

WORLD

NATION



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- PPP nominates Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as its PM candidate
- New criminal laws, cyber crime, terror J&K to be discussed at DGPs meet
- Filed appeal challenging HC verdict on adolescent girls, West Bengal tells SC

THE HILLS TIMES

www.thehillstimes.in

THE HILLS TIMES

Voice of the hills people

Vol .No. XXIV

Issue No. 350

RNI-ASSEN/2000/12862

DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

FRIDAY, JANUARY 5, 2024

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Assam Police issues guidelines for picnics ● AJYCP stages protest against NHIDCL for slow NH 715 work, alleges construction lapses

Keshab assures support to Balijan road-mishap injured

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Jan 4: A day after the tragic accident at Balijan (Dergaon), which claimed 12 lives, Health and Family Welfare minister Keshab Mahanta on Thursday visited Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (JMCH) to inquire about the condition of the 24 injured persons who were undergoing treatment at the hospital.

He visited the hospital following the director of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

An official source stated that Mahanta was briefed by the JMCH authorities and doctors attending the injured about their condition, adding, "Four among the injured were being treated in the ICU".

The minister was informed that two among the wounded have recovered completely and are likely to be discharged soon.

Later, Mahanta also interacted with the patients' families and assured them that all the necessary assistance would be provided by



the Assam government to ensure their speedy recovery. He mentioned that the injured were receiving free medical services.

Four seriously injured were shifted on Wednesday of which two were admitted to GMCH and two to the Cardiothoracic and Neuroscience Centre, Guwahati, for

advanced medical care.

Jorhat MLA Hitendra Nath Goswami, Jorhat district commissioner (DC), the SP, and the joint director of health service accompanied the minister during his visit.

Meanwhile, a delegation of Asom Sena Central Committee, led by its chief convener Bijoy

Shankar Bordoloi, along with members from AASU, Marwari Yuba Mancha, visited JMCH and inquired about the condition of the injured people.

They distributed food among the injured, relatives or attendants of the injured ones, health workers and security personnel of the institute. "If needed, the organisations were ready to donate blood for the injured," Bordoloi added.

At least 12 people, including three children, were killed and 38 others suffered injuries in a head-on collision between a coal-laden truck and a bus in Golaghat district on Wednesday. Among the deceased, 10 died on the spot and two at Jorhat Medical College and Hospital.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and Transport Minister Parimal Suklabaidya also expressed deep anguish over the incident.

Suklabaidya also ordered an inquiry into the accident, and asked top officials of his department to reach the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

India expresses shock at Iran blasts

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: India on Thursday said it is shocked and saddened over the "terrible" bombings in Iran's Kerman city, and expressed solidarity with the government and people of the Gulf nation.

At least 95 people were killed and many others injured on Wednesday in two bomb explosions near the cemetery of slain Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, who was killed in a drone strike in 2020.

"We are shocked and saddened on the terrible bombings in the Kerman City of Iran. At this difficult time, we express our solidarity with the government and people of Iran," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims and with the wounded," he said on 'X'.

The people killed and injured had gathered at a ceremony near Soleimani's cemetery to commemorate the commander on his fourth death anniversary.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said Iran is taking "legal and international actions" over the terror attacks in Kerman. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

INDIA bloc faces seat-sharing hurdle

War of words hots up between Congress and TMC in Bengal

BERHAMPORE/KOLKATA, Jan 4: Fissures appear to have emerged in the INDIA alliance as its two key allies, the Congress and the Trinamool Congress, on Thursday clashed over seat sharing for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal.

State Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said, "The grand old party won't beg for seats from the TMC," drawing a response from the Mamata Banerjee-led party, which said, "Bad-mouthing alliance partners and seat sharing can't go hand in hand."

Chowdhury, a staunch critic of the TMC, launched a no-holds-barred attack, accusing Bengal's ruling party of being busy "serving Prime Minister Narendra Modi" rather than strengthening the oppo-

sition alliance. His remarks prompted a sharp reaction from the TMC, which criticised Chowdhury for making "callous remarks" and cautioned the Congress high command to rein in their state president.

Seat sharing between the two parties has been a bone of contention, with media reports suggesting that the TMC is keen to allocate only two seats, a proposition unacceptable to the Congress Bengal unit. In the 2019 elections, the TMC won 22 seats, the Congress won two (Behrampur and Malda South), and the BJP secured 18.

The war of words, brewing for the past few days, took an ugly turn on Thursday after Chowdhury slammed the TMC for not being serious about allying with the Congress in Bengal. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)



Closely monitoring: India on situation in Red Sea

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: India on Thursday said it is closely watching the unfolding situation in the Red Sea, amid growing global concerns over Houthi militants stepping up attacks on several commercial ships in the region. The comments by External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal came a day after

the Indian Navy said its ships and aircraft remain "mission deployed" to maintain surveillance and undertake maritime security operations in the North and Central Arabian Sea.

"We attach very high importance to freedom of navigation, free movement of commercial shipping. It is an evolving situation and we are looking at all aspects of it," Jaiswal said at a media briefing.

"As you know, we have Indian Navy ships patrolling the area. They are also keeping a watch on Indian ships there. So far, we are not part of any multilateral initiative in the area. We are looking at the unfolding situation very closely," he said. There have been concerns over Iran-backed Houthi militants launching strikes on several commercial ships in the Red Sea in the last couple of weeks amid the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Liberian-flagged vessel MV Chem Pluto, with 21 Indian crew members, was the target of a drone attack off India's west coast on December 23 that triggered security concerns in New Delhi. Besides MV Chem Pluto, another commercial oil tanker that was on the way to India came under a suspected drone strike in the Southern Red Sea on the same day. The vessel had a team of 25 Indian crew.

In another incident, Malta-flagged vessel MV Ruen was hijacked on December 14 by pirates. The Indian Navy on Wednesday said it continues to monitor the maritime security situation in the North and Central Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)



AMLU declares 48-hour strike against 'Hit and Run Law'

HT Correspondent

DALGAON, Jan 4: The All Assam Motor Labour Union (AMLU) has called for a 48-hour strike starting January 5, opposing the 'Hit and Run Law' of the center.

Leaders of the Union held a press meets at their regional office in Kharupetia and urged all sections to cooperate with the strike to revoke the black law. Rahul Ali, Rinku Brahma, Jiaul Hoque, Jabbar Ali, Suman Das, Raju Roy, Dipu Basumatary, Dulal Ch Saikia, and many more leading personalities of the Union from across the state gathered and criticised the law, stating that it's an injustice to the entire motor labor force.

"We cannot continue this service while we're insecure," they added.

Criticising the law and Union home minister Amit Shah, they said that the center is imposing baseless duties forcefully on the drivers to create pressure, whereas no one commits (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

Border with Myanmar imposed by British: Mizoram CM tells Modi amid influx of people

AIZAWL, Jan 4: Mizoram chief minister Lalduhoma on Thursday told Prime Minister Narendra Modi that people of his state consider the 510-km-long border it has with Myanmar was imposed on them by the British.

Thousands of people from the neighbouring country have taken refuge in Mizoram following a military coup in Myanmar in 2021. "The Indo-Myanmar boundary on the Mizoram side was demarcated by the British without the consent of the affected people... The Zo ethnic tribes of Mizos regarded the Indo-Myanmar border as an imposed boundary, which has geographically separated the Mizo tribes," an official statement quoted Lalduhoma as saying during his meeting with Modi.

A large section of the people of Myanmar who have taken refuge in the state belong to the Chin, also known as the Zo, community. They share the same ancestry and culture



since February 2021, according to the state home department.

Lalduhoma said that his government and the Mizo people wanted to provide shelter and look after the Myanmar nationals as they share ethnic ties.

The two leaders also discussed other issues related to the development of Mizoram.

The prime minister informed Lalduhoma that the Centre is always open to assist Mizoram and usher in development in the northeastern state.

In a post on X, Lalduhoma later said, "Productive meeting with Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodi ji today. Delighted to strengthen our collaboration for the progress and development of #Mizoram. Looking forward to frequent discussions on key issues." Six Mizoram districts - Champhai, Sialha, Lawngtlai, Serchhip, Hnahthial and Saitual - share a (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

the Mizos of Mizoram. Chin is also a state in western Myanmar.

Lalduhoma, who became the chief minister of the northeastern state last month, called on Modi in his official residence in New Delhi during the day. This is their first meeting. He also informed the prime minister about the influx of refugees from Myanmar after the military junta seized power through a coup in February 2021, the statement said.

Over 31,000 Myanmar nationals have taken shelter in Mizoram

Ranjit Kumar Dass inspects developmental works at Namsang tea estate

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Jan 4: Panchayat and Rural Development minister, Ranjit Kumar Dass, visited the residential colony of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin) at Namsang tea estate under Jaipur Development Block in Dibrugarh here on Thursday.

During his visit, he assessed the quality and progress of work on each house under construction. Notably, a total of 113 houses have been constructed in this colony under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin).

The minister also inspected the roads, model Anganwadi centers, children's parks, and water supply schemes of Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) of



MGNREGA's Pavers block, currently under construction in the said colony.

In a statement to the media after the visit, Dass mentioned that the residential colony of Pradhan

Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin, under construction at Namsang Tea Estate, is the largest residential colony in the entire country.

"The construction of houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin in the state is proceeding at a fast pace," he added.

Dass emphasised that the government has taken steps to provide one house and related facilities by constructing such residential colonies for every eligible landless family in the state.

Present on the occasion were Naharkatia MLA Tarang Gogoi, Zilla Parishad chief executive officer Bipul Kumar Das, block development officer of Jaipur Development Block Ranjit Buragohain, and other local dignitaries.

'Guardian minister Jogen Mohan participates in external evaluation'

Gunotsav kickstarts in Karbi Anglong

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Jan 4: The first phase of Gunotsav in the state began on January 3 in Karbi Anglong with self-evaluation by the School Managing Committee (SMC) members. The external evaluation is scheduled from January 4 to 6.

Gunotsav will be conducted in 1,252 schools from Class I to Class IX, with a total enrollment of 74,698 spread across educational blocks in Bokajan, Howraghat, Samelangso, Rongmongve, Lumbajong, Nilip, and Langsompri in Karbi Anglong.

On the first day of External Evaluation, guardian minister for Hill Areas (HAD), Jogen Mohan, participated as an external evaluator, inspecting various schools between Manja and Diphu. He visited Mohongdijua High School, Mohongdijua, conducting reading and writing tests for students.

Accompanied by Diphu MLA, Bidyasing Englang, district commis-



sioner, Madhumita Bhagawati, and Inspector of Schools, Biren Engti, the minister inspected the school campus for hygiene and cleanliness. During an interactive meeting, a student highlighted the need for a separate girls' toilet, prompting the Minister to instruct SMC members to prepare an estimate for immediate construction. Parents also voiced

concerns about the lack of a boundary wall, leading to anti-social elements damaging school property. The Minister assured support for addressing these issues.

Later, the minister visited Diphu Government Boys HS School, where the principal, Hilary Terang, discussed the school's needs with its large enrollment and both As-

samese and English sections.

Informing the media, the guardian minister stated that Gunotsav has brought positive changes to education in Assam, promoting quality education. He emphasised the government's commitment to providing support based on identified needs during school visits.

The executive member (EM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) education, Richard Tokbi, as an external evaluator, visited Loringlangso LP School in Matipung under Lumbajong educational block on Thursday.

The school has classes from KG-I to Class-V with a total enrollment of 314 and eight teachers. The EM, along with School Headmistress Protibha Patorpi, conducted reading tests for students and pledged support for the construction of an Additional Classroom (ACR) and a boundary wall for the school.

HT BRIEFS

KNCA president passes away

DIPHU: Merina Beypi, former president of Karbi Nimsa Chingthur Asong (KNCA), a Karbi women's organisation breathed her last this morning at around 9:10 am at her residence, Sarihajan, Karbi Anglong. Late Beypi was associated with the Autonomous State movement since 1986 led by Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and Karbi Students Association (KSA) and was actively working in KNCA. Her demise has been mourned by KNCA members and the ASDC and KSA. President, KNCA, Maikon Rongpharpi, expressing her condolences, said the late Beypi was a woman who stood firm for the cause of women's rights and justice. Late Bey was beaten by police in an agitation in front of Bokajan CCI cement factory during the Autonomous State movement.

Burmese Supari

BOKAJAN: The police in Karbi Anglong recovered illegal Burmese Supari in a checking at Dillai Gate, under Dillai Police Station. The police intercepted a truck, AS17 C 5722 and recovered 1600 kg of Burmese Supari. The contraband was being brought from Khatkhati and was destined for Guwahati and its market value is ₹ 16 lakh.

Adarsha Vidyalayas

GUWAHATI: In a significant move towards enhancing the education landscape in Assam, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma declared the establishment of eight new Adarsha Vidyalayas across various districts of the state. Emphasising the government's commitment to creating the best human resources through quality education, Sarma highlighted the pivotal role of education in shaping the future of Assam.

Govt mulls further streamlining of visa approval process for Chinese technicians

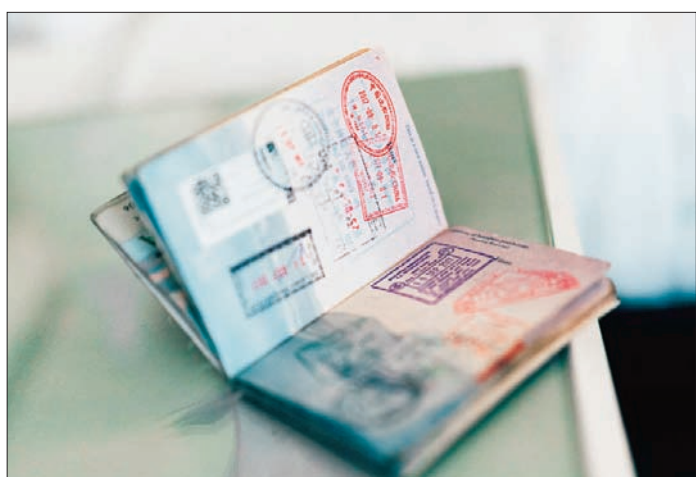
PLI scheme was announced in 2021 for 14 sectors such as telecommunication, white goods, textiles among others

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: The government is considering further streamlining of processes for timely approval of visas for Chinese professionals and technicians whose expertise is required by the Indian industry to set up manufacturing capacity, a senior official said.

Certain Indian industry players have approached the government stating that they are facing problems in getting visas for Chinese professionals whose expertise is required for things like setting up machines in factories.

The government has recently put in place a standard operating procedure (SOP) for streamlining visa approvals for Chinese technicians whose expertise is required by vendors under the PLI (Production Linked Incentive) scheme.

"Now we may be liberalising it for others. That process is on and a Cabinet note is under preparation.



Within the existing system, there is an SOP now to expedite visas for Chinese who are to come in to help set up manufacturing capacity in India. We have already streamlined it quite a bit, now we are trying to see whether it could be done for

them," the government official, who did not wish to be named, said.

An industry official said problem arises when Indian authorities insist for a university qualification certificate for the Chinese profes-

sionals.

"An expert may not have that kind of documents, he/she has earned expertise by working in a particular field for years. We are requesting the Indian authorities to facilitate the visa approval processes for Chinese professionals. We need them for things like installation of machines, increasing quality and productivity in manufacturing lines only. We need their expertise only where we are not getting help in India or any other country," the industry official said.

The PLI scheme was announced in 2021 for 14 sectors such as telecommunication, white goods, textiles, manufacturing of medical devices, automobiles, speciality steel, food products, high-efficiency solar PV modules, advanced chemistry cell battery, drones and pharma with an outlay of ₹ 1.97 lakh crore. (PTI)

Sets 2027 as target to become self-reliant in pulses Amit Shah launches tur dal procurement portal

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Aiming to make India self-reliant in pulses by 2027, cooperation minister Amit Shah on Thursday launched a tur dal procurement portal through which farmers can register and sell their produce to NAFED and NCCF at a minimum support price or market price.

A similar facility will be unveiled in future for urad and masoor farmers as well as maize farmers, he said.

The minister also transferred via Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) about Rs 68 lakh to 25 farmers registered with NAFED and NCCF towards payment for sale of tur via the multilingual portal.

The National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd (NAFED) and the National Cooperative Consumers' Federation of India (NCCF) are two central nodal agencies that undertake pulses procurement on behalf of the government for maintaining a buffer stock. They also buy pulses under the Price Support Scheme when the rates fall below the MSP.

After the launch, Shah said before the sowing operation, tur farmers can register on the portal to sell their produce to NAFED and NCCF at minimum support price (MSP).

The registered tur farmers will have an option to sell either to NAFED/NCCF or in the open market. Suppose the open market price of tur remains higher than the MSP at the time of harvesting, in that case an average rate will be arrived through a formula, he said, adding that the payment will be done through DBT.

Shah further said more farmers were not taking up pulses farming in the country because prices were not assured.

With procurement via the portal, the initiative will bring a major reform in the agriculture sector and help achieve self-reliance in pulses production, he said.

"Tur will be procured from farmers and it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guarantee," he added.

It may be noted that the tur dal procurement portal comes at a time when the domestic tur output in the 2023-24 kharif season is anticipated to be lower for the second straight year in view of fall in acreage and the central nodal agencies hope to procure maximum quantity for maintaining sufficient buffer and keep a lid on retail inflation ahead of general elections.

Tur production had touched a record of 4.87 million tonnes in 2016-17 kharif season and in the consecutive years the output fell and reached as low as 3.31 million tonnes in 2022-23. As per the initial estimate of the agriculture ministry, tur output is pegged at 3.42 million tonnes for 2023-24 kharif season.

Currently, harvesting of tur -- a main kharif pulse crop -- is still underway in some parts of the country.

Going forward, Shah said a procurement portal will be launched for the benefit of urad and masoor farmers also. Urad and masoor are two other pulses the country depends on imports and assured procurement



will help boost the production.

Since the government is pushing for ethanol blending with petrol and reducing crude oil imports, the minister said maize is being promoted for ethanol making and a portal will be launched wherein farmers can sell their produce.

Stating that the country is still dependent on import of some varieties of pulses except for chana and moong, the Minister stressed on the need to grow more pulses as majority of the population in India are vegetarians for whom pulses are a major source of protein.

That apart, the pulses crops which can be grown with less water have the ability to provide 30-40 kg of nitrogen in one hectare of land and saves farmers from spraying the same, he said.

"Grow pulses, don't worry about prices. We will procure at MSP," the minister assured the farming community.

"By December 2027, the country should become self-reliant in pulses. We will not import even one kilo of pulses from January 2028," he added.

He appealed to Primary Agriculture Credit Societies (PACS), Farmer Producers Organisations (FPOs) and progressive farmers to create awareness about the portal and encourage farmers to take advantage of this facility.

Pulses production has increased in the last ten years to 26.05 million tonnes in 2022-23 from 19.2 million tonnes in 2013-14 crop year (July-June), due to more than two times increase in the minimum support price, he said.

However, the domestic production of pulses is still short of consumption and depends on imports.

Agriculture minister Arjun Munda, minister of state for cooperation B L Verma, and minister of state for consumer affairs Ashwini Choubey as well as NAFED and NCCF officials were also present at the event. (PTI)

Markets rebound after 2-day slump; Sensex jumps 491 points

MUMBAI, Jan 4: Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded nearly 1 per cent on Thursday after sliding for the past two sessions, propped up by bargain hunting in realty, power and financial stocks.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 490.97 points or 0.69 per cent to settle at 71,847.57 points. During the day, it rallied 598.19 points or 0.83 per cent to 71,954.79 points.

The Nifty climbed 141.25 points or 0.66 per cent to 21,658.60 points.

"Market bounced back after the last two negative trading days led by strong monthly business updates of leading banks, emphasising robust credit growth. The Realty sector was the highest gainer in anticipation of robust demand in the residential category, which was supported by healthy housing loan disbursement data announced by banks," said Vinod Nair, head of research, Geojit Financial Services.

Bajaj Finance was the biggest gainer on the Sensex chart, rising 4.44 per cent, followed by NTPC, IndusInd Bank, Axis Bank, Tata Motors, Nestle, Power Grid, Infosys, Bajaj Finserv and HDFC Bank.

HCL Tech, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti and Hindustan Unilever were among the losers.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge jumped 1.49 per cent, and smallcap index climbed



1.04 per cent.

"The Nifty realty index has outperformed the broader market in 2023, marking a strong turn since the RBI paused on rate hikes in March 2023. A potential rate cut in 2024, as global rates likely head down, will be positive for the sector. However, the strong rally in realty stocks so far has priced in some of these gains.

"It is important to note that property sales have favoured premium & luxury housing in this upturn so far. A potential rate cut could help the affordable housing segment more. With talks of the government reviving its interest subvention scheme for affordable housing, there seems to be some more steam to the rally," Naveen KR, smallcase manager and senior director - Windmill Capital, said.

Among the indices, realty zoomed 6.61 per cent, utilities jumped 2.55 per cent, telecommunication (2.09 per cent), services (1.68 per cent), financial services (1.30 per cent), banking (0.93 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.82 per cent).

Auto and metal were the laggards.

"Asian shares were mixed on Thursday as traders dialled back bets of steep and early rate cuts this year, with the minutes of the Federal Reserve's last meeting providing few clues on when US cuts might start.

"European stock markets rose Thursday, rebounding after recent losses as investors digested regional inflation data and the outlook for central bank rate cuts," said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the negative territory.

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

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.92 per cent to USD 78.97 a barrel.

On the domestic macroeconomic front, India's manufacturing sector growth fell to an 18-month low in December amid a softer increase in factory orders and output despite minimal inflation.

The HSBC India Manufacturing PMI survey, conducted by S&P Global, showed that there was a softer, albeit sharp, increase in factory orders and output, while business confidence towards the year-ahead outlook strengthened.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 666.34 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. (PTI)

Gold slumps ₹ 420; silver plummets ₹ 1,900



NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Gold price slumped ₹ 420 to ₹ 63,550 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid weak cues in the international markets, according to HDFC Securities.

In the previous trade, the precious metal had settled at ₹ 63,970 per 10 grams.

Silver also plummeted ₹ 1,900 to ₹ 76,900 per kilogram, while it had closed at ₹ 78,800 per kg in the previous close.

"Gold edged lower on Thursday, with spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets trading at ₹ 63,550/10 grams, down by ₹ 420 following bearish trends in the overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the global markets, gold and silver were quoting lower at USD 2,042 per ounce and USD 23.05 per ounce, respectively.

Gandhi said that Comex gold prices fell to a two-week low as uncertainty around the US Federal Reserve's plan to reduce interest rates contributed to prevailing risk-off sentiment among traders.

There is uncertainty on interest rate cut timeframe after the release of the minutes of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting held last month. (PTI)

KFC introduces range of meals starting at ₹ 149



HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 4: KFC has introduced range of meals starting at ₹ 149.

"As lunchtime nears, and the hunger pangs reach their peak, consumers can choose from a variety of meals including longer burgers, rolls, or rice bowl, paired with the iconic hot & crispy chicken, peri peri chicken strips or fries, along with refreshing beverages. There's something for everyone as consumers can choose from a variety of veg and non-veg options.

KFC Lunch Specials are available exclusively from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm at all KFC restaurants. So, get set for a crispy, crunchy, delicious lunchtime, with options starting at ₹ 149.

Like everything else at KFC, the Lunch Specials comes with the assurance of KFC's 5X Safety Promise of Sanitization, Screening, Social Distancing, and Contactless service with Vaccinated teams. All surfaces and frequently touched areas in a restaurant are regularly sanitised, team members and riders are screened regularly for their temperatures.

₹ 4,000 cr in Kuppah Hydro Project

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: NHPC has inked an initial pact to invest ₹ 4,000 crore in 750 MW Kuppah Pumped Hydro Storage Project at Chhota Udaipur in Gujarat. Taking a step towards clean and green energy, NHPC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Gujarat Power Corporation (GPC) for investment in Kuppah Pumped Hydro Storage Project (750 MW) on January 3, 2024, a company statement said. (PTI)

Rupee rises 7 paise to close at 83.23 against US dollar

MUMBAI, Jan 4: The rupee appreciated 7 paise to close at 83.23 against the US dollar on Thursday, helped by a bullish trend in domestic equities and weakness of the American currency in the overseas market.

