



- At least 68 killed in central Gaza in airstrike
- Thousands join migrant caravan in Mexico ahead of Blinken's visit
- Cong chief says 'answer may not lie in a discussion'
- Poonch: Army initiates Court of Inquiry as police lodges murder case

HT BRIEFS

Security reviewed

GUWAHATI: A top official of the Border Security Force (BSF) on Monday reviewed the operational preparedness along the India-Bangladesh border. BSF Inspector General Dinesh Yadav also visited border outposts in Coochbehar district of West Bengal. He also visited border areas under the Guwahati Frontier, and reviewed the current security scenario and operational preparedness. He was briefed by top officials about measures to combat various challenges along the border. Various remedies to control trans-border crimes were also discussed. (PTI)

Woman burnt

TEZPUR: A 30-year-old woman was attacked with sharp weapons and burnt to death for allegedly practising witchcraft in Assam's Sonitpur district. The police have arrested four persons in this connection while two others are still absconding. A search operation has been launched to nab the duo, ASP Madhurima Das. The woman, Sangita Kati, was attacked by a neighbour, identified as Suraj Baghwar, who had brought in some people from outside their Nij Bahbari village. The attackers, who were allegedly in an inebriated state, tied up her husband and later set her ablaze. (PTI)

Vajpayee played leading role in 'good governance': CM Himanta

'Susashan Divas' celebrated across country to pay tribute to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on his 99th birth anniversary

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Dec 25: Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said that former Prime Minister and Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee had played a leading role in introducing 'good governance' into the country's administrative machinery.

The chief minister said this while attending the 'Susashan Divas' or 'Good Governance Day' celebrations hosted by the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority at the Atal Udyan in Maligaon in the city. The day coincides with the 99th birth anniversary of Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The Chief Minister also laid the foundation for construction of a statue of the former Prime Minister at the Atal Udyan. December 25 is being observed as 'Susashan Divas' or 'Governance Day' across the country since 2014 as a mark of tribute towards the late visionary leader, who had led the nation



to new heights of glory during his tenures as the Prime Minister.

Speaking on the occasion, CM Sarma said, "The former Jan Sangh leader led an eventful life during which he donned the hat of a poet, a journalist, a pracharak for Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the founder president of the Bharatiya Janata Party, parliamentarian for numerous times, Union minister of external affairs as well as the leader of the opposition in

Lok Sabha. In his role as Prime Minister, Vajpayee scripted new chapters in the nation's march to glory and greatness.

"Vajpayee as a personality with indomitable spirit and never conceded to defeat even during the worst times of the BJP," Sarma said.

The CM also said that Vajpayee had laid the foundation of the developed India that current Prime Minister (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

ULFA(I) linkman injured in police firing

RANGIA, Dec 25: A suspected ULFA (Independent) linkman was injured in a police firing while allegedly attempting to escape from custody in Assam's Kamrup (Rural) district on Monday, an officer said.

The police had raided the house of Pranjal Das alias Bhelu in Baihata Chariali area on Sunday night and recovered a flag of the outfit, following which he was taken into custody, Kamrup (Rural) superintendent of police Hitesh Roy said.

Das tried to escape from police custody in New Market area and the police opened fire in which he was injured on Monday. He was admitted to the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital for treatment.

The SP said that Das was a close associate of another ULFA(I) linkman, Ashim Adhikary, arrested in Guwahati last week for allegedly recruiting cadres to the outfit.

He was allegedly involved in hoisting the outfit's flag at Baihata Chariali recently, the SP added.

Meanwhile, director general of police G P Singh warned that initiation of violence by a banned organisation was unacceptable.

He said "Our initial plan, after

the first grenade blast, was peace and conflict resolution through discussion".

"However, our peace initiative was taken as a weakness and further violence was committed. We still believe that peace and conflict resolution is the best way ahead but, initiation of violence from a banned organisation is unacceptable", Singh posted on 'X'.

The incident occurred a day after a suspected ULFA(I) cadre and three youths, who were allegedly en route to join the banned outfit, were injured in two separate incidents of police firing at Sivasagar and Tinsukia respectively when they attempted to escape from police custody.

The ULFA (I), however, claimed in an e-mail statement to the media that Das and the three youths, who were injured in police firing were not involved with the outfit.

Earlier, three suspected ULFA(I) linkmen were arrested from a house in Guwahati last week, close on the heels of recent blasts in three major towns of Tinsukia, Sivasagar and Jorhat.

Following the recent incidents by the ULFA(I), the police have stepped up security and intensified patrolling across the state. (PTI)

Odisha to raise special security battalion for Shree Jagannath Temple

BHUBANESWAR, Dec 25: Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik on Monday approved a proposal for the creation of a dedicated special security battalion for providing security to Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri and to ensure proper crowd management, an official said.

It was envisioned and conceptualised to render security, better facilitation of devotees, and crowd management measures at Shree Jagannath temple. The temple draws thousands of devotees every day, the official said.

Official sources said that while the daily footfall of devotees was estimated to be about fifty thousand, it doubles and triples on weekends and on important religious occasions.

"The anticipated flow of devotees is likely to witness a substantial increase after the dedication of the new Heritage Corridor Project - Srimandir Parikrama prakalp to the public," the official said.

The new battalion would have the primary responsibility of providing security to the temple and they will be specially trained for better crowd management and tourist/devotee facilitation for ensuring a hassle-free and orderly 'darshan' by the devotees, said the Inspector General of Police (Central Range) Ashish Singh. The Special Security Battalion would comprise (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

People celebrate Christmas, offer prayers, make merry in Assam

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: The Christmas cheer caught on with Assam on Monday as people of all faiths joined in offering prayers and merry-making on the occasion.

From midnight masses to prayers in the morning, the churches particularly came alive with the festive spirit. Governor Gulab Chand Kataria and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, among others, wished the people on the occasion.

"May this special occasion prompt reflection on the profound teachings of Lord Jesus, inspiring us to contribute towards a society brimming with love, humanity, and compassion," Kataria wrote on X.

Sarma, also taking to the micro-blogging site, wrote, "Wishing a #MerryChristmas! For those celebrating, may Jesus illuminate your path with wisdom and happiness."

Special prayers were held in churches since Sunday night. The Christmas day also began with prayers and the singing of carols.

In various places, including Kokrajhar, carols were sung in local languages by people dressed in their traditional attire. Carnivals were organised at different places, including by churches, where various fun activities were organised for the visitors. People of other religions also joined the festivities, praying for peace and happiness all around. (PTI)

Departure of grounded Romanian plane with Indian passengers delayed

PARIS, Dec 25: The departure of a Romanian aircraft carrying nearly 300 passengers, mostly Indians, to Mumbai was delayed on Monday as some of them did not want to return to their country of origin, media reports said on Monday, three days after being grounded by the French authorities at an airport near Paris over suspected "human trafficking".

The situation was, for a time, confusing, according to Me Lilianna Bakayoko, lawyer for the Romanian airline Legend Airlines.

Speaking to BFM TV, she said that some passengers did not want to return to their country of origin and that they had refused to board the plane initially this Monday morning.

"Some of the passengers would be unhappy with this return because they wanted to continue their

journey to Nicaragua as planned," the French news broadcast television and radio network reported.

According to the 'Le Monde' newspaper, the local prefecture, or official in charge, "confirmed" that the plane would indeed take off "but not before noon" local time.

Two passengers are not authorised to leave, and may face charges, the newspaper said.

The Nicaragua-bound charter flight that took off from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) carrying 303 passengers was grounded at the Vatry airport, 150 km east of Paris, on Thursday over suspected "human trafficking".

On Sunday, the French authorities allowed the A340 aircraft, operated by Romanian company Legend Airlines, to resume its journey.

"We are very relieved. We were

impatiently waiting for this," the lawyer for the airline, Lilianna Bakayoko, was quoted as saying by the channel.

All the passengers who are not in police custody and who have not applied for asylum are expected to leave, the channel reported. According to some reports, nearly four dozen passengers have filed asylum applications.

The lawyer added that the company will continue to be "available to investigators", and "will seek damages from its client because it has suffered significant harm".

On Sunday, the airport was turned into a makeshift courtroom and four French judges questioned the detained passengers. The hearings were conducted as part of the investigation opened by the Paris prosecutor's office on suspicion of human (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

3 bills replacing British-era criminal laws get President's assent

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: President Droupadi Murmu on Monday gave assent to the three new criminal justice bills, which were cleared by Parliament last week.

The three new laws, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya Act, will replace the colonial era Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act of 1872.

While replying to a debate on the three bills in Parliament, Union home minister Amit Shah said the focus was on delivering justice rather than handing down punishment.

The three legislations aim at completely overhauling the criminal justice system in the country by giving definition of various offences and their punishments.



These have given a clear definition of terrorism, abolished sedition as a crime and introduced a new section titled "offences against the state".

The bills were first introduced during the monsoon session of Parliament in August. After the Standing Committee on home affairs made several recommendations, the government decided to withdraw the bills and introduced their

redrafted versions last week.

Shah had said the three bills were drafted after comprehensive consultations and that he had gone through every comma and full stop of the draft legislation before bringing them to the House for approval.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita lists offences such as acts of secession, armed rebellion, subversive activities, separatist activities or endangering the sovereignty or unity in the new avatar of the sedition law.

According to the laws, anyone purposely or knowingly, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or by electronic communication or by use of financial means, or otherwise, excites or attempts to excite secession or armed rebellion or subversive (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Yuletide spirit grips people of Karbi Anglong



HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 25: Christmas was celebrated with religious fervour and joy by people of Karbi Anglong. People of the Christian community celebrated the occasion by attending Christmas service and organizing several programmes across the district.

On Christmas Eve people could be seen attending the midnight mass and sitting around bonfire and singing and merry-making. People could be heard singing carols in churches across Diphu.

Christmas commemorates the birth of Lord Jesus Christ at Bethlehem town in Jerusalem. It also symbolises the spirit of joy, love and giving.

Churches and the homes of people in Diphu town were adorned with Christmas bells, decorative lights and stars. People could be seen visiting wishing each other dressed in their best attire and participating in the Christmas service.

At Rongchingdon Baptist Church the Christmas service started at 11 am. The Church hall was packed as a large number of people, including children in large

numbers participated in the morning mass. Pastor Harun Rongpi was the chairman of the service. The theme was, 'I bring to you good news...' Luke 2:10.

Mission Board chairman, Ronsing Millik, the appointed speaker in his Christmas message gave a brief account of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. He explained the meaning and purpose of Christmas and said Christ was born to save humanity from sin.

Millik reminded the faithful that the real meaning of Christmas is to allow Christ to be born in our hearts. It should not be an outer preparation by going for new clothes, decorating the homes and feasting, but the heart and mind should be clean to receive Christ.

Sunday School children presented bible memory verses on the birth of Christ. They also presented dances with gospel songs. The women's group also presented a Christmas chorus.

Earlier, bible reading was taken up by the secretary, the women's department, Jacolyn Taropi. The service ended with a mass prayer led by (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal reviews Bogibeel projects

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Dec 25: Union minister of ports, shipping and waterways and Ayush, Sarbananda Sonowal visited the project sites at Bogibeel to review the progress of jetties on Monday.

The Union minister directed the authorities to ensure quality in the construction of the projects, which are likely to fasten the cargo movement via Brahmaputra onto the global trade ways.

Expressing his satisfaction over the progress



at the Bogibeel, Sarbananda Sonowal, said, "Dibrugarh has always been a major trade hub in Northeast India. Given its commercial impor-

tance and as the nerve centre of the region, the Narendra Modi led government is committed to regain its past glory. Waterways play an important role in the economic and commercial prospect. For long, the immense potential of Mahabahu Brahmaputra was ignored. Until Modiji became Prime Minister, the Bogibeel remained neglected."

"We all know how the construction of the Bogibeel Bridge gained pace after Modi ji took charge. Similarly, under the leadership of the PM the waterways of (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Festival included cultural performances, exhibition showcasing authentic cuisine, handloom, handicrafts of NE

11th edition of Northeast Festival concludes in Delhi

HT Bureau

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: The 11th edition of the North East Festival that drew hordes of Delhiites and people of the Northeastern region living in the Delhi-NCR came to a close on late Sunday night.

The three-day festival that showcased the region's rich culture, its sumptuous cuisine, and its artistic prowess at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi was inaugurated by Union minister of state for external affairs and culture, Meenakshi Lekhi on December 22.

Several popular artists from the Northeast including Assam's heart-throb Zubeen Garg, singer Papon, Nepali rock band from Sikkim 'Girish and The Chronicles' and actor-singer Shruti Haasan and her alternative rock band enthralled the audience with their melodies.

As many as 300 folk artists, a Meitei martial arts showcase, a dole art masterclass by artist Santanu Hazarika, and a North East Rock Battle also added to the splendour of the cultural extravaganza.



"Delhi holds a special place in our hearts, and the city's warmth has always been overwhelming. The North East Festival has evolved into a symbol of identity for the people of the Northeast. With this edition, we got a greater footfall, marking another milestone in our journey," Shyamkanu Mahanta, chief organiser of North East Festival said.

The event also included a tourism B2B meet and a similar meeting with the textile and food processing sector. The exhibition arena hosted over 100 MSME entrepreneurs presenting 'Made in North East' products, giving visitors a great chance to explore and purchase authentic items. With as many as 150 stalls, the exhibition promoted (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Delhi HC refuses to direct TRAI to furnish info on tapping mobile phones

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: The Delhi High Court has set aside an order upholding the Central Information Commission's (CIC) direction to telecom regulator TRAI to collect and furnish information under Right to Information (RTI) Act proceedings about the alleged tapping of a mobile user's phone.

A bench headed by Justice Vibhu Bakhru allowed an appeal filed by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) against a single-judge bench order and said an act of surveillance is carried out under the government's directions and in the interest of the country's sovereignty and integrity, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states or public order, or for preventing incitement to the commission of an offence, and is exempted under the RTI Act.

"Any orders passed by the government concerned in relation to interception or tapping or tracking of a phone is passed when the authorised officer is satisfied that it is necessary or expedient to do so in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states or public order, or for

preventing incitement to the commission of an offence," the bench, also comprising Justice Amit Mahajan, said in a recent order.

"In a given case, the disclosure of any such information, therefore, may impede the process of investigation and may be construed to prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, the strategic, scientific and economic interest of the State, relations with foreign states or lead to incitement of an offence, and would therefore be exempted from disclosure under the terms of section 8 of the RTI Act," the court concluded.

It further said phone tapping does not fall under the affairs of telecom service providers and the information sought also does not relate to the functions of the TRAI under the law.

"Any contrary view would give the authority (TRAI) unbridled power to call for information and interfere with the functions of telecom service providers, and also would not be in consonance with the objects sought to be achieved by the TRAI Act," the court said. It said the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

51.5% agri exports from just 5 products make sector vulnerable to global prices: GTRI

China with higher rice productivity does not encourage export of rice as every kg of rice products can consume up to 80 litres of water

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: India's agri export basket is dependent on just five commodities including rice and sugar and this makes the sector vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices and demand, a report by economic think tank GTRI said on Monday.

The Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said these five products -- basmati rice, non-basmati rice, sugar, spices, and oil meals -- account for 51.5 per cent of India's total agriculture exports.

Furthermore, India grapples with various domestic challenges including infrastructural deficits, quality control issues, and non-tariff barriers, all of which impede the growth and competitiveness of its agricultural sector, it said.

"This makes them (agri exports) vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices and demand," it said, adding these commodities also face frequent export bans in India.

At present export of non-basmati rice is currently banned from



India and India is also fighting at the WTO (World Trade Organisation) to protect subsidies to rice and wheat under a public stock holding programme.

Besides, certain WTO member countries have taken India to disputes on sugar for providing subsidies to farmers. "All this makes India's top exports vulnerable and uncertain," it added.

To deal with the issue, the think tank has suggested the government to focus on areas like modern infrastructure for the sector.

The report said China with higher rice productivity does not encourage export of rice as every kg of rice products can consume up to 80 litres of water.

Besides, certain WTO member countries have taken India to dis-

putes on sugar for providing subsidies to farmers. "All this makes India's top exports vulnerable and uncertain," it added.

To deal with the issue, the think tank has suggested the government to focus on areas like modern infrastructure for the sector.

The report said China with higher rice productivity does not encourage export of rice as every kg of rice products can consume up to 80 litres of water.

It also said that in 2023, India's agricultural trade landscape presents a challenging scenario.

With agriculture exports and imports projected to reach USD 43.3 billion and USD 33 billion, respectively, the sector is experiencing a significant downturn compared to the previous year, it added.

"Exports will decline by 7.2 per cent and imports by 10.1 per cent in 2023 over 2022. India's agriculture exports will be 10.1 per cent of India's merchandise exports. (PTI)

Gujarat industrial policy shows govt's commitment: Stakeholders

AHMEDABAD, Dec 25: The Gujarat government's industrial policy, launched in August 2020 with an aim to provide Rs 40,000 crore in subsidies to industries over five years, is a reflection of its commitment to make the state a global business destination, stakeholders have said.

The policy, valid for a period of five years since its launch, promises an average annual outlay of Rs 8,000 crore, indicating substantial support for industries, they said ahead of the 10th edition of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit to be held from January 10-12, 2024, in Gandhinagar.

The summit is a forum for business networking, knowledge sharing and strategic partnerships for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The state's industrial policy has been well on target to achieve its mission to promote entrepreneurship and innovation by inclusive and balanced regional development, world-class infrastructure, and initiatives aimed at easing the business environment and export competitiveness.

This is a reflection of the government's commitment to make the state a global business destination for sustainable manufacturing and services industry and contribute to the vision of an "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India), according to the stakeholders.

Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) Managing Director Rahul Gupta said the new industrial policy will provide a favorable environment for industrial growth and development in the state. (PTI)

Adani Green Energy inks pact with SECI for supply of 1,799 MW solar power



NEW DELHI, Dec 25: Adani Green Energy (AGEL) on December 25 said it has signed a power purchase agreement (PPA) with the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) to supply 1,799 MW of solar power. With the signing of this balance PPA, AGEL has completed the power offtake tie-up for the entire 8,000 MW manufacturing-linked solar tender awarded to it by the SECI in June 2020, a company statement said.

According to the statement, AGEL has announced the execution of a PPA with the SECI to supply 1,799 MW of solar power. "We are glad to conclude the largest green PPA and enable a sustainable energy landscape. Aligned to India's target of 500 GW non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030, Adani Green is determined to deliver in excess of 45 GW renewable energy, a five-fold increase from our current operating portfolio," Amit Singh, CEO, AGEL, said in the statement.

AGEL has progressed on the commitments of the SECI manufacturing-linked solar PV tender, including setting up 2 GW of PV cell and module manufacturing facilities. AGEL has already commissioned a solar PV cell and module manufacturing plant with a capacity of 2 GW per annum through its associate company Mundra Solar Energy Ltd (MSEL), it stated.

The plant is located at Mundra, Gujarat. AGEL holds 26 per cent shares of MSEL through its wholly-owned subsidiary Adani Renewable Energy Holding Four Ltd. With this, Adani Green now has tied up PPAs of 19.8 GW and the balance is merchant capacity in its 20.6 GW locked-in portfolio, it stated.

With over 2 lac acres of land already tied up in resource rich areas of India, the portfolio is fully de-risked for execution of 45 GW capacity by 2030, the statement added. (PTI)

POCO M6 5G launched at an attractive price

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: Following the immense success of POCO M6 Pro 5G, POCO a leading technology brand today announced the launch of its newest addition to the popular M series - the POCO M6 5G starting at ₹9,499. This new smartphone is set to disrupt the 5G smartphone sector once again and aims to strengthen its leadership in the affordable 5G segment by providing a feature-rich, innovative, and reliable device.

Commenting on the launch, Himanshu Tandon, country head, POCO India said, "The M series has consistently raised the bar by delivering many firsts in the smartphone industry. This year, we made a significant impact in the 5G segment by adding the POCO M6 Pro 5G to our M series portfolio, which became the most affordable 5G smartphone in India. Now, with the introduction of the POCO M6 5G, we are committed to carrying forward this legacy and continuing our mission of making 5G technology accessible to all. We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to experience the remarkable possibilities that 5G brings, and the POCO M6 5G is our way of turning that vision into a reality."

NESFB appoints Satish Kumar Kalra as interim MD & CEO

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: North East Small Finance Bank (NESFB) is delighted to announce the appointment of Satish Kumar Kalra as its interim managing director and chief executive officer. With approval from both the NESFB board and the Reserve Bank of India, Kalra brings to the table an illustrious career spanning over four and a half decades in the banking industry.

Kalra's professional journey is marked by his tenure at Andhra Bank as the managing director & CEO (In-charge), and executive director, where he drove significant growth achieving a 13% compound annual growth rate in credit and added over 1200 branches worldwide. His expertise in treasury management, NPA credit management, and risk management has been pivotal in his previous roles. Known for his innovative approach, Kalra has been instrumental in spearheading business transformation initiatives, capital and profit planning, and human resource development.

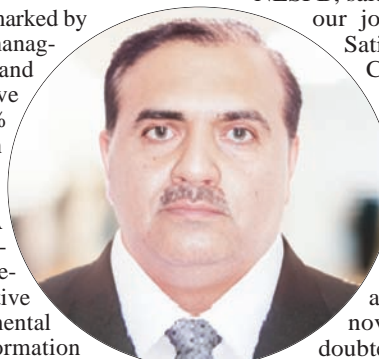
Kalra's long association with several prestigious institutions as an independent director, including roles at PNB GILTS, Ind Bank Merchant Services, JK Cement Limited, and CAN FIN Homes Ltd. underscores his deep expertise in the industry.

As Kalra steps into the role of MD & CEO at NESFB, he will be instrumental in steering the bank towards a path of growth and stability. His expertise will be pivotal in enhancing branch management and the bank's asset base further bolstering the bank's sta-

bility. Additionally, he will oversee the bank's strategic growth and business directives in line with the highest governance and regulatory standards. He will spearhead the ongoing merger process between slice and NESFB, dedicating particular attention to the optimisation of bank operations and ensuring a seamless cultural integration of the two entities.

Tapan Kumar Hazarika, independent director, NESFB, said, "We are at a pivotal juncture in our journey, and the appointment of Satish Kumar Kalra as interim MD & CEO stands testament to our commitment towards excellence and sustainable growth. His formidable experience and leadership acumen give us immense confidence in his ability to steer NESFB through the forthcoming changes. His strategic vision aligns perfectly with our goals, and we are eager to witness the innovation and progress he will undoubtedly bring to NESFB."

Commenting on his appointment, Satish Kumar Kalra, interim MD & CEO, NESFB, added, "I am deeply honoured to assume this role. This is a unique opportunity to be at the helm of what is poised to be a groundbreaking merger in the banking industry - a cross-cultural collaboration between two entities set to redefine the financial landscape by leveraging NESFB's grassroots banking and slice's digital prowess. I'm looking forward to guiding NESFB through this transformative phase and shaping a new future for banking in India."



NINL was home to snakes, scorpions when acquired by Tata Steel: MD Mehta

KALINGANAGAR (ODISHA), Dec 25: Snakes and scorpions crawled the premises of NINL, the land around was covered with bushes and the plant machinery was full of rust, its MD & CEO Sudhir Kumar Mehta said remembering the challenges involved in restarting the sick unit within a set 90-day deadline.

The company was in debt, Mehta said, adding NINL is now doing financially good and has generated a revenue of around ₹3,000 crore in the April-September or first half of the ongoing fiscal.

On July 4, 2022, Tata Steel completed the acquisition of Odisha-based Neelachal Ispat Nigam Ltd (NINL) -- the first state-owned steel company to be divested by the Narendra Modi-led government -- through its erstwhile sub-

siary Tata Steel Long Products (TSLP) for a consideration of ₹12,100 crore.

"NINL premises is of 2,500 acre. It had been closed for a long period. When we first entered the unit post the acquisition, there were snakes, scorpions, and lizards crawling in the premises. Bushes

offices and buildings were repaired and reconstructed and broadband lines were laid to connect the plant with outside world, he said.

In August, all the employees were paid their entire salary as per the take over agreement, Mehta said. NINL's 1 million tonne per annum (MTPA) steel manufactur-

October 11, 2022, and the first billet was casted within two weeks on day of Diwali - October 24, he said.

"It was indeed a momentous day for the entire NINL family as we have celebrated Diwali in such a way - with a new found purpose and pride. All eyes were wet with emotions to see the plant operating once again," Mehta recalls.

T V Narendran, CEO & MD, Tata Steel, said: "The team from Tata Steel and the erstwhile employees of NINL have worked together to revive and turnaround a plant that has been shut for almost three years and we are now operating at full capacity. This is a great testament to their passion, commitment, and capability. NINL is poised to grow and form a very important part of Tata Steel group's long product portfolio." (PTI)

Running at 100 pc capacity now

up to several feet had grown all over the area and the plant machinery was lying non-functional in rust," Mehta said, replying to a question on the revival of the sick unit within a 90-day deadline set by the parent Tata Steel.

Accordingly, a detailed plan was chalked out and the entire area was cleaned and made accessible. The

ing unit at Kalinganagar, around 120 km from state capital Bhubaneswar, was closed for over three years on account of various reasons including lack of funds.

Further, technical and mechanical experts from Tata Steel plants in Kalinganagar, Jamshedpur, and Meramandali worked non-stop to restart the NINL blast furnace on

Here's what happens to the billions that go unspent each year

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec 25: Gift cards make great stocking stuffers — just as long as you don't stuff them in a drawer and forget about them after the holidays.

Americans are expected to spend nearly \$30 billion on gift cards this holiday season, according to the National Retail Federation. Restaurant gift cards are the most popular, making up one-third of those sales.

Most of those gift cards will be redeemed. Paytronix, which tracks restaurant gift card sales, says around 70% of gift cards are used within six months.

But many cards — tens of billions of dollars' worth — wind up forgotten or otherwise unused. That's when the life of a gift card gets more complicated, with expiration dates or inactivity fees that can vary by state.

LOVED, BUT LOST

After clothing, gift cards will be the most popular present this holiday season. Nearly half of Americans plan to give them, according to the National Retail Federation.

But many will remain unspent.

Gift cards get lost or forgotten, or recipients hang on to them for a special occasion. In a July survey, the consumer finance company Bankrate found that 47% of U.S. adults had at least one unspent gift card or voucher with an average value of \$187. That's a total of \$23 billion.

THE GIFT OF TIME

Under a federal law that went into effect in 2010, a gift card can't expire for five years from the time it was purchased or from the last time someone added money to it. Some state laws require an even longer period. In New York, for instance, any gift card purchased after Dec. 10, 2022, can't expire for nine years. Differing state laws are one reason many stores have stopped using expiration dates altogether, says Ted Rossman, a senior industry analyst at Bankrate.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

While it may take gift cards years to expire, experts say it's still wise to spend them quickly. Some cards — especially generic cash cards from Visa or MasterCard — will start accruing inactivity fees if they're not used for a year, which eats away at their value. And if a retail store closes or goes bankrupt, a gift card could be worthless.

Perhaps consider clearing out your stash on National Use Your Gift Card Day, a five-year-old holiday created by a public relations executive and now backed by multiple retailers. The next one is Jan. 20, 2024.

OR SELL IT

If you have a gift card you don't want, one option is to sell it on a site like CardCash or Raise. Rossman says resale sites won't give you face value for your cards, but they will typically give 70 to 80 cents per dollar.

THE MONEY TRAIL

What happens to the money when a gift card goes unused? It depends on the state where the retailer is incorporated.

When you buy a gift card, a retailer can use that money right away. But it also becomes a liability; the retailer has to plan for the possibility that the gift card will be redeemed.

Every year, big companies calculate "breakage," which is the amount of gift card liability they believe won't be redeemed based on historical averages. For some companies, like Seattle-based Starbucks, breakage is a huge profit-driver. Starbucks reported \$212 million in revenue from breakage in 2022. But in at least 19 states — including Delaware, where many big companies are incorporated — retailers must work with state unclaimed property programs to return money from unspent gift cards to consumers. Money that isn't recovered by individual consumers is spent on public service initiatives; in the states' view, it shouldn't go to companies because they haven't provided a service to earn it.

CLAIM IT

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have unclaimed property programs. Combined, they return around \$3 billion to consumers annually, says Misha Werschul, the executive director of the Washington State Budget and Policy Center.

Werschul says it can be tricky to find the holders of unspent gift cards, but the growing number of digital cards that name the recipient helps. State unclaimed property offices jointly run the website MissingMoney.com, where consumers can search by name for any unclaimed property they're owed, including cash from gift cards. (AP)

Year of social media soul-searching

Twitter dies, X and Threads are born and AI gets personal

NEW YORK, Dec 25: We lost Twitter and got X. We tried out Bluesky and Mastodon (well, some of us did). We fretted about AI bots and teen mental health. We cooed in private chats and scrolled endlessly as we did in years past. For social media users, 2023 was a year of beginnings and endings, with some soul-searching in between.

Here's a look back some of the biggest stories in social media in 2023 — and what to watch for next year.

GOODBYE TWITTER

A little more than a year ago, Elon Musk walked into Twitter's San Francisco headquarters, fired its CEO and other top executives and began transforming the social media platform into what's now known as X.

Musk revealed the X logo in July. It quickly replaced Twitter's name and its whimsical blue bird icon, online and on the company's San Francisco headquarters.

"And soon we shall bid adieu to the twitter brand and, gradually, all the birds," Musk posted on the site.

Because of its public nature and because it attracted public figures, journalists and other high-profile users, Twitter

always had an outsized influence on popular culture — but that influence seems to be waning.

"It had a lot of problems even before Musk took it over, but it was beloved brand with a clear role in the social media landscape," said Jasmine Enberg, a social media analyst at Insider Intelligence. "There are still moments of Twitter magic on the platform, like when journalists took the platform to post real-time updates about the OpenAI drama, and the smaller communities on the platform remain important to many users. But the Twitter of the past 17 years is largely gone, and X's reason for existence is murky."

Since Musk's takeover, X has been bombarded by allegations of misinformation and racism, endured significant advertising losses and suffered declines in usage. It didn't help when Musk went on an explosive-ridden rant in an on-stage interview about companies that had halted spending on X. Musk asserted that advertisers that pulled out were engaging in "blackmail" and, using a profanity, essentially told them to get lost.

Continuing the trend of welcoming back users who had been banned by the



former Twitter for hate speech or spreading misinformation, in December, Musk restored the X account of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, pointing to an unscientific poll he posted to his followers that came out in favor of the Infowars host who repeatedly called the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting a hoax.

LGBTQ and other organizations supporting marginalized groups, meanwhile, have been raising alarms about

X becoming less safe. In April, for instance, it quietly removed a policy against the "targeted misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals. In June, the advocacy group GLAAD called it "the most dangerous platform for LGBTQ people."

GLSEN, an LGBTQ education group, announced in December that it was leaving X, joining other groups such as the suicide prevention nonprofit Trevor Proj-

ect, saying that Musk's changes "have birthed a new platform that enables its users to harass and target the LGBTQ+ community without restriction or discipline."

HELLO X. AND THREADS. AND BLUESKY

Musk's ambitions for X include transforming the platform into an "everything app" — like China's WeChat, for instance. The problem? It's not clear if U.S. and Western audiences are keen on the idea. And Musk himself has been pretty vague on the specifics.

While X contends with an identity crisis, some users began looking for a replacement. Mastodon was one contender, along with Bluesky, which actually grew out of Twitter — a pet project of former CEO Jack Dorsey, who still sits on its board of directors.

When tens of thousands of people, many of them fed-up Twitter users, began signing up for the (still) invite-only Bluesky in the spring, the app had less than 10 people working on it, said CEO Jay Graber recently.

This meant "scrambling to keep everything working, keeping people online, scrambling to add features that we had on

the roadmap," she said. For weeks, the work was simply "scaling" — ensuring that the systems could handle the influx.

"We had one person on the app for a while, which was very funny, and there were memes about Paul versus all of Twitter's engineers," she recalled. "I don't think we hired a second app developer until after the crazy growth spurt."

MENTAL HEALTH WORRIES

Social media's impact on children's mental health hurtled toward a reckoning this year, with the U.S. Surgeon General warning in May that there is not enough evidence to show that social media is safe for children and teens — and calling on tech companies, parents and caregivers to take "immediate action to protect kids now."

"We're asking parents to manage a technology that's rapidly evolving that fundamentally changes how their kids think about themselves, how they build friendships, how they experience the world — and technology, by the way, that prior generations never had to manage," Dr. Vivek Murthy told The Associated Press. "And we're putting all of that on the shoulders of parents, which is just simply not fair." (AP)

CEM Pramod Boro pays homage to Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 25: On the auspicious occasion of the 99th birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna and former Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 'Good Governance Day' was celebrated with reverence and solemn tributes

across the nation. The commemorative event took place at the Samadhi of Atal in Rajghat, New Delhi, where dignitaries from various quarters gathered to pay homage to the renowned statesman-poet.

The ceremony was graced by

the presence of India's Rashtrapati Draupadi Murmu, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Union ministers, all of whom paid their respects to Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Among the attendees were chief

executive member (CEM) of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Pramod Boro, and Rajya Sabha MP Rungwa Narzary, representing the BTR. They offered heartfelt tributes to the great leader amidst a significant assembly of dignitaries from various corners of the country.

In connection with the birth anniversary celebration of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a prathana sabha (prayer meeting) was organised, extending invitations to all NDA partners, including UPPL and AGP parties from Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and Assam state, respectively.

CEM Pramod Boro expressed his gratitude for being part of the Good Governance Day celebration on the auspicious occasion of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary.

"Today, on the occasion of his birth anniversary & Good Governance Day, had the privilege of offering my humble tributes to the great statesman-poet, Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji, at the Samadhi of Atal Ji at Rajghat," said CEM Pramod Boro.

NEATEHUB felicitates agri startups with funding

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Dec 25: The North-East Agriculture Technology Entrepreneurs Hub (NEATEHUB), an agribusiness incubator affiliated with Assam Agricultural University, celebrated a valedictory and cheque distribution ceremony, recognising 10 agribusiness startups. These innovative ventures received a total funding of ₹ 160 lakhs under the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana - Remunerative Approaches for Agriculture and Allied Sectors Rejuvenation (RKVY-RAFTAAR) scheme.

NEATEHUB, operating as an agribusiness incubator, supported these entrepreneurs through its Isanya and Saranya incubation programs, targeting the idea and startup stages, respectively. Participants in the Isanya program secured pre-seed funding of ₹ 5 lakhs each, while those in Saranya received up to ₹ 25 lakhs per startup.

The selected Isanya entrepreneurs at the pre-seed stage include Sabina Farmin Saikia of Eco Web Lab Pvt Ltd. The Saranya entrepreneurs at the seed stage comprise Devajit Sharma of Aquagreen Eco-Farming Pvt Ltd, Liba Elijah Raiveio of Twosis Garden Pvt

Ltd, Pushpanjali Das of Greenbam Infratech Pvt Ltd, Dr Syed Wasifur Rahman of Asomi Polyseed Pvt Ltd, Khumanthem Rakesh Singh of Lemlei Enterprise Pvt Ltd, Rejaul Gabil Momin of Gabil Agro Industries Pvt Ltd, Dr Bijaylakshmi Goswami of Agrithink Services LLP, Ranjit Baruah of Tender Buds Teas & Crafts Pvt Ltd, and Monalisa Borthakur of AmbyGold Manorama Foods Pvt Ltd.

The chief guest for the ceremony was Akash Jyoti Gogoi, a distinguished entrepreneur and recipient of the 'Assam Gaurav' award. Dr BC Deka, addressing the audience, highlighted the necessity of innovation in agribusiness and encouraged entrepreneurs to expand their ventures beyond the region. Dr Danish Tamuly, director on the board of NEATEHUB, stressed the significance of technology-driven innovation in the north-eastern region.

Established in 2018 on the AAU campus, NEATEHUB operates as an Atal Incubation Centre, fostering a sustainable ecosystem for emerging agripreneurs in the northeastern region by providing technical support, mentorship, allied services, and co-working spaces.

South Salmara Police conducts raid



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: In a decisive move against illicit activities, the South Salmara District Police conducted a raid based on credible source inputs. The operation, carried out at the residence of Rahidul Islam under MKCR PS, resulted in the apprehension of three individuals.

During the raid, law enforcement discovered and seized 13 plastic containers, weighing a total of 15.16 grams, suspected to be associated with the consumption of heroin. In response to these findings, a case has been officially registered at MKCR PS, underscoring the police's commitment to addressing and curbing illicit activities in the region.

The prompt and decisive action by the South Salmara District Police reflects their ongoing efforts to maintain community safety and combat substance abuse within their jurisdiction.

Arunachal Pradesh CM spreads Christmas joy on social media

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: In a heartwarming gesture, the chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu took to the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) to extend warm Christmas greetings to the residents of the state and beyond.

In his tweet, the chief minister conveyed, "Let's celebrate the holy festival of Christmas with the usual fervor and spirit of bonhomie, exchanging warm wishes and creating lasting memories. May Lord Christ bless all with love, compassion, happiness, prosperity, and good health."

The message resonates with a call for unity and joy during the festive season, emphasising the values of love, compassion, and goodwill. The chief minister's online Christmas wishes aim to spread positivity and blessings as the community comes together to celebrate this joyous occasion.

Christmas celebrated in Manipur

IMPHAL, Dec 25: Christmas was celebrated in Manipur with Christians attending special prayer services and mass feasts on Monday.

Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh greeted the people of the state on the auspicious occasion of Christmas.

"Let the spirit of Christmas illuminate our lives with love, compassion, and joy", he said in a post in X, adding that "May this Christmas fill our hearts with hope and inspire us to create a better future for all".

Pastor Rev Khayaipam of Tangkhul Baptist Church in Imphal said, "There will be community celebrations but we have encouraged and requested our members not to indulge in lavish spending and grand feasting. Rather, we have requested them to use the resources to help those who are marginalised in the current crisis and those in need."

All Manipur Christian organisations had recently appealed to all Christians in the state to celebrate the festival in low-key in the spirit of forgiveness, peace, love and unity.

G Guite, a member of the Baptist Church in Churachandpur told PTI "Compared to previous years, there is less excitement. Even the decorations are much less this year. Our pastors have told us to tone down our celebrations. And also we ourselves, in respect our fallen brothers, do not want to engage in extravagance." (PTI)

Christmas celebrated in Christian majority Meghalaya

SHILLONG, Dec 25: Christmas was celebrated in Christian majority Meghalaya with midnight services in churches and people exchanging greetings and gifts with friends and relatives on Monday.

Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma wished the people of the state on the occasion of Christmas.

"May the spirit of Christmas bring you and your family hope, love and happiness," he said.

The CM said, "With a grateful heart for everything that happened this year, I send each of you Christmas and New Year greetings filled with faith, hope and love. May the miracle of Jesus' birth bring miracles in our lives and bless us with a hope-filled 2024."

The chief minister also attended a Christmas concert in his hometown in Tura at the Baptist Church.

The state capital Shillong was all decked up and the streets and thoroughfare were illuminated with lights.

In the Khyndailad and Laitumkhrah area of the city, the Tourism Department lit up the entire area and government and private buildings were decorated with Christmas trees, banners and Christmas festoons.

There were traffic snarls at the two localities even at midnight as people thronged to take selfies and thousands of passers-by stopped to click pictures on their mobile phones.

Different Church denominations organised special midnight services in their respective churches. At Shillong Catholic Cathedral, a special midnight service was led by Archbishop Rev Victor Lyngdoh where the faithful received the holy communion. (PTI)

Nagaland celebrates Christmas with religious fervour

KOHEMA, Dec 25: Christian-majority Nagaland on Monday celebrated Christmas with religious fervour by holding special prayer services and mass feasts.

Houses, government offices and commercial buildings were illuminated on the occasion.

On Christmas Eve, revellers were seen moving around in groups. They greeted each other with 'Merry Christmas' as fireworks lit the sky with the strike of midnight.

On Sunday morning, people dressed in their finest were seen attending special prayer services and listening to sermons on the birth of Jesus. They exchanged greetings and enjoyed mass feasts.

In state capital Kohima, various churches of the Chakhesang Naga tribe came together to celebrate the occasion at the NBCC Convention Centre.

In a benevolent gesture at commercial hub Dimapur, members of the Dimapur District Autorickshaw Drivers' Union provided free autorickshaw rides to the faithful attending Christmas services.

Around 50 autorickshaws with stickers "free town

YABA tablets worth ₹ 10 crore seized



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: In a significant victory in the war against drugs, Cachar District Police, in collaboration with the BSF, have successfully seized YABA tablets valued at ₹ 10 crore.

Acting on credible information, Cachar Police, in tandem with the BSF, conducted a targeted search operation, intercepting a vehicle entering from a neighboring state in the Chalachpra area of Silchar. The operation resulted in the confiscation of YABA tablets worth ₹ 10 crore.

At the scene, law enforcement apprehended five individuals, and an extensive investigation is currently underway to unravel the full extent of the drug network.

Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma took to the social media platform X to share the news of this significant drug bust, commending the police for their dedication and accomplishment.

Christmas celebrated with religious enthusiasm in Mizoram

AIZAWL, Dec 25: Christmas was celebrated with religious enthusiasm and traditional fervour across Mizoram on Monday.

Churches of various denominations held special services and congregational singing called 'Zaikhawm' to celebrate the day. Similar church services will be held in the evening and Zaikhawm at night.

Celebrations began on Christmas Eve, locally known as 'Urawk Zan', during which worship service and congregational singing were organised.

The grand celebration was held on Monday during which church service, sermons on the birth of Jesus and congregational singing were

organised in the churches.

Community feasts, which form an integral part of the Christmas celebrations, will be held on Tuesday by most churches. Some churches, however, organised community feasts on Monday. In Mizoram, which celebrated the centenary of the arrival of Christianity to the state back in 1994, Christmas is a blend of religion and traditions.

Notwithstanding the English way of celebrations, the proselytised Mizos follow their own way of celebrating Christmas in tune with their traditions.

The state government has banned fireworks to ensure peaceful and pollution-free

celebrations.

According to the police, no law and order problem has been reported from anywhere in the state so far on Monday.

Several NGOs, political parties and churches have reached out to orphanages, rehabilitation centres and poor families, donating charity both in cash and kind in the pre-Christmas period.

Historians recorded that the first Christmas on Mizoram's soil was celebrated in 1871, not by the Mizos but by the invading colonial British troops near the Tuivai River on the present-day Mizoram-Manipur border. Mizo warriors had attacked the British soldiers during the celebrations. (PTI)

AAJAOA to celebrate 75 years of service with Maharajat Jayanti



HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, Dec 25: In commemoration of the remarkable 75 years of service by the All Assam Junior Agriculture Officers' Association (AAJAOA), preparations are underway for the grand celebration of Maharajat Jayanti on January 27, 28, and 29, 2024, at Sishuram Hazarika Samanyai Khetra in Morigaon.

The unveiling of the Maharajat Jayanti program was initiated with the ceremonial erection of the lai-khuta at the late Sishuram Hazarika Khetra today. Mri-

ganab Das, EAC of Morigaon, along with DAO Ashok Sarma, JAO Dibya Jyoti Hazarika, Lakhmi Narayan Deb Mishra, Ex DAO, and local farmers participated in the enthusiastic ceremony.

A felicitation program preceded the lai-khuta ceremony, organised by the members of the organisation. The lai-khuta erection ceremony was presided over by Divya Jyoti Hazarika, secretary of the Maharajat Jayanti's reception committee. The event saw the presence of key figures such as Buddha Kumar Nath, president of the Central Committee of Junior Agricultural Officers Association, Gopal Hazarika, secretary of the reception committee, and Rajen Deka.

The three-day Maharajat Jayanti festival is set to feature various activities, including farmer training, agricultural seminars, exhibitions, competitions, delegate meetings, topic selection sessions, and a diverse array of indigenous and tribal food items. Cultural activities will also be an integral part of the celebration.

The meeting, chaired by Central Committee president Buddha Kumar Nath, concluded with the adoption of several crucial resolutions aimed at ensuring the successful and harmonious celebration of the upcoming Maharajat Jayanti program, with an appeal for the cooperation of all sections of the people.

Assam Rifles spreads Christmas cheer



HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARALI, Dec 25: In a heartwarming celebration of the festive season, Assam Rifles celebrated Christmas at the Battalion Headquarters in Lokra, bringing together personnel, families, and the local community in a joyous and inclusive event.

The festivities included a vibrant Christmas tree lighting ceremony at Lokra Church, accompanied by enchanting carol performances that resonated with the spirit of the season. AR personnel, families, nearby locals, and the children from Mercy Home Orphanage were all invited to partake in the merriment, transforming the day into a festive wonderland.

The event, witnessed by 172 AR personnel, 35 families, 20 children from Mercy Orphanage, and 45 locals, featured a variety of activities catering to attendees of all ages. From visits with Santa Claus to delightful holiday treats, the celebration aimed to create lasting memories and foster a sense of community and togetherness. Highlighting the spirit of giving, the Children of Mercy Children Home (orphanage) received donations of basic amenities as Christmas and New Year's gifts from Assam Rifles. This thoughtful initiative was met with appreciation from the local community, highlighting the unit's commitment to spreading joy and prosperity during the festive season.

Tripura celebrates Good Governance Day

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 25: In a momentous celebration of Good Governance Day, the Government of Tripura unveiled the Tripura Institution for Transformation (TIFT) on Monday. Proudly standing among the forefront states, Tripura has operationalised the State Institution for Transformation (SIT) under the State Support Mission of NITI Aayog. TIFT stands as a comprehensive initiative, housing a project implementation unit, monitoring & evaluation and data analytics unit, and a media monitoring unit. Notably, it incorporates a CM dashboard modeled after Gujarat, a CM War Room dedicated to overseeing major projects, flagship schemes, and citizen services, along with a video conferencing facility spanning all districts, sub-divisions, and block offices.

New railway road over bridge inaugurated at Jagiroad



disruptions.

The Northeast Frontier Railway constructed the ROB (No. 85A) at

a total cost of ₹ 85.96 crores to ensure the safety of both rail and road users. The total length of the

ROB is 344 meters, featuring a bow string arch steel girder of 74 meters length, with a height of 12.85 meters and a weight of 730 MT. The ROB includes a newly constructed three-lane road of 11 meters width connecting NH 24 & NH 715A with viaducts on both sides. Additionally, two staircases on either side of the Bow String Girder have been provided for pedestrians to cross the railway track safely.

The new ROB aims to facilitate smooth traffic flow during rush hours, prevent trespassing on railway tracks, and enhance operational efficiency for both train and road traffic in the Jagiroad area. The project is expected to benefit the entire population of Jagiroad and Morigaon district.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.
- Jesus Christ*

Houthi Strikes Disrupt Global Shipping

In recent developments in the Red Sea, Yemen's Houthi rebels continue their targeted assaults on ships, impacting global shipping and escalating geopolitical tensions. The United States leads a coalition of 10 nations in efforts to prevent further attacks, emphasizing the shared interest in avoiding a potentially uncontrollable escalation. The Houthi rebels claim their strikes on ships, particularly those linked to Israel, aim to pressure Israel into ending the Gaza conflict. These attacks, supported within Yemen, also serve the Houthi recruitment drive for new fighters. The situation is exacerbated by the toll of over 20,000 Palestinian lives lost in Gaza since October 7 due to Israeli bombings and artillery shelling. The Houthi capture of the cargo ship 'Galaxy Leader' on November 19, linked to Israel, has turned into a tourist attraction for Yemenis. Furthermore, their targeting of ships in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial passage to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, has led to disruptions in global shipping. Approximately 30 percent of global container ship traffic relies on this route. Sanam Vakil of Chatham House notes the strategic importance of the Houthi presence in northern Yemen, creating a geopolitical bottleneck. While Houthi attacks haven't caused injuries or deaths, their impact on global shipping is significant. Over 12 shipping firms, including major players like Mediterranean Shipping Company and CMA CGM, have suspended operations in the Red Sea. This disruption affects about 12 percent of the world's seaborne oil and eight percent of liquefied natural gas, with companies opting for longer routes around the southern tip of Africa, increasing costs by at least 15 percent.

In response, the United States has imposed sanctions on 13 individuals accused of financing the Houthi rebels. A maritime coalition involving the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Seychelles, and Bahrain aims to deter the Houthi actions. However, Yemen's internationally recognized government, based in Aden, faces a delicate situation, unwilling to be perceived as supporting Israel. Iran, a supporter of the Houthi rebels, treads carefully not to escalate the Gaza conflict regionally. However, Eleonora Ardemagni of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies doubts Iran's extensive influence over the Houthis. The Houthi rebels pursue an independent agenda, capitalizing on internal challenges before October 7 to gain widespread support by backing Gaza. The Houthi state media reports over 1,000 protests, boycotts, and recruitment efforts since the Gaza conflict began. Despite war-weariness in Yemen, supporting Hamas has helped the Houthi recruit new fighters, deployed not only in Gaza but also against the Yemeni government stronghold of Marib. The Red Sea attacks may be a diplomatic tactic aimed at Saudi Arabia. Talks between the Houthi and Saudi Arabia for a ceasefire follow a UN-mediated truce in 2022, with tensions and disruptions to oil trade pressuring Saudi Arabia to return to the negotiating table.

Despite the involvement of the United States and its allies, the Houthi belligerence persists. Houthi spokesperson Mohamed Abdul-salam attributes the Red Sea "operations" to supporting Gaza. The US, cautious not to escalate the crisis, refrains from retaliatory action against the Houthi, highlighting the delicate balance in the region as both parties avoid crossing a dangerous threshold. The Red Sea tensions escalate as Houthi rebels target ships linked to Israel, disrupting global shipping. Despite international efforts, the impact persists, challenging diplomatic resolutions.

Save the Maharashtra tiger, 41 killed in 10 months alone

By: Arun Kumar Shrivastav

Maharashtra boasts a seemingly healthy tiger population, but the numbers hide a troubling reality: a significant number of these magnificent creatures are dying, with a third of the deaths attributed to unnatural causes. Since 2018, Maharashtra has lost 151 tigers. Poaching and electrocution were responsible for 42 tiger deaths. Drowning incidents and rail/road accidents killed another 16. Tiger habitats should be kept free of road/rail intrusions.

As of October 2023, Maharashtra recorded 41 tiger deaths, including from accidents and poisoning. In 2022, the toll was 29, with 18 dying from natural causes, four to accidents, four to electrocution, and three to poaching. The 2022 'Tiger Census' revealed Maharashtra had an estimated 444 tigers in its six tiger reserves: Tadoba Andhari, Pench, Navegaon Nagzira, Bor, Melghat, and Sahyadri. Poaching remains the most serious threat to tigers. And poacher gangs have become increasingly brazen. Only enhanced surveillance and protection in buffer areas, besides translocation corridors to safeguard dispersing tigers during their territorial expansion, will help tiger poachers.

Some tigers inadvertently become victims of electrified fences which farmers erect to protect their crops from herbivores. The story is that farmers often steal power to electrify farm fences. They do this electrification themselves or by untested hands, shoddy unsafe work, indeed, for which tigers pay the price with their precious lives.

Electrocution victims is also the favoured method of poachers, who also use live traps to ensnare tigers. Tigers keep falling victim to electrocution and illegal hunting posing a significant threat to wildlife conservation efforts. In 2011, the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) introduced anti-snare walks (ASWs) to detect and remove snares in and around wildlife protected areas.

At a recent orientation training conducted by WTI for the forest and electricity department officials, SM Dathrak, the Range Forest Officer of North Deori, stressed the importance of ASWs. There's the recent incident of the deaths of three leopards – a mother and two cubs – from electrocution, which prompted residents to be more careful when erecting electrified fencing. In the Vidharba region of Central India, which is a critical corridor for tiger movement but faces high anthropogenic pressure, tigers and other wildlife are at risk due to encounters with humans. In the past decade, the region has seen tiger and leopard deaths from snares and traps, along with electrocution from live wires. The WTI conducted orientation workshops across eight Territorial Divisions of the Nagzira-Navegaon Tiger Reserve (NNTR) ranges. These workshops involved forest officials and collaboration with Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (MSDCL) officials to reduce electrocution and snaring in the landscape. The focus extended beyond core areas to buffer zones where tigers frequently roam.

Practical sessions included forest officials walking along electric lines and forest-agriculture boundaries to identify snaring incidents and record ASW tracks and data using an Anti-Snare Walk mobile application. Presentations covered wildlife crime in India, the Wildlife (Protection) Act, and documentation of evidence during encounters. Efforts like these demonstrate a commitment to safeguarding tigers and other wildlife in Maharashtra, where conservationists, government agencies, and local communities work together to protect these majestic creatures and their habitats.

As per media reports, Sudhir Mungantiwar, Maharashtra's Minister for Forests, emphasizes the importance of launching public awareness programs to inform locals about tiger presence. In the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, the forest department employs AI-based e-surveillance to capture thermal images of tigers and alert local villagers. Mungantiwar underscores the priority of reducing tiger electrocution to zero. A senior forest department official acknowledges that tiger deaths in Maharashtra are linked to population growth. He asserts that unnatural deaths are a consequence of saturation in tiger landscapes and expanding urbanization, leading to increased man-animal conflicts. Many of Maharashtra's tigers reside in landscapes with human settlements, mining activities, and other human interventions. (IPA Service)

The vacuity of the free trade argument

A country with relatively unrestricted trade will face two problems: the first is a balance of payments problem because its exports are insufficient relative to its imports. And the second, the creation of unemployment, and more generally of domestic resources remaining idle, because domestic goods cannot compete with imports. These two are not identical problems. There can be unemployment even when there is no import surplus.

During the colonial era domestic "deindustrialisation" caused massive unemployment of artisans and craftsmen even though the Indian economy did not have an import surplus. In what follows I shall concentrate only on the employment question.

The fact that unrestricted trade creates domestic unemployment is quite obvious. Yet there is a general impression that free trade is a good thing, and an utterly spurious argument is advanced to create this impression. This argument states that countries should specialise in the production of those goods where they have a "comparative advantage"; if each country does this, then world output would be larger than otherwise, so that all countries can profit. This free trade argument based on "comparative advantage" is a complete fiddle. It assumes that in each country there is always full employment of all resources, including labour-force, irrespective of whether it is engaging in trade or not. It follows that if all resources, including its labour-force, are fully employed before and after trade, then all that trade involves is a mere redirection of resources from one kind of use to another; it cannot by assumption cause the unemployment of any resource including a country's labour-force.

Once we reject this assumption however, as we must since it has

no basis either in facts or in theory, the potentially deleterious implications of free trade for a country become clear.

There is a very simple way of seeing this. Suppose the total production capacity of the world economy is 100 units; if total demand in the world economy is 80 units, then 20 units of world output would remain unrealised, and hence, under capitalist conditions, unproduced. The resources that remain unemployed as a result will be distributed among the countries in a certain manner.

A question may be raised here. Keynes, afraid of the workers being disillusioned with capitalism because of the unemployment it generates and hence moving towards socialism, had suggested State intervention in a capitalist system to raise the level of aggregate demand and hence employment; why can this not be attempted at the world level itself in which case no country would be left with utilised resources even in the event of free trade?

The very simple and obvious answer to this question is that for this to happen there has to be a world State with a world government, which there isn't under capitalism. And in countries where resources remain unutilised because the world demand is not large enough, if their particular states attempted to raise demand in those economies to create larger unemployment, then under free trade conditions this extra demand might "leak out" resulting in additional imports and hence an unsustainable trade deficit. If these countries did not have free trade and could protect their economies, then their governments could expand domestic aggregate demand and hence employment. But their hands get tied because of free



trade. The fact that under a free trade regime a country's government cannot intervene to raise aggregate demand and hence employment, but has to accept meekly the fall-out of the consequences

of whatever the level of world demand happens to be, means that employment, whether in a particular country or at the world level, might well be lower with free trade than if countries could resort to protection. This totally negates the fundamental argument for free trade. This argument, it may be recalled, hinged on the fact that each country, specialising in producing only those goods where its comparative advantage lay, would increase world output which would be potentially beneficial for all countries; but this argument collapses once we recognise that post-free-trade world output might be lower than pre-free-trade world output if the level of world aggregate demand in the former situation shrinks compared to the latter.

What, it may be asked, does the post-free-trade world aggregate demand depend upon? The primary determinant of world aggregate demand is the demand generated within the leading capitalist country, in the present con-

text the United States, which enjoys a degree of autonomy in generating demand even when this demand "leaks out" to other countries. This is because it does not have to worry about a trade deficit as its currency is generally considered to be "as good as gold" and it can simply print money to finance its external deficits which the rest of the world would be willing to hold.

It is for this reason that consumption plus investment plus government expenditure in the United States becomes the primary determinant of world aggregate demand. Government expenditure of the US in particular is important here because it has a certain autonomy: it can be turned on like a tap. In this sense the US State, despite being a nation-state, can potentially act, and even actually acts up to a point, as a surrogate world-state in conditions of contemporary capitalism.

There is however a contradiction here which is now beginning to make itself felt. While the US State can act as a surrogate world state, it is not a world state; it remains, everything said and done, a nation-state after all. If the US State increases domestic aggregate demand which "leaks out", then, even though the US may not have any problems in financing its external deficit, it gets indebted while financing its

external deficit. And it gets indebted while generating employment, most of which is located abroad. An enlarging through larger government expenditure of US aggregate demand therefore, while it may not raise any technical problems for the US in the sense of being unsustainable, militates against its narrowly national point of view, which its State cannot ignore as it is after all a nation-state. Its nation-state role in short comes in the way of its surrogate world-state role. This contradiction is now reaching an acute form.

During the pandemic the US ran large fiscal deficits to finance the provision of relief to their populations. Even after the pandemic was over, the US was keen to continue with relatively larger fiscal deficits for reviving domestic aggregate demand, but was somewhat thwarted by the recent upsurge of inflation. But once this upsurge abates, there is likely to be a stimulus to domestic demand in the US by State expenditure, but this would be accompanied by protectionism to prevent any "leaking out" of demand to other countries. In fact, the US for some time has been moving towards protectionism, most clearly directed against China, but also vis-à-vis other third world countries.

Some have called this move towards protectionism in the US "de-globalisation" but that is not correct. While there is this tendency to introduce protectionism, no restrictions are being placed by the US on the movement of finance capital; indeed, on the contrary, any third world country imposing capital controls faces victimisation by the US. Such contradictions, however, do not bother the US. After all, it is a country that is going protectionist even while preaching the virtues of free trade to the rest of the world. (IPA Service)

Maldivian politics unveiled: Subtle forces that could favor India

By: Dipak Kurni

Political complexities are unfurling in the Maldives, revealing intricate narratives beyond the anticipated dichotomy. The much-discussed national elections were often framed as a contest between the 'pro-India' Maldivian Democratic Party and the 'pro-China' People's National Congress. However, a deeper exploration unravels a more nuanced reality. During the tenure of former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih (2018-2023), the Maldivian Democratic Party fostered a diplomatic thaw, notably restoring amicable relations with Delhi following the preceding administration's anti-Indian stance under Abdulla Yameen.

In a surprising turn of events, the People's National Congress, led by Mohamed Muizzu, ran a virtual 'India Out' campaign during this election season. Ultimately, their strategic approach resonated with the electorate, leading to their victory in the polls. In keeping with his electoral commitment, Mohamed Muizzu formally requested the Indian Government to withdraw its personnel. Notably, he assured a stance that is unequivocally 'pro-Maldives', steering clear of being labeled as either 'anti-India' or 'pro-China'. The context of Muizzu's presidential candidacy adds another layer, as he entered the race due to the legal exclusion of Abdulla

Yameen over corruption and money laundering charges. This context has amplified expectations of a potential shift in Male's diplomatic allegiance from Delhi to Beijing, seemingly on behalf of Yameen's interests. The unfolding narrative has aligned with expectations, prompting Delhi to adopt a cautious stance and observe President Mohamed Muizzu's actions to gauge the true extent of his perceived reservations toward India. The lingering question revolves around whether Muizzu, previously characterized as a politically charged, accusatory opposition leader during the campaign, will diverge from this image and chart a distinctive course or align closely with his supposed mentor Yameen's inclinations.

The prospect of Muizzu tempering his political rhetoric in favor of practical considerations, potentially mitigating the noise against Delhi, remains uncertain in these early stages. As is customary in politics, the complexities and subtle currents beneath the surface are likely more intricate than they appear. Importantly, Muizzu's autonomy from Abdulla Yameen beyond a certain point could significantly shape the unfolding political dynamics.

Following the settling dust of the recent elections, two unrelated topics have dominated discussions in the Maldives. Firstly, there's a pervasive sense of uncertainty surrounding Mohamed

Muizzu's political trajectory, keeping the public discourse engaged in speculation. Secondly, the sudden surge in onion prices, a staple in Maldivian cuisine, has captured attention.

With India restricting onion exports to address its domestic inflation concerns, Male is grappling with the repercussions, witnessing a spike in prices from Maldivian Rupee 200-300 per sack to 900-1000. Attempts to explore alternative supplies from Pakistan and China have highlighted the challenges, as the quality and pricing don't match up. This unintended consequence serves as a stark reminder of the Maldives' reliance on India for socio-economic stability. Efforts to seek exemptions from export restrictions underscore the importance of maintaining robust relations with India for the well-being of the Maldivian economy.

A palpable unease is quietly brewing between Mohamed Muizzu and his former benefactor, Abdulla Yameen, introducing a layer of complexity that challenges conventional assumptions, especially regarding Muizzu's future interactions with Delhi. The rift originated during a period when Yameen initially advocated for his party's election boycott. However, the broader coalition began leaning towards supporting Muizzu as the preferred candidate. Yameen eventually relented, allowing Muizzu to secure victory in the elections. Nevertheless, there exists a lin-

gering sense that Yameen felt somewhat slighted by the success of his supposed nominee.

Notably absent from Muizzu's victory speech was any expression of gratitude towards Yameen or acknowledgment of his pivotal role in securing success at the polls. Despite fulfilling his campaign promise by releasing Yameen from incarceration, Muizzu opted not to delay celebratory events to accommodate Yameen's presence and participation. This nuanced behavior speaks volumes about the evolving dynamics between the two, indicating a shift in the dynamics of their relationship post-election.

Rumblings within political circles suggest that President Mohamed Muizzu is becoming increasingly aloof to unsolicited advice and interference from Abdulla Yameen. Muizzu appears determined to carve out his own distinctive style, policies, and preferences as a rightfully elected President, rather than serving as a mere conduit for someone else's agenda. The lead-up to Yameen's promised release was marked by tense interactions, with Muizzu urging Yameen's supporters to refrain from street protests and entrust him with the handling of Yameen's release. This approach evidently did not sit well with Abdulla Yameen, fostering a growing sense of discontent. The dissatisfaction deepened as ministerial appointments within the

Muizzu cabinet were made without active consultation or accommodation of Yameen's preferences, further fueling the frustrations of the former President. Yameen's release, facilitated by the provisions within the Prisons and Parole Act, comes with a caveat - it restricts his formal engagement in political discussions. This legal technicality adds another layer, limiting Yameen's capacity to actively advocate for his own agenda. Muizzu's perceptible independence and his emergence as a distinct political figure lie at the core of the intricate political landscape currently unfolding in the Maldives' nascent government.

The unfolding dynamics of Muizzu's newfound assertiveness and its implications for his relationship with Delhi remain uncertain. It seems improbable for him to overtly align himself as 'pro-China' in the manner Abdulla Yameen did. Muizzu, like any seasoned politician, may adjust his stance based on practical considerations that enhance his political appeal, rather than simply adhering to Yameen's agenda. Interestingly, this nuanced approach could inadvertently benefit India, despite any preconceived labels attached to Muizzu. The evolving political landscape holds the key to understanding how these dynamics will play out. (The writer can be reached at dipaknewslive@gmail.com)

Global shipping industry hostage to Red Sea-Suez crisis

By: K Raveendran

The shipping industry is keeping its fingers crossed till the Gaza-Houthi triggered crisis in Red Sea-Suez Canal areas lasts. The duration of the current situation is what matters. A temporary disturbance – a perceived bump in the road – and the industry may cope. But, if it lasts, with container vessels forced to divert around the Cape of Good Hope, and the inaccessibility of critical ports will add to the strain.

The Red Sea, especially with the Suez Canal, is like a superhighway for shipping containers, connecting different parts of the world, particularly Europe, Asia and Africa. However, ongoing disruptions will escalate operational costs, adding significant strain, while concurrently exerting downward pressure on profits. It marks a disheartening beginning to the strategic planning for the year 2024.

The Red Sea trade route is strategically significant due to its role in connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, providing a shortcut for ships travelling between Europe and the countries in Asia and Africa. The 193-km long

canal accounts for 12 percent of global trade, including 30 percent of all container movement. A huge amount of Europe's energy supply, palm oil and grain come through the Suez Canal Waterway which also gets impacted by these attacks and subsequently by the disruptions thereafter.

A lingering question is when naval forces, particularly from Egypt, Great Britain, France, and the US, will take control of security in the Red Sea.

It is significant that the crisis is at a time when shares of shipping lines have jumped in anticipation of a post-Covid disruption revival. It will all depend on how navies take this up. Egypt has a significant commercial interest in the functioning of the Suez Canal as it is one of the main revenue drivers and if the diversion happens then it will have a significant impact there.

According to Container Xchange, the platform for the logistics industry, a consistent pricing trend has been observed in the surge of freight rates, with increases of 20 to 30 percent on major East-West corridors in the spot prices. Up to 77 million TEU of capacity, accounting for 5 to

6 percent of the market's total capacity, is affected.

Missile attacks by Houthi militants in the Red Sea have prompted leading shipping entities like CMA CGM, Hapag-Lloyd, Maersk, and Mediterranean Shipping Co. to temporarily halt transits through the Suez Canal. Additionally, the Panama Canal has been effectively closed to multipurpose shipping until at least May, leading carriers to explore alternative routes via the Cape of Good Hope and the Strait of Magellan.

According to the platform, the market anticipates that especially in Europe which is on the receiving end of import containers from the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia and China, that container scarcity will lead to an increase in container prices and the market. Ports at the receiving end of those import containers like the port of Rotterdam and Hamburg, are recording a significant increase in container prices over the last two weeks, since the situation in Red Sea started to escalate.

Some of the main ports in Germany like Rotterdam, Hamburg, Bremen are posting significant week on week price increases

and of course the interpretation is that the situation in the Red Sea has contributed to this increase.

The situation in the Red Sea has been escalating quite significantly over the last two weeks where Houthi rebels have started to attack the commercial vessels by the big ocean liners. Subsequently the container liners are essentially instructing their vessels to avoid transiting through the Suez Canal and around the Cape of Good Hope adding quite a significant delay and time to their East to West trade journeys.

An additional 40 percent longer route, causing heavy upward pressure in the operating costs is expected to persist as the shipping time extends anywhere between one to four weeks due to the longer route.

Israel has been particularly affected due to the shipping crisis. About 30 percent of Israeli imports come through the Red Sea on container vessels that are booked two to three months in advance for consumer or other products, meaning that if the voyage will now be extended, products with a shelf life of two to three months will not be worthwhile importing from the Far East. (IPA Service)

Making disability a joke is neither comedy nor art

By: Shashank Pandey

I sat through roughly two and a half hours of crisis while watching the recent Bollywood movie Aankh Micholi. Recently, Goa State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities ordered two district administrations to stop the movie from screening. The office of the Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disabilities also issued notice to the makers of the movie and Central Bureau of Film Certification seeking a response from them, as the movie violated Sections 3 (non-discrimination) and 92 (punishment for offences of atrocities) of the Rights of Person with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act).

In brief, the story is based on a family of six. Barring two members, all of them live with some form of disability. The story is premised on the theme of the marriage of the lead character (Mrunal Thakur), who is living with a visual disability, rendering her unable to see at night. The underlying premise is that the disability is a disease that has to be hidden from outsiders (including the one you will be marrying).

Undoing the understanding of disability

The disability movement across generations has struggled to eradicate the engrained idea of the medical model of disability, wherein your disability is identified in the medical condition. The American civil rights move-

ment percolated into the disability rights movement. Thus, the social model of disability was followed, wherein societal barriers are identified as the source of disability and not the individual. This understanding was implemented through legislative mandate under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which used the phrase "person with disability" rather than a disabled person – placing individuals at the forefront. It also defines a person with disability in a more social sense: "a person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others".

The makers of this movie and others in the Indian cinema world have systematically misconstrued this fundamental differentiation. In the movie, characters often view the inherent disability as a person's characteristic and a painful extra. Disability is termed a beemari (disease).

No legal excuse

The apparent argument from the makers of the movie is the freedom of expression and creative liberty. This overarching freedom is also limited by reasonable limitation under Article 19(2), specifically decency and morality. The makers have rendered the creation an ideal piece of ableism devoid of decency. The Supreme Court has proactively decided not to confine the



contours of decency to just acts of a sexual nature but has widened the horizons to include acts that would invite a collective shock, disgust or revolt.

For instance, in Dr. Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhu vs Shri Prabhakar Kashinath Kunte, while explaining indecency, the Supreme Court said, "...Indecency is not confined to sexual indecency; indeed it is difficult to find any limit short of saying that it includes anything which an ordinary decent man or woman would find to be shocking, disgusting and revolting..."

The makers in the work employ the ableist framework in every corner of the screenplay, garbed as humour. This fundamentally invites disgust from a large set of society whose lives are depicted as devoid of any dignity. The Supreme Court in Vikash Kumar vs UPSC, while explaining the dignity of persons with disabilities, said that it is "intrinsic to individual dignity, recognising the worth of every person as an equal member of

the society, respect for the dignity of others and fostering conditions in which every individual can evolve according to his capabilities".

Section 5B of the Cinematograph Act, 1952 deals with the 'Principles of guidance in certifying films'. Subsection (1) of section 5B allows the film certification authorities to not certify a film for public exhibition if it is against "decency and morality". This can serve as an instrument to direct makers to comply with basic tenets of dignity wherein creativity subordinates every other aspect.

The RPwD Act was implemented to ensure equality and dignity for persons with disabilities. Resultantly, section 3 of the RPwD Act talks about equality and non-discrimination. It is operationalised in different sectors through various sections of the RPwD Act, wherein government and private bodies are obligated to ensure this mandate. Thus, the Cinematograph Act must be aligned with these principles.

Creating stereotype through cinema

The phenomenon is not new and is documented in a seminal piece by Joyjeet Pal. He underlines four trends in Indian films: first, disability as punitive; second, disability as dependence; third, disability as disequilibrium and fourth, disability as maladjustment. For the first trend, an all-time classic Sholay (1975) fits the mould; the antagonist thinks chopping off a character's arms is worse than death. Disability as a divine punishment has also been a central theme for makers, which is visible in movies like Dhanwaan (1981).

The second aspect, and probably the most prominent one, is of disability as dependence. The sympathetic attitude towards persons with disabilities is often transformed into the object of pity and a metaphor depicting helplessness. This is catalysed by cinematic depiction. Pal, in his paper, underscores a series of films that have regularly employed this trend, mainly as a subject of violence because of this dependence, like in Hum Aapko Aapse Pyaar Hai (2006) or an all-time classic like Mother India (1957), wherein the disability is looked at with ridicule as it is presumed to default dependence.

The third and fourth aspects are closely related to finding disability as something extra that burdens an individual's ability to live a "normal" life in a society. This is evidenced in the screen-

plays where the protagonist's sole objective is to either correct her/his disability or that of someone else. This is vividly visible in Shatrughan Sinha's movie Aa Gale Lag Jaa (1974), where he endeavours to cure a polio-struck boy by employing the most extreme form of mental violence. Thus, as Pal mentions in his paper, there is a dearth of cinema wherein the protagonist stays disabled throughout the film. Recent creations like Margarita with a Straw (2014) or Guzaarish (2010) serve as an exception on this front.

The social maladjustment aspect of disability further attributes the trait of evilness. This is not unique to Indian films, as the recent addition to James Bond's franchise showed Rame Malek as having a disability to underline his evil characters further. However, the most common usage of this aspect in in comedy, which is exactly what makers of Aankh Micholi intended to do. A few examples include Hum Hai Kamaal ke (1993) or Tom Dick and Harry (2006).

However, the makers of Aankh Micholi indulge in establishing the undertone that persons with disabilities are not necessarily equal, especially when they have to fit into the institution of marriage. The underlying messaging of the film – that to fit in the most fundamental unit of our society, people with disabilities must hide their disability – cannot be overlooked.

Respect the new reality

Hindi cinema has seen a transition to accommodate disability more meaningfully and is sticking to a new understanding of the concept. This understanding is depicted in films like Black (2005) and My Name is Khan (2010). The makers don't necessarily have to overwrite disability in their screenplay for any of the four trends mentioned above.

If Bollywood wants to make a comedy using disability as the central theme, they might wish to experiment with an extreme option: casting a person with a disability. In the movies Peanut Butter Falcon (2019) or Give me Liberty (2019), an actor with Down Syndrome and locomotor disability shows that comedic timing is not the exclusive domain of able-bodied individuals but rather a skill to be acquired with effort. It might not have to look far for inspiration either. Gulzar's 1972 classic Koshish had its poster and introduction credits in sign language, as the lead actors were living with some form of disability.

The character depicted that they can live independently if society doesn't interfere. This conceptual understanding was far ahead in both cinematic and political discourse. The decline of Indian cinema from Koshish to Aankh Micholi on the issue of disability depiction shows the intellectual bankruptcy of today's makers. Making disability a joke is neither comedy nor art. (Courtesy: The Wire)

Social media is broken for news; Here's what I'm doing about it

By: Dinesh

Apps like Instagram were once about seeing how your friends were doing, seeing who ate what, where and with whom and more unnecessarily details alike. But over the years, they became a source of details that are necessary. They became your news source, for reports like this: The Israel-Hamas war is all set to escalate. US President Joe Biden reportedly gave \$8 billion to assist Israel. To counter this massive funding, BBC reported that Ukraine was smuggling weapons to Hamas.

What you just read in italicized text are two instances of disinformation pointed out by The Guardian, with a wee bit of my own trickery (linking them both as cause and effect). The news about US President Joe Biden's \$8 billion funding is from an edited document posted on X (formerly Twitter). And nope, BBC did not report the weapon-smuggling thing; it was from a fake video masquerading to be from BBC. (Now that you know it, please do me a favour and don't share that bit out of context. Thanks!)

Both were unrelated and made up news events, but have one thing in common: Both were posted on social media. Out of 8,000 people that Ipsos surveyed from 16 countries with an election next year: 56% rely on social media as their main source of news, more than TV (44%) or news sites (29%). And 85% of people (from the same survey) said they were worried about disinformation's impact on people.

What do the stats mean?

For starters, they mean more people are relying on a news source that isn't as reliable as a newspaper, or even a TV news channel (whose job you'll see stand-up comedians do better; to understand why, read this YKA article by Jaimine), but is easy to use and gets you the news you'll want (with interest-based targeting). This also means platforms that are designed & used for entertainment now have become main distribution outlets for both trusted news sources and spreaders of disinformation. For example, how do you "like" an post on wars and rising emissions?

With its rising popularity, here's a thing for you to detect: Are social media platforms ideal to be the digital town square of our lives? And what does it mean for journalism?

Problem 1/3: Surveillance Capitalism (it's as bad as it sounds)

As the primary source of revenue, be it the video-centric YouTube or the text-based Twitter/X, you'll find ads at the heart of most social media apps you know. If you're hearing about Pixelated – a decentralised alternative to Instagram – here for the first time, that's because it doesn't rely on ads and doesn't have the billions to compete with mainstay apps. On their own, ads aren't harmful. But social media apps run targeted-ads. For starters, companies track your habits and interests to target you with ads based on them. Say, if you like posts on skin-care, you'll be seeing ads promoting lotions, serum and alike. Where's the harm, you ask?

Targeted-ads also are at the core of a concept called surveillance capitalism, a system where your data is the product for sale, and is obtained via surveilling what you do on and off a platform. The more targeted-ads you see, the more likely you're to purchase something and that equals more money for the social media apps. Along with this data collection comes the risk of data breaches, and constant sharing of data with law enforcement agencies.

As per Shoshana Zuboff, professor emerita at Harvard Business School and the person who coined the term, it's not just about monitoring your habits, but also "actuating" i.e., influencing them. This means social media apps condition our actions with app design that silently nudges us towards doing something that helps their bottom line (even



at the cost of our time and mental health), like Instagram's infinite-scrolling feeds and YouTube's auto-playing videos. Viewing it as a risk to democracy, and your freedom of thought & action in a Q&A with The Harvard Gazette in 2019, she goes on to say:

Long-story short: Ethical business models matter and social media hasn't got one. Should you want to deep-dive into the privacy concerns of surveillance capitalism, you can read this YKA article by yours truly (because yes, it's a whole new Pandora's Box of woes and needs a separate article).

Problem 2/3: The rigged pay-to-play model

If you have ever played a game in the last decade, you may have come across in-app purchases for skins, upgrades and in-game currency. In short, you pay for things that make you win more against those who don't. Social media did a Ctrl+C on this idea, with added real-world implications.

Ever since Facebook and Instagram have gone mainstream, news sources have found themselves relying on them for distribution. And the social media giants have taken note. If you're a small business or a regular poster, you know organic reach has gotten tougher over the years; less than 10% of your own followers will see and like your posts.

Instagram, Facebook and X have already launched their own paid-verification programs, where you pay \$12-15 (to Meta in the EU) or \$8 a month (to X) a month for a tick-mark next to your username and boosted reach. If you run a media company, be ready to shell out a cool \$1,000 per month on X. This not only skews the distribution game – and by extension, the overall conversation on a subject – towards those who can afford to pay for more engagement, i.e., big media houses and companies, but it also violates the 'End-to-End principle'. As the EFF notes, it means:

Hence, instead of seeing posts from friends and handles you follow i.e., the reason you sign up on any social media app, you now see posts that Instagram (like most social media apps) thinks you may like. This control over what you see, listen and understand means social media, once a great "traffic funnel" for news outlets, has also now turned into an uneven pay-to-play field, biased against issues faced by the minority (like religion and caste based discrimination) and those covering them. Lowering the barrier to the verified check-mark also means disinformation gets to go wild, due to the (hot) air of credibility the mark brings, along with increased reach. X already proved it with the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

Problem 3/3: They are 'psychoactive drugs.'

That's how Dr. Greenfield, psychologist and founder of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction in West Hartford, Conn., terms social media apps, while speaking to New York Times.

The best thing about newspapers is, you can pick them up when you want to, and leave them when you don't; you have full control over when you read, what you read and for how much time. And the news that you read aren't targeted at you, based on your interests.

Things are different with a social media app like say, Instagram or YouTube. By design, they imitate slot machines where you're lured

in with the promise of a reward every time you open the app or pull to refresh, but you don't know what it is and when you'll get it. Who liked your post this time? Which video will play next? Did Taylor Swift tease her next album? You never know. This makes social media a great way for entertainment when you're feeling tired, but also a terrible way to get your news from (esp. when you're tired). Consuming news should be a voluntary choice and not an impulse-driven one.

Should I consider deleting my social media account?

For most, social media serves some purpose which can be memes, texting people or building networks. If you rely on it for something essential like getting customers for your small business or bringing attention to an issue that traditional news won't cover (like dilution of India's environmental policies), I feel social media's still the way to go. As rigged as the platforms have become, they remain crucial ways to connect with people.

Deleting your account, while rewarding, is an extreme step to take only if you're willing and able. What you should consider is, an alternative news medium like a newspaper or this little zine I'm working on <insert black moon emoji> as your primary way of being in the know about what's happening. Because as much as a 60-second reel from some influencer would like to explain you the war on Gaza's people, it will inevitably miss out on decades' of crucial context and you deserve to know it before forming opinions.

What's your solution here?

With their core business reliant on surveillance capitalism, companies like Meta and Google have near-zero incentive to work towards user-centric design, one that respects your choices. It's the reason why they're so terrible for your privacy, are so compulsive and as Shoshana terms their model, "an assault on human autonomy."

But what if you could take the youthful design & conciseness of social media, the reliability of a newspaper for critical issues and mix them into one idea? Newspapers are better than social media w.r.t factual accuracy and accountability, but they tend to stick to mainstream issues that assure them readership. If you're learning now that a mega infra project threatens nearly a million (~10 lakh) trees to be cut in Nicobar Islands, and risks displacing indigenous Shompen, Onge & Nicobarese tribes, you now have proof.

This is where Detected, the weekly zine I mentioned earlier, strives to achieve. It's a business model that resists and isn't based on surveilling you wherever you go (which also enables us to cater to your needs, not advertisers'). If this explainer made you consider going for a news source outside of social media, I believe you'll find Detected useful. I'm joined by my friends with this, forming a small team of three, where we design an issue with:

- Curated articles from reliable sources every week, on issues you won't see the mainstream media discussing anytime soon (like how Chrome's a 'threat to privacy & democracy')
- A cover story on critical issues and topics relevant to you; this very article is the cover story of i19 (Detected's nineteenth issue)
- An incentive to not take our word for things and understand the topic in-depth, straight from the source.
- A business model supported by readers, not advertisers. What you say, goes.

Plus, we do without the tracking shenanigans that enables the mass surveillance which Google & Meta rake in billions from. We do not know which articles you read through Detected, nor we track your reading activity. It's your private reading experience (as long as you don't use Chrome, to protect from trackers on news sites). (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

Puchka, golgappa, panipuri – is there one original among many doppelgangers?

By: Rohan Banerjee

A few weeks ago, I was at a bookshop and asked the proprietor if they had any books on puchka. "I think you mean panipuri?" he queried, his eyes narrowing. Not wishing to engage in the long and arduous debate that would be necessary to prove him wrong, I smiled politely and nodded. Mollified, he told me how much he enjoyed eating panipuri and then directed me to a magisterial book on Indian cuisine.

A quick browse through the index of the book revealed no references to puchka. There was, however, a single citation for panipuri – it read "see golgappa". I returned the book to the shelf and decided not to inform the proprietor how the book had relegated his beloved panipuri to the status of a mere synonym. As someone who loved books, he did not deserve to have his heart broken by them.

When I moved from Kolkata to Mumbai in 2010, there were many ways in which this new city felt alien, not least of which was the shift in street-food lexicon. Gone were the days of egg roll, fish fry, and mutton chop being commonplace roadside grub. Instead, the bustling lanes of Mumbai offered vada pav, bhajia pav, misal pav, and if you craved variety, pav bhaji. There was no food item, it seemed, which could escape the pav's embrace.

In the midst of all this bread, the discovery of panipuri had kindled hope. Here was a snack that finally seemed familiar, a snack that resembled its portly cousin from the East and could, perhaps, quell both hunger and homesickness. I had popped that first panipuri into my mouth, expecting the explosion of flavours that puchka produced: the tang of lime, the heat of chilli, the lip-smacking piquancy of the water.

Imagine then my consternation, when I realised what looks like puchka and feels like puchka does not always taste like puchka. It was my encounter with its deceitful doppelganger that made me curious about the provenance of puchka and its many versions so popular across the country. What is their story and which of them can lay claim to being the original?

According to internet folklore, it was Draupadi of the Mahabharata who created this divine dish. During their days of exile, so the legend goes, the Pandavas had to make do with meagre resources and Kunti, their mother, wanted to test her daughter-in-law's frugality. So, she asked Draupadi to conjure a meal out of leftover potato sabzi and a little wheat dough. Knowing that the dough was insufficient to make chapatis for all five brothers, Draupadi graced them, and the world, with her innovative invention: a small, crunchy shell (the deep-fried puri) filled with the sabzi.

This myth has seeped so far into the public consciousness that it even inspired a puchka-themed Durga Puja pandal in Kolkata. Yet, it is difficult to swallow this story whole – particularly, since Draupadi, Kunti, and the Pandavas would have never set eyes on a potato. The tuber arrived on Indian shores only in the 17th century, courtesy of European traders.

In his book Digesting India: A Travel Writer's Subcontinental Adventures with the Tummy, the humourist Zac O'Yeah refers to an alternate origin story of the panipuri. In medieval times, the Yamuna was believed to be the cause, and carrier, of diseases. It was the royal physician at the imperial court in Delhi, he writes, who came up with the idea of a diet "rich in certain spices" to combat the virulent waters of the river. This disinfectant mix of spices and condiments supposedly birthed the "classic chaat masala" we know and love today.

While attributing medicinal motive to chaat

and puchka does make this theory more attractive, these tales are likely apocryphal. In fact, if one were to go by the words of renowned academic and food historian, Pushpesh Pant, seeking to locate the place and time of chaat's conception is itself a flawed enterprise. In an interview discussing the history of Indian cuisine, Pant brushed away a question on the antecedents of panipuri as a misguided and fruitless inquiry. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps it is futile to attempt to isolate a single point of origin for such mercurial fare, every element of which is inconstant.

Depending on the state, city or even neighbourhood you find yourself in, you may encounter variances in the type of puri, filling, and water (both flavour and temperature) being used by the local sellers. Manoj Chaurasia, who hails from Varanasi, has been selling chaat in Mumbai for over 22 years. He takes pride in making his own chaat masala – an intricate mix of spices, which is a staunchly guarded secret – and offers rare insight into the subtle regional differences that make street-food so distinctive.

The sweetened water popular with his panipuri-craving customers in Mumbai is made, he tells me, by soaking khajur, or dates. Whereas, in Benares, it is the tartness of imli, or tamarind, that defines the meetha pani, or sweet water, added to the golgappa. Interestingly, the idiosyncratic golgappa water also finds mention in the works of the pioneering food historian KT Acharya, who tantalisingly described it as "cold, fiery pepper-mustard liquid concoction".

Then there is, of course, the matter of the filling – the raison d'être of the dish.

I had learnt the difference that filling can make when I had taken my first bite of a panipuri. Instead of a fiery ball of mashed potatoes – studded with chickpeas and chopped green chillies, and seasoned with salt, spices, and lime juice – what rested on my tongue was the velvety ragda, a mildly spiced curry of boiled white peas. (In retrospect, it could have been worse. It could have been a filling of moong sprouts). Speaking to me while serving his customers at a street corner in Bandra, Chaurasia confirmed that most of his patrons prefer the ragda. Potatoes, if used, are generally sliced and not mashed, with the spice mix sprinkled on top. It is the way people like it here, he shrugs.

Kurush Dalal, the eminent archaeologist and culinary anthropologist, echoes this last sentiment. In a conversation with me about the origins, history and varieties of panipuri, he describes the puri quite eloquently – and precisely – as "a vessel". As the puri gradually evolved from the kachori, he explains, it was the imagination of the maker, and the appetite of the eater, which dictated the filling it could contain.

Be it potatoes, ragda, or even bhel (a South Gujarat speciality, I am surprised to learn from Dalal), what you can put in a puri depended on what you can sell. The customer, after all, is king and it was the unique tastes of customers across the breadth of this country, that shaped the assorted forms of this delicacy.

As with much else in history, puchka, too, refuses to be shackled by the notions of purity and cannot be pinned down to a single, original source. Indeed, its many avatars, and the devotion they arouse in their respective fiefdoms, mirror the diversity of our nation.

There is a part of me that says I should appreciate this vibrancy; that I should celebrate the cultural milieu that allows so many varieties of this cherished snack to exist; that I should eschew juvenile chauvinism, and learn to treat all the different versions without bias or prejudice. Perhaps one day, I will listen to that part of me. But for now, I would kill to get a decent plate of puchka in Mumbai. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

Pope Francis blasts the weapons industry as he makes a Christmas appeal for peace in the world



ROME, Dec 25: Pope Francis on Monday blasted the weapons industry and its "instruments of death" that fuel wars as he made a Christmas Day appeal for peace in the world and in particular between Israel and the Palestinians.

Speaking from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica to the throngs of people below, Francis said he grieved the "abominable attack" of Hamas against southern Israel on October 7 and called for the release of hostages. And he begged for an end to Israel's military campaign in Gaza and the "appalling harvest of innocent civilians" as he called for humanitarian aid to reach

those in need.

Francis devoted his Christmas Day blessing to a call for peace in the world, noting that the biblical story of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem sent a message of peace. But he said that Bethlehem "is a place of sorrow and silence" this year.

Francis' annual "Urbi et Orbi" ("To the City and the World") speech typically offers a lament of all the misery facing the world, and this year's edition was no different. From Armenia and Azerbaijan to Syria and Yemen, Ukraine to South Sudan and Congo and the Korean peninsula, Francis appealed for humanitarian initiatives, dialogue

and security to prevail over violence and death.

He called for governments and people of goodwill in the Americas in particular to address the "troubling phenomenon" of migration and its "unscrupulous traffickers" who take advantage of innocents just looking for a better life.

He took particular aim at the weapons industry, which he said was fuelling the conflicts around the globe with scarcely anyone paying attention.

"It should be talked about and written about, so as to bring to light the interests and the profits that move the puppet

strings of war," he said. "And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise?"

Francis has frequently blasted the weapons industry as "merchants of death" and has said that wars today, in Ukraine, in particular, are being used to try out new weapons or use up old stockpiles.

He called for peace between Israel and Palestinians, and for the conflict to be resolved "through sincere and persevering dialogue between the parties, sustained by strong political will and the support of the international community." (AP)

The 68 fatalities include at least 12 women and seven children, according to early hospital figures

At least 68 killed in central Gaza in airstrike, adding to weekend's bloodshed

PDEIR AL-BALAH, Dec 25: At least 68 people were killed by an Israeli strike in central Gaza, health officials said on Sunday, while the number of Israeli soldiers killed in combat over the weekend rose to 15.

Associated Press journalists at a nearby hospital watched frantic Palestinians carry the dead, including a baby, and wounded following the strike on the Maghazi refugee camp east of Deir al-Balah. One bloodied young girl looked stunned while her body was checked for broken bones.

The 68 fatalities include at least 12 women and seven children, according to early hospital figures.

"We were all targeted," said Ahmad Turukmani, who lost several family members including his daughter and grandson. "There is no safe place in Gaza anyway."

Earlier, the Health Ministry in Gaza gave the death toll as 70. The Israeli military had no immediate comment. As Christmas Eve fell, smoke rose over the besieged territory, while in the West Bank Bethlehem was hushed, its holiday

celebrations called off. In neighbouring Egypt, tentative efforts continued on a deal for another exchange of hostages for Palestinians held by Israel.

The war has devastated parts of Gaza, killed roughly 20,400 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

The mounting death toll among Israeli troops - 154 since the ground offensive began - could erode public support for the war, which was sparked when Hamas-led militants stormed communities in southern Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 and taking 240 hostages.

Israelis still largely stand behind the country's stated goals of crushing Hamas' governing and military capabilities and releasing the remaining 129 captives. That's despite rising international pressure against Israel's offensive, and the soaring death toll and unprecedented suffering among Palestinians. "The war exacts a very heavy price from us, but we have no choice but to continue fighting," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin



Netanyahu said.

In a nationally televised speech, Israeli President Isaac Herzog appealed for the country to remain united. "This moment is a test. We will not break nor blink," he said.

There has been widespread anger against his government, which many criticize for failing to protect civilians on October 7 and promoting policies that allowed Hamas to gain strength over the years. Netanyahu has avoided accepting responsibility for the military and policy failures.

"Over time, the public will find it hard to ignore the heavy price paid, as well as the suspicion that the aims that were loudly heralded are still far from being attained,

and that Hamas is showing no signs of capitulating in the near future," wrote Amos Harel, military affairs commentator for the Haaretz newspaper.

The Israeli military said it had completed the dismantling of Hamas' underground headquarters in northern Gaza, part of an operation to take down the vast tunnel network and kill off top commanders that Israeli leaders have said could take months.

Efforts toward negotiations continued. The head of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, arrived in Egypt for talks. The militant group, which also took part in the October 7 attack, said it was prepared to consider releasing

hostages only after fighting ends. Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh travelled to Cairo for talks days earlier. Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than two-thirds of the 20,000 Palestinians killed have been women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

On Friday, Israeli airstrikes on two homes in Gaza killed 90 Palestinians, including dozens from an extended family, according to rescuers and hospital officials. One of the homes, located in Gaza City, became one of the deadliest airstrikes in the war after 76 people from the al-Mughrabi family were killed, said Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for Gaza's Civil Defense department.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said a 13-year-old boy was shot and killed in an Israeli drone attack while inside al-Amal Hospital in Khan Younis, a part of Gaza where Israel's military believes Hamas leaders are hiding. (AP)

Thousands join migrant caravan in Mexico ahead of secretary of State Blinken's visit to the capital



TAPACHULA, Dec 25: A sprawling caravan of migrants from Central America, Venezuela, Cuba and other countries trekked through Mexico on Sunday, heading toward the U.S. border.

The procession came just days before Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrives in Mexico City to hammer out new agreements to control the surge of migrants seeking entry into the United States.

The caravan, estimated at around 6,000 people, many of them families with young children, is the largest in more than a year, a clear indication that joint efforts by the Biden administration and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government to deter migration are falling short.

The Christmas Eve caravan departed from the city of Tapachula, near the country's southern border with Guatemala. Security forces looked on in what appeared to be a repeat of past tactics when authorities waited for the marchers to tire out and then offered them a form of temporary legal status that is used by many to continue their journey northward.

"We've been waiting here for three or four months without an answer," said Cristian Rivera, traveling alone, having left his wife and child in his native Honduras. "Hopefully with this march there will be a change and we can get the permission we need to head north."

López Obrador in May agreed to take in migrants from countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba turned away by the U.S. for not following rules that provided new legal pathways to asylum and other forms of migration.

But that deal, aimed at curbing a post-pandemic jump in migration, appears to be insufficient as the number of migrants once again surges, disrupting bilateral trade and stoking anti-migrant sentiment among conservative voters in the U.S.

This month, as many as 10,000 migrants were arrested per day at the U.S. southwest border. Meanwhile, U.S. Customs and Border Protection had to suspend cross-border rail traffic in the Texas cities of Eagle Pass and El Paso as migrants were riding atop freight

trains.

Arrests for illegal crossing topped 2 million in each of the U.S. government's last two fiscal years, reflecting technological changes that have made it easier for migrants to leave home to escape poverty, natural disasters, political repression and organized crime.

On Friday, López Obrador said he was willing to work again with the U.S. to address concerns about migration. But he also urged the Biden administration to ease sanctions on leftist governments in Cuba and Venezuela — where about 20% of 617,865 migrants encountered nationwide in October and November hail from — and send more aid to developing countries in Latin America and beyond.

"That is what we are going to discuss, it is not just contention," López Obrador said at a press briefing Friday following a phone conversation the day before with President Joe Biden to pave the way for the high level U.S. delegation.

The U.S. delegation, which will meet the Mexican president on Wednesday, will also include Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and White House homeland security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall.

Mexico's ability to assist the U.S. may be limited, however. In December, the government halted a program to repatriate and transfer migrants inside Mexico due to a lack of funds.

So far this year, Mexico has detected more than 680,000 migrants living illegally in the country, while the number of foreigners seeking asylum in the country has reached a record 137,000. Sunday's caravan was the largest since June 2022, when a similarly sized group departed as Biden hosted leaders in Los Angeles for the Summit of the Americas.

Another march departed Mexico in October, coinciding with a summit organized by López Obrador to discuss the migration crisis with regional leaders. A month later, 3,000 migrants blocked for more than 30 hours the main border crossing with Guatemala. (AP)

Death toll goes up to 149 in China's earthquake

BEIJING, Dec 25: The death toll from the 6.2-magnitude earthquake that jolted northwest China earlier this week has risen to 149 with two people still missing. The quake, the worst in nine years in the region, struck midnight on December 18 at a depth of 10 kilometres.

The Quake hit Jishishan County, Gansu Province, and Minhe County in the neighbouring Qinghai Province last Saturday causing heavy death and destruction. The death toll in Qinghai Province has risen to 32 while two people are still missing, the Qinghai Emergency Management Department said on Monday. Search for the two missing people was continuing, the department said. The death toll in Gansu Province stood at 117 and 781 people injured. About 200 people were injured in the Qinghai quake.

Chinese Premier, Li Qing visited the quake-hit areas on Saturday and asked the rescue and relief teams to make sure that people live through the winter safely.

So far, about 500 individuals have been discharged from the hospital after receiving treatment, while 282 people remain under treatment. Among them, 17 are in critical condition and 69 are severely injured, according to official media reports. China's National Forestry and Grassland Administration (NFGA) has allocated disaster-relief materials to Gansu and Qinghai which included 1,335 pieces of cold prevention materials and communication equipment, state-run Xinhua reported.

Primary and secondary schools in Jishishan County, northwest China's Gansu Province resumed classes on Monday, state-run CGTN TV reported. The quake was China's deadliest since an earthquake killed 617 people in Yunnan province in 2014. (PTT)

Police in Serbia fire tear gas at election protesters threatening to storm capital's city hall

BELGRADE, Dec 25: Riot police in Serbia fired tear gas to prevent hundreds of opposition supporters from entering the capital's city council building on Sunday in protest of what election observers said were widespread vote irregularities during a general election last weekend. Serbia's populist President Aleksandar Vucic said it was an attempt to overthrow the government orchestrated from abroad. He said more than 35 people were arrested and more detentions would follow. "This was an attempted violent takeover of the state institutions of the Republic of Serbia," Vucic told the pro-government Pink TV. The country's populist authorities have denied rigging the vote and described the election to fill parliament and local offices as fair. Vucic said Sunday that claims of irregularities in the vote were blatant "lies" promoted by the political opposition.

Vucic suggested the unrest was instigated from abroad but provided no evidence to support the claim. Addressing the nation on state media as the protest took place outside Belgrade city hall, he called the demonstrators "drugs" who would not succeed in destabilizing the state and said, "This is not a revolution."

"They will not succeed," Vucic said. "We are doing our best with our calm and mild reaction not to hurt demonstrators" who came to the event to protest peacefully. Shielded riot police first barricaded themselves inside the city government building, firing tear gas and pepper spray as hundreds of opposition protesters broke windows at the entrance. Later, the police pushed the crowd from the downtown area and made several arrests. The protesters shouted "Open the door" and "Thieves," as they pelted the building with eggs and stones. Some chanted "Vucic is Putin," comparing the Serbian presi-



dent with Russia's leader. Nebojsa Zelenovic, one of the leaders of the opposition Serbia Against Violence alliance, said police officers swarmed all of downtown Belgrade, including the roofs of buildings. The area is home to the national parliament and the presidential headquarters along with the city government.

There were no immediate reports of injuries. Results from the Dec. 17 election showed a victory for Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party in both the parliamentary and Belgrade city ballots. Serbia Against Violence, the party's main opponent, said it was robbed of a win, especially in Belgrade.

"We will continue with our fight," Zelenovic said. An observation mission made up of representatives of international rights watchdogs reported multiple irregularities, including cases of bought votes and the stuffing of ballot boxes.

The observers also noted unjust conditions for opposition candidates due to media bias, an abuse of public resources and the president's dominance during the campaign.

"Police are everywhere, also on the roofs. It is obvious that they do not want to recognize (the) election results. We will continue with our fight," Nebojsa Zelenovic, one of the leaders of the alliance, said. (AP)

Beijing sees most hours of sub-freezing temperatures in December since 1951

BEIJING, Dec 25: Beijing recorded the most hours of sub-freezing temperatures in December in more than seven decades as a cold wave has enveloped northern and central swathes of China, bringing snowstorms and record-breaking temperatures.

A weather observatory in the Chinese capital as of Sunday had recorded more than 300 hours of sub-freezing temperatures since Dec. 11 — the most since records began, in 1951, according to the official newspaper Beijing Daily.

The city saw nine consecutive days with temperatures below minus 10 degrees Celsius (14 degrees Fahrenheit), the paper added.

Parts of northern and central China have shivered under frigid cold snaps this month, with authorities closing schools and highways several times due to snowstorms.

Temperatures at 78 weather stations across the country hit record lows for the month of December, while average temperatures this month in northern and some central parts of China hit record lows set in 1961, according to the National Meteorological Centre. (AP)

Afghan schoolgirls are finishing sixth grade in tears; under Taliban rule, their education is over

KABUL, Dec 25: Bahara Rustam, 13, took her last class at Bibi Razia School in Kabul on December 11 knowing it was the end of her education. Under Taliban rule, she is unlikely to step foot in a classroom again.

In September 2021, a month after US and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan following two decades of war, the Taliban announced that girls were barred from studying beyond sixth grade. They extended this education ban to universities in December 2022.

The Taliban have defied global condemnation and warnings that the restrictions will make it al-

most impossible for them to gain recognition as the country's legitimate rulers. Last week, UN special envoy Roza Otunbayeva expressed concern that a generation of Afghan girls is falling behind with each day that passes.

Last week, an official in the Education Ministry said Afghan girls of all ages are allowed to study in religious schools known as madrasas, which have traditionally been boys-only. But Otunbayeva said it was unclear if there was a standardised curriculum that allowed modern subjects.

Bahara is holding onto her education and pores over textbooks at home. "Graduating from sixth

grade) means we are going to seventh grade," she said. "But all of our classmates cried and we were very disappointed."

There was no graduation ceremony for the girls at Bibi Razia School. In another part of Kabul, 13-year-old Setayesh Sahibzada wonders what the future holds for her. She is sad she can't go to school anymore to achieve her dreams.

"I can't stand on my own two feet," she said. "I wanted to be a teacher. But now I can't study, I can't go to school."

Analyst Muhammad Saleem Paigir warned that excluding women and girls from education will be disastrous for Afghanistan.

"We understand that illiterate people can never be free and prosperous," he said. The Taliban have barred women from many public spaces and most jobs, all but confining women to their homes. (AP)



Pakistani police free 290 Baloch activists arrested while protesting extrajudicial killings

ISLAMABAD, Dec 25: Pakistani police on Monday freed 290 Baloch activists who were arrested when they attempted to hold a protest last week in the capital, Islamabad.

Their release came days after protest organizers gave authorities a deadline to release all those detained.

The activists had traveled 1,600 kilometers (about 1,000 miles) on Thursday from Turbat, a town in Baluchistan province, to protest forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the militancy-ravaged southwest.

The protesters were mostly women and some had brought along their children, aged 7-12, when

security forces used batons and water canons to disperse and arrest them.

They wanted to draw attention to the case of 24-year-old Balaach Mola Bakhsh, who died in November while in police custody in Baluchistan. Authorities said he was killed after militants ambushed the police vehicle transporting him.

Police said Bakhsh was carrying explosives when he was arrested. His family insists he is innocent, demanding justice for him. They also said he had been detained since October. Police said they arrested him in November.

The police use of force against the protesters sparked anger among



Baluchistan residents and drew nationwide condemnation from top human rights activists.

Protest organizers said that as the dozens of vehicles carrying the activists reached the outskirts of Islamabad before dawn Thursday, police used water canons against them and started beating them up to prevent them from reaching the heart of the capital. At the weekend, organizers and protesters held

a sit-in outside the Islamabad Press Club to denounce the violence. "Four female police officers with batons hit me," Mahrang Baloch, one of the organizers, told reporters as she and dozens of others held portraits of those detained by the police, demanding their release. Senator Mushtaq Ahmed and top human rights activist Farhat Ullah Baba attended the sit-in and condemned the use of force by authori-

ties. "These peaceful demonstrators are victims of state terrorism," Ahmed said, adding that every citizen had the right to peacefully protest in Pakistan.

Baluchistan province — which borders Afghanistan and Iran and is rich in oil, gas and minerals — has been the scene of low-level insurgency by Baluch nationalists for more than two decades. Baluch nationalists initially wanted a share of provincial resources, but later initiated an insurgency for independence.

According to human rights activists, those who demand a greater share of the province's natural resources often go missing after being detained by security forces. (AP)

Egypt floats ambitious plan to end Israel-Hamas war as death toll in an Israeli strike rises to 106

Egyptian officials discussed the outline of the proposal with Ismail Haniyeh, the Qatar-based political leader of Hamas, who visited Cairo last week

CAIRO, Dec 25: Egypt has put forward an ambitious, initial proposal to end the Israel-Hamas war with a cease-fire, a phased hostage release and the creation of a Palestinian government of experts who would administer the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank, a senior Egyptian official and a European diplomat said on Monday.

The proposal, worked out with the Gulf nation of Qatar, has been presented to Israel, Hamas, the United States and European governments but still appeared preliminary. It falls short of Israel's professed goal of outright crushing Hamas and would appear not to meet Israel's insistence on keeping military control over Gaza for an extended period after the war.

Israel's War Cabinet, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will meet later Monday discuss the hostage situation, among other topics, an Israeli official said, but would not say if they would discuss the Egyptian proposal. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the media.

Word of the proposal comes as Israeli airstrikes heavily pounded central and southern Gaza, crushing buildings on families sheltering inside.

In the Maghazi refugee camp, rescue workers pulled dozens more bodies from the wreckage hours after a strike levelled a three-story building and shattered others nearby.

At least 106 people were killed, according to hospital records seen by The Associated Press, making it one of the deadliest strikes of Israel's air campaign.

The war has devastated large parts of Gaza, killed more than 20,400 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

The mounting death toll among Israeli troops — 17 since Friday and 156 since the ground offensive began — could erode public support for the war, which was sparked when Hamas-led militants stormed communities in southern Israel on

October 7, killing 1,200 and taking 240 hostages.

Israelis still largely stand behind the country's stated goals of crushing Hamas' governing and military capabilities and releasing the remaining 129 captives. That's despite rising international pressure against Israel's offensive, and the soaring death toll and unprecedented suffering among Palestinians.

EGYPTIAN PROPOSAL

The Egyptian proposal was an ambitious bid not only to end the war but also to lay out a plan for the day after.

It calls for an initial cease-fire of up to two weeks during which Palestinian militants would free 40 to 50 hostages, among them women, the sick and the elderly, in return for the release of 120-150 Palestinians from Israeli prisons, the Egyptian official said. He spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing talks.

At the same time, negotiations would continue on extending the cease-fire and the release of more hostages and bodies held by Palestinian militants, he said.

Egypt and Qatar would also work with all Palestinian factions, including Hamas, to agree on the establishment of a government of experts, he said. The government would rule Gaza and the West Bank for a transitional period as Palestinian factions settle their disputes and agree on a roadmap to hold presidential and parliamentary elections, he added.

In the meantime, Israel and Hamas would continue to negotiate a comprehensive "all-for-all" deal, he said.

This would include the release of all remaining hostages in return for all Palestinian prisoners in Israel, as well as the Israeli military's withdrawal from Gaza and the Palestinian militants' halting of rocket attacks into Israel. Close to 8,000 Palestinians are held by Israel on security-related charges or convictions, according to Palestinian figures.

Egyptian officials discussed the outline



of the proposal with Ismail Haniyeh, the Qatar-based political leader of Hamas, who visited Cairo last week. They plan to discuss it with the leader of the Islamic Jihad group, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, who arrived in Cairo on Sunday, the official said. The militant group, which also took part in the Oct. 7 attack, said it was prepared to consider releasing hostages only after fighting ends. A Western diplomat said they are aware of Egypt's proposal. But the diplomat, who demanded anonymity to discuss the matter, doubts that Netanyahu and his hawkish government would accept the entire proposal. The diplomat gave no further details.

INSIDE GAZA

Israel's offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than two-thirds of the more than 20,400 Palestinians killed have been women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants among the dead.

After Sunday night's strike in the Maghazi camp, first responders and residents searched through the rubble, many with their bare hands or simple tools. The dead continued to flow into Al-Aqsa Martyrs

Hospital in nearby Deir al-Balah, where men prayed over several dozen bodies laid out on the ground. Sobbing relatives peeled open body bags to get a last look or kiss the face of a loved one. One man wept as he hugged a body wrapped in bloody plastic sheeting, the size of a small child.

Another man knelt over the body of a relative, screaming, "I swear to God, he was a man. I swear to God, he was better than the whole of Hamas."

The devastation of the war over the past weeks has brought sporadic eruptions of anger against Hamas, something that would have previously been unthinkable during the group's 16-year rule over Gaza. Apart from the Maghazi deaths, the bodies of another 80 people killed in strikes across central Gaza were also received at the hospital from late Sunday to early Monday, hospital records showed.

Since Friday, 17 Israeli soldiers have been killed in combat, most in southern and central Gaza — an indication of the heavy fighting in and around the southern city of Khan Younis.

"The war exacts a very heavy price from us, but we have no choice but to continue fighting," Netanyahu said Sunday.

There has been widespread anger

against his government, which many criticize for failing to protect civilians on October 7 and promoting policies that allowed Hamas to gain strength over the years. Netanyahu has avoided accepting responsibility for the military and policy failures.

"Over time, the public will find it hard to ignore the heavy price paid, as well as the suspicion that the aims that were loudly heralded are still far from being attained, and that Hamas is showing no signs of capitulating in the near future," wrote Amos Harel, military affairs commentator for the Haaretz newspaper.

In northern Gaza, Palestinians reported heavy Israeli bombardment and gunfire in the urban refugee camp of Jabaliya, an area Israel had claimed to control. The Israeli military said it had completed the dismantling of Hamas' underground headquarters in northern Gaza.

Israel faces international criticism for the civilian death toll, but it blames Hamas, citing the militants' use of crowded residential areas and tunnels. Israel says it has killed thousands of Hamas militants, without presenting evidence.

Israel also faces allegations of mistreating Palestinian men and teenage boys detained in homes, shelters, hospitals and elsewhere during the offensive. The military says it had detained hundreds of Palestinians, including more than 700 who were transferred to Israel for further interrogation about suspected ties to militants. It has denied abuse allegations and said those without links to militants are quickly released.

Speaking from a hospital bed in Rafah after his release, Khamis al-Burdayni of Gaza City said Israeli forces detained him after tanks and bulldozers partly destroyed his home. He said men were handcuffed and blindfolded.

"We didn't sleep. We didn't get food and water," he said, crying and covering his face. (AP)

PMML, a party backed by Hafiz Saeed, fields candidates in Pak

LAHORE, Dec 25: A new political front organisation of the 26/11 terror attacks mastermind Hafiz Saeed has fielded candidates for most of the national and provincial assembly constituencies across Pakistan for the February 8 general elections.

Saeed, the founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), has been in jail since 2019 after being convicted for several years in multiple terror finance cases along with some other leaders of the banned Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD). The Pakistan Markazi Muslim League (PMML) party - set up by Saeed - says it is a political party. The electoral symbol for the PMML is 'chair'.

In a video message, PMML President Khalid Masood Sindhu said that his party is contesting on most of the national and provincial assembly seats. "We want to come to power not for corruption but to serve the people and make Pakistan an Islamic welfare state," he said. Sindhu is a candidate for NA-130 Lahore, from which Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz supreme and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is also contesting.

Saeed's son Talha Saeed is contesting from Lahore's NA-127.

When contacted, Sindhu denied his party's link with Saeed's outfit. "The PMML has no backing of Hafiz Saeed," he claimed on Monday. In 2018, the Milli Muslim League (MML) was the political face of JuD. It had fielded candidates on most seats, especially in Punjab province but failed to win a single seat.

For the 2024 polls, the PMML has been formed because of a ban on the MML.

The US has placed a USD 10 million bounty on Saeed, a UN-designated terrorist. (AP)

Russian shelling kills 4 as Ukraine prepares to observe Christmas

KYIV, Ukraine, Dec 25: Russian shelling in southern Ukraine's Kherson region killed four people Sunday, including an 87-year-old man and his 81-year-old wife who died after a strike on their apartment building. The barrage injured nine other people, including a 15-year-old, sparked fires in homes and at a private medical facility, and set a local gas pipeline alight, the head of the regional military administration, Oleksandr Prokudin, said. "There are no holidays for the enemy," Andrii Yermak, the head of the Ukrainian president's office, wrote on social media, commenting on the Kherson attack. "They do not exist for us as long as the enemy kills our people and remains on our land." The shelling across Kherson reached the center of the region's capital city of the same name. The assault took place as Ukraine prepared to officially celebrate Christmas for the first time on Dec. 25, having previously marked the date on Jan 7. Some Orthodox Ukrainians observed Christmas on Dec. 25 last year in response to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church observes the birth of Jesus on Jan 7. The cathedral in the Monastery of the Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Kyiv, held its Christmas celebration on Jan 7 of this year, but the service was held in the Ukrainian language for the first time in the 31 years of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union. (AP)

Ukraine says it shot down Russian fighter jets and drones as the country officially marks Christmas

KYIV, Dec 25: Ukraine's air force on Monday reported that it shot down two Russian fighter jets during the night along with two cruise missiles and 28 Shahed-type drones.

The report said the attacks were aimed at southern and central regions of Ukraine, but that no casualties were immediately known. It said that 31 drones were launched in all, but details of what the three that weren't intercepted may have struck weren't given.

A summary from the Ukrainian presidential office said that one civilian was killed and at least four wounded in Russian attacks over the previous 24 hours. The death occurred in the town of Chornobaivka in the Kherson region, which is partly under Russian control and experiences daily fighting.

Ukraine observed Christmas on Monday, the first time the country has officially marked the holiday on December 25 rather than the January 7 date followed by some Orthodox countries, including Russia.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed legislation in July to move the public holiday's date. Ukraine is predominantly Orthodox Christian, but the faith is divided between two churches, one of which had long affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which didn't recognise the authority of the Russian church and had been regarded as schismatic, was granted full recognition in 2018 by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Orthodoxy's top authority.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was a branch of the Russian church, announced in 2022 after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war that it was breaking ties with Moscow and considered itself autonomous. However, its parishes continue to follow the same liturgical calendar as the Russian church and will observe Christmas on January 7. (AP)

Imran's party to challenge 'flawed' ECP verdict on intra-party polls, electoral symbol in high court

ISLAMABAD, Dec 25: The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party on Monday said that it will challenge the election commission's decision to declare its intra-party polls as unconstitutional and revoke the iconic 'cricket bat' symbol in the Peshawar High Court.

A five-member panel of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on Friday rejected the organisational elections of Khan's party and its plea to have a cricket bat as the electoral symbol for the general elections.

PTI lawyer and central information secretary Mohammad Muazzam Butt on Monday said the party had decided to approach the Peshawar High Court and file a writ petition on December 26, Dawn newspaper reported.

He said the party leadership would file the case and claimed the ECP's verdict was a "legally flawed" decision. He added the commission had failed to serve justice in its order.

The electoral watchdog declared void for the second time in less than a month the PTI's internal elections in which Barrister Gohar Ali Khan was elected as the party's new chairman.

With this decision, Gohar Khan, a close aide of Khan, 71, lost his position as chairman of PTI, days after his appointment.

Khan, a former iconic international cricketer, is synonymous with the cricket bat. He is lodged in Adiala Jail at Rawalpindi facing multiple cases.

The ECP declared the party ineligible to obtain an election symbol to contest the upcoming general elections on February 8 next year.

"It is held that PTI has not complied with our directions rendered therein order dated November 23 and failed to hold intra-party election following PTI prevailing Constitution, 2019 and Election Act, 2017, and Election Rules, 2017," the poll body had said in its 11-page order.

The PTI had termed the decision part of the "fa-



mous London Plan" and a "disgusting and shameful attempt to stop the party from [participating in the] election".

It had also claimed that the party would still win the general elections and maintained that it would appeal the decision at every forum.

It asserted that its candidates would contest the polls with the 'bat' symbol, come what may.

Butt on Monday claimed that petitions against the PTI's internal elections were filed in the ECP based on "malicious intent" and "on orders of some people".

"We are not being provided a level playing field and attempts are being made to keep us away from polls," the secretary added.

Meanwhile, experts have criticised both the poll watchdog as well as the former ruling party for what they called their contradictory behaviour.

Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (Pildat) head Ahmed Bilal Mehboob said Khan's party should have been more careful about its intra-party polls.

"At the same time we have seen the election commission has been soft over many other things," he added. Khan, the PTI founder, had decided to stay away from party elections as it would have invited a legal challenge by his opponents because the ECP disqualified him in the Toshakhana corruption case. (PTI)

Serbia police detain at least 38 people as opposition plans more protests against election results

BELGRADE, Dec 25: Serbian police said Monday they have detained at least 38 people who took part in a protest against reported widespread irregularities during a recent general ballot that declared the governing populists as winners of the parliamentary and local councils' elections.

Opposition group Serbia Against Violence has been staging protests since the Dec. 17 elections, saying there has been election fraud, particularly in the capital, Belgrade. Some politicians began a hunger strike.

On Sunday evening, protesters tried to enter Belgrade's city council, breaking windows, before riot police pushed them back using tear gas, pepper spray and batons.

Senior police official Ivica Ivkovic told reporters that those detained were facing charges of inciting violent change of constitutional order — in reference to attempting to overthrow the government — and violent behaviour. He added that eight officers were injured, including some seriously.

The opposition said that police used excessive force and beat up some of its supporters.

Several hundred university students

and other citizens on Monday blocked traffic at a key Belgrade street that hosts government headquarters, braving a police warning against the blockades of roads and bridges in the capital. No incidents were reported as some students played volleyball and soccer on a sunny day. Police "are ready and capable of countering any acts of violence with determination," Ivkovic said.

The country's Serbian Progressive Party has denied rigging the vote and described the elections as fair despite criticism from international monitors and local election observers. President Aleksandar Vucic described Sunday's protests as an attempt to overthrow the government with help from abroad, without specifying what he meant. Serbia's Prime Minister Ana Brnabic thanked Russia late Sunday for tipping off Serbia in advance of violent protests against the election results.

Vucic has "irrefutable evidence" that the West is encouraging the opposition protests, Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Botan-Kharchenko told Russian media after meeting with Vucic on Monday. In a post on Instagram on Monday, Vucic also referred to "mentors from abroad" of his political opponents leading the protests but offered no other details. Po-



lice officers and state property were "brutally" attacked by those who want to demolish democracy and the election will of Serbia's citizens, Vucic said.

Serbia is formally seeking membership in the European Union, but the Balkan nation has maintained close ties with Moscow and has refused to join Western sanctions imposed on Russia over the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Vucic's party claimed victory in both the parliamentary and Belgrade city ballots elections. Serbia Against Violence, the governing party's main contender,

said that it was robbed of a win, especially in Belgrade.

Representatives of several international rights watchdogs observing the elections reported multiple irregularities during the vote, including cases of bought votes and ballot-box stuffing. They also noted unjust conditions for opposition candidates because of media bias, abuse of public resources by the ruling party, and Vucic dominating the ruling party's campaign and media time allocated for candidates despite not taking part in the elections himself. (PTI)

Shipping firm Maersk says it's preparing for resumption of Red Sea voyages after attacks from Yemen

FRANKFURT, Dec 25: Shipping firm Maersk says it is preparing to allow vessels to resume sailing through the Red Sea, thanks to the start of a US-led multinational naval operation to protect shipping from attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Houthi attacks have led to a major disruption of shipping through the Suez

Canal and the Red Sea, one of the most important arteries for trade in oil, natural gas, grain and consumer goods between Europe and Asia.

Maersk said in a statement on Sunday that "we have received confirmation that the previously announced multi-national security initiative Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG) has now been set up and deployed to allow maritime commerce to pass through the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden and once again return to using the Suez Canal as a gateway between Asia and Europe".

The company said it was working on plans for the first vessels to make the

journey "and for this to happen as soon as operationally possible".

The Houthis are Iranian-backed rebels who seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in 2014, launching a grinding war against a Saudi-led coalition seeking to restore the government. The Houthis have sporadically targeted ships in the region, but the attacks have increased since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

The rebels have threatened to attack any vessel they believe is either going to or coming from Israel. That has escalated to apparently any vessel, with container ships and oil tankers

flagged to countries like Norway and Liberia being attacked or drawing missile fire.

Major shipping companies include Maersk have been avoiding the Red Sea and sending their ships around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope. That added what analysts say could be a week to two weeks of voyages. The disruption also hiked fuel and insurance costs. (AP)



In year of milestones, SC upholds Art 370, demonetisation

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: In a year of milestones, the Supreme Court delivered a melange of seminal verdicts in 2023 including those that upheld the Centre's decisions to scrap Article 370, which bestowed special status on Jammu and Kashmir, demonetisation of Rs 1,000 and Rs 500 currency notes, and refused to accord legal recognition to same-sex marriages.

Under Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud, the top court created a record by disposing of an unprecedented 52,191 cases between January 1 and December 15, 2023. It had disposed of nearly 40,000 cases the previous year.

Though the Modi government received an emphatic endorsement from the Supreme Court for its decisions nullifying Article 370 and binning Rs 1000 and Rs 500 notes, it was at the receiving end of apex court order that held the Delhi government had legislative and executive control over services in the national capital except for public order, police and land.

A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court (SC) unanimously ruled that the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners shall be made by the President on the advice of a committee consisting of the prime minister, the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India. However, these led to the framing of a new law on the appointment of CEC and ECs and amendments to the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act by the Centre. Now the CJI will not be part of the committee for selecting members of the poll panel as was envisaged in the March 2 judgement of the Supreme Court. Through the new GNCTD Act the Centre also wrested control over services from the Delhi government.

The top court is now again seized of the Delhi government's fresh plea against the amended GNCTD Act.

Notwithstanding the continuing tug of war between the Supreme Court and the Centre over appointment and transfer of judges in constitutional courts on the recommendation of the collegium, the apex court worked with full strength of 34 judges

for the major part of the year and all the 14 recommendations for judgeship of the apex court were approved with alacrity.

The decades-old hope of the queer community for legal validation of their marriages and consequential rights like adoption, enrolment as parents in schools, opening of bank accounts and succession got dashed as a five-judge constitution bench came out with a fractured verdict leaving major issues to the discretion of Parliament.

The Centre also drew flak from the Supreme Court for granting repeated extensions to Sanjay Kumar Mishra as the Enforcement Directorate (ED) chief and held it "illegal".

The Centre won the legal battle over scrapping of Article 370, with a five-judge constitution bench unanimously upholding its decision to abrogate its provisions. The apex court, however, ordered restoration of statehood for the present-day Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir "at the earliest" and holding the state assembly elections by September 30, 2024.

In a setback to the central government, its curative plea seeking an additional Rs 7,844 crore from the Union Carbide Corporation's successor firms to extend higher compensation to the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy that left over 3,000 people dead and caused massive environmental damage was junked.

In one of the cases involving the Adani Group, the apex court reserved its verdict on a PIL on the Adani-Hindenburg row on allegations of stock price manipulation.

The discretionary powers of state governors and legislative assembly speakers in granting assent to bills and deciding disqualification petitions against MLAs, especially in opposition-ruled Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Kerala and Telangana, came under scrutiny by the apex court.

On the police strife between the rival Shiv Sena factions in Maharashtra, the court ruled it cannot reinstate the MVA government headed by Uddhav Thackeray since the Shiv Sena leader chose to resign without taking a floor test in the wake of

a rebellion in his party, paving the way for continuation of Eknath Shinde as the chief minister.

Later in the year, it extended the deadline for Maharashtra assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar to decide cross-petitions by rival Sena factions seeking disqualification of each other's MLAs from December 31 to January 10, 2024.

The apex court talked tough over the governors of Punjab and Tamil Nadu delaying assent to bills passed by the state legislatures, cautioning the Raj Bhawan occupant in Chandigarh against "playing with fire" and observing his counterpart in Chennai, accused of "sitting over" 12 bills, was a "matter of concern".

The apex court, while taking note of hate speeches at political rallies and religious programmes, said it was looking to put in place a machinery to deal with these.

The year saw marathon hearing of important cases, including on reconsideration of the Supreme Court's 1998 judgement which said lawmakers enjoy immunity from prosecution for taking bribe to make a speech or cast a vote, besides on pleas challenging the remission granted to 11 convicts in the Bilkis Bano gang-rape case and murder of seven of her family members during the 2002 Gujarat riots.

Judgements in these cases are expected in 2024. The apex court will also deliver its verdict on petitions challenging electoral bonds scheme for political funding next year.

Matters related to air pollution during winter in Delhi-National Capital Region also kept the apex court busy. It made hard-hitting remarks and passed directives for curbing the menace. In a first initiative of its kind, the Supreme Court launched a handbook containing a glossary of "gender unjust terms" and suggested alternative words and phrases which may be used in legal lexicon.

According to the handbook, words like eve-teasing, prostitute, and housewife will be out of the legal jargon and be replaced with terms like street sexual harassment, sex worker and

homemaker.

In a bid to make itself litigant friendly, the Supreme Court undertook measures including launch of portal 'SuSwagatam' to enable lawyers and litigants to register themselves online and get e-passes to enter courtrooms. It also onboarded the National Judicial Data Grid, a repository of data on pendency and disposal of cases.

The SC also stepped in to assuage the concerns of those hit by ethnic violence in Manipur and passed a raft of directives, including for setting up a panel of three former women high court judges to ensure that people are protected, rehabilitated and compensated.

Batting for media freedom, it said criticism of government policies cannot be termed "anti-establishment" and quashed the Centre's telecast ban on Malayalam news channel, 'MediaOne'.

On pleas questioning the seizure of electronic devices like mobile phones and laptops of individuals, especially media professionals, by investigating agencies, it asked the Centre to come out with guidelines.

Dealing with cases of anti-terror law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the apex court delivered important verdicts including the one which held that mere membership of a banned organisation was an offence liable to be punished with imprisonment under the provisions of this law.

In another verdict, it held that mere holding of certain literature through which violent acts may be propagated would not attract the provisions of UAPA.

The apex court also dealt with several matters related to animals, including the death of eight cheetahs, translocated from Africa, in the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh.

A five-judge constitution bench upheld the validity of amendment acts of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka which allowed bull-taming sport 'Jallikattu', bullock-cart races and buffalo racing sport 'Kambala', saying they are "valid legislations". (PTI)

Kharge says 'answer may not lie in a discussion', MPs' suspension was premeditated

DHANKHAR-KHARGE LETTER WAR

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: It was the mass suspension of MPs that was "premeditated" and "weaponised" by the ruling party to sabotage Parliamentary practices, Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge alleged on Saturday, hitting back at Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar.

Kharge was replying to a second letter on the disruption of parliamentary proceedings and the suspension of MPs by Vice President Dhankhar, who had alleged that the disorder by the Opposition in the House was deliberate and part of a strategy.

In his letter on Saturday, Dhankhar had also said, "We need to move ahead", and invited the Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha for an interaction on December 25 "or a time of your convenience" at his official residence.

The Congress president, in his reply, said that he agrees with the Chairman that they need to move ahead but stressed that the "answer may not lie in a discussion in the Chairman's chambers, if the government is not keen on running the House".

The Congress chief said he is currently out of Delhi and it would be his "privilege and duty" to meet the Chairman as soon as he is back.

Replying to the points raised by Dhankhar, Kharge alleged that the suspensions were "executed without any application of mind" and said that as the custodian of the House, he should protect the people's right to hold its government accountable in Parliament.

The opposition leader alleged that the ruling party has "weaponised the suspension of MPs as a convenient tool to undermine democracy, sabotage Parliamentary practices and throttle the Constitution".

Kharge said the Chairman's letter "unfortunately justifies the autocratic and arrogant attitude of the Government towards Parliament".

"If anything privilege motions have also been weaponised to muzzle the voice of the Opposition. This is a deliberate design of the ruling dispensation to undermine Parliament itself. By suspending MPs, the government is effectively silencing the voice of the voters of 146 MPs altogether," Kharge said.



"You have also mentioned that disorder was deliberate and premeditated."

"I would like to submit that if anything, it is the mass suspension of the Opposition MPs from both Houses of Parliament that seems to be premeditated and premeditated by the Government and I am most sorry to say, executed without any application of mind, as can be seen by the suspension of an INDIA party MP who was not even present in the Parliament," he said.

While Dhankhar, in his letter, had said that his attempts to meet the Leader of Opposition were turned down, Kharge said he had sought a statement from the Union Home Minister Amit Shah on the security breach on December 14, before the suspensions started.

"I recognise it is well within your powers as Chairman to decide on these notices. However, it was regrettable that the Chair condoned the attitude of the Hon'ble Home Minister and the Government who did not wish to make a statement on the floor of the House."

"It was even more regrettable that the Hon'ble Home Minister made his first public statement before a TV channel when Parliament was in session and the Chair did not find that sacreligging the temple of democracy," Kharge alleged.

The senior Congress leader urged him to examine his con-

cerns "objectively and with neutrality as the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha."

He said a Union minister allegedly informed an opposition parliamentarian that most opposition MPs "will be suspended before the home minister is present in the Rajya Sabha".

"We would have expected the Chairman to have inquired if such a threat was indeed issued. Such comments grossly undermine the Chair who we believe is the final authority on conducting the House including suspension of members," Kharge said.

Kharge said as the custodian of the House, the Chairman should protect the people's right to hold its government accountable in Parliament.

"The Chairman should also kindly note that the government has escaped accountability on all crucial issues like serious border incursions by China, or continued unrest in Manipur or the recent intrusion in the Lok Sabha by visitors who had been facilitated entry by a BJP MP," he said.

"It would be distressing when history judges the presiding officers harshly for Bills passed without debate and not seeking accountability from the government."

"It is disappointing that the Hon'ble Chairman feels effecting suspensions facilitated legislative business by passing bills without discussion," he said.

Kharge had on Friday told Dhankhar that the suspension of MPs on such a large scale was detrimental to the core principles of India's parliamentary democracy.

In his letter to Dhankhar, the Congress chief had said he was pained and agonised at the suspension of so many MPs and felt frustrated and disheartened.

The Congress president was responding to an earlier letter by Dhankhar in which he had said rendering the House dysfunctional by making a demand to the Chair that cannot be acceded was unfortunate and against public interest.

The Rajya Sabha was adjourned sine die on Thursday, a day ahead of the scheduled end of Parliament's Winter session.

The Winter session began on December 4 and was scheduled to conclude on December 22. (PTI)

Poonch: Army initiates Court of Inquiry as police lodges murder case over killing of 3 civilians

JAMMU, Dec 25: The Army has initiated a Court of Inquiry as police lodged a murder case against unknown persons over the death of three civilians picked up for questioning by the force after three soldiers died in a terrorist attack in Poonch recently, official sources said on Monday.

In a related development, a brigadier-level officer was shifted and action is being taken against three officers of 48 Rashtriya Rifles as the Army has taken a serious note of the incident which sparked allegations of custodial torture and widespread outrage.

The soldiers lost their lives when their vehicles were ambushed by terrorists at Dhatyar Morh between Dhera Ki Gali and Buzilaz in the Surankote area of Poonch on December 21. Three civilians, aged between 27 and 42, were allegedly picked up by the Army for questioning following the attack and they were found dead on December 22. Video clips purportedly showing their torture were shared widely on social media.

In a post on X on December 23, the Additional Directorate General of Public Information (ADGPI) of the Indian Army said, "Search operations by the security forces are continuing in the area of operations after the incident of 21 Dec 23. Reports have been received regarding three civilian deaths in the area. The matter is under investigation. Indian Army stands committed to extending full support and cooperation in

the conduct of investigations."

Taking its investigation forward, the sources said the Army has initiated a Court of Inquiry into the alleged torture and the subsequent death of the three civilians.

A brigadier-level officer, incharge of the Surankote belt, was shifted, and action against other officers of the unit concerned will also be taken, the sources said.

The counter-insurgency unit of the Army was in the news for wrong reasons in October also when one of its major-rank officers opened fire on his colleagues and exploded grenades inside the Neeli post camp near Thanamandi, leaving five personnel including three officers injured. The sources said police have also registered a case under section 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal code against unidentified accused army personnel.

"...after terror incident at DKG on December 21, army troops carried out searches in Topa Peer in buffilaz for the terrorists who escaped after the attack. During searches, Army troops detained a few local youth for questioning, reportedly three such youth namely Safer Ahmad, Mohd Showkat and Shabir Ahmad succumbed to injuries."

"As such, cognizable offence under section 302 IPC is made out. On this information instant case stands registered. As the instant case is of special nature...special report will be submitted separately as investigation is taken up," an official said quoting the FIR. (PTI)

3 killed in bus-truck collision in UP's Bahraich

BAHRAICH (UP), Dec 25: Three people, including two passengers of a bus, died and 20 others were injured when it collided head on with a rice-laden truck on Monday morning, police said. According to the police, prima facie the accident took place due to dense fog.

Police sources said that truck driver Pappu (50), a resident of Deoria, died on the spot. Bus driver Mahboob (35), a resident of Shravasti, and bus passenger Ram Raj (38), a resident of Gonda, also died on the spot.

They added that 20 passengers of the ill-fated bus were also injured. Circle Officer (City) Rajiv Sisodia said, "Most of the people travelling in the bus are said to be labourers from UP working in Gujarat. Prima facie it seems that due to excessive fog in the morning, the drivers could not see each other. The Bahraich-Balrampur road on which the accident took place is a two-lane road without a divider."

"Had there been dividers, perhaps the accident would not have happened. The driver's sides of both the vehicles collided head on, due to which both the drivers died on the spot," he said. The third deceased, bus passenger Ramraj (24), was a resident of the Gonda district, the CO said.

Bahraich District Magistrate (DM) Monica Rani and Superintendent of Police (SP) Prashant Verma reached the incident site and the district hospital and took stock of relief, rescue and treatment given to the injured. The SP told reporters that the truck was coming from Shravasti to Bahraich and the bus was going from Rajkot in Gujarat to Balrampur. Both the vehicles collided head on near the Dharaswan village on Bahraich-Shravasti road in Kotwali Dehat police station area. (PTI)

MP cabinet expansion: Vijayvargiya, Prahlad Patel among 28 MLAs sworn in as ministers

BHOPAL, Dec 25: Twenty eight legislators, including former Union minister Prahlad Patel and BJP national general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya, were on Monday inducted into the Madhya Pradesh cabinet led by chief minister Mohan Yadav.

A total of 18 MLAs took oath as cabinet ministers, while 10 were sworn in as ministers of state including six with independent charge.

Governor Mangubhai Patel administered the oath of office and secrecy to the ministers at a function held in the Raj Bhawan here.

Those who took oath as cabinet ministers are - Vijay Shah, Kailash Vijayvargiya, Prahlad Patel, Karan

Singh Verma, Rakesh Singh, Uday Pratap Singh, Sampat Ukey, Tuliram Silawat, Aidil Singh Kansana, Govind Singh Rajput, Vishvas Sarang, Nirmala Bhuria, Narayan Singh Kushawaha, Nagar Singh Chouhan, Pradyumna Singh Tomar, Rakesh Shukla, Chaitanya Kashyap and Inder Singh Parmar.

The ministers of state with independent charge are Krishna Gaur, Dharmendra Bhav Lodhi, Dilip Jaiswal, Gautam Tetwal, Laxman Patel and Narayan Singh Pawar.

The other MLAs who took oath as minister of state are Narendra Shivaji Patel, Pratima Bagri, Dilip Ahirwar, and Radha Singh, the official said.

Five women legislators - Sampa-

tia, Ukey, Nirmala Bhuria, Krishna Gaur, Pratima Bagri and Radha Singh - are among those included in the ministry led by CM Yadav.

The total strength of the cabinet has now gone up to 31, including CM Yadav and two deputy chief ministers Rajendra Shukla and Jagdish Devda.

The maximum strength of the council of ministers in Madhya Pradesh, which has 230 MLAs, can be 35, including the CM.

In the state assembly elections held last month, the BJP won 163 seats and the Congress 66.

Yadav took oath as chief minister on December 13 along with Shukla and Devda who were sworn in as deputy CMs. (PTI)

Pending paddy bonus of ₹ 3.7k cr transferred to 12 lakh farmers in Chhattisgarh

RAIPUR, Dec 25: Chhattisgarh chief minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Monday digitally transferred pending bonus of ₹ 3,716 crore to more than 12 lakh farmers who had sold their paddy in 2014-15 and 2015-16 in cooperative societies under minimum support price. Addressing the function meant to disburse bonus, Sai said his government will fulfil every "Modi guarantee" (ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's pre-poll promise) in the next five years. The event was held in Bendri village of Raipur district to mark Good Governance Day, observed nationwide on the birth anniversary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The bonus of ₹ 300 per quintal was not disbursed to paddy farmers by then Raman Singh-led BJP government for Kharif marketing seasons 2014-15 and 2015-16. The previous Congress government under Bhupesh Baghel had promised to disburse this bonus but failed to do so citing some reasons. In its manifesto for the 2023 Assembly polls, which were held on November 7 and 17, the BJP had promised to pay this bonus on December

25 if it came to power in Chhattisgarh.

"We had promised farmers that as soon as the BJP comes to power in the state, we will give the outstanding bonus of two years to them. I am very happy today we have transferred ₹ 3716 crore into the bank accounts of more than 12 lakh farmers", the CM said. The confidence of the farmers of Chhattisgarh on the BJP government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has increased, Sai asserted. The CM further said his government has decided to provide 18 lakh houses to the poor under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna.

"We have made a provision in the recent supplementary budget to give ₹ 1000 per month to married women under Mahtari Vandan Yojna," he said. The promises of annual assistance of Rs 10,000 to landless labourers, recruitment to one lakh government vacant posts in a transparent manner, free treatment upto ₹ 10 lakh under Ayushman Card, procurement of paddy at ₹ 3100 per quintal and tendu leaf collection at ₹ 5500 per standard sack will also be fulfilled, he added. (PTI)

Semiconductor policy to help realise Gujarat's commitment towards self-reliance: CM Patel

AHMEDABAD, Dec 25: The 'Gujarat Semiconductor Policy' will help realise the state's commitment for a self-reliant India and Gujarat, Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel has said.

The policy is setting the stage for a future in the world of technology and manufacturing, and helping Gujarat transform itself into a semiconductor powerhouse, he said. According to the state government, chip maker Micron Technology's decision to set up a USD 2.75-billion plant at Sanand near Ahmedabad indicates that Gujarat's dedicated semiconductor policy is bearing fruit and attracting global players.

Under the policy, the state government will set up 'Dholera Semicon City' near Ahmedabad where eligible projects will be given subsidies for setting up manufacturing units, it said ahead of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit (VGGGS) to be held in Gandhinagar next month.

The summit is a forum for business networking, knowledge sharing and

strategic partnerships for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

In June this year, the Gujarat government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Micron Technology for setting up a semiconductor assembly and test facility at Sanand.

"With the prime minister's guidance, Gujarat has emerged as a policy-driven state. Taking this tradition further, we have implemented the country's first dedicated semiconductor policy. Our commitment for 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' and 'Aatmanirbhar Gujarat' will be realised by this policy," CM Patel has said.

In July last year, Gujarat announced a dedicated policy to draw new investments in the semiconductor sector by offering incentives and subsidies to start operations in the state, and will remain in force till 2027.

The Dholera Special Investment Region (SIR) is set to host the ambitious 'Semicon City', spanning 5,000-10,000 acres and generating a massive two lakh



jobs over the next five years by attracting semiconductor fabrication units, display fabrication units, silicon photonics, and semiconductor assembly, testing, marking, and packaging facilities, as per the state government.

Speaking at a startup event recently on semiconductor policy investment, Union Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Rajeev Chandrasekhar said, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji in January 2023 enacted a

policy. We have these big units and plants like Micron coming up in Gujarat."

"There are over 30 design startups that have come up. We are going to set up a new Indian semiconductor centre for research," he said.

The policy has been designed in line with the Centre's 'India Semiconductor Mission' to attract and facilitate new projects in the sector, the government said in a release.

To encourage investments, a 75 per cent subsidy is offered on the purchase of first 200 acres required for setting up manufacturing units, with additional land provided at 50 per cent subsidy, the state government said.

Eligible projects under this policy enjoy a power tariff subsidy of Rs 2 per unit for a decade and good quality water at a rate of Rs 12 per cubic metre for the first five years, with additional incentives for projects with significant foreign direct investment or those relocating from overseas locations, it said. (PTI)

Gonda: Posters, hoarding declaring Brij Bhushan's 'dominance' removed

The former WFI chief has denied the allegations against him and claimed that he was being targeted under a conspiracy by Cong leaders

GONDA (UP), Dec 25: Posters and hoardings declaring the "dominance" of BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh put up here after his aide won the Wrestling Federation of India chief polls have been removed after the Centre suspended the newly-elected sports body.

Singh, who helmed the WFI for multiple terms, had boasted about his "dabdaba" (dominance) which he had asserted will continue as his confidant Sanjay Singh won the WFI polls. He was accused of sexual harassment by some female wrestlers.

Posters and hoardings reading "dabdaba toh hai dabdaba toh rahga (there is his dominance, there will be his dominance)" were put up outside the MP's house here and at other places in the town after Sanjay Singh's victory in the polls. His supporters also pasted pamphlets carrying the same message on their vehicles.

All these posters and hoardings have now been taken down now as the Sports Ministry announced the suspension of the WFI for alleged violation of procedures, and a day after Brij Bhushan announced his retirement from the politics of wrestling.

"I realised that some of these posters reeked of arrogance," Singh conceded on Sunday after a meeting with party chief J P Nadda in New Delhi.

"I am now retired. I have a lot of other work. I have to oversee elections (Lok Sabha) too," Brij



Bhushan, an eastern UP strongman, had said.

Nadda had summoned Singh for a meeting in a bid to defuse the crisis that erupted as some leading wrestlers restarted their protest after Singh's close associates took control of the Wrestling Federation of India.

The supporters of the six-time MP are not happy with what has happened over the past few days. Even though they did not say much explicitly, they looked disheartened.

Local wrestlers kept away from daily practice in 'akhara' in Gonda and neighbouring Ayodhya over Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh's announcement he was saying goodbye to the politics of wrestling.

Uttar Pradesh BJP president

Bhupinder Chaudhary had defended the sports ministry's decision to suspend the newly-elected WFI helmed by Sanjay Singh.

Chaudhary had said in Barabanki on Monday the Union Sports Ministry's action was not due to pressure from anyone and that it followed due process.

Gonda district Congress president Pramod Mishra has also welcomed the sport's ministry decision.

Local Samajwadi Party leader Suraj Singh said the government's decision is "not the defeat of any person but that of 'ahankar' (arrogance).

Young wrestlers from Punjab, Haryana, Jharkhand, Bihar, Maharashtra and other places for under-20 and under-15 national wrestling championship scheduled from De-

cember 28 have started returning home after the government decision to suspend functioning of WFI.

Wrestlers like Olympic medalists Bajrang Punia and Sakshi Malik and World Championship medalist Vinesh Phogat have levelled allegations of sexual harassment against Brij Bhushan and the case is being heard in the Delhi High Court. The former WFI chief has denied the allegations against him and claimed that he was being targeted under a conspiracy by Congress leaders.

Singh's brusque manners are seen by many in the party as an avoidable cause of confrontation, and his announcement may help calm the waters, party sources said.

The Thakur leader from eastern Uttar Pradesh is, however, an influential figure in several constituencies and enjoys considerable support.

The Sports Ministry on Sunday suspended the WFI indefinitely after the newly-elected body made a "hasty announcement" of organising the U-15 and U-20 nationals "without following due procedure and not giving sufficient notice to wrestlers" for preparations.

The ministry also said the new body was working under the "complete control of former (WFI) office-bearers", which was not in conformity with the National Sports Code. (PTI)

Nitish speaks out for first time since INDIA meet

PATNA, Dec 25: Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar on Monday rubbished speculations that he felt having been passed over at INDIA bloc's meeting in Delhi last week when it was suggested that Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge be made the prime ministerial face.

The JD(U) leader maintained that having taken the initiative to bring parties opposed to the BJP, he desired nothing for himself but admitted having stressed at the meeting the need to expedite seat-sharing

arrangements.

"I felt no disappointment (maayusi)...no resentment (naaraazgi)", asserted Kumar when journalists approached him with queries here at a memorial of late Atal Bihari Vajpayee where he had turned up to pay tributes to the former prime minister's birth anniversary.

"At the meeting the issue (of naming a leader came up). I made it clear at the outset that I was not interested. Then another name was

proposed, I said it was okay with me", said the Bihar CM alluding to the proposal by his Delhi and West Bengal counterparts, Arvind Kejriwal and Mamata Banerjee respectively.

The JD(U) leader's detractors in the BJP-led NDA have latched on to the development and claimed that Kejriwal, who heads the Aam Aadmi Party and Banerjee, who is Trinamool Congress supremo, had in effect snubbed Kumar's alleged prime ministerial ambitions. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Vajpayee played leading role

Narendra Modi aspires to achieve, referring to Vajpayee's leadership qualities that led to the successful atomic weapons testing at Pokhran and the national expansion of national highways.

"The Kargil victory was a high watermark of late Vajpayee's tenure as Prime Minister and it was also during his tenure that the Union Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) was established with the aim of expediting the development process of the northeastern states," Sarma said.

Expressing gratitude towards Vajpayee for having a soft corner in his heart that was reflected in the pro-NE policies during his tenure as Prime Minister, the chief minister said that all are now working to transform the dreams of the late great leader for the Northeast into reality under the dynamic leadership and guidance of the current PM Modi.

State Assam minister of public health engineering department Jayanta Malla Baruah, MP Queen Ojha, MP and political secretary to chief minister Pabitra Margherita, president of Assam Pradesh BJP Bhabesh Kalita, GMDA chairman Narayan Deka, Guwahati Municipal Corporation mayor Mrigen Sarania along with a host of other dignitaries were also present on the occasion.

Odisha to raise special security

around 1,190 personnel and it would be placed under the command and control of the Superintendent of Police, Puri, he said.

While the temple stands over about 10 acres of land, now after the opening of the Heritage corridor, the area would increase threefold. There will be a big open space to go around the temple and its periphery. This apart, the security of the temple is the top priority of the government, Singh said.

Meanwhile, with a large number of devotees from across Odisha and outside thronging the Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri to seek the blessings of the Lord Jagannath during the New Year period, the authorities have made elaborate arrangements to ensure smooth 'darshan' at the shrine.

In view of the rush at the shrine, the Shree Jagannath Temple Administration (SJTA) has taken a host of measures to ensure hassle-free darshan for the devotees, an official said, adding that the local district police have also made arrangements and installed CCTV cameras outside the temple with barricades.

While special security arrangements have been made at the temple, the local police have also deployed special police personnel, home guards and lifeguards for tourists near the sea beach. (PTI)

Departure of grounded Romanian

trafficking. According to the French media, some of the passengers spoke Hindi and others Tamil.

After authorising the plane to leave, the French judges on Sunday chose to cancel the hearings of the passengers due to irregularities in the procedure.

The passengers include a 21-month-old child and 11 unaccompanied minors.

The police custody measures for two passengers of the flight were lifted on Monday. The two men were taken into custody on Friday on suspicion of having played a role in what could be an illegal immigration ring. Their detention was extended on Saturday for up to 48 hours.

The Public Prosecutor's Office specifies that a judicial investigation has been opened for aiding the illegal entry and stay of foreigners in the territory as part of an organised gang and participation in a criminal association.

The airline's lawyer has denied any involvement in the trafficking.

A "partner" company that chartered the plane was responsible for verifying the identity documents of each passenger, and communicated the passengers' passport information to the airline 48 hours before the flight, Bakayoko said.

Human trafficking carries a potential sentence of up to 20 years in France. According to the reports, the travel may have been planned by the Indian passengers to reach Central America from where they can attempt to enter the United States or Canada illegally.

But an anonymous tip indicated that passengers were "likely to be victims of human trafficking" in an organised gang. (PTI)

3 bills replacing British-era

activities, or encourages feelings of separatist activities or endangers sovereignty or unity and integrity of India or indulges in or commits any such act shall be punished with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment which may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine.

According to 124A Section of IPC, which deals with sedition, anyone involved in the crime may be punished with life imprisonment or with a three-year jail term. Under the new laws, 'Rajdroh' has got a new term 'Deshdroh', thus doing away with the reference to the British crown.

Also for the first time, the word terrorism has been defined in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. It was absent in the IPC. Under the new laws, the magistrate's power to impose fines has been increased as well as the scope of declaring a proclaimed offender. (PTI)

Yuletide spirit grips people

Jemson Rongpi. After the service ended men and women, youth and children wished each other Merry Christmas. The celebration ended with a Christmas feast, which attended by all present. In the evening the youth department organised a 'Gift Exchange Programme' which was attended by Sunday School children and Church members.

Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal

India are being re-energised to propel growth and usher a new era of development. The jetties at Bogibeel and Gujjan are being constructed with a view to provide an efficient mode of transportation for the trade interests of the region. I believe that the Marine Jetty at Bogibeel will be inaugurated this new year, unlocking huge possibilities for the people of this region," he said.

The Inland Waterways of Authority of India (IWAI), the nodal agency for waterways development in the country under the Union ministry of ports, shipping and waterways, is undertaking multiple projects in Assam, aimed at development of the National Waterways in the region. IWAI is presently working on multiple projects with an investment of more than ₹ 850 crores in Assam.

On the additional infrastructure around Bogibeel, the Union minister said, "Bogibeel is placed at a strategically advantageous position. Under the inspiring leadership of PM Modiji, we are committed to further invest at Bogibeel to build additional infrastructure like an administrative office, customs clearance office, etc. This will turn Bogibeel into a value added proposition. We are committed to make Bogibeel as a major trade hub with multi-modal connectivity via railways, roads and waterways, providing a major boost to economic proposition of the region."

The projects are being developed with technical assistance from IIT Mumbai and IIT Guwahati. The project at Bogibeel is being executed by the Indian Port Rail and Ropeway Corporation Limited (IPRCL). Sonowal directed the officials to complete the seven floating jetties at Jogighopa, Tezpur, Biswanath, Nimati, Bindhakata, Oiranghat, and Sadiya. The recent spurt in cargo and tourist jetties will be maintained with this initiative.

Delhi HC refuses to direct TRAI to

TRAI was established for the purpose of regulating telecom services to protect the interest of the service providers and consumers in the telecom sector, and to promote and ensure an orderly growth of the sector.

The court noted that "information" under the RTI Act includes any information relating to any private body, which can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force.

The high court had, in August 2021, stayed the single-judge order, saying irreparable damage will be caused if the same was not done.

Lawyer Kabir Shankar Bose had filed an RTI application seeking information and details on whether his phone was being tapped and by which agency.

The telecom regulator had said directions to intercept a phone number are issued only by government officials of certain ranks and such information cannot be collated by it and furnished to a consumer or subscriber as it would "prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of the nation".

Bose had moved the CIC after his telecom service provider, Vodafone, declined his request for information on whether his phone was being tapped.

The company had claimed that it did not come under the ambit of the RTI Act. Bose had then moved the TRAI, which said it did not have the information he had asked for.

The CIC, in its September 12, 2018 order, asked the TRAI to obtain the information from the telecom company and provide it to Bose.

The TRAI challenged it in the high court and the single judge, on November 20, 2018, upheld the CIC's decision, saying the TRAI has the powers to call for any information or conduct an investigation where it considers expedient.

The single-judge order also said the TRAI does have the obligation to get the information from the private body and furnish it to the subscriber. (PTI)

11th edition of Northeast Festival

a wide array of agri-horti products, handloom, handicrafts, and processed food. Apart from a Christmas special bazaar, showcasing northeastern crafts, the festival also featured local fabrics and designs from the region.

The organisers felicitated three journalists, CK Nayak, Kallol Bhaumik and Pranjal Pratim Das for their outstanding contributions in projecting the northeastern region in proper perspectives to the rest of the world.

Musical maestros to enthrall audience at Thumri Festival

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: Hosting celebrated maestros and rising stars, the three-day Thumri Festival, starting Tuesday, aims to weave tales of love and devotion while blending folk and classical influences.

Organised by the Delhi government's art and culture department, Sahitya Kala Parishad, the festival, scheduled to take place at Kamani Auditorium, promises an unforgettable journey into the heart of India's musical heritage.

"Thumri Festival is an enthralling celebration of our rich cultural heritage. We invite all the culture lovers to be a part of an event that preserves and promotes our traditional arts. "Let us have a deep connection to our musical history as the melodic tones of Thumri weave a beautiful cultural enlightenment," said Saurabh Bhardwaj, Delhi's Minister of art, culture, and language, in a statement. The gala will showcase the melodious journey of Hindustani classical music through performances by several eminent artists and their exponential disciples.

It will open with a performance by Hindustani classical vocalist Padmaja Chakraborty, followed by soulful renditions of Banaras-style Thumri, Tappa, and Ghazal by Padma Shri awardee Soma Ghosh.

Performances by Pandit Vishwanath of the 'Kirana Gharana', Hindustani exponent Shruti Sadolikar Katkar and father-son duo Pandit Saajan Mishra and Swarnsh Mishra are also part of the line-up.

The classical music festival will conclude on 28 December with performances by vocalist Sushri Pooja Goswami, Carnatic musician Sucheta Ganguly and legendary classical singer Pandit Ajay Pohankar and Abhijit Pohankar showcasing the Kirana gharana's brilliance in a six-decade musical journey. (PTI)

Atal Bihari Vajpayee set example of purity, transparency in politics: CM Adityanath

LUCKNOW, Dec 25: Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath on Monday termed former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the "Ajatashtru" (the one who has no enemies) of India's politics, and said that he set an example of purity and transparency in politics.

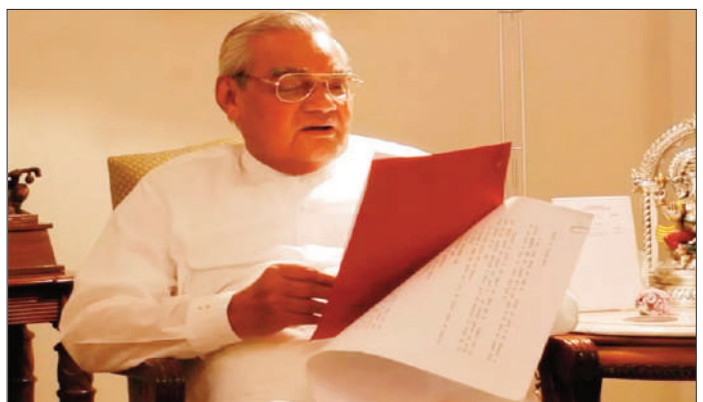
"Atal ji was the 'Ajatashtru' of India's politics. Along with bailing out India from political instability of India, he set an ideal example of purity and transparency in politics in the country.

"The foundation stone of the new model of development, security and good governance that India has established under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the last nine-and-a-half years was laid by respected Atal ji during his reign," Adityanath said at the Lok Bhavan in Lucknow on Vajpayee's birth anniversary.

Tributes were paid to former PM Vajpayee at the Lok Bhavan by CM Adityanath, Deputy Chief Ministers Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak and other leaders on Monday.

Due to his special attachment towards Uttar Pradesh, Vajpayee chose the state for his education and workplace, Adityanath said.

He added that the state government is working with commitment towards the ideals and values for



which the former PM dedicated his life. The UP CM said this year is also the beginning of Vajpayee's birth centenary. Many programmes will be organised in the next one year to keep his memories alive and to showcase every aspect of his life, which gave a new direction to the society and the nation.

To remember his literary interest and contribution in the field of journalism, different types of programmes will be organised from gram panchayat to state level in basic education schools, universities and other institutions, he added. On this occasion, deputy chief ministers Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak, Jal Shakti Minister Swatantra Dev Singh, UP Legislative Council member and state BJP

chief Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary, other public representatives and other senior officers were present, the UP government said in a statement.

Earlier, in a post on X, Adityanath said, "Tributes were paid to the carrier ('sanvaahak') of excellent democratic values in Indian politics former prime minister 'Bharat Ratna' revered Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji at his statue on the occasion of 'Good Governance Day'. The sacred memories of respected Atal ji will always remain alive in the hearts of all of us."

Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya in a post said, "A strong politician, who gave the country a strong identity on the world stage, a multi-faceted personality, a dynamic speaker, our source of inspiration, the grandfather of the

BKP, former PM and (the one) honoured with Bharat Ratna, hundreds of salutes to respected Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji on his birth anniversary!"

Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak in a post on X, said, "Today, on the occasion of 'Good Governance Day', the birth anniversary of respected Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji, the grandfather of the BJP, the 'Ajatashtru' of Indian politics and our source of inspiration, former Prime Minister 'Bharat Ratna'. Floral tributes were paid at the statue of revered Atal ji at the Atal Bihari Scientific Convention Centre, Lucknow."

A great orator, Vajpayee was the popular face of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and then the BJP. His acceptability beyond ideological boundaries was a key reason behind the BJP drawing support from many parties as he ran a coalition government from 1999 to 2004. Vajpayee was born on December 25, 1924 in Gwalior, and died on August 16, 2018 in New Delhi.

He was elected to the Lok Sabha from Lucknow in 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004. In the following Lok Sabha elections in 2009, 2014 and 2019, the BJP maintained its dominance on the seat as Lalji Tandon (2009) and Rajnath Singh (2014 and 2019) were elected MPs respectively. (PTI)

Ranbir, Alia officially introduce daughter Raha to media on Christmas

MUMBAI, Dec 25:

Raha, who turned one on November 6, was dressed in a white and pink frock with a reindeer on the front and a pair of red shoes.

Wrap up the year gone by & gear up for 2024 with HT! Click here

Ranbir carried the little one in his arms with Alia by their side.

The couple also thanked the media for their wishes as Raha made her "paparazzi debut".

Last month, Alia had talked about keeping Raha's face from getting splashed across social media.

"I don't want it to seem like I am hiding my daughter. I am proud of her. If the cameras were not rolling right now, I would put a giant image of her on the screen. I love her. I am proud of our baby. But we are new parents. We don't know how we feel about her face splashed out all over the internet, she's



barely a year old," the "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani" star had said at an event.

In February, Alia had publicly called out the paparazzi for "invading her privacy" and clicking pictures of her in her house without consent.

The privacy of celebrity children under media glare is often a topic of discussion, especially in the era of social media.

While stars like Shah Rukh Khan and Kareena Kapoor Khan have been liberal about their kids getting photographed in public, there are exceptions in Rani Mukerji and Anushka Sharma who urge the paparazzi to not click pictures of their children.

Ranbir and Alia, who started dating after meeting on the sets of "Brahmastra: Part One - Shiva", tied the knot last April.

Ranbir recently tasted massive box office success with his recent release "Animal" and Alia won the National Film Award for her performance in "Gangubai Kathiawadi" this year. (PTI)

'Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire' collects ₹ 402 crore in opening weekend



MUMBAI, Dec 25: "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire", starring Prabhas, has grossed Rs 402 crore at the global box office in three days of its release.

Directed by Prashanth Neel and produced by Hombale Films, the movie also stars Prithviraj Sukumaran. It hit the screens on Friday in Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam

and Hindi.

The makers shared the latest box office figures on the official X page of "Salaar".

"BOX OFFICE KA SALAAR. #BlockbusterSalaar hits 402 crores GBOC (worldwide) in 3 days!" the post read. Set in the fictional city of Khansaar, "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire" revolves around

two friends Deva (Prabhas) and Vardha (Prithviraj).

According to Hombale Films, the movie earned Rs 178.7 crore registering the record for the best opening day figures for any Indian title in 2023. "Salaar: Part 1 - Ceasefire" also stars Shruti Haasan, Eshwari Rao, Jagapathi Babu and Sriya Reddy. (PTI)

Arbaaz Khan, Sshura Khan get married; actor shares first photos from wedding



MUMBAI, Dec 25: Actor-producer Arbaaz Khan and make-up artist Sshura Khan on Sunday got married in an intimate ceremony in the presence of family and friends.

The nuptials took place at Arbaaz's sister Arpita Khan Sharma's residence here. Arbaaz shared the first pictures from the wedding on his official Instagram page on early Monday morning. "In the presence of our loved ones,

me and mine begin a lifetime of love and togetherness from this day on! Need all your blessings and good wishes on our special day," he captioned the photos with Sshura.

The bride and groom wore floral outfits for the ceremony: Arbaaz had donned a bandhgala sherwani and Sshura wore a pink pastel organza lehenga. Arbaaz's son Arhaan, parents Salim Khan and Salma Khan attended

the wedding along with his stepmother Helen, his brothers Salman Khan and Sohaib Khan, his nephew Nirvaan Khan, sister Alvira Khan Agnihotri and brother-in-law Atul Agnihotri.

Julia Vantur and Raveena Tandon also attended the wedding.

Arbaaz was married to model-actor Malaika Arora for 19 years. He was previously in a relationship with model Georgia Andriani. (PTI)

Christopher Landon exits 'Scream VII' as director: 'Dream job that turned into nightmare'



LOS ANGELES, Dec 25: It's time to move on, says director Christopher Landon, who has officially exited Scream VII months after the embattled feature film lost two of its leads Jenna Ortega and Melissa Barrera.

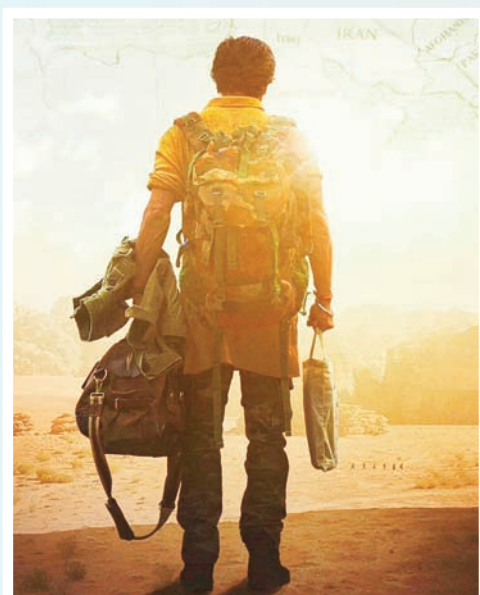
The filmmaker announced his departure from the upcoming movie in the popular horror franchise on Instagram. "I guess now is as good a time as any to announce I formally exited Scream 7 weeks ago. This will disappoint some and delight others. It was a dream job that turned into a nightmare. And my heart did break for everyone involved. Everyone. But it's time to move on," Landon wrote.

The director, a creative voice behind the horror film series Paranormal Activity, said he hopes the legacy of Scream series director Wes Craven continues to flourish.

"I have nothing more to add to the conversation other than I hope Wes' legacy thrives and lifts above the din of a divided world. What he and Kevin created is something amazing and I was honored to have even the briefest moment basking in their glow," he added in his post.

In November, Ortega left Scream VII, a day after Spyglass Media Group fired co-lead Barrera from the film over her social media posts referring to the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict. Ortega's exit, which was her and her representation team's decision, came before the SAG-AFTRA strike but was not made public until last month. (PTI)

Representatives of different countries to attend special screening of 'Dunki'



MUMBAI, Dec 25:

A special screening of the Shah Rukh Khan-starrer "Dunki" will be held on December 28 here for representatives of several countries, including the US, the UK, France, South Korea and Australia.

"Dunki", based on an illegal immigration technique 'donkey flight', is directed by Rajkumar Hirani.

The comedy-drama has grossed Rs 157.22 crore at the global box office since its release on Thursday.

"Dunki has arrived on the big screens

and in no time has started to rule the hearts of the audience...With its compelling story, the film has brought a significant subject to the masses that speaks about the illegal immigrants who take the donkey route to go abroad. Amid its successful run in the theatres, a special screening will be held for the consulates of various nations on 28th December," a member of Hirani's team said in a statement.

The representatives of Belgium, Ger-

many, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Spain, Turkey, and the Netherlands are also expected to attend the event, the member further said. "Dunki" also stars Boman Irani, Taapsee Pannu, Vicky Kaushal, Vikram Kochhar, and Anil Grover. A JIO Studios, Red Chillies Entertainment, and Rajkumar Hirani Films presentation, the film is produced by Hirani and Gauri Khan.

It is written by Abhijat Joshi, Hirani and Kanika Dhillon. (PTI)



Iyer, especially, with his well-documented weakness against the short ball, will have to churn out something really special

Rohit's men gear up to end 31-year wait for series win in South Africa

CENTURION, Dec 25: He endured the heartbreak of a lifetime 36 evenings back but Rohit Sharma will give his all to erase the memories of a World Cup final defeat as he trains his eyes on ending India's 31-year wait for a Test series win on South African soil.

The two-match Test rubber, starting here on the Boxing Day, will be India's ninth away series in the Rainbow Nation since 1992, and captain Rohit will have an onerous task of traversing a difficult terrain in order to conquer what has always been dubbed the team's 'final frontier'.

However, for the action to start at Supersport Park, the heavy rains predicted on the first two days need to subside. The Centurion track offers variable bounce and is one of the fastest in the region. And that makes up for a compelling contest between bat and ball in relatively cooler and windy conditions in an open ground where it can jag around a bit.

In the last 50 over World Cup, skipper Rohit, at best would have emulated Kapil Dev and Mahendra Singh Dhoni, but if he and his men manage to pull off a coup in this country, he would stand first among the equals.

Mohammed Azharuddin (1992) failed, so did Sachin Tendulkar (1996) and Sourav Ganguly (2001). Rahul Dravid (2006-07), Dhoni (2010-11 and 2013-14) won Test matches, and so did Virat Kohli (2018-19 and 2021-22) but none of them could win the elusive series in South Africa.

So Rohit will have a job at hand and a win might just be the much-needed soothing balm required to heal the World Cup wounds even though the scars will remain.

For the golden generation of Indian cricketers, this is also their last



African Safari and a chance to conquest what no other team could on eight previous tours.

In Temba Bavuma's South Africa, they have a team that has a crack fast bowling attack, which could make some of the young Indian batters look like cats on hot tin roof.

For Yashasvi Jaiswal, it will be the first big test against a quality attack comprising Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Marco Jansen and Gerald Coetzee. There will be way more bounce than what he got in the Caribbean, and the variable nature of it will ask him probing questions.

Similarly, Shubman Gill and Shreyas Iyer, who have proven their mettle on sub-continental pitches, need to up their game in more challenging batting conditions.

Iyer, especially, with his well-

documented weakness against the short ball, will have to churn out something really special.

Coach Rahul Dravid doesn't want Jaiswal and Gill to change their style but wants them to develop game awareness and play as per the need of the hour.

"We encourage the players to play (in a manner) they feel most comfortable. In the end they are judged by the results they produce. They know that," Dravid said.

But that freedom comes with a rider. "We want to encourage them in the way they play but also keeping the conditions in mind and certain, sort of tactical thing they have to adopt when they play in South Africa."

"The nature of ball, how it behaves over 80 overs, shots that they play early and later on. I think it's

about finding balance between having cricket smarts to read the game and understand the situation, and of course allowing to express yourself.

"Hopefully, they make smart decisions," the coach had said on Christmas eve.

But all said and done, India's performance will depend on three factors: how well the skipper executes his hook and pull shots, for how much time Virat Kohli decides to leave balls outside the off-stump, and how well the team covers up Mohammed Shami's absence.

The skiddy Mukesh Kumar looked better at the nets but the extra bounce available makes a case for Prasad Krishna.

Bavuma, the retiring Dean Elgar, the stylish Aiden Markram, the exciting Tony de Zorzi, and the dogged Keegan Petersen constitute

a good batting unit that can make Indian bowlers toil hard.

KL Rahul donning the big gloves is another aspect of this game. The team management handing over keeping responsibilities to Rahul can be viewed from two different prisms.

The positive one would be the faith in his ability as a glovesman in 50-over cricket and hoping that he can do it for 90 overs in a day.

The not-so-positive aspect will be the sheer desperation not to lose that extra batter in Iyer and also not looking at the bigger picture that Rahul could find it extremely difficult to stand up to Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja in a month's time against England at home, provided Ishan Kishan isn't back from his mental health break.

It will be another away Test match which Ashwin might have to miss because of conditions and combinations.

At Supersport Park, it normally takes three and half to four days to achieve results and if the toss happens on the second day, after a washout on opening day, batting first will surely be a very difficult proposition.

Teams:

India: Rohit Sharma (captain), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, KL Rahul (wk), Shreyas Iyer, Ravindra Jadeja, Shardul Thakur, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Prasad Krishna, KS Bharat (wk), Abhimanyu Easwaran (2nd Test).

South Africa: Temba Bavuma (captain), Aiden Markram, Tony de Zorzi, Dean Elgar, Keegan Petersen, Kyle Verreynne (wk), Tristan Stubbs (wk), Nandre Burger, Marco Jansen, Wiaan Mulder, Gerald Coetzee, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, David Bedingham. (PTI)

Plenty of new faces in Indian women's ODI squad for Australia series



NEW DELHI, Dec 25: Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque and Titas Sadhu were on Monday included for the first time in the Indian women's ODI squad for the upcoming limited overs assignment against Australia.

The Indian women's team will play in three One-day Internationals and as many T20Is against the visiting Australian team from December 28 with the first ODI at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai.

A crafty left-arm-spinner, the Patiala-born Kashyap, 20, was earlier called up for the T20I series against England but did not get a game.

Shreyanka earned her maiden ODI call-up after she made her debut in the T20I series against England earlier this month.

In three matches against Heather Knight's women, Shreyanka picked up five wickets and won the Player of the Match award in the third and final T20I of the series.

Kashyap was part of India's victorious women's Under-19 World Cup winning squad in February, and so was Titas Sadhu.

Saika Ishaque was one of the top bowlers for the Mumbai franchise in the inaugural Women's Premier League. (PTI)

The three-match ODI series will be played at the Wankhede Stadium and will start on December 28. The next two matches will be played on December 30 and January 2.

The action will then shift to DY Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai which will host the three T20Is on January 5, 7 and 9.

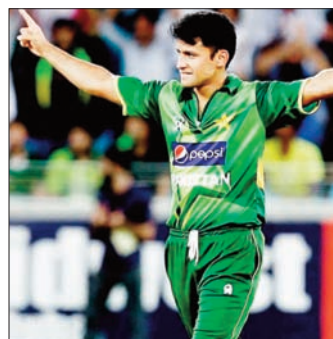
Harmanpreet Kaur remains the captain of both the teams with Smriti Mandhana being her deputy.

India won the one-off women's Test against Australia by eight wickets in Mumbai on Sunday.

ODI Squad: Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Yastika Bhatia (wk), Richa Ghosh (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque, Renuka Singh Thakur, Titas Sadhu, Pooja Vastrakar, Sneha Rana, Harleen Deol.

T20I Squad: Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Yastika Bhatia (wk), Richa Ghosh (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque, Renuka Singh Thakur, Titas Sadhu, Pooja Vastrakar, Kanika Ahuja, Minnu Mani. (PTI)

PCB appoints Yasir Arafat as high performance coach ahead of T20 series in New Zealand



KARACHI, Dec 25: Pakistan Cricket Board has appointed former allrounder, Yasir Arafat as the high performance coach of the national team for next month's five-match T20 series against New Zealand.

Yasir will reach Lahore from London and will leave with the Pakistan white-ball players for New Zealand where five matches are scheduled from January 12.

The Pakistani selectors have already announced a 17-member squad for the T20 series in New Zealand which is seen as a preparation for the ICC World Cup in West Indies and USA next year.

Yasir, who had applied for the post of bowling coach earlier this year when the PCB had approached Mickey Arthur to take over as head coach, is a qualified coach and has worked in New Zealand and England.

A source said that Yasir will replace Simon Helmut, who is the high performance coach of the Pakistan team for the ongoing Test series in Australia.

"Yasir's appointment came about on the recommendation of the national team's director Muhammad Hafeez who is calling the shots in Australia even above captain, Shah Masood," the source said.

Yasir, who appeared in three Tests and some white ball games for Pakistan, was a member of the squad that won the ICC World T20 in England in 2009.

This will be the fifth appointment of a coach with the Pakistan team since Hafeez was named Director of the team.

Hafeez has seen the appointments of Umar Gul and Saeed Ajmal as the team's fast and spin bowling coaches and then the short term appointments of Adam Hollioake and Simon Helmut as batting coach and high performance coach of the team in Australia for the three-Test series. (PTI)

Injuries mean Pakistan's 15-test losing streak in Australia may be hard to break at MCG

MELBOURNE, Dec 25: Pakistan goes into Tuesday's Boxing Day match against Australia on a 15-match test losing streak, not having won Down Under since November 1995. The team's ever-expanding injury list heading into the Melbourne Cricket Ground test won't make ending the streak any easier.

Pakistan spinner Noman Ali became the second player in two days to withdraw from the touring squad for the remainder of the three-test series due to illness and injury. Left-arm spinner Mohammad Nawaz will replace Ali in the squad, the selection committee said on the weekend.

Ali, who didn't play in the 360-run defeat in the first test at Perth last week, underwent surgery for appendicitis in Melbourne on Saturday.

"Noman Ali complained of sudden and severe abdominal pain yesterday, leading to examinations and scans in emergency that confirmed a diagnosis of acute appendicitis," a Pakistan team statement read.

"Post-surgery he is stable and doing fine. He will be discharged later (on Saturday)."

The latest blow for the tourists comes after fast bowler Khurram



Shahzad, who took match figures of 5-128 in his impressive test debut in Perth, was ruled out for the remainder of the series with a rib stress fracture and muscle tear on Thursday. Leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed, who missed out the first test, was also ruled out of the test because of a leg injury.

Pakistan traveled to Australia with a weakened bowling lineup after fast bowler Naseem Shah was ruled out due to a long-term injury and Haris Rauf opted to play in Australia's Big Bash League instead of joining the touring squad.

"It is really unfortunate that Noman Ali is not available for the test matches," chief selector Wahab Riaz said. "Due to logistical challenges, including visa issues for any new player, and considering the requirement for a left-arm spinner, Nawaz was the best available choice for the side."

Australia opener Usman Khawaja, who was reprimanded by the International Cricket Council for wearing a black armband in support of Palestinians in Gaza during

the first test, was not expected to wear it on Tuesday for the start of the second.

He risked further sanction by the ICC if he wore it again, and said last week he had no plans to wear the armband again during this series.

ICC regulations prevent cricketers from displaying messages of political, religious or racial causes during international matches. Khawaja was born in Pakistan and is the first Muslim to play test cricket for Australia.

On Sunday at training, though, Khawaja was seen with the image of a dove holding an olive branch — recognized as a universal symbol of peace — on his right boot and on the back of his bat.

But the left-hander's application to the ICC to be allowed to display the images during the Melbourne test was turned down.

Australia captain Pat Cummins feels the dove symbol supports his teammate's right to have strong beliefs, but accepts the governing body's ruling.

"We really support Uzzy. He's standing up for what he believes and I think he's done it really respectfully," Cummins said Monday. (AP)

I want to achieve what no other Indian team has in South Africa: Rohit

Mohammed Shami, who played a big role in the 2021 Test win at Centurion, will be missed due to his left heel injury

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 25: Rohit Sharma, as leader of the side, wants to achieve what past Indian teams have not in the past 31 years — a series victory in South Africa but even that won't be able to heal the scars of World Cup final defeat.

The skipper wants his unit to be the first one to win a series in the Rainbow Nation in India's ninth attempt since 1992.

"These are very important matches in terms of where we stand as a team. Also to look back that we have never won a series here as well, it's a big opportunity for us to do well here," Rohit said on the eve of the opening Test.

"We came pretty close the last two times when we toured here but again we have come to this place with lot of confidence to try and achieve what nobody (Indian) team has ever achieved in this part of the world," the skipper said, exuding confidence.

So will it act as a balm for World Cup final defeat and he was straight?

"I don't know whether a Test series win in South Africa can be a balm for a World Cup final defeat. I mean World Cup is World Cup. It's mehaat ki haai, kuch toh

result milein. (We have been working so hard, it's time we get some big result). We all want that," Rohit answered typically in his own sweet style.

However, Mohammed Shami, who played a big role in the 2021 Test win at Centurion, will be missed due to his left heel injury.

"What he has done for our team over the years, obviously it's a big miss but someone will come in place of him, try and fill in that role and it will not be easy but we have confidence," said Rohit.

"Prasidh (Krishna) extracts a lot of bounce due to his height and Mukesh can swing the ball. We were suppose to have a look at pitch today and decide whether we want someone to bowl up or back. We have 75 percent decided and rest 25 percent we would tomorrow," the skipper replied with a wry smile.

South Africa isn't exactly a dream destination for batters and in Shreyas Iyer, Shubman Gill and Yashasvi Jaiswal, the team has three top-order players, playing a Test here for the first time.

"That's a challenge. But at some point, we (him, Virat Kohli, KL Rahul) were also



newcomers when we came to South Africa or Australia or England. And it's the same for these guys as well."

KL Rahul keeping wickets is not exactly team management's long term plan but

certainly for this series where it gives the team the cushion to play an extra batter.

"I don't know how long he wants to keep but he is quite keen to take up the role," Rohit said, indicating that against

Yoga girl Nidhi Dogra won Silver medal at the national level

HAMIRPUR (HP), Dec 25: Popularly known as the "rubber doll," Nidhi Dogra has won the Silver medal at the 67th National School Games held recently in Kolkata.

Dogra, a Class 10 student of Super Magnet Senior Secondary School, Pratap Nagar, Hamirpur, won the medal in the national-level artistic yoga competition in the National Yogasana School Sports Competition, said her father, Shashi Kumar, who is also her coach.

Dogra aced five out of seven asanas in the games held from December 19 to 21, he added.

The resident of Khiund village has won several won medals at national and international level and holds six world records. She has also won several reality shows.

She is the brand ambassador of Yoga World Book of Records.

Dogra said she worked very hard to win the medal and had practised for four hours every day at home for this competition. (PTI)



England on rank turners with three spinners in operation, this won't be the best idea.

But he is happy that Rahul was flexible enough to accept the challenge.

"Look every cricketer needs to go through some kind of transformation in their career, hardly few players, who start at one position and play throughout in that position, KL is one of them."

"The way he (Rahul) kept in World Cup, it was quite pleasing. He is really working hard and he himself is quite keen to take up that role, so it gives us an option to play a solid batter at either No 5, 6 or 7," said Rohit. He also indicated that Rahul will bat in the middle order as his experience and game awareness in those slots in invaluable.

"He got 100 last time while opening the innings. But this time, he will play in middle order, we have seen he does most of the things right in that position in ODIs."

"He bats in the middle order, he understands situations and is an experienced player. He knows what exactly what is required at different stages of the game and gives us solid balance," he said. (PTI)

FIFA threatens to suspend Brazil over confederation president's removal by court

FIFA and South American soccer body CONMEBOL also said in the letter they will form a commission to discuss the matter in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO, Dec 25: FIFA warned Brazil on Sunday it could suspend its national teams and clubs from international competitions if an intervention by its soccer body leads to the election of a new president in January.

FIFA said in a letter to a Brazilian soccer executive that the country's soccer body CBF could face suspension if it does not heed its call to wait and instead holds a swift election to replace Ednaldo Rodrigues as president regardless. The document was obtained by The Associated Press.

A Rio de Janeiro court removed Rodrigues and all his appointees at CBF from office on Dec. 7 due to irregularities in his election last year. Brazil's two highest courts upheld that ruling last week.

Soccer's governing body FIFA historically rejects government and third-party interference in its member associations, which ultimately could leave five-time World Cup winners Brazil out of major competitions until the crisis is solved.

The Rio court ruling also named José Perdigão, the head of Brazil's top sports court, as an intervener to organize new elections for the presidency within 30 working days. FIFA said in previous letters to CBF it considers the intervention to be undue.

Sunday's letter was signed by FIFA's Kenny Jean-Marie, its chief members' association officer, and CONMEBOL's deputy secretary-general, Monserrat Jiménez García. FIFA and South American soccer body CONMEBOL also said in the letter they will



form a commission to discuss the matter in Brazil on Jan. 8.

"FIFA and CONMEBOL would like to strongly emphasize that, until such mission takes place, no decision affecting CBF, including any elections or call for elections, shall be taken. Should this not be respected, FIFA will have no other option but to submit the matter to its relevant decision-making body for consideration and decision, which might also include a suspension," the letter

said. "For the sake of good order, we would also like to underline that should CBF be eventually suspended by the relevant FIFA body, it would lose all of its membership rights with immediate effect and until the suspension is lifted by FIFA. This would also mean that CBF representative and clubs teams would no longer be entitled to take part in any international competition while it is suspended," it added.

The document also says that any irregular

interference in its member associations "can lead to sanctions as provided for in the FIFA Statutes, including a suspension, and this even if the third-party influence was/is not the fault of the member association concerned."

Perdigão said in a statement he sees FIFA's letter "as a positive sign." He also added he will "call for the elections within the established deadline, with the transparency and integrity that are demanded."

Spokespersons for Rodrigues did not respond to a request for comment from the AP.

Rodrigues first took the job as interim president in 2021 after predecessor Rogério Caboclo was suspended. Local media reported he is currently in negotiations with other Brazilian soccer executives to either bid again for the presidency in new elections or to support another candidate.

Rodrigues' term in office runs through 2026. He is yet another CBF president to face legal problems in recent years, though he is not involved in corruption cases like predecessors Ricardo Teixeira, José Maria Marin and Marco Polo del Nero.

Caboclo was suspended from the presidency in September 2021 in connection with a sexual harassment case at the CBF, which opened the path for vice presidents to elect Rodrigues as the first Black president of the soccer body. The ruling against the 69-year-old Rodrigues could hurt Brazil's bid to host the Women's World Cup in 2027 and his quest to hire Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti to lead the national team next year. (AP)

You will get an answer for sure in due course: Rohit on his T20I future



JOHANNESBURG, Dec 25: India captain Rohit Sharma can leave everyone in peals of laughter with his comments, while himself maintaining a poker face. Before the press conference started here on Monday, he smiled and told everyone, "No questions on IPL. Only on Indian cricket team."

Someone pushed his luck and enquired, "it's a press meet, we can ask." Rohit pointed to the BCCI logo on his crest to signal it's a board-organised press meet. He knew he would be probed about his white-ball future.

Where does Rohit the batter see himself in the coming two years?

"I will play whatever cricket is there in front of me," he said in a loaded answer one can interpret the way one wants to.

The next question was more direct? "Do you seniors, you, Virat (Kohli) feel desperation to play T20 World Cup?"

"Desperation cricket khelne ke liye sabko hai (We are all desperate to play cricket). Everyone wants to do well whatever chances they get," he said.

And, then, he let everyone know what they were trying to extract from him.

"I know what you are trying to ask. You will get an answer, you will, for certain," said Rohit as he tried to suppress his grin.

Pochettino unfazed by Chelsea disciplinary record

LONDON, Dec 25: Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino is defending his team's unwelcome position as the Premier League side with the most yellow cards this season.

Pochettino said Chelsea's 56 bookings in 18 league games did not show a lack of discipline but rather his players' desire to compete.

"We are in a big club, you feel the pressure," Pochettino said ahead of Chelsea's next league game against Crystal Palace on Wednesday. "When you are frustrated, and you don't have maybe the experience of other teams, you make a mistake."

The team collected five bookings during the 2-1 defeat to Wolves at Molineux on Sunday, among them Cole Palmer who will now miss the Palace game after accruing five for the campaign.

Raheem Sterling also saw yellow for simulation when he

On a serious note, he admitted that the World Cup final was a bitter pill to swallow for everyone in the team.

"The World Cup until the final the way we played, you expect to go an inch further. Unfortunately, we couldn't do it and that was the hard part, take that, honestly we have all these years worked hard for it, and you saw how we managed to play the first 10 games and the final," he said.

"Obviously, we didn't do certain things well in the final and that cost us the match, there were not many things we could point out that we didn't do this right or we didn't do that right," said Rohit, sounding practical in his thought process.

Just like he had said in an Instagram video, Rohit felt the love of the fans had got him back to playing cricket after the loss to Australia in the final.

"It's hard (to overcome) from a loss like that, but there's so much happening in life and there's so much cricket happening, move on from that (World Cup loss), it took time to come out from that and you got to look forward," he added. "Honestly, I got a lot of messages from the outside world as well and that motivated me personally to get up and start doing my job again," he concluded. (PTI)

Wolves hang on to beat wasteful Chelsea 2-1 in sole Premier League Christmas Eve fixture

WOLVERHAMPTON, Dec 25: Chelsea slumped to a third defeat in four Premier League games as second-half goals from Mario Lemina and Matt Doherty earned Wolverhampton a deserved 2-1 victory at Molineux on Sunday.

Lemina headed in unmarked from Pablo Sarabia's corner early in the second period, just reward after Gary O'Neil's side had weathered early pressure and the hosts had spurned a host of chances, most glaringly from Raheem Sterling.

Chelsea labored to find a way back, but as has been the case for much of the season, failed to find the key pass in the final third, with Cole Palmer ineffective.

Then in stoppage time and with the visitors committed forward, Wolves broke and Hugo Bueno crossed for Doherty to take advantage of a poor clearance to slot home a second.

Substitute Christopher Nkunku headed his first Chelsea goal in the dying minutes, but Mauricio Pochettino's side slipped to a third away league defeat on the spin.

Armando Broja spurned the game's first opening. After Sterling fed Malo Gusto down the right, his low cross into the box arrived perfectly at the foot of the Albanian, playing as a lone striker with Nicolas Jackson moved to the wing. Looking to shoot first time, Broja missed and the chance was gone.

Sterling was Chelsea's most dangerous threat in the first half, running at Wolves down either flank and pitching inviting deliveries. The best of them fell to Jackson who had found space, but as the ball dropped, his touch failed to match his movement and the pass squirmed beneath his foot and away.

Then after half an hour, it was Sterling's turn to spurn a chance. The England international did brilliantly to harry and dispossess Joao Gomes, Wolves' last man, who dithered on the ball deep in his own half. With the defense stranded upfield, Sterling advanced on goal with Jackson and Palmer wide open beside him. Either player would have had a tap-in but Sterling went alone and hit a weak shot straight at Jose Sa.

Wolves' best chances of the half came in the closing seconds, first when Sarabia fired just wide from the edge of the box via a deflection, then Hee Chan Hwang raced clear of Levi Colwill from a ball over the top and lashed over.

They began the second half with similar urgency, Gomes hitting a shot that nicked off Lesley Ugochukwu and grazed the post before defender Toti got forward from the back and drew an outstanding point-blank save from Chelsea's stand-in goalkeeper Djordje Petrovic.

It was a warning the visitors did not heed and the goal moments later was an almost carbon copy of Toti's chance. (AP)

Ratcliffe wants struggling Man United back at the top of English and European soccer

MANCHESTER, Dec 25: British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe has finally got his hands on Manchester United after securing a stake of up to 25% in the Premier League club. Ratcliffe's interest in sports — and soccer in particular — is long-standing. The 71-year-old owner of petrochemicals giant has been a United fan since childhood, and supporters will like his stated ambitions.

"We all want to see Manchester United back where we belong, at the very top of English, European and world football," Ratcliffe said Sunday after a deal, subject to Premier League approval, was confirmed following lengthy negotiations with the Glazer family, United's American owners.

The announcement comes after moves elsewhere in European soccer that could have seen Ratcliffe take control of one of United's main Premier League rivals as recently as last year.

Ratcliffe, one of the richest people in Britain, had initially looked to buy the Glazers' controlling stake of around 69%, but eventually agreed to become a minority shareholder.

He had to see off competition from Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani, who withdrew in October from the bidding process after failing to agree a deal for a complete takeover.

Ratcliffe made a surprise late bid for Premier League club Chelsea in 2022, despite not being involved in a months-long bidding process.



A consortium led by Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital had already seen off competition — from the likes of Chicago Cubs owner the Ricketts family, and Boston Celtics co-owner Steve Pagliuca — to enter exclusive talks to buy out former Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich when Ratcliffe made his move.

Despite his long-standing support of United being well-publicized, Ratcliffe was adamant his interest was serious.

"We are British and have great intentions for Chelsea," he said at the time. Ultimately his bid came too late to disrupt Boehly and Clearlake's takeover.

Later that year, Ratcliffe let it be known that was interested in buying United as rumors of a Glazer sale surfaced.

He then altered that stance. "Our position has developed

since the summer and we are now focusing our efforts in Nice and raising our ambitions for the club to make them into a top-tier club in France to compete with PSG," INEOS said in a statement. "This would represent much better value for our investment than buying one of the top-tier Premier League clubs." Then came the Glazers' announcement that they would be open to selling, and Ratcliffe launched a bid to buy out the Americans' stake.

While Ratcliffe is tasked with helping to make United competitive again in the Premier League — a competition it once utterly dominated — his Nice side is impressing in the south of France.

Ratcliffe completed the takeover of Nice four years ago. After some inconsistent seasons, Nice, under its philosophy-studying Italian coach Francesco Farioli, is chal-

lenging defending champion Paris Saint-Germain.

Nice is second in the French league, five points behind leader PSG after 17 rounds.

So Nice can realistically target second place and an automatic spot in next season's Champions League.

But that could be problematic. UEFA rules in place for more than 20 years do not allow two clubs where the same owner has "decisive influence" on how they are run to both enter European competitions if they could cross paths at any point in the season.

If both teams qualify for the Champions League, priority goes to the team which finishes higher in its domestic league. On current form, that is Nice.

Ratcliffe's first entry into soccer club ownership was Lausanne-Sport in 2017. INEOS already was a sponsor of its local club in Switzerland where it had moved parts of the business in 2010.

INEOS management's stated ambitions for the top-tier Swiss club were to qualify for European competitions and work with youth academies in Africa. Its first player signing was soccer great Zinedine Zidane's son, Enzo.

Lausanne is currently 10th in what is now a 12-team league.

Ratcliffe has also successfully ventured into the world of cycling.

Back in 2019, the mighty Team Sky became Team INEOS (and later INEOS Grenadiers) after a change of ownership. (AP)

With eye on Olympic quota, CWG medallist Jaismine working on mental acuity, power

Last year, Jaismine had become the first female boxer to be inducted into the Indian Army

GREATER NOIDA, Dec 25: Commonwealth Games bronze medallist boxer Jaismine Lamboria is working on increasing her mental acuity as well as sharpening her punches as she eyes a coveted Paris Olympic quota.

The talented boxer ended her debut Asian Games campaign on an anti-climatic note earlier this year. Having won the first round in dominant fashion, Jaismine seemingly had a brain fade moment after she was given a warning, with referee eventually forced to stop the 60kg quarter-final bout.

"I was given a warning, counting for the first time. So, I was not able to handle it. My mind just went blank. It is important to know how to come back from such a situation which I didn't," Jaismine told PTI after winning her quarterfinal bout at the National Championships here on Monday.

A win would have not only fetched her a medal but also a Paris Olympics quota.

"After that Asian Games bout, coaches told me to work on the mental aspect. I am working with a psychologist. He has told me to work on visualisation and do meditation," she added.

The 22-year-old cruised to the National Championships semifinal in the 60kg category, which is one of the two women's weight classes where India is yet to seal a quota. A top-three finish at the Nationals



will ensure a return to the national camp for Jaismine, where she has been a regular for the past two years.

Jaismine has come a long way since competing in her debut World Champi-

onships in 2022. From someone who used to only counterattack, she has learnt to be the aggressor.

"There has been progress, I am learning a lot of things, I try and work on my weak-

nesses. My game is getting better with time. Par ek dum se nahi aa raha, time lag raha hai (I am not able to win medals, it's taking time)," rued Jaismine.

"Mera quarterfinal mei reh jata hai (I

end up losing in the quarterfinals)," she added, having lost in the last-eight stage both in the World Championships and the Asian Games.

Last year, Jaismine had become the first female boxer to be inducted into the Indian Army. At the Services camp, she trains and spars with male boxers to increase the power of her punches.

"I am working on my mistakes from before. I prefer back-peddling but my Services coaches tell me to not just rely on that and go ahead and attack."

"I train with the boys during the Services camp. It improves my game and strength. There are only three girls in the camp, so coaches pay a lot of attention to what we should do and should not do."

Under Boxing Federation of India's (BFI) new selection process, Jaismine had always topped the charts in the 60kg weight division. "Dimitry (Dmitruk) sir and Bernard (Dunne) sir also tell me to connect punches and go ahead and attack and build pressure. At the same time, be ready for counter attack," she adds.

The top-three boxers in 60kg will move to the national camp where they will undergo an assessment, based on which a pugilist will be selected for the next Olympic qualifier, which is slated to take place in Busto Arzizio, Italy from February 29 to March 12. (PTI)