come to this Winter Session determined to cooperate fully with the functioning of Parliament. The opposition wanted to participate in major debates on matters of national importance, he said. But what has been seen sadly is that the government has no interest in letting the opposition function responsibly in Parliament, he alleged. "We have seen when we were in power how important it was to accommodate the opposition's interest. If we had been in this position, we would have had the home minister come for 10 minutes, we would have had a discussion for half an hour or 45 minutes, that would have defused the situation. (PTI)



# Ruckus in J'khand assembly

## over suspension of BJP MLAs

**RANCHI, Dec 20:** The Jharkhand assembly witnessed uproarious scenes for the second consecutive day on Wednesday as members of the opposition BJP protested against the suspension of three party legislators for the remainder of the winter session.

As the House assembled for the day's business around 11.07 am, BJP legislator Randhir Singh entered the well to protest against the suspension of the three MLAs. Other BJP members joined him and also came to the well of the House. The saffron party legislators sat in the well, demanding revocation of the suspension, and wore black bands on their faces as a mark of protest.

Speaker Rabindra Nath Mahto requested them to raise their points from the chairs but they continued to shout slogans against the gov-

ernment. Amid noisy scenes, the question hour was washed out and the Speaker adjourned the proceedings till 12.30 pm.

The Speaker had on Tuesday suspended three BJP MLAs--chief whip Biranchi Narayan, whip J P Patel and legislator Bhanu Pratap Sahi -- for the remainder of the winter session. They were marshalled out of the House for "creating disturbances" in the proceedings. BJP legislator Amit Mandal said that the three legislators were suspended only for raising issues of the youth.

Meanwhile, Congress MLA Irfan Ansari supported the Speaker's action. Leader of Opposition Amar Bauri urged the Speaker to revoke the suspension of BJP legislators. "This government has failed to fulfil students' aspirations," he said. (PTI)

# Harsimrat Badal flags absence of oppn

## House discussing bills on criminal jurisprudence

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Harsimrat Kaur Badal on Wednesday flagged the absence of a majority of opposition members in the Lok Sabha on day the House was discussing three key proposed criminal laws, saying key bills should not be passed in such a manner. As many as 97 opposition Lok Sabha members have been suspended from the House since December 14 for displaying placards and disrupting proceedings.

She also referred to the youth of Punjab getting emotional and taking steps during the militancy period in the state, and said the two men who jumped inside the Lok Sabha chamber on December 13 raised the issue of their unemployment, Manipur and farmers. Ramesh Bidhuri (BJP) also referred to the Parliament security breach, saying people are being misled on the incident.

He said the incident is being discussed on social media and references are being made to Bhagat Singh. He said when Bhagat Singh entered Parliament (then Central Legislative Assembly), India was under

British rule. "But we live in a democracy...people elect their representatives and bring them to Parliament. It was not the case when Britishers were here," he said.

"There are elections every five years, if you are not happy then you have the option to change the government," he said. While participating

in the debate on the three bills, Badal said police has been given arbitrary powers with no checks and balances which are against liberty and dissent. "... and here is a living example that such an important bill is being discussed which should be in a fair and transparent manner with everybody allowed to air their views and here there is only the ruling party and a handful of us opposition people... This is not the way for such an important bill to be passed," she said. Union home minister Amit Shah introduced the three re-drafted bills -- the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita (BNSS) and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill (BSB) -- last week and the Lok Sabha on Tuesday took them up for a debate for their consideration and passage. (PTI)



# Ruling party MPs stand in RS in solidarity with Dhankhar

## BJP attacked the opposition over Rahul Gandhi making a video of the performance by Banerjee

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Ruling party members on Wednesday participated in the proceedings of the Rajya Sabha while remaining standing to express solidarity with Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar after a TMC MP mimicked him in Parliament premises.

The treasury benches participated in the Question Hour proceedings while standing for about ten minutes. Among those seen standing were finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, commerce minister Piyush Goyal, education minister Dharmendra Pradhan, transport minister Nitin Gadkari and parliamentary affairs minister Prahlaad Joshi.

A political row broke out on Tuesday after Trinamool Congress leader Kalyan Banerjee derisively mimicked Dhankhar during the opposition's protest on the stairs of Parliament against the MPs' sus-

pension, drawing strong condemnation from the ruling BJP.

The BJP also attacked the opposition over Congress leader Rahul Gandhi making a video of the performance by Banerjee.

As soon as the House resumed at noon, Joshi said, "In protest against the action of their party's former president (Rahul Gandhi) and in your honour and in honour of the Constitution, we would participate in the Question Hour while remaining standing in silence. We request for your permission."

"We strongly condemn how Rahul Gandhi insulted you and your constitutional position. To tarnish a particular community and section of society is not right," he said. "As far as I have seen, this is the first time they have fallen to this level and there is no end to this. We strongly condemn this. They have been insulting people at constitutional posi-



tions," Joshi said.

The minister said for 20 years they "insulted" the prime minister because he comes from a poor family and belongs to the OBC background. They kept on "insulting" him even after he became the prime minister, he said.

"Then they insulted the Presi-

dent of India who is a tribal. And now they have insulted the Vice President of India, who is a farmer's son and hails from the Jat community. "For the first time a farmer's son and 'Jat-putra' reached this level and they have insulted this post of the vice president of India. I want to make it

clear that India will not tolerate the insult of the vice president and India will not tolerate the insult of the Constitution," he asserted amid slogan-shouting by members of the treasury benches.

The minister said the President and Lok Sabha Speaker have also condemned the act of insulting the vice president. He said several big people in different fields have condemned this and "we too strongly condemn this insult".

As members of treasury benches stood in honour of the chair, opposition members raised slogans demanding that the home minister come to the House and make a statement on the Parliament security breach issue. After the ruling party members stood for about 10 minutes during Question Hour, the Chairman asked them to resume their seats, saying he was touched by the gesture. (PTI)

# 20 cases of Covid sub-variant JN.1 found in three states: INSACOG

India recorded 614 new coronavirus infections in a day, the highest since May 21

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** As many as 20 cases of COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1 have been found across the country with 18 traced in Goa and one each in Kerala and Maharashtra, INSACOG data showed.

The Centre has asked states and union territories to maintain constant vigil amid an uptick in COVID-19 cases and the detection of the new JN.1 variant in the country.

Health minister Mansukh Mandaviya Wednesday reviewed the preparedness of health facilities across the country and stressed on being alert against emerging strains of coronavirus.

India recorded 614 new coronavirus infections in a day, the highest since May 21, while the active cases have increased to 2,311, according to the Union health Ministry data updated on Wednesday.



The JN.1 variant was previously

classified as a variant of interest (VOI) as part of the BA.2.86 sub-lineages, the parent lineage that is classified as a VOI, the world body said on Tuesday. However, in recent weeks, JN.1 cases continued to be reported in multiple countries and its prevalence has rapidly increased globally. (PTI)

According to the Union health Ministry data updated on Wednesday. The World Health Organisation has classified JN.1 as a separate "variant of interest" given its rapidly increasing spread but said that it poses a "low" global public health risk.

## MAKE IN INDIA Tata Boeing Aerospace delivers 250<sup>th</sup> fuselage for AH-64 Apache

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Tata Boeing Aerospace Limited (TBAL) on Wednesday said it has delivered the 250th fuselage for the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter from its production facility in Hyderabad.

TBAL produces the fuselage for customers around the world, including the US Army.

"Tata Boeing Aerospace Limited has delivered the 250th fuselage for the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter from its state-of-the-art facility in Hyderabad," the company said.

TBAL has been supplying the fuselages to Boeing's Apache final assembly plant in Mesa, Arizona.

"These fuselages are manufactured for customers around the world, including the US Army, and most recently, the six on order with the Indian Army," it said.

The company said this "milestone" reflects TBAL's continuous dedication to bolstering India's defence capabilities and advancing the nation's indigenous manufacturing prowess.

The joint venture between Boeing and Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL) employs over 900 engineers and technicians, leveraging cutting-edge robotics, automation, and advanced aerospace concepts in its manufacturing processes, it said in a release.

"TBAL's 14,000 sqm facility serves as a global sole source supplier for Apache fuselages, with over 90 per cent of the parts used in the Apache aerostructure assemblies manufactured in India through more than 100 Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) suppliers," it said. The AH-64 Apaches hold the reputation of being the world's one of the most advanced and proven attack helicopters.

The helicopter is capable of delivering a variety of weapons which include air to ground Hellfire missiles. (PTI)

## Amnesty FCRA 'violations': CBI files supplementary charge sheet

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The CBI has filed a supplementary charge sheet in connection with its probe against Amnesty International India Pvt Ltd and its then executive director Aakar Patel for alleged FCRA violations in which it is understood to have given details about the role of other directors and signatories, officials said on Tuesday.

The agency filed the charge sheet nearly 23 months after the first report against Amnesty International India Pvt Ltd (AIITL) and Patel, registered on January 7, 2022, in a special court here.

In its recent supplementary report, the agency has charge-sheeted eight entities, including Patel, AIITL, Indians For Amnesty International Trust (IAIT), the then directors of

AIITL Shobha Mathai, Nandini Anand Basappa, Minar Vasudeo Pimple, head of operations of AIITL Mohan Premananda Mundkur and its authorised signatory Raj Kishor Kapil under Indian Penal Code section 120B (criminal conspiracy) and sections 11 (1), 35 and 39 (2) of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010.

While going through the submissions of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) after the first report, they said the special court had asked the agency to probe the role of other directors and file a supplementary final report.

"The prosecution is relying upon the statements of the signatories and directors of the company to prove that the accused (Patel) was in

charge of the affairs of the company. The role of signatories of the contract and directors of the company have not been investigated into," the special court had noted.

In its supplementary charge sheet filed before the court last week, the officials said the agency had corroborated allegations of its FIR.

The agency alleged Amnesty International (UK) had invested ₹ 10 crore in AIITL on September 24, 2015, classified as "Compulsory Convertible Debentures (CCD)", which was shown in the balance sheet and Income Tax returns as "Long Term Borrowings", officials said. This money was kept in fixed deposits, they said.

The agency said IAIT allegedly obtained an overdraft facility for

## No of children supported under non-institutional care increasing: WCD

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The number of children supported under non-institutional care has been increasing during the last few years - from 26,084 children covered in 2019-20 to 62,675 children in 2022-23, the government said on Wednesday.

Responding to a question in Rajya Sabha, women and child development minister Smriti Irani said post notification of Adoption Regulations, the adoption order pendency has come down to 106 from the earlier pendency of 997.

"However, there is no delay reported by the states/UTs regarding approving adoption of orphan children," she said in a written response.

She said the number of children supported under non-institutional care has been increasing during the last few years i.e. 26,084 children covered in 2019-20, 29,337 children in 2020-21, 29,338 children in 2021-22 and 62,675 children in 2022-23. (PTI)

## ED summons Tejashwi Yadav, Lalu Yadav for questioning in money laundering case

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The Enforcement Directorate has summoned Bihar deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav and his father and RJD chief Lalu Prasad for questioning in the railways land-for-jobs money laundering case probe, official sources said on Wednesday.

While Tejashwi (34), has been asked to depose before the federal probe agency at its office in Delhi on December 22, Prasad (75), has been asked to appear next week on December 27 to record their statements under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The ED has once questioned Tejashwi for about eight hours in this case on April 11 but this is the first time it has summoned Prasad for joining the probe.

The summons comes following the questioning of an alleged "close associate" of the Lalu Prasad family, Amit Katyal. He was arrested by the ED in November.

The alleged scam pertains to the period when Prasad was the railway minister in the UPA-1 government.

It is alleged that from 2004 to 2009, several people were appointed to Group "D" positions in various zones of the Indian Railways and in lieu, these people transferred their land to the family members of the then railway minister Prasad and a linked company named A K Infosystems Private Limited.

Katyal was the director of this company when it acquired land from candidates "on behalf" of Lalu Prasad, the ED had earlier claimed in a statement.

"The registered address of the company is D-1088, New Friends Colony, New Delhi, which is the house belonging to Lalu Prasad Yadav and his family members," the agency had alleged.

"Several other lands were also acquired by Amit Katyal in the said company in return for



giving undue favours by Lalu Prasad Yadav when he was minister of railways," the agency said.

After acquiring the land, it said, shares of the said company were "transferred" to the family members of Lalu Prasad in 2014.

The ED case, filed under the criminal sections of the PMLA, stems from a complaint lodged by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

According to the CBI, no advertisement or public notice was issued for appointment, but some residents of Patna were appointed as substitutes in different zonal railways in Mumbai, Jabalpur, Kolkata, Jaipur and Hazipur.

As a quid pro quo, the candidates, directly or through their immediate family members, allegedly sold land to Prasad's family members at highly discounted rates, up to one-fourth to one-fifth of the prevailing market rates, the CBI alleged.

Over the last few months, the ED has recorded the statements of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supreme's wife and former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi, their daughters Misa Bharti (RJD MP in Rajya Sabha), Chanda Yadav and Ragini Yadav in this case. (PTI)

## DMRC to give ₹ 15 lakh compensation to next of kin

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The DMRC will provide a compensation of ₹ 15 lakh to the next of kin of a woman passenger who died after an accident at a metro station recently, officials said on Wednesday.

In addition, the DMRC shall also take care of the education of her two children, the urban transporter said in a statement.

The incident took place on December 14 at the Inderlok Metro Station here. The 35-year-old woman, Reena, succumbed to injuries at Safdarjung Hospital on Saturday.

She was dragged along the platform as her sari got stuck in the door of a train. The woman is survived by a 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son.

According to the provisions in the Metro Railway (Procedure of Claims) Rules, 2017, a compensation of ₹ 5 lakh shall be paid to the deceased's next of kin, the statement said.

"In addition, as humanitarian assistance to the children of the deceased, an additional amount of ₹ 10 lakh shall also be provided. Since the children are both minors, DMRC is currently engaged in sorting out the legal modalities of handing over the amount to the legal heir," it said.

In addition, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) shall also take care of the education of the two children, the urban transporter said.

Union Minister for Housing And Urban Affairs Hardeep Singh Puri on Wednesday posted on X to offer his condolences to the victim's family members.

"Deeply pained to hear about the sad demise of Smt Reena Ji in a tragic incident at Inderlok Metro Station. While @OfficialDMRC is providing financial com-



pensations, I have also directed senior officials of DMRC to work out modalities to ensure guidance, care & education of the children Riya & Hiten who had unfortunately lost their father earlier.

"I offer my heartfelt condolences to them. May God bless them & give them all the strength to bear their irreparable loss. @PMOIndia @MoHUA\_India @PIB India," he wrote.

The two children had earlier demanded financial compensation in the form of a fixed deposit.

According to reports, the relatives of the children have expressed their inability to look after them due to financial constraints.

The woman's son, who studies in class 6, said he was with her mother at the time of the incident.

The DMRC in its statement on Wednesday also said that a team of senior officials has been deputed to look into the matter to facilitate all requirements quickly.

Puri has also directed that caretaking and education of the children be ensured by the Delhi Metro management, it said. (PTI)

## Man mows down 3 persons with van in Amravati over enmity

**AMRAVATI, Dec 20:** A man allegedly killed an elderly couple and their daughter-in-law by hitting them with his mini van over an old enmity in Maharashtra's Amravati district, police said on Wednesday.

The incident took place at around 8 pm on Tuesday in Na-

chona village, Superintendent of Police Vishal Anand told PTI.

The accused and the victims were neighbours and had a dispute, according to police.

They had a quarrel on Tuesday over some issue, the official said.

While the victims were standing on a road in front of their house,

the accused allegedly rammed his mini van into them, he said.

The deceased included a 70-year-old man, his wife aged 67 and their daughter-in-law (in her 30s).

The accused was taken into custody, the police said, adding further investigation was on into the incident. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Himanta applauds BJP-UPPL

as one of the most ancient forms of indigenous beliefs in the state, Sarma said." It has been strongly enriching Assam's cultural and spiritual environment for thousands of years".

Commenting on the Kherai dance that is performed as part of Bathou religion, Sarma said Kherai not only displays cultural aspects but also reflects spiritual awakening of its followers.

Besides this, Sarma also praised the BTR administration for its liberal grant of Rs 5 crore for the construction of the Bathou Traditional and Cultural Centre and exuded confidence new structure would contribute greatly towards preservation and spread of Bathou faith in the state and beyond.

Sarma also attended a Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra rally organised and opined that the aim of this rally, flagged off by Prime Minister Narendra Modi last November, is to attain cent percent saturation point in the enrolment of beneficiaries under the government's flagship schemes such as Ayushman Bharat, Ujjwala Yojana, Suraksha Bima Yojana, Jiban Jyoti Bima Yojana, to name a few.

He appealed to the eligible beneficiaries to make best use of the on-spot registration process for inclusion into the schemes so that they don't remain deprived of the social sector schemes meant for them.

Assam minister of Housing & Urban Affairs Ashok Singhal and BTR chief executive member Pramod Boro, along with a host of dignitaries accompanied the chief minister during his visit to Kokrajhar.

## Tipra Motha urges Tripura

Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC) president Asish Kumar Saha have separately expressed strong reservations on the rally. (PTI)

## Cong receives ₹ 2.81 crore

He said the party's aim is to reach out to more and more people through the campaign and connect as many people with the Congress as possible. The sources said more than one crore people have hit the application so far, adding that the crowdfunding would gain momentum during a December 28 rally in Nagpur to mark the party's foundation day.

The Congress will soon appoint observers in various states to step up the campaign. Besides Kharge and Gandhi, Ashok Gehlot, C P Joshi, Sushilkumar Shinde, Devender Yadav, Pawan Khara, Jairam Ramesh, Niranjan Pattanayak and Parinithi Shinde were among those who donated more than ₹ 1 lakh.

The campaign was launched to coincide with the 138th year of the formation of the Congress.

The party said the initiative is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's historic "Tilak Swaraj Fund", which was launched more than 100 years ago in 1920-21. The initiative aims at empowering the party in creating an India that is rich in equal resource distribution and opportunities, a senior leader said.

Donors have been asked to donate in the multiples of ₹ 138, symbolising the party's enduring commitment to a better India. The party has created two online channels for the crowdfunding campaign -- a dedicated portal at donateinc.in and the official Congress website at inc.in. (PTI)

## 2 held with morphine

worth around ₹ 90 lakh from a car. The police was carrying out checking at Lahorijan Patrol Post, under Dillai police station when they intercepted a Swift Dzire car, AS01FN5844, 28 identical plastic cases containing heroin was recovered. In this connection Habibur Rehman, resident of Mangaldai and Jeherul Ali, resident of Hajo were arrested. The contraband weighed 334 grams.

## No more 'tarikhp-pe

the visit of an FSL team will be mandatory in cases of offence where punishment is more than seven years," he said. "Now the accused will get seven days to file a plea for acquittal..."

"The judge has to hold the hearing in those seven days and in a maximum time of 120 days, the case would come to trial. "There was no time limit for plea bargaining earlier. Now if one accepts their crime within 30 days of the crime then the punishment would be less..."

"There was no provision to present documents during trials. We have made it compulsory to produce all documents within 30 days. No delays will be made in that," Shah added.

The minister said a provision for "trial in absentia" has also been introduced. "Several cases including those which shook the nation like Mumbai bomb blasts..the accused have taken shelter in Pakistan and trial has not been held... now they will not be mandated to be here..if they do not appear before the court within 90 days, the trial will be conducted in their absence," he said.

According to Shah, the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill, passed by voice vote, were drafted after comprehensive consultations. He said that he had gone through every comma and full stop of the draft legislations before bringing them before the House for approval. (PTI)

## Israel to recruit thousands

Paunzer had told PTI last month. The Israeli construction industry employs workers in specific fields where there is a lack of Israeli workers.

Israel urgently needs workers to continue with construction projects and the contractors have made a strong plea with the government to bring in hundreds of thousands of people from abroad to meet the needs.

The largest group of about 80,000 workers in the construction industry come from the Palestinian Authority-controlled West Bank and another 17,000 from the Gaza Strip, a huge majority of whom had their work permit revoked following the Hamas attack on Israel in October.

Another group of about 7,000 have come from China and some 6,000 from Eastern Europe. The ongoing war has created a shortage of workers. Israel's Minister of Economy Nir Barkat had discussed the possibility of bringing workers from India to fill the need in Israel's infrastructure industry during his India visit in April this year.

"Israel's Minister of Economy, Nir Barkat, during his trip to India in April this year had spoken to officials and his counterpart in New Delhi about hiring Indians in various sectors, including in the construction sector," a source here had told PTI. "The discussions revolved around bringing in almost like 160,000 people," he said.

About 18,000 Indians are working in Israel, mostly as caregivers. Most of them decided to stay back in Israel and did not leave the country during the war with Hamas because "they felt quite secure" and "also because the salaries are quite attractive".

Israel and India also inked an agreement in May during Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's visit to New Delhi that will allow 42,000 Indian workers to work in the Jewish state in the fields of construction and nursing, a move that was then seen to help deal with the rising cost of living and assist thousands of families waiting for nursing care.

A statement released by the Israeli Foreign Ministry then said that 34,000 workers would be engaged in the construction field and another 8,000 for nursing needs. (PTI)

## Delhi HC orders removal of concrete around trees

### Questions point of such 'beautification'

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The Delhi High Court on Wednesday asked the authorities here to immediately remove the concrete around trees in Bhikaji Cama Place Complex and questioned the rationale behind such "beautification".

Justice Jasmeet Singh issued notice to the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and forest department officials on a contempt plea over the concretisation of the trees and the failure to take prompt action on a complaint regarding the damage caused to the trees.

Petitioner Aditya N Prasad said he learnt in August that an enclosed platform (chabutara) was being constructed around the standing trees in the Bhikaji Cama Place Complex by the DDA for "beautification" purposes.

"What is this beautification? On pavement you make concrete structures? It is for trees. You are restricting movement. What is the point?" Justice Singh asked during the hearing.

The court asked the counsel for the forest department to file a detailed response as to why no



prompt action was taken by its officials against the concretisation in order to protect the trees even after a complaint was made.

"I will shut your department. You are totally incompetent.. How do you address this promptly after 50 days? This is not going in the right direction. This is painful," the court told the counsel for the forest department.

"Respondents shall ensure that the concrete around the trees is removed immediately," the court or-

dered. The court also directed the conservator of forests to submit a status report on the extent of violations of the order pertaining to concretisation of trees and remedial measures undertaken.

The petitioner said there are orders of the National Green Tribunal that mandate leaving one metre open space around the trunk of trees and prohibit any construction activity near it. Prasad alleged there was also

wilful disobedience of the high court's directions to the forest department to set up a telephone helpline and website where citizens can lodge complaints about damage to trees and specifically described the manner in which "prompt" action is to be taken once the complaint has been received.

He submitted that in spite of a complaint having been made, the construction work continued and no preventive measures were taken. He claimed his complaint was relayed to the division concerned only after 48 days.

"The status on the Green Helpline website of the department of Forests and Wildlife, GNCTD regarding the Complaint made by the Petitioner reflects that the same has been rejected as a 'false complaint' and no action was taken to prevent the violation of the Orders of this Hon'ble Court or prevent the damage being caused to the Trees," the petition said.

The matter would be heard next on January 30. (PTI)



## PRITHVIRAJ SUKUMARAN SAYS 'SALAAR' EXPLORES BOND BETWEEN TWO FRIENDS

**MUMBAI, Dec 20:** Prashanth Neel's "Salaar", an upcoming movie headlined by Prabhas, has all the elements of a quintessential mass film but what will keep the audiences engaged is the tale of two friends, says actor Prithviraj Sukumaran.

Titled "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire", the big-budget action film is set in the fictional city of Khansaar and follows the story of Deva and Vardha, played by Prabhas and Sukumaran, respectively. It will be released on Friday.

Sukumaran said the movie's announcement back in December 2020 made waves in the South film industry be-

cause of the names attached to the project -- Neel, the director of blockbuster "KGF" franchise, and Prabhas, the lead star of SS Rajamouli's "Baahubali" series.

And when he heard the narration of the story from Neel, Sukumaran said he was left surprised. "I had different notions about what the film would be. I didn't expect it to be a story of two friends, their bonding, and what happens between them. That caught me by surprise."

"What drew me in was the drama. Despite all the spectacular fight sequences and huge sets, what pulls you in 'Salaar' is the drama. That drama, regard-

less of how big or small the film is or in which language the film is made, it works," the 41-year-old actor told PTI in an interview here. For an actor, the scale of a film is secondary, added Sukumaran, who has worked across languages and delivered hits such as "Indian Rupee", "Ravananan", "Ennu Ninte Moideen", "Ezra", "Kaaviya Thalaivan" and "Lucifer". "If you are making a Rs 600 crore film with a rotten script, then there's no point. With 'Salaar', it is not about the budget or the scale. 'Salaar' worked for me and it will work for the audience because it is a good film..." (PTI)

## 'FILM ON LALU WOULD BE WONDERFUL BUT I AM NOT MAKING ONE'

**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** Clearing the air, eminent filmmaker Prakash Jha on Wednesday said he is neither making a film on veteran Bihar politician Lalu Prasad Yadav nor is involved in any manner in the process of making one.

Speaking to PTI, the National Award-winning director opined that Bollywood is interested only in commercial cinema and not in different regions or various aspects of society. "I have no idea... I also heard about it. I read somewhere that I was doing a movie on Lalu Prasad Yadav ji -- the great human being, politician and strategist," he said, when asked about the news regarding an upcoming film on the former Bihar chief minister by Prakash Jha Productions.

"I think it will be a wonderful subject, but unfortunately I am not involved in it," Jha said.

For months, the news of a film on Yadav by Jha has been doing the rounds after some Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leaders commented on it.

Although the filmmaker was asked about it earlier, he neither confirmed nor denied it. This is the first time he has spoken and disassociated himself from any such plan. Asked about his upcoming projects, Jha said, "We have just completed a web series called Sankalp, which should be re-



leased sometime early next year. "And I am working on another web series, which I had committed to, based on a book called 'Half Lion'. It's on the life and times of (PV) Narasimha Rao, the former prime minister of India," he said. Jha said preparations were underway to start shooting for a feature film early next year, but did not share details about it.

"I don't make films on topics, I make films on stories. The story is called 'Janadesh'," he replied when asked about what the proposed feature film is on. On why there are very few Bollywood films on subjects from the Northeast despite having an abundance of issues, Jha opined that he does not think the Mumbai-based industry is really concerned about different regions or aspects of society. "I don't think Bollywood is at all interested in it. Bollywood is interested only in commercial movies. It's the regional films, the smaller films, and smaller kind of communities that deal with such stories. So, don't expect Bollywood to talk about the Northeast or problems of any region," he added. (PTI)

## ADIVI SESH, SHRUTI HAASAN'S PAN-INDIA MOVIE IS TITLED 'DACOIT'



**MUMBAI, Dec 20:** Actors Adivi Sesh and Shruti Haasan's upcoming pan-India action drama has been titled "Dacoit", the makers announced on Wednesday.

The film, which is being shot simultaneously in Hindi and Telugu, is produced by Supriya Yarlagaadda and presented by Annapurna Studios. It is co-produced by Suniel Narang.

The project marks the feature directorial debut of Shaneil Deo, who has previously served as the director of photography for several Telugu blockbusters such as "Kshanam" and "Goodachari", both headlined by Sesh.

"Dacoit" is billed as a gripping story of two former lovers, who must unite to commit a series of robberies to change their lives.

Deo and Sesh have also penned the film's story and screenplay, the makers said in a press release. "Shaneil Deo has an absolutely fantastic vision. It's grand without being grandiose and elegant without being uppity. That sort of an elegant eye coupled with a very rustic nature of the script and the characters set in the hinterlands of silent India, its villages and towns make for an explosive, angry combustion that is this film. I think 'Dacoit' is going to explode in people's hearts," Sesh said. (PTI)

**GUWAHATI, Dec 20:** Stating that the society is "far stronger" than a few individuals who certify movies, filmmaker Prakash Jha on Wednesday denounced censorship of movies or web shows but said these should be made "responsibly".

In an interview with PTI here, the acclaimed director stressed that the freedom to tell a story is available in both mainstream theatres and OTT (over-the-top), but it has to be made in an "engaging manner" for people to watch.

"I have never ever supported censorship. Because societies are far stronger than a bunch of individuals who decide as to what the society has to watch," he added.

Without naming any, Jha said contents showing violence or sex are being watched by the public in cinema halls even though those are duly certified.

"The society goes and makes those films successful. Now, why don't you censor the society? Put a censor on the society, can you do that? So, the society will decide as to what it wants to see. And I agree with that," he said.

Asked if OTTs give more freedom in making a film on a contentious subject as it does not face any physical attack like those exhibited in cinema halls, Jha said one can take freedom in every possible manner or in any medium.

"But you have to communicate responsibly, because you



are communicating with people and there is a certain amount of civility or responsibility which is connected with the communication of the medium.

"I believe in that, and that is why I try and negotiate my stories in a (particular) manner. Whether I am telling it for cinema or OTT, I would like to speak responsibly," he added.

The National Award winning filmmaker further said that for him, making movies is like telling stories which deal with human societies and people, and such sensitive subjects have to be told responsibly.

"As far as the medium is concerned, whether it is movies or OTTs, actually it is (just) storytelling. So, you have to tell engaging stories, you have to let the characters speak what they need to speak. For me, it is the same --

whether I make movies or those get exhibited on OTTs," he added.

The only difference between products for OTTs and theatres is that there is an expansion of storytelling in the digital format, Jha said.

"You have characters of every sub-plot and stories of every character. Whereas in movies, you have to speak about the main story and wind it in two to two-and-half hours. That's the only difference. Otherwise, there is no difference in scale or telling the story whatsoever," he added.

The director, who has been making films for over three decades and has now ventured into OTTs as well, also said that times change, societies change and so the manner of speaking stories change, but the stories remain the same. (PTI)

## Prabhas says Rajamouli encouraged him to do 'Salaar': 'Don't even think, just do it'

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Prabhas says he often seeks advice from SS Rajamouli on his future projects and when filmmaker Prashanth Neel approached the actor for "Salaar", the "Baahubali" director asked him to grab the opportunity with both hands.

Prabhas and Neel are awaiting the release of "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire", which hits the screens on Friday. It also stars Prithviraj Sukumaran and Shruti Haasan.

The team of "Salaar" sat for a conversation moderated by Rajamouli. In the video shared by production house Hombale Films on its official X page, Prabhas praised Neel of "KGF" films fame for crafting "Salaar" as a beauti-

ful drama. "Prashanth sir did extraordinary drama, especially me and Prithvi sir. The whole story is between us... There's a beautiful drama between me, the mother and Shruti Haasan. He's very good in drama, even in 'KGF' we see (drama)... I think he got inspired from you (Rajamouli) also because he used to talk about you... When we thought we'll do ('Salaar'), I called Rajamouli. I always call him. I was like 'Prashanth wants to do a film', and he was like 'Don't even think, just do it,'" Prabhas said.

The actor also recalled how life changed for him after the phenomenal success of Rajamouli's two-part period action drama "Baahubali".



"After 'Baahubali', it was really tough. I didn't know what to do. Suddenly, I went from the Telugu industry to India to Japan. I went to Italy and abroad. It is very comfortable because no one knows us there."

"In Italy, I was standing outside a Dolce Gabbana store and suddenly a man came, couldn't even speak English and he said 'Prabhas'. He didn't say Baahubali, he said Prabhas. I was like 'Rajamouli, I can't even live here.' But it's so exciting. I thought 'Rajamouli, one film, that's it,'" he added.

Set in a fictional city of Khansaar, "Salaar" revolves around two friends Deva and Vardha, played by Prabhas and Prithviraj, who end up becoming

arch rivals. Prithviraj, known for films such as "Lucifer" and "Ayyappaiah Koshiyum", likened the upcoming film to American epic fantasy series "Game of Thrones". "I keep comparing 'Salaar' to 'Game of Thrones' because the drama is like... There are so many characters, plot points and intricate character dynamics. I don't know how he (the director) has fit the story into two parts. It's a tough thing to do," he said.

After the release of the film's trailer, a section of social media users started speculating that the worlds of "Salaar" and "KGF" could be connected. Putting the rumours to rest, Neel said there was "no link" between the two film series. (PTI)

# Sports Ministry confirms Satwik, Chirag for Khel Ratna, Shami and 25 others for Arjuna award

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** The Sports Ministry on Wednesday put its stamp on the nominations for the annual sports awards, confirming the prestigious Khel Ratna honour for badminton players Satwik, Sairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty and the Arjuna award for 26 sports persons, including pacer Mohammed Shami.

The awards will be conferred on the athletes by President Droupadi Murmu at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on January 9. Chirag and Satwik are Asian Games gold medallists, World Championships bronze winners

and Commonwealth Games silver medallists.

On the other hand, Shami, 33, had a spectacular run in the ODI World Cup, where India finished second-best, losing to Australia in the final.

Shami was the leading wicket-taker in the World Cup, with 24 wickets to his name in seven outings.

The athletes selected for this year's Arjuna award include hockey players Krishan Bahadur Pathak and Sushila Chanu, archers Ojas Pravin Deotale and Aditi Gopichand Swami, boxer Mohammad Hus-

samuddin, chess player R Vaishali, golfer Diksha Dagar, shooters Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar and Esha Singh, wrestlers Antim Panghal and Sunil Kumar, paddler Ayhika Mukherjee and para archer Sheetal Devi, among others.

The athletes were nominated for the awards by a government panel on December 13.

The ministry also cleared five coaches for Dronacharya award in the regular category and three in life-time category.

The Dyan Chand award in the life-time category will be conferred to three persons.

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar is the recipient of the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (MAKA) Trophy 2023, while Lovely Professional University, Punjab and Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra are the first and second runner-ups.

National Sports Awards are given every year to recognise and reward excellence in sports.

List of National Sports Award winners:

Major Dhyhan Chand Khel Ratna Award for 2023: Chirag Shetty and Satwik Sairaj Rankireddy (badminton).

Arjuna Awards for 2023:

Ojas Pravin Deotale (archery), Aditi Gopichand Swami (archery), Murali Shreshankar (athletics), Parul Chaudhary (athletics), Mohameed Husamuddin (boxing), R Vaishali (chess), Mohammed Shami (cricket), Anush Agarwalla (equestrian), Divyakriti Singh (equestrian dressage), Diksha Dagar (golf), Krishan Bahadur Pathak (hockey), Sushila Chanu (hockey), Pawan Kumar (kabaddi), Ritu Negi (kabaddi), Nasreen (kho-kho), Pinki (lawn bowls), Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar (shooting), Esha Singh (shooting),

Harinder Pal Singh Sandhu (squash), Ayhika Mukherjee (table tennis), Sunil Kumar (wrestling), Antim (wrestling), Naorem Roshibina Devi (wushu), Sheetal Devi (para archery), Illuri Ajay Kumar Reddy (blind cricket), Prachi Yadav (para canoeing).

Dronacharya Award (regular category) for outstanding coaches: Lalit Kumar (wrestling), RB Ramesh (chess), Mahaveer Prasad Saini (para-athletics), Shivendra Singh (hockey), Ganesh Prabhakar Devrukhkar (mallakhamb).

Dronacharya Award (life-time

category) for outstanding coaches: Jaskirat Singh Grewal (golf), Bhaskaran E (kabaddi), Jayanta Kumar Pushilal (table tennis).

Dhyhan Chand Award for lifetime achievement: Manjusha Kanwar (badminton), Vineet Kumar Sharma (hockey), Kavitha Selvaraj (kabaddi).

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (MAKA) Trophy 2023: Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (overall winner university); Lovely Professional University, Punjab (1st runner-up); Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (2nd runner-up). (PTI)

## INDIA'S LONE ODI SERIES WIN IN THE RAINBOW NATION CAME IN 2018

# India eye runs from top-order in series-deciding third ODI against SA

**PAARL (SOUTH AFRICA), Dec 20:** With a similar storyline of faltering opening combination running through the first two matches, India's hopes of registering their second ODI series triumph in South Africa will revolve around a sturdy start from the openers in the third and final match here on Thursday.

India's lone ODI series win in the Rainbow nation came in 2018, and for an encore they require a robust beginning from Ruturaj Gaikwad and B Sai Sudharsan as a pair.

Sai Sudharsan has been impressive in his two outings in the series so far, notching up 55 and 62. But Gaikwad could not support him from the other end.

The right-hander fell for five and four as India's first-wicket alliance ended at 23 and four at Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth.

In contrast, South African openers Tony de Zorzi, who cracked his maiden century, and Reeza Hendricks milked 130 runs to kill the chase.

Similarly, Tilak Varma, who showed some early promise in his career, seemed to have tapered off a bit in the last couple of months.

The elegant left-hander who packs a punch struggled to touch his peak in the home T20I series against Australia and the struggle seemed to have followed him to South Africa as well. The Hyderabad batter is yet to hit his peak



here.

It is important for Gaikwad and Varma, unless he is replaced with uncapped Rajat Patidar for tomorrow's match, to rediscover their range because India no longer have Shreyas Iyer in the middle-order to shore up the innings. The 30-year-old Patidar usually bats at No. 4 for Madhya Pradesh.

Iyer had joined an inter-squad match to prepare for the upcoming Test series after the first one-

dayer.

However, these top order batters can draw some solace from the Boland Park pitch, which often tends to lean towards batsmen.

The Port Elizabeth pitch had a bit of uneven bounce on it, particularly in the first innings, but the Paarl deck often offers true bounce and carry, helping batters to free their arms and go through the shots without any inhibitions.

It might also nudge the think-

tank to give another chance to free-hitting Sanju Samson, who got out for 12 in the last match, and the Kerala cricketer donning the big gloves at Port Elizabeth could be an indication of that.

India also have a tiny concern in their bowling department ahead of the third ODI. Mukesh Kumar is yet to pick up a wicket in two matches, and the pacer needs to slip into his striking armour sooner than later.

The Bengal man found the

going tough once Proteas opener Tony de Zorzi bludgeoned him through the on-side with mighty hacks.

Arshdeep Singh and Avesh Khan did the perfect demolition job in the first match, and the former continued to be thrifty in the second match as well.

So, it is imperative for Mukesh to find his rhythm with the new ball and pick up a wicket or two upfront to keep South Africa on the backfoot.

The team management might also think of giving a match to veteran leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal, whose tour to SA will end on the morrow.

He had shown a streak of good form in the recent Vijay Hazare Trophy for Haryana.

But it remains to be seen whether the management can convince either Kuldeep Yadav or Axar Patel to move away for Chahal.

Both Kuldeep and Axar have been selected for the Test series and the spin duo would want to have as much game-time as possible against their names.

From a South African perspective, the performance of left-handed De Zorzi might have filled them with the hopes of finding an ideal, long-term replacement for Quinton de Kock.

Fast bowler Nandre Burger too was fiery with the new ball and the Proteas will hope for him to give another hustle round to the Indians. (PTI)

## 'Need to maintain energy to secure maiden Test win over Australia'



**MUMBAI, Dec 20:** India captain Harmanpreet Kaur wants the hosts to play with the same energy and intensity which they displayed against England, when they take the field in the one-off women's Test versus Australia starting here on Thursday.

India thrashed England by a record 347-run margin in the lone Test at the DY Patil Stadium to record the biggest win for any side in terms of runs and will now look to register their maiden Test win over Australia.

India have never beaten Australia in 10 Tests and the contest will definitely challenge them in terms of fitness and temperament, given they are playing back-to-back matches.

"The way we played the first Test (of the season), we want to carry the same energy into this one. It is very exciting, knowing Australia is such a good team and everyone wants to beat them," Kaur told reporters after India's training session on Wednesday. Australia will be without Meg Lanning who has retired from international cricket recently, and in her place Alyssa Healy will lead the side.

Kaur said Lanning's absence will not make much difference as Australia have a strong side.

"They have a balanced side and everyone has experience of all formats. We can't say Meg (Lanning) is not there and take them lightly. We just need to think what best we can do rather than thinking about how good they are," she said.

The India skipper said while the prospect of playing Test

cricket excites her side, it has been slightly challenging to manage the players' workload.

"When you are playing back-to-back Tests, it is important to recover and feel fresh. When you bat and bowl for three days – the likes of Deepti (Sharma), Pooja (Vastrakar) who didn't get enough rest – we try to take care of their loads," Kaur said.

"They need to feel ready for the game and we made them train accordingly. The ones who had lesser loads we pushed them hard in the nets to feel more confident."

"The more we feel fresh, the better it will be for us, because there is hardly (any) time to prepare. If there was a 10-12 day (break), you can take 2-3 days off and again prepare yourself. We were lucky we had fourth day off (against England) and then just one day off. We tried to recover in that."

While the pitch at the DY Patil Stadium turned out to be a slow turner, there is plenty of grass on offer at the Wankhede Stadium strip. "Maybe in the evening we will have a fair idea of how the wicket will look like. I have 13 players in my mind who are going to play, in the evening we will have a final call," Kaur said.

Kaur said the experience of playing against Australia and also in competitions like Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) would be beneficial for India. "We have played a lot of cricket against Australia. We know their weaknesses, we will sit and discuss our game plan accordingly," she said. (PTI)

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Inter Church Men and Women Knock-out Football Tournament concludes

**HT Correspondent**

**KOILAMATI, Dec 20:** The 3rd Inter Church Men and Women Football Knock-out Football Tournament organised by Arlongpira Baptist Church, Sports Ministry concluded on December 19 last at Rishakhidi playground in Nilip, Karbi Anglong. The men's final match was played between Bethel Presby-

terian Church and ICYM (Indian Catholic Youth Movement), where the former defeated the latter by 1-0 to clinch the title. The women's final match was played between Chokihola Assumption Parish and Arlongpira Baptist Church, where the former defeated the latter by 2-0 to clinch the title.

The winner, men's, received a

trophy and cash prize of Rs.15,000/- while the runner's up team received a trophy and cash prize of Rs. 10,000/-.

Archim Hanse received the Highest Scorer award. Women's category winning team received a trophy and cash prize of Rs. 6000 and runner's up also received a trophy and cash prize of Rs.4000.

Deputy Speaker, Assam Legislative Assembly, Dr. Nunal Momin and local Member of Autonomous Council (KAAC), Pobitra Rongpi gave away the trophies and cash prizes to the winning and runners teams of both men and women category. The prize distribution ceremony was attended by BDO of Nilip Development Block, Julie

Terangpi; Chairman, Nilip BLCC Sonjoy Teron; president, BJP East Karbi Anglong District Committee Rolen Killing, president, Nilip BJP Mandal Committee Bapuram Teron and general secretary, Relipson Teron; Pastor of Arlongpira Baptist Church, Bipin Kro and Pastor of Jang-et langso Baptist Church Propdik Tokbi.

## Sanjay Singh confident of getting WFI top job

**NEW DELHI, Dec 20:** Sanjay Singh, the Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh loyalist, on Wednesday exuded confidence of sweeping the much-delayed Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) elections, saying the fraternity knows who would be beneficial for the sport and who could inflict damage to it.

UP Wrestling Association vice-president Sanjay, who hails from Varanasi, is up against Commonwealth Games gold medallist Anita Sheoran for the post of president. Anita is backed by the country's top wrestlers, who had accused outgoing WFI president Brij Bhushan of sexually exploiting women grapplers during his tenure. The WFI office was teaming with the state officials who have gathered for Thursday's elections. A few coaches and referees were also present and all hoped for a favourable outcome.

If sources are to be believed, the Sanjay Singh panel, backed by Brij Bhushan, has the support of at

least 41 out of 50 electoral college members. Except for the state of Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir and Odisha, the rest are believed will vote for the Sanjay Singh panel.

"The entire fraternity knows who has worked for the betterment of the sports and who have tried to cause damage. The work done by the WFI in the last 11 years is a proof that the sport of wrestling has grown at a good pace in India. People will have that in mind when they will cast their votes," Sanjay Singh told PTI.

The elite wrestlers, including Olympic medallists Bajrang Punia and Sakshi Malik and World Championships medallist Vinesh Phogat, had spearheaded the agitation at Jantar Mantar against Brij Bhushan. They were promised that none of Brij Bhushan's family members or associates will be allowed to contest the elections. (PTI)

**MUMBAI, Dec 20:** Mahela Jayawardene, Mumbai Indians' Global Head of Cricket, admitted that replacing Rohit Sharma with Hardik Pandya as the team's captain was a tough decision but termed it a necessary call with future in mind.

Pandya's return to MI as captain had evoked sharp responses from the teams' fan base, but Jayawardene asserted that Rohit will remain an integral part of the side. "It was a tough decision. It was emotional, to be honest. It's fair on the fans as well (to react). I think everyone is emotional and we have to respect that as well. But at the same time, as a franchise, you have to make those decisions," Jayawardene told JIO Cinema.

The former Sri Lanka captain said the decision was made after meaningful conversations.

"The legacy is something we want to build on and make sure



we keep fighting for those wins, those trophies. That's the focus going ahead. "Probably, every-

one in their eyes will think it is too soon, but it is a decision we had to make at some point,"

Jayawardene said. Jayawardene said Pandya fitted well into Mumbai's leadership environ-

ment. "Hardik (Pandya) has been in the dressing room for quite some time, so that's nothing new. We know what he brings in as an all-rounder," he said.

"It will be something different with his experience of leading the team at Gujarat, so, it is an opportunity to build on that." However, Jayawardene said stripping of captaincy will not have any effect on Rohit's place in the MI establishment.

"Having Rohit in the team, on and off the field to guide the next generation is very important for us." "He has been absolutely brilliant. I have worked very closely with him. I am sure he will be part of the legacy who will guide that through."

Jayawardene cited the example of Sachin Tendulkar, who gave away MI captaincy to play as a senior batter and mentor the younger players of the side to validate his point. (PTI)



সত্যমেব জয়তে

অসম চৰকাৰ

সাংস্কৃতিক পৰিক্ৰমা বিভাগৰ উদ্যোগত  
বিশ্বনাথ জিলা প্ৰশাসনৰ সহযোগত

# শুহীদ কনকলতা বৰুৱাৰ ১০০ বছৰীয়া জয়ন্তী উদ্‌যাপন

২২ ডিচেম্বৰ ২০২৩

পুৱা ১০ঃ০০ বজা

গহপুৰ উচ্চতৰ মাধ্যমিক বিদ্যালয় খেলপথাৰ, বিশ্বনাথ

॥ মুখ্য অতিথি ॥

ড° হিমন্ত বিশ্ব শৰ্মা, মুখ্যমন্ত্ৰী, অসম

॥ সন্মানীয় অতিথি ॥

শ্ৰীবিমল বড়া, মন্ত্ৰী, সাংস্কৃতিক পৰিক্ৰমা, উদ্যোগ, বাণিজ্য আৰু ৰাজহুৱা প্ৰতিষ্ঠান বিভাগ  
শ্ৰীঅশোক সিংহল, মন্ত্ৰী, গুৱাহাটী উন্নয়ন ইত্যাদি বিভাগ

॥ বিশিষ্ট অতিথি ॥

শ্ৰীপল্লৱ লোচন দাস, সাংসদ, তেজপুৰ লোকসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীউৎপল বৰা, বিধায়ক, গহপুৰ বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীৰঞ্জিৎ দত্ত, বিধায়ক, বিহালী বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীপদ্ম হাজৰিকা, বিধায়ক, চতিয়া বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীপ্ৰমোদ বৰঠাকুৰ, বিধায়ক, বিশ্বনাথ বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীগণেশ কুমাৰ লিঙ্গু, বিধায়ক, বৰছলা বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীপৃথ্বীৰাজ ৰাভা, বিধায়ক, তেজপুৰ বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
ড° অমিয় কুমাৰ ভূঞা, বিধায়ক, বিহপুৰীয়া বিধানসভা সমষ্টি  
শ্ৰীকৃষ্ণ কমল তাঁতী, বিধায়ক, ৰঙাপাৰা বিধানসভা সমষ্টি

উক্ত অনুষ্ঠানত ৰাইজৰ উপস্থিতি আন্তৰিকতাৰে কামনা কৰা হ'ল।

জিলা আয়ুক্ত  
বিশ্বনাথ জিলা, অসম

সঞ্চালক  
সাংস্কৃতিক পৰিক্ৰমা, অসম

তথ্য আৰু জনসংযোগ সঞ্চালকালয়, অসমৰ দ্বাৰা প্ৰচাৰিত

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অসম বাৰ্তা ছাবস্ক্ৰাইব কৰিবলৈ ৮২৮৭৯১২১৫৮ ত Assam লিখি ৱাটছএপ কৰক