

- Russia-India ties making 'steady headway' despite 'current turbulences': Putin
- A Russian drone and artillery attack kills 6 in Ukraine and knocks out power in a major city
- Tamil actor, DMDK founder leader Vijayakanth dies
- ED probes land transactions of Priyanka, Robert Vadra

Qatar appellate court commutes death sentence of 8 Navy veterans: MEA

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: In a huge relief to eight Indian Navy veterans on death row, an appellate court in Qatar has commuted their sentence. "We have noted the verdict today of the Court of Appeal of Qatar in the Dahra Global case, in which the sentences have been reduced," the External Affairs Ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

The ministry didn't specify what the "reduced" punishment was and said a detailed judgment was awaited. "Due to the confidential and sensitive nature of proceedings of this case, it would not be appropriate to make any further comment at this juncture," the ministry said and added that it was in close touch with the legal team as well as the family members to decide on the next steps.

The appellate court verdict is also seen as a big diplomatic win for India as it comes weeks after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani on the sidelines of the COP28 Summit in

Dubai. After the meeting on December 1, Modi said they discussed the well-being of the Indian community in Qatar.

The Indian nationals, who were working with Doha-based Al Dahra Global Technologies, were taken into custody in August 2022 in an alleged espionage case. While the charges against them were not made public by Qatari authorities, they were sentenced to death by Qatar's Court of First Instance in October this year.

The private firm provided training and other services to Qatar's armed forces and security agencies. India had moved the Court of Appeal in Qatar against the death sentence last month.

"Our Ambassador to Qatar and other officials were present in the Court of Appeal today, along with the family members. We have stood by them since the beginning of the matter and we will continue to extend all consular and legal assistance. We will also continue to take up the matter with the Qatari authorities," (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Oppn parties, civil society sceptical on proposed ULFA accord, terms it as BJP's 'election agenda' 'Without ULFA (I) participation talks meaningless'

GUWAHATI, Dec 28: Opposition parties and civil society in Assam are sceptical about the relevance of the proposed accord with the ULFA pro-talks faction.

The accord is set to be signed in New Delhi on December 29, but there are concerns that it will not bring peace to the state as long as the ULFA (Independent) does not participate in discussions. Critics argue that this accord is simply an election agenda of the ruling BJP at both the central and state levels.

Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leader Debabrata Saikia told PTI that a permanent solution to the long-standing issue 'will be possible only when all sections of the outfit come for talks. I request chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma to ensure that ULFA(I) led by Paresh Barua is also brought to the discussion table'.

"We welcome discussions and hope for a solution to the long-standing dispute. This is nothing new as this initiative was taken in 2011 during the Congress regime but after the BJP came to power in 2014, they did nothing to take the peace process forward," he said.



"The timing of the signing of the accord, therefore, has created doubts in the mind of the people of Assam. We suspect that it may be just an election gimmick before the Lok Sabha polls in 2024," the opposition leader said.

Saikia urged both the Central and state governments not to 'hoodwink the people of Assam and take them for a ride but ensure that peaceful negotiations are held with both factions of ULFA so that permanent peace can be achieved

in the state'. He alleged that on one side, innocent civilians are being arrested and injured in encounters with militants and on the other, peace talks are being held in New Delhi and 'it is doubtful that in such a situation, permanent peace can be realised'.

Rajior Dal head and MLA Akhil Gogoi told PTI that the peace talks and an accord can be welcomed only "if more power or special status is conferred to the state under

the Constitution, resulting in the state having more control over the natural resources along with economic and political rights'.

"The accord, however, will not be meaningful for the people of Assam if it only results in an economic package and resettlement of the overground ULFA cadres. Moreover, it is irrelevant to hold talks with those who are not currently involved in the struggle. Discussions with the ULFA(I) are of utmost importance for permanent peace or solution of the long-standing issues of the state," he said. Gogoi demanded that the Centre should hold talks with ULFA(I) at the earliest to settle the issue if they want 'permanent peace in Assam and India'.

Assam Jatiya Parishad's general secretary Jagadish Bhuyan said there have been many accords signed in the past, but their implementation remains incomplete.

"We extend our best wishes for the proposed accord but hope it will include a clause that the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) will not be included in the state at any cost." (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

India sees single-day rise of 702 Covid cases

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: India saw a single day rise of 702 cases of Covid-19, with the number of active cases of the infection rising to 4,097, the health ministry said on Thursday.

Six new fatalities -- two from Maharashtra and one each from Karnataka, Kerala, West Bengal, and Delhi -- were reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8 am.

The country had recorded 752 new cases on December 22.

The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits by December 5, but the cases have again gone up after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions.

The daily numbers were in lakhs at the peak of the pandemic, which began in early 2020 and has seen more than 4.5 crore people getting infected and over 5.3 lakh deaths in about four years since then across the country.

The number of people who recuperated from the infection stands at over 4.4 crore with a national recovery rate of 98.81 per cent, according to the ministry's website. According to the website, 220.67 crore doses of Covid vaccines have so far been administered in the country.

KSA demands investigation against suspended APS officer

DIPHU, Dec 28: The Karbi Students Association (KSA), Diphu District Committee (DPC), has demanded a thorough investigation into the actions of Rumir Timungpi, a suspended APS officer and daughter of Mangal Sing Timung, executive member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

The association asserted that Rumir's alleged misconduct warrants a fitting punishment.

According to the official statement, KSA strongly condemned Rumir for what they describe as a disgraceful act. The association alleged that (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

HT BRIEFS

Four arrested

BOKAJAN: The police in Karbi Anglong in an operation nabbed four from Nagaland at Khan Basti, Karbi Anglong under Khakhati police station. The arrested men from Nagaland have been identified as Limatemjen (34), resident of Molungyimesen, Diphuphar police station, Chumukedima district, Nagaland; Joseph Chishi (40), resident of 5th mile unit village, Diphuphar police station, Chumukedima district, Nagaland; Khekatu Sumi (39), resident of 5th mile unit village, Diphuphar police station, Chumukedima district, Nagaland and Bokicho Chopi (33), resident of Khuwuboto colony, Zunheboto Sadar. A .22 mm pistol fitted with a magazine and 02 live ammunitions were recovered from them along with ₹ 50,400 cash and four mobile phones. A case has been registered against them.

Mohan Bhagwat

MAJULI: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat on Thursday asserted that every nation has its own unique way of life which is derived from its culture. "The 'sanskriti' (culture) of Bharat is reflected through 'Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti' (truth is one but it's revealed by intellectuals differently). This all-inclusive tradition exists only in Bharat," Bhagwat said at the 'Poorvottar Sant Manikanchan Sammelan' at the North Kamala Bari Satra in Assam's Majuli. He pointed out that in the present times, the country has to stand firm to give the message of peace and coexistence to the world and "to fulfil this noble task, the revered spiritual leaders will have to come forward in our society". "We all have the same ancestors and the same values. We will have to take our unity forward while adhering to our diversity."

Mizoram: Assam Rifles seize drugs worth ₹ 956 crore in 2023

AIZAWL, Dec 28: Assam Rifles has seized drugs worth ₹ 956 crore in Mizoram this year, marking a more than 50 per cent increase in drug seizures compared to last year. According to Assam Rifles data, the paramilitary force had recovered drugs worth ₹ 330.93 crore in 2022.

During operations in various places from January to December 25 this year, the paramilitary force recovered 33kg of heroin valued at ₹ 546.62 crore, compared to a meagre 1.5kg of the narcotics valued at ₹ 40.87 crore in 2022. Data also revealed that the paramilitary force seized 3kg of opium worth ₹ 1.8 lakh, 20.5kg of poppy seeds worth ₹ 53 lakh, and 25.95kg of ganja (cannabis) worth ₹ 18.48 lakh this year.

Additionally, the Assam Rifles re-

covered more than 12 lakh tablets of methamphetamine worth over ₹ 339 crore, as well as 98,000 tablets of triprolidine worth ₹ 9.8 crore during the period.

In comparison, last year the paramilitary force seized had 8.85 lakh tablets of methamphetamine valued at ₹ 289.83 crore and 1.9 lakh tablets of pseudoephedrin worth ₹ 11.88 lakh. Apart from drugs and narcotics, the Assam Rifles also recovered various contraband items such as areca nuts, foreign cigarettes, and liquor, mainly smuggled from Myanmar, with a total value of ₹ 96 crore during the year.

Meanwhile on Thursday, officials from the excise and narcotics department seized 835 grams of heroin and arrested (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

NRL, CSIR-NEIST seal ₹ 90 crore pact to boost petrochemical research

JORHAT, Dec 28: In a ground-breaking move, Numaligarh Refinery Ltd. (NRL) has committed a staggering ₹ 90 crore in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with CSIR-North East Institute of Science and Technology (CSIR-NEIST), said an official statement on Thursday.

As per the statement, the agreement aims to establish the NRL-NEIST R&D Centre at CSIR-NEIST, marking a pivotal moment in petrochemical research. CSIR-NEIST Director, Dr. G. Narahari Sastry, expressed that the MoU signifies a historic collaboration, leveraging CSIR-NEIST's profound expertise in petrochemical research.

"With multidisciplinary R&D capabilities, the institute aims to pro-



vide comprehensive solutions to industry challenges and drive technological advancements for societal development," he added.

The MoU signing ceremony, attended by key figures including Dr. Sastry, Bhaskar Jyoti Phukan (MD,

EM Richard Tokbi highlights positive impact of Gunotsav on school education

DIPHU, Dec 28: Richard Tokbi, the executive member (EM) for Education at Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), stated on Thursday that the Gunotsav results indicate an improvement in school education.

The KAAC Gunotsav occurred on October 16, 17, and 18, 2023, marking the first such event in Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong. The purpose of the Gunotsav was to evaluate the quality of education in government schools and identify areas for improvement.

Conducted under the initiative of chief executive member (CEM) Tuliram Ronghang, the Gunotsav aimed to enhance the quality of education.

"We need to thank our CEM as he has a dream of accomplishing 'Vision 2025' to promote quality education. Under his initiative, Gunotsav Karbi Anglong has been conducted. I express my gratitude to the officials of the education department, teachers,



and all those involved in the KAAC Gunotsav. It is preparation for the Assam Gunotsav," said EM Tokbi during a press conference held at his official residence. EM Tokbi also announced that Assam state Gunotsav would be conducted across the state in January 2024. The Gunotsav will be held in three phases, with Karbi Anglong (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

2 arrested in connection with Jorhat grenade blast

JORHAT, Dec 28: In a significant development, two persons have been arrested on Thursday in connection with the grenade blast at the Lichubari 41 sub area military station in Jorhat on December 14, said an official.

Jorhat superintendent of police (SP), ML Meena, confirmed that both suspects were apprehended, and their motorcycle, believed to be involved in the incident, has been seized.

Meena further stated that the interrogation of the two detainees is currently underway, and additional names and details pertaining to the case will be disclosed tomorrow.

The breakthrough in the investigation was credited to the assistance of CCTV footage and other crucial pieces of evidence, aiding law enforcement in identifying and arresting (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Shah sets target of winning 10 LS seats in Telangana

HYDERABAD, Dec 28: Senior BJP leader and Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday set a target for the party to win at least 10 seats and secure a 35 per cent vote share in Telangana in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, party sources said.

At a meeting of 'mandal' presidents of the party from across Telangana, he claimed that the Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) is a "sunk ship" and the state's ruling Congress is a "sinking ship" while the BJP is Telangana's future, they said.

Seeking to boost cadres' morale after the BJP was relegated to third position in the recent assembly polls, Shah said the party used to get less than 10 per cent of votes in Gujarat before it emerged as a major force in the western state and won power. "You have to work hard. The BJP is being seen as the state's future. You have to ensure that at least

10 lotus blooms here," he said, referring to the party's election symbol, according to a source.

Telangana has 17 Lok Sabha seats, of which the BJP had won four in the 2019 elections. Its vote share was close to 20 per cent.

The BRS, which was in power at the time, had won nine seats and the Congress three.

Shah said some people are wondering why he is visiting the state after the BJP lost in the assembly polls. He asserted that he will keep visiting Telangana till the BJP forms government in the state, urging its members to expose the "corruption" of the Congress.

The government may have changed in Telangana but it will not benefit the people, Shah said, targeting the BRS and the Congress for their alleged appeasement and corruption. (PTI)

Human error behind Nepal's Yeti Airlines crash that killed all 72 people: Report



KATHMANDU, Dec 28: The crash of a Yeti Airlines' aircraft in January this year that killed all 72 people on board, including five Indians, in Nepal's resort city of Pokhara was caused by human error, according to an inquiry report submitted to the government on Thursday.

Yeti Airlines' 9N-ANC ATR-72 aircraft crashed on the bank of the

Seti River between the old airport and the new airport minutes before landing on January 15.

A five-member Investigation Commission formed after the crash said in its report that the aircraft crash on January 15, 2023, was due to human error, Nepal's official news agency RSS reported.

The five Indians - Abhishek Kushwaha (25), Bishal Sharma

(22), Anil Kumar Rajbhar (27), Sonu Jaiswal (35) and Sanjaya Jaiswal (26) - were among 72 people on board when the plane crashed.

The Commission formed under the coordination of former Secretary Nagendra Prasad Ghimire submitted the report to the Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Sudan Kirati. It took eight months and three days for the Commission to carry out the investigation and prepare the report.

The government had formed the five-member probe commission on the day of the plane crash. Retired captain of the Nepali Army, Deepak Prakash Bastola, retired captain Sunil Thapa, aeronautical engineer Ekraj Jung Thapa and joint-secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Buddhi Sagar Lamichhane were the members of the probe commission. Minister Kirati (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

'We expect the Space Activity Bill to be discussed in Parl which will cover various factors'

India's space industry seeks bold reforms, clarity on FDI

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: India's private space industry has sought bold and transformative reforms with clarity on the foreign direct investment to propel the nascent sector in the new year.

The industry had welcomed the government decision, reflected in the Telecommunications Act approved by Parliament, to adopt the administrative route for allocation of satellite-based spectrum which would help bridge the digital divide by enabling space-based broadband internet access to remote parts of the country.

Industry bodies -- Indian Space Association (ISpA) and Satcom Industry Association (SIA-India) -- have also asked the government to bring the Space Activity Bill for approval of Parliament to give statutory cover to the Space Policy announced earlier this year.

"We expect the Space Activity Bill to be discussed in Parliament



which will cover various factors of India's space goals, including insurance in space, international and national obligations, define offences and subsequent punishments, barriers of entry for private companies, liability for damages caused in space," Lt Gen A K Bhatt (retd), di-

rector general, Indian Space Association (ISpA), told PTI.

Bhatt said once the FDI Policy is in place, funds will flow from Indian big companies and there will be financial incentives to private players to be able to operate.

In its pre-budget memorandum,

SIA-India has sought increased budgetary outlay for the Department of Space, tax incentives for research and development, extended tax-holiday for deep tech start-ups to seven years, interest rate subsidies, financial incentives for academia and visa programmes for entrepreneurs.

"The proposed budget reforms outlined in the memorandum are crucial for fostering innovation, ensuring global competitiveness, and propelling the Indian space industry to new heights," said Subba Rao Pavuluri, president of SIA-India.

However, prior to implementing financial stimulus and regulatory measures, the space sector requires a comprehensive Quantitative Analysis and delineation of Space Economy Sectors, akin to the OECD framework or the US Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) framework, the industry body said. The emphasis (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Engineering exports dip in first eight months of FY24 : EEPCC

Share of engineering exports in India's total merchandise exports was recorded at 23.17 per cent in November 2023

KOLKATA, Dec 28: Exports of engineering goods during the period April to November of the current financial year have dipped 1.81 per cent at USD 69.46 billion as against USD 70.74 billion in the similar previous period, Engineering Exports Promotion Council (EEPC) of India said.

Engineering goods exports to West Asia and North Africa (WANA), North East Asia, and CIS countries recorded positive year-on-year growth in the first eight months (April-November) of the current financial year 2023-24, while shipments to key regions like North America, EU, ASEAN and South Asia witnessed decline during this period.

Excluding iron and steel, engineering exports recorded a marginal 0.79 per cent y-o-y growth during April-November 2023-24, EEPCC said in a statement on Thursday.

Engineering exports from India



declined by 3.10 per cent to USD 7.85 billion in November 2023 from USD 8.10 billion in November 2022.

Commenting on the latest engineering exports numbers, EEPCC India chairman Arun Kumar Garodia said "Overall, factors like high-interest rates and weakening industrial output, volatility in com-

modity prices and increase in trade-restrictive measures are affecting global trade and in turn India's engineering exports".

He said, "Given the above situation, we seek guidance and support from the government to face these difficult times. Factors such as raw material prices and the high cost of logistics are becoming an

additional burden for Indian exporters in the face of this global trade depression. We urge the government to look into these matters and continue supporting us to keep us competitive in the global market".

The share of engineering exports in India's total merchandise exports was recorded at 23.17 per cent in November 2023, as against 24.11 per cent in the preceding month, EEPCC said.

Among top exporting destinations, exports to Saudi Arabia, Russia, South Korea, Mexico, Singapore, UAE, and Brazil experienced year-on-year growth in November 2023, while shipments to the USA, UK, Germany, Italy, and China saw negative export growth, the trade body said.

Notably, since the signing of the FTA with Australia, engineering exports to the country declined for the first time in November this year. (PTI)

Rupee rebounds 17 paise to 83.17 against US dollar

MUMBAI, Dec 28: The rupee rebounded after two straight days of fall to settle 17 paise higher at 83.17 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, amid a weak American currency overseas and a rally in domestic equity markets.

The inflow of foreign funds and a downward trend in crude oil prices also supported the Indian currency, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the domestic currency opened at 83.33 and traded in a range of 83.16-83.34 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.17 (provisional), registering a gain of 17 paise over its previous close. The rupee had lost 18 paise in the previous two sessions. On Wednesday, the domestic currency settled 15 paise lower at 83.34 against the dollar, a day after closing at a loss of 3 paise.

Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said the rupee appreciated on the weak US dollar and a surge in domestic markets.

Choudhary said the rupee is likely to trade with a slight positive bias on fresh foreign inflows and an extended decline in the US dollar. Also, "traders may take cues from weekly unemployment claims data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹ 82.90 to ₹ 83.50".

The US dollar declined on rising expectations of rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve. The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading lower by 0.28 per cent at 100.37 on Thursday.

Meanwhile, global oil price benchmark Brent crude declined 0.64 per cent to USD 79.14 per barrel. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 371.95 points or 0.52 per cent to settle at an all-time high of 72,410.38 points. The broader NSE Nifty soared 123.95 points or 0.57 per cent to 21,778.70 points. (PTI)

RBI to act early to prevent any risk to India's fastest growth potential: Guv Shaktikanta Das



MUMBAI, Dec 28: Reserve Bank Governor Shaktikanta Das on Thursday said India is one of the fastest growing major economies in the world with a rising potential growth profile, and stressed that the central bank remains committed to act early and decisively to prevent any build-up of risks.

In his foreword to the RBI's 28th issue of the Financial Stability Report (FSR), Das said achieving durable price stability, ensuring medium-term debt sustainability, further strengthening financial sector resilience, creating new growth opportunities and promoting inclusive and green growth remain key policy priorities.

The FSR reflects the collective assessment of the Sub-Committee of the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) on risks to financial stability and the resilience of the Indian financial system.

Observing that the global economy is facing multiple challenges, Das said the Indian economy exhibits macroeconomic resilience, with a robust financial system that is supporting its growth dynamics. "We remain alert and committed to act early and decisively to prevent any build-up of risks,"

he said.

He also said that recent macro-prudential measures taken by the central bank to curb lenders' exuberance towards certain segments of retail loans underline its commitment to preserve financial stability without compromising availability of funds for productive requirements of the economy.

"India is one of the fastest growing major economies in the world with a rising potential growth profile," the governor said, and added the sharp rebound in growth is underpinned by sound macroeconomic fundamentals, robust domestic demand and prudent public policies.

Even as India confronts global headwinds and emerging challenges from technological disruptions, cyber risks and climate change, he said RBI's endeavour will be to continue to fortify the financial system, promote responsible innovation and invigorate inclusive growth.

The Reserve Bank and the other financial regulators remain invested in preserving financial stability and fostering a financial system that is resilient to shocks and supportive of growth, he added. (PTI)

Gold glitter on global cues, jumps ₹ 450



NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Gold prices surged ₹ 450 to ₹ 64,300 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid strong global cues, according to HDFC Securities.

This is at least the second time the precious metal prices have touched a record high of ₹ 64,300 per 10 grams on December 4.

In the previous trade, the yellow metal had ended at ₹ 63,850 per 10 grams. Silver also climbed ₹ 400 to ₹ 79,500 per kilogram, while it had closed at ₹ 79,100 per kg in the previous close.

In the international markets, gold and silver were quoting higher at USD 2,080 per ounce and USD 24.31 per ounce, respectively.

"The Comex spot gold surged to a three-week high following a fall in US Treasury yields and the dollar index, while traders anticipate aggressive Federal Reserve interest rate cuts by next year," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

The US jobs data, to be released on Thursday, will give more cues on the macro front and provide further insights into the potential shifts in the US Fed's monetary policy, Gandhi added. (PTI)

Markets hit fresh lifetime highs; Sensex gains 370 points

MUMBAI, Dec 28: Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty advanced further to settle at record highs for the second straight session on Thursday, buoyed by lower crude prices in international markets and fresh foreign fund inflows amid largely positive global cues.

Hectic buying in energy, metal and FMCG counters also added to the momentum, traders said.

Rising for the fifth consecutive day, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 371.95 points or 0.52 per cent to settle at an all-time closing high of 72,410.38. During the day, it rallied 445.91 points or 0.61 per cent to reach its lifetime peak of 72,484.34.

The Nifty climbed 123.95 points or 0.57 per cent to settle at a fresh record of 21,778.70. During the day, it zoomed 146.7 points or 0.67 per cent to hit its lifetime high of 21,801.45.

In the last five sessions, the BSE benchmark rallied 1,904.07 points or 2.70 per cent, and the Nifty climbed 628.55 points or 2.97 per cent.

"The benchmark index maintained its optimism and hit a fresh high owing to ease in the Red Sea issue and reversal of FII inflows. A decline in crude oil prices below USD 80 prompted widespread purchasing across oil and energy companies."

"The Asian market too advanced due to expectation of more aggressive rate cuts by the Fed next year," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.



Mahindra & Mahindra was the biggest gainer in the Sensex pack, rising 2.81 per cent, followed by NTPC, Power Grid, Nestle, Tata Motors, ITC, Bharti Airtel and Kotak Mahindra Bank.

In contrast, Larsen & Toubro, Wipro, JSW Steel, UltraTech Cement, and Asian Paints were among the laggards.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.66 per cent, and smallcap index advanced 0.23 per cent.

Among the indices, oil & gas jumped 2.45 per cent, energy rallied 2.18 per cent, metal (1.60 per cent), FMCG (1.24 per cent), realty (0.97 per cent) and power (0.95 per cent). On the other hand, industrials and IT were the laggards.

"Asian shares scaled five-month peaks on Thursday as market wagers on ever-more aggressive rate cuts extended a huge rally in US stocks. Gains in Asia were led by Chinese shares, which were headed

for their best day in four months, boosted by a rotation into some of 2023's worst-performing sectors. European stocks opened mildly lower," said Deepak Jasani - head of retail research, HDFC Securities.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Shanghai, and Hong Kong settled with gains, while Tokyo ended lower.

European markets were trading marginally lower. The US markets ended in the green on Wednesday.

"Markets have been gaining for five consecutive trading sessions on the back of optimism over expected growth next year. Global markets were also supportive as investors hoped for an early rate cut in 2024."

"Also, FIIs have turned net buyers after being sellers for six consecutive days. Overall, we expect the positive momentum to continue and markets to end the year on a buoyant note," said Siddhartha Khemka, Head of retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd. (PTI)

Social media companies made \$11 billion in US ad revenue from minors: Harvard study

WASHINGTON, Dec 28: Social media companies collectively made over \$11 billion in U.S. advertising revenue from minors last year, according to a study from the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health published on Wednesday. The researchers say the findings show a need for government regulation of social media since the companies that stand to make money from children who use their platforms have failed to meaningfully self-regulate. They note such regulations, as well as greater transparency from tech companies, could help alleviate harms to youth mental health and curtail potentially harmful advertising practices that target children and adolescents.

To come up with the revenue figure, the researchers estimated the number of users under 18 on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube in 2022 based on population data from the U.S. Census and survey data from Common Sense Media and Pew Research. They then used data from research firm eMarketer, now called Insider Intelligence, and Qustodio, a parental control app, to estimate each platform's U.S. ad revenue in 2022 and the time children spent per day on

each platform. After that, the researchers said they built a simulation model using the data to estimate how much ad revenue the platforms earned from minors in the U.S.

Researchers and lawmakers have long focused on the negative effects stemming from social media platforms, whose personally-tailored algorithms can drive children towards excessive use. This year, lawmakers in states like New York and Utah introduced or passed legislation that would curb social media use among kids, citing harms to youth mental health and other concerns.

Meta, which owns Instagram and Facebook, is also being sued by dozens of states for allegedly contributing to the mental health crisis.

"Although social media platforms may claim that they can self-regulate their practices to reduce the harms to young people, they have yet to do so, and our study suggests they have overwhelming financial incentives to continue to delay taking meaningful steps to protect children," said Bryn Austin, a professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Harvard and a senior author on the study. (AP)

US companies are picky about investing in China

Burgers and lattes don't raise the sorts of friction that more high-tech industries have in the complicated US-China relationship

WASHINGTON, Dec 28: There's been no shortage of tough news for China's economy as some of the world's biggest brands consider or take action to shift manufacturing to friendlier shores at a time of unease about security controls, protectionism and wobbly relations between Beijing and Washington.

Count Adidas, Apple and Samsung among those looking elsewhere.

But as a tumultuous 2023 for the Chinese economy comes to a close, there has been at least one bright spot for Beijing when it comes to foreign investment: American fast-food chains have decided a market of 1.4 billion people is simply too delicious to pass up.

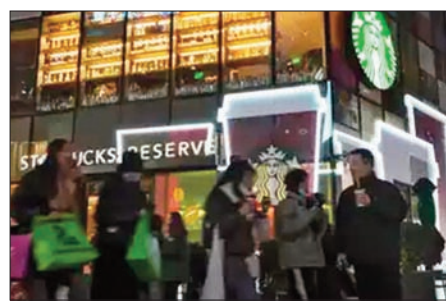
KFC China's parent company opened its 10,000th restaurant in China last month and aims to have stores within reach of half of China's population by 2026. McDonald's is planning to open 3,500 new stores in China over the next four years. And Starbucks invested \$220 million in a manufacturing and distribution facility in eastern China, its biggest project outside the U.S.

This is surely not what Chinese President Xi Jinping had in mind as he made the case to American CEOs about the upside of China's "super-large market" last month while he was in San Francisco for a summit of world leaders. The investments in fast food and other consumer goods, while Washington is curbing exports of computer chips and other advanced technology, don't fit into China's own blueprint for modernizing its economy.

"As you try to interpret the signals from McDonald's and Starbucks" and other chains, says Phil Levy, chief economist at the supply chain management firm Flexport, "note what the industries are: These are not high-tech burgers."

And while some U.S. companies are increasing investments in the world's second-largest economy, overall foreign investment began falling this year. In the July-September quarter, net foreign direct investment in China sank to a deficit of \$11.8 billion, the first quarterly deficit since Beijing began publishing the data in 1998.

As tensions simmer between China and its Western trading partners, many multinational companies are shifting investments to other places, such as Southeast Asia or India, or repara-



triating their earnings. That has sapped China of a key engine when its economy has yet to fully recover from the disruptions of the pandemic and a property industry crisis that has been a drag on growth.

Beijing puts some of the blame on U.S. government policies.

Commerce Ministry spokesperson Shu Jueting said recently, "The U.S. side has repeatedly politicized economic, trade and technology issues and overstretched the concept of security, abused export control measures, and restricted trade and investment in China by its own enterprises, which is forcing enterprises to give up opportunities in the Chinese market and opportunities for win-win cooperation."

A survey released in September by the U.S.-China Business Council, which represents American companies in China, suggested that the uncertainty has taken a toll: 43% of its members said China's business environment had deteriorated in the past year, and 83% said they were less optimistic about China than they had been three years ago. Twenty-one percent said they were investing fewer resources in China, versus just 10% who were investing more.

Surveys of European and Japanese companies have shown similar results.

While China's market is gigantic, it's ailing. Unemployment among young Chinese rose to over 20% by June, the last time the government released that data. Housing prices are falling and the stock market is down nearly 15% since the summer. That's left many Chinese feeling nervous about spending.

Still, bullishness for China as other industries try to de-risk and detangle from Beijing may be a profit-increasing strategy for the fast-

food industry.

"We believe there is no better time to simplify our structure, given the tremendous opportunity to capture increased demand and further benefit from our fastest-growing market's long-term potential," McDonald's CEO Chris Kempczinski said as the Chicago-based company announced in November it was increasing its minority 20% ownership of its McDonald's licensed stores in China, Macau and Hong Kong to 48%.

Burgers and lattes don't raise the sorts of friction that more high-tech industries have in the complicated U.S.-China relationship. Those strains have persisted under the presidency of Joe Biden, who took office vowing to do more to counter China's expanding military clout and its menacing of neighbors, to improve the country's treatment of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities, and to crack down on intellectual property theft.

Relations hit a low point in February when Biden ordered a Chinese spy balloon that traversed the continental United States to be shot down. Beijing, which claims self-governed Taiwan as its own territory, also protested a stopover in the U.S. by the island's president, Tsai Ing-wen, earlier this year. China answered fresh U.S. controls on exports of advanced computer chips and the technology to make them with limits of its own on exports of vital commodities like graphite, gallium and germanium, all metals used in making semiconductors, solar panels, missiles and radar.

The relationship appears to be stabilizing somewhat as 2023 winds down, highlighted by last month's Biden and Xi meeting outside San Francisco. But since then, Biden's top advisers have said there are no plans to shift the strategy of tightening regulations and blocking U.S.-based high-tech investments in China, citing the need to safeguard national security.

Both former President Donald Trump, the 2024 GOP presidential front-runner, and Biden have worried about depending on China, a potential adversary, for supplies of critical materials used in many high-tech products. Both have sought to reduce America's reliance on Chinese factories and have encouraged compa-

nies to shift away from China to other countries — so-called "friend-shoring."

Still, Biden administration officials have said they don't want to see a total decoupling of the world's two biggest economies.

"De-risking, yes. Decoupling, no," Nicholas Burns, the U.S. ambassador to China, said at a recent event in Washington. "We want to continue a major trade and investment relationship with China, just not ... in the realm that might help them leapfrog over us sometime in the next 10 years in military technology."

Rosemary Coates, executive director of the nonprofit Reshoring Institute, noted that decisions to expand or retrench are relatively easy for a company like McDonald's or its fast-food rivals.

Franchises "can be opened or closed," Coates said. "It's not like you're investing in an auto plant or some kind of machine shop."

China's vast market is vital for many foreign companies: At their annual investors day gathering this month, McDonald's executives noted that 70 million of the 150 million customers active in its customer loyalty program are in China.

KFC China says growth in its new outlets has averaged more than 22% over the last five years. The chain Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen relaunched its brand in China in August with a flagship restaurant in Shanghai and plans to open 1,700 stores over the next 10 years.

But for all the promise of China's huge market, U.S. businesses have other reasons to think twice about expanding in China.

In July, the U.S. recommended Americans reconsider traveling to China because of arbitrary law enforcement and exit bans and the risk of wrongful detentions. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo has warned Chinese leaders that U.S. businesses might stop investing in their country if they do not address complaints about worsening conditions due to raids on firms, unexplained fines and unpredictable official behavior.

While insisting that China is keen to have foreign investment, Beijing has given no indication it might change trade, market access and other policies that irk Washington and its other trading partners. (AP)

Bad assets of banks decline multi-year low to 0.8 pc in Sept: RBI report

MUMBAI, Dec 28: The Reserve Bank on Thursday said net non-performing assets ratio of banks declined to a multi-year low of 0.8 per cent at the end of September 2023 and the country's domestic financial system remains resilient.

"The resilience of the non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) sector improved with CRAR at 27.6 per cent, GNPA ratio at 4.6 per cent and return on assets (RoA) at 2.9 per cent, respectively, in September 2023," said the RBI's Financial Stability Report (FSR).

The gross non-performing assets (GNPA) ratio of banks also declined to a multi-year low of 3.2 per cent, it said.

The report reflects the collective assessment of the Sub-Committee of the Financial

Stability and Development Council (FSDC) on risks to financial stability and the resilience of the Indian financial system.

It further said that the capital to risk-weighted assets ratio (CRAR) and the common equity tier 1 (CET1) ratio of scheduled commercial banks (SCBs) stood at 16.8 per cent and 13.7 per cent, respectively, in September 2023. (PTI)

NAME CHANGE

I have Changed my name from Mohammed Aliur Rahman to Oliur Rahman by swearing a notarial affidavit at Sankardevnagar Hojai. From today onwards I will be known as Oliur Rahman for all purpose.

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (EOI)

No.: C/MISC/SCANNER/TSK/2023 Date: 26-12-2023

Sub : Invitation of Expression of Interest for installation and operation of Scanner machine at Parcel Office of New Tinsukia station under NINFRIS.

Divisional Railway Manager (Commercial), N. F. Railway, Tinsukia Division invites "Expression of Interest" from the interested party/agency for installation and operation of Scanner machine at Parcel office of New Tinsukia station under NINFRIS for one year.

The prospective investors/promoters are expected to submit detailed business proposal. The division will not make any further investment. Electricity supply will be provided on payment basis.

The primary interest of the division in this dealing is to prevent booking/transportation of illegal materials through Railways/leased parcels over the Division. Interested person may contact the undersigned office or through DCM (I/C)'s Mail ID tsk.nfr@gmail.com for the above EOI by 31.01.2024.

DCM (I/C), Tinsukia
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY
"SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE"

Son arrested for alleged matricide

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Dec 28: One person has been apprehended for the alleged murder of his mother in Bhelguri Kalia Gaon, situated under the jurisdiction of Deberapar Police Outpost, Mariani Police Station, Jorhat. The accused, Nobin Bora, is facing charges under Section 302 IPC, and a case (No: 120/2023) has been officially registered against him, according to the Police Outpost in-charge, SI Birup Kumar Gogoi.

The arrest followed the discovery of Nobin Bora in a room with his battered mother, Niru Bora, on Wednesday night. Responding to neighbours' reports of a disturbance around 11:30 pm, the police arrived at the scene and forcibly entered the residence after breaking open the back door. Inside, an iron rod and the broken leg of a chair were found.

Sadly, Niru Bora was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital. The police are investigating the motive behind this tragic incident. Family members revealed that Nobin had a history of opium addiction, but he had supposedly overcome this habit recently. The investigation is ongoing to uncover the circumstances leading to this unfortunate event.

Governor praises Asam Sahitya Sabha's centennial contribution to nation building



HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Dec 28: The 107th anniversary of the founding of Asam Sahitya Sabha, celebrated by the Sivasagar Jila Sahitya Sabha, unfolded as a grand affair at Sivasagar Boarding Field. The distinguished guest list included Governor Gulab Chand Kataria, cabinet ministers Ranaj Pegu and Jogen Mohan, MPs Topon Kumar Gogoi and Pabitra Margherita, Asam Sahitya Sabha presidents Dr Surjakanta Hazarika, education adviser to the Government of Assam Dr Nani Gopal Mahanta, renowned novelist Jayanata Mahav Bora, and DC Sivasagar AV Yadav, among others.

Governor Kataria, attending as the chief guest, expressed gratitude to the erudite individuals of the state who dedicated themselves to establishing and preserving the legacy of Asam Sahitya Sabha over a century. He acknowledged the Sabha's role in uniting the people of the region, acting as both an emotional and intellectual bridge with the mainland.

Highlighting the importance of mother tongue in education, Governor Kataria commended the ongoing efforts by the government to create an environment conducive to learning the indigenous culture and language. He paid homage to literary stalwarts

such as Trimurti Lakshminath Bezbarua, Ananda Chandra Agarwala, Hemchandra Goswami, and Sankardev for their invaluable contributions in revitalising Assamese literature and providing a pan-Indian perspective.

During the gathering, Ranaj Pegu clarified the government's stance on Assamese medium schools, highlighting that closures were limited to institutions with minimal enrollment. He explained the introduction of English medium for mathematics and science subjects in Assamese medium schools to strengthen proficiency in the second language. Pegu un-

veiled the souvenir 'Smriti-prapat'.

Jayanata Mahav Bora, an Academy Award winner, raised concerns about the perceived threat to the Assamese language. He alleged the removal of Assamese from airport announcements in Assam and urged for its reinstatement. Topon Kumar Gogoi, MP, Jorhat, and president of the celebration committee, welcomed attendees, highlighting Sivasagar's role as the cradle of Assamese literature and culture.

Pabitra Margherita, MP, Rajya Sabha, shared exciting developments, including the publication of a book on Lachit Borphukan in 23 languages, a dream project of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. He announced financial contributions from various sources and advocated for renaming Dibrugarh Airport after Chaolong Sukapha.

Dr Surjakanta Hazarika, Asam Sahitya Sabha president, Dr Nirupoma Mahanta, Sivasagar Jila Sahitya Sabha president, Dr Anil Saikia, former principal of Moran College, Inspector of Schools Devajoti Gogoi, Sahityacharya Narendra Padun, and Jila Sahitya Sabha secretary Santosh Dutta were among the dignitaries present. The event witnessed over four thousand school children singing patriotic anthems, fostering a sense of unity and cultural pride.

Bodoland Territorial Council Legislative Assembly concludes one-day Winter Session



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 28: The Bodoland Territorial Council Legislative Assembly concluded its one-day Winter Session at the BTC Legislative Assembly House, Bodofa Nwgr, in Kokrajhar on Thursday. Chaired by Katiram Boro, the speaker of the BTC Legislative Assembly, the house unanimously passed resolutions for the Green Bodoland Mission and a Child-Friendly & Child Labour-Free Bodoland. Pramod Boro, the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), moved both resolutions, stressing the importance of ensuring environmentally sustainable development aligned with global best practices.

Over the past three years, the government of BTR has been actively working on various child-friendly policies, addressing the needs and rights of children in the region. The Winter Session discussed several crucial decisions, notably the provincialisation of services for 259 teaching and non-teaching staff across 10 venture degree colleges in Bodoland Territorial Region. This action, outlined in order No. BTC/EDN-01/2022-23/Pt.I/39, dated December 16, 2023, is a partial fulfillment of the Bodo Peace Accord 2020 (Clause No. 6.3).

Collaborative efforts involving CEM Pramod Boro, executive members, signatory organisations such as ABSU, UBPO, former leaders of the NDFB, and BTR Government Department of Education played a pivotal role in realising the need for this decision. The colleges benefiting from this move include Tamulpur College, Dimakuchi College, Udalguri Mushalpur College, Baksa Tamulpur Degree College, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma College, Borobazar College, Bhergaon College, Zamduar College, Koklabari Chapaguri College, and Runkhata College. A total of 79 assistant professors, 65 tutors, 108 administration staff, and 7 office staff as tutors will be provincialised along with these colleges.

Addressing administrative challenges, the session discussed the withdrawal of an order (No. BTC/IBA-679/2020/244) that had entrusted the overall monitoring and supervision of projects under 16 different subjects and matters to deputy commissioners of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri. This move, initiated on June

4, 2021, aimed to streamline the proper and timely implementation of various government schemes. However, given the success of the BTR government in achieving good governance and effective service delivery, the order has been withdrawn.

Deputy commissioners of the BTR districts are now mandated to report to the Government of BTR, as per the Bodo Peace Accord 2020 (Clause No. 4.6), which states that deputy commissioners in BTAD will report to the chief executive member of BTC through the chief executive officer regarding all developmental activities in their districts.

Additionally, the house was informed about upcoming advertisements to fill 1216 posts of elementary teachers, addressing the shortfall of teachers in government/provincialised elementary schools across the region. During the session, two landmark resolutions were moved by CEM Pramod Boro and adopted unanimously. The resolutions are part of the Green Bodoland Mission, aiming to reclaim the climate for a resilient and sustainable future in BTR.

The Green Bodoland Mission includes mass-scale tree plantation in 2000 hectares of BTR, totaling approximately one crore plants over two years. It also focuses on plastic pollution reduction, advocating for the ban of single-use plastics, and sustainable groundwater management for a resilient future. Two percent of the SOPD budget for 2023-24 has been allocated to the Green Bodoland Mission.

The legislative assembly paid tribute to notable figures who recently passed away, including former minister Sarat Borkataki, former MP Bhadrashwar Tanti, former MLA of Jania Aashaque Ali, and actor Jayanta Das. Speaker Katiram Boro led a one-minute silence in their memory.

CEM Pramod Boro said that the house deeply discussed overall development and citizen welfare. The BTR government remains committed to working for massive ushering of sustainable development, emphasising good governance and welfare services for citizens. Various development and welfare schemes have been initiated across the region, highlighting the government's dedication to the well-being of its citizens.

Books unveiled at Rangina Sarpo Auditorium



HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 28: A literary event unfolded at the Rangina Sarpo Auditorium, Lorulango, where two significant books were released. The books, namely 'Mahant Lookar Amrit Bani' by writer-journalist Dharmendra Khaklary and a collection of poems titled 'Boroxunar Tupalure Aziu Amoni Kore' by Rupali Basumatary, took center stage.

'Mahant Lookar Amrit Bani' by Dharmendra Khaklary, a resident of Gorukhiya Pukhuri, Howraghat, Karbi Anglong, is a compilation of speeches and opinions from illustrious personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Thakur, Swami Vivekananda, and more.

The release of 'Mahant Lookar Amrit Bani' was conducted by Surjya Rongphar, executive member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, while the book of poems, 'Boroxunar Tupalure Aziu Amoni Kore', was unveiled by Astitya Xomoyor Kobi, Laksheswar Sarma. This collection features a total of 60 poems.

The book release event was graced by the presence of writers Dharmendra Khaklary and Rupali Basumatary, writer Sar-et Hanse, Padmashree Dhansing Engti, Sahitya Academy's Bal Sahitya Puraskar winner Ratneswar Narzary, senior citizen journalist Nagen Bora, MLA Darsing Ronghang, and other esteemed personalities.

Suklabaidya calls for caution in road construction

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, Dec 28: Transport, Excise, and Fisheries minister Parimal Suklabaidya emphasised caution in road construction during a public awareness program on road safety in Laharighat, Morigaon district. Arriving on a motorcycle from Dhing, Nagaon district, the minister aimed to promote road safety awareness. Accompanied by Morigaon district commissioner Devashish Sharma and superintendent of police Hemant Kumar Das, Suklabaidya addressed a meeting at the Public Works Department Inspection Bungalow in Laharighat.

Highlighting the collective responsibility for preventing road accidents, Shuklabaidya stressed the societal impact of each fatality. He urged parents to teach their children responsible driving habits, including wearing helmets and avoiding alcohol consumption. Additionally, drivers were encouraged to adhere to speed limits and traffic regulations. District commissioner Devashish Sharma welcomed the participants, including superintendent of police Hemant Kumar Das, District Road Safety Committee member secretary Govind Singh, additional district commissioner Pranjal Barua, district transport officer Bapan Kalita, social worker Praveen Medhi, and various dignitaries.

Poorvottar Sant Manikanchan Sammelan held at North Kamalabari Satra

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Dec 28: In a historic gathering on Thursday, the 'Poorvottar Sant Manikanchan Sammelan - 2023' unfolded its spiritual essence at the North Kamalabari Satra of Majuli, bringing together 104 spiritual leaders from 48 Satras of the state and 37 religious institutions from across the north-eastern states. The event, graced by the presence of RSS Sarsangchalak Dr Mohan Bhagwat, aimed to foster coordination, goodwill, and harmony among diverse Sanatan spiritual traditions and communities.

The conference provided a platform for discussions on various issues faced by the people of the north-eastern region of Bharat, as well as the different sects operating in the area. Sarsangchalak Dr Mohan Bhagwat emphasised the unique cultural identity of Bharat, stating that just as every person has a particular nature, every nation has its own unique way of life derived from its culture.

The essence of Bharat's culture is reflected in the idea of 'Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti' (Truth is one but revealed differently by intellectuals), a tradition that embraces inclusivity and unity in diversity. Dr Bhagwat stressed that, especially in today's critical period, Bharat has a responsibility to spread the message of peace and



coexistence to the entire world. Highlighting the importance of unity amidst diversity, Dr Bhagwat said that unity is not uniformity but a sense of togetherness. He called upon revered spiritualists and Sants to play a role in promoting unity and contributing to society's self-reliance through service, education, healthcare, and employment.

Dr Bhagwat urged for national awareness within families to uphold Bharat's eternal spiritual values and time-tested customs. He called upon Dharmacharyas, Maths, and temples to convey Bharat's profound message and spiritual values to the new generation.

Drawing inspiration from Sri-manta Sankardev, Dr Bhagwat urged the assembly to follow his example of bringing social reforms and eliminating societal evils

through benevolent behavior. The gathering included prominent Satradhikars, Dharmacharyas, and religious leaders from various regions, highlighting the diverse cultural fabric of north-east Bharat.

The two-day visit of Sarsangchalak Dr Mohan Bhagwat holds significance, particularly in light of recent reports on religious conversions in Majuli. The RSS, advocating Hindu nationalism, has consistently highlighted the preservation of indigenous cultural practices and traditions. The Poorvottar Sant Manikanchan Sammelan served as a testament to the unity in diversity, echoing the timeless spiritual values of Bharat on the sacred grounds of Majuli. The event concluded with Dr Bhagwat addressing a massive public meeting in Majuli, reinforcing the importance of cultural preservation and coexistence.

IIE, AEI to initiate training on different trades

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 28: The Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) in association with Assam Engineering Institute (AEI) initiated training on job oriented courses for unemployed youths at AEI campus in Guwahati.

The youths will be able to avail the training free of cost. Food and lodging will be provided free of cost to them.

Meanwhile, PPF will offer logistic support to the below poverty line youths among the participants. Hitesh Tabildar, principal of AEI also held a meeting with vice chairman of PPF, Rafique Ahmed Laskar regarding skill development training to educated and uneducated youths of the state.

500 kg of lablab bean exported to London

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, Dec 28: In a momentous development just days before the close of 2023, farmers from Nitaipukhuri near Demow in Sivasagar District, under Thowra Constituency, have made a significant impact. For the first time, a shipment of 500 kilograms of lablab bean (urohi), cultivated by the farmers of Dihingpara Farmers' Producer Company (FPC) in Nitaipukhuri, Sivasagar, was successfully exported to London on Wednesday.

State Agriculture minister Atul Bora expressed his delight at virtually attending the flag-off ceremony. He wrote on X, "Delighted to virtually attend the flag-off ceremony as 500 KG Lablab Bean (Urohi) were exported to #London from #Assam today." The Lablab Beans were produced

by the dedicated farmers of Dihingpara FPC in Nitaipukhuri, Sivasagar district.

Minister Atul Bora extended his heartfelt congratulations to the officials of the Horticulture Department, Government of Assam, the Agriculture Department of Sivasagar, chairman of the FPC Mantu Saikia, and every farmer involved in this remarkable achievement. He also expressed gratitude to Kaushik Barua, an enterprising youth who played a pivotal role in facilitating the export of Lablab Beans from Sivasagar. Furthermore, minister Bora thanked the concerned officials of the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) for their cooperation in making this export possible.

Indigenous women in Manas landscape learn tailoring to explore alternative livelihoods



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 28: Aaranyak, a prominent conservation organisation, recently conducted a four-day tailoring training program for 11 women of the Himalaya Self Help Group

(SHG) in Bhuyapara, Baksa, within the Manas Landscape. The initiative aims to equip women with tailoring skills, providing them with opportunities for alternative livelihoods and reducing their dependence on the forest.

Renowned tailor Kamaluddin Ali from Rupahi Bazar led the training, covering the basics of measuring, cutting, and stitching blouses and frocks. The SHG members actively participated in hands-on practice under the supervision of the trainer, gaining practical skills in garment-making.

The project, titled 'Securing population of tigers, habitats and biological corridors in Assam, India', is supported by IUCN-KFW and focuses on biodiversity conservation in the Manas landscape, Baksa district. Aaranyak's inclusive approach aims to empower women economically, fostering their engagement in forest conservation and sustainable practices.

Through initiatives like tailoring training, indigenous women become key stakeholders in conservation efforts, contributing to the long-term sustainability of biodiversity and habitats. This project not only addresses gender disparities but also strengthens community involvement for effective forest conservation in the region.

President Droupadi Murmu to grace Karbi Youth Festival 2024 in Diphu

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 28: The eagerly anticipated Golden Jubilee celebration of the Karbi Youth Festival 2024 is set to receive the esteemed presence of President of India, Droupadi Murmu, as the chief guest. The event, scheduled for January 17, 2024, at noon in Taralango, Diphu, was confirmed by chief executive member of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang.

Joining President Murmu at this grand occasion will be a distinguished lineup of dignitaries, including Governor Gulab Chand Kataria, Meghalaya Governor Phagu Chauhan, Nagaland Governor La Ganesan, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Nagaland chief minister Neiphiu Rio, and Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma.

Chief executive member of KAAC, Tuliram Ronghang shared the news on his social media X, stating, "I am delighted to announce that President Droupadi Murmu has graciously consented to attend as the Chief Guest at the Golden Jubilee celebration of the Karbi Youth Festival 2024 on January 17, 2024, at noon. This prestigious event will also be graced by the presence of Assam Governor Gulab Chand Kataria, Governor of Meghalaya Phagu Chauhan, Nagaland Governor La Ganesan, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam, Neiphiu Rio, Chief Minister of Nagaland, and Conrad K Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya. The week-long celebration will unfold from January 12 to 19, 2024, at the Karbi People's Hall, Taralango, Diphu. Everyone is cordially invited! KARDOM."

Chandubi Festival to commence on January 1

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 28: The eagerly awaited 14th edition of the Chandubi Festival is scheduled to kick off in Kamrup district on January 1, extending through January 5. This annual festival has become a significant event, drawing thousands of tourists to celebrate the cultural diversity and natural beauty of the region.

Organised by the All Rabha Students Union, Borduar Bholaogon Anchalik Committee, in collaboration with various Rabha organisations, the festival serves the dual purpose of raising awareness about the preservation of Chandubi Lake and promoting it as a prominent tourist destination.

The festival is expected to feature a five-day program showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the Rabha and other tribes, attracting not only locals but also tourists from across the state and beyond. A highlight of the event is a vibrant cultural procession reflecting the diverse traditions of the Rabha and other tribes in the state.

For the past 13 years, the Chandubi Festival has been a major draw, offering a platform to showcase local folk culture, ethnic cuisine, traditional handloom and attire, boating activities, and more. The festival spotlights the scenic beauty of Chandubi Lake, a freshwater lake created during a significant earthquake in 1897, now serving as an economically viable water body supporting the communities around it. In a recent ceremony, the Lai Khuta (foundation pole) of the Chandubi Festival was laid by Debajit Napha, the magazine secretary of Nihikil Rabha Students Union (NRSU), in the presence of an enthusiastic audience. The festival aims to promote ecotourism in this biodiversity hotspot of the state, contributing to the region's cultural and economic growth.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

To be or not to be that is the question
- William Shakespeare

India-UAE oil transactions

India and the UAE recently completed their first transaction in rupees for crude oil from the Emirates. A major shift in how global trade is conducted, typically done in dollars, this step is a significant boost to the growing trade between India and the UAE, which is likely to surpass the \$100 billion target within a few years. Businesses and traders from both countries welcomed this move as an important part of their cooperation. It opens the door for better economic partnership and simplifies international financial dealings. After the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed in 2022, trade between the UAE and India increased to \$85 billion. The UAE became India's third-biggest trading partner and the second-biggest export market in the fiscal year 2022-23. In turn, India ranked as the UAE's second-largest trading partner. For India, which is the third-largest energy consumer in the world, using its own currency for payment is a significant step in its strategy to reduce reliance on the widely-used dollar and to increase the global use of the Indian rupee. This aligns with the BRICS, of which India is a member, strategy to shift away from the US dollar as the dominant global reserve currency.

Experts in currency matters explain that trading using the rupee removes the necessity of converting into another currency for import or export payments, and aids in preserving foreign exchange reserves. Making the Indian rupee more widely used internationally could lower India's borrowing costs and help establish the rupee as a recognized payment medium for global trade transactions. As the rupee gains popularity in international trade transactions, it might eventually reach the status of a strong currency, similar to the US dollar. The initiative to use the rupee for payments is in line with the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) decision on July 11, 2022, which permits importers to make payments in rupees and allows exporters to receive payments in the local currency. Since then, India has taken measures to enhance the role of the rupee in international payments, authorizing over a dozen banks to conduct trade settlements in rupees with 18 different countries.

India has been actively persuading other major oil exporters, including Saudi Arabia and Russia, to accept the Indian rupee for their trade transactions. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to the UAE in July, the Central Bank of the UAE and the Reserve Bank of India signed two agreements. The first agreement aimed to create a structure for using local currencies in international transactions, while the second focused on connecting their payment systems. After the deal with the UAE on rupee settlements, the Indian Oil Corporation paid for one million barrels of crude oil from Abu Dhabi National Oil Company using Indian rupees. Some of India's oil imports from Russia have also been paid for in rupees. India's Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said that India has been working with the UAE to increase bilateral trade to a \$100 billion target.

In search of an Opposition in Bangladesh election



By: Saleem Samad

Nosy political scientist, political analyst and political observers have been scratching their heads to understand, where is the opposition in the upcoming national election scheduled to be held on January 7, 2024.

Which party will sit on the opposition bench in the magnificent iconic Jatiya Sangsad (parliament) building?

It should not sound strange that in an election, a party that gets a majority in an election forms a government, while the runners-up (second majority) takes a seat on the opposition bench in the parliament. That's a norm in political science.

A day before, the European Union (EU) was equally curious to know where the opposition is. The EU asked the governing Awami League general secretary, Obaidul Quader, to know who would be the opposition party in the 12th national parliament.

Quader, also Road Transport and Bridges Minister said 'The results of the polls will tell who will be the opposition.' Indeed, a simple answer to a complex question.

In Bangladesh, the governing party Awami League has ensured that the principal opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is eliminated and thousands of the key leaders, members and supporters are behind bars.

The trumped-up cases are mostly terrorism, vandalism and destruction of government properties.

The Awami League has sacrificed six constituencies for its alliance partners and 26 for the Jatiya Party in the national election, said the ruling party's Office Secretary Biplob Barua that their party leaders have withdrawn their candidacies from these 32 seats. Thus the party will contest for 263 constituencies.

On the other hand, the Jatiya

Party Secretary General Mujibul Haque Chunnun announced that the party will contest for 287 constituencies, out of 300.

With the Jatiya Party joining, the pre-election camp gets bigger, writes Jahidul Islam in the Business Standard.

If the Awami League shares seats with the Jatiya Party the latter will become a 'loyal opposition' that will be subservient to the governing party and would hardly oppose nor debate any bill that goes against the freedom and rights of the people.

The 'loyal opposition' will need not walk out from the session nor debate in the parliament, other than asking for political favour for the party and their members only.

Meanwhile, upbeat Awami League lawmaker Prof Mohammad A. Arafat and Chairman of Suchinta Foundation who is active on Twitter (X) writes: 30 former parliamentarians, including five advisors to the (opposition) BNP Chairperson and 15 members of the BNP Central Committee, are participating in the election.

Apart from the central leaders, 87 leaders of the BNP, including the president, vice president, general secretary of the district, and upazila (sub-district) level, are contesting the election.

Arafat, who is an active cyber warrior against the opposition (BNP) and critic of the Awami League regime troll army, seems to justify the absence of BNP and others in the poll and remarked that "They look set to mount a tough challenge in many seats. In addition, the Jatiya Party and its 14-party partners will also face stiff competition in many seats. Trinamool BNP and BNM (Bangladesh Nationalist Movement) have also fielded strong candidates in many seats. (The author is an award-winning independent journalist based in Bangladesh. He could be reached at saleem-samad@hotmail.com; Twitter: @saleemssamad)

India: Triumphs, tragedies and resilience amidst adversity

Amidst the jubilation over the inauguration of a new Parliament, triumphs in space exploration, and a commendable tunnel rescue mission, India grappled with the shadows of adversity throughout the year. Ethnic unrest in the Northeast claimed numerous lives, while a series of natural disasters and accidents inflicted heavy tolls. Additionally, the courageous stand of renowned women wrestlers against sexual harassment took center stage, adding complex layers to the narratives that unfolded in the headlines.

The onset of January 2023 ushered in a tumultuous period marked by a barrage of serious allegations. Accusations of sexual misconduct surfaced, targeting BJP MP and Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. Spearheaded by prominent wrestlers such as Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik, and Bajrang Punia, a protest unfolded at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. The wrestlers called for the disbandment of WFI, the removal of its president, and a thorough investigation into the allegations, setting the stage for a contentious and pivotal moment.

In the month of February, Delhi's Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia found himself in the midst of a legal storm. Following approximately eight hours of questioning by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) regarding alleged irregularities in the now-discarded Delhi excise policy, Sisodia faced a significant turn of events. The sequence leading to Sisodia's arrest by the CBI commenced in July 2022, triggered by a report from Delhi Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar to Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena. The report accused Sisodia of granting undue advantages to liquor vend licensees in exchange for alleged "kickbacks" and "commissions," purportedly utilized by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) during the February Punjab Assembly elections earlier that year. The arrest marked a critical moment in a narrative rife with political implications and legal intricacies.

March unfolded with the political landscape in the Northeast taking center stage, marked by crucial elections and a significant development in the Lok Sabha. The BJP secured a resounding victory in the Tripura Assembly elections, reclaiming power in Meghalaya and Nagaland as a junior coalition partner. Overcoming challenges posed by a Left-Congress alliance and the rising influence of TIPRA Motha in tribal constituencies, the BJP secured 32 seats in Tripura, one more than the majority mark.

In Nagaland, the party retained power alongside senior alliance partner Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party, while in Meghalaya, the National People's Party emerged as the single-largest party. Despite contesting elections separately,

the NPP and BJP, having previously governed the state together, decided to join forces once again to establish a government.

Adding to the month's political dynamics, the Congress party faced a significant setback with the disqualification of senior leader Rahul Gandhi from the Lok Sabha. This development followed his conviction in a defamation case by a Surat court. A notice issued by the Lok Sabha Secretariat confirmed his disqualification from the House, effective from March 23, the day of his conviction. This dual narrative of electoral triumphs and political setbacks characterized the headlines, shaping the political discourse throughout the month.

April marked a significant demographic milestone for India as it officially surpassed China, becoming the world's most populous country. Projections indicated that India's population would reach 142.86 crore by mid-year, slightly ahead of China's 142.57 crore. According to United Nations estimates, India's population is anticipated to continue growing for the next three decades before entering a phase of decline. Amidst this demographic shift, the month witnessed notable events, including the encounter of a gangster-turned-politician in Uttar Pradesh and the apprehension of a Khalistani separatist.

In Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, on April 15, Atiq Ahmed and his brother Ashraf met a fatal end in a confrontation, unfolding in the presence of police personnel and media witnesses. The incident underscored the complex intersection of crime and politics.

Meanwhile, in Punjab, the arrest of Waris Punjab De chief Amritpal Singh, a radical Sikh self-styled preacher, unfolded after a month-long chase by the Punjab police. These events added layers to the multifaceted narrative of April, combining demographic shifts with incidents that echoed the complexities within the political and social fabric of the country.

May witnessed a dichotomy of events that underscored the diverse facets of India's socio-political landscape. The month commenced with the eruption of violent clashes across various locations in Manipur during the 'Tribal Solidarity March' initiated by the All Tribal Students' Union on May 3. These incidents reignited historical tensions between the plain-dwelling Meitei community and the hill tribes, exposing the enduring fault lines within the state.

Contrastingly, later in May, India celebrated the inauguration of its new Parliament building, described as an embodiment of the nation's culture, pride, and spirit. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pivotal speech during the inauguration on May 28 aimed to contextualize this moment



within a broader national narrative. The new Parliament building, constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 971 crore, stands adjacent to the existing Parliament House. Notably, it boasts an increased capacity, accommodating 888 parliamentarians in the Lok Sabha and 300 in the Rajya

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Dipak Kurmi

Sabha, up from the previous capacities of 543 and 250, respectively. This architectural feat signifies a blend of tradition and modernity, symbolizing the evolving identity and aspirations of the nation.

June brought sorrow and mourning to India as a devastating collision unfolded near Bahanga Bazar station on June 2. The incident involved the Chennai-bound Coromandel Express, the SMVT Bengaluru-Howrah Express, and a goods train, resulting in the tragic loss of over 280 lives and leaving more than 850 people injured. The collision occurred when the Coromandel Express, instead of proceeding along the main line, entered the loop and collided with the goods train from the rear. Disturbing images from the scene depicted the Coromandel's locomotive perched atop the goods train, encapsulating the severity of the tragedy.

July brought forth continued tragedy for India as a distressing video surfaced, revealing the horrifying ordeal of two women from the Kuki-Zomi community. The footage depicted the women being paraded naked by a mob of men and subjected to sexual assault. This incident, which occurred in Manipur over two months prior, gained public attention, leading to the filing of a police complaint. Simultaneously, another zero FIR was registered at the same police station, addressing the alleged abduction, rape, and murder of two Kuki-Zomi women. In addition to these distressing events, Himachal Pradesh grappled with extreme weather conditions, facing devastating landslides, extensive damage, and the collapse of numerous buildings. Three spells of excessive rain triggered havoc in Himachal, unleashing flash floods, cloudbursts, landslides, subsidence, and sinking of land.

The repercussions were particularly severe in Mandi, Kullu, Manali, Shimla, and certain parts of Kangra. The government's as-

essment indicated a staggering loss of Rs 12,000 crore for the state. Despite the challenges and upheavals in July, a glimmer of hope emerged with the successful launch of India's moon mission, Chandrayaan-3, on July 14.

August witnessed a momentous occasion for India as Chandrayaan-3, its Moon mission, made history with a successful landing on the lunar surface on August 23. The Lander's soft landing at the Moon's South Pole marked a significant achievement, making India the sole country to accomplish this feat.

On the political front, the Congress found relief as senior leader Rahul Gandhi returned to Parliament following the Supreme Court's stay on his 2019 criminal defamation case related to his remarks on the 'Modi' surname. The restoration of Rahul's membership by the Lok Sabha Secretariat, about four months after its revocation, brought a notable development in the political landscape.

September marked the pinnacle of India's year-long presidency of the G20 with the highly anticipated summit held in New Delhi. Leaders from the world's most influential nations gathered in the capital, culminating in the adoption of a G20 Leaders' Declaration. Against the backdrop of a global geopolitical shift, exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war and the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, India assumed leadership during a critical period. The economic reverberations of these twin events disproportionately affected developing and underdeveloped countries, hindering their efforts toward post-pandemic recovery.

Despite nearly five months passing since the initiation of clashes during a tribal solidarity march in Manipur, the state remained ensnared in tension. Ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities' fuelled intermittent violence, claiming over 175 lives and leaving more than 1,000 injured, sustaining a simmering crisis.

October unfolded with tragedy as over 70 lives, including Army personnel, were lost in Sikkim following the catastrophic burst of the South Lhonak Lake - a glacial reservoir perched at 17,000 ft in the state's northwest. The deluge, triggered by incessant rains, unleashed a torrent downstream, elevating water levels in the Teesta river and in-

undating four districts, including Mangan, Gangtok, Pakyong, and Namchi on October 4.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, refrained from recognizing same-sex marriages, emphasizing that such a determination falls within the purview of the legislature. Any judicial interference in this matter, the court asserted, would constitute an encroachment on the legislative domain. Additionally, the month witnessed a tragic series of explosions during a Sunday prayer convention hosted by the Christian denomination Jehovah's Witnesses near Kochi in Kerala. The blasts claimed the lives of at least 7 individuals and left over 30 others injured, casting a somber shadow over the month.

November saw the resurgence of election fervor as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Mizoram headed to the polls, setting the stage for the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Despite a formidable campaign, India experienced collective heartbreak as it narrowly missed securing victory in the ODI World Cup after an impressive 40-night streak of invincibility, stumbling on the 41st night to a subdued defeat.

The month's highlight, however, centered around a monumental rescue mission to extract 41 workers trapped in the aftermath of a tunnel collapse in Uttarakhand. Spanning over 400 hours, the operation tested resolve, grit, and perseverance on both sides of the 57 meters of debris. Overcoming setbacks, the final lap saw 14 "rat-hole miners" break through the last 12 meters, reaching the trapped individuals and eliciting a nationwide sigh of relief.

December unfolded with the announcement of new governments in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Mizoram following the Assembly polls on December 3 and 4. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance secured a resounding victory in Madhya Pradesh, overturning Congress governments in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, solidifying its authority in 17 states and Union Territories. Despite a consolation win for the Congress in Telangana, where it secured 64 seats and a 39.4% vote share, the party's robust performance reinforces its presence in the South.

On the 22nd anniversary of the Parliament attacks, December 13 witnessed a significant security breach as two individuals leaped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the visitors' gallery, raising slogans and releasing yellow smoke from canisters. The incident sparked panic among those present, prompting reflections on potential consequences. The two men, apprehended in the Lok Sabha, had concealed canisters in their shoes and navigated desks in an apparent attempt to reach the Well of the House. (The writer can be reached at dipaknewslive@gmail.com)

Cash still fundamental part of the Indian daily life



By: Girish Linganna

In 2016, India suddenly stopped using two types of banknotes, which made up 86% of all the money in use. This was done to fight corruption and hidden wealth.

Known as Demonetisation, this action led to chaos at banks and ATMs. Critics argued it harmed those with low incomes and disrupted India's large cash-based economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood by the decision, stating it reduced hidden wealth, improved tax adherence, and enhanced transparency.

Seven years after the ban, cash is still widely used in India, raising questions about the effectiveness of the move. The Reserve Bank of India reports that in 2020-21, the amount of cash in use grew by 16.6%, which is higher than the 12.7% average growth rate of the previous ten years. The cash-to-GDP ratio, a measure of cash usage, reached over 14% in 2020-21 before dropping slightly to 13% in

2021-22. Meanwhile, digital payments are also increasing, helped by more people using smartphones and debit cards, and the government's digital distribution of welfare benefits.

The rise in digital payments in India is mainly due to the Unified Payments Interface (UPI). This system allows quick and easy transfers between bank accounts using financial apps. In the last year, the value of UPI transactions exceeded one trillion dollars, which is about a third of India's total economy. India saw an impressive 89 million transactions, making up 46% of all digital payments worldwide, as reported by ACI Worldwide and Global Data in 2023.

The fact that both cash and digital payments are growing at the same time is often called a "currency demand" paradox. The Reserve Bank of India's latest annual report explains that this is surprising because cash and digital payments are usually seen as alternatives to each other, so their simultaneous increase doesn't

seem to make sense. People are using ATMs less and the speed at which money is being passed around in the economy has decreased.

Despite this, many in India still see cash as an important way to save for emergencies and as a way to keep value. As of March 31, the larger currency notes (500 and 2,000 rupees) made up over 87% of all banknotes in use, as per the Reserve Bank of India. Interestingly, the central bank stopped using the 2,000-rupee note, the highest value note, which was introduced after the 2016 currency ban.

Before the pandemic, a study showed that people liked using cash for small buys and digital methods for bigger ones. A recent survey by LocalCircles, a community social media platform, revealed that many people prefer cash for things like buying groceries, eating out, takeaways, paying for help, personal services, and home repairs.

According to a paper by the Reserve Bank of India, the greater preference for cash could be due to lower interest rates on bank savings, the extensive informal and rural sectors, and more direct cash benefits given during the pandemic.

Politics and real estate also play a role in the ongoing use of cash. Undeclared money is still a significant source of funding for political parties during elections. For instance, income tax authorities recently discovered about 3.5 billion rupees (around \$42 million) at locations connected to an opposition MP. In 2018, Prime Minister Modi's administration introduced electoral bonds, which are lim-

ited-time, interest-free bonds of set values, with the aim of reducing illegal cash and increasing transparency in political funding. However, critics argue that these bonds have actually reduced transparency due to their secretive nature.

Most of the undeclared wealth is still found in the real estate sector. A survey by LocalCircles in November reported that 76% of people who purchased property in India over the past seven years used cash for the transaction, with 15% paying more than half of the total amount in cash. Only 24% stated they didn't use cash, compared to 30% two years earlier. The importance of cash in real estate deals is linked to property developers depending on the backing and favour of politicians, as discovered in a study by the Financial Experts.

India isn't alone in seeing both digital and physical cash grow together. The European Central Bank, in a 2021 report, mentioned a "paradox of banknotes". They observed that although the usage of banknotes for shopping appears to be declining, the demand for euro notes has been rising continuously. Despite expectations of a decrease due to more digital payments, the actual demand for cash hasn't fallen, with the number of euro notes increasing since 2007. Sweden stands out as an exception, being the world's leading cashless society.

In India, cash is still a fundamental part of daily life for many. Seena, an auto-rickshaw driver in Bangalore, notes, "Most of my customers still pay in cash. Cash will never disappear." (IPA Service)

Are we headed for an open autocracy?

By: Anand K. Sahay

We are in a time of momentous transition. Recent events suggest that as a nation we could be headed for life-altering turbulence. Separately, each episode is of high impact, and together they have the potential to accelerate a process in the direction of an open autocracy that could betoken, for all practical purposes, a one-party state apparatus – bidding adieu to the constitution we have nurtured for 75 years – if circumstances remain supportive.

Predictably enough, in the short run, the most critical of these would be the return of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to office in the next Lok Sabha election, five months away. Whether as a propaganda trick or not, Modi has recently declared that a third straight win for him was a foregone conclusion.

Looking at the country's political map, it is a no-brainer that an effective coming together of the significant sections of the opposition in the major states will block Modi's further advance, and that may result in his relegation to the background. He appears to have way too many adversaries within the safe universe who could turn vengeful if power slips from his grasp.

The top shots in Lucknow, and not a few in Nagpur, the city of the RSS headquarters, or in Delhi, Bhopal and Jaipur, to say nothing of the second or third string players in elsewhere, who now pretend to be obsequious or dutiful, are likely to lose little time in getting even for real or perceived slights.

On the other hand, A failure on the part of the INDIA alliance parties to recognise the

magnitude of the historical moment they are navigating is poised to leave each of them isolated. Unity is, therefore, an existential imperative. Are they aware of this reality?

If anything, the recent assembly polls in the northern states, which the BJP won decisively, showed that the local Congress satraps were blissfully unaware of the great political significance of these particular elections and carried on as though it was business as usual. So was the Congress leadership, else it would have rapped the three erring chieftains on their knuckles for their tunnel vision when there was still time.

Rahul Gandhi was candid enough to bring up the subject in the December 21 meeting of the Congress Working Committee but, with the Congress, there is no knowing that the party won't fluff its lines again when it deals with partners and allies to prepare for the parliament election.

After being displaced from its high perch 30-odd years ago – when the party was indeed a gargantuan enterprise – it has not quite figured out how to operate the philosophy of working in tandem with entities some of whom may well have a chip on their shoulder, being state parties that have made space for themselves by edging out the Congress over time. Working in genuine partnership with the Congress is a lesson that the state parties of the INDIA alliance also need to learn – and in quick time. There is not much time left.

Comparisons of the present situation with the Janata experiment do not hold water. The entity that regional parties of the day (including the BJP's precursor, Jana Sangh, was also just that at the time) were called upon to ally with was not the



Congress but a disgruntled Congress rump.

Modi played a high-stakes game in the recent elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. He would have been acutely conscious that in the event of a serious setback in this battle, the wolves within the BJP would be out, baying for his blood. They would question his ability – or even credentials – to lead the party in the forthcoming Lok Sabha election. These polls were close to being a point of reckoning, if not a make or break moment, for the prime minister, although this was not apparent. Inherent in them was the potential to bring the 10-year Modi rule to a turning point, whether history marked a turn or not.

It is not clear the prime minister's Congress opponents figured any of this. They did not discern the sensitivity of the moment. They went about as though this was just another poll battle. They didn't understand that a positive result would give Modi the leap and momentum in advance of the key election in 2024 and help him set the field for the main battle ahead.

Though Modi was taking his chances, he was not playing blind when he forced the BJP's key state leaders – the architects of its past wins in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – out of the reckoning, appealing to the electorate to cast their vote in his name. He was aware that the wind of communalism was in his sails. Two important considerations would have weighed as inordinately powerful factors – Ayodhya and Kashmir.

After a long four-year wait, the Supreme Court decided to take up the Kashmir case – the challenge to the Union government jettisoning the constitutional autonomy of J&K. The arguments being reported in the press gave ample indication which way things were going. To many it seemed that the timing of an event of such magnitude may not be unrelated to the electoral timetable. The judgment came on December 11, 2023, after the recent assembly election results were announced, but forms a prelude to the parliament election due early next year.

Arguably the most crucial

event in setting the narrative of the new nationalism espoused by Modi and his party was the November 2019 Ayodhya judgment of the Supreme Court, which called the destruction of the Babri Masjid a "criminal act" but also, defying logic and common sense, handed over possession of the site on which it had stood to the so-called Hindu parties, meaning a clutch of Hindutva outfits.

Since then, activities associated with the construction of the new temple to Lord Rama have been flooding the newspapers and social media. They have also found a regular mention in the BJP's speeches during the assembly elections. The inauguration of the temple scheduled for January 22, 2024, is the primary news in the Modi calendar, and is dutifully reflected in the mainstream media.

This background became the setting for the win in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which has unbound the Prometheus of Hindutva, who is portrayed as a heroic figure – greater than anything that has happened to the Hindu supremacist ideology since its inception.

To add more grist to the mill, the temple disputes of Varanasi and Mathura appear to be continually stoked in the direction desired by the new nationalists by various levels of our judicial system, not excluding the Supreme Court.

Senior BJP leaders now routinely refer to Modi as the 'best' prime minister India has ever had, clearly surpassing Vajpayee and not to mention the great leaders of the freedom movement, such as Nehru, who is just about recognized as a former prime minister – and sought to be made less than significant. The already-established Modi cult owes not a little to its forceful promotion by Modi himself, who seeks to portray himself as larger than life and all-conquering. The G20 meet in Delhi this year was an illustration.

It is in the reign of this cult figure that a senior functionary of the Ayodhya temple administration has declared the upcoming inaugural of the temple on January 22 as an event of history on par with the independence of India from British rule in 1947. The new chief minister of Madhya Pradesh has said that the prime meridian, the internationally recognised zero degree longitude line, will now be made to pass through Ujjain in his state, which is the seat of the Lord Shiva as Mahakaal (the Great Time). The currently recognised marker is Greenwich near London, and the international time zones are calculated in relation to Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).

Modi is the "strong leader", the Hindutva forces hanker for, veritably the current avatar of the "Chakravarti samrat" of ancient India, a mighty, conquering ruler who cannot be accountable to his subjects, and who is beyond questioning or

reproach.

Then it is no surprise that the prime minister declared to a newspaper in an interview, ignoring the parliament which was in session, that the December 13 incident, which saw the breach of the security system in the new parliament building and the entry in utterly dumbfounding circumstances of some youths, shouting slogans and letting off smoke-filled canisters, into the Lok Sabha chamber, was "serious", but "there shall be no debate."

What followed was predictable enough as the presiding officers of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, in a space of three days suspended nearly 150 opposition MPs because they made a ruckus and showed protest placards when their demand for a statement by the Union home minister was ignored by the Chair.

For all practical purposes, the prime minister's statement about not encountering a debate became a dictat for those who run the chambers of parliament.

It is plain that while Prometheus may have now broken free, thanks to multi-sided institutional capitulation, the institutions of modern India are themselves now in chains, waiting upon the will of the master. After this, if the next engagement is in the bag for the ruler, we may only anticipate a turn of enormous magnitude in our constitutional and political history.

This is the inverted reality the INDIA opposition alliance can overlook at its own peril as it goes about in its inscrutable meandering fashion to chart out an electoral battle plan. Grand upsets are a part of history, including our own not so distant electoral past. But it is not chance that brings it about. (Courtesy: The Wire)

Impact of Israel-Hamas conflict on terrorist radicalisation in India

By: Sameer Patil

The outbreak of Israel-Hamas hostilities, following the latter's deadly raid on 7 October 2023, has sparked never-before-seen violence in the Gaza Strip. The involvement of external powers, coupled with the regional powers' pursuit of geopolitical ambitions through proxies, threatens the fragile stability of West Asia. However, beyond the geopolitical implications lurks the threat of terrorist violence and radicalisation as a consequence of this conflict.

The Hamas' shrewd use of graphic videos and imagery from its initial spectacular violence in southern Israel and then the death and destruction caused by Israel Defense Forces' campaign in the Gaza Strip has generated a discernible pro-Hamas sentiment across many countries. This has acted as a stimulus for pan-Islamic terrorist groups like al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), as well as other regional terrorist organisations. In South Asia, too, terrorist organisations and their sympathisers are using developments in West Asia to spur radicalisation and rally vulnerable, impressionable youth to fill their ranks.

Global scenario

Counter-terrorism experts around the world have noted that the Israel-Hamas conflict may cause a resurgence of the terrorist threat. The nature and scale of Israel's retaliatory strikes in the Gaza Strip have expectedly generated anger and condemnation across the Muslim world. Terrorist organisations like AQ have exploited these sentiments to assert their relevance. Days into the Hamas attack on Israel, AQ's franchisees in North and West Africa commended the attacks and called for more violence against the Jews. Likewise, AQ's Somali affiliate, al-Shabaab, praised the Hamas fighters and termed it the "battle of the entire Muslim Ummah."

In Europe, there has already been a spillover of the West Asian developments. Since 7 October, there have been two terrorist attacks in France – the beheading of a teacher in northern France (13 October), and the stabbing of a tourist in Paris (3 December), and one attack in Brussels, Belgium (16 Octo-

ber, though not explicitly linked by the authorities to the Israel-Hamas hostilities). These attacks have fuelled concerns among security agencies that the Israel-Hamas hostilities are potentially acting as a catalyst for terrorist radicalisation that can trigger a new wave of lone-wolf terrorist violence.

This radicalisation is also getting a boost from Hamas' disinformation and propaganda tactics, seeking to generate sympathy for its actions by using explicit imagery and videos from the Israeli ground and air offensive in the Gaza Strip. To push its disinformation and propaganda, the group has used 'X' (formerly Twitter) social platform and Telegram encrypted messaging service.

Recently, researchers unearthed a propaganda network of 67 accounts on 'X' platform that was coordinating and amplifying a campaign of posting false, inflammatory content related to the war. On Telegram, Hamas-linked channels regularly post violent graphics of its assault and highlight the aspect of civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip caused by Israeli raids. This has provided ample fodder for disinformation and impaired the international community's understanding of the exact situation on the ground.

The Indian context

In India, too, the situation is not different. Since Hamas' raid, the security establishment has kept a close watch on the mobilisation happening on the Israel-Palestine issue in the country, with Kerala and Maharashtra having emerged as states of particular concern. In Kerala, for instance, a pro-Palestine rally convened on 27 October in Malappuram by Solidarity Youth Movement (SYM), the youth wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, saw the virtual participation of Khaled Mashal, the former head of Hamas, based in Qatar.

While the meeting did not figure any calls for violence and Hamas is not a banned organisation in India, the pro-Palestine campaign in the state is being held in a manner that glorifies Hamas and its leaders as warriors. This conflation of pro-Palestine sentiments with pro-Hamas sentiments is worrisome and establishes a

justification for terrorist violence. Interestingly, SYM held this event as part of its ongoing campaign titled "uproot Hindutva and apartheid Zionism." In Maharashtra, according to the security agencies' statistics, between 7 October and 20 November, 27 pro-Palestine protests took place in various parts of the state, including Pune, Kolhapur, and Thane (Mumbai and Bhiwandi) districts. Some protest rallies were also held online.

These developments have also allowed organisation like the Popular Front of India, which, despite being banned in September 2022, continues its activities through its political front, the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI). On 20 October, the SDPI held a pro-Palestine rally in Pune. In response, there were also some pro-Israel rallies. This mobilisation is symbolic of the polarisation that the Indian society is witnessing over the Israel-Hamas conflict. However, it is also spawning antagonism between religious communities – something that terrorist organisations are eager to exploit. Moreover, they have also portrayed the police crackdown on some of the pro-Palestine rallies as a crackdown on "peaceful protests," thereby fuelling the sense of injustice and victimhood.

In the pan-Islamic terrorist propaganda, India is generally clubbed with Israel. In April 2006, then AQ leader Osama bin Laden, in one of his audio messages had mentioned the "Zionist-Hindu war against Muslims." Interrogation reports of previously apprehended Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists from Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir had revealed that new recruits to the organisation were radicalised by showing footage of global events like the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Israeli crackdown on Palestinian protesters at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Notably, Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Islamist, was one of LeT's co-founders. In the last decade, however, the threat of radicalisation to India further intensified with the IS making concerted efforts to target vulnerable youth in India. Even as the IS declined, the threat persisted,

as was evident from the two back-to-back killings in June 2022 in Udaipur, Rajasthan and Amravati, Maharashtra, carried out by the radicalised lone wolves. This year alone, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has arrested multiple suspects on charges of recruitment and radicalisation. Against this backdrop, the Indian security establishment notes that the developments in West Asia have given a new lease of life to the terrorist organisations, with many of them being enthusiastic about their prospects – the kind of enthusiasm that they showed after the August 2021 takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban. This will intensify terrorist propaganda and radicalisation. Already, the al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent has urged its supporters to attack American, British and French nationals and interests after Israel's military campaign began.

In addition, a video messages from Pakistan-based fugitive terrorist Farhatullah Ghorri, previously associated with the LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed, is also circulating on encrypted messaging platforms. Using video clips from the Gaza Strip, he castigates India for supporting Israel and urges Indian Muslims to unite with the Ummah in its fight against Israel. Ghorri was part of the terrorist recruitment network in the Persian Gulf in the late 2000s.

Therefore, his message aims to resonate with the vulnerable elements of the Indian diaspora in the region. Clearly, with pan-Islamic and Pakistan-based terrorist organisations weaponising the deluge of footage from the Gaza Strip, their propaganda will have a far-reaching impact on terrorist radicalisation in India. The wide availability of encrypted messaging platforms and Pakistan's attempts to revive terrorist violence exacerbate this threat. The Ministry of Home Affairs, particularly the NIA, has kept up the pressure on terrorist organisations and the supporting ecosystem. However, Indian agencies will have to step up their vigil in monitoring the renewed radicalisation drive by the terrorist masterminds and their well-resourced benefactors. (Courtesy: ORF)

Year-ender: How India battled extreme weather events in 2023's climatic turmoil

By: Anjal Prakash

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) revealed that 2023 was the warmest year globally, breaking all previous records. The WMO's provisional 2023 State of the Global Climate report, released before COP28, emphasised the urgent need for action to curb global warming and its devastating impacts.

This warming trend is mirrored in India, where the India Meteorological Department (IMD) reported the warmest August and September in 122 years. According to a report by the Center for Science and Environment, a significant shift has been observed in the winter, traditionally India's second-wet period, with January and February experiencing above-average temperatures for the third consecutive year.

February 2023 was notably the warmest on record since 1901, accompanied by an alarming decline in rainfall, particularly in Central India, and a 76 per cent deficit in the North-west region. Experts attribute these anomalies to changes in Western Disturbances (WDs), cyclonic storms originating in the Mediterranean, influenced by climate change.

Heatwaves persisted into June, impacting 12 states/UTs (union territories) and attributed to human-caused climate change by Climate Central. Between June and August, 11 states/UTs experienced higher temperatures, made at least three times more likely by the climate crisis. The India Meteorological Department linked this trend to greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels, projecting a further increase in frequency and duration by 2060. The pre-monsoon season in March witnessed extreme storm activities, leading to the highest rainfall in Central India and the Southern Peninsula since 1901. April saw unprecedented hailstorms on 27 out of 30 days, with heatwaves occurring seven days in at least nine states. A study by the World Weather Attribution (WWA) attributed these heatwaves in April to climate change, predicting their increased frequency.

Monsoon meltdown and climate-induced extremes

In 2023, India confronted a surge in extreme weather events, signalling a new normal heightened by climate change. The year commenced with unprecedented temperatures in February, breaking a record of the past 123 years. The impact of climate change became evident in April and June, marked by a humid heatwave in East and Central India that was made 30 times more likely. Cyclone Biparjoy in the Arabian Sea lingered for 13 days, setting a record as the longest-duration cyclone since 1977.

Incessant rainfall wreaked havoc in North-West India, prompting flash floods and landslides in Himachal Pradesh, while Delhi grappled with

its highest rainfall in four decades. Meteorologists and climate scientists attribute the escalating frequency of extreme weather events to rising global warming levels.

The Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India, underscores that monsoonal rainfall will intensify and affect larger areas due to increased atmospheric moisture content. The IPCC Report 2023 warns of a 20 per cent surge in extreme rainfall events in the Indian subcontinent, leading to incessant and erratic rainfall, intensifying floods, and more frequent cyclonic events.

India has witnessed a rise in average temperatures, decreased monsoon precipitation, increased extreme events, and a rise in sea levels since the mid-20th century. Analysts emphasise the continuous moisture feed from the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea contributing to extreme weather events.

Himalayan vulnerability unveiled

In the tumultuous landscape of the Himalayas, 2023 has unfurled a harrowing sequence of events, with the latest being a Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) wreaking havoc in Sikkim. From the submergence of Joshimath to the extensive losses witnessed in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh during the monsoon, the region grapples with unprecedented rainfall, landslides, and accelerated glacial melt, signalling the unmistakable impacts of climate change.

The intricate interplay of geological, hydrological, and meteorological hazards, coupled with an elevated seismic risk, paints a dire picture for the Himalayas. The existing framework reveals shortcomings in handling high-risk projects, often neglecting the impacts of climate change and lacking sophisticated methodologies.

The Himalayan region, home to numerous operational and upcoming hydroelectric projects, calls for a twofold approach: ensuring mega projects align with environmental preservation and fortifying against multiple threats through comprehensive risk assessments. The evolving climate crisis necessitates a proactive stance, incorporating all risks during project design and establishing independent bodies for impartial risk assessments in the Himalayas.

Cyclonic turmoil

In 2023, India faced the impact of several cyclones, contributing to a year marked by extreme weather events. Among the notable ones, Cyclone Biparjoy, the first severe cyclone of the year, made landfall in Western India near the Pakistan border on June 15. Initially classified as a very severe cyclonic storm, it was later downgraded to severe, causing substantial damage to Gujarat's Saurashtra and Kutch coasts.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) issued an orange alert,

predicting the storm's trajectory across the Jakhau Port area, resulting in winds up to 125 km/h. The cyclone led to casualties, injuries, and widespread destruction of vegetation, infrastructure, and transport links. Rising sea surface temperatures in the Arabian Sea, attributed to climate change, were identified as a contributing factor to the cyclone's intensity.

Another significant cyclone, Hamoon, struck the Bay of Bengal from October 23 to 25. With a maximum wind speed of 148 km/h, it affected the Eastern and Northeastern regions. Additionally, Cyclone Mocha, a Category 5 storm in the Bay of Bengal from May 11 to 14, did not make direct landfall in India but impacted Myanmar. These cyclones collectively resulted in a toll on human lives, causing casualties and injuries, while also inflicting substantial damage to infrastructure. The cyclones, exacerbated by climate change-induced factors, highlighted the vulnerability of coastal areas and underscored the need for effective disaster preparedness and mitigation measures in the face of increasingly frequent and intense tropical storms.

2023's unusual weather patterns sound a call for action

Climate scientists and experts highlight multiple factors contributing to the unusual weather patterns in 2023. These include the alignment of weather systems, an atmospheric phenomenon amplifying global temperatures, more enormous wildfires releasing more carbon, warming in the North Atlantic Ocean, exceptional warming in the Arabian Sea since January, and unusual upper-level circulation patterns.

The tragedy in Sikkim, where lives and infrastructure succumbed to the forces of a GLOF, brings to light the critical oversight in constructing hydropower projects, failing to account for these complex dynamics.

The escalating frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, intensified by global warming, cast a looming threat over the region. As the narrative of the Sikkim tragedy unfolds, it underscores the imperative need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Environment Clearance (EC) procedures.

Recognising the urgent need for action, India must intensify efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, transition to renewable energy, enhance energy efficiency, and adopt sustainable practices. Strengthening early warning systems and building resilience to extreme weather events are crucial for safeguarding communities. India's experience underscores the global imperative to address climate change collectively, focusing on reducing emissions and fostering adaptation measures to secure a sustainable future. (Courtesy: The Quint)

NKorea's Kim vows to bolster war readiness to repel 'unprecedented' US-led confrontations

SEOUL, Dec 28: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for bolstered war readiness to repel what he said were unprecedented US-led confrontational moves in comments during a key political meeting tasked with setting state objectives for 2024, state media reported on Thursday.

Kim's comments indicated once again that North Korea will likely continue weapons tests to modernize its nuclear arsenal for the time being. But observers say Kim likely hopes to eventually use his boosted arsenal as leverage in diplomacy with Washington, possibly after the US presidential election in November next year. During Wednesday's second-day session of the ruling party's plenary meeting, Kim set forth unspecified tasks for the military and the munitions industry to "further accelerate the war preparations" in the face of "(anti-North Korea) confrontation moves by the US and its vassal forces unprecedented in history," the official Korean Central News Agency said.

It said Kim also clarified the party's stance on expanding North Korea's strategic cooperation with anti-imperialist countries amid the world's rapidly changing geopolitical situation. KCNA said Kim spoke about the direction of the North's dealings with South Korea as well but didn't elaborate.

The Workers' Party meeting is expected to last several days, and state media are expected to publicise details of its discussions after it ends, likely on December 31. Experts say North Korea is expected to come up with pledges and steps to strengthen its nuclear attack capability and expand cooperation with Russia and China, which are also locked in separate confrontations



with the US

Topics to be dealt with at the meeting could include North Korea's push to operate more spy satellites following its launch of its first military reconnaissance satellite on November 21. After the November launch, North Korea said it will submit to the plenary meeting a plan to launch more satellites to improve its spaced-based surveillance capabilities on its rivals.

Since last year, North Korea has performed a barrage of missile tests in breach of UN bans, including last week's launch of the solid-fueled Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile — its most advanced weapon designed to attack the mainland US. The North has argued it has sovereign, legitimate rights to conduct such tests to deal with the expansion of US-South Korean military exercises that it views as invasion rehearsals. Kim has refused to return to diplomacy with the US since his high-stakes diplomacy with then-President Donald Trump fell apart in 2019. A main sticking point in the collapsed Kim-Trump diplomacy was how much sanctions relief North Korea would be given in return for a partial surrender of its nuclear programme. (AP)

Putin's remarks came on Wednesday when visiting External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar called on him at the Kremlin

Russia-India ties making 'steady headway' despite 'current turbulences': Putin to Jaishankar

MOSCOW, Dec 28: Russia's relations with India and its people are making "steady headway" despite the "current turbulences" in the world, President Vladimir Putin has said and expressed confidence that the two countries will maintain their traditionally friendly ties in "any alignment of political forces" after elections in India.

Putin's remarks came on Wednesday when visiting External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar called on him at the Kremlin.

"We are very pleased to note that despite the current turbulences in the world, relations with our traditional friends in Asia, with India and the Indian people are making steady headway," Putin said.

The ties between India and Russia remained strong notwithstanding Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. India has not yet condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and it has been maintaining that the crisis must be resolved through diplomacy and dialogue.

"We know Prime Minister Modi's position and we have repeatedly spoken about this —

the position concerning his attitude to complex processes, including hotspots, to the situation in Ukraine," Putin said.

"I have repeatedly informed him about the situation around this conflict. I know about his desire to do everything to resolve this problem peacefully, but we will now talk more about it. We will provide you with additional information about this situation," Putin said.

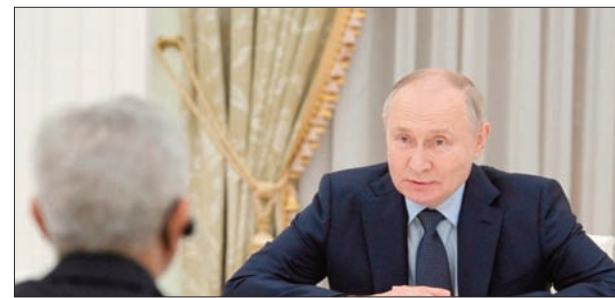
Putin said he would be happy to see "our friend", Prime Minister Modi in Russia.

"We will have an opportunity to discuss the current issues and talk about the prospects for developing Russian-Indian relations. We have to cover a lot of ground," Putin said.

"So I would like to ask you to convey to him my best wishes and please, give him our invitation — we are looking forward to seeing him in Russia," Putin said.

He acknowledged that India's domestic political calendar is not simple.

"It is complicated considering that India will hold general elections to parliament. We wish success to our friends in India.



We believe we will maintain our traditional friendly ties in any alignment of political forces," Putin, who is seeking a fifth term in office in March next year, said.

Jaishankar, on his part, conveyed the personal greetings of Prime Minister Modi and also handed over a letter to Putin in which he expressed his thoughts about the state of India-Russia cooperation and the progress that the two sides have made in recent days, according to a press release issued by the Kremlin.

Jaishankar also told Putin that Prime Minister Modi looks forward to visiting Russia next year.

"I am sure that we will find a date which is mutually convenient for the political calendar of

both countries. So it is certainly something that he looks forward to," the Kremlin press release quoted Jaishankar as saying.

Putin also talked about bilateral trade relations.

"Our trade is growing for the second year running and at a confident pace. This year, the growth rates were even higher than last year," he said.

India's import of Russian crude oil has gone up significantly despite increasing disquiet over it in many Western countries.

"Our trade is growing for the second year running and at a confident pace. This year, the growth rates were even higher than last year. I don't remember how many percentage points it grew by last year, but we have

already surpassed this figure in the nine months of this year," the Russian president said.

"It is common knowledge that this is primarily energy resources — oil, oil products and coal, but it's not just that. We are working together in high-tech areas," he said.

Jaishankar also informed Putin that bilateral trade has touched more than USD 50 billion.

"We believe that this is something whose potential is now only beginning to be visible. It is important that we give it a more sustainable character, and we discussed how we should do that," Jaishankar said.

He also pointed out that India and Russia have signed agreements on Tuesday which would take the Kudankulam nuclear power project forward.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Deputy Prime Minister and Chair of the Russian side of the Intergovernmental Russian-Indian Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation Denis Manturov and Presidential Aide Yuri Ushakov also attended the meeting. (PTI)

A Russian drone and artillery attack kills 6 in Ukraine and knocks out power in a major city

KYIV, Dec 28: Russia fired almost 50 Shahed drones at targets in Ukraine and shelled a train station where more than 100 civilians were gathered to catch a train to Kyiv, Ukrainian officials said on Wednesday. The barrages killed at least five people and knocked out power in most of the southern city of Kherson.

The aerial barrage came a day after Ukrainian warplanes damaged a Russian ship moored in the Black Sea off Crimea as both sides' soldiers struggle to make much progress along the front line of the 22-month war.

Overnight, the Kremlin's forces launched an artillery and drone bombardment of the Kherson region just as some 140 civilians were waiting for a train at the region's capital city of the same name, according to Ukrainian Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko. The shelling killed one policeman and injured two other police officers, as well as two civilians. More than 100 people who were waiting for the train at the time of the attack arrived in Kyiv on Wednesday morning, national rail operator Ukrzaliznytsia said.

The attack on the Kherson region and its capital hit residential areas and a mall as well as striking the power grid, leaving around 70% of households in Kherson city without electricity during the

winter cold, regional Gov. Oleksandr Prokudin said.

It was not immediately possible to estimate when power might be restored, he said. Targeting energy infrastructure was also a Russian tactic last winter, when it tried to break Ukrainians' spirit by denying them heating and running water.

In Odesa, another major city in southern Ukraine, the drone assault killed two people and wounded three, including a 17-year-old man, regional Gov. Oleh Kiper said. Ukraine's air force said it intercepted 32 out of the 46 drones that Russia fired overnight.

A Western military assessment, meanwhile, reckoned that Russia's capture this week of a city in eastern Ukraine would not provide it with a springboard for major battlefield gains.

Ukrainian commander-in-chief Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi said Tuesday that his troops had retreated to the northern outskirts of the city of Marinka, which sits about 20 kilometers (12 miles) west of Donetsk, the largest city in Russian-held territory. Zaluzhnyi said his troops had held Marinka for almost two years but Russians "were destroying it street by street, house by house."

The Institute for the Study of War, a think tank, said, "Russian forces are highly unlikely to make rapid opera-

tional advances from Marinka."

But it noted that "localized Russian offensive operations are still placing pressure on Ukrainian forces in many places along the front in eastern Ukraine."

Amid concerns that weapons supplies from abroad could diminish as allies become fatigued with the war, Ukraine's minister of strategic industries told a briefing on Wednesday that the defense sector aims to increase production significantly next year and that production was three times higher in 2023 than in the previous year.

Oleksandr Kamyshin said Ukraine is now producing six Bohdana self-propelled artillery units per month. Bohdanas are a strategically important weapon for the Ukrainian defense industry as they are the only Ukrainian-produced self-propelled gun using NATO-standard 155mm rounds instead of the 152mm rounds used by artillery based on Soviet technology.

Kamyshin also said the country next year aims to produce up to 1,000 long-range strike drones — which have a range of about 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) — an increase from only a few dozen a month currently. It is also targeting production of 10,000 middle-range and 1,000 long-range strike drones. (AP)

6 Indian family members killed in fatal crash in US

HOUSTON, Dec 28: In a horrific accident, at least six members of an Indian family, including two children, were killed when their minivan collided head-on with a pickup truck in the US state of Texas, officials said.

The accident occurred on Tuesday evening near Johnson County, near Fort Worth, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS).

Seven people of the same family from Amalapuram town in Andhra Pradesh were in the minivan, and only one of them, 43-year-old Lokesh Potabathula, survived with critical injuries.

Authorities identified those who died as Potabathula's wife, 36-year-old Naveena Potabathula; the couple's children, 9-year-old Nishidha Potabathula and 10-year-old Krithik Potabathula; and Naveena Potabathula's parents, 60-year-old Sitamahalakshmi Ponnada and 64-year-old Nageswararao Ponnada.

The DPS identified the driver of the minivan, 28-year-old Rusli Barri of Irving, as one of the deceased victims. The elderly were visiting their daughter Naveena and grandkids Krithik and Nishidha from India, the Consulate General (CG) of India in Houston said. (PTI)

Argentina's unions take to the streets to protest president's cutbacks, deregulation and austerity

BUENOS AIRES, Dec 28: Thousands of union members and activists took to the streets of Argentina's capital on Wednesday to protest a decree from President Javier Milei that imposes sweeping deregulation and austerity measures meant to revive the country's struggling economy. Unions had asked a court for a prior injunction to block measures lifting some labour protections, but a judge rejected the appeal, noting the decree had not yet entered into effect. It does so on Friday.

Argentine labour activists question whether Milei, a self-described anarcho-capitalist who has long railed against the country's "political caste," can impose the measures by way of an emergency decree bypassing the legislature where his party has few seats.

"We do not question the president's legitimacy ... but we want a president who respects the division of powers, who understands that workers have the need to defend themselves individually and within the framework of justice when there is unconstitutionality," said Gerardo Martinez, general secretary of Argentina's construction workers' union. The protest went off peacefully, except for a confrontation between a small group of protesters and police. Journalists were caught up in the scuffle as police broke up the group of protesters, and some were beaten by police.

"The country is not for sale!" some protesters chanted, apparently referring to proposals that would allow the privatization of state-run industries. Since taking office on December 10 following a landslide election victory, Milei

has devalued the country's currency by 50 per cent, cut transport and energy subsidies, said his government won't renew contracts for more than 5,000 recently hired state employees and proposed repealing or modifying about 300 laws. He says he wants to transform Argentina's economy and reduce the size of its state to address rising poverty and annual inflation expected to reach 200 per cent by the end of the year. The General Labor Confederation read a statement at the march on Wednesday saying Milei's decree "introduces a ferocious, regressive labour reform whose only purpose is to hamstring union activity, punish workers and benefit business interests."

Milei's administration has quickly faced protest. The government had said it will allow demonstrations, but threatened to cut off public aid payments to anyone who blocks thoroughfares. Marchers were also forbidden to carry sticks, cover their faces or bring children to the protest. Milei, a 53-year-old economist who rose to fame on television with profanity-laden tirades against the political establishment, became president with the support of Argentines disillusioned with the economic crisis.

In a media interview ahead of the protest, he accused those who oppose his reforms of "not being aware of the seriousness of the situation." His initiatives have the support of Argentina's Business Association which called them a "historic opportunity" to fight the "excessive size of the state" and the negative consequences of decades of budget deficits. (AP)



Hong Kong man jailed for 6 years after pleading guilty to a terrorism charge over a foiled bomb plot

HONG KONG, Dec 28: A Hong Kong man was sentenced on Thursday to six years in prison after pleading guilty to a terrorism charge under a Beijing-imposed national security law for his involvement in a foiled plot to bomb court buildings.

Prosecutors said Ho Yu-wang, 19, was the plot mastermind who planned to manufacture explosives and target court buildings in 2021. The plot, involving mostly secondary students back then, was foiled due to a police investigation, while no bombs were made and no casualties occurred, the

prosecution earlier said.

Police said they raided a guesthouse room in 2021 and seized equipment believed to be used for making explosives. They also alleged Ho had written notes saying that his goal was to destabilize Hong Kong, promote conflicts between the central government and others, and build up a resistance group.

Two other defendants received a jail term of up to six years for an alternative charge. Ho is a lesser-known activist in the semi-autonomous city's pro-democracy movement, but his case has drawn attention because most of those arrested for



the plot were students when the prosecution began about two years ago.

In May, Ho pleaded guilty to conspiracy to organize, plan or commit terrorist activities under the security law imposed on the former British colony following the 2019 protests.

The security law enacted in

2020 criminalizes acts of succession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces, leading to the prosecution of many leading activists in the city. Beijing and Hong Kong authorities hailed it for bringing back stability to the financial hub. Judge Alex Lee said if the plot had been carried out it would have changed the social conditions in Hong Kong from bad to worse, and Ho had disregarded the rule of law and the risks of his "fellow gangsters."

He reduced his term from a starting point of 10 years, based on grounds that Ho made a timely plea and provided practi-

cal assistance to the police later.

In his mitigation, Lee heard that Ho was grateful he had been arrested, barring his plan from materializing in the end, and that he has changed his mindset and resumed his studies, particularly of Chinese history.

Two other defendants — Kwok Man-hei, 21, and Cheung Ho-yung, 23 — were sentenced to two-and-a-half years and six years in jail respectively. They pleaded guilty to conspiring to cause explosions that were likely to endanger life and property, an alternative to the terrorism charge that falls under a separate law. (AP)

Canada may arrest two suspects in Nijjar's killing 'within weeks'

OTTAWA, Dec 28: Canadian police are close to arresting two men believed to be responsible for the fatal shooting of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in the British Columbia province in June and are still in the country, according to a media report. According to The Globe and Mail newspaper, the suspects are currently under police surveillance and are expected to be apprehended "in a matter of weeks."

According to three anonymous sources quoted by the newspaper, the two suspected killers did not leave Canada following Nijjar's assassination and have been under police surveillance for months. The ties between India and Canada came under severe strain following Canadian PM's allegations in September of a "potential" involvement of Indian agents in the killing of Khalistani separatist Nijjar outside a gurdwara in Surrey city on June 18. India had designated Nijjar as a ter-

rorist in 2020. India has rejected Trudeau's allegations as "absurd" and "motivated". The report on Wednesday said that police will unveil details regarding the alleged involvement of the assassins and their connection to the Indian government when formal charges are filed.

"Within the community, there's a sense of closure that might come with the two people being arrested like it's being said," the Global News quoted Moninder Singh said. (PTI)

Top Pakistan official claims Afghan-backed terror outfit TTP sought to control parts of tribal areas

ISLAMABAD, Dec 28: A high-ranking Pakistani official has strongly refuted Afghan interim foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's claims that Pakistan withdrew from a deal with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan at the last minute and claimed that the talks collapsed due to unreasonable and unconstitutional demands by the dreaded terror outfit.

According to a media report, the top official said that under the guise of negotiations, the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terror group was aiming to establish its own 'empire' within the former tribal areas with tacit support from the Afghan Taliban.

During an informal exchange between Afghan interim Foreign Minister Muttaqi and Pakistan's Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayyad at the Palestine Conference in Tehran last week, the Taliban leader alleged that most of the issues between Pakistan and

the TTP were resolved in 2022, according to The Express Tribune newspaper.

He contended that the only remaining point of contention was regarding the merger of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). According to Muttaqi, Pakistan withdrew when both sides were on the verge of finalising an agreement.

However, this top-ranking Pakistani official familiar with the matter dismissed Muttaqi's statement as absurd, stating that the Afghan diplomat's narrative lacked veracity.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the subject's sensitivity, explained that the talks collapsed due to unreasonable and unconstitutional demands by the TTP.

The newspaper reported that the official elucidated that under the guise of negotiations, the terrorist group aimed to establish its own 'empire' within the former

tribal areas, with tacit support from the Afghan Taliban. "Should we yield our territory to these terrorists? Absolutely not," the official asserted, placing the blame on the Afghan Taliban government for the current impasse in bilateral relations.

Another factor that hindered the progress of the talks was Pakistan's realisation that the TTP was using the dialogue as a pretext to reorganise. Despite the ceasefire announcement, terrorist attacks by the TTP continued unabated.

The official emphasised that Pakistan had provided ample time to the Afghan Taliban to neutralise the TTP threat.

"We presented evidence and shared the whereabouts of TTP terrorists within Afghanistan. However, despite these efforts, the Afghan Taliban made mere promises and failed to take substantive action against the TTP," the official added. (PTI)

Jacques Delors, architect of the modern EU and 'Mr. Europe,' dies aged 98

BRUSSELS, Dec 28: Jacques Delors, a Paris bank messenger's son who became the visionary and builder of a more unified Europe in his momentous decade as chief executive of the European Union, has died in Paris, the Delors Institute think tank told The Associated Press on Wednesday. He was 98.

"The whole of Europe mourns the death of one of its greatest architects," the institute said in a statement. "The best results of European integration cannot be dissociated from the vision, the courage, the conviction, the perseverance and the relentless work which characterized Jacques Delors' work during his 10 years at the head of the European Commission." Paying tribute, the office of French President Emmanuel Macron said: "This grandson of farmers and the son of a bank employee, whose rise was entirely due to his talent, never allowed the lofty heights to corrupt his human righteousness."

Delors "became the builder of the EU as we know it today," German Chancellor Olaf Scholz wrote on X,



formerly Twitter. "It is our responsibility to continue his work today for the good of Europe."

Polish president tangles with new government in battle over control of state media

For many, the owlish but hard-driving Socialist and Catholic was simply "Mr. Europe." The EU, which stretches these days from Finland to Portugal and is home to some 450 million people, was dubbed "the house that Jacques built" by a popular biography.

Under his 1985-1995 tenure at the head of the EU's bureaucracy in Brussels, member countries agreed to tear down barriers that prevented the free movement of capital, goods, services and people. Delors was also

key in drawing up the blueprint for economic and monetary union, which led to the creation of the European Central Bank and the euro currency.

The latter, considered by many to be Delors' masterpiece, is now official tender for 20 of the 27 EU nations. But in the years leading up to his death, some of Delors' handiwork came under threat. A narrowly averted crisis over Greece shook the eurozone, while the EU's borders came under pressure from hundreds of thousands of refugees and other migrants, revealing fault lines within the bloc. In 2016, the U.K. voted to leave the EU in a repudiation of the "ever-closer union" the former EU Commission president told to forge.

Further expansion eastward of the EU into territory once controlled by Moscow had been halted by ferocious Kremlin opposition. And the economies of many of the bloc's member nations appeared to be stuck in idle, with persistent low growth rates and millions of people unable to find work.

In remarks that may ring as true today as when he left office, Delors in 1995 cautioned fellow Europeans that "we have a future filled with danger." He insisted their countries, which spent centuries at one another's throats in devastating and bloody wars, must continue to strive for "agreements at political, social and economic levels."

For many, the moody Frenchman with big ideas yet painstaking attention to detail was the most influential figure in constructing a more united Europe since the postwar founders of the Common Market decided to bind their nations together to prevent another war.

Wim Kok, a former Dutch prime minister, admiringly called Delors the man "who for 10 years determined the face of Europe like no other." "I am satisfied like an artisan from whom someone ordered a table and chairs, who did everything he could to craft a fine work, and who today sees it in front of him," Delors told a newspaper reporter in 1998, three years after leaving Brussels. (AP)

NPP forming govt, interstate border issues, ethnic strife for Meghalaya in 2023

The state government announced the constitution of such a panel to review the 1972 policy

SHILLONG, Dec 28: Electoral activities dominated the early part of 2023 in Meghalaya, where the National People's Party formed government with support of the BJP, as the year also remained witness to an MLA's defiant fast over a reservation policy, interstate border issues and ethnic strife.

Led by its charismatic young leader Conrad K Sangma, the NPP bagged 26 seats in the 60-member House, seven more than what the party had managed in the 2018 assembly polls.

The NPP got another shot in the arm in May, when the People's Democratic Front (PDF), along with two MLAs, merged with it, increasing the ruling party's tally to 28.

Despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi and top central ministers campaigning for the BJP, the saffron party could only retain the two seats it had won in 2018.

The Opposition Congress and the TMC secured five seats each, while the newly floated Voice of the People Party (VPP) won four.

Within months of formation of the new government, VPP chief Ardent Basaiawmoit began a fast that lasted for over 200 hours, demanding the Conrad K Sangma-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance government constitute an expert committee to review a 51-year-old reservation policy.

The state government announced the constitution of such a panel to review the 1972 policy, which awarded 40 per cent



of reserved jobs to Garos, 40 per cent for Khasi-Jaintia tribes, 5 per cent for other tribes and 15 per cent for general category candidates.

The VPP leader maintained that the ratio in terms of job reservation should be proportionate as per the population structure of the state.

Sangma also reconstituted the regional committees in a bid to resolve the remaining six areas of differences along the interstate border with neighbouring Assam.

The committees headed by deputy chief ministers Prestone Tynsong and Sniawhalang Dhar and tourism minister Paul Lyngdoh have met, but could not make any significant headway due to reported skirmishes along the border.

Last year, Assam and Meghalaya had signed a border pact for the first six areas of differences identified between the two

northeastern states.

The talks for the remaining six areas of differences, which include the disputed Langpih area in Meghalaya's West Khasi Hills, and Mukroh and Lapangap villages in West Jaintia Hills district, are at an advanced stage, officials said.

In September, clashes broke out at Lapangap village and the situation remained tense for weeks, as people of two ethnicities attacked each other with catapults, bows and arrows.

At one point, the Assam Police resorted to firing teargas shells to disperse unruly crowds, which engaged in violence by burning down huts, police had said.

The relocation of residents of the Punjabi Lane area here also made news in Meghalaya during the year, as the state government proposed to shift 342 families from the disputed area to land owned by the Shillong Municipal Board.

People from Punjab, who were brought to Shillong around 200 years ago by the British, live in the area.

After initial reluctance, the residents agreed to the proposed relocation but with certain demands, including the government providing them plots and bearing the cost of constructing their houses.

The genesis of the relocation can be traced to a clash that erupted in the area, after a person was assaulted in May 2018. Thereafter, the Shillong Municipal Board began an exercise to determine the legal residents of the area. (PTI)

Arunachal: Congress celebrates its 139th foundation day

ITANAGAR, Dec 28: The Arunachal Pradesh unit of the Congress on Thursday celebrated the 139th foundation day of the party.

Former minister Takam Pario hoisted the party flag at a function held at Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan here.

Speaking on the occasion, Pario said the Congress has always accorded topmost priority to the interest of the people.

"The Congress is proud of its illustrious history and legacy. It remains the party that truly represents India's multi-cultural, multilingual and multi-religious society," Pario said.

He said the Congress led India's freedom struggle and guided the country to the path of development.

"The Congress is not merely a political organisation. It has encompassed every facet of the nation's life. It has a rich legacy of contributions to Arunachal Pradesh," he said. (PTI)

Tripura Assembly winter session from January 5

AGARTALA, Dec 28: The Winter Session of Tripura Assembly would commence from January 5, state parliamentary affairs minister Ratan Lal Nath said on Thursday.

The Business Advisory Committee (BAC) which met on Thursday cleared the business of the upcoming session of Assembly, Nath told reporters.

The winter session of the assembly will commence on January 5 with the customary address by Tripura Governor Indrasena Reddy Nallu.

He said there will be no major 'business' on the part of the government but two bills - Tripura Goods & Services Tax (7th amendment) Bill and Tripura State Tribal (4th amendment) Bill will be tabled in the House.

Nath said the first day of the session will be adjourned after the Governor's speech as a mark of respect to BJP MLA Surajit Dutta, who passed away on Wednesday.

"This time the opposition members will get ample opportunity to discuss various issues



including views on the governor's address. I do believe the session will be beneficial for all sides", he said.

Meanwhile, a senior police officer said security will be beefed up around the Assembly keeping in mind the recent security breach in Parliament.

"The movement of vehicles will be monitored strictly. Besides, tight-checking will be done to keep troublemakers out of bay. We requested the Assembly authority to issue visitors' passes after proper scrutiny", said the officer. (PTI)

Tripura BJP MLA Surajit Dutta dies after prolonged illness

AGARTALA, Dec 28: Tripura BJP MLA Surajit Dutta passed away at a Kolkata hospital on Wednesday night after a prolonged illness, according to officials.

Dutta (70) is survived by wife and daughter. The Ramnagar MLA, who had been suffering from multiple diseases, was admitted to an Agartala hospital on Tuesday due to breathlessness. He was then transferred to Kolkata for better treatment, but died during the process.

Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha expressed his sorrow in a Facebook post, saying, "I am saddened and pained by the death of senior politician and sitting BJP MLA Surajit Dutta during treatment in a hospital outside the state."

Saha added, "His death is an irreplaceable loss for the state. May his soul rest in eternal peace. My deepest sympathies go out to the grieving family. Om Shanti."

As a sign of respect, the Tripura government announced a one-day state mourning on Thursday. (PTI)

Meghalaya govt to hire chopper for VIP movement: CM

SHILLONG, Dec 28: Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma on Thursday said his government plans to hire a twin-engine chopper exclusively for the movements of VIPs.

The VIP chopper service is valid initially for three months.

"It is necessary sometimes. It saves a lot of time. Movements need to be done by senior leaders. Keeping fiscal constraints (the state is facing), we are not procuring a chopper but will be hiring on an hourly usage basis," the chief minister said in a statement.

He said, "We are giving out a tender for a short-term lease and we pay on an hourly basis. That is the most efficient way and will not incur much financial burden".

The chief minister's statement came in the wake of reports that the state government plans to procure a chopper

for VIP movements.

He said the state government has come up with a tender to hire chopper services and not for procuring a chopper because that in itself is very expensive.

He also said that the normal sorties for the Shillong-Tura-Guwahati route used by visitors get disturbed when VVIP takes the choppers.

The Transport department had on December 22 floated an advertisement requesting a proposal for wet lease of one twin-engine helicopter with a seating capacity of 4-5 passengers.

The last date for submission for the proposal is January 2, 2024, while the tender will be opened on January 16 following which the winning bidder will have to make the chopper available within 5 days for the government's usage. (PTI)

Meeteis have the qualities to be ST: MSA

Origin of Meetei resembles all the other genuine tribes of the world and no one can deny it

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 28: The Meetei Students' Association (MSA), Manipur University has stated that the Meetei possessed all the characteristics of being a tribe though the Constitution of India doesn't recognise the ethnic group as one, the Sangai Express quoted.

It is the wrong narratives on the origin and history of Meeteis and some influences which have prevented the ethnic group from getting the ST status, said the association in a statement.

MSA further said that the PhD theses and books must be re-examined by constituting a fact finding committee and clear all confusions which claim Kukis are indigenous to Manipur.

MSA further reiterated that the origin of Meetei resembles



all the other genuine tribes of the world and no one can deny it.

Claiming that Kuki-Zo people who came from Myanmar have been creating trouble in Manipur by claiming itself to be an indigenous people of the State and by writing books and research papers based on concocted stories, MSA added that the depicting Anglo-Kuki War as historically true must be debunked.

Many sites which are associated with the history of Meeteis and sacred to them

(the Meetei) have also been claimed by Kuki-Zo people as theirs, MSA claimed.

Further stating that Meetei was depicted wrongfully as the descendant of Arjuna of Mahabharata by some intellectuals, MSA suggested that a fact finding committee must be constituted and let them carry out an in-depth research on the history and origin of Meeteis to clear all the confusion.

It went on to claim that Tikendrajit, Paona Brajabashi, Thangal General,

Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu and other heroes of Anglo-Manipuri War 1891 have been depicted as freedom fighters of India independent movement.

The Nupi Lan of 1939 has also been portrayed as a movement against British India while Moirang has been depicted as the first place in India where the tri-colour was hoisted in 1944, MSA said and maintained that history shouldn't be allowed to be altered based on the fancy and whim of some people.

Saying that history must be kept in its truest form as it gives historical pride and responsibility to the groups concerned, MSA appealed to all concerned to lend a hand in rectifying the distorted versions of Manipur history particularly pertaining to the Meeteis.

MPCC questions significance of 'Good Governance Day'

IMPHAL, Dec 28: Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) recently questioned the significance of celebrating "Good Governance Day" by the ruling BJP "when its government in Manipur has failed on all fronts, particularly its failure to resolve the nearly eight month ethnic violence".

"Good Governance Day" has been observed on December 25 each year since 2014 to mark the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The celebration of the day hosted by the ruling BJP in Manipur held at the City Convention Centre, Imphal, was attended by chief minister N Biren Singh, state BJP president A Sarda Devi, BJP ministers, MLAs and others.

Addressing media today at Congress Bhavan here in connection with the preparation being made by the MPCC for Rahul Gandhi's 'Bharat Nyay Yatra' which is set to flag off from Manipur on January 14, MPCC president K Meghachandra asked whether the BJP can give 'good governance' to the people of the state. (NNN)

LOST

I lost my HS (class 12) Marksheet in Diphu on November 20, 2023 bearing Registration Number 15/RP/0664/236807/1 8 of Board of Secondary Education, Assam.

Arsim Bey,
C/o- Ratan Bey,
Lorulangso Chephongsajir, Ward No.- 5
PO.- Diphu,
PS.- Diphu,
Karbi Anglong, Assam
PIN- 782 460

LOST

I have lost my HSLC Admit Card bearing Roll B11-591 No.0180 of 2011 of Board of Secondary Education Council.

Lajak Debnath
S/o: Binay Bhushan Debnath
Village:-Golaghatia Basti P.O: Hojai, P.S: Hojai Assam.
Mobile:-9401362412

KARBI ANGLONG AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL DEPARTMENT OF S.E. WORKS KAAC::SECRETARIAT DIPHU-782460

No. KAAC/S.E.W-964/2023-24/98

Dtd. 26/12/2023

TENDER NOTICE

Sealed tender affixing non refundable KAAC court fee stamp (receipt) Rs. 10.00 (Rupees Ten) only eventual to be drawn up in form are hereby invited from KAAC registered contractor/reputed firms of works department and will be received by the undersigned up to **4 P.M. on 10/01/2024**, and will be opened on the same date, place and the hours in presence of the tenderer or their authorized agent if any. If the day of the opening of tender happens to be a holiday/non-working days, the tender will be opened in the next day. The undersigned has the right to accept, reject any tender without any reason thereof and will not be bound to accept, the lowest tender quoted rate. To accept. The lowest tender quoted.

SL No.	Name of Works	Tender Amount	Earnest money	Time allowed completion
1.	Interior and exterior furnishing of Koka Amreng	Rs. 1,40,74,556.00	ST/SCIOBC=1% General = 2%	90 days

Detail N I T documents and name of works amounts may be obtained from Office of the S.E.(Works), KAAC, Diphu during working hours on payment of Rs, 500/-

Terms Conditions

N.B

- The rate to be quoted as % (Percent) above/below/as per schedule rate for building/sanitary/ works for all division under APWD for the year 2013.14.
- Earnest money should be deposited in favour of the undersigned in the form of call deposit/bank draft & should be attached with the tender without which no tender will be accepted.
- The Contractor shall Repair/Re-Construction if the works executed failed due inferior quality of works The KAAC Authority will take legal action if the contractor refuse to repair/Re- construction the works.
- The work must be carried on as directed by the E.E (W), KAAC/KAAC Authority.
- The following up to date documents should be enclosed with the tender.
 - Professional Tax Clearance Certificate.
 - Sale Tax Clearance Certificate/GST.
 - Council Registration.
 - Call Deposit.
 - Council receipt
 - Caste Certificate.
 - Aadhaar Card
 - Pan Card
 - Account number
- Payment will be made subject to availabilities of fund
- The undersigned is not bound to accept the lowest quoted rate.

Sd/-
Superintending Engineer (Works)
Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council
DIPHU

Memo No. KAAC/ SE-W-964/2023-24/98(A)

Dtd. 26/12/2023

No.KOK(Bldg)/Tech-132/4397

Date 26/12/2023

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tenders affixing non-refundable court fee stamp of Rs.8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five) only with a validity period of 180 (One hundred eighty) days, which will subsequently to be converted and drawn up in the printed F-2 Form are invited from the intending Registered contractors of Class-I (A, B, C) & Class-II Categories of the Assam, P.W.D.(Bldg) for submitting tenders for the work stated below. The tenders will be received by the undersigned up to 1:30 P.M on 06/01/2024 and will be opened on the same date and place at 2:00 P.M.

Name of Division	Name of Work	(Approx.) Estimated Value of work	Earnest money 1% for ST/SC/OBC/MOBC & 2% for GNL	Cost of Tender Documents	Time of Completion
1	2	3	4	5	6
P.W.D. Kokrajhar Dist. & Chirang Dist. Territorial Building Division.	Construction of digital Computer Room (RCC) at the top of (Male female lock up) attached to District & Sessions Court Building at Kokrajhar	Rs.18,38,993.00	Rs.18,500.00 & Rs.37,000.00	Rs.1,000.00	6 (Six) Months

Detailed N.I.T. may be seen in all working hours in the office of the undersigned. Tender papers will be issued to the contractors or their authorized agent up to 1:30 P.M in all working days from 30/12/2023 to 06/01/2024 in the office of the undersigned on payment in the form I.P.O./Bankers Cheque/Demand Draft/Bank Draft. / C.D duly pledged in favour of the Executive Engineer, P.W.D. Kokrajhar District & Chirang District Territorial Building Division, Kokrajhar. The Contractors should submit attested copy of Registration Certificate for the year 2023-2024, latest clearance Certificate of Income Tax, GST, along with tenders. In case the office is remain closed/ bandh for any reason on tender papers issuing/receiving/opening date, then the same will be issued/received/opened in the next working day.

Sd/-
Executive Engineer, P.W.D.,
Kokrajhar Dist. & Chirang Dist.
Territorial Building Division, Kokrajhar

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1019

Tamil actor, DMDK founder leader Vijayakanth dies

Vijayakanth was to offer alternative to DMK, AIADMK

CHENNAI, Dec 28: DMDK founder-leader and popular yesteryear Tamil actor Vijayakanth, who sowed the seeds of hope among his supporters on the possibility of a real alternative to the Dravidian majors, the DMK and AIADMK, died here on Thursday following illness.

Praised as 'Karuppu MGR' (black MGR) by his fans for his generosity, Vijayakanth had been ill and kept a low profile for the past 4-5 years and his wife Premalatha formally took over the reins of the DMDK on December 14 and she was declared the general secretary at a party meet here.

Vijayakanth aged 71 was popular as 'Captain' after he performed the role of an IFS officer in the 1991 blockbuster Tamil movie 'Captain Prabhakaran.' He is survived by his wife and two sons. Vijayakanth was born Vijayaraj to KN Alagarsamy and Andal Alagarsamy in the temple town of Madurai. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and chief minister M K Stalin were among a string of leaders to condole the death.

The acclaimed actor, even before he gave the hope of a new messiah after his political entry in 2005, had a huge fan following, which he organised well into a structural unit and that stood him in good stead when he took the political plunge.

Respected as a philanthropist



and hailed by the Tamil film world and fans alike for over two decades (since the early 1980s) as 'the macho actor' and real life saviour, that impressive on and off-screen charisma appeared to translate well electorally too, considering the DMDK's performance, which bet on eradicating poverty and corruption. Vijayakanth's spirited fight against graft in movie 'Ramana' immediately struck a chord with the electorate during his initial years in politics. Within a year of its formation the Vijayakanth-led party garnered about 8.40 per cent votes in the 2006 assembly election, though only Vijayakanth managed to win. His maiden win from Virudhachalam in northern Tamil Nadu, where the Pattali Makkal Katchi wielded considerable influence, was seen as a

positive sign of his mass appeal. His run-in with the PMK, which opposed the entry of actors into politics helped him strengthen his political standing. In the 2009 Lok Sabha polls, the actor-turned-politician's party had a little over 10 per cent vote share. Though Vijayakanth had often repeated that his 'alliance is only with the people,' the party allied with the AIADMK in the 2011 Assembly elections.

The Jayalalithaa-led bloc won the polls and the DMDK founder went on to become the Leader of the Opposition (2011-16) by winning from the Rishivandiyam constituency in northern TN.

In 2011, the DMDK won 29 Assembly segments after contesting 41 seats (nearly eight per cent vote share) and emerged as the second

largest party.

Though an ally, he questioned the powers-that-be and his verbal duel with Jayalalithaa in the Assembly took the state by storm and he appeared all set to break the hegemony of the Dravidian parties, that have held sway for over half a century in Tamil Nadu's politics.

After the AIADMK-DMDK alliance soured, the DMDK joined the BJP-led alliance for the 2014 general election, in which, the PMK and Vaiko-led MDMK were also constituents.

In the alliance, though Vijayakanth's party got the lion's share of 14 out of 39 LS seats in Tamil Nadu, it failed to win even a single seat and the party's vote share plummeted to 5.1 per cent. In the 2016 Assembly polls, the DMDK was the major party in the Makkal Nala Kootani (People's Welfare Front), a four-party front in which the Left parties, MDMK and the VCK were partners.

The alliance parties faced a rout and the Chief Ministerial candidate of the front, Vijayakanth lost his deposit in Ulundurpet.

The DMDK could only garner about 2.4 per cent vote share in 2016 and in the 2019 LS polls drew a blank after contesting in four Parliamentary constituencies as part of the AIADMK-BJP alliance and it also lost the EC recognition of a state party. The gradual slide continued between 2011 and

2016 when functionaries and MLAs had either quit the party or were expelled over several issues.

From 2016 onwards, Vijayakanth's health gradually deteriorated and in view of his poor health he could not devote time for party affairs. Considering factors such as absence of robust second-rung leaders, the party's decline appeared irreversible.

Under Premalatha's stewardship, the DMDK faced the 2021 Assembly election as a partner of the TTV Dhinakaran-led Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam and it faced a rout again. Vijayakanth named one of his two sons as Prabhakaran and championed the rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka. His wedding with Premalatha and several family functions had been presided over by late DMK patriarch M Karunanidhi. MIOT International hospital said in a press release: "Captain Vijayakanth was on ventilatory support following his admission for pneumonia. Despite the best efforts of the medical staff he passed away in the morning on 28th December 2023."

While the party statement had said that Vijayakanth had tested positive for coronavirus and was under ventilator, the hospital bulletin said he battled pneumonia. Hospital sources said the party issued that statement even before the results for the second round of samples were available. (PTI)

ED probes land transactions of Priyanka, Robert Vadra



NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Purchase of three plots of land in Haryana in 2005-06 by Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law Robert Vadra from a real estate agent is being probed along with a land deal made by his wife Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) claimed in a recently filed money laundering case charge sheet.

The federal agency filed the charge sheet (prosecution complaint) in November before a Delhi court against UAE-based NRI businessman C C Thampi, who is allegedly linked to Robert Vadra, and Sumit Chadha, a relative of alleged middleman Sanjay Bhandari. Though Robert Vadra and Priyanka Gandhi, a Congress general secretary, have not been named as accused in the charge sheet, this is the first time that Gandhi has been named in a charge sheet filed before a court.

A special Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court in Delhi took cognisance of this charge sheet on December 22 and listed the matter for next hearing on January 29, 2024.

Bhandari fled to the UK in 2016 and the British government approved his extradition to India in January this year acting on a legal request made by the ED and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

The two federal agencies are probing charges of money laundering and tax evasion against the alleged middleman for holding alleged undisclosed assets abroad.

The ED stated in the charge sheet that it came across the land purchase and sale transactions of the Vadras after it registered a Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) case against 67-year-old Thampi in 2015. A 'long and thick relationship' existed between Robert Vadra and Thampi, the agency said.

Robert Vadra has been questioned by the agency in this case in the past and he had denied any wrongdoing.

Thampi, the ED said, had purchased about 486 acres of land between 2005 and 2008 in Amritpur

village in Haryana's Faridabad district through H L Pahwa, a real estate agent based in Delhi-NCR.

"It is imperative to mention that Robert Vadra also purchased three pieces of land measuring 334 kanals (40.08 acres) in Amritpur from H L Pahwa from 2005-2006 and sold the same land to H L Pahwa in December 2010," it said in the charge sheet.

"Further, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, wife of Robert Vadra, also purchased agricultural land measuring 40 kanal (05 acres) in village Amritpur, district Faridabad, Haryana, from H L Pahwa in April 2006 and sold the same land to H L Pahwa in February 2010," the ED stated.

It said "Pahwa was receiving cash out of the books for the purpose of acquisition of land." It was also noticed that Robert Vadra did not pay the entire consideration to Pahwa. The investigation in this regard is still ongoing," the ED said. Thampi was arrested in this case in January 2020 and the ED in a recent press statement alleged that he was a 'close associate' of Robert Vadra. Thampi is at present out on bail.

The ED also stated in the charge sheet that Thampi, in a statement recorded before the agency in January 2020, said he purchased a Land Cruiser car from Robert Vadra 'more than 10 years ago' for which he made payments to the businessman through cheques from his NRE accounts in India.

It also said Thampi has not submitted any documents or details to explain a bank transaction of ₹ 10 lakh with Robert Vadra in 2007.

"Thus, from the above, it is quite evident that Robert Vadra has a close association with C C Thampi," it said.

In June 2019, Thampi told the ED that he knew Robert Vadra for more than 10 years and the businessman was "initially introduced" to him by Madhavan, PA to Sonia Gandhi.

He told the agency that he met Robert Vadra "number of times in the lounge of Hotel Taj Man Singh and some other restaurants in Delhi and also in Dubai." (PTI)

Delhi HC refuses Neelam Azad urgent hearing on police remand

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: The Delhi High Court on Thursday refused urgent listing of a plea by Neelam Azad, a woman arrested in the December 13 Parliament security breach case, who alleged that her police remand was illegal as she was not allowed to consult a legal practitioner of her choice to defend her during the trial court proceedings.

The matter was mentioned for urgent hearing by her lawyer before a vacation bench of Justices Neena Bansal Krishna and Shalinder Kaur, which said there was no urgency in the matter.

"In any case it will be taken up on 3rd (January). There is no urgency," the bench said.

Azad's lawyer said she has challenged her remand order and on January 5, her police custody was getting over. Turning down the request, the court responded there was still "enough time" for the hearing to take place before the remand came to an end. In her petition seeking a writ of habeas corpus directing her production before the high court as well as an order to "set her at liberty," Azad said that being disallowed to consult a lawyer of her choice amounted to violation of her fundamental right guaranteed under the Constitution, making the remand order unlawful. The trial court has remanded her in police custody till January 5. Under Indian laws, a detainee or a person on their behalf can file a habeas corpus petition in a high court or the Supreme Court for their production if they feel they have been detained illegally. Upon production, if the court concerned concludes that the detention is illegal, it can order their release.

"Upon her arrest, the petitioner's family wasn't informed. It was informed only in the evening of 14.12.2023. Further, she wasn't permitted to meet any person including advocates which is mandatory under Article 22(1) of the Constitution of India. Even at the court a single DLSA (Delhi Legal Services Authority) counsel was appointed to all the accused persons without giving them any choice among counsels," the plea,

filed through lawyer Suresh Kumar, has alleged. "The remand order dated 21.12.2023 is illegal and violative of Article 22(1) of the Constitution of India which mandates the accused person to be defended by a legal practitioner of his choice whereas in the present case the petitioner's advocate wasn't permitted to take instructions and defend the petitioner prior to the disposal of the remand application," the plea added.

The petition also said Azad was produced before the trial court on December 14 "after a period of 29 hours from the time of arrest."

Article 22(2) of the Constitution says that every person who is arrested and detained in custody shall be produced before the nearest magistrate within a period of 24 hours of arrest excluding the time necessary for the journey from the place of arrest to the court of the magistrate and no such person shall be detained in custody beyond the said period without the authority of a magistrate. On December 21, the trial court extended till January 5 the police custody of four accused, including Azad, arrested in the Parliament security breach case, after the city police said they needed to uncover all those involved in the conspiracy.

While the four were arrested on the very day of the incident, two others were apprehended later.

Recently, the high court stayed the trial court's direction to the police to supply a copy of the FIR to Azad, noting that it is a case of sensitive nature and, according to a judgment of the Supreme Court, FIRs in sexual offences, offences pertaining to insurgency, terrorism, and those under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act are not to be uploaded on website of the authorities. In a major security breach on the anniversary of the 2001 Parliament terror attack on December 13, two men, Sagar Sharma and Manoranjan D jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery during Zero Hour, released yellow gas from canisters and shouted slogans before being overpowered by some MPs. (PTI)

Modi govt trying to cover up territorial setback in 6 decades: Jairam Ramesh

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Congress leader Jairam Ramesh on Thursday alleged that the government is trying to cover up the worst territorial setback in six decades against the country and Chinese troops have been denying Indian patrols access to the strategic Depsang Plains, Demchok, and other areas in eastern Ladakh since May 2020.

Ramesh on X cited a post by Ladakh-based politician Konchok Stanzin, who said a landmark at the site of the legendary Rezang La battle of the 1962 Sino-India conflict in Ladakh was dismantled by the Army as part of the disengagement process with China.

Stanzin is the councillor of Chushul in the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. "Chushul Councillor Konchok Stanzin has revealed here that the site at which Major Singh fell, where a memorial had been built, was dismantled as it fell in the buffer zone negotiated with China in 2021. This is a huge insult to the memory of Major Singh and the fallen heroes of Charlie Company," Ramesh said on X. The Congress leader said the defence of Rezang La by C Company of 13 Kumaon, led by the legendary Major Shaitan Singh, is one of the

most storied episodes of Indian war history.

"If any proof was still needed that the buffer zones negotiated by the Modi government are in territory previously controlled by India, it is provided by this most shameful concession," he said. "For four years, the Modi government has tried to cover up the worst territorial setback in six decades for India with its DDL approach: Deny, Distract, Lie and Justify. Since May 2020, Chinese troops continue to deny Indian patrols access to the strategic Depsang Plains, Demchok and other areas in eastern Ladakh," said the party general secretary.

He also debunked the purported Indian triumph in Doklam in 2017, and cited the mounting encroachment by China on Bhutanese land. "Despite hollow claims of an Indian victory in Doklam in 2017, China has increased its stronghold on Bhutanese territory in the past six years, increasing the threat to India's Siliguri Corridor, also known as Chicken's Neck," said Ramesh.

"China understands that if the Prime Minister is allowed to claim PR successes, he will continue to cede ground to the Chinese salami-slicing tactics." (PTI)



J'khand BJP releases 'charge sheet' against Soren govt

RANCHI, Dec 28: Jharkhand BJP on Thursday released a 20-page 'Arop Patra' (charge sheet) highlighting the alleged failures of the Hemant Soren government in the state during the four years of its reign.

Releasing the 'charge sheet' here a day ahead of the fourth anniversary of the Soren government, BJP Jharkhand chief Babul Marandi said the tenure of the JMM-led government is marked by corruption, deteriorating law and order and unfulfilled promises.

The document, he said, highlights the failure of the Soren government to fulfill promises made by the chief minister when it assumed power four years ago like providing five lakh jobs and unemployment allowance, besides various assurances given to women and tribals in the state.

The JMM-Congress-RJD government helmed by Soren will

complete four years in power on Friday. The government has decided to celebrate the occasion in a grand way and distribute thousands of appointment letters at a function to be held at the Morabadi ground here.

"The Arop Patra highlights the prevailing corruption and deteriorating law and order in the state. Corruption in Jharkhand has become a matter of discussion in the country and crores of rupees were seized from the premises linked to a Congress MP (Dhiraj Sahu) and government officials during this period. Illegal sand mining is rampant and is being carried out without the mandatory auction of the sand ghats. There is also illegal mining of coal and stone in Jharkhand and CBI probe is underway in a few cases," Marandi said.

He alleged that Soren protects corrupt officers. "He himself does not follow the law." (PTI)

Milestones of social justice ministry in 2023

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: From the submission of the Rohini commission report constituted to examine the sub-categorisation of OBCs to 714 districts declaring themselves manual scavenging-free, this year the Union social justice and empowerment ministry touched several milestones.

All districts have been requested, either to declare themselves free from manual scavenging or upload the data of insanitary toilets and manual scavengers associated with it on "Swachhta Abhiyan" mobile app.

As of November, 714 districts out of 766 districts in the country have declared themselves as manual scavenging-free. Amid the caste census debate, this year the Rohini Commission, constituted to examine the sub-categorisation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), submitted its report to President Droupadi Murmu in July. However, its submission has not been made public and is presently under scrutiny.

The findings of the Rohini Commission are set to play a crucial role in the debate over the caste census. Unique Disability ID (UDID), launched in 2021, saw the issuance of 1 crore cards this year.

In 2023, all 35 international airports and 55 out of 69 domestic airports provided accessibility features for differently-abled like ramps, accessible toilets, help desks and lifts with Braille and auditory information systems. Further, all international/customs airports are reported to have been provided with aerobridges. As many as 709 railway stations have

been made 'fully accessible', and 4,068 railway stations have been made 'partially accessible', according to official data. Seven states/UTs have informed that 2,839 state government buildings have been selected to be made accessible. In the Central government, CPWD reported completion of retrofitting all 1,100 central government buildings targeted under the 'Accessible India Campaign'.

The Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities delivered two landmark judgments, mandating government offices to relocate if inaccessible and addressing insensitivity towards disabilities at airports.

In another move, action was taken against MTNL for neglecting disability status updates, requiring officers to undergo sensitisation at a disability services trust. The Chief Commissioner called for action on accessibility at the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus, invoking relevant disability acts.

Additionally, a ban on the sale of hearing aids by e-commerce platforms was ordered to protect individuals with hearing impairments.

The disability affairs department announced a 1 per cent interest rate rebate to 'divyangjan' borrowers under the National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation loan for timely repayment.

"This initiative aims to alleviate the financial burden on divyang individuals seeking financial assistance, while also promoting responsible repayment practices." (PTI)

RBI continues battle against inflation, possible rate cut in 2024

RBI's efforts continue to decrease inflation to 4% on durable basis

MUMBAI, Dec 28: For five consecutive policy reviews in 2023, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) chose to hold rates, citing inflation threat. And when the prices did cool off a bit, it reminded all about the target to get the headline consumer price inflation at 4 per cent and the risks from food inflation.

Heading into the New Year, all eyes are on when RBI will cut the rates, especially after one of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) members stressed on the need for such an action in the face of the US Federal Reserve's guidance for easing rates. Also, some analysts point to the Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) falling below the 4 per cent mark in mid-2024 and then, there will be prospects of a rate cut.

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das,

who is into the last year of his second three-year term at the helm of the central bank, has been steadfast in highlighting the need to get the inflation down to 4 per cent on a durable basis. CPI cooled off to a four-month low of 4.87 per cent in October but rose to 5.55 per cent in November. After announcing the December monetary policy review, Das said that "loosening in rates is not on the table at all" till the inflation demon is chained at or is under 4 per cent for a durable time.

In December, he said the future is "very fickle", where any shock can hit the economy. The policy stance has continued to be "withdrawal of accommodation" through the year and will be relooked only when inflation reaches the target zone for a "durable time", Das had said.



Episodic rise in inflation like the one fuelled by sky-high tomato and onions prices in the latter half of the year has made the central bank's warnings on potential troubles from food inflation feel more real. The Monetary Policy Com-

mittee (MPC) has the mandate to keep inflation at 4 per cent, with a margin of 2 per cent on either side.

Post general elections, the central bank will be keenly watching the actions of the new government to decide on its policy rate and liq-

uidity strategies.

Into his sixth year as the Governor, Das had taken over the reins at a tumultuous time for the institution on December 11, 2018 after the surprise resignation of his predecessor Urjit Patel and then navigating through the pandemic mayhem. Das has been feted the world over for his leadership and he was also chosen for the best central banker award this year.

With the bureaucrat-turned-central banker at the helm, relations between the Mint Road and North Block has been cordial, barring his continued opposition on crypto currencies.

Das has also flagged risks in the financial system and kicked off a series of addresses from May 2023 to bank boards and their managements. He had told them that the

central bank's periodic inspections have revealed lapses in corporate governance, smart accounting practices to inflate profits and also attempts at evergreening of loans.

The mid-December notification prohibiting banks to lend to an entity that has bets in an Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs) is seen by many as a fall out of such concerns. After warning about potential risk build-up on the unsecured loans front, the central bank has followed it up with a notification to massively jack up the risk weights on unsecured loans in November, rattling the credit market and more so non-bank lenders which have been underwriting such loans.

To clip the wings of large corporates which bargain for cheaper loans for their lower-rated connected entities, the regulator said it

will soon introduce curbs on such lending. The central bank ensured that the mega-merger of the HDFC twins happened smoothly.

Apart from the entrenched entities, the challenge from new age entities indulging in lending activities continued in 2023. Such activities are expected to grow bigger as newer attempts continue at disrupting the game, according to experts.

The central bank's policies over the years have come in for a lot of praise as the government propped the digital payments architecture through the year, and also made it into a key theme during the G20 presidency.

In the New Year, the RBI will also focus on promoting the Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) so that it reaches a critical mass in terms of volume. (PTI)

India to
million

Startup story set for better script in New Year after unicorns, funds fall

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Funding winter and corporate governance woes separated the men from the boys in the country's startup space in 2023 that saw funds into the segment tapering to just around USD 8 billion.

All said, investors are hopeful of strong growth of the maturing startup ecosystem in the New Year.

Edtech and health tech segments that grew exponentially during the pandemic plunged into an abyss of financial uncertainties, with several firms shuttering their business, and valuation of prominent players like BYJU'S and PharmEasy plummeting 85-90 per cent.

Indian startups are estimated to have laid off over 15,000 employees in 2023. Startups with sustainable business models as well as the well-capitalised ones are expected to weather the current turmoil. And the horizon in 2024 is expected to be "exciting" as well as "challenging". Venture capital firm Lightspeed, which has invested in firms like BYJU'S, Magicpin and OYO, said a high cycle or a low cycle of two years does not really impact the outcome of companies that get built over a period of 8-10 years.

"As such, we think of the current phase as a part of the growing up of our ecosystem. Yes, there will be consolidation, valuation correction and even some mortality of companies but all in all, the end result will still be progress," Lightspeed's Partner Rahul Taneja said.

Reflecting a challenging environment for the startup ecosystem, which has churned out numerous unicorns, the total funding tumbled this year compared to a staggering USD 35 billion it attracted two years ago.

Also, corporate governance issues came to the fore at various promising unicorns making the investors' community jittery. BharatPe, GoMechanic, 4B and BYJU'S all had to grapple with multiple red flags in terms of corporate governance ways as well as funding.

Debt fund Stride Ventures' Man-



aging Partner Apoorva Sharma said all lenders in general have been extremely cautious and the primary focus has been to ensure healthy asset quality.

"The average ticket size is already in the range of say ₹20 crore now, which in 2021 was close to ₹45-50 crore. If you look at venture capital investments, it was about USD 35 billion in 2021, about USD 25 billion in 2022 and in 2023, it will be roughly about USD 8 billion. It is declining every year," she said. Further, Sharma said several unicorns have not gone for public valuation and those which are raising funds are doing so either by way of flat valuation or promising discounts in the next round of fund raise.

According to venture capitalist firm Fundamentum Partnership, the number of unicorns dropped to 72 as of November this year from 110 in 2022. "As of November 2023, India had 72 unicorns in comparison to 110 unicorns last year," Fundamentum Partnership's Principal Prateek Jain said.

Consulting firm HexGn's CEO Jaspreet Sethi estimates that health and medtech segments saw an 8 per cent valuation decline while in the case of e-tail, market places and portals, the fall is 9 per cent. The fintech sector saw a marginal decline of 2 per cent in 2023, he

added. IvyCap Ventures' Founder and Managing Partner Vikram Gupta said that approximately 30 unicorns saw changes in their status between 2021-2023.

"When we look at specific sectors, the multiples in the consumer/D2C sectors might have dropped from 5-7 times in 2021 (price to revenue) to around 2-3 times in 2022. Now, they may be showing an increase of 2-4 times.

"Similarly, in SaaS, these multiples may have dropped from 10-30 times in 2021 to 3-5 times in 2022, and may currently be coming to 5-7 times in 2023," Gupta said.

On the other hand, startups with sustainable business models and those innovating around artificial intelligence, Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), deep tech, fintech, electric vehicles and casual gaming, are anticipated to progress well.

Softbank Group, which has invested USD 15 billion in India in the last few years, sees emergence of global technology companies out of India and maturity in the funding ecosystem with many venture capital players getting IPO (Initial Public Offering) exits.

"Our India portfolio has done quite well in terms of exits as well as operating performance of companies. Even in 2023, we saw companies like Lenskart, Firstcry, Meesho and Ola Electric raise cap-

ital from external investors. This has been possible due to strong operating performance of these companies. Several companies are maturing and growing well," SoftBank Investment Advisers Investment Director Narendra Rathni said.

As founders continue to focus on operating performance, he said they are driving robust, sustainable growth with a clear path to cash flow break-even.

"We continue to see investor interest in such high quality companies. Entrepreneurs and shareholders are now being more reasonable on valuation expectations," Rathni said.

While investors like Berkshire Hathaway exited from prominent fintech player One97 Communications (Paytm) at a loss of around 31 per cent per share, Honasa Consumer, which sells products under Mamaearth brand, brought cheers to investors, including Bollywood actor Shilpa Shetty Kundra, with a good IPO.

"India's GDP per capita is at USD 2,600. This is like 2005 in China, where discretionary spending and consumption economies take off when countries cross USD 2,000 GDP per capita," Fireside Ventures' Partner and Co-Founder Vinay Singh said.

According to Lightspeed's Taneja, 2024 promises to be exciting and challenging in equal parts.

"We believe that this will also be the year when we will see a lot more IPOs coming through. From a theme standpoint, we believe that core themes such as local consumption, fintech, enterprise SaaS and infrastructure - will continue to dominate deal flow," he said.

Fintech firm Mobikwik and e-commerce firm Meesho reported their first ever profits while India's biggest fintech firm PhonePe raised USD 850 million at a pre-money valuation of USD 12 billion during the year. The growth in the fintech sector is also being helped by the crackdown on Chinese loan apps that has created space for Indian firms. (PTI)

Four killed, Six injured in road crashes due to fog in UP

LUCKNOW/UNNAO/MUZAFFARNAGAR, Dec 28: At least four people were killed and six injured in separate road crashes in Uttar Pradesh due to reduced visibility caused by dense fog, police said on Thursday. Chief minister Yogi Adityanath had to cancel his trip to Ayodhya on Thursday due to poor visibility because of dense fog, press secretary in the CM's office Mrityunjay Kumar said.

Adityanath had to fly to the temple town ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit on December 30 to inaugurate a new airport and a new railway building. Sources said he might travel to Ayodhya by road either this evening or Friday morning.

According to the state meteorological department officials, dense fog was reported from across Uttar Pradesh in the early hours of Thursday, with visibility plunging down to less than 40 metres in some areas.

The weather department officials have forecast

dense fog with visibility dropping to 50 metres in the state for the next two days during the morning hours.

In Unnao, two men were killed when their motorcycle collided with a stationary truck here in Uttar Pradesh, police said on Thursday, suspecting that the accident took place due to dense fog.

"Govind Pathak (31) and Vivekanand (21) were travelling on a motorcycle and it collided with a truck on Wednesday night," Sehramau Station House Officer (SHO) Kamal Dubey said.

"It appears that the duo failed to spot the truck due to dense fog. While Pathak was killed on the spot, Vivekanand succumbed to injuries at a hospital a few hours later," he said.

Early Thursday, police constable Dinesh Yadav, who was driving a police jeep, was injured when his vehicle collided with a truck in an area under the Purva Police Station. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Qatar appellate court

the ministry statement said. The court verdict was welcomed by political parties, former diplomats and security experts, among others. "The Indian National Congress shares its immediate relief along with the entire nation that the Court of Appeals in Qatar has decided not to go ahead with the death penalty... While fuller details are awaited we express the hope that even the jail sentence that has replaced the death penalty will be set aside and the officers will be set free," Congress' Jairam Ramesh said on X. BJP general secretary Tarun Chugh said the relief for the former Navy personnel was a "victory of the diplomatic efforts" under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi.

"This news has made it clear that the entire world recognises the strength of India's foreign policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi," Chugh said. Former diplomat Anil Trigunayat also welcomed the verdict and hoped that the veterans would be exonerated of the charges. "It is good that the court has reduced their sentences. I sincerely hope that they will not only be exonerated but also be returned home at the earliest," Trigunayat said. Former Navy spokesperson D K Sharma, said, "This great news, but this is the first step, at least the capital punishment has been reduced. The final aim is to bring them home. That is what we are hoping and praying for." "Every provision will be made use of. Our relations with that country are such that we can see which provision can be invoked and how our people can be brought back," Sharma said in response to a question on an agreement on sentenced persons between India and Qatar.

Sharma said he was confident that the government and every authority involved in the matter would take legal recourse to get the veterans back home. "It is too premature to talk about straight from capital punishment to release. It is probably a sequential thing that may happen and probably take more time," Sharma said. In 2015, India and Qatar signed an agreement that allows persons sentenced to jail terms to complete their punishment in their own country.

According to the agreement, a sentenced person may be transferred if the death penalty has not been imposed on the sentenced person; the judgment is final; no criminal proceedings are pending against the sentenced person in the transferring state in which his presence is required. The agreement also applies to persons facing life imprisonment.

Among the eight veterans, captain Navtej Gill was awarded the President's Gold Medal for excellence when he graduated from the Naval Academy and later served as an instructor at the Defence Services Staff College at Wellington in Tamil Nadu. The others are captain Saurabh Vasisht, commanders Purnendu Tiwari, Amit Nagpal, SK Gupta, BK Verma, Sugunakar Pakala, and Sailor Ragesh. (PTI)

'Without ULFA (I) participation

It should also ensure that the economic, cultural, social and political rights of the indigenous people of the state are safeguarded," he said. The BJP leader hoped that the ULFA leadership will be alert and ensure that the discussions and signing of the accord will not just be a "political agenda" of the ruling party but will protect the rights of the people of the state. Civil society organisation Asom Nagarik Samaj's general secretary Paresw Malakar said the BJP governments at the Centre and the state have kept the people in the dark regarding the outcome of discussions with the ULFA leadership and the clauses to be included in the accord.

"Even the ULFA leadership who had submitted a 12-point charter of demands claimed that they were not aware of the clauses. Ideally, the Paresw Barua-led ULFA(I) faction should also have been a part of the discussion but as they are yet to come for talks," he added.

"We feel the accord will be more for the politicians of the ruling party who will highlight it during the forthcoming election campaign," Malakar added. A 16-member delegation of ULFA pro-talks faction, led by chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and general secretary Anup Chetia, are currently in New Delhi to hold discussions with the Union home ministry officials before the proposed signing of a tripartite peace accord with the central and the state governments on December 29.

The accord is expected to be signed in the presence of Union home minister Amit Shah and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. The ULFA was formed in 1979 at the historic Rang Ghar, the Ahom era amphitheatre, in Sivasagar and was banned in 1990 when it started an armed conflict against the state.

The outfit split into two factions in 2011 when the pro-talks faction led by Rajkhowa decided to return to the state from abroad and participate in peace talks while the other group, ULFA (Independent), led by its commander Paresw Barua, was opposed to negotiations unless the "sovereignty" clause was included.

The chief minister on assuming office in 2021 had sent out an olive branch to the ULFA(I) for talks with the latter announcing a ceasefire of operations but recently it carried out three blasts in Tinsukia, Sivasagar and Jorhat which they claimed was in response to the "arrogant" attitude of director general of police GP Singh.

The police retaliated by injuring five persons, two suspected ULFA(I) linkmen and three youth, who were allegedly on their way to join the outfit, in shoot-outs. (PTI)

Mizoram: Assam Rifles

two persons in Mualzen area of Champhai district, near the Myanmar border, according to an official statement. The two have been identified as Lalngaihwama (26) from Ngalchawm village in Mamit district, and Lalruatlungwa (28) from Ainawn Veng in Aizawl. The two accused have been charged under the relevant sections of the Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, the statement added. (PTI)

EM Richard Tokbi

district falling in the first phase on January 3, 4, 5, and 6. On the first day of the Gunotsav, self-evaluation will be conducted by members of the School Managing Committee (SMC) and School Managing and Development Committee (SMDC). On January 4, 5, and 6, external evaluation by elected members, MLAs, members of the Autonomous Council, EMs, and government officials will take place.

The Gunotsav will cover Bokajan, Howraghat, Samelango, Rongmongve, Lumbajong, Nilip, and Langsomepi Education Blocks, encompassing 1,252 schools from Class 1 to 9, with a total enrollment of 74,698 students. In West Karbi Anglong, the Gunotsav is scheduled for February 5, 6, 7, and 8, covering four education blocks—Amri, Chinthong, Rongkhong, and Socheng—with a total of 718 students and 42,201 students in grades A+ 208, A-146, B-112, C-112, and D-140.

KSA demands investigation

Rumir and her father paid a substantial amount, exceeding a crore of rupees, for her selection as an APS officer. They also claim that this money is suspected to be ill-gotten from the misappropriation of KAAC funds by Mangal Sing Timung.

NRL, CSIR-NEIST seal

as a national industrial research lab, is ideal for delivering globally relevant R&D solutions. Dr Swapnali Hazarika, senior principal scientist and group leader of the Chemical Engineering Group at CSIR-NEIST, will lead the NRL-NEIST R&D Centre. The agreement outlines 11 identified verticals, including separation science, catalysis and reaction engineering, waste to wealth, value addition, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), geotechnical investigation, testing of petroleum products, scaling up of processes, and energy. This collaboration aims to address R&D challenges faced by downstream petroleum industries in India, fostering innovation and progress in the sector.

2 arrested in connection

the individuals responsible. "CCTV footage and other evidence helped in the apprehension of the duo," the SP added. The SP further revealed that one of the arrested individuals was the rider of the motorcycle, while the other, riding pillion, was directly involved in lobbing the grenade at the military station.

Human error behind

directed the subordinate bodies to strictly implement the Probe Commission's suggestions. The Yeti Airlines tragedy in Pokhara was the 104th crash in Nepali skies and the third biggest in terms of casualties. (PTI)

India's space industry seeks

on promoting private entities, encouraging youth participation, and nurturing deep tech startups aligns with the ambitious goals of creating India's space odyssey, with a moon landing by 2040 and a space station by 2035, SIA-India said. It also wanted the government to establish specialised research and development hubs, testing facilities for space technologies and data centres to process, analyse and store massive data from space-related activities. ISpA's Lt Gen Bhatt (ret'd) said Indian start-ups had received 123.90 million dollars in 2023, taking the total funding raised to 380.25 million dollars till date. In the past year, a total of 54 new space startups have emerged, bringing the current count of space startups in India to 204, Bhatt said. According to industry estimates, the private space sector in India accounts for about two per cent of the global space economy and is projected to grow to about 10 per cent by 2040. (PTI)

157 cases of Covid sub-variant JN.1 detected

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: A total of 157 cases of Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1 have been detected in the country, with Kerala reporting the highest number of 78, followed by Gujarat at 34, according to the INSACOG's data updated on Thursday. Several states have been reporting an uptick in the number of Covid cases over the last few weeks and nine states and Union territories have so far detected the presence of the JN.1 sub-variant of the virus. These states are Kerala (78), Gujarat (34), Goa (18), Karnataka (eight), Maharashtra (seven), Rajasthan (five), Tamil Nadu (four), Telangana (two) and Delhi (one), according to the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG). The INSACOG's data showed 141 Covid cases recorded in the country in December had the presence of JN.1, while 16 such cases were detected in November. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has classified JN.1 as a separate "variant of interest" given its rapidly-increasing spread, but said it poses a "low" global public health risk. The JN.1 sub-variant of the coronavirus was previously classified as a variant of interest (VOI) as part of the BA.2.86 sub-lineages, the parent lineage that is classified as a VOI, the world body said. (PTI)

NIA files chargesheet against 6 accused in Maharashtra ISIS terror-module case

NEW DELHI/MUMBAI, Dec 28: The NIA has filed a chargesheet against six accused in the Maharashtra ISIS terror-module case, highlighting a larger conspiracy with international linkages and the involvement of foreign-based handlers of the terror group, an official said on Thursday.

The accused, chargesheeted before the NIA Special Court in Mumbai under various sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and Indian Penal Code (IPC), were allegedly engaged in actively propagating the violent and extremist ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and carrying out acts preparatory to terrorist violence through the recruitment of individuals to the organisation and its cause, a spokesperson of the federal agency said.

The official identified the chargesheeted accused as Tabish Nasser Siddiqui of Mumbai, Zulfikar Ali Barodawala alias "Lalabhai", Sharjeel Shaikh and Akkif Ateeque Nachan of Borivali-Padgha, and Zubair Noor Mohammad Shaikh alias "Abu Nusaiba" and Adnanali Sarkar of Pune.

"They are all members of the

proscribed ISIS outfit and had hatched a conspiracy to further the terrorist activities of the organisation, with the intention to strike fear and terror among people and threaten the security of India, its secular ethos and culture and the democratic system of governance," the NIA spokesperson said.

The accused were held in July during multiple raids conducted by the NIA in Maharashtra. The 400-page chargesheet, filed in the court of Special NIA Judge A K Lahoti, has 16 protected witnesses. The NIA spokesperson said the investigation exposed a complex network of individuals committed to propagating the extremist and violent ideology of the ISIS in India.

Barodawala and Nachan were also earlier chargesheeted in the Pune ISIS-module case for fabrication of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to trigger blasts, the official said, adding that Barodawala and Siddiqui had taken an oath of allegiance ("Bayath") to the self-styled "Khalifa" (leader) of the ISIS.

The NIA spokesperson said the agency also found the accused in possession of incriminating mate-

rial related to "Hijrah" (migration) to Syria, along with propaganda magazines, such as "Voice of Hind" and "Voice of Khurasan", published by the ISIS.

"Further, the accused had been sharing DIY (do-it-yourself) kits with their contacts. The accused were also found to be raising funds to finance their terror plans and designs," the official added.

The NIA lodged the case against Siddiqui and others in Mumbai on June 28, following information from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) regarding a conspiracy hatched by them to disturb the unity, integrity, security and sovereignty of the country, and wage a war against the government by promoting the terrorist activities of the ISIS.

Further investigations in the case are continuing, the official said. The ISIS, also known by the names of Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), Daesh, Islamic State in Khurasan Province (ISKP), ISIS Wilayat Khurasan and Islamic State of Iraq and Sham Khurasan (ISIS-K), has been operating through various modules to spread terror across the country, he added. (PTI)

Gujarat emerges as India's 'petro capital'

Gujarat PCPIR spread over 452.98 square km area well connected by road, rail, port, air connectivity

AHMEDABAD, Dec 28: With the world's largest grassroots oil refinery in Jamnagar and OPA's petrochemical complex at Dahej in Bharuch district, Gujarat is now recognised as the 'petro capital' of India, officials said.

Reliance Industries Ltd's (RIL) Jamnagar refinery is the largest and most complex single-site refinery in the world with 1.4 million barrels per day (MMBPD) crude processing capacity, they said.

As per the official website of RIL, the Jamnagar refinery complex houses some of the world's largest units, such as the fluidised catalytic cracker, coker, alkylation, paraxylene, polypropylene, refinery off-gas cracker and petcoke gasification plants. Gujarat chief minister Bhupendra Patel recently threw light on the impact of the state's petrochemical sector.

"Industrial development is an important means to realise the resolve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The chemical and petrochemical sector's sustainable growth has surpassed all (other states)," Patel said at an event.

In the Vibrant Gujarat Global



Summit (VGGS) held in 2019, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) worth ₹3,000 crore was signed for a bio-refinery in the Dahej Petroleum, Chemicals and Petrochemicals Investment Region (PCPIR), followed by a ₹7,000 crore MoU in 2022 for chemical manufacturing in Dahej, officials said. The 10th edition of the VGGS will be held in Gandhinagar between January 10 and 12 next year on the theme of 'Gateway to the Future'. UPL Limited Chair-

man & Group CEO Jai Shroff recently commended Gujarat's progressive policies for the remarkable growth of the sector.

"Thanks to the support extended by the Gujarat government, major players of this sector have scaled new heights in the global market. These companies started as small scale units but eventually grew into major players. As a result of proactive government policies, the state contributes to around 75 per cent of the country's total dye and

intermediates manufacturing," said Shroff. With companies like Reliance, Shell, ONGC and others already having their manufacturing set up in Gujarat, experts believe the state will one day be unparalleled in its chemicals and petrochemicals sector. The Petroleum, Chemicals and Petrochemicals Investment Region at Dahej in Gujarat's Bharuch district is one of the four PCPIRs declared by the Centre under the PCPIR Policy 2007, as per its website. The Gujarat PCPIR is spread over 452.98 square km area and is well connected by road, rail, port and air connectivity.

ONGC Petro additions Limited, or OPA, facility at the PCPIR is one of South Asia's single largest petrochemical complexes. OPA's website said, adding the mega petrochemical complex is spread over 5 sq km with a capacity to produce 14 lakh tons of polymers and 5 lakh tons of chemicals. While OPA is the 'Anchor Tenant' of PCPIR, it also houses manufacturing and processing facilities of BASF, ONGC, RIL, Welspun, Pidilite and GNFC among others. (PTI)

Freebird Music Festival soars to new heights with unforgettable performances

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Dec 28: The Freebird Music Festival, presented by Imperial Blue and curated by Esque Entertainment, reached unparalleled heights as it unfolded a musical extravaganza at Greenwood Resort. The collaborative forces of Esque Entertainment and Lazy Kick Events, headed by Sagar Kumar and Sahil Hussain respectively, came together to create a three-night celebration that redefined entertainment in Guwahati.

The inaugural day kicked off with a pre-flight event, featuring the year's finest Anime/Japanese cultural showcase and an epic Battle of Bands. The Greenwood Resort buzzed with excitement as the

audience immersed themselves in the unique fusion of music and culture.

The lineup on the first day included stellar performances by KRSNA, WHEN CHAI MET TOAST, SHANKURAJ KONWAR, and LADY MIDDAY. KRSNA radiated sheer joy as he delivered an exceptionally energetic performance, captivating the audience with his mesmerising songs. The crowd enthusiastically joined in, chanting along to most of his tunes, creating an electric atmosphere. A remarkable 3,000 enthusiastic attendees were drawn by KRSNA's magnetic presence, and an additional 7,000-plus audience members swayed to the beats during FARHAN's captivating per-

formance. The synergy between the artist and the crowd created an unforgettable experience, marking the event as a resounding success. The following day witnessed an electrifying encore with performances by FARHAN AKHTAR, SUZONN, NEELAKASH, RAIN IN SAHARA, and CLOUD COLLECTIVE. The audience was treated to a mesmerising display of musical prowess that transcended genres. The highlight of the night was Farhan Akhtar receiving a remarkable apparel gift from an enthusiastic member of the audience, showcasing the deep connection between the artists and their fans.

At Esque Entertainment, our goal is to curate experiences

that transcend the ordinary. The Freebird Music Festival was a testament to the power of music and cultural diversity. We aimed to create not just an event but an unforgettable journey, and the overwhelming response from the audience is a testament to the success of that vision." - Said Sagar Kumar-CEO, Esque Entertainment.

"Freebird Music Festival is more than just a performance; it's a celebration of music, culture, and the incredible energy of the audience. Guwahati, you were electric! Thank you, What an incredible night! Freebird Music Festival, you've set the bar high for festivals that celebrate diversity and talent. The energy from the audience was infectious, and we can't wait to

be back." - Said- Farhan Akhtar, Actor, Singer of Bollywood. Esque Entertainment extends heartfelt gratitude to its partners, including Greenwood Resort and PayTM Insider, for making this extraordinary event possible. The Freebird Music Festival not only showcased exceptional musical talent but also exemplified Esque Entertainment's commitment to creating immersive and unforgettable experiences. For more information and updates, follow Esque Entertainment on social media: Facebook: @EsqueEntertainment, Instagram: @EsqueEntertainment, Twitter: @EsqueEvents, Official Hash-tags: #FreebirdMusicFest #EsqueEntertainment #MusicMeetsYou.

TATA PLAY BINGE UNLOCKS BOUNDLESS SPORTS ENT WITH THE ADDITION OF FANCODE

HT Bureau
GUWAHATI, Dec 28: Adding another avenue to feed India's growing demand for sports consumption, Tata Play Binge - India's largest OTT aggregation platform, announced the inclusion of India's premier sports destination platform, FanCode to its array of 25+ other popular OTT apps.

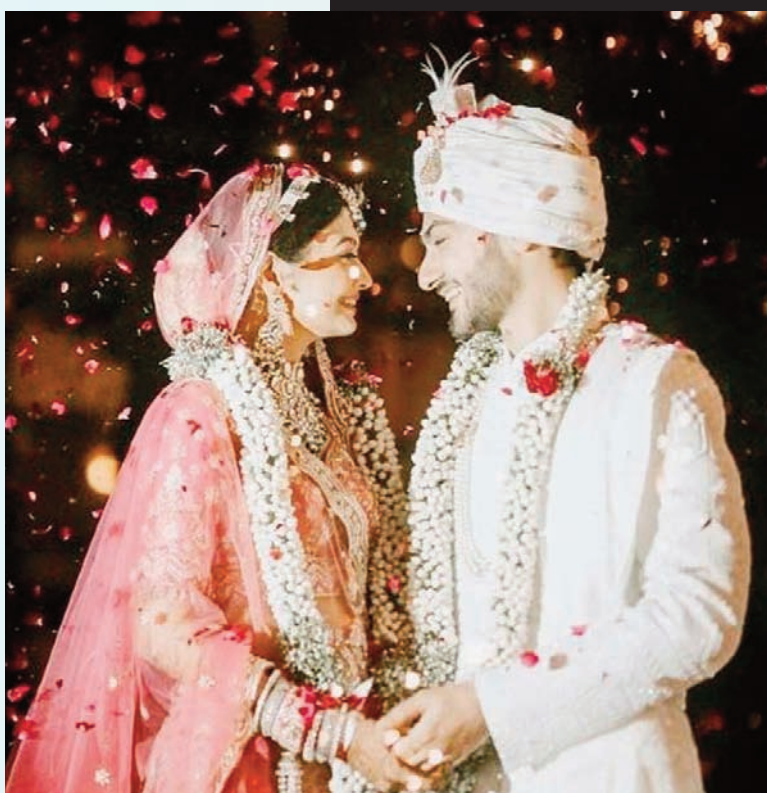
This marks the platform's first sports-led addition to its offering, solidifying Tata Play Binge's position as the ultimate destination for comprehensive and diverse entertainment. With this development, users will now have access to unlimited LIVE sports content featuring championships of cricket, football, kabaddi, basketball, volleyball, baseball and rugby.

A subsidiary of Dream Sports, India's leading Sports Technology company, FanCode will embark viewers on an unparalleled journey into the world of sports entertainment. The platform has streamed over 550 tournaments and more than 18,000 matches, redefining the boundaries of viewer experience. Users will get to revel in exclusive championships like the Dream11 Super Smash, Carabao Cup, Tamil Nadu Premier League, Bangladesh Premier League and the exhilarating Yuva Kabaddi Series, alongside 50 other sports events that bring the fervor of competitions to

the forefront. Additionally, they will also get to watch all the cricketing action from the West Indies including the Caribbean Premier League, the dynamism of Major League Baseball, the intensity of the Volleyball Nations League.

Commenting on the new partnership, Tata Play's Chief Commercial and Content Officer, Pallavi Puri, said, "Tata Play Binge's rich tapestry of content has been very diverse and inclusive towards every genre of content. Be it international OTT platforms or region focused content, the 25+ apps on Tata Play Binge has something for everyone. We look at entertainment from a very wholistic lens which helps us build experiences for all kinds of viewers. With the addition of FanCode, we will be strengthening the sports viewing community, giving them ample entertainment choices to be engaged with throughout the year."

Yannick Colaco, co-founder, FanCode, said, "This is an exciting chapter for us at FanCode. As we actively seek to connect with new users and propel our growth, the partnership with Tata Play Binge is a significant milestone. Millions of new users will now be able to access FanCode and watch their favourite sports content from around the globe, at their convenience."



'CHEENI KUM' ACTOR SWINI KHARA TIES KNOT WITH BOYFRIEND URVISH DESAI

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Actor-influencer Swini Khara, best known for her role in Amitabh Bachchan-starrer "Cheeni Kum", has tied the knot with her boyfriend Urvish Desai in an intimate ceremony in Jaipur.

The 24-year-old former child star shared photos from her wedding ceremony on Instagram. "Found love and a soulmate in mirroring personalities. Blessed to

be surrounded by our friends and family on our most special day #swinigothervish," Khara wrote in the caption.

In another post, she shared a video from the marriage and wrote, "Blessings and lots of love #swinigothervish #wedding #jaipur #royalwedding."

Khara started out as a child actor, appearing in films such as "Parineeta" and "Elaan" as

well as popular television show "Baa Bahoo Aur Baby".

She is best remembered for starring in R Balki's 2007 movie "Cheeni Kum", in which she played the role of Sexy, a young child who battles cancer and is a close friend of Bachchan's character of chef Buddhadhe Gupta. The movie also featured Tabu, Paresh Rawal and late cinema icon Zohra Sehgal. (PTI)

Veteran actor Sharmila Tagore reveals she battled cancer

MUMBAI, Dec 28: Veteran actor Sharmila Tagore has revealed that she was battling with cancer when filmmaker Karan Johar approached her to play a key role in his movie "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani".

The cinema icon and her son, actor Saif Ali Khan, appeared in the latest episode of Johar's celebrity chat show "Koffee with Karan".

In the episode, which dropped on Disney+ Hotstar on Thursday, Johar said he wanted Tagore to play the role of Alia Bhatt's grandmother in the movie, which was released in August.

"I had offered Sharmila ji the part played by Shabana (Azmi) ji in 'Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani'. She was my very first choice. Due to health reasons at that time, she couldn't say yes, but it is a regret I have," the filmmaker said.

Tagore, 79, said she didn't want to take a risk during the pandemic as she was not vaccinated.

"This is at the height of Covid.

They hadn't really grappled with Covid at that time. They didn't know about the vaccine, we were not vaccinated. You know, (it was) after my cancer. So, they didn't want me to take that risk," she said.

Tagore, however, did not reveal the details of her battle with cancer.

The veteran, known for her roles in Satyajit Ray's "The World of Apu", "Devi" and Hindi movie such as "Kashmir Ki Kali", "Aradhana", "Amar Prem" and "Chupke Chupke", said not doing Johar's movie is a regret and she hopes to collaborate with the filmmaker in future.

"It will be a regret, and it is something I hope that we can make up for and work together," Tagore said.

Earlier this year, Tagore made a return to acting with family drama "Gulmohar", co-starring Manoj Bajpayee. The film, directed by Rahul V Chittella, was released on streaming service Disney+ Hotstar. (PTI)



HANNAH WADDINGHAM SAYS SHE HAS NO TIME FOR TOM CRUISE HATERS

LOS ANGELES, Dec 28: Tom Cruise has a new fan in "Ted Lasso" star Hannah Waddingham, who says the Hollywood superstar is one of the most "inspiring human beings" she met in her life. The British actor recently worked with Cruise on the latest chapter of his "Mission: Impossible" series.

Appearing on the Christmas episode of UK channel ITV's "James Martin's Saturday Morning", Waddingham said she spent five days with Cruise filming the action tentpole on the USS George HW Bush fighter carrier.

"I have to say, I have a real problem with anybody that goes at (Tom Cruise) now. Having met him and having spent five days intensely..."

"He is without doubt one of the loveliest and encouraging, positive and inspiring human beings I have ever met. Isn't he gorgeous? I have no time for anyone saying anything about him," the 49-year-old actor said.

Waddingham joined the cast for the eighth installment, which was originally designed as the second part to "Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One", in March this year. The details of her character have been kept under wraps.

"Mission: Impossible 8" is scheduled to be released in US theatres on May 23, 2025.



2023: When Hindi movies made a spectacular theatrical comeback after a year of misfires

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: The year that was marked the triumphant return of the alpha male to the big screen and ageing star Shah Rukh Khan fronting Bollywood's march back to the box office after "Pathaan", "Jawan" and "Dunki" with Sunny Deol and Karan Johar walking alongside, reviving their careers and the fortunes of the Hindi film industry.

The year, the first after the pandemic, began with "Pathaan" and finishes with "Dunki", the two very different Shah Rukh films bookending the success of Sunny Deol starrer "Gadar 2", Johar's "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani" and the hugely controversial "Animal" that brought back Bobby Deol into the lime-light.

But 2023 was not just about macho heroes fighting their way to victory in high octane, high tech thrillers edged with

VFX and testosterone. Bollywood's return to its theatrical glory days was also about sequels and agenda-driven films.

Last year, around this time, Hindi cinema was struggling to make a mark in theatres, while films from the South captured the hearts of audiences across India, the pinnacle being "RRR" song "Naatu Naatu" winning at the Oscars. Major Bollywood titles that failed to work at the ticket window in 2022 included "Samrat Prithviraj", "Raksha Bandhan", "Shamsher" and "Laal Singh Chaddha".

The revival kickstarted with Shah Rukh's spy act in the January release "Pathaan" that brought him back to movies after a gap of four years. The Siddharth Anand-directed film became one of the biggest hits of the year with its earnings of Rs 1,000 crore worldwide, leading to many think-pieces and

discussions for its palatable patriotism in a hero who was found in a theatre and named "Pathaan" by a group of Afghan women he saves during a mission. Shah Rukh followed it up with another hit in September's "Jawan", which once again saw the actor live up to the hype surrounding his return. Directed by Atlee, the film went on to mint more money than "Pathaan" by earning over Rs 1,100 crore.

He seems to have hit a hat-trick with "Dunki", which has done reasonably well at the box office despite mixed reviews. Though its earnings don't match up to the earlier two films, the Rajkumar Hirani-directorial has grossed over Rs 250 crore globally since its December 21 release.

"Gadar 2" was the surprise package of the year. It made over Rs 500 crore and marked one of the most spectacular

returns to forms for Sunny in his 40th year in films.

In fact, the year belonged to the Deol family. It saw papa Dharmendra playing a hardcore romantic in "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani" and younger brother Bobby walk away with praise for his brief but impactful role in "Animal".

Besides, Sunny's son Rajveer also made his acting debut with "Dono", which did not do the numbers but got its lead actor noticed.

With the film, Johar, whose last full-fledged feature was 2016's "Ae Dil Hai Mushkil", reminded his fans why he continues to be a filmmaker who knows how to tug at the heartstrings through his larger-than-life cinema.

The family entertainer, starring Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt, is Johar's most realised film, delivering both laughs and lessons on equality and re-

spect in relationships while overturning stereotypes that have long been Hindi movie tropes. He has acknowledged in interviews that he tried to correct past mistakes in his own cinema through the film about a rich Punjabi brat and a Bengali journalist. While there was a "Rocky Aur Rani..." giving viewers a progressive vision, the year ended with Sandeep Reddy Vanga's "Animal", starring Ranbir Kapoor, in one of the most divisive films of 2023.

Just like Vanga's "Kabir Singh", "Animal" too courted controversy over its projection of masculinity, violence and its promotion of the toxic, overtly macho hero. The film, however, is one of the biggest Hindi blockbusters of the year by earning over Rs 800 crore. Before "Animal", Ranbir had a solid hit in "Tu Jhoothi Main Makkaar", which also raised eyebrows for its depiction of gen-

der dynamics. There were smaller, quieter successes too.

Three years after "Shikara", Vidhu Vinod Chopra returned to the big screen as a director with "12th Fail", a low-budget film whose box office success (over Rs 60 crore) surprised many. With testosterone seemingly at an all-time high, cinegoers didn't quite warm up to female-led stories, except for Rani Mukerji's "Mrs Chatterjee Vs Norway". Kangana Ranaut-starrer "Tejas", Vidya Balan-starrer "Neeyat", "Akelli" featuring Nushratt Bharuccha, Shilpa Shetty's "Sukhee" and "Dhak Dhak", starring Ratna Pathak Shah and Dia Mirza, didn't work.

It was also a year of sequels with "Gadar 2", "OMG 2", "Tiger 3", "Dream Girl 2" and "Fukrey 3" releasing and proving the worth of franchise cinema. (PTI)

Man City rallies for 3-1 win at Everton to get Premier League campaign back on track

LIVERPOOL, England, Dec 28: Manchester City had to come from behind to beat Everton 3-1 on Wednesday and climb back into the Premier League's top four.

Just back from winning its first Club World Cup title in Saudi Arabia, City went behind to Jack Harrison's first-half goal but recovered after the break thanks to a well-taken strike by Phil Foden and a penalty by Julian Alvarez.

Bernardo Silva added the third when he pounced on a poor clearance by Jordan Pickford to curl home into an empty net in the 86th.

It was only City's second win in seven league matches but lifted the defending champions above Tottenham into fourth place, five points behind leader Liverpool with a game in hand.

Second-place Arsenal can move six points clear of City by beating West Ham on Thursday.

City was without Erling Haaland again because of a foot injury and Pep Guardiola's side had a sluggish start as Everton took the lead in the 29th minute.

City midfielder Rodri was pressured into an uncharacteristic loss of possession on the edge of his own area, and Dwight McNeil teed up Harrison to sidefoot home from close range.

The former City winger almost scored a spectacular second with Ederson at full stretch to tip over



his swerving outside-of-the-left-foot effort.

City defender John Stones had to come off with an injury in the 43rd, but the visitors needed just 19 minutes after the break to turn things around.

Foden was given too much space on the edge of the area from a corner to beat Pickford with a low shot inside his left-hand post in the 53rd, and Alvarez put his team ahead from the spot after Nathan Ake's shot hit Amadou

Onana's arm as he slid in to block.

Referee John Brooks awarded a corner before changing his mind and pointing to the spot, with Alvarez's blast down the middle proving too powerful as it went underneath the diving Pickford's legs.

Bernardo Silva's 20-yard effort into an unguarded net secured the win after he collected Alvarez's block on the goal-keeper. (AP)

Rodrigues, Vastrakar propel India to 282/8 against Australia in 1st ODI



MUMBAI, Dec 28: A fine 82 from Jemimah Rodrigues and a brisk unbeaten 62 from Pooja Vastrakar propelled India Women to their highest ODI total of 282/8 against Australia in their opening match here on Thursday.

India's previous-best against Australia in ODIs was 281/4 at Derby in 2017.

With several top-order batters failing to convert starts, Jemimah battled energy-sapping heat and humidity to carry her imperious form, notching up her second fifty in four ODIs this year, and the first against Australia.

The right-handed batter also recorded her second-best score in the format, laced with seven boundaries off 77 balls. She also forged several partnerships in the middle at the Wankhede Stadium, including a 68-run stand with Pooja for the eighth wicket.

Pooja displayed her big-hitting ability yet again, smashing the ball to all corners of the ground to bring up her fourth fifty.

The right-handed bat-

ter smacked seven fours and two sixes to remain unbeaten on 62 off just 46 balls.

India's late surge saw the hosts collect 56 runs in the last six overs with Pooja carrying on after Jemimah had fallen to Ashleigh Gardner (2/63).

Earlier, it was a far-from-convincing start for the hosts, who lost Shafali Verma (1) in the third over with Darcie Brown (1/33) getting to nip one back into the right-hander.

Richa Ghosh was sent in at No. 3 and she made a sparkling start, hitting four boundaries to make 21 off 20 balls before mistiming one off Annabel Sutherland (1/43) to be caught at mid-off by Tahlia McGrath.

India suffered another massive blow when captain Harmanpreet Kaur walked back for a 17-ball nine after Darcie took a stunning diving catch on her left at short fine leg, off Ashleigh.

With wickets falling steadily, opener Yastika Bhatia continued to hold one end up to inch closer to a half-century.

But she could not negotiate a tempting full toss from leg-spinner Georgia Wareham (2/55) and was caught by Megan Schutt at deep square leg.

Yastika, though, deserves full marks, as the makeshift opener gave a decent platform to Jemimah and Pooja to build on with her 64-ball 49.

Both Deepti Sharma (21, 28 balls, 4x4s) and Amanjot Kaur (20, 36 balls, 1x4s) squandered good starts to be dismissed in identical manner.

After adding 39 runs for the fifth wicket with Jemimah, Deepti hit one straight to Phoebe Litchfield at mid-wicket off Alana King. Amanjot was also caught by Alana at mid-wicket off Georgia Wareham after putting on 45 for the sixth wicket with Jemimah.

Megan Schutt ensured Sneha Rana (1) had a short stay in the middle when she cleaned up the all-rounder in the 38th over, which had the pair of Jemimah and Pooja joining forces in the middle. (PTI)

Madueke's late penalty hand Chelsea 2-1 win over Crystal Palace

LONDON, Dec 28: Substitute Noni Madueke bailed out a misfiring Chelsea side with a late penalty to secure a 2-1 win over Crystal Palace in the Premier League on Wednesday for a rare home victory in 2023.

Just as it looked like Chelsea's inefficiency up front would cost it again, Madueke was tripped by Eberechi Eze inside the area and stepped up to the spot himself to send goal-keeper Dean Henderson the wrong way in the 89th minute.

It secured just a sixth home league win of the calendar year for Chelsea at Stamford Bridge, which used to be a fortress under Jose Mourinho and several managers after him but has been anything but under Mauricio Pochettino and his three most recent predecessors from last season.

Chelsea has not found any kind of consistency under Pochettino, who was forced to name the club's youngest-ever starting lineup for a Premier League game following a slew of injuries and suspensions.

The hosts started well, though, as they largely dominated the first half and took the lead through Mykhailo Mudryk in the 13th minute. But they missed several chances to double their advantage before Michael Olise equalized just before the break.

Pochettino's team continued to control possession in the second half but Nicolas Jackson missed their best chance to restore the lead in the 74th when the struggling striker lifted the ball wide after he was played clear through on goal.

Jackson then thought he had scored just minutes later when he steered in a cross into the box but he was ruled offside after a VAR check. Referee Michael Salisbury initially waved play on after Eze's challenge on Madueke but was eventually called to the pitchside monitor by his VAR assistant to review the incident, and then pointed to the spot.

Chelsea is provisionally in 10th place after 19 rounds, with Palace now just three points outside the relegation zone in 15th. (AP)

Women Football League: KASA-FC beat Udayan SK 2-0

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 28: The Karbi Anglong Sports Association Girls Football Club (KASA-FC) won against Udayan SK, Guwahati by 2-0 of the 1st Assam State Women's Football League held at Salbari Stadium, Baksa district on Thursday. KASAFC's Meghasmita Kropi scored one goal in the 64th minute and Serbirika Terangpi in 71st minute. The KASA girls have collected 3 points after defeating Udayan SK, Guwahati. The KASA-FC needs to play an-

other four matches in the phase-IV on December 30 against Sonari Town club, on January 2 against Avalanche SC, on January 4 against Kokrajhar SAI, on January 6, Oil India Lakshya 11 and on January 8 against Udayan Kristi Sangha. The team is led by team manager Longban Terang and the coach is Rustom Engti.

The champion team will be given a chance to play in India Women's League being organised by All India Football Federation.

Man United set to enter a new Ratchcliffe era with spotlight on January transfers and Ten Hag's future

MANCHESTER, ENGLAND, Dec 28: Fans of Manchester United know 2024 will be anything but boring as the club tries once again to end a period of on-field decline that has lasted 10 years for the record 20-time English league champions.

British billionaire Jim Ratchcliffe agreed Sunday — Christmas Eve — to buy a minority stake in United. The owner of petrochemicals giant INEOS, and a number of sports teams, will also take charge of United's soccer operations.

The announcement of the deal, worth around \$1.6 billion, came more than a year after American owners the Glazers put United up for sale in November 2022. The deal requires Premier League approval.

Here's a look at the people involved and issues likely to be raised by the deal, including the future of United manager Erik ten Hag.

JIM RATCLIFFE

The 71-year-old Ratchcliffe is one of the richest people in Britain and a boyhood United fan from Greater Manchester.

He already owns French club Nice and cycling team INEOS Grenadiers. He is a one-third shareholder of the Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula One team and competes in the America's Cup with sailing team INEOS Britannia.

"We all want to see Manchester United back where we belong, at the very top of English, European and world football," Ratchcliffe said.

TEN HAG

The Dutch manager has endured a troubled season, with his team losing 13 games in all competitions and being eliminated from the Champions League at the earliest possible stage.

He has faced reports of locker room un-



rest and speculation about his job, but there has been no suggestion from United that his position is under threat and he said this month that he believes he has the backing of the club's hierarchy.

Still, his relief was evident as United came back from 2-0 down against Aston Villa to win 3-2 in the Premier League on Tuesday.

Afterward, Ten Hag was positive about the arrival of Ratchcliffe.

SOCCER OPERATIONS

Ratchcliffe will take charge of United's failing soccer department. How that will work in practice is one of the biggest questions.

After more than 20 years of success under former manager Alex Ferguson, United hasn't won the title since he retired in 2013. Ten Hag is the fifth permanent manager United has had in repeated attempts to turn its fortunes around.

INEOS's director of sport Dave Brailsford — who was at the Villa game — and CEO Jean-Claude Blanc will join the board of the soccer club.

Brailsford was credited for his role in the success of British cycling in recent years. Blanc has held prominent posi-

tions at Juventus and Paris Saint-Germain.

JANUARY TRANSFERS

As the deal is expected to take up to 10 weeks to go through, Ratchcliffe will not be in place in time for the January transfer window. He will, however, be consulted on any major soccer decisions such as transfers and the future of Ten Hag.

Members of Ratchcliffe's team have already visited United's training ground and discussed operations. It is likely they will have already been consulted on plans for January and possible signings.

It is not yet known how football director John Murtough's position will be affected by Ratchcliffe's investment, but the club's recruitment operations will be part of the INEOS owner's remit under the new structure.

DIVIDENDS

It has been agreed that no dividends will be taken for a period of three years, with investment in the team and infrastructure said to be the immediate priority.

Old Trafford is in need of modernization, while Ten Hag's squad still looks well short of rivals like Manchester City, Arsenal and Liverpool after suffering early elimination from the Champions League.

FULL SALE

There is no obligation for the Glazers to sell any further shares to Ratchcliffe. But Ratchcliffe does have right of first refusal if any further shares are sold within a year of the deal being completed.

If the Glazers choose to sell the entire club to a third party after 18 months of the deal being completed, Ratchcliffe would be forced to sell his shares subject to them being priced at a minimum of \$33 per share. (AP)

GOVT. OF ASSAM OFFICE OF JOINT DIRECTOR OF HEALTH SERVICES, KARBI ANGLONG DISTRICT DIPHU – 782460

No. KA/Esstt/H&FW/Post/Interview/2023-24/ 1846 Dated, Diphu the 28th December, 2023

VIVA-VOCE INTERVIEW FOR GRADE-III POSTS (TECHNICAL & NON-TECHNICAL)

It is hereby to informed to all concerned candidates that the written examination result of different category of Grade-III posts under the Joint Director of Health Services, Karbi Anglong, District, Diphu which was conducted on 30-11-2023 is hereby declared. The Roll No. of eligible candidates of Grade-III (Technical & Non-Technical) for Viva-Voce interview is given below:-

Sl. No.	Name of Post	Roll No.
1	Staff Nurse	7, 12, 14, 24, 25, 26, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 49, 50, 55, 56, 57, 59, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 71, 73, 74, 75, 77, 78, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85, 95, 96, 97, 99, 100, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 156, 157, 159, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 177, 178, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 188, 190, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 200, 202, 210, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 226, 227, 228, 229, 232, 233, 235, 237, 238, 239, 243, 245, 248, 252, 253, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 263, 265, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 285, 288, 289, 290, 291, 293, 294, 295, 300, 301, 302, 303, 305, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320.
2	Ophthalmic Assistant	02
3	Leprosy Injector	7, 22, 23, 27, 49, 50, 59, 60, 64, 78, 82, 85, 91, 92, 98, 99, 100, 101, 104, 112, 122, 123, 124, 125, 132, 139, 178, 211, 214, 217, 224, 227, 235, 236, 241, 250, 251, 252, 255, 256, 257, 262, 263
4	Dresser	1,2,4,5
5	Store Keeper	10, 20, 26, 39, 47, 57, 72, 74, 82, 103, 104, 110, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 176, 178, 179, 180

All the candidates of above mentioned Roll Nos. are directed to appear for Viva-Voce Interview is fixed on 04-01-2024 at 10:00 AM at the office of the Joint Director of Health Services, Karbi Anglong, Diphu.

No separate calling letter will be sent to candidates. Candidates are directed to bring all original testimonials/ certificate etc. while appearing the interview.

Sd/-
Joint Director of Health Services,
Karbi Anglong District, Diphu.

No. KA/Esstt/H&FW/Post/Interview/2023-24/ 1846-A Dated, Diphu the 28th December, 2023

Elgar, Jansen take SA to 408; India struggle at 62 for 3 at tea



CENTURION, Dec 28: Rohit Sharma and Yashasvi Jaiswal got a couple of unplayable deliveries, while Shubman Gill played an irresponsible shot as India, staring at an innings defeat, stuttered to 62 for 3 at tea on the third day of the opening Test against South Africa here on Thursday.

South Africa, riding on Dean Elgar's superbly-crafted 185 and Marco Jansen's career-best 84, posted a healthy first-innings score of 408.

Trailing by 163 runs, India's lack of preparedness was evident as the top order could neither handle movement nor bounce as they still need 101 runs to avoid an embarrassing innings defeat.

Virat Kohli (18 batting) and Shreyas Iyer

(6 batting) are surviving dangerously with the deliveries flying all around. The sun is beating down, odd balls are keeping low and survival isn't an option against a quality Proteas attack.

Kagiso Rabada, just like he had got Virat Kohli in the first innings, bowled one in the off-middle corridor to Rohit Sharma (0). The skipper closed the face of his bat after the ball had moved away, only to see the off-stump pegged back.

Rohit had anticipated an inswing but it deviated away.

Yashasvi Jaiswal (5) hasn't played on a track offering such steep bounce. Nandre Burger got one to rear up from length and Jaiswal's technique of swaying away from

the delivery didn't help matters, with the ball kissing the gloves and landing into the keeper's hands.

Shubman Gill (26) knew that attack was the best form of defence. But when Jansen fired one into the blockhole from wide of the crease, Gill played all over when the situation demanded a bit more discretion.

Kohli hit some nice boundaries but it will be a miracle for India to change the course of the match.

Earlier veteran Elgar missed out on a well-deserved maiden double hundred but inflicted enough damage on India in company of young Jansen to potentially bat the visitors out of the opening Test.

Elgar, whose previous highest Test score

is 199, was inching towards his maiden double hundred before a faint tinkle to a leg-side bouncer from Shardul Thakur brought an end to his innings.

But that didn't deter the lanky Jansen, not exactly known for his batting prowess, from negotiating a deflated Indian attack that looked out of sorts and bereft of ideas.

The Elgar-Jansen pair added 111 runs for the sixth wicket.

The Indian bowlers were even more disappointing on the third morning with Shardul Thakur (1/101 in 19 overs) and Prasidh Krishna (1/93 in 20 overs) spraying all over the place, only to be mercilessly punished by the former Proteas skipper Elgar and the lanky left-arm seamer Jansen.

The pair drove, pulled, cut at will and neither the old ball nor the semi-new ball could bring about any change in fortune for the visiting team bowlers.

Jasprit Bumrah (4/69 in 26.4 overs) and Mohammed Siraj (2/91 in 24 overs) once again were unlucky as they repeatedly beat the bat of Elgar and Jansen but didn't have the rub of the green going their way.

Prasidh and Thakur were not only below-par but also missed both line and length.

Prasidh was inducted into the squad to hit the deck and generate extra pace off the surface, but he missed the trick by consistently bowling length balls. Even someone like Gerald Coetzee dispatched him into the stands.

On a track that demanded bowlers to bend their backs, Thakur literally floated the deliveries, which were hit all around the park. When he started using the short-ball tactic, Jansen hooked him for good as he didn't have enough pace to hurry the batter.

The only bowler who came out with his reputation intact was Ravichandran Ashwin, who for most part, came from an angular run-up but ended with figures of 1/41 in 18 overs.

But, even his effort wasn't enough as the Prasidh-Shardul duo, having already conceded nearly 200 runs (194 in 39 overs) cumulatively in less than 40 overs, have severely dented their team's chance of redemption. (PTI)

Fresh 'concerns' emerge over Formula E race in Hyderabad after change of guard in Telangana



NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Formula E has raised fresh concerns over its race in Hyderabad, saying it might not be able to go ahead with the round scheduled for February 10 following the latest communique from the new Telangana government.

The inaugural electric race in the country was held in February this year with then IT Minister KT Rama Rao playing a huge role in bringing the race to the city. However, KTR's BRS party lost the state election to Congress in December.

Considering the operational challenges involved in hosting the first race, Formula E had dropped Hyderabad from the provisional calendar before including it in the final calendar in October.

The change of guard has put them in a tough spot with the Congress government's letter to Formula E adding to its woes ahead of the race in six weeks' time.

"Following a recent official communication received from the new Government of Telangana, Formula E is seeking urgent clarification of their contractual commitments under the agreement and how it could impact the Hyderabad race."

"Based on the content of the letter received, Formula E is concerned the race will not be able to go ahead as planned," Formula E said in a statement.

Formula E officials had met

members of the new government earlier this month.

Initially, a four-year agreement was signed between Formula E, Telangana government and Greenko, which has pulled out of the event after the inaugural edition.

"Formula E's senior executive team met with the new leadership of the Government of Telangana immediately following elections earlier this month. Discussions have been ongoing since then."

"With the event just a few weeks away and in its final stages of preparation, Formula E, partners and suppliers have already made significant commercial investments in the event."

"The inaugural Hyderabad E-Prix in February this year returned almost 84 million USD in positive economic impact to the region, many times more than the overhead costs invested by Formula E and the Government of Telangana," the statement added.

The cost of holding a Formula E race varies. The first race in Hyderabad cost the stakeholders more than Rs 150 crore. It was the first FIA World Championship status event held in India in 10 years, following Formula 1's departure in 2013.

Formula E is staged around the world and in iconic world cities including Tokyo, Berlin and London. (PTI)

AFC Cup: Odisha FC to face ASEAN Zone champions in Inter Zone semis



KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 28: Indian Super League side Odisha FC has been pitted against a yet to be determined ASEAN Zone champions in the Inter Zone semi-final of the ongoing AFC Cup during a draw ceremony here on Thursday.

Odisha FC had emerged victorious in the AFC Cup South Zone, having beaten Bashundhara Kings of Bangladesh in their final Group D encounter earlier this month.

Four teams -- Central Coast Mariners FC (Australia), Phnom Penh Crown FC (Cambodia), Macarthur FC (Australia) and Sabah FC (Malaysia) -- are vying for the ASEAN Zone champions honour.

The ASEAN Zone final will take place on February 22 and the winner will face Odisha FC in the Inter Zone semi-final, which will be a double-leg affair.

The opening leg will take place on March 6 or 7 at the home of the ASEAN Zone champions, followed by the return leg at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar on March 13 or 14.

The winner of the Inter Zone semi-final will take on either FC Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kyrgyz Republic) or Futuro FC (Chinese Taipei), the other two semifinalists.

The Inter Zone final will be played in April and the winner will face the West Zone champions in the AFC Cup final on May 5.

Odisha FC has been in decent form this season winning the Indian Super Cup, beating Bengaluru FC. It is currently placed third in the ISL. (PTI)

Former India defender Prabir Majumdar's passes away, AIFF condoles

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Former Indian defender Prabir Majumdar died on Thursday after suffering from a brief illness.

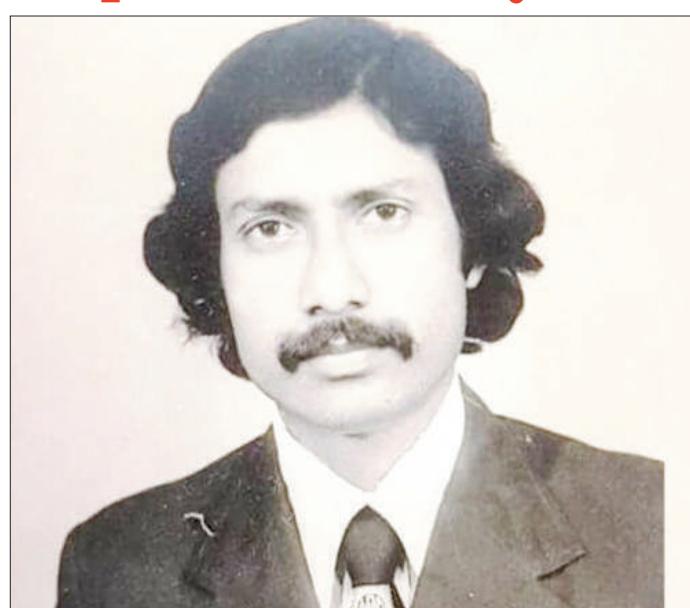
He was 77 and is survived by his wife and a son.

A stylish wing-back of the 1960s and 1970s, Majumdar was a member of the Indian team in the 1974 Asian Games.

He also featured for the national side during the 1974 Asian Games held in Tehran, where the team failed to create an impact and finished at the bottom of the group table.

In the domestic circuit, Majumdar was a part of East Bengal and Eastern Railways, besides also representing Bengal in the Santosh Trophy.

His stint with East Bengal was the highlight of his career during the 1970s, as the club had a golden



run during that phase.

Expressed his condolences, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) president said: "Prabir-da was one of the most dependable and respected defenders of his time and stood out among many star players."

"I extend my sincerest condolences to his family at this time of sorrow."

Majumdar won several titles with East Bengal, which included the Calcutta Football League, IFA Shield, Durand Cup, Rovers Cup, DCM Trophy, Bordoloi Trophy, and many more.

"Prabir Majumdar was a top footballer of his time and continued to inspire footballers of later generations. His death has created a void in Indian football," AIFF Secretary M Satyanarayan said in a release. (PTI)

Govt didn't follow 'proper procedure' while suspending WFI, will challenge in court: Sanjay

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Newly-elected WFI president Sanjay Singh on Thursday said that the sports ministry did not follow "proper procedure" while suspending the wrestling national body and will challenge the government's decision in a court.

The sports ministry on Sunday suspended the WFI, three days after its elections were held, for flouting its own constitution while taking certain decisions, including the announcement of U-15 and U-20 National Championships.

Sanjay, however, said that his "autonomous" and "democratically elected" body could not have been suspended by the government without hearing the WFI's side of the story.

"We have won the elections (of WFI) democratically. The returning officer was the retired chief justice of J&K High Court, there were observers from the IOA and UWW (United World Wrestling). There were 22 state units (three absent out of 25 state associations) taking part in the elections, 47 votes were polled out of which I got 40," Sanjay told PTI.

"After all these, if you say we are suspended, we are not going to accept it. A democratically-elected body was not given a chance to explain its position which is against the principle of natural justice which everybody is entitled to under the Constitution of India."

Asked what is the way forward for his body, he said, "WFI is an autonomous body and the government has not followed proper procedure. We are going to

talk to the government and if it (government) does not take back the suspension, we are taking legal opinion and going to court."

He said since the WFI is contesting the suspension, he does not accept the three-member ad-hoc committee formed by the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) on Wednesday to run the day-to-day affairs of the national sports body.

He said the visit by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in an akhada in Haryana to meet Olympic medallist Bajrang Punia made it clear that the trio, who led the five-month-long protest accusing former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexually harassing women grapplers, were playing politics.

"It is clear that they (Bajrang, Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik) are being backed by the Congress, tool-kit gang and left parties. These three are playing on the lap of these political parties," said Sanjay, a close aide of Brij Bhushan.

"Please tell me any fourth wrestler who is opposing the WFI other than these three. These three don't want the junior wrestlers to progress, they want to take away the rights of junior wrestlers."

"Bajrang had gone (to the Hangzhou Asian Games) without taking part in the trials and he came back with 10-0 loss. They are not in wrestling, they are in politics. Please come forward if you are concerned about wrestling, the road is clear for you, but if you want to do politics, please do it in the open."



Sanjay also took a dig at Bajrang for leaving his Padma Shri on the road after he decided to return it to the government.

"It may be a personal matter, but the country's emotions are associated in Khel Ratna, it's not for a single person, but belongs to the whole society. Padma Shri is not something which should be put on a road."

After the election of Sanjay as WFI chief, Sakshi quit the sport while Bajrang decided to return his Padma Shri. Vinesh followed suit by returning her Khel Ratna and Arjuna Award.

Sanjay also claimed that he had written a letter to the United World Wrestling requesting lifting of the ban imposed on WFI, and he is hopeful of a favourable de-

cision from the international parent body.

"We have written to the UWW requesting to lift the ban imposed on the WFI, as the elections were held democratically. Office holidays are going on (in Europe) so may take some days."

He also claimed that the newly-elected office bearers did not violate any constitutional provision of the WFI while announcing dates and venue of the U-15 and U-20 National Championships in Gonda - Brij Bhushan's Lok Sabha constituency -- after the December 21 elections.

"There was full quorum when we took the decision to hold the U-15 and U-20 Nationals. There was an AGM on the day of the elections, we went to a hotel (in Delhi) and took the decision."

"If the Nationals were not held this year, the future of the young wrestlers would have been spoilt, which it has happened now. They will become overage. Everybody agreed to the venue also."

Asked why the newly-elected WFI secretary general Prem Chand Lochab was not involved in the decision making, he said, "We told the secretary general to go there (at the hotel) along with us but he did not come. I don't know what is his intention."

"We followed the WFI Constitution to the full. If we did something (wrong), the government should have asked for an answer from us instead of restraining us from our work. WFI is an autonomous body and we were elected in a democratic way under our (WFI) constitution." (PTI)