However, rising crude oil prices capped sharp gains for the local unit, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened flat at 83.30 against the greenback.

The rupee oscillated between an intra-day low of 83.32 and a high of 83.21 against the greenback and finally settled at 83.23 against the dollar, higher by 7 paise from its previous close.

The rupee gained for the second day in a row following a weaker greenback after mixed signals from the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting minutes.

"Better-than-expected service PMI number pushed the euro higher versus the US dollar. The rupee also accumulated the gain along with other Asian currencies after Eurozone data. However, the local unit trimmed the afternoon gains amid higher crude oil prices and importers' dollar demand," Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said, adding that "Spot USD/INR is expected to consolidate between 83.10 and 83.50".

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.32 per cent lower at 102.16.

Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, advanced 1.05 per cent to USD 79.07 per barrel.

On the domestic equity market front, Sensex surged 490.97 points, or 0.69 per cent, to settle at 71,847.57 points. The Nifty advanced 141.25 points, or 0.66 per cent, to 21,658.60 points. (PTI)

₹ 12,000 crore to be invested in Gujarat

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: DCM Shriram Ltd, a leading Chlor Alkali manufacturer, plans to invest ₹ 12,000 crore for manufacturing chemical and petrochemical products in Bharuch, Gujarat by 2028. The company said it has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Gujarat government in this regard on Wednesday in the presence of Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel at a ceremony organised as part of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit to be held on January 10-12. (PTI)

US job openings fell slightly in November but remain high by historical standards

In November, job openings dropped by 128,000 in transportation, warehousing and utilities and by 78,000 at hotels and restaurants

WASHINGTON, Jan 4: America's employers posted 8.8 million job openings in November, down slightly from October and the fewest since March 2021. But demand for workers remains strong by historical standards despite higher interest rates.

Wednesday's report from the Labor Department showed that the number of job vacancies dipped from 8.9 million in October. It also showed that the number of people quitting their jobs — a sign of confidence in the labor market — fell to its lowest level since February 2021. The number of quits is now roughly where it stood before the pandemic erupted nearly four years ago.

In November, job openings dropped by 128,000 in transportation, warehousing and utilities and by 78,000 at hotels and restaurants. The federal government reduced job openings by 58,000. By contrast, openings in construction rose by 43,000 and in retail by 42,000.

Wednesday's report, called the Jobs Openings and Labor Turnover Summary, reinforced other recent evidence that while the job market is slowing from its robust heights, it remains solid. Layoffs, for example, are still at unusually low levels.

In the face of rising interest rates, job openings have gradually but steadily declined since peaking at a record 12 million in March 2022. But they remain at historically high levels: Before 2021, monthly job



openings had never topped 8 million.

The inflation fighters at the Federal Reserve have raised their benchmark interest rate 11 times since March 2022 to a 22-year high of about 5.4%. They would like to see the job market cool from the red-hot levels of the past couple of years, thereby reducing pressure on businesses to raise pay — and prices. Compared with outright layoffs, a decline in job openings is a relatively painless way for that to happen.

So far, the Fed appears to be on track for a so-called soft landing — avoiding a recession while slowing

economic activity enough to conquer high inflation.

The unemployment rate is currently 3.7%, not far above a half-century low. Through November of last year, American employers added a healthy 232,000 jobs a month. The December jobs report, which the government will issue Friday, is expected to show that the economy added 155,000 jobs — still a decent number — last month.

And inflation is decelerating: Consumer prices were up 3.1% in November from 12 months earlier, down from 9.1% in mid-2022, though it remains above the Fed's 2%

target.

The central bank, which has left its benchmark interest rate unchanged for three straight meetings, has signaled that it expects to cut rates three times in 2024.

"Overall, the labor market remains strong, but demand is cooling, coming in better balance with supply," said Ruben Feroqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "And wage and inflation pressures are decelerating. These data will be welcome news for policymakers and support the Fed's view that the next move in rates will be lower." (AP)

PRESS NOTIFICATION

WALK-IN INTERVIEW FOR THE POST OF CONTRACT MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS IN RANGIYA DIVISION

EMPLOYMENT NOTICE NO.: 01/2024/GAZ(CMP) DATED: 02-01-2024

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 18-01-2024 TIME: 10:00 HRS.

Venue: Office of the Chief Medical Superintendent, Rangiya, N.F. Railway, Rangiya-781365; Number of post: 04 (four); Community wise break up: UR-02, SC-01, ST-0 & OBC-01.

NAME OF THE STATIONS:-

SN	Name of the Hospital/HU	No. of post	Discipline
01	Rangiya Hospital	01	GDMO (CMP)
02	New Bongaigaon Hospital	01	GDMO (CMP)
03	Rangapara North Health Unit	02	GDMO (CMP)

TERMS AND CONDITION

(01) The appointment will be on Full Time Contract basis for a period not exceeding one year or till replaced by UPSC selected doctors, whichever is earlier, for the specified STATIONS only. (02) The contract shall liable to be terminated by giving 15 days notice by either side. Without assigning any reasons or if the Contract Medical Practitioner is mentally/physically incapacitated. (03) The administration reserves the right to place engaged CMPs anywhere in the jurisdiction of Rangiya Division. (04) The Contract appointment shall not confer any right for regularization or absorption in the post or right for continuity in service or automatic extension of the terms of contract. (05) The number of annual terms for engagement of CMPs is upto 12 terms on year to year basis or till attaining the age 60 years whichever is earlier and each term of engagement shall not exceed more than one year. (06) A candidate should not exceeding 53 years of age as on 01-01-2024. However, age relaxation is admissible to candidates belongs to SC/ST/OBC categories as per extant rule. (07) The Contract Medical Practitioner shall produce certificates of his/her character and antecedents from two gazetted officers of the Central/State Government. (08) Educational/Technical qualification: The candidate should be a minimum MBBS pass Degree from an institute recognized by the Medical Council of India (MCI) and with registration in MCI or with a valid registration certificate of any of the State Medical Councils of India after completion of one year of compulsory rotator intership. (09) Those doctors who have already been engaged for 12 terms in Indian Railway need not apply.

The willing eligible candidates should report for the "WALK-IN" interview along with filled application form as in Annexure-A in the office of the Chief Medical Superintendent, N.F. Railway, Rangiya-781365 on 18-01-2024 at 10:00 Hrs., with copies of all certificates/testimonials IN ORIGINAL and attested true copies and also two passport size photographs. In the event of any wrong information/fake academic certificates/testimonial etc. the candidates will liable to be taken up under Govt of India's law in force.

Detailed notification is available at www.nfr.indianrailways.gov.in (general infor.-departments-personnel-online interview)

Divisional Railway Manager (P), Rangiya

NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY

Serving Customers With A Smile

Cachar district administration and PGCIL signs MoU for healthcare advancements

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 4: In a significant development aimed at enhancing healthcare facilities in Cachar district, the district administration has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCIL). The signing ceremony, a testament to the commitment towards Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), took place at the old conference hall of the Deputy Commissioner's Office.

The MoU, signed by district development commissioner Rajib Roy and senior GM head of NERTS, Anjan Sanyal, marks a collaborative effort to provide advanced healthcare equipment and facilities to the region. The ceremony, attended by journalists from various media houses, witnessed the presence of key officials, including Supriya Paul, deputy general manager of Power Grid Corporation Ltd (Silchar unit), joint director of Health Dr Ashutosh Barman, principal of SMC&H Dr Bhaskar Gupta, Dr Hrituraj Thakuria, and Rahul Ghose, district programme

manager of NHM, among others.

Expressing gratitude for the collaboration, DDC Rajib Roy highlighted the significance of the MoU, emphasising its role in addressing critical healthcare needs. He acknowledged the continual support received from NERTS and expressed optimism about future collaborations for broader developmental initiatives.

The Power Grid Corporation's contribution to Cachar district includes the construction of a much-needed pediatric ward for sick newborns at SM Dev Civil Hospital. DDC Roy underscored the importance of this facility, citing its potential to save lives in emergency cases. He extended thanks to Power Grid Corporation for their generous donation of life-saving equipment.

Roy acknowledged the gradual improvement in healthcare infrastructure in Cachar but highlighted the need for patients to travel to Shillong or Guwahati for certain services. He explained that the advanced healthcare facilities provided under this collaboration would significantly



cantly benefit the residents by reducing the need for such extensive travel.

Providing details of the financial aspects, DDC Rajib Roy informed that the

cost of constructing the pediatric ward is approximately ₹ 99,02,963 lakh. Additionally, Power Grid is contributing advanced vital diagnostic and therapeutic

equipment worth ₹ 1,81,21,376, showcasing their commitment to supporting infrastructural development through CSR activities.

The collaboration aims to enable the treatment of patients within SMC&H, Silchar, eliminating the necessity for referrals and ensuring the efficient management of sick newborns at SM Dev Civil Hospital. The initiative is anticipated to offer a safe delivery option for expecting women, enhancing postnatal care for mothers and neonatal care.

Addressing the gathering, Anjan Sanyal, head of HR at PGCIL, elaborated on the objectives of their CSR activities. Supriya Paul, deputy general manager of Power Grid Corporation (Silchar unit), expressed gratitude to the district authority, DC Cachar, ADC-Health, Cachar, joint director Health, and NHM office for providing Power Grid with the opportunity to serve society and humanity. He thanked all present during the MoU signing ceremony, highlighting the importance of the ALS in the valley and ICU in the civil hospital as crucial elements of

the initiative.

Dr Ashutosh Barman, joint director of the Health Department, commended the active intervention of DC Cachar and the personal interest shown by DGM Power Grid, Supriya Paul, in supporting the construction of the sick newborn care unit and pediatric ward at SM Dev Civil Hospital.

Principal SMC&H, Silchar, Dr Bhaskar Gupta, also spoke on the occasion, stressing on the positive impact this collaboration would have on healthcare services in Cachar. Noteworthy is the fact that as part of its CSR activity, PGCIL will provide financial assistance for medical equipment to Silchar Medical College Hospital, construct a sick newborn care unit at SM Dev Civil Hospital, and supply DG sets to 7 BPHCs in Cachar district. The project, set to be completed within 8 months, will be implemented through an MoU between Power Grid Corporation and the district administration of Cachar. The program was attended by various health officials and stakeholders.

Assam Police releases comprehensive SOP for picnic-goers

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 4: In response to the growing trend of picnic gatherings, particularly during the months from November to March in the state, the Assam Police has introduced a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to regulate and ensure the safety of participants and the general public.

The SOP encompasses various crucial guidelines to enhance the overall picnic experience while mitigating potential risks associated with large-scale gatherings.

To begin with, there is a strict adherence to avoiding overcrowding in picnic-going vehicles, ensuring that they do not surpass their recommended capacity to mitigate associated hazards. The SOP also imposes a prohibition on the trading of illicit liquor in and around picnic spots, fostering a secure and controlled environment.

Moreover, drivers of these vehicles are mandated to abstain from

consuming any intoxicants before assuming control of the wheel, highlighting the importance of responsible driving practices. To maintain a peaceful travel environment, the SOP prohibits loud music within vehicles.

Local police are directed to conduct continuous raids on dhabas, roadside eateries where illicit liquors might be sold, to ensure compliance with the law. Movement of picnic parties is restricted to specific hours, before sunrise and after sunset, aligning with safety considerations.

Additionally, local police stations should be promptly informed about the origin and destination of travel plans, facilitating coordination and prompt emergency response. The SOP encourages the establishment of vigilance groups by local police to detect any illicit activities and maintain overall security.

To enhance visibility and secu-

urity, vulnerable areas within and around picnic spots should be equipped with sufficient lighting facilities. Designated parking areas are crucial to accommodate vehicles safely and prevent congestion.

Special emphasis is placed on safety measures during foggy conditions, ensuring no movement occurs during such instances to minimise the risk of accidents. Finally, bus drivers are advised to wear appropriate footwear, and comprehensive briefings should be conducted to ensure awareness of safety guidelines among all participants.

While these guidelines serve as a comprehensive framework, authorities stressed that this is a suggestive and not exhaustive list. Coordination with the District Transport Office (DTO) and other enforcement agencies is crucial to enforcing these measures effectively and preventing accidents during picnic gatherings.

Conclusion of nodal teachers training in Biswanath

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, Jan 4: The three-day district-level training program aimed at enhancing the expertise of nodal teachers in secondary levels (IX-XII) on 'Child Mental Health & Protection' concluded at Gingia Mahabir HSS in Biswanath. The event, organised by Samagra Siksha, commenced on Tuesday and saw active participation from 90 nodal teachers representing various secondary and senior secondary schools.

Tankeswar Bora, the principal of Gingia Mahabir HSS, inaugurated the program, setting the tone for an enriching learning experience. The training featured Rihutshmita Saikia and Meghali Bhuyan as master trainers, with support from resource persons Joonmani Mahanta, Barun Bhagawati, and Anjan Baskota.

Throughout the three days, participants engaged in comprehensive sessions covering aspects of child mental health & protection. The program aimed to equip nodal teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to address mental health issues among students and ensure their overall protection.

The concluding session welcomed distinguished guests, including Bedabrat Bora, district programme officer (DPO) for Biswanath, along with Manisha Baishya and Rashmi Rekha Rajkhowa from DIET, Sonitpur, who served as guest lecturers. Their valuable insights added depth to the discussions and contributed to the overall success of the training.

'Kotha-Saurabh' sparks intellectual discourse in Majuli

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Jan 4: On December 30, Majuli witnessed the unfolding of the second edition of the intellectually stimulating 'Kotha Saurabh Adda' at the 'Bhogali Jaiva Boichitra Kshetra'. The esteemed guest of honour for the event was Kishori Mohan Pal, a venerable journalist, writer, and social activist. The discussion centered around the theme 'Journalism and Social Life: As I See It', providing profound insights into the challenges and essence of journalism.

The collaborative effort of state-level voluntary organisations 'Bonphul' and 'S I Media Foundation (SIMFA)', the event aimed to foster intellectual exchange and create a platform for informed discussions. Pal, a figure of immense experience and wisdom, addressed the gathering, instilling a sense of resilience in the face of challenges confronting print journalism. Despite acknowledging the rise of digital media, Pal highlighted that journalism, in all its forms, must navigate diverse problems. He encouraged journalists to stand firm against attempts to stifle the voice of the media.

Pal's discourse extended to the religious landscape of the state, where he affirmed the freedom of Indian citizens to choose any reli-



gion. In a poignant moment, he underscored that the teachings of Sankardev, a revered saint, should be adhered to without any inclination towards aggression.

The conversation unfolded to cover various topics, ranging from the imperative of rational and scientific efforts for the conservation of Majuli's Charaichong forest area to the commendable initiatives of individuals like Sanjay Ghosh in the river island. Pal delved into personal anecdotes, recounting incidents like his principled stand against ragging during his time at Cotton College. Praises were extended to logical and scientific minds in the state, including

Dinesh Chandra Goswami, Kulendu Pathak, and Shivanath Barman.

Pal, a luminary in the realms of writing and journalism, presented a humble perspective on his own journey. Rejecting the label of success, he likened himself to a part of the vine, drawing inspiration from Vaishnava philosophy. The veteran journalist shared moments from his journalistic career, which commenced in 1972 as a correspondent for 'Daily Janambhumi' and 'Assam Express'. His honest and courageous reporting often invited conspiracy and opposition from fellow reporters.

Dr Debjit Saikia, principal of

Majuli College, served as the moderator for the discussion, acknowledging Pal's unwavering commitment to preserving the Assamese society and language. Social worker Guna Saikia, reflecting on the event, expressed regret that Pal, if situated in Jorhat or Guwahati, might have garnered more recognition. Pal, in response, expressed gratitude for the honor bestowed upon him during the program, deeming it a remarkable event in Majuli's history.

Among the attendees were environmental activist Manas Pratim Dutta, teacher and cultural activist Dipak Baruah, poet Jatindranath Mudai, social activist Samarjit Sen, and youth activists Debjyoti Dutta and Jyotirmoy Das. The event, initiated by Dr Nabajyoti Dutta, assistant professor at DHSK Commerce College, Dibrugarh, and writer Sanjit Kumar Bordoloi of Jorhat, holds the promise of becoming a beacon for intellectual exchange in Assam.

This 'Kotha-Saurabh' adda, an evening program that centers on a notable figure with a rich experience of social life each time, has opened up new avenues for the expansion of intellectual sharing in the state. It signifies a commitment to fostering thoughtful discussions and providing a platform for the exchange of ideas in Assam.

NABARD-sponsored beautician training conducted



HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Jan 4: In Batadroba near Nagaon, a successful Micro Enterprise Development Programme (MEDP) on beautician techniques for women Self-Help Group (SHG) members concluded recently. The two-week training, sponsored by NABARD and conducted by the implementing agency Gramya Unnayan Sangstha, aimed to enhance the skillsets of over 30 women from the greater Batadroba areas.

Master trainer Nijumoni Borah played a key role in conducting the programme, covering various aspects such as record-keeping, enterprise management, business dynamics, and hands-on sessions in facial makeup, bridal makeup, eyebrow shaping, skin toning, hair straightening, dressing, and eyelash extension.

The valedictory session witnessed the presence of distinguished guests, including Rajendra Perna (DDM, NABARD), Rajib Borah (SBI, Batadroba), Stuti Sarma (Assam Gramin Vikas Bank), and Pinky Saikia (ASRLM, CRP). Rajendra Perna highlighted the importance of MEDP programs in addressing skill gaps and optimising production activities for women SHG members.

As part of the training, participants had a day-long exposure visit to Mithi Beauty Parlour and Sahil Unisex Salon in Nagaon town, enriching their practical understanding of the beauty industry. Perna emphasised that the program aimed to upgrade both technical and entrepreneurial skills, enabling participants to either work in existing beauty parlors or start their own ventures.

The valedictory session, under the guidance of Mukut Deka, the secretary of Gramya Unnayan Sangstha, marked the culmination of the program that commenced on December 14, 2023.

Nighttime restrictions on vehicles imposed in Dhubri

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 4: In response to the prevalent foggy conditions and the rising concerns of potential accidents, the Dhubri district administration has issued an order under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC). The order, effective immediately, aims to ensure the safety of human life and properties by restricting the movement of specific vehicles and imposing parking regulations.

The order imposes restrictions on various modes of transportation and parking. Firstly, the movement of e-Rickshaws on the National Highway is restricted between 5 pm and 8 am. Secondly, there are limitations on the movement of dumpers and tractors, which are not allowed on national highway and other state roads from 5 pm to 7 am. Thirdly, stringent parking regulations are in place. All types of vehicles, including heavy ones, are prohibited from parking along national highway and state roads. Moreover, parking in front of dhabas, hotels, resorts, or any location other than designated parking areas is strictly forbidden. These measures aim to regulate traffic and ensure safety on the roads.

District Magistrate Dibakar Nath, IAS, highlighted the need for these measures to avert unwanted accidents caused by reduced visibility during foggy conditions. The decision stems from the District Road Safety Committee (DRSC) meeting on road safety, where concerns were raised about the substantial increase in fatalities and injuries in road accidents in the state in recent weeks.

Annual day held at 1 No Gereki LP School

HT Correspondent

BISWANATH CHARIALI, Jan 4: The annual day and prize distribution ceremony of 1 No Gereki LPS, organised by the School Management Committee (SMC) and Mothers' Group under Pub Nagsankar Cluster, took place on Thursday at the school premises. The event, presided over by Bhusar Kharia, the president of SMC, featured a series of cultural programs presented by the students. The gathering included Jiten Patar, CRCC of Pub Nagsankar cluster, Bhola Bora, Chiteswar Bhuyan, Punu Kharia, as well as members of the general public, guardians, and parents. Arun Bordoloi, the school's secretary, led all the proceedings of the open session, with assistance from Mousumi Baishya.



Gautam Gogoi's mother urges his return following alleged joining of ULFA(I)

HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Jan 4: After the recent peace deal between the pro-talk faction of the ULFA and the government, a disheartening incident has come to light. Gautam Gogoi, a youth employed as a technical assistant in IIT Guwahati, has reportedly joined the anti-talk insurgent group ULFA(I), leaving his family in profound grief and shock.

Gautam, son of Tileswar Gogoi and Nirada Gogoi of Deoraja near Amguri, left home for Guwahati at about 6 am on Wednesday after spending a fortnight with his family. However, after his departure, he switched off his mobile, and Amguri Police visited his home on Thursday. Gautam's devastated

mother appealed to her son through the media, urging him to return home.

Following two youths from Geleki and Nitaipukhuri in 2023, Gautam Gogoi is suspected to be the first youth from the district this year to have allegedly joined the anti-talk faction of ULFA. SP Sivasagar Subhrajyoti Bora stated over the phone that they have no information about any youth joining the outfit.

However, they have unconfirmed reports of two youths joining ULFA(I) last year. Due to the regular flow of people to and from all neighbouring states through open borders, it is challenging for the police to identify and track individuals who go missing after certain points.



DGP GP Singh delivers new year message to colleagues

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 4: Director general of police (DGP) GP Singh IPS has shared a comprehensive new year message with colleagues in the Assam Police through his social media X (formerly Twitter), setting the tone for a dedicated and service-oriented year ahead.

In his message, DGP GP Singh emphasised the significance of the new year as an opportunity to embark on a fresh chapter in their collective service to the people of the state. He called upon colleagues to re-dedicate themselves to providing an enhanced policing experience, outlining key focus areas for the coming year.

The DGP highlighted cybercrimes, specifically cyber financial frauds, as a critical concern affecting a large number of people not only in Assam but across the country and the world. He stressed



the need for a focused approach in handling the misuse of financial institutions, mobile, and internet platforms in such cybercrimes.

Addressing the scourge of road traffic accidents, DGP GP Singh underscored the importance of a holistic approach to improving traffic movement, positioning the Assam Police as a major stakeholder and a catalyst for positive change.

Further, the DGP called for continued improvements in investigations, aiming for an enhanced rate of charge sheets and convictions. He urged the utilisation of forensic potential as outlined in the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bhartiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita, and Bhartiya Sakshya Sanhita, foreseeing a qualitative change in the lives of the people of Assam.

While reiterating focus areas, DGP GP Singh emphasised a policy of zero toler-

ance for misconduct among Assam Police personnel. He stressed that police officers and stations should continue to be regarded as temples for police personnel and safe havens for citizens, especially women, children, and marginalised sections of society. Any form of sexual and financial misconduct within these premises would remain unacceptable.

The DGP urged colleagues to strive for improved conduct and behavior towards junior colleagues and the general public, emphasising the importance of respect and empathy. He reiterated that being inebriated while on duty or in uniform would continue to be unacceptable.

Concluding his message, DGP GP Singh expressed hope for collectively scripting a glorious chapter in Assam's journey towards peace, prosperity, and development, signing off with a spirited "Jai Hind".

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Happiness is good health and a bad memory.
- Ingrid Bergman

India navigates free trade challenges

As India engages in advanced negotiations with the United Kingdom and the European Union on free trade agreements (FTAs), a cautious approach is urged due to potential trade diversions from China. Trade expert H.A.C. Prasad highlights the need for strategic consideration, especially in FTAs where China plays a major role. However, with the possibility of trade diversion from China, coupled with investment shifts, India stands at a pivotal moment to capitalize on emerging opportunities. Studies conducted by Prasad, in collaboration with the Exim Bank of India, emphasize the significant benefits of forging FTAs with developed nations. The suggestion to evolve India's current regional forum with the QUAD nations into an economic and trade grouping adds an intriguing dimension to India's strategic approach. While challenges loom in FTAs where China holds a dominant position, negotiations with advanced countries like the US, UK, and EU are deemed potentially beneficial. Prasad points out indicators of trade diversion from China to India, emphasizing the need for swift action to turn this prospect into reality, particularly as foreign investors consider relocating from China.

India has already concluded Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements (CECA) with Australia and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA) with the UAE, both including the services sector. Ongoing negotiations with the UK and the EU are progressing positively, though India-US FTA talks appear to face hurdles due to US policy. Prasad underscores the importance of reviewing existing FTAs and concludes that some past agreements were flawed. A careful but prompt reevaluation, akin to zero-budgeting principles, is recommended. Prasad suggests bringing Indo-UK and Indo-EU FTA negotiations to a timely conclusion, even if it requires terminating less useful FTAs or making them more beneficial for India upon renewal. Highlighting pitfalls in certain FTAs, Prasad advocates for uniformity in tariff concessions to prevent confusion and predictability issues for domestic producers. Evaluating whether tariff concessions are still necessary for developing countries is advised, especially as India faces increased competition in the US market after the withdrawal of Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits. Prasad suggests introducing graduation and sunset clauses in India's FTAs, particularly for earlier agreements, to address competition concerns from countries enjoying GSP benefits in the US market. He emphasizes that FTAs should prioritize economic gains through tariff liberalization, with political and strategic gains playing a secondary role.

Identifying areas for further negotiation, Prasad points to the leather and footwear sector, where reciprocal duty concessions with Japan need renegotiation. In marine products, India's FTAs lag behind those of EU-Vietnam and EU-Ecuador, necessitating fair treatment for Indian exports. In agriculture, there's room to negotiate better concessions for Indian products like coffee with FTA partners like Japan, South Korea, China, and the Philippines. As India stands on the cusp of potential trade diversions from China, careful review and strategic decisions regarding existing and future FTAs are imperative. Prasad's insights call for a balanced approach that prioritizes economic gains while ensuring fair treatment for India in international trade partnerships.

Dharavi's renaissance or displacement? The complex journey ahead



The announcement of Gautam Adani's joint venture with Mumbai's Slum Rehabilitation Authority to redevelop Dharavi, Asia's largest informal settlement, has sparked a mix of hope and skepticism among stakeholders. The project, led by Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRPPL), has hired a global team of architects and consultants with the goal of transforming Dharavi into a modern and vibrant urban area. The ambitious vision includes the creation of private homes with improved living conditions, the revitalization of businesses, and the upskilling of the local community.

The project's partnership with architect Hafeez Contractor, US design firm Sasaki, and UK consultancy firm Buro Happold demonstrates a commitment to leveraging expertise from around the world. The Adani Group's statement emphasizes a dedication to integrity, inclusivity, and community engagement in approaching this complex endeavour. However, questions remain about the potential impact on Dharavi's existing residents and businesses, as well as the long-term sustainability of the redevelopment. One key point of comparison cited by the project's spokesperson is Singapore's successful transformation from a land of shanties and slums to a modern, well-planned city. The Singapore Housing Development Board's experience in crafting over 1.2 million homes over five decades serves as a model for the Dharavi Redevelopment Project. The intention to learn from Singapore's urban rejuvenation is an encouraging sign of the project's commitment to drawing from proven best practices.

However, the comparison to Singapore also raises concerns about gentrification and potential displacement of Dharavi's existing residents. Singapore's urban renewal was not without its controversies, including the demolition of existing neighbourhoods and displacement of low-income residents. There is a need for careful consideration of the social

implications of the Dharavi redevelopment, ensuring that the vibrant culture and community spirit are preserved and enhanced, rather than erased by top-down urban planning.

The involvement of the Maharashtra government, which approved the Adani Group's bid for the project, also raises questions about the transparency and accountability of the redevelopment process. Given the scale of the project - covering 625 acres and touted as "the world's largest urban renewal scheme" - there is significant public interest and scrutiny surrounding the decision-making and implementation of the project. Clear communication and engagement with the local community will be essential in ensuring that the project aligns with the needs and aspirations of Dharavi's residents. In addition to the physical redevelopment, the project's emphasis on vocational job opportunities and upskilling of the local community is a positive step towards addressing the economic challenges faced by Dharavi's residents. The creation of sustainable livelihoods and economic opportunities within the redeveloped area will be critical in ensuring the long-term success and inclusivity of the project. It will be important for the project to work closely with local stakeholders and organizations to develop strategies for integrating the existing workforce into the new economy that emerges from the redevelopment.

While the grand vision of transforming Dharavi into a model of urban redevelopment is certainly ambitious, it also carries immense responsibilities. The potential impact on the lives and livelihoods of Dharavi's residents cannot be underestimated. The success of the project will ultimately be measured not only by the physical transformation of the area, but by the social and economic outcomes for the local community. The Adani Group and its partners must navigate a complex landscape of competing interests, historical context, and socio-economic dynamics to ensure that the redevelopment of Dharavi is truly a renaissance, and not a displacement, of its vibrant culture. *(The author can be reached at shashankadas0007@gmail.com)*

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has made the far right mainstream

Giorgia Meloni, the former fascist and current prime minister of Italy, is a distant relative of the communist theorist Antonio Gramsci. On its face, this revelation, which Italian genealogists disclosed earlier this month, might seem like an interesting piece of trivia - funny but ultimately meaningless. However, Meloni, despite sharing none of her ancestor's politics, emerged out of a process of social transformation that the author of the Prison Notebooks would not struggle to understand.

Meloni's rise was fuelled by a broader right-wing cultural shift that normalized her outlook by tying it to Italy's self-image in a bid for what Gramsci would have called hegemony. Accordingly, the Brothers of Italy, Meloni's party, takes its name from "Fratellid' Italia," the words in the opening line of the country's national anthem.

Just like war, culture is the continuation of politics with other means. Since her settling in Palazzo Chigi, Meloni's praetorians have been briskly dispatched to every key post in the country's cultural administrative infrastructure. A furious power grab on museums, theatres, orchestras, literary fairs and prizes, the Venice Biennale, and universities has taken place.

On the national broadcaster, Rai, all the main news program's hosts have changed seemingly overnight in order to reflect the present division of power. Rai has three main chan-

nels: Rai 1, Rai 2, and Rai 3. Since the last elections the TG1, Rai 1's newspaper program, has been transformed into the press office of Fratellid' Italia, the TG2 into the megaphone of Forza Italia, and the TG3 into the mouthpiece of the soft-left Democratic Party, formerly the Italian Communist Party.

The wall between the political class and the fourth estate has become especially porous under Meloni's rule. As a reward for his trusted service to her government, she anointed Gennaro Sangiuliano, the former editor of TG2, minister of culture. This is a man who, while presiding at the award ceremony of the Premio Strega, Italy's equivalent of the Pulitzer, candidly confessed that he hadn't read any of the

books that had made the shortlist. Italy's post-fascists are not guilty of doing anything new,

however. Heavily monitored by the United States, which did everything possible to undermine the Left and prevent the rise of communism throughout the postwar era, Italy has always struggled to develop independent cultural institutions.

Indeed, political parties in Italy have for a long time unashamedly put their people in positions of influence, according to their electoral share. This game of cronyism has become so popular that it even has its own name, "lottizzazione," or "spoils system," practiced

shamelessly by the center left for decades.

Like Donald Trump, who appointed his son-in-law Jared Kushner to an adviser role, Meloni has also practiced a form of nepotistic rule. Her brother-in-law Francesco Lollobrigida has taken up the position of minister of agriculture and used his platform to trumpet Great Replacement conspiracy theories during official speeches.

In practice, this bid for cultural hegemony has largely been aimed at low and popular culture. A much-talked-about J. R. R. Tolkien exhibition currently up in Rome has sought to show that the cultural pantheon of this far right has changed. Out: the foamingly racist Julius Evola, the philosopher of fascism Gio-

vanni Gentile, and the far-right futurist poet F i l i p p o Marinetti; in: the anti-modern trilogy The Lord of the Rings.

Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner have moved out of the premises, and the heirs of fascism are now mainstream - and popular. At the Atrium festival, Fratellid' Italia's cultural conference, billionaire mogul Elon Musk and Britain's prime minister Rishi Sunak were welcome guests. Italy's postfascists have clearly made it into the mainstream. What has smoothed this transition has been the adoption of the Anglophone cultural war by much of the Italian right. They have successfully

managed to transplant the Anglo-American battle against "cultural Marxism" to Italy, where, unlike in the United States, the Left has long had a strong influence over the country's media institutions, albeit largely those in high culture.

In Italy, "high culture" has generally been the domain of the Left. The main reasons for this are the strong current of anti-communism that dominated postwar Italian politics and prevented the Left from taking political power, relegating it to the cultural arena.

The Christian Democrats governed the country under close American tutelage in the post-1945 era until corruption scandals crushed them in the early 1990s, paving the way for Silvio Berlusconi's domination of Italian politics. During the 1943-45 liberation from the Nazis and their fascist allies, the Palmiro Togliatti-led Italian Communist Party (PCI), fearful of hostile American influence, opted for a parliamentary rather than a revolutionary path to socialism.

Locked out of power, Togliatti constructed through the PCI a vast capillary network of institutions like the Case del Popolo, working-men's clubs where ordinary people could learn their daily Marx and Stalin.

The fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) remained throughout this period a minority cohort made up of Mussolini-nostalgic lunatics. This created a strange balance of power in a blocked democracy

where the radical left was never allowed to win electoral power, leading to the formation of an unwritten pact between the Christian Democrats and the PCI. The Christian Democrats took charge of the economy, law and order, foreign affairs, and media, while circumstances relegated the PCI to control of culture and the arts. As a result, all the major publishing houses and the majority of intellectuals, artists, academia, and public cultural institutions have always been post-Marxist in outlook.

Today, with the Left all but nonexistent, the Right has been free to take control of the cultural sphere. But absent a clear enemy, it has treated culture as the means through which it can mark its difference from the political mainstream.

Italian liberals have done this by branding themselves defenders of civil rights while pushing privatization and spending cuts. Meanwhile, the postfascists - obliged to walk the fiscal line imposed by Brussels - have had to overemphasize their cultural differences in order to mask the neoliberal consensus shared between them and their liberal opponents. As long as the postfascists and liberals continue to agree on the size of Italy's deficit, the harshness of migration policy, and the danger of large-scale public spending to the economy, museums and TV shows will remain the only places in which political differences can come into view. *(IPA Service)*

A year where truth and illusion became inextricably intertwined

By: Dipak Kurmi

As December bids its farewell, we can't help but look back with a sigh at the tumultuous series of unfortunate events that defined the landscape of 2023. It's intriguing to note that Cambridge Dictionary crowned "hallucinate" as the Word of the Year, a choice that resonates beyond its original context of AI tools conjuring up deceptive information. It eerily mirrors the overarching theme of the past year - a period marked by an intensified distortion of truths and the gradual erasure of boundaries between what we perceive and what is genuinely real.

As the year made its transition, the unjust Russian aggression against Ukraine marked its tenth month. In this span, the shaky justifications presented by Russia for this unprecedented assault on a sovereign nation, in clear violation of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and the Minsk Accords of 2014-15, were laid bare. Surprisingly, the onslaught persists, now devoid of the supposed fear of NATO's eastward expansion. Simultaneously, the Chinese crossing of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) into Indian territory has endured for a daunting thirty months.

In India, the onset of the year witnessed a direct assault on the remnants of press freedom. The Union government took a restrictive stance by proscribing a two-part documentary from BBC, labeling it as Faustian. Additionally, BBC offices in India encountered intimidation from the state's coercive mechanisms, a recurrent strategy wielded by the government with heightened latitude this year to suppress any form of dissent.

During the initial days of March, a unanimous decision by a five-bench judge of the Supreme Court mandated that the Chief Election Commissioner and election commissioners would be appointed by the President based on the advice of a committee comprising the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition, and the Chief Justice of India. In blatant disregard of this ruling, the government pushed through a bill in Parliament. This legislation replaces the Chief Justice with a minister, granting the government unchecked authority in appointing officials to the Election Commission and effectively undermining electoral oversight in the nation.

May witnessed the eruption of appalling ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur, a state governed by the BJP. Surprisingly, there was a notable absence of immediate actions to quell the unrest and restore nor-

malcy. Instead, efforts were invested in curbing the dissemination of information from the state. Despite persistent pleas from the opposition to shed light on the situation in Manipur, the Prime Minister chose silence. Presently, the factual landscape remains veiled in uncertainty, prompting the Supreme Court to oversee the gradual progression toward an uneasy calm.

In May, the Reserve Bank of India made the notable move to withdraw the 2,000-rupee note. It's worth noting that no denomination in the entire history of independent India's currency system has had a briefer existence than the 2,000-rupee note. This succinctly highlights the impulsive and myopic nature of the government's 2016 policy, underlining a lack of lessons learned from that regrettable decision, almost akin to a dark comedy with tragic overtones.

September saw the Parliament being compelled to relocate from its historic seat, abandoning the original building. The erstwhile Parliament structure was repurposed into a Samvidhan Sabha or Constituent Assembly, disregarding its pivotal role over the last seven decades in shaping an ancient civilization into a modern nation. The motives behind this relocation remain enigmatic, as the old edifice still stands tall, exuding vibrancy, mystique, and an aura of untarnished dignity.

In October, the world witnessed a horrifying terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas on innocent Israeli citizens, resulting in hundreds of casualties and numerous people being taken hostage. The Israeli response has been characterized as both severe and disproportionate, with the entire population of the Gaza Strip experiencing a form of collective punishment reminiscent of medieval and barbaric practices. This relentless onslaught persists, with women, children, and even the wounded enduring systematic and clinical extermination.

In November, a Qatari court sentenced eight retired navy personnel to death, a verdict that has since been commuted. However, the specific charges against them remain shrouded in mystery, and their current 'condition' remains a source of profound concern. I had previously addressed this matter in Parliament back in December 2022. Despite my efforts, ten months later, our esteemed "decorated veterans" endure humiliation within the confines of a Qatari prison.

In early December, the judgment on Article 370 was delivered, signaling a significant impact on the federal structure

of our nation, a matter that should raise collective concern. Notably, the court opted not to address the pivotal question of whether Parliament has the authority to transform a state into two Union territories - a crucial aspect of the dispute. Additionally, the apex court sanctioned the reorganization of Ladakh into a Union territory, based on the assurance from the solicitor general that statehood would be reinstated in the remaining part of Jammu & Kashmir. This commitment, however, holds no binding force on any future government or legislature. Interestingly, the court took a quixotic stance, deeming the process of abrogating Article 370 as ultra vires of the Constitution of India, yet asserting that the abrogation itself was intra vires.

The culmination of the year witnessed a direct attack on India's democracy. On December 13th, 2023, the 22nd anniversary of the terror attack on Parliament, two individuals breached the security of the Lok Sabha, releasing smoke canisters. Surprisingly, despite the fact that these intruders accessed Parliament with a pass recommended by a BJP MP, neither the presiding officers nor the police have taken any action against him thus far.

Conversely, to shield itself from additional embarrassment and evade public scrutiny, the government suspended 146 Opposition members of Parliament. Their demand for accountability from the home minister became the grounds for this drastic action, establishing a concerning precedent for India's parliamentary system of governance.

Amidst the suspension saga, crucial bills, including the telecom bill and the three criminal law bills, sailed through without any opposition. The parliamentary scenes during this period bore an unsettling resemblance to an Orwellian dystopia, reminiscent of authoritarian regimes, where dissent seemed to have been erased from the script.

In the sequence of significant events that shaped 2023, the reverberations of "hallucinate" stretch beyond mere linguistic nuances. It transforms into a metaphor for a year where the lines between reality and illusion became hazy, thrusting citizens into a struggle with distorted renditions of the truth. The global shift towards right-wing populism, coupled with a disregard for democratic principles and constitutionalism, highlights a disconcerting governance trend. This trend places emphasis on control over transparency and prioritizes power at the expense of accountability. *(The writer can be reached at dipaknewslive@gmail.com)*

Ahead of budget on February 1, finance minister has to work on strategy for debt reduction

By: K R Sudhama

Ahead of the general Budget on February one, International Monetary Fund has warned India to return to fiscal consolidation path and efficient spending implying mounting debt and rampant freebies culture are unsustainable. Finance Ministry might be dismissive of IMF observation saying any interpretation that the IMF article IV country report implies that general government debt would exceed 100 per cent of GDP in the medium term is misconstrued. The Indian government may also take solace in saying India has done relatively well when cross-country comparison is made of major economies, especially after Covid.

The Finance Ministry's claim is certainly valid but it is also a fact that India's debt has been increasing in recent years and there is need to get back to serious fiscal consolidation. In fact Finance Ministry has admitted in its statement that India's debt, which was around 82.9 per cent of GDP in 2002, had come down to 66.4 per cent of GDP in 2010 during Manmohan Singh era. It went up to 70.4 per cent in 2018 and from thereon to 81 per cent of GDP. The government may claim 81 per cent is still less than 82.9 per cent of GDP in 2002, but fact of the matter is that the debt has gone up around 15 per cent during Modi era, which is a matter of concern. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman herself has flagged the issue of high debt recently. It may be true that some other countries Japan, Singapore, US, Sri Lanka, France and UK, have performed badly when compared to India. Their debt is already beyond 100 per cent of GDP and in case of Japan it was as high as 260 per cent of GDP in 2022. This is no solace.

Of course Nirmala Sitharaman has done reasonably well on debt management despite difficult economic situation arising out of Covid. But the fact remains that steady increase in debt from 66 per cent of GDP in 2010 is a matter of concern. There may not have been fiscal profligacy as in some of the advance economies during Covid but it is also a fact that Sitharaman had very little headroom to manage Covid through high debt. Take the case of China where the debt was just 25.9 per cent of GDP in 2002. It went up to 33.9 per cent of GDP in 2010 and 56.7 per cent in 2018 and 77 per cent in 2022.

Next month's budget is certainly an interim one because of the general elections in April-May this year. But Sitharaman will certainly not be able to overlook the problem of mounting debt problem and may need some drastic steps to bring debt down to targeted 70 per cent of GDP in the medium-term. IMF's warning that government's debt could be 100 per cent of GDP under adverse shocks by FY2028 cannot be taken lightly. It may be the worst case scenario, but it is certainly rings alarm bells for India to get back to fiscal consolidation path rapidly.

While acknowledging that India's debt composition helps mitigate debt sustainability risks, IMF directors recommended ambitious medium-term consolidation efforts given elevated public debt levels and contingent liability risks. In that context, improving revenue mobilization and spending efficiency would allow for continued improvements in digital and physical infrastructure and targeted social support. IMF also encouraged the authorities to put in place a sound medium-term fiscal framework to promote transparency and accountability and align policies with India's development goals.

The government should realise that one of the reasons for high debt is partly due to falling savings rate from a high of 36 per cent of GDP during Manmohan Singh era to as low as 27 per cent of GDP in recent years. This has forced the government to borrow more for capital expenditure. There is also widespread criticism of both states and centre for indulging in populism to serve their respective political ends.

Ahead of the constitution of 16th Finance Commission with noted economist Arvind Panagariya as its head, to recommend devolution of central taxes and grants to states, Reserve Bank of India has red-flagged the issue of states reverting to the old pension scheme and unsustainable subsidies flowing from guarantees or freebies promised at the time of elections, regardless of the financial condition of states. The new finance commission is expected to be asked to look into this worrying aspect. Many states have deficits because of subsidies for populist measures like free electricity and so on. The centre too is no better as its subsidy bill too is mounting year after year. Covid is used as one excuse.

An assessment of the FY22 finance accounts of all states show that states spend 0.87 per cent of the GSDP on an average on subsidies, but a few states spent more like Punjab, 2.35 per cent, Rajasthan, 1.92 per cent, Madhya Pradesh, 1.69 per cent Chhattisgarh, 1.62 per cent and Jharkhand 1.58 per cent. The Reserve bank has rightly argued in its report on state finances that the finance commission should consider higher share of conditional transfer to states based on reforms, quality of expenditure and fiscal sustainability. Populism of a particular state cannot be financed by taxpayers of other states.

There is also merit in looking at PLI scheme, which subsidises Indian economy is surely in a bright spot and perhaps doing better than several other major economies, but this does not diminish in any way the concern of mounting debt, which needed to be reigned-in to restore the economic health. *(IPA Service)*

What do we really know about India's GDP?

By: Arun Kumar

Controversy refuses to die down about the size of India's GDP and its growth rate. It all started when the new GDP series with base 2011-12 was released in 2015. Not only did analysts point to problems, the government itself was unhappy that it showed a higher growth during the UPA's ten years compared to the post-2014 NDA period.

The pandemic in 2020 severely dented the economy and the economy witnessed its steepest decline since Independence. The recovery from this low base was also steep. This has led to the official claim that India has done well in spite of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine to become the fastest growing major economy in the world. Is this the correct picture of the economy? That depends on the accuracy of the numbers and the policies formulated on that basis.

Pre-pandemic controversies
Doubts about the accuracy of data in the new series from 2011-12 have risen on several counts. To begin with, when the new series was announced in 2015, there was no back series to compare it with. It was said that the new series was based on the MCA21 data base of the industrial sector, which was more complete than what was used till then, the IIP data. It was stated that the back series could not be generated both because the MCA21 data base had not stabilised earlier and the relevant data on employment became available from 2011-12.

But neither of these should have mattered since the MCA21 data base goes back a long time and earlier employment figures could have been used as has been often done. The real reason appeared to be political. Namely, to

show higher GDP growth during the NDA period compared to the UPA period.

The next controversy was the government's claim that the Indian economy grew at an average of about 7% during 2015-2020, which made it the fastest growing large economy in the world. This was undermined by A. Subramanian (2019). He showed that the growth rate was over estimated by up to 2.5% after 2014.

The next blow came when NSSO reported in 2019 that out of a sample of 35,456 companies taken from MCA21 data base, 38.7% were 'out of survey' units. These units are either not traceable or misclassified. So, data is either missing or mis-specified. Thus, the use of MCA21 for GDP calculation could be leading to errors in estimation.

The government argued that the inclusion of the 'out of survey' companies brings the output closer to the true production and there is no over-estimation of GDP.

A committee was set up to work out the missing back series. Its report showed that the rate of growth was higher during the UPA period compared to the NDA years. The government rejected it and in an unprecedented move, asked the NITI Aayog to rework the series. The NITI Aayog obliged and presented a back series showing that the rate of growth was higher during the NDA period compared to the UPA years.

Upward bias in GDP
The problem with the GDP data becomes clear when the official data shows that the highest rate of growth during the decade of the 2010-20 was in the year of demonetisation, 2016-17. From all accounts, starting November 2016, output was severely impacted in that year. Even if it is assumed that the output was

growing up to October 2016, and declined after that, the average GDP growth became negative. This points to the flawed methodology used to measure GDP which gave an 8% upward bias to GDP in 2016-17. Even this flawed methodology showed the official growth rate declining from 8% in Q4 of 2017-18 to 3.1% in Q4 of 2019-20. So, the real actual rate of growth would have become negative even before the pandemic.

Pandemic and the lockdown severely impacted the economy in 2020 and more particularly the unorganised sector. Subsequent recovery has been K-shaped — namely, some sectors growing while others (unorganised sector) declined. This decline has not been captured in data leading to over-estimation of the GDP. This becomes clear when one looks at the method of estimation of GDP, especially the quarterly GDP, which is what is usually discussed in public discourse.

Official methodology
I have previously analysed the official document which presents the 'Methodology of Compiling Quarterly GDP Estimates'. It mentions three factors that need to be noted regarding the calculation of GDP from the supposedly more accurate production side:

"The production approach used for compiling the QGVA estimates is broadly based on the benchmark-indicator method."

"In this method, for each of the industry-groups, estimates of GVA are compiled..."

"In general terms, quarterly estimates of Gross Value Added (GVA) are extrapolations of annual series of GVA."

These three points clarify that for the quarterly estimates of GDP based on the production approach, most current data are not available so, benchmark indica-

tors from an earlier reference year have to be used. The last survey of unincorporated enterprises was carried out in 2015-16 so that the reference year is now dated and does not capture the current reality.

Further, the methodology states that current figures are obtained by extrapolations of the annual series of GVA of previous years. But if the previous year figures are incorrect, how can their extrapolation be correct? This has been the case post the demonetisation, introduction of the Goods and Services Tax and the lockdown. Each of these three occurrences administered a shock to the economy and caused disruption.

Finally, in some cases, the procedure adopted is to make annual projections and then to divide them by four to give the quarterly figures. Two problems arise. First, there are varying levels of activity in the different quarters. For instance, there is heightened activity during the festive season, while it is low at the start of the financial year. So, division by four cannot be correct. Second, errors in the figures of the previous year get projected to the next year.

Shocks undermine the method

The methodology outlined above relies on a smoothly functioning economy. But it will not apply when there are big unexpected changes, called a shock, like due to demonetisation or the sudden lockdown. The shocks impact the basic parameters of the economy. Like the ratio of the unorganised to the organised sector or the real output in the agriculture sector. So, with a shock, neither the 'benchmark indicators' will be valid nor will it be correct to extrapolate from a normal year to the next one that has experienced a shock.

The Indian economy has suffered several shocks since 2016. Demonetisation in 2016 followed by the introduction of the structurally faulty GST in 2017, the NBFC (non-bank financial company) crisis in 2018 and finally the sudden lockdown in 2020. Each of them impacted the unorganised and the organised sectors differentially, thereby changing the ratio between the two and invalidating the old benchmark indicators.

Further issues with quarterly data

The problems related to methodological issues were compounded by the data deficiencies. Even for the organised sector, only limited data is available. For instance, the corporate sector data representing industry is available only for a few hundred firms. In the case of agriculture, it is assumed that targets set by the ministry are achieved. But that has not been the case in the last few years due to heat or late rains or inability of perishable crops to come to the market during the lockdown and demonetisation, so that it rotted in the fields and agricultural output declined while it was taken to have increased. The method for estimating the unorganised sector in the GDP needed to be modified, but this has not been done.

In brief, there are two inter-related problems with the GDP data. The infirmity in the data and the invalidity of the method to calculate the GDP.

The problem was further compounded by the government's lack of faith in its own employment data which it rejected in 2019 because it showed that unemployment had reached a high of 45 years. Since employment data is used in the calculation of the GDP, if it is rejected, the GDP calculation also becomes unreliable.

To persist with the methodology in the 2017 official document, new indicators are required based on fresh surveys. But no new survey of the unorganised sector has been conducted since 2015. Even the Census has not been conducted in 2021 and that compounds the problem.

Further, each of the shocks listed above impacted the economy differently. So, without a change in the method and resolving the data issues, errors get compounded and reliable GDP numbers cannot be generated.

Stance of international agencies

The government claims that international agencies, like the IMF and the UN, have supported its claims on GDP. Their figures for GDP growth differ from the official figures by a small percent. But that is not surprising since these agencies are not data collecting agencies and use the official data on a host of macro variables.

Effectively, all of them reproduce the errors in the official data and none of them have more accurate data. The surprise is that all these agencies ignore the data-related issues when the errors are glaring. Worse, if Indian data has such huge errors, other developing countries are likely to have similar or even greater errors, making international comparisons meaningless.

Impact on other macro aggregates

GDP data is the base used to estimate other macro aggregates, like consumption and savings. These affect the measurement of poverty and growing inequality. If growth is strong then it would imply strong growth in employment. But this link is broken since growth is in the organised sector while the unorganised sector is declining. The former

hardly creates employment while the latter which provides a bulk of the employment is losing employment. So, this lopsided growth has broken the link between growth and employment.

Further, if the unorganised sector declines then the overall demand becomes short, leading to low capacity utilisation and decline in the investment rate and even the organised sector rate of growth will fall. This was visible in the period 2017-18 and 2019-20 (before the pandemic).

The incorrect GDP numbers should impact the fiscal situation. This is reflected in the revenue and expenditures often missing the targets set in the budget. The final figures differ considerably from the budget and revised estimates. But these revisions are not as stark as the errors in the GDP data should lead to.

The reason for this smaller error is that the budget is largely for the organised sectors and of the organised sector. The revenue collection is largely from the organised sector. Most expenditures are also for the organised sector. Where the expenditures pertain to the unorganised sectors like on food, rural development, education and health, revisions are made when the deficit in the budget increases. Thus, the budgetary calculus is not as seriously impacted as the large errors in GDP data ought to lead to.

Conclusion

To conclude, India's GDP numbers are vitiated due to methodological and data-related deficiencies. This suits the ruling party's political narrative of a well-functioning economy. By continuing to harp on these incorrect numbers and hiding the true facts, it adds to the non-transparency in the government's functioning. (Courtesy: The Wire)

A cautionary note on India dispatching warships to counter Houthi attacks

By: (RETD) Lt Gen Bhopinder Singh

The fabled peninsular land of King Solomon and Queen Sheeba or the modern-day Yemen at the mouth of the choppy Red Sea has had a vivid history of engagement with India. Greek and Latin writers even wrongly addressed this region as 'India'.

Geography afforded it an invaluable site for the trade of spices, textiles, and aromatics (e.g., frankincense, myrrh, etc.) and even rare cultivation (at one time, the only place in the world growing coffee) to ship goods between the proverbial 'West' and the 'East'. Antiquity of the land ensured that it saw interchanging rule and dominance of Paganistic beliefs, Judaism, Christianity to Islam with uniquely tribal, sectarian, and ethnic sub-strains to survive and thrive, cheek-by-jowl with each other, but always uneasily.

Irreconcilable lawlessness amongst its constantly fighting tribes has been the norm for eons and the Ottoman Statesman and Military Commander, Hadim (eunuch) Suleiman Pasha, had lamented, "Yemen is a land with no lord, an empty province. It would be not only possible but easy to capture, and should it be captured, it would be master of the lands of India and send every year a great amount of gold and jewels to Constantinople."

But even the Ottomans had to accede to the native and puritanical Wahabi movements and then to the British, who were keen to establish a coal depot in the region to service the busy sea lanes of steamers ferrying up and down to India. Again, Yemen's location on the busiest sea lanes (accentuated further with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869) made it even more prized and sensitive.

Yemen and India: A civilisational connect of harmony and commerce

The transshipment traffic brought engagement and among the notable Islamic saints who came from Yemen to India were perhaps the spiritual leaders of the Dawoodi Bohra community in the 16th Century.

Yemen was also a catchment area for mercenaries who served as prized fighters in Nana Phadnavis's Maratha empire (5000 fighters), with Bahadur Shah the Sultan of Gujarat, and in later years with the armies of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The famous gastronomic delight of the Hyderabad Haleem owes its roots to Yemeni Hareeshah.

Many enterprising Indians made their fortunes with commerce in Yemen e.g., Cowasji Dinshaw ('Adenwala') who was so successful that he was often called the 'un-



crowned king of Aden'. Years later, a precocious 16-year-old clerk for Besse & Co (distributors for Shell company) dreamt of building an oil refinery in India whilst in Yemen, his name was Dhirubhai Ambani!

A fractured and weaponised society that is the playing ground of foreign powers

For a turbulent land with perennial wars and intrigues with its immediate Arabian and African neighbourhood and with foreign colonisers — the consistent engagement with India and Indians was always based on trade and commerce, with no animosity or fear of the other, besetting the two distant lands. However counterintuitively, co-religionist sovereigns like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, or the United Arab Emirates, evoke a sharper reaction as they are invariably associated with (or support) sections of the myriad tribes that are based on sectarianism (Shia-Sunni divide) or even intra-sect one-upmanship to perpetuate their own national/regime interests.

With conflicting sovereign interests playing out, violent assertions of local tribal/sectarian sentiments, and the sheer desperation of socio-economic deprivations — Yemen today is in the crying throes of an unprecedented humanitarian genocide and bloodlust. While localised in despair (ranked highest on the Fragile State Index and second worst on Global Hunger Index, globally) and accompanying violence, the bloody Yemeni violence has escalated to hitting targets in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (whom the essentially Shiite Houthi rebels blame to be supporting its rivals in the Sunni dominated, Presidential Leadership Council). Yemen is in flames and embers are reaching out, beyond borders.

The ensuing Israel-Hamas war has given a topical opportunity to the local Houthis to cock-a-snook at the inefficacy and capitulations of Sunni Sheikdoms and posture its own brazen muscularity and commitment by firing its missiles at Israeli cities. Along with the co-sectarian Hezbollah in Lebanon and the principal supporter, Iran,

Houthis have taken their presence to a Pan-Islamic agenda, though still only targeting Israel, the US and Arab Sheikdoms. The slogan of the Houthis is also internationalist i.e., "God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam".

Yemen conflict spills over into the busy lanes of the Red Sea

The American warships and interests within their extended 'range' are now susceptible to Houthi attacks. Amidst the mayhem of the civil war, perhaps Indian expatriates in the form of doctors and nurses are the only foreigners allowed to stay back, given their perceptions of neutrality in the ongoing crisis. The recent case of Kerala nurse, Nimisha Priya, facing capital punishment owing to charges of murdering her Yemeni employer, is symptomatic of the presence of Indian expats, despite the war and closure of the Indian Embassy. So, despite the fractious divide within Yemen, Indians (not even Pakistanis) are the rare oddities with no known biases towards any of the warring sides.

Now, the sanctioning, isolation, and territorial wars have taken a toll on the belligerent Houthi militia (whereas, the Presidential Leadership Council has the backing of Saudi-USA military and financials, besides the indirect support of the West/US). Like the neighbouring profession of lucrative piracy, though fraught with severe risks, by equally deprived Somali militias on the African coast, the Houthis have started targeting international liners on the busy Red Sea searoutes, which serve as entry points for ships used by the UN. That is about 12% of global trade.

From seized patrol boats, Water-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (WBIEDs), Anti-Ship Missiles (ASHMs), mines and even, drones and helicopters are wreaking havoc on the busy shipping lanes. The United States has launched Operation Prosperity Guardian (along with 20 countries, not including India) to safeguard ships in the dangerous Red Sea waters.

Recently, the US is believed to have sunk 3 Houthi ships and killed

10 rebels, after they had attacked a Singapore-flagged Maersk container vessel. Earlier Gabon-flagged commercial tanker Sai Baba (with 25 Indian crew members) was drone-attacked and yet another merchant vessel MV Chem Pluto under Liberian flag (with 21 Indian crew) was hit by Drone.

Given the presence of Indians on board and ensuring the safety of sea lanes to and from India's busy ports on the Western side, Delhi too had to act, albeit purely defensive/military and not politically. It rightfully avoided the US grouping of Operation Prosperity Guardian and still dispatched three formidable, guided missile destroyers in 'various areas of the sea' to 'maintain a deterrent presence' to counter the 'recent spate of attacks in the Arabian Sea' — the balance and avoidance of any specificities in wordsmithing was key and telling.

Delhi needs to nuance and balance its reaction, beyond US/Israeli grouping

India has its own robust relations with all sides in the Middle Eastern theatre and it cannot be drawn into a war that is simply not its own doing, or on behalf of others. Indeed, the safety of sea lanes and Indian interests in the region are paramount and the same must be actioned without insinuating any political preferences or aspersions. Iran is a priceless strategic partner (with the rare honour of having defied OIC resolutions against India on Kashmir, in the past), as are the economic giants in the form of UAE-Saudi Arabia combine, and India cannot jeopardize its own interests on either by taking a side, openly. It must do whatever is required militarily or even diplomatically, but siding openly with the US or Israeli sides in the Middle Eastern conundrum is to forsake its well-earned 'strategic ambiguity' and 'distance'.

The Houthis have not expressed any India-specific agenda or threats, as they are firmly under the control of Iran and Delhi can ill-afford to upset the appellation, unnecessarily. India's vast Muslim population also has sectarian undercurrents and concerns, though well under control.

India's interests and future are dependent on healthy relations and positive perceptions as a noble and moral land. Capitals like Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Tel Aviv/Jerusalem, Tehran to even Sa'naa or Aden are all equally important, not less or more than the other — history is suggestive of India's consistent moral stand (e.g., on Palestine, Israel, and Iran) that is not dependent on anyone's religion, race or in the case of a internecine battleground like Yemen, even on preferences amongst various sects, tribes and ethnicities. (Courtesy: The Quint)

Is there a future for the China-Japan-Korea Trilateral?

By: Pratinashree Basu & Aishiki Chowdhury

Discussions to restart the China-Japan-Korea (CJK) Trilateral meeting have been met with cautious optimism. Germinating in 1999 as an informal meeting on security issues between the heads of state under the aegis of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) meet in Manila, the collaborative discussions among the three countries were met with immense scepticism. But by the early 2000s, an "Action Strategy" had been established spanning areas such as intellectual property rights, resource conservation, security imperatives, and North Korean denuclearisation.

In 2008, post a major roadblock, the first independent Trilateral Summit in Fukuoka, Japan, signalled a watershed moment—with the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat opening in Seoul in September 2011. Even while frayed bilateral circumstances continued to undercut trilateral meetings, lower-level (and crucially non-political) exercises took place, particularly in the realm of finance, science, and environment—with the Trilateral Tabletop Exercise of 2013 becoming a significant operating framework of joint response to natural disasters, post the 2011 Japan earthquake and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima.

Recent developments in Northeast Asian geopolitics have not been conducive from Beijing's perspective. The substantial improvement in bilateral ties of both Tokyo and Seoul with Washington and the first trilateral meeting among the three earlier in 2023 is poised to alter the region's equation slowly but steadily.

Efforts to make Seoul and Tokyo gravitate away from Washington's sphere of influence are expected from Beijing. One such avenue is the CJK trilateral forum. Nonetheless, while the recent Foreign Ministers meeting among China, Japan, and South Korea sparked speculations about a revival of the trilateral, how the meeting ended is an indication of what lies

ahead for the grouping at least in the near future.

Japan happens to be one of China's top five foreign investors, while South Korea and Taiwan are some of the biggest importers of Chinese goods and services. A triangular trade relationship flourishes as China continues to import intermediate goods from Japan and South Korea to process into final products and ship to other Asian countries as well as the United States (US).

A decade earlier, an inter-CJK Foreign Trade Agreement could have had the potential to spearhead a multilateral region-wide FTA in East Asia—leading to deeper integration of the Asian market, perhaps even including provisions on non-tariff, technical barriers to trade as well as sharing supply chains and production networks. From Beijing's perspective, riding on the impetus provided by the already existing comprehensive economic partnership with Korea (since 2010) and a similar agreement with Japan (since 2011)—a similar partnership with China on the bilateral level would not only smooth over many extant differences but also pave the way for a multilateral cooperative network.

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The recent convening of top CJK diplomats in

Busan, therefore, sparked a flurry of conjectures—with reports of Japanese demands for the removal of the Chinese ban on Japanese seafood amidst Tokyo's controversial discharge of treated radioactive wastewater from Fukushima, sparking a terse exchange wherein Wang Yi allegedly opposed "irresponsible actions" on the part of Japan. Hecalled for an independent monitoring of the process.

In response to South Korea's call for Chinese efforts in de-escalating North

Korean provocations, China is said to have described itself as a "stabilising force" in the region, reiterating its role as something of an arbiter of future constructive relations and urging that the "One China" principle be maintained.

Crucially, however, there was ample stress on pivoting to deepening ties for innovation, progress, and relations of mutual benefit, with stress on the maintenance of the momentum for regional economic integration. The three foreign ministers agreed to advance cooperation across security, environment, technology, and economic sectors. They also spoke of the threat that Pyongyang nuclear programme.

Potentially, a Trilateral Summit could be in the works and a meeting early next year could see the re-opening of the trilateral FTA negotiations, as well as three-way cooperation strategies and discussions on varied global concerns. However, a three-way summit, the first one after 2019, has been in the works for a while now with little information regarding when it might indeed be held. Regardless of the optics of the foreign ministers' meeting in November, there appears to be little in the way of constructive traction for the CJK trilateral for two main reasons—first, Beijing has been steadily boosting its ties with Pyongyang, with the most recent one being close on the heels of the meeting among the three foreign ministers; and second, Beijing's attempts at pulling Seoul and Tokyo away from Washington have been inadequate at best.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi also met his Japanese and South Korean counterparts before all three of them met together and stressed on the "sincerity" that each needed to bring to the grouping. But the crux of China's messaging at the bilateral meetings as well as the one among all three was to underscore that the US was external to the region and Japan and ROK should toe China's line. For now, therefore, the CJK trilateral does not appear to have an optimistic future. (Courtesy: ORF)

The Yemen-based militants have carried out at least 23 attacks in response to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza since Dec 19

US warns Houthis to cease attacks on Red Sea vessels or face potential military action

WASHINGTON, Jan 4: The United States and 12 allies issued what amounted to a final warning to Houthi rebels on Wednesday to cease their attacks on vessels in the Red Sea or face potential targeted military action.

The Yemen-based militants have carried out at least 23 attacks in response to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza since Dec. 19.

A senior Biden administration official declined to detail rules of possible engagement if the attacks continue, but underscored that the Iranian-backed Houthis should "not anticipate another warning" from the U.S. and its allies.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, spoke soon after the countries issued a joint statement earlier Wednesday condemning the attacks and underscoring that international patience was strained.

The statement was signed by the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Separately, the U.S. called on the United Nations Security Council on Wednesday to take action against the Houthis and warned their financier Iran that it has a choice to make about continuing to provide support to the rebels.

"Let our message now be clear: we



call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews," the countries said. "The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways."

For weeks, the Houthis have claimed attacks on ships in the Red Sea that they say are either linked to Israel or heading to Israeli ports. They say their attacks aim to end the Israeli air-and-ground offensive in the Gaza Strip that was triggered by the Palestinian militant group Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel.

However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue.

The attacks have targeted commercial shipping vessels transiting through

the critical Bab el-Mandeb Strait that links markets in Asia and Europe since the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas and Israel's subsequent war against the militant group in Gaza.

The U.S. and its allies have formed Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect ship traffic, and currently, warships from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom are patrolling the area. On Sunday, U.S. helicopters opened fire on Houthi rebels after they attacked a cargo ship in the Red Sea, killing several of them.

The U.S. Navy helicopters returned fire in self-defense sinking three of the four boats and killing the people on board while the fourth boat fled the area, according to U.S. Central Command said. The Houthis acknowledged that 10 of their fighters were killed in the confrontation and warned of consequences.

U.S. ships in recent weeks have shot down waves of Houthi ballistic missiles and one-way explosive drones.

President Joe Biden has sought to keep the three-month war between Israel and Hamas from escalating into a broader regional conflict. But the official stressed that the U.S. and its allies would respond similarly to such malign action that has impacts on global commerce anywhere around the globe.

"As the President has made clear, the United States does not seek conflict

with any nation or actor in the Middle East, nor do we want to see the war between Israel and Hamas widen in the region," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said. "But neither will we shrink from the task of defending ourselves, our interests, our partners, or the free flow of international commerce."

The official said any potential action against the Houthis will be done in a "very smart way that does not potentially draw us in deep to a situation" with Iran and its proxy groups.

At the U.N., U.S. deputy ambassador Christopher Lu said that without Iranian support the Houthis "would struggle to effectively track and strike commercial vessels navigating shipping lanes through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden."

Biden last week ordered U.S. airstrikes against Iranian-backed militia groups, including Kataib Hezbollah, after three U.S. servicemembers were injured in a drone attack in northern Iraq.

In November, U.S. fighter jets struck a Kataib Hezbollah operations center and command and control node, following a short-range ballistic missile attack on U.S. forces at Al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq. Iranian-backed militias also carried out a drone attack at the same air base in October, causing minor injuries. (AP)

Iran says at least 84 were killed in blasts at a ceremony honoring slain general

DUBAI, Jan 4: Two bombs exploded and killed at least 84 people at a commemoration for a prominent Iranian general slain by the U.S. in a 2020 drone strike, Iranian officials said, as the Middle East remains on edge over Israel's war with Hamas in Gaza.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for what appeared to be the deadliest militant attack to target Iran since its 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran's leaders vowed to punish those responsible for the blasts, which wounded at least 284 people. The explosions struck minutes apart on Wednesday, shaking the city of Kerman, about 820 kilometers (510 miles) southeast of the capital, Tehran. The second blast sprayed shrapnel into a screaming crowd fleeing the first explosion.

An earlier death toll of 103 was twice revised lower after officials realized that some names had been repeated on a list of victims

and due to the severity of wounds suffered by some of the dead, health authorities said. Many of the wounded were in critical condition, however, so the death toll could rise.

The gathering marked the fourth anniversary of the killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force, in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq. The explosions occurred near his grave site as long lines of people gathered for the event.

Iranian state television and officials described the attacks as bombings, without immediately giving clear details of what happened. The attacks came a day after a deputy head of the Palestinian militant group Hamas was killed in a suspected Israeli strike in Beirut. The first bomb Wednesday was detonated around 3 p.m., and the other went off some 20 minutes later, the Iranian interior minister, Ahmad Vahidi, told state television. He said the second blast killed and wounded the most people. Images and video shared on social media appeared to correspond with the accounts of officials, who said the first blast happened about 700 meters (765 yards) from Soleimani's grave in the Kerman Martyrs Cemetery near a parking lot. The crowd then rushed west along Shohada Street, where the

second blast struck about 1 kilometer (0.62 miles) from the grave. A delayed second explosion is often used by militants to inflict more casualties by targeting emergency personnel responding to an attack.

Iranian state TV and state-run IRNA news agency quoted emergency officials for the casualty figures. Authorities said Thursday would be a national day of mourning.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the attackers will face "a harsh response," though he didn't name any possible suspect. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi added: "Undoubtedly, the perpetrators and leaders of this cowardly act will soon be identified and punished." Iran has multiple foes who could be behind the assault, including exile groups, militant organizations and state actors. While Israel has carried out attacks in Iran over its nuclear program, it has conducted



targeted assassinations, not mass casualty bombings. A U.S. State Department spokesman, Matthew Miller, said American officials had "no reason" to believe Israel was involved in Wednesday's attack in Iran. That was echoed by National Security Council spokesman John Kirby at the White House, who said "our hearts go out to all the innocent victims and their family members."

Sunni extremist groups including the Islamic State group have conducted large-scale attacks in the past that killed civilians in Shiite-majority Iran, though not in relatively peaceful Kerman.

Iran also has seen mass protests in recent years, including those over the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in 2022. The country also has been targeted by exile groups in attacks dating back to the turmoil surrounding its 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran itself has been arming militant groups over the decades, including Hamas, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthi rebels. As Israel wages its devastating war in Gaza after Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks that killed 1,200 people, both Hezbollah and the Houthis have launched attacks targeting Israel that they say come on behalf of the Palestinians. (AP)

Trump asks US Supreme Court to overturn Colorado ruling barring him from ballot over Jan 6 attack

DENVER, Jan 4: Former President Donald Trump on Wednesday asked the US Supreme Court to overturn a ruling barring him from the Colorado ballot, setting up a high-stakes showdown over whether a constitutional provision prohibiting those who "engaged in insurrection" will end his political career.

Trump appealed a 4-3 ruling in December by the Colorado Supreme Court that marked the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment was used to bar a presidential contender from the ballot. The court found that Trump's role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol disqualified him under the clause.

The provision has been used so sparingly in American history that the U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on it. Wednesday's development came a day after Trump's legal team filed an appeal against a ruling by Maine's Democratic Secretary of State, Shenna Bellows, that Trump was ineligible to appear on that state's ballot over his role in the Capitol attack.



Both the Colorado Supreme Court and the Maine secretary of state's rulings are on hold until the appeals play out.

Trump's critics have filed dozens of lawsuits seeking to disqualify him in multiple states. He lost Colorado by 13 percentage points in 2020 and does not need to win the state to gain either the Republican presidential nomination or the presidency. But the Colorado ruling has the potential to prompt courts or secretaries of state to remove him from the ballot in other, must-win states.

None had succeeded until a slim majority of Colorado's seven justices — all appointed by Democratic governors — ruled last month against Trump. Critics warned that it was an overreach and that the court could not simply de-

clare that the Jan. 6 attack was an "insurrection" without a judicial process.

"The Colorado Supreme Court decision would unconstitutionally disenfranchise millions of voters in Colorado and likely be used as a template to disenfranchise tens of millions of voters nationwide," Trump's lawyers wrote in their appeal to the nation's highest court, noting that Maine has already followed Colorado's lead.

Trump's new appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court also follows one from Colorado's Republican Party. Legal observers expect the high court will take the case because it concerns unsettled constitutional issues that go to the heart of the way the country is governed.

All the parties to the case have urged the court

to move quickly. Trump's lawyers on Wednesday asked the court to overturn the ruling without even hearing oral arguments.

The lawyers representing the Colorado plaintiffs have urged oral arguments but also seek a vastly accelerated schedule, calling for a resolution by next month. Colorado's primary is March 5. Sean Grimsley, an attorney for the plaintiffs seeking to disqualify Trump in Colorado, said late last month on a legal podcast called "Law, disrupted" that he hopes the nation's highest court hurries once it accepts the case, as he expects it will. "We have a primary coming up on Super Tuesday and we need to know the answer," Grimsley said.

The Colorado high court upheld a finding by a district court judge that Jan. 6 was an "insurrection" incited by Trump. It agreed with the petitioners, six Republican and unaffiliated Colorado voters whose lawsuit was funded by a Washington-based liberal group, that Trump clearly violated the provision. (AP)

PPP nominates Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as its PM candidate

LAHORE, Jan 4: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has nominated its chairman and former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as its official prime ministerial candidate ahead of the general elections on February 8, a media report said on Thursday. The PPP's Central Executive Committee (CEC) discussed in detail the party's campaign for the general election. The meeting also discussed the party election manifesto, which decided to give priority to youth and women empowerment, employment, health, and education. The News International reported.

Soon after the meeting late on Wednesday evening, a detailed post on PPP's official X handle with photos of the meeting informed that members of the CEC expressed their confidence in the leadership of party president Asif Ali Zardari and chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. "President Asif Ali Zardari presented the name of chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the candidate for the Prime Minister on behalf of Pakistan Peoples Party. The CEC has endorsed Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the Prime Ministerial candidate of PPP," the party posted on X.

The 35-year-old son of slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto is contesting from Lahore (NA-127) constituency, where he would compete with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Shasta Perwaiz Malik and a PTI-backed candidate.

PPP leaders including Secretary General Taj Haider, Syed Khurshid Shah, Rana Farooq Saeed Khan, Qamar Zaman Kaira, Samina Khalid Ghurki, Murad Ali Shah, Chaudhry Aslam Gill, and Ali Badr were present at the meeting.

The newspaper report further quoted Bilawal, as talking to the media after the meeting: "Gen Zia imposed the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) on us and Gen Faiz Hameed imposed the PTI. (PTI)

Nevada judge attacked by defendant during sentencing in Vegas courtroom scene captured on video

LAS VEGAS, Jan 4: A Nevada judge was attacked on Wednesday by a defendant in a felony battery case who leaped over a defense table and the judge's bench, landing atop her and sparking a bloody brawl involving court officials and attorneys, officials and witnesses said.

In a violent scene captured by courtroom video, Clark County District Judge Mary Kay Holthus fell back from her seat against a wall and suffered some injuries but was not hospitalized, courthouse officials said.

A courtroom marshal was also injured as he came to the judge's aid and was hospitalized for treatment of a bleeding gash on his forehead and a dislocated shoulder, according to the officials and witnesses.

The attack occurred about 11 a.m. at the Regional Justice Center in Las Vegas.

The defendant, Deobra Delone Redden, 30, was wrestled to the floor behind the judge's bench by several court and jail officers and courtroom staff members — including some who are seen throwing punches.

He was arrested and jailed at the Clark County Detention Center, where records showed he faces multiple new felony charges including battery on a protected person — referring to the judge and court officers. "It hap-

pened so fast it was hard to know what to do," said Richard Scow, the chief county district attorney who prosecuted Redden on a case that stemmed from an arrest last year on allegations that Redden attacked a person with a baseball bat. Redden's defense attorneys, Caesar Almase, did not respond to later telephone and email messages seeking comment.

Redden was not in custody when he arrived at court Wednesday. He wore a white shirt and dark pants as he stood next to Almase, asking the judge for leniency while describing himself as "a person who never stops trying to do the right thing no matter how hard it is."

"I'm not a rebellious person," he told the judge, later adding that he doesn't think he should be sent to prison. "But if it's appropriate for you then you have to do what you have to do." As the judge made it clear she intended to put him behind bars, and the court marshal moved to handcuff him, Redden yelled expletives and charged forward — amid screams from people who had been sitting with Redden in the courtroom audience.

Records showed that Redden, a Las Vegas resident, was evaluated and found mentally competent to stand trial before pleading guilty in November to a reduced charge of attempted battery causing substantial bodily harm. (AP)

Scenes of loss play out across Japan's western coastline after quake kills 81, dozens still missing

SUZU, Jan 4: His face hidden under a humble straw hat, the man stood silent, watching several helmeted rescue workers carefully lift his wife's body from the rubble, wrapped in blue plastic on a stretcher.

He wiped his weary face with a rag. His eyes were red. This scene in the city of Suzu was tragically repeated across Ishikawa Prefecture and nearby regions on the western coastline of Japan after Monday's 7.6 magnitude tremor that decimated houses, twisted and scarred roads and scattered boats like toys in the waters, and prompted tsunami warnings.

The death toll stood at 81 people as of Thursday. Ishikawa officials said 47 of those who died were in the city of Wajima and 23 were in Suzu. The 11 others were reported in five neighboring towns. More than 330 people have been injured, at least 25 seriously. Those reported missing ballooned from 15 to 79 overnight, including a 13-year-old boy. Officials initially said 80 were missing but corrected the number later.

What exacerbated matters was people visiting to ring in the new year with their loved ones when the quake hit. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reinforced rescue operations with about 3,600 soldiers in addition to the initial 1,000. Their mission is to provide those affected with fresh water and hot meals, as well as set up bathing facilities for the 34,000 who lost their homes and are now staying at evacuation facilities.

Although Japan is reputed for relatively reliable disaster relief, essential supplies such as water, food and blankets have been running short.

"All we got was a couple of rice balls," said elderly Yasuo Kobatake cupping his hand in a tiny ball to show how small the meal was. He has been staying with his wife at an elementary school, an impromptu evacuation center. He was only given a tiny paper cup, half-filled with water that "vanished in a sip."

When the earth trembled, Kobatake was about to wear his shoes to head out. He ran out of the house barefoot with just one sock on. That first tremor was followed by the main more destructive quake which flung him to the ground. A concrete wall came crashing down, barely missing him.

Kobatake can no longer access his destroyed house. "So here I am with my wife sleeping beside all the others (taking shelter at the school). We talk to each other and we try to encourage each other," he said.

Kobatake hoped help was on the way. However, many roads have been blocked by landslides or suffered cracks because of the strong quake, making it difficult for trucks delivering water and food supplies to reach those in need. The hardest hit spots were on the Noto Peninsula, the center of the quake, connected by a narrow land strip to the rest of the main island of Honshu, making alternative routes scarce.

Snow is expected over the weekend, so finding those trapped under the rubble has become even more critical. Three days after Monday's quake, rescuers are still pulling out people alive from under debris. But time is running out. Experts categorize the first 72 hours as crucial to finding survivors. Authorities warned more quakes and tsunamis

could follow, stressing extra caution over the coming few days. Plans are also underway to fly some evacuated people out to safer areas. After-shocks continued to rock the coastal areas, near the epicenter in Noto, about 300 kilometers (185 miles) from Tokyo on the opposite coast, hit Monday. The quake set off tsunami warnings, followed by waves measuring more than 1 meter (3 feet) in some places. The warnings have since been lifted.

The usual pastoral landscape of Ishikawa was replaced by gray stretches of ash and charred walls, where a fire broke out in Wajima city. Cars were perched crooked on roads scarred with deep giant cracks. Lopsided houses missing rooftop tiles sat sadly beside a home the quake flitted to the ground, reducing it to a pile of wood. Boats floated belly-up in the bay.

The first day of trading on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, usually a celebratory affair with the ringing of a big bell and throngs of kimono-clad women, was marked with a moment of silence, as people bowed their heads, to mourn the dead.

"I would like to express my heartfelt prayers for the souls of those who lost their lives, and my deepest sympathies to all those suffering from the disaster," said Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki.

Japan is prone to earthquakes, with many fault lines and volcanoes. A massive quake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in 2011 caused widespread damage in northeastern Japan. So far, no major problems have been reported at nuclear plants following this week's earthquake and aftershocks. (AP)

Myanmar's military government pardons 10,000 prisoners to mark Independence Day

BANGKOK, Jan 4: Myanmar's military government on Thursday pardoned nearly 10,000 prisoners to mark the 76th anniversary of gaining independence from Britain, but it wasn't immediately clear if any of those released included the thousands of political detainees jailed for opposing army rule.

The head of Myanmar's military council, Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing, pardoned 9,652 prisoners to mark the holiday, state-run MRTV television reported.

Min Aung Hlaing also granted amnesty to 114 jailed foreigners who will be deported, MRTV said in a separate report.

The prisoner releases were expected to begin Thursday and take several days to be completed. At Insein Prison in Yangon — notorious for decades for housing political detainees — relatives of prisoners gathered at the gates from early morning.

The identities of those granted pardons were not immediately available. There was no sign that among the prisoners being released would be Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been held virtually incommunicado by the military since it seized power from her elected government in February 2021.

The 78-year-old Suu Kyi is serving 27 years' imprisonment

after being convicted of a series of politically tinged prosecutions brought by the military. The charges on which she was convicted include illegally importing and possessing walkie-talkies, election fraud, corruption, violating coronavirus restrictions, breaching the official secrets act and sedition. Her supporters and independent analysts say the cases against her are an attempt to discredit her and legitimize the military's seizure of power while keeping her from taking part in the military's promised election, for which no date has yet been set.

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a rights monitoring organization, 25,730 people have been arrested on political charges since the army takeover.

Of those arrested, 19,930 people were still in detention as of Wednesday, AAPP reported. At least 4,277 civilians, including pro-democracy activists, have been killed by security forces in the same period, the group says. Most of those detained are being held on incitement charges for allegedly causing fear, spreading false news or agitating against government employees.

Mass prisoner releases are common on major holidays in the Southeast Asian nation. Myanmar became a British



colony in the late 19th century and regained its independence on Jan. 4, 1948.

In the capital, Naypyitaw, Myanmar's military government celebrated the anniversary with a flag-raising ceremony and a small military parade at City Hall.

Myanmar has been under military rule since the army's takeover, which was met with massive resistance that has since turned into what some U.N. experts have characterized as civil war.

Despite huge advantages in trained manpower and weaponry, the military government has been unable to quash the resistance movement. After an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups launched a coordinated offensive against the military last October in Shan state in the north and Rakhine in the

west, it is now facing its greatest battlefield challenge since the conflict began.

Min Aung Hlaing did not touch on the country's extended political crisis in his Independence Day message, which was published in the state-run press. Vice-Senior Gen. Soe Win, the vice-chairman of the ruling military council, delivered Min Aung Hlaing's speech at a flag-saluting ceremony, which was broadcast live on state television.

He appealed to ethnic minority groups, many of which are engaged in armed struggle against military rule, to strengthen national unity, and promised that the military government would hold an election and hand over state responsibilities to the elected government. However, he did not give a time-frame for the election. (AP)

Last rites of five people gunned down in Manipur performed

State govt announces formation of special investigation team to probe killings

IMPHAL, Jan 4: The last rites of five persons who were gunned down by cadres of the proscribed Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) were performed at Lilong Chingjao in Manipur's Thoubal district on Thursday.

Religious and civil rights leaders who attended the rituals appealed to people not to make provocative statements on social media which could offend other communities. They said legal action will be taken against those who make such remarks.

Earlier, the Joint Action Committee (JAC) formed in connection with the killings decided to take the bodies for final rites after the state government agreed to an ex gratia of Rs 10 lakh each to the next of kin of the deceased, Rs 2 lakh to the seriously injured, and Rs 1 lakh to those who sustained



minor injuries, according to officials.

JAC convener, Md Habibullah told reporters that the state government had assured them of providing jobs to the next of the kin of the deceased.

Four persons were killed and 10 others sustained injuries in Thoubal district's Lilong Chingjao when RPF members opened fire on a few locals on Monday. One person succumbed to injuries on Tuesday. Members of the RPF had come to extort money from a person in the locality, which led to an altercation followed by the shooting, an official said.

Following the violence, curfew was reimposed in Thoubal, Imphal East and Imphal West, Kakching and Bishnupur districts.

In a video message, Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh condemned the violence and appealed to people, particularly the residents of Lilong to maintain peace.

More than 180 people have been killed and several hundred injured since ethnic violence broke out in Manipur in May last year. (PTI)

In an official notification, the state government also announced the formation of a six-member special investigation team headed by senior divisional police officer, Yairipok Md Riyajuddin Shah to probe the killings.

BJP appeals to HNLC to reconsider decision

SHILLONG, Jan 4: Meghalaya's BJP unit on Thursday expressed concern over the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) withdrawing from the tripartite peace talks with the Centre and the state government.

The banned militant outfit decided to withdraw from peace parleys after their demand for general amnesty for their members was not met.

"We are concerned about the outfit's withdrawal from the peace talks. We believe that peace is necessary for development and progress. We urge all parties involved, including the HNLC, to work towards achieving lasting peace in the state," said Chuba Ao, the BJP secretary in-charge of Meghalaya.

In a letter to the Centre's interlocutor AK Mishra on Wednesday, HNLC chairman Bobby Marwein had said, "We regret to inform you that we are reluctantly withdrawing from the peace talks with your government. This decision is due to the unfortunate circumstance that our general demands have not been met." A copy of the letter was also sent to Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma.

Last week, the outfit had issued a death threat to Gavin Mylliemngap, an MLA of the ruling National People's Party, after the government decided to close down the state-run cement company at Sohrai in East Khasi Hills district.

The outfit was dissatisfied with the state government's suggestion for the employees to consider tak-



ing the golden handshake or voluntary retirement scheme due to the lack of results from investments made over the past 15 years.

Responding to the threat, Mylliemngap said it was unfair for the HNLC to blame a single person for the issues faced by the cement company.

Paul Lyngdoh, cabinet minister and spokesperson for the ruling Meghalaya Democratic Alliance, said the outfit should refrain from issuing threats as people of the state are intelligent enough to understand the problems with the cement company.

Regarding the outfit's withdrawal from the peace talks, Lyngdoh said, "I cannot comment on such a radical stance. The state government is continuing with the talks, and I am confident that this statement will not impede its progress. As the HNLC has not declared a complete halt or closed its doors to peace talks, the discussions are still on the right track."

The tripartite peace talks began last year but came to a halt when the state government requested the top leaders of the outfit to participate.

During their initial meeting in June last year, the outfit demanded the withdrawal of all cases against its members before further talks could proceed.

In 2021, the HNLC had authorised its vice-chairman and foreign secretary to participate in the ongoing talks.

In the same month, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) filed a chargesheet against four members of the outlawed organisation for allegedly detonating a bomb at the Star Cement Factory in December 2020 due to the company's failure to pay ransom.

The investigation revealed that the explosion was carried out by the outfit after the company's owner refused to pay the "illegal tax" demanded by Marius Rynjah alias Hep Koit, the outfit's finance secretary.

The NIA chargesheet named one Emmanuel Suchen from Meghalaya and three others from Bangladesh, including outfit chairman Bobby Marwein, general secretary Sainkupar Nongtraw, and Rynjah.

Speaking to PTI, Sadon Blah, the HNLC's representative, said the general amnesty should involve the withdrawal of all cases against the outfit's members, including the NIA case against the top leaders.

Over the past three decades, the outfit has carried out armed attacks, IED blasts, and other unlawful activities, resulting in the injury and death of hundreds of civilians and armed personnel in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills region. (PTI)

Commission of Inquiry extends time of filing complaints till January 24

IMPHAL, Jan 4: The Commission of Inquiry (Manipur violence) has extended the time for filing statements or complaint/ allegation by way of affidavit till January 24.

The Commission of Inquiry appointed by the central government to conduct an inquiry into various aspects of violence in Manipur that took place on and after May 3 last year had invited all persons acquainted with the subject matter of the inquiry to furnish to the commission their statements by way of affidavits. The commission, in a public notice issued on November 23 informed that any person may also file affidavits directly with the commission through post or in person within a period of 45 days from the date of issue of the public notice.

Another public notice issued on Thursday extended the time for filing the statements or complaint/ allegation by way of affidavit till January 24.

The time has been extended taking into account various circumstances, and in particular the public interest and the interest of fair inquiry by giving op-

portunity to the maximum number of persons to file their statements, or complaint/ allegation by way of affidavit, it said.

The Commission has received a number of applications/requests for extension of time for filing statements or complaint/ allegation by way of affidavit, the notification said.

The Commission has given serious consideration to various factors reflected in the applications/ requests seeking extension of time.

The Commission has also considered, among other factors, that sporadic incidents of violence took place during the notice period which resulted in disruption of normal life and activity in parts of Manipur, it added.

The Central government on June 4 last year appointed a three-member Commission of Inquiry headed by Ajai Lamba, former Chief Justice of the Gauhati High Court, to probe the ethnic violence in Manipur that has claimed more than 200 lives so far and displaced over 50,000 people. (NNN)

Solar grids to light up over 9,000 remote households in Tripura

274 solar micro grids to be installed at cost of ₹81 crore

AGARTALA, Jan 4: The Centre has sanctioned ₹81 crore to Tripura for setting up 274 solar micro grids in remote areas of the north-eastern state to light up over 9,000 houses, an official said on Thursday.

Under the project of the Ministry of Development of Northeast Region (DoNER), the micro grids will be established in hamlets in Dhalai, Unakoti, and South, West and North Tripura districts, where conventional electricity appears non profitable to the state power utility because of low population density, he said.

"The DoNER has sanctioned ₹81 crore to Tripura for setting up 274 solar



micro grids in remote areas, particularly tribal hamlets, where conventional electricity has not reached the people yet. A total of 9,250 families will be benefited under the project," an official of the Tripura Renewable Energy Development Agency (TREDA) said.

The northeastern state still has several tribal and non-tribal habitations, where electricity has not reached yet due to geographical isolation and low population density, he said, adding the project will light up the houses by using solar power.

"Each solar micro grid will have an installed capacity ranging from 2 KW to 25 KW depending on the population of a particular habitation. Although the tariff has not been finalised yet, the beneficiary needs to pay a small amount for power consumption," he said, adding the work is expected to commence in the current fiscal.

According to TREDA estimation, the northeastern state has a solar power potential of 2,000 MW, of which only 19.50 MW is being generated at present.

Recently, the state has unveiled Tripura Energy Vision for generating 500 MW of solar power by 2030. (PTI)

Arunachal guv highlights special focus on hydro, tourism sectors

ITANAGAR, Jan 4: Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lieutenant General (Retired) K T Parnaik on Thursday stressed the need for a special focus on hydropower and tourism sectors. The Governor, during a meeting with state deputy chief minister Chowna Mein at Raj Bhavan here, said that both sectors have a huge potential.

Mein, who called on the governor, exchanged New Year greetings and discussed developmental issues of the state, an official communiqué said. Parnaik, who recently visited remote Vijaynagar in Changlang district, suggested the promotion of non-conventional energy resources such as solar lighting. He, however, also advocated for minimum interference with the natural habitat of flora and fauna of the state. The Governor also called for the expansion of tourism infrastructure. He advised the deputy chief minister, who is also the in-charge minister of economics and statistics, to automate official data in the state.

Parnaik said the automation would help the government conduct a comparative analysis of the decadal growth of the state and identify areas that require more attention, funding and initiatives. The Governor commended the state government for the participation in the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra and Sewa Aapke Dwar campaigns in reaching out to the people and providing benefits under various schemes and programmes to eligible beneficiaries, the communiqué added. (PTI)

Naga political issue resolution delayed for oil exploration, says Nagaland MP

HT Correspondent
DIMAPUR, Jan 4: Lone Lok Sabha MP from Nagaland, Tokheho Yepthomi said many people in Delhi intended to delay the Naga political issue as long as possible to make arrangements for extraction of oil along the Assam-Nagaland border.

In a statement, Yepthomi said very soon 64 per cent of India's oil production will come from the northeastern states, of which Nagaland will not be a part. He added that the ongoing Indo-Naga talks have halted oil exploration in Nagaland. The MP said the oil refineries have brought revenues amounting to Rs 18000 crore for Assam over the last 10 years.

"Whilst our neighbours make economic progress at a blistering pace, we Nagas have stifled development on the pretext of Article 371 (A) and the political negotiations," he said.

"Whatever justification we give for the inability and incapacity to keep pace with development and economic growth with the rest of the country and world is because of the unresolved political issue and the use of money power in all walks of life," he said.

Yepthomi said of the 35 oil fields along Nagaland-Assam border, seven- Champang, Hozukhe, Nikihe, Pishikhu, Tokishe, Khoponala and Toshezu are in Naga-



land. "Citing Article 371 (A) and the Naga political negotiations, none of the aforementioned oil fields are operational," he said.

Yepthomi also said the Nagaland government should ascertain the amount of oil deposit in Nagaland before finalising the agreement for sharing of oil royalty with Assam. He said more than 60 per cent of Nagaland's population is under the age of 25, meaning they are all younger than the Naga political negotiations.

"It is time for Nagas to decide for the sake of economic independence or to continue and keep negotiating for political sovereignty," Yepthomi stressed.

Also stating that Nagaland has the highest percentage of population of unemployed youths in the country, Yepthomi said the stranglehold of businesses in the state by outsiders through the guise of 'power of attorney' has become so deeply entrenched that it has left people of the state at the mercy of outsiders.

Agartala bound Tejas Rajdhani to divert route to cater to more passengers

GUWAHATI, Jan 4: The Northeast Frontier Railway has decided to divert the route of operations of the Tejas Rajdhani Express running between Agartala and Anand Vihar Terminal from January 15 to cater to the long-cherished demands of a vast area of population from West Bengal and Bihar, which earlier lacked the privileges to travel in Rajdhani Express trains. The Tejas Rajdhani Express will divert its route through Malda, Bhagalpur junction, Jamalpur junction via Patna junction from January 15.

With the diversion of route, there will be changes in timings and total journey time. Train no. 20501 (Agartala-Anand Vihar Terminal) will commence its journey from Agartala on January 15 at 15:10 hours to reach its destination at Anand Vihar Terminal of Delhi on Wednesday at 10:50 hours.

Similarly, train no. 20502 (Anand Vihar Terminal-Agartala) will commence its journey from Anand Vihar Terminal of Delhi at 19:50 hours on Wednesday to reach Agartala in Tripura on Friday at 15:40 hours. The train will run via important stations of West Bengal and Bihar namely Malda Town, Bhagalpur and Jamalpur, thus increasing the geographic connectivity of the states of Tripura, Assam, West Bengal and Bihar with the capital city of our nation. This will also boost the socio-economic scenario for all the newly connected places.

The details of stoppages and timings of these trains are available at IRCTC website and are also being notified in various newspaper and social media platforms of Northeast Frontier Railway. Passengers are requested to verify the details before undertaking their journey.

BJP targets 400 seats in LS polls, says BJP national vice president



SHILLONG, Jan 4: BJP national vice president and Meghalaya in-charge, M Chuba Ao on Thursday said that the party's target is to get 400 seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

After chairing a meeting to review the election preparation of the party in Meghalaya, Ao said, "Our target is to get 400 seats this time. Therefore, we will have to go everywhere where we did not get last time. We will try our level best to win in these constituencies."

Stating that the party's progress report is very encouraging, he said, "We believe we will achieve it and it is our mission today."

Chuba Ao then said there are some weak seats and some seats are regional centric, but the party will try to improve its performance in such seats. Ao then said that the BJP is quite strong in both Shillong and Tura parliament seats in Meghalaya. Whether the party has decided on the candidates for the two seats, the Meghalaya in-charge said, "We will discuss the matter with the state team and then with the national team. The candidates for the Shillong and Tura constituencies will be finalized only after a discussion with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah."

He said that many people have approached the party for tickets, but one has to be acceptable by the people. He however, maintained that the party will select candidates from among its members. (NNN)

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NAME CORRECTION

I, Shri Bhuneshwar Chauhan, S/o Umasankar Chauhan, residence of No. 2 Belbari, P.O., Mailoo & P.S., Kheroni, district-West Karbi Anglong, Assam, do hereby solemnly affirm that the spelling of my name was incorrectly written and recorded as 'Bhubneswar Chouhan' in my matriculation certificate under National Institute of Open Schooling vide Roll No.02001582032, Session 2009.

By this affidavit, I declare and affirm that the correct spelling of my name is 'Bhuneshwar Chauhan' which is recorded in my Aadhaar, PAN Card and other vital documents.

'Bhubneswar Chouhan' and 'Bhuneshwar Chauhan' is the same and one person. The statement of this affidavit is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and nothing has been concealed therein.

New criminal laws, cyber crime, terror in J&K to be discussed at DGPs meet; PM, Shah to attend

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Implementation of the three criminal laws enacted recently, activities of pro-Khalistani groups and terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir are among the key issues to be discussed at a three-day conference of DGPs and IGPs in Jaipur beginning January 5, officials said on Thursday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will interact with the country's top police officers before addressing them at a formal session while Union Home Minister Amit Shah will be present throughout the conference that will span several sessions.

Issues to be handled during the general elections, cyber crime, Maoists' problem, and inter-state police coordination are some of the other major topics expected to be discussed during the meeting, a Union Home Ministry official said.

About 250 officers in the rank of Director General of Police (DGP) and Inspector General of Police (IGP) will physically attend the conference at the Rajasthan International Centre in Jaipur while more than 200 others are likely to participate virtually.

Many officers have been tasked with delivering presentations on specific subjects such as counterterrorism, online fraud, cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, activities of pro-Khalistani groups and Left wing extremism among others, the MHA official said.

There will be detailed deliberations on how to face all these emerging internal security challenges.

Modi will attend conference on January 6-7, his office said.

A statement by the Prime Minister's Office said another key agenda of the conference is deliberations on

the road map for implementation of the new criminal laws.

Further, the conference will also deliberate on futuristic themes in policing and security like the challenges posed by new technologies such as AI, Deepfake etc. and ways to deal with them, it said.

The conference also provides an opportunity to identify tangible action points and monitor their progress, which is also presented before the prime minister every year.

The conference is the culmination of extensive deliberations involving police and intelligence officers from district, state and national levels on identified themes, the statement said.

Best practices from states and Union territories under each of the themes will be presented at the conference so that states can learn from each other, it said.

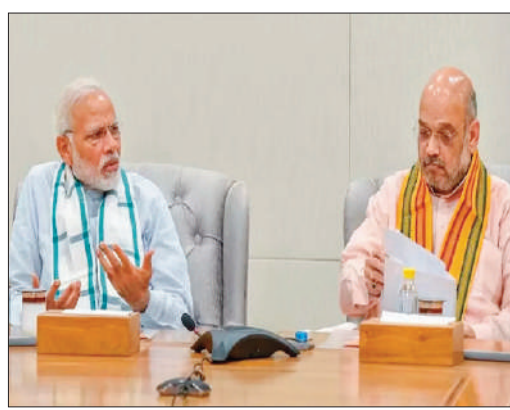
Since 2014, the prime minister has taken a keen interest in the DGP conference, it added.

Free flowing thematic discussions over breakfast, lunch and dinner have also been planned in this year's conference.

This will provide an opportunity to senior police officials to share their views and recommendations on key policing and internal security issues affecting the country to the prime minister.

Till 2013, the annual meet was held in New Delhi. The following year, after the Modi government came to power, it was decided to hold the event, organised by the MHA and the Intelligence Bureau, outside the national capital.

Accordingly, it was first held in Guwahati in 2014, Rann of Kutch in 2015, the National Police Academy



in Hyderabad in 2016, the BSF Academy at Tekanpur in 2017, Pune in 2019.

In 2020, the meet was held virtually during the Covid pandemic and in hybrid mode in Lucknow in 2021. The conference was held in New Delhi in January 2023.

The number of business sessions and topics have increased significantly, with a focus on improving policing in the service of the people.

Before 2014, the deliberations largely focused on national security matters. Since 2014, these conferences have a twin focus on national security as well as core policing issues, including prevention and detection of crime, community policing, law and order and improving the police's image, among others, another official said.

Earlier, the conference was Delhi-centric with offi-

cers coming together only for the meet.

Residing on the same premises over two to three days has served to build a heightened sense of unity among officers of all cadres and organisations since 2014, the official added.

Direct interaction of the police's top brass with the head of government has resulted in a convergence of views on crucial challenges faced by the country and the emergence of doable recommendations, the official further said.

In the past few years, the topics have been selected after detailed discussions with the highest echelons of the police service.

Once selected, several interactions on presentations are held before committees of DGPs to encourage participation and incorporate ideas from the field and from younger officers.

As a result, all presentations are now broad-based, content-intensive and carry a set of cogent, actionable recommendations.

Since 2015, detailed follow-up of recommendations of past conferences has become the norm and is the topic of the first business session, attended by the prime minister and the home minister, the official said.

Recommendations are tracked closely by the conference secretariat, led by the Intelligence Bureau, with the help of nodal officers in the states.

Decisions made in the past few conferences brought in significant policy changes, leading to improvement of policing, including setting higher standards for effective policing in rural and urban areas and improved methods of modern policing based on smart parameters, the official added. (PTI)

BJP wants me arrested so I can't campaign for LS polls: Kejriwal on ED summons

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday alleged that the BJP-led central government wanted to arrest him to stop him from campaigning for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Addressing a press conference here, he accused the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of wanting to tarnish his image and asserted that his honesty is his "biggest asset".

Kejriwal, who is also the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener, had skipped the Enforcement Directorate summons on Wednesday for the third time.

"My lawyers have told me that the ED summons are illegal. BJP wants to arrest me to stop me from campaigning for Lok Sabha polls," he alleged.

Kejriwal said that he has written to the ED, saying their summonses are "illegal" but has not got any response.

"They haven't replied because they know that their summonses are illegal. Should I follow illegal summonses? If legally sound summons will be issued, I will follow them. My greatest wealth is my honesty. They want to break me by tarnishing my image," he said.

Kejriwal said that eight months ago when he was called by the Central Bureau of Investigation, he had appeared before the agency.

"Why am I being summoned before Lok Sabha polls? It is because the BJP does not want to get me interrogated but arrested by the ED," he claimed.

The chief minister underlined that there is no excise policy scam as it is being alleged and there is no evidence against any of the AAP leaders who are in jail.

"Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh and Vijay Nair are not in jail because they were involved in corruption but because they did not join the BJP. We are able to fight them because we have not been involved in corruption," he said.

Kejriwal on Wednesday skipped the summons by the ED in connection with the Delhi excise policy case and cited Rajya Sabha polls, Republic Day preparations and the probe agency's "non-disclosure and non-response approach" as reasons for not appearing before it.

In a letter addressed to the ED, the AAP leader also said that he would be "happy to answer" any questionnaire sent by it. (PTI)

Filed appeal challenging HC verdict on adolescent girls, West Bengal tells SC

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: The West Bengal government on Thursday told the Supreme Court that it has filed an appeal challenging a Calcutta High Court judgement which advised adolescent girls to "control sexual urges" and young men to train themselves to respect women.

The apex court on December 8 last year had criticised the verdict and termed as "highly objectionable and completely unwarranted" some observations made by the high court. The top court, which had initiated a suo motu writ petition in the matter, had observed that judges are not expected to "preach" while writing judgements. The matter came up for hearing on Thursday before a bench of justices A S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan. Senior advocate Huzefa Ahmadi, appearing for West Bengal, informed the bench that the state has filed an appeal in the apex court against the October 18 last year verdict of the high court.

"The appeal was listed today before another bench of this court. That bench unfortunately could not

sit," he said. The bench observed the suo motu writ petition and the appeal filed by state will have to be heard together.

"It is not only about observations. See the kind of findings," it said.

"In the course of this, so many findings have been recorded. Where from these concepts come, we don't know. But we want to deal with each and everything which is said. Your assistance is required," it said.

The bench asked the registry to list the suo motu writ petition and the special leave petition (SLP) filed by the state on January 12 after taking approval of the Chief Justice of India. In its judgement, the high court had said that female adolescents should "control sexual urges" and "not give into two minutes of pleasure".

In its order passed on December 8 last year, the apex court had referred to certain observations made by the high court and said, "Prima facie, the said observations are completely in violation of the rights of the adolescents guaranteed under

Article 21 of the Constitution of India." It had observed the issue before the high court was about the legality and validity of order and judgement dated September 19/20, 2022 by which a man was convicted for offences under sections 363 (kidnapping) and 366 (kidnapping, abducting or inducing woman to compel her marriage) of the Indian Penal Code as well as section 6 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

"As per the order of the the Chief Justice of India, suo motu writ petition under Article 32 of the Constitution of India has been initiated mainly due to sweeping observations/findings recorded by the division bench of the High Court of Calcutta in the impugned judgment," it had said. The apex court had said in the appeal against conviction, the high court was called upon to adjudicate only on the merits of the appeal and nothing else.

"But we find that the high court has discussed so many issues which were irrelevant. Prima facie, we are

of the view that while writing a judgment in such appeal, the judges are not expected to express their personal views. They are not expected to preach," it had said.

The high court had made the observations while hearing an appeal by a man who was given a 20-year prison term for the offence of sexual assault. It had acquitted the man stating that this was a case of "non-exploitative consensual sexual relationship between two consenting adolescents, though consent in view of the age of the victim is immaterial".

The high court had also said it is the duty/obligation of every female adolescent to "protect her right to integrity of her body; protect her dignity and self-worth; thrive for overall development of her self transcending gender barriers; control sexual urge/urges as in the eyes of the society she is the loser when she gives in to enjoy the sexual pleasure of hardly two minutes; protect her right to autonomy of her body and her privacy". (PTI)

Cong leaders meet to discuss poll strategy, Bharat Nyay Yatra

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Senior Congress leaders from across the country met here on Thursday to discuss strategy for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, seat sharing and preparations for the Rahul Gandhi-led Manipur to Maharashtra Bharat Nyay Yatra beginning January 14.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge convened the meeting of party general secretaries, state in-charges, state unit chiefs and Congress Legislature Party leaders at the party headquarters here. Former party chief Rahul Gandhi was also present.

This is the first meeting of the newly appointed party officials after Kharge carried out a reshuffle in December.

Ahead of the meeting, former Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot said two meetings of the internal Congress committee were held to deliberate on seat sharing with other parties.

"The committee will now present its report to party president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi. We will be meeting again to discuss strategies to strengthen the INDIA alliance and address seat-sharing issues," Gehlot said.

The Congress has been out of power for 10 years and is now banking on the INDIA bloc to unitedly take on the BJP and oust it from power.

The Congress leadership has held separate meetings with state leaders and discussed the poll preparedness in their respective states in the past few months.

The Bharat Nyay Yatra, the second version of the Bharat Jodo Yatra that was held between September 2022 and January 2023, will be held from Imphal to Mumbai between January 14 and March 20.

The yatra from India's east to west is an attempt by the Congress to reach out to people and connect with them ahead of the Lok Sabha polls due in April-May. (PTI)

BJP launches 'I'm also a Karsevak, Arrest Me Too' campaign in Karnataka

BENGALURU, Jan 4: The BJP in Karnataka on Thursday launched a campaign, 'I'm also a Karsevak, Arrest Me Too' as it stepped up its protests in several parts of the State over the recent arrest of a Hindu activist in connection with a 31-year-old case related to the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation.

Leading the campaign in Bengaluru, MLA and former minister V Sunil Kumar staged a sit-in demonstration near the Sadashivanagar police station, amid chants of "Jai Sri Ram" by BJP workers. Holding a placard with a message 'I'm also a Karsevak, Arrest Me Too', Kumar said he too took part in the Rama temple agitation in 1992, for which he should also be arrested. Later, the police took him into preventive custody.

Senior BJP leaders K S Eshwarappa and C T Ravi lead the protests in the district headquarters town of Shivamogga and Chikkamagaluru, respectively.

Srikanth Poojari, a Karsevak, was arrested by police in the north Karnataka city of Hubballi last week in connection with a case of rioting registered in December, 1992.

The BJP has accused the Congress government of being harsh on Hindus, and also indulging in

minority appeasement. The Congress has charged the BJP with politicising the issue.

The Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has described Poojari as a "social miscreant" and "criminal suspect" and said he is facing allegations of involvement in 16 anti-social activities, including illegal liquor sales, gambling and matka.

Talking to reporters, Kumar said, "The campaign 'I'm also a Karsevak, Arrest Me Too' has been launched to condemn the "anti-Ram and anti-Hindu policies" of the Congress government.

He said that thousands of people from Karnataka participated in the 1990 and 1992 "Kar Seva" in Ayodhya despite the threats of the government of that time.

He alleged that the ruling Congress in Karnataka has resorted to a strategy of intimidating Karsevaks, and Ram devotees.

Denouncing the Siddaramaiah government over the arrest, Kumar said the Hindu activist is being portrayed as a criminal but the Mangaluru cooker bomb accused is called as innocent.

He alleged that the "Congress leaders are writing letters to the government to set free the accused persons of KJ Halli and DJ Halli riot cases". (PTI)

Ruling Left, Oppn Cong in Kerala attack PM over 'Modi's Guarantee' speech

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Jan 4: Kerala's ruling Left and the Opposition Congress on Thursday launched a scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi a day after he highlighted pro-women initiatives at a BJP programme in the southern state, asserting that "theatrics like 'Modi's Guarantee' will not be effective in the state.

Senior leaders of both fronts also stated that the BJP's dream of a blooming lotus in the political waters of Kerala will remain unfulfilled, as the party will not be able to win a single seat in the upcoming polls in the state.

Reacting to Modi's claim at the all-women conference held in Thrissur on Wednesday, senior Congress leader and MP K Muraliedharan said the people of Kerala don't believe in his guarantee.

"Modi's Guarantee will not work in Kerala. Such theatrics will not be effective in the state. As the prime minister, he has the freedom to visit, but he will not secure a single MP from here. There's no point in wasting his time in Kerala. The people of the state don't be-



lieve in his guarantee," Muraliedharan said.

When asked about the presence of certain prominent actors and sportspersons at Modi's event in Thrissur, the Congress leader said it was common for such people to participate in functions attended by the prime minister.

"When we come to power, they will attend our functions as well," he said.

In a fiery speech at a massive women-only event organised by the BJP in Thrissur, Modi underlined his government's women empowerment measures, particularly

the Women's Reservation Bill, stressing that these initiatives were a part of 'Modi's Guarantee'.

He reiterated "Modiyude Guarantee" (Modi's Guarantee) in Malayalam as many as 17 times.

The prime minister highlighted the achievements of his government in empowering women, citing various initiatives such as Ujjwala, tap water connections, toilets, Mudra loans, and more.

Modi also said he guaranteed freedom for Muslim women from triple talaq and fulfilled it honestly.

Speaking to the media in Thrissur, State Revenue Minister and

CPI leader K Rajan said the prime minister should have apologised to the women in Manipur who are suffering in the ongoing violence.

CPI state secretary Binoy Vishwam also shared similar sentiments and asked Modi to locate Manipur on a map and visit the state.

"The women who gathered there (Thrissur) would have expected him to say something about Manipur. Remember the two women who had to run naked amidst the violence in Manipur. They were not just members of any particular community; they were representatives of women in our country. The PM could have at least apologised for the pain they suffered in front of the women gathered in Thrissur," Rajan said.

When asked about the prime minister's remarks on gold smuggling in his speech, Rajan said all the agencies of the Central government have been investigating Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and the ministers for the past seven years and have found nothing.

"We are not afraid of such fake narratives," he said. (PTI)

Global Times article praises India's strides in economic, foreign policy spheres under PM Modi

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: India has become more strategically confident and proactive in creating and developing a "Bharat narrative", an article in China's Global Times has said, praising India's significant strides in the spheres of economic, social governance and foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Global Times, a prominent state-run Chinese media outlet, has published the article penned by Zhang Jiadong, the director of the Center for South Asian Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, that highlights India's remarkable achievements over the past four years.

It acknowledges India's robust economic growth, improvements in urban governance, and a shift in attitude towards international relations, notably with China.



"For example, when discussing the trade imbalance between China and India, Indian representatives earlier used to primarily focus on China's measures to reduce the trade imbalance. But now they are placing more emphasis on India's

export potential," Zhang said in the article.

The article said that with its rapid economic and social development, India has become more strategically confident and more proactive in creating and develop-

ing a "Bharat narrative".

"In the political and cultural spheres, India has moved from emphasising its democratic consensus with the West to highlighting the 'Indian feature' of democratic politics. Currently, there is even more emphasis on the Indian origins of democratic politics," the article published on January 2 said. This shift, the author asserted, reflects India's ambition to escape its historical colonial shadow and act as a "world mentor", both politically and culturally.

Furthermore, the article lauded India's foreign policy strategy under Modi, highlighting the nation's multi-alignment approach and bolstering ties with major global powers such as the US, Japan, and Russia while displaying a nuanced stance in the Russia-

Ukraine conflict. The article noted that India's strategic thinking in foreign policy has undergone another change and is clearly moving toward a great power strategy.

"Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed power, he has advocated for a multi-alignment strategy, promoting India's relations with the US, Japan, Russia and other countries and regional organisations," Zhang said in the article.

"India has always considered itself a world power. However, it has only been less than 10 years since India shifted from multi-balancing to multi-alignment, and now it is rapidly transforming toward a strategy of becoming a pole in the multipolar world. The speed of such changes is rarely seen in the history of international relations," he said. (PTI)

PM Modi shares glimpses of snorkelling adventure in Lakshadweep

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Prime Minister Narendra Modi went snorkelling to explore the undersea life during his recent visit to Lakshadweep islands.

Modi posted pictures of his undersea exploration on X and shared his "exhilarating experience" of the sojourn in the islands located in the Arabian Sea.

"For those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list. During my stay, I also tried snorkelling - what an exhilarating experience it was," he wrote.

Modi also shared pictures of his early morning walks on the pristine beaches of Lakshadweep and some moments of leisure, sitting on a chair by the beach.

"In addition to the scenic beauty, Lakshadweep's tranquility is also mesmerising. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on how to work

even harder for the welfare of 140 crore Indians," he said.

Modi was in Lakshadweep on January 2 and 3 to inaugurate the Kochi-Lakshadweep Islands Submarine Optical Fiber Connection and lay foundation stone for the renovation of primary healthcare facility and five model Anganwadi centres.

He also dedicated several projects to the nation.

"Recently, I had the opportunity to be among the people of Lakshadweep. I am still in awe of the stunning beauty of its islands and the incredible warmth of its people. I had the opportunity to interact with people in Agatti, Bangaram and Kavaratti. I thank the people of the islands for their hospitality. Here are some glimpses, including aerial glimpses from Lakshadweep," Modi said on X. (PTI)

YSR Telangana party leader Sharmila joins Cong, says it was her father's dream to see Rahul as PM

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Y S Sharmila, the daughter of former Andhra Pradesh chief minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy and founder of YSR Telangana Party, joined the Congress here on Thursday.

She also announced the merger of her YSR Telangana Congress with the Congress, and said she would fulfil any responsibility given to her. Sharmila joined the Congress in the presence of party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and former party president Rahul Gandhi.

She later met Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi at her residence and paid her respects. Sonia Gandhi welcomed her in the party fold.

Lauding the Congress, she said it is the largest and "most secular" party in the country as it unwaveringly serves all communities and unites all sections of people.

"I am very happy to be merging the YSR Telangana party with the Congress. It gives me immense joy that the YSR Telangana party is going to be a part of the Indian National Congress from today onwards," she said.

Describing her father and former chief minister YSR Reddy as a legendary leader of the Telugu people, she said he not only served the Congress all his life, but also gave his life serving the Congress.

"Today, it would give him great joy that his daughter is following in his footsteps and is going to be a part of the Congress itself," she said.

"The Congress is still the largest secular party of our country. The Congress has always upheld the true culture of India. The Congress has built our nation's foundations.



The Congress has unwaveringly served all communities, uniting all sections of the people of India," Sharmila said in the presence of top party leadership.

"I truly honour the Congress because it is the most secular party, the largest secular party of the country," she said.

She said Rahul Gandhi has won the confidence of the people with his Bharat Jodo Yatra and that also led to the party's victory in Karnataka. Sharmila said she was happy that she was part of the Congress victory in Telangana. She had announced her support to the Congress during the recent assembly polls in Telangana to end the alleged corrupt and anti-people rule of the BRS led by K Chandrasekhar Rao.

"I also realised that is going to have a domino effect in Telangana and, therefore, I graciously withheld from contesting in Telangana. Congress stood a chance of victory in Telangana and we did not want to break the anti-KCR vote. The Congress won in Telangana and I

am most happy that we contributed a part to that victory," she said.

She said it was her father's dream to see Rahul Gandhi as prime minister and she would be happy to contribute to it.

"It was my father's dream to see Rahul Gandhi as prime minister of our country and I am very glad that I am going to be a part in making that happen. Whatever responsibility the Congress will lay on me, I promise to fulfil that responsibility with all loyalty, integrity and diligence," Sharmila said.

In a post on X, she later said she is delighted on merging the YSR Telangana Party with the Congress, the party her father belonged to, "the party that he lived in, that he served tirelessly, and breathed his last in".

"This moment would make him most ecstatic and nothing can be more heartening than this homecoming for me," she said.

"Back to the party that is the biggest secular party in the country and upholds the pluralistic and true culture of India and had built this

nation from its foundation, unwaveringly serving all communities, uniting all," she said.

"As much as the daughter of Congress for the people of the country, to uphold democratic values, protect constitutional rights and preserve unity and brotherhood amid current disturbing trends perpetrated from divisive forces," she also said in her post.

Sharmila earlier during her joining also raised the issue of ethnic violence in Manipur, and said "as a Christian it pained me that such cruelty took place in Manipur."

She said 2,000 churches were vandalised and 60,000 people became homeless in the state. "That kind of cruelty is something that I have not been able to digest even to this day. That struck me that this is what will happen if a secular party is not in power," she said.

"Therefore, I am joining the Congress and merging the YSR Telangana Party with the Congress very gladly today because I know that the Congress will uphold all sections of the people in Indian society," she asserted.

After chairing her party meeting on Tuesday in Hyderabad, Sharmila had said she and other leaders will meet the top leadership of the Congress, including Kharge, and make a "crucial" announcement in Delhi. Sharmila is the younger sister of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy. On a day when Sharmila joined the Congress, her brother Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy met former Telangana CM K Chandrashekar Rao, who is recuperating after a hip replacement surgery. (PTI)

Education Ministry launches portal for students' study tour to PM Modi's school in Gujarat

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: The school students from across the country will get a chance to go on a seven-day study tour to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's school in Gujarat's Vadnagar town, the Ministry of Education said on Thursday.

The ministry has launched an online portal for the interested students of classes 9 to 12 to register and participate in the programme.

A batch of 20 students, including 10 girls and 10 boys, will participate in the programme every week throughout the year. "Prerana: An Experiential Learning programme" aims at offering a meaningful, unique and inspiring experience to all participants, and empowering them with leadership qualities, according to the ministry officials.

"Prerana is driven by a strong commitment to integrate principles of the Indian education system and the philosophy of value-based education, which is a cornerstone of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020," a senior ministry official said. The curriculum of Prerana School prepared by IIT Gandhi Nagar is rooted in nine value based themes: Swabhiman and Vinay, Shaurya and Sahas, Parishram and Samarpan, Karuna and Sewa, Vividhita and Ekta, Satyanishtha and Shuchita, Navachar and Jigyasa, Shraddha aur Vishwas, and Swatantrata and Kartavya.

"The programme based on above themes will inspire the youth and

foster respect for Bharat's unity in diversity, embodying the spirit of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' and will contribute by making the youth of today, a flame holder for Viksit Bharat. Towards this endeavour, the participants will be guided by the mentors from prestigious institutions," the official said.

The programme will be operated from a Vernacular School, established in 1888, in Vadnagar, Gujarat. The school was also attended by Prime Minister Modi.

"The school stands as a tribute to Vadnagar's indomitable spirit, a living city that has triumphed over challenges like earthquakes and natural calamities and is home to ancient heritage sites and monuments inhabited since the early historic period and in the modern day. The school signifies the fact that extraordinary lives often find their roots in ordinary foundations," the official said.

"Grounded in the timeless wisdom of India's rich civilization, this unique initiative embodies a vision aligned with the principles and ideals of our honourable prime minister, who is an alumnus," he added. The programme will have a day-wise schedule featuring yoga, mindfulness and meditation sessions followed by experiential learning, thematic sessions and hands-on interesting learning activities.

"Evening activities will include

visits to ancient and heritage sites, inspirational film screenings, mission life creative activities, talent shows etc. ensuring a holistic learning approach," the official said.

"Apart from this, the students will engage in diverse activities, embracing indigenous knowledge systems, latest State-of-Art technologies and learning from inspirational personalities," he added.

As per the ministry's portal, the selection will take place in three stages. In the first stage, the students enrolled in classes 9 to 12 in any recognised school of the country will register on the portal by giving their information. Based on the details provided by the students and their special achievements, 200 students will be shortlisted in each district with 50 per cent of them being girls.

In the second stage, the students will exhibit their talent in multi-modal activities like recording a short video, writing essay/poem/story and other creative expression (painting/ caricature etc.) on topics like "Why should I be selected for Prerana" or "My Vision of India @ 2047".

In the third stage, two students (one boy and one girl) along with two students for the reserve panel will be selected through personal interview, achievements and impromptu writing to judge their personality and suitability for the programme. (PTI)

Tension in Thrissur as BJP objects to Youth Congress-KSU action at Modi's stage

THRISSUR (KERALA), Jan 4: Tensions rose in the city on Thursday as BJP workers vehemently objected to Youth Congress-KSU workers attempting to sprinkle cow dung water on the stage used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an event the previous day.

According to Hindu belief, cow dung water is used to cleanse impurities from a place.

Police said that tensions escalated in the area when Youth Congress and Kerala Students Union (KSU) workers staged a march towards Thekkinkadu Maidan, where the event had been held the previous day. They were allegedly protesting because the branches of a banyan tree near the venue were cut as part of the security measures for Modi's programme on Wednesday.

BJP workers, who were engaged in dismantling the stage on Thursday countered the march, which

resulted in a tense atmosphere.

Police intervened promptly and had to use force to disperse the two groups, restoring order in the area.

"There was a push and shove between the activists. The tension eased when officers stationed themselves between the two groups," a police officer told PTI.

The protesting Youth Congress-KSU workers were removed from the spot, he added.

BJP's district leaders said the party workers only prevented the Youth Congress members from sprinkling cow dung water at the venue.

Youth Congress workers, however, alleged that BJP activists arrived armed with sticks, intending to attack them during their protest against the cutting of the banyan tree branches.

The BJP workers blamed the Youth Congress-KSU workers, saying they caused trouble before

the stage in Thekkinkadu Maidan was dismantled.

BJP state chief K Surendran strongly criticised the Congress, claiming that the act of sprinkling cow dung water on the Vadakkumnanatha temple ground (Thekkinkadu Maidan) exposed the party's elitist mindset.

In an apparent reference to Modi's OBC background, Surendran attributed the Congress's actions to them questioning how a person from a backward caste could speak on the sacred land of Lord Vadakkumnantha.

He also alleged that the Congress had previously used casteist slurs against the country's President and Vice President.

In a democracy, protests should be held in a respectful manner, he stressed.

He added that such protests would not be tolerated under any circumstances. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Keshab assures support to

accident spot in Golaghat district to extend all possible assistance. "A probe will reveal whether there was proper signage on the road... We will take necessary steps and if needed, file an FIR against the responsible persons," he said.

Meanwhile, hours after 12 people lost their lives in an accident while en route for a picnic, the Assam Police have issued guidelines for such trips, prohibiting movement in the dark and asking picnickers not to play loud music inside vehicles.

Sharing the 'SOP on Picnic' on X, the Assam Police said there should not be overcrowding in vehicles.

"No loud music on the vehicles to be allowed... There should not be any movement of picnic parties before sunrise and after sunset," it said.

On the other hand, the Jorhat district committee of AJYCP staged a demonstration today at the office of the NHIDCL at Chiroita Gaon here seeking early completion of the much delayed four lane construction of the NH 715 (formerly NH 37) in Jorhat district.

The protestors shouted slogans against the NHIDCL and urged the state government to intervene in this regard. They also sought complete adherence to safety measures in the ongoing four-laning construction work to prevent road accidents.

Expressing resentment over the extremely slow pace of work, lack of proper signages and protective measures, the protestors stated that several lives had been lost and many injured due to half done works in the last couple of years.

They further stated that two private companies awarded contracts to execute the project were terminated one after another in the past five years by NHIDCL reportedly due to anomalies in implementation of the project.

India expresses shock

"Based on preliminary information from official sources, this ministry has initiated immediate legal and international actions through the United Nations regarding the terrorist attack in Kerman," Amirabdollahian said in post on 'X'.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei issued a message following the attacks in which he warned "criminals" of punishment and a hard response over the tragedy, according to IRNA news agency. (PTI)

INDIA bloc faces

"The TMC is not serious about strengthening or forging an alliance in Bengal. The TMC is busy pleasing and serving Prime Minister Narendra Modi to protect themselves from the clutches of the CBI and the ED," he told reporters in his constituency.

Referring to media reports that the TMC was willing to part with the two seats won by the Congress in 2019, Chowdhury expressed his displeasure, saying, "Congress is not going to beg before TMC for seats."

He added, "The Congress is not going to beg before TMC for seats; we don't need their alms. Who are they to decide how many seats the party will contest? If needed, we will fight on our own; let the party high command take a call on it," highlighting his role in the ongoing CPI(M)-Congress alliance in West Bengal.

Congress MP from Malda South Abu Hasem Khan Chowdhury had last month claimed that he had learnt from the media that TMC would leave his seat and Berhampore for the party as part of the seat sharing deal.

According to TMC sources, the ruling party in Bengal is inclined to allocate four out of the 42 Lok Sabha seats to Congress. Currently, the Congress holds two seats in West Bengal, both in minority-dominated districts of Malda and Murshidabad.

The TMC leadership strongly criticised Chowdhury and urged the Congress high command to rein him in if they were serious about the alliance.

Senior TMC MP Sougata Roy said, "Badmouthing TMC and our party supremo Mamata Banerjee and alliance can't go hand in hand."

The regular insults hurled at us by Chowdhury and some leaders of the Bengal Congress have to stop if the party wants an alliance. The Congress high command must rein in Adhir Chowdhury if they want an alliance in Bengal."

Roy wondered what prompted Chowdhury to make such remarks, saying, "Who told him that we have offered two seats? Our leader Mamata Banerjee has said that in Bengal, TMC will lead the fight, but across the country, it will be the INDIA alliance that will fight against the BJP."

During the December 19 INDIA opposition bloc meeting, the TMC set a December 31 deadline for finalising the seat-sharing agreement, a demand that remains unmet. The political landscape shifted notably when Mamata Banerjee, just ahead of the opposition bloc meeting, expressed confidence in a three-way alliance involving the TMC, Congress, and the Left.

However, within a few days, Banerjee accused the CPI(M) and Congress of colluding with the BJP in West Bengal, asserting that the TMC would lead the battle against the saffron camp in Bengal during the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, while the INDIA bloc would spearhead the fight nationwide.

Both parties have previously fought elections in alliance, including the 2001 assembly polls, 2009 Lok Sabha elections, and 2011 assembly polls. In 2011, the Congress-TMC alliance defeated the 34-year-old Left Front regime in West Bengal.

The history of their alliance has been marked by discontent, with Congress accusing the TMC of depriving them of legitimate seats in previous elections. (PTI)

Border with Myanmar

510 km-long international border with Myanmar's Chin state. The majority of the refugees live in relief camps, while others are accommodated by their local relatives and some others live in rented houses.

A number of Myanmar soldiers also fled to Mizoram after their camps along the international border of Wale were overrun by pro-democracy militia in the past few months. All of them were sent back.

Lalduboma also met Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari and urged him to expedite road construction projects in Mizoram.

The chief minister also called on Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday and discussed how the External Affairs Ministry and the Mizoram government could collaborate more closely.

Closely monitoring: India

"Indian Naval ships and aircraft remain mission deployed for maintaining enhanced surveillance and undertaking maritime security operations," it said.

"In the last one week, Indian Naval Task Groups deployed in the area have investigated large number of fishing vessels and boarded vessels of interest," it added.

Four people nabbed

authorities to combat illegal wildlife activities. "The collaborative efforts between law enforcement agencies and the community remain pivotal in safeguarding the precious fauna and upholding the sanctity of protected areas like Kaziranga National Park," it added. (PTI)

India, Nepal ink several

Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' during which the two sides exchanged substantive views on the age-old, unique, and multifaceted Nepal-India relations. Jaishankar called on Prime Minister Prachanda at the latter's office 'Singdurbar' and conveyed the warm wishes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Nepal is important for India in the context of its overall strategic interests in the region, and the leaders of the two countries have often noted the age-old "Roti Beti" relationship. The country shares a border of over 1,850 km with five Indian states - Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Land-locked Nepal relies heavily on India for the transportation of goods and services.

In June, Prime Minister 'Prachanda' visited New Delhi during which both sides signed several major pacts including one on increasing New Delhi's import of power from the neighbouring country to 10,000 MW in the next 10 years from the current 450 MW. (PTI)

AMLU declares 48-hour

an accident willingly. One of the leaders warned the government that ministers, MPs, and MLAs have their cars driven by professional drivers, saying if the center doesn't revoke the law, it may cause troubles for them as well.

High-fat diets found to make immune system changes, enhance risk of Covid

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Diets high on fat have been found to affect genes linked to the immune system, brain function, and potentially COVID-19 risk in a new study.

Researchers said that it was the long-term consumption of high-fat diets that were seen to cause the observed changes, and that readers should not panic about a single meal. The researchers at the University of California - Riverside (UCR), US, fed mice three different diets over the course of 24 weeks where at least 40 per cent of the calories came from fat. They then looked at all four parts of the mice's intestines, along with their microbiome. A fourth control group of mice was fed a low-fat diet. Compared to the low-fat diet group, all the other three groups were found to experience "concerning" changes in gene expression. These groups were made to consume diets based on saturated fat from coconut oil, monounsaturated, modified soybean oil and unmodified soybean oil high in polyunsaturated fat.

"Word on the street is that plant-based diets are better for you, and in many cases that's true. However, a diet high in fat, even from a plant, is one case where it's just not true," said Frances Sladek, a



UCR cell biology professor and senior author of the study published in the journal Scientific Reports. Further, it may not be possible to "just exercise away these effects", according to UCR microbiologist Poonamjot Deol, the study's co-first author.

"Some people think, 'Oh, I'll just exercise more and be okay'. But regularly eating this way could be impacting your immune system and how your brain functions," said Deol. The team advised about 10-15 per cent of fat consumption everyday. Some of the intestinal changes brought about by high-diets did not surprise the researchers, they said, such as major changes in genes related to fat me-

tabolism and the composition of gut bacteria. However, other observations were more surprising, such as changes in genes regulating susceptibility to infectious diseases, including those recognising infectious bacteria and those controlling inflammation, they said.

"So, it's a double whammy. These diets impair immune system genes in the host, and they also create an environment in which harmful gut bacteria can thrive," said Sladek. The team has previously linked soybean oil-based diets to obesity and diabetes, both of which have been studied to be major risk factors for Covid.

Their latest work examining the impacts of the three high-fat diets

have found them to heighten the expression of ACE2 and other host proteins, used by spike proteins of Covid-causing virus to gain entry into the body. The coconut oil diets were found to impact gene expression the most, followed by the unmodified soybean oil diets, suggesting that polyunsaturated fatty acids in unmodified soybean oil play a role in altering gene expression.

Microbiome changes, on the other hand, were observed to be more pronounced in mice fed with diets based on soybean oil, which the researchers said was the most commonly consumed oil in the US, and is increasingly being used in other countries, including Brazil, China, and India.

They also noted that the findings applied only to soybean oil and not to other soy products, tofu, or soybeans. Further, the experimental mice being fed these high-fat diets for 24 weeks was like "starting from childhood and continuing until middle age" in human terms, according to Deol.

"One night of indulgence is not what these mice ate. It's more like a lifetime of the food," said Deol. The team hopes that the study makes people look more closely at their eating habits. (PTI)

Britney Spears denies working on new album, says she will 'never return to music industry'

LOS ANGELES, Jan 4: Shutting down rumours that she is working on a new album, pop singer Britney Spears said she will "never return to the music industry".

The singer shared a post on Instagram alluding to reports that surfaced on Wednesday about Spears potentially tapping Charli XCX and writer Julia Michaels for an unannounced record, her first in nearly a decade.

"Just so we're clear most of the news is trash!!! They keep saying I'm turning to random people to do a new album ... I will never return to the music industry !!! "When I write, I write for fun or I write for other people

!!! For those of you who have read my book, there's loads you don't know about me ..." the singer wrote.

Britney dismissed rumors about her creating songs for a new album and revealed that she has been working behind the scenes as a ghostwriter for others. In a statement, she mentioned, "When I write, it's either for my enjoyment or for other people...I've penned more than 20 songs for others in the last two years!!! I function as a ghostwriter, and I genuinely find joy in that role."

The pop star seemed to be addressing recent reports from early Wednesday that suggested Britney Spears



might be working on a new, unannounced album, potentially with Charli XCX and writer Julia Michaels. Variety reported on this possibility, noting that Michaels had collaborated with Spears before on 'Slumber Party' from the 'Glory' album.

Spears then described herself as a 'ghostwriter,' which means she writes for other artists without putting her name on the projects, and stated that she "honestly [prefers] it that way."

She also addressed claims that her book, 'The Woman in Me,' was published with-

out her permission. The book became a national best-seller in its first week, selling over 1.1 million copies in print, pre-sales, e-books, and audiobooks.

She added, "I've written over 20 songs for other people in the past two years !!! I'm a ghostwriter and I honestly enjoy it that way !!! People are also saying MY BOOK WAS RELEASED WITHOUT MY AP-PROVAL ILLEGALLY and that's far from the truth ... have you read the news these days ??? I'm so LOVED and blessed !!!" (PTI)

PERIOD DRAMA SERIES 'SHOGUN' TO PREMIERE ON DISNEY+ HOTSTAR IN FEBRUARY

MUMBAI, Jan 4: Streaming service Disney+ Hotstar on Thursday announced that "Shogun", an upcoming historical drama series, will premiere on its platform in February.

The limited series, which hails from FX Productions, is based on author James Clavell's bestselling novel of the same title. It is created by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks.

The premiere of the 10-episode limited series will include the first two episodes, followed by a new episode each week, a press release said.

Set in Japan in the year 1600 at the dawn of a century-defining civil war, "Shogun" stars Hiroyuki Sanada as "Lord Yoshii Toranaga", who is fighting for his life as his enemies on the Council of Regents unite against him.

"When a mysterious European ship is found marooned in a nearby fishing village, its English pilot, John Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis), comes bearing



secrets that could help Toranaga tip the scales of power and devastate the formidable influence of Blackthorne's

own enemies — the Jesuit priests and Portuguese merchants.

"Toranaga's and Blackthorne's fates become inextricably tied to their translator, Toda Mariko (Anna Sawai), a mysterious Christian noblewoman and the last of a disgraced line. While serving her lord amidst this fraught political landscape, Mariko must reconcile her newfound companionship with Blackthorne, her commitment to the faith that saved her and her duty to her late father," the official plotline read.

"Shogun" also features Tadanobu Asano, Hiroto Kanai, Takehiro Hira, Moeka Hoshi, Tokuma Nishioka, Shinnosuke Abe, Yuki Kura, Yuka Kouri and Fumi Nikaido.

Justin Marks also serves as the showrunner and executive Producer alongside Michaela Clavell, Edward L. McDonnell, Michael De Luca, and Kondo. Sanada has produced the show along with Eriko Miyagawa. (PTI)

EKTA R KAPOOR, TUSSHAR KAPOOR COLLABORATING FOR 'DUS JUNE KI RAAT'



MUMBAI, Jan 4: Producer Ekta R Kapoor and her actor-brother Tusshar Kapoor are reuniting for an upcoming project, titled "Dus June Ki Raat". The series, which will be released on Jio Cinema and ALT Balaji, will also feature actor Priyanka

Chahar Choudhary. Ekta, who earlier worked with Tusshar on feature films such as "Kuch To Hai", "Shootout at Lokhandwala" and "C Kkompany", shared the news on Instagram. "Dus June Ki Raat". It Begins #favshow #Jai Mata Di,"

Ekta wrote alongside a picture of the clapperboard.

The show is being directed by Tabrez Khan. "Dus June Ki Raat" will be produced by Sachin Mohite under the banner of Jaasvand Entertainment and co-produced by Ekta R Kapoor. (PTI)

AMALA PAUL, JAGAT DESAI TO BECOME PARENTS

MUMBAI, Jan 4: Actor Amala Paul is expecting her first child with husband, entrepreneur Jagat Desai.

Paul, known for her work in Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam films such as "Neelathamara", "Mynaa", "Deiva Thirumagal", "Vettai" and "Pitta Kathalu", shared the news in a post on Instagram on Wednesday evening.

The 32-year-old posted photos from her beach photoshoot with Desai and in one of them, she is seen flaunting her baby bump.

"Now I know that 1+1 is 3 with you! #pregnant #pregnancy #maternity #mom #baby #love #comingsoon," Paul wrote in the caption.

Paul and Desai tied the knot in November 2023 in Kochi, Kerala. She was earlier married to filmmaker AL Vijay from 2014 to 2017. (PTI)



I enjoy playing villain roles, says Vijay Sethupathi

MUMBAI, Jan 4: Expressions are like food and versatile actor Vijay Sethupathi says he wants to have a taste of everything through the characters he plays.

The versatile actor, who most recently featured in a negative role in Shah Rukh Khan-starrer "Jawan", will next be seen as a lead in Sriram Raghavan's highly-anticipated "Merry Christmas" where he stars opposite Katrina Kaif. Sethupathi said he has fun when he gets to play villainous characters whether it was in "Jawan" or "Vikram Vedha". "I enjoy villain roles. In real life, I can't kill anybody, I get a chance to do it (in films). I can express that wholeheartedly... On screen, you can express and play with emotions, it's fun. Please don't think bad about me. Expressions are like food and taste, and I

want to have all the taste," the actor said responding to a query by PTI at a press conference for "Merry Christmas".

The Tamil superstar, known for critically-acclaimed performance in movies such as "96", "Petta", "Master", "Vikram", Malayalam hit "Super Deluxe" and OTT show "Farzi", is full of praise for Kaif, who he described as a "beautiful, sensible, and dedicated" actor.

"I never expected I'll work with this actor and I'm a very big fan of Katrina. I was very happy when I saw her on the first day and I couldn't express (my happiness)... She is a thoughtful actor."

Sethupathi said Kaif has managed to survive in the industry for more than two decades because she is a sensible actor. "She is in the industry not because she is beautiful but also sensible. You

can't survive for so long just on the basis of beauty. There should be sense and understanding as well. I felt it when I was working with her. I read my co-actors, cameramen, I sense my sets, and understand my director's vision, I try to crack their minds so that I can fit in, otherwise, I'll be (in) separate (zone)."

The actor said it was a great collaborative experience teaming up with "Merry Christmas" director. They decided to work together after they met during the Melbourne Film Festival.

"At first, I thought this man was very serious but he is not at all serious. I spent about 25 to 30 days and when I spent time with a director, I can understand him, and how he wants to conceive the film and everything," he added.

Raghavan has shot the film in both Hindi and Tamil with different supporting cast. The filmmaker, known for cult hits such as "Ek Thi Hasina", "Johnny Gaddar", "Badlapur" and "Andhadhun", said as a Tamilian, he wanted to make a film in the language.

"I'm a Tamilian and I wanted to make a Tamil film. Like I've been living in Mumbai and I want to direct a Marathi film. With this film, I got a chance to do that with Vijay as an actor from there. But I don't think I'll again do this because it requires a lot of hard work," he said. The filmmaker hopes that the story connects with the audience as much as it did with him and his team.

"Merry Christmas" presented by Tips Films and Matchbox Pictures, is set to release theatrically on January 12. (PTI)

India Women vying for all-round improvement in T20Is against Australia

NAVI MUMBAI, Jan 4: With an eye on the T20 World Cup later this year, the Indian women's cricket team will be vying for all-round improvement against six-time world champions Australia when the two sides clash in a three-match series starting here on Friday.

For the Harmanpreet Kaur-led Indian side, plenty will be at stake after a 0-3 hammering against Australia in the recently-concluded ODI series, having earlier lost a three-match T20I series to England.

The historic wins in the one-off Test each against England and Australia notwithstanding, Harmanpreet's side has a lot of ground to cover in white-ball cricket to improve its dismal record against Australia. If their horrendous fielding in the second ODI cost India the game by a mere three runs, the batters cut a sorry figure on a perfect deck to be bowled out for 148 after Australia piled up a record 338/8 in the third ODI. India lost the opening ODI by six wickets since none of the bowlers could impose themselves on a long Australian batting order.

The hosts dropped a total of eight catches in the last two matches and erred quite a bit in their DRS calling too. India's batting also did not inspire much confidence even though they were playing in their own backyard. The batters lacked initiative to attack, their power-game left much to be desired and a collective plan was never seen when it came to taking down the opposition's bowling.

Harmanpreet's form continued to be a concern with India skipper en-



during a forgettable run.

Harmanpreet could only manage 17 runs in three ODIs against Australia. The poor run was reflection of her woeful run of form as she has six single-digit scores across formats in her last nine outings and none of them is in excess of fifty.

Jemimah Rodrigues and Richa Ghosh were India's stars in the ODIs but there has been lack of big scores from the top half.

Smriti Mandhana has only one

50 in three ODIs against Australia. India's new ball pair of Renuka Singh Thakur and Pooja Vastrakar also could not find much purchase off the wickets or conditions at the Wankhede Stadium, but playing on fresher decks at the DY Patil Stadium under lights will give

them a chance to get the ball talking again. For Australia, this tour has witnessed the ascension of the young Litchfield, who played India with the bat in the ODIs, striking two fifties and a ton to establish herself as one to watch out for.

Australia, who have won each of the last three T20I World Cups, have looked to imbibe their learnings from this India tour, which is serving their dominant bunch of players a perfect opportunity for the next global competitions in the subcontinent. Bangladesh will host the T20 World Cup in September-October this year and India will organise the next 50-overs World Cup in 2025.

Alyssa Healy's side has made its share of mistakes but Australia also know how to turn the tables around with their sharp fielding, which was on display in the ODIs even though they dropped a few. All-rounder Grace Harris will come into the Australian squad which aims to repeat its performance of the T20I series in 2022. The team clinched a five-match series 4-0 with one game ending in a tie. In fact, that tied game here at the DY Patil Stadium separates two long phases of defeats for India — five and four matches lost in a row respectively — against Australia in T20Is.

For that matter, India have only six wins to show from 31 matches while Australia have won 23 and one game tied, a stat which makes it clear that Harmanpreet's side has its task cut out yet again.

Squads: India: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana (vc), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Yastika Bhatia (wk), Richa Ghosh (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque, Renuka Singh Thakur, Titas Sadhu, Pooja Vastrakar, Kanika Ahuja, Minnu Mani.

Australia: Darcie Brown, Heather Graham, Ashleigh Gardner, Kim Garth, Grace Harris, Alyssa Healy (c&wk), Jess Jonassen, Alana King, Phoebe Litchfield, Tahlia McGrath (vc), Beth Mooney (wk), Ellyse Perry, Megan Schutt, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Wareham.

Time: 7:30PM IST. (PTI)

Nothing is impossible: Italy captain Puglisi confident ahead of FIH women's Oly Qualifiers



RANCHI, Jan 4: Italy women's team captain Sara Puglisi said on Thursday that her side is high on confidence while gearing up for a "tough" challenge against higher-ranked teams in the FIH Hockey Olympic qualifiers scheduled to begin here on January 13.

The Italian side will begin its campaign on January 13 against New Zealand, which will be the first meeting between the two teams in seven years.

World No. 19 Italy are grouped in Pool B and will take on the USA on January 14, and then play their final Pool game against India on January 16.

"We know it will be a tough competition. But everything is open and nothing is impossible. We will do what we need to get the results in our favour," said Puglisi after Italy arrived here.

The other teams in the fray include Olympic silver medallists Germany, former Asian Games Champions Japan, Chile and the Czech Republic in Pool A.

The top three teams from the tournament will qualify for the Paris Olympic Games.

Opening up on the team's preparations, Puglisi said: "We have had a few months of preparations together. We have worked a lot. We have come

here and we will finish our final steps of training this week and then we will start the tournament together. It is quite exciting."

Italy are the second team to have arrived to Ranchi after hosts India.

"We wanted to finish our preparations here so that we get used to the weather and the turf - hence we decided to come early," said Puglisi in a HI release.

While Italy have achieved several distinctions in women's hockey over the years, including a gold medal at the 2013 Euro-Hockey Nations Championship II, they are yet to earn an Olympic berth.

"It has been a long time since we have been waiting to go to the Olympics. So, if we are able to qualify, we will be over the moon. It's a dream for everyone," the skipper said.

Italy chief coach Andres Mondo also backed his team despite the lack of experience.

"We are a very new and young team, and you could see we are using different formations. At the moment, we are ranked at no 19. But this team, the quality of players that we have, we do not feel we are number 19," he signed off. (PTI)

Former midfielder Ivan Hašek returns as the Czech Republic coach

PRAGUE, Jan 4: Ivan Hašek was appointed as the Czech Republic's new coach for the European Championship on Thursday. Hašek was hired to November 2025 with an option to extend his contract to the 2026 World Cup if the team qualifies, said Petr Fousek, the Czech Football Association head.

"It's a great honor for me," Hašek said.

He returns as coach after taking charge for five games in 2009-10.

Hašek, aged 60, replaces Jaroslav Šilhavý, who resigned on Nov. 20 after the final game in Euro 2024 qualifying, a 3-0 victory over Moldova. The result secured an eighth straight qualification for the Euros for the Czechs. Šilhavý took over as coach in 2018 but was under fire for the team's poor performances in qualifying. The Czechs completed Group E in second place behind Albania.

Under Šilhavý, the Czechs reached the quarterfinals of the 2020 European Championship.

Hašek was a midfielder who played 56 times for the Czechs from 1984-94. He coached in France, Japan and the Middle East. His last job was managing Lebanon until 2022. "He was coaching abroad for a long time, which is a bonus," Fousek said. The Czechs open Euro 2024 in Germany on June 18 against Portugal in Leipzig before facing Turkey and a team from the play-offs, which will be known in March, in Group F. (AP)

Bumrah rewarded for bowling consistently in the channel: Tendulkar

CAPE TOWN, Jan 4: Having started his Test journey here at the Newlands six summers ago, India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is a touch emotional about the venue, and the icing on the cake was the 'Player-of-the-Series' award after the series-levelling record win over South Africa here on Thursday.

Bumrah, who made his Test debut here in 2018, grabbed his second five-wicket haul as India defeated South Africa by seven wickets in the shortest match in Test history, lasting 642 balls.

"This ground will always hold a special place in my heart," Bumrah, who was the leading wicket-taker in the two-match series with 12 scalps, said during the post-match presentation.

"The journey started here in 2018, always have fond memories. Very happy it went well today."



"That journey started in 2018 -- our bowling unit was experienced and we wanted to make an impact. I didn't expect the game to go this fast." Twenty-three wickets tumbled on day one as India were set a paltry target of 79 to level the two-match series.

India did so in 12 overs in the second session on day two, making it the shortest-ever Test.

On South Africa opting to bat first after winning the toss, he said, "We wanted to bat first as well. Test cricket gives you surprises. Great series."

India had a pace-bowling attack without the injured Mohammed Shami and featured the likes of Mukesh Kumar, Prasidh Krishna,

Mohammed Siraj besides Bumrah. "Our team is going through a transition but the message is the same -- keep fighting. A lot of bowlers have been changed, the message in the team, keep fighting. "We fought it out in the last game as well. It requires a lot of patience. We are very happy that we were able to do it in this game."

On a pitch that offered plenty of assistance, Siraj demolished the South African batting in the first innings, bundling them for 55 with his six-wicket haul.

"It's my best figures in Test career. I tried to be consistent and hit the right areas." Player of the Match Siraj, who returned career-best figures 6/15, said.

"I wasn't consistent in the previous match and that's why we leaked a lot of runs. Worked hard on consistency and tried to be relentless with my lengths." (PTI)

Manchester United returns on-loan Reguilon to Tottenham



MANCHESTER, Jan 4: Manchester United ended its loan deal for Tottenham defender Sergio Reguilon on Thursday.

The Spanish left back moved to Old Trafford in August on a season-long loan. But United has exercised a break clause in the contract and Reguilon will return to Spurs.

"With fewer games in

the second half of the season and injured players returning, there will be less opportunity for Sergio to play," United said. "It was decided it was in the best interests of all parties for the Reguilon to return to Spurs."

The 27-year-old Reguilon was signed to cover injuries to Luke Shaw and Tyrell Malacia at the start of the season.

He made 12 appearances in all competitions.

Shaw has since returned and Malacia is close to recovery.

United has been eliminated from the Champions League and the English League Cup. That means manager Erik ten Hag is unlikely to face fixture congestion in the second half of the season and extra pressures on his squad. (AP)

Ranji Trophy preview: Veterans, young hopefuls embark on a fresh journey

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: Bright dreams of a new journey, desperation to stage a comeback and desire to rediscover old glory will be the dominant themes of this season's Ranji Trophy that begins at various centres across the country from Friday.

On the periphery, the latest edition of the premier domestic competition might appear to be having little or no say in the cricketing fortunes of a clutch of players, especially with India's batting and bowling line-ups almost sealed in Tests.

The selectors also might not ring in too many changes for the five-match home rubber against England later this month. Also India will play the red-ball format only in September at home against Bangladesh, courtesy an avalanche of white-ball

matches, including the IPL and the T20 World Cup in June.

So, it might seem like there is zero incentive to toil in some remote grounds across the country over the next month and thereabouts. But in reality, a whole lot more is bubbling beneath that seemingly staid surface of insignificance over this Ranji Trophy. No one will be more in focus than the two 35-year-old veterans — Ajinkya Rahane and Cheteshwar Pujara, whose Test careers are now in doldrums.

Rahane and Pujara will hope to log in some big runs in the competition to keep their names in the selectors' discussion, especially since several younger cricketers are also vying for a spot in the national team.

Rahane will have to carry an additional burden. Along with his personal resurrection, the el-

egant batter will have to lead Mumbai to a much-desired title.

The 41-time champions' last Ranji triumph came in the 2015-16 season and since then they have struggled to maintain their supremacy in the domestic circuit. They will hope that Rahane, an astute leader and tactician, can change their fortunes this time.

Similarly, Karnataka's Mayank Agarwal, who was the highest run-getter the previous season with 990 runs, will want another massive season under his belt. At some stage, an opening slot could open in the Indian team, currently filled by captain Rohit Sharma and the young Yashasvi Jaiswal, and Agarwal would not want to miss that chance. There are some serious contenders for the opening slot such as Bengal's Abhimanyu

Easwaran, who is currently in South Africa as a replacement for the injured Ruturaj Gaikwad.

So, Easwaran will not be playing at least the first-round match as he has not been named in the state squad because of his national commitments.

Then there are a host of young names who are eager to make an impression and remain in the range of selectors' radar.

Sarfraz Khan has churned out truck-load of runs for Mumbai in the last few seasons but has not been able to crack open the doors of national team even once.

The attacking right-hander will hope to continue in the same vein in the new season as well to attract a kinder glance from the powers that be.

The bowling stock too will

come under intense scrutiny.

The injury-enforced absence of senior pacer Mohammed Shami and the well below-par effort of Prasidh Krishna against South Africa have exposed the rather bare cupboard of back-up options in fast bowling department at least in the traditional format.

In that context, promising names like Karnataka's Vidwath Kaverappa, Vysakh Vijayakumar, who had an excellent run in the 2022-2023 season, Arzan Nagwaswalla of Gujarat, Bengal's Ishan Porel etc could be watched closely this season.

Along with these young tyros, Saurashtra captain and veteran seamer Jaydev Unadkat too will be eyeing a fine outing to remain in the reckoning as he can bring in that left-arm variety into the attack. (PTI)

Australia Women will look to be ruthless against India in T20I series: Wareham



NAVI MUMBAI, Jan 4: Being ruthless when on top has driven this Australia Women's team to remain dominant against India, a trait that the visitors will look to sustain in the three-match T20I series, said leg-spinner Georgia Wareham here on Thursday.

Having never lost a bilateral ODI series to India, Australia enjoy a 23-6 record in 31 T20Is against their opponents with one tied game and the remaining one producing no result.

The Aussies bounced back from a crushing defeat in the one-off Test to win the three-match ODI series 3-0.

"We speak about that a lot in our meetings (about) being ruthless — when we're on top — we like to keep doing that and not let it slip," Wareham told the reporters on the eve of the first T20I at the DY Patil Stadium.

"If we get the opportunity to be in that position again, we're gonna keep on trying to be as ruthless as possible," she added.

Wareham also hoped Australia would be able to carry momentum from the ODI series into the shortest format.

"India, being such great competition, (it is a) really good practice, but at the same time, we still want to win over these games. Coming off the three wins in the ODIs, we will take a little bit of momentum from that," she said.

Wareham, like her teammates including captain Alyssa Healy, mentioned about India being a

challenge and she stressed that the way Harmanpreet Kaur's team plays is exciting.

"T20 cricket is, it is ruthlessly — it's that word again — but it comes down to the day. Anyone can win any game. It just takes a couple of players to have a really good day out there," she said.

"Luckily, we've been on the right side of that last few games. Every time we've come up against India in a World Cup, we've been put under a lot of pressure."

The way they play their game is really exciting. It is a really tough matchup for us given the power that they have, at the top of the order for the bowlers, and the variety that they have," she said.

Wareham added: "It's really a good challenge to sort of see where we're at, I think coming up in the (T20) World Cup in Bangladesh."

The Victorian bowler said India vice-captain Smriti Mandhana has been a "tough" match-up for their bowlers.

"For leg spinners, myself and Kingy (Alana King) it's the left-handers that have probably given us the most grief, but someone like Smriti Mandhana, is a really tough match-up against us," said Wareham.

Wareham, who played for Gujarat Giants in the inaugural Women's Premier League, joined the Mandhana-led Royal Challengers Bangalore for the second edition during the auction last month. (PTI)

Bumrah bamboozles Proteas as India record historic victory in Cape Town

CAPE TOWN, Jan 4: Jasprit Bumrah, India's priceless fast bowling mean machine, produced a hostile spell to guide India to a series-leveling seven-wicket victory against South Africa in the shortest game ever played in Test history.

Bumrah (6/61 in 13.5 overs), the master practitioner of fast bowling, knocked the stuffing out of South Africa's middle-order in a menacing morning spell though Aiden Markram (106 off 103 balls) fought like a lone ranger on a burning deck to take South Africa to 176 in 36.5 overs at stroke of lunch on day two.

A target of 79 even on the toughest of tracks wasn't exactly a tall order and young Yashasvi Jaiswal (28) threw his bat around before skipper Rohit Sharma (16 not out) completed the formalities in the company of Shreyas Iyer (4 not out off 6) in just 12 overs.

This was India's first victory at Newlands in seven attempts and one that would be remembered for the hostility exhibited by two Indian fast bowlers – Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj, who produced a career-best six-wicket haul to bowl out South Africa for 55 in the first innings.

The series-leveling win gave Rohit the bragging rights of being only the second skipper after Mahendra Singh Dhoni (2010-11) to draw a series in the 'Rainbow Nation'.

However, South Africa remains an un conquered territory for India, who have not been able to win a Test series in the country.



It was the shortest Test match ever in terms of overs bowled, bettering the previous best that involved Australia and South Africa at the MCG way back in 1932.

A total of 106.2 overs were bowled in this match while 109.2 overs were bowled in that 1932-match which Australia won. Eerily, South Africa's first innings had lasted for 23.2 overs, just like this game. It would be surprising if the Newlands Stadium track doesn't receive a "Below Average" rating from ICC match referee Chris Broad.

In fact, South African batting consultant and former national skipper Ashwell Prince

had termed it as the "fastest Day 1 track" he has even seen at this venue but what worried him was the "inconsistent bounce" on offer.

As a venue, Newlands' host body West Province Cricket Association is bleeding financially and one and a half day game is basically a loss making event for it.

Skipper Rohit won't mind winning his first Test as a skipper in a SENA country but more importantly, the decisions he took was a reflection of his leadership acumen.

Playing Mukesh Kumar (4 wickets) in place of Shardul Thakur was a good move and also making the bowlers realise the ideal

length to bowl after the goof up in Centurion. The way Bumrah and Siraj read the pitch in the first essay was an example how the current generation doesn't throw in the towel after a debilitating defeat.

On Thursday, the ball didn't fly off the surface as much as it did on the opening day but with enough juice available to get movement off the surface, Bumrah from his back of length approach in the first essay reverted to a more traditional fuller length deliveries to set the alarm bells ringing for the Proteas.

This was his ninth five-wicket haul in Test cricket. Sensing that he could soon run out of partners once David Bedingham (11) edged one behind the stumps and Kyle Verreynne misjudged the length while going for an unnecessary pull-shot, Markram started attacking the inexperienced Mukesh Kumar (2/56 in 10 overs) and the ever-profligate Prasidh Krishna (1/27 in 4 overs).

Markram, found it easy to muscle the balls through the gaps as he hit 17 fours and two mighty sixes off Prasidh.

In the morning, a vintage Bumrah was in full bloom on a tailor-made surface.

Starting at 62 for 3, South Africa quickly lost their middle-order to be 111 for 7 before Markram took charge in a 51-run stand with Kagiso Rabada where he launched into every Indian bowler.

It finally took first innings hero Siraj (1/31) to induce a mistimed heave from Markram, ensuring the lead did not cross 100-run mark. (PTI)

Warner out for 34 as rain, poor light curtails 2nd day of 3rd Australia-Pakistan test

Warner out for 34 in his farewell test



SYDNEY, Jan 4: Australia opener David Warner was dismissed for 34 in his farewell cricket test against Pakistan at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Thursday before rain and poor light ruined most of the rest of the second day. Playing in his 112th and last test, Warner was caught at first slip by Babar Azam off Agha Salman's bowling before lunch.

Play was interrupted in the middle session with Australia at 116-2 in reply to Pakistan's 313. The lights were on at the SCG and the conditions were gloomy, but the decision to take players from the field for bad light was met with boos from the crowd and criticism from former players.

Players stayed off for a further 40 minutes while 25,000 fans remained in attendance, before rain began to fall and the day was officially washed out.

Marnus Labuschagne will resume on 23 on Friday morning with Steve Smith on 6.

"It is so frustrating," Australia's ex-coach and test opener Justin Langer said on Channel 7 television. "I have walked in all the shoes as a player and batsman. You want to be off and want perfect conditions, and then as coach you want what's best for your team."

"But when you look at the big picture, it is crazy these guys aren't playing test cricket here. You have a big crowd here, they have come here for David Warner's last game."

Warner will still likely have a chance to bat in the fourth innings of the match. He had threatened to go on with a big score on his home ground after surviving a chance

earlier when dropped at slip by Saim Ayub on 20.

Resuming on six following a nervous one-over stay late on Day 1, Warner produced one of the shots of the morning when he square-drove Hasan Ali for four. He steered another ball from Hasan between slips and gully to the boundary, while an edge off Aamir Jamal also went for four.

But on 34, Warner's time at the crease came to an end. Facing a ball from Salman that gripped and bounced, Warner was squared up on the crease and outside-edged the ball to Babar at first slip.

Warner walked from the field and quickly glanced back to view a replay on the stadium screen as he received a standing ovation from the crowd.

On Wednesday after Pakistan won the toss and elected to bat, Australia captain Pat Cummins took 5-61 for his third consecutive five-wicket haul. Pakistan's top order was again exposed before a lower-order rally helped the tourists to its 300-plus total.

Pakistan was in danger of being dismissed cheaply at 96-5 but an enterprising counterattack led by wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan with a brisk 88, followed by a half-century from Agha Salman and a maiden test half-century by Aamer Jamal helped Pakistan recover to a respectable total.

With Australia assured of winning the series after wins in Perth and Adelaide, the lead-up to the match was almost exclusively about Warner's last test. Flanked by his three daughters, he led the home team out on to the SCG before the match. (AP)

India Women vying for all-round improvement in T20Is against Australia

NAVI MUMBAI, Jan 4: With an eye on the T20 World Cup later this year, the Indian women's cricket team will be vying for all-round improvement against six-time world champions Australia when the two sides clash in a three-match series starting here on Friday.

For the Harmanpreet Kaur-led Indian side, plenty will be at stake after a 0-3 hammering against Australia in the recently-concluded ODI series, having earlier lost a three-match T20I series to England.

The historic wins in the one-off Test each against England and Australia notwithstanding, Harmanpreet's side has a lot of ground to cover in white-ball cricket to improve its dismal record against Australia.

If their horrendous fielding in the second ODI cost India the game by a mere three runs, the batters cut a sorry figure on a perfect deck to be bowled out for 148 after Australia piled up a record 338/8 in the third ODI.

India lost the opening ODI by six wickets since none of the bowlers could impose themselves on a long Australian batting order.

The hosts dropped a total of eight catches in the last two matches and erred quite a bit in their DRS calling too.

India's batting also did not inspire much confidence even though they were playing in their own backyard.

The batters lacked initiative to attack, their power-game left much to be desired and a collective plan was never seen when it came to taking down the opposition's bowling.

Harmanpreet's form continued to be a concern with India skipper enduring a forgettable run.

Harmanpreet could only manage 17 runs in three ODIs against Australia. The poor run was reflection of her woeful run of form as she has six single-digit scores across formats in her last nine outings and none of them is in excess of fifty.

Jemimah Rodrigues and Richa Ghosh were India's stars in the ODIs but there has been lack of big scores from the top half. Smriti Mandhana has only one fifty to show in this home season and has failed to convert starts on a consistent basis.

It remains to be seen if India will pair Yastika Bhatia with Mandhana at the top as they did in the ODIs or with Shafali Verma, who scored 52 at the start of the season against England.

In complete contrast, two of Australia's batters Phoebe Litchfield and Tahlia McGrath have struck three consecutive fifties each across two formats.

India's new ball pair of Renuka Singh Thakur and Pooja Vastrakar also could not find much purchase off the wickets or conditions at the Wankhede Stadium, but playing on fresher decks at the DY Patil Stadium under lights will give them a chance to get the ball talking again.

For Australia, this tour has witnessed the ascension of the young Litchfield, who played India with the bat in the ODIs, striking two fifties and a ton to establish herself as one to watch out for.

Australia, who have won each of the last three T20I World Cups, have looked to imbibe their learnings from this India tour, which is serving their dominant bunch of players a perfect opportunity for the next global competitions in the subcontinent.

In fact, that tied game here at the DY Patil Stadium separates two long phases of defeats for India — five and four matches lost in a row respectively — against Australia in T20Is.

For that matter, India have only six wins to show from 31 matches while Australia have won 23 and one game tied, a stat which makes it clear that Harmanpreet's side has its task cut out yet again.

Squads:

India: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana (vc), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Yastika Bhatia (wk), Richa Ghosh (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque, Renuka Singh Thakur, Titas Sadhu, Pooja Vastrakar, Kanika Ahuja, Minnu Mani.

Australia: Darcie Brown, Heather Graham, Ashleigh Gardner, Kim Garth, Grace Harris, Alyssa Healy (c&wk), Jess Jonassen, Alana King, Phoebe Litchfield, Tahlia McGrath (vc), Beth Mooney (wk), Ellyse Perry, Megan Schutt, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Wareham. (PTI)

ICC amends stumping, concussion substitute rules

DUBAI, Jan 4: The International Cricket Council (ICC) has effected a notable change in playing conditions, as per which the umpires henceforth will only assess the side-on replays for stumping without considering the caught-behind scenario during the Decision Review System (DRS) referrals.

The modification has come into effect on December 12, 2023 and accordingly if a team wants to refer to caught-behind in the process of a stumping, it will now have to exercise a DRS option for the caught-behind appeal separately.

In the series against India early last year, Australian wicketkeeper, Alex Carey widely used review for caught-behind after a stumping without exhausting the team's DRS option.

Now, the appeal for stumping will only display images from the side-on camera and the umpires will only consider them as they will not inspect for a snick.

"The change confines a stumping review to only check for stumped, therefore preventing the fielding team a free review for other modes of dismissal (i.e.,



caught behind) without choosing a player review," read ICC's new amendment.

The ICC has also brought in more clarity in concussion replacement rule. Now, the substitute player will not be permitted to bowl if the replaced player was suspended from bowling at the time of the concussion.

Similarly, the global governing body

also has limited to four minutes the time set for on field injury assessment and treatment.

Along with these ICC rule changes, the BCCI has also decided to continue the L Dead Ball' and two bouncers per over rules that it implemented during last year's Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy and Vijay Hazare Trophy in the Ranji Trophy beginning on Friday. (PTI)

Three-Test series an absolute minimum: CA chief Nick Hockley

MELBOURNE, Jan 4: South Africa's decision to send a second-string side for Tests in New Zealand was a "wake-up call", said Cricket Australia chief Nick Hockley, adding that CA will continue to advocate for series containing a minimum of three matches as part of the World Test Championship (WTC). South Africa faced heavy backlash from current and former players after it named a shadow side for the two-Test tour of New Zealand reserving their top players for the second season of the SA20 — launched by CSA and IPL investors last year.

While the two Tests in New Zealand are scheduled from February 4 to 17, the SA20 is slated to start from January 10.

"That's been a wake-up call for everyone," Hockley told SEN. "The role of T20 [in] bringing new kids and new people into the game can't be underestimated. The belief is that the two can coexist. This was suboptimal scheduling," said Hockley.

"I think we in Australia — it's very clear that throughout the whole period the Big Bash has been around — have always prioritised international cricket."

"But this has shone a light. And certainly,

we'll be working with the ICC through scheduling groups to make sure those types of clashes don't manifest and really champion the fact that people need to be prioritising international cricket." There is a divide when it comes to allotting Test matches as part of a series with big teams such as India, England and Australia getting 3 to 5 Tests, while the rest competing mostly in two Test series as part of WTC.

According to the WTC regulations, a series should contain a minimum of two Tests.

"The preference is a minimum three-Test series. So, we'll keep advocating and championing that," Hockley said. "I do think there is work to be done on the FTP (Future Tours Programme) going forward, and it's really [about] cementing the World Test Championship, [and] really advocating for three-Test series as an absolute minimum."

"And then as best as we possibly can, making sure that [when it comes to] domestic T20 competitions, we minimise the overlap for those countries where it is an important source of revenue, so that every country is prioritising international — and particularly Test — cricket." (PTI)

WFI to challenge its suspension next week, calls EC meeting on January 16

NEW DELHI, Jan 4: A defiant Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) will challenge its suspension by the Sports Ministry in court next week and has also called for an Executive Committee meeting here on January 16 to discuss the way forward.

Citing violation of the National Sports Code and the WFI constitution, the government had suspended the newly-elected body on December 24, three days after the Federation conducted its election.

The WFI has maintained that it neither accepts the suspension nor does it recognise the ad-hoc panel that has been constituted by the IOA to manage the day-to-day affairs of the sport.

"We need a properly functioning Federation. We are taking the matter to the court next week. This suspension is not acceptable to us because we were elected democratically. We have also called the Executive Committee meeting on January 16," WFI President Sanjay Singh told PTI. Singh, who hails from Varanasi, reasoned how the ad-hoc panel was not equipped to deliver in crunch time.

"You have seen how the team for the Zagreb Open was announced. Five weight categories will go unrepresented. This will happen in the absence of a proper Federation. If certain wrestlers were unavailable in their respective categories, then why were their replacements not sought?"

"Never ever in a tournament, when the federation was in place, we let India go unrepresented in any weight category. And what was the logic in picking the same team that competed in the Asian Games. There are other contenders as well."

"I have been getting calls from wrestlers who thought they were worthy of a place in the Indian team. They said they could have made the team if they were given a fair chance to prove themselves through trials. That is why you need a proper federation in place," he said.

Meanwhile, a WFI source revealed that the notice for the Executive Committee was issued on December 31. One of the points in the circulated agenda is to "explain define and interpret certain provisions of the constitution."

The circular clearly mentioned, citing the constitution, that the President "shall be chief officer of the WFI. He shall be empowered to call meetings of the council and executive, if he deems proper."

It may be mentioned that the ministry had objected to non-involvement of the secretary general in the December 21 General Council meeting of the WFI.

The WFI had maintained that it had not flouted any rule and that the President, as per the constitution, had the power to take decisions and the secretary general was bound to execute those decisions.

South Africa always challenge us, we can take pride in this performance: Rohit Sharma

CAPE TOWN, Jan 4: Rohit Sharma's countenance reflected his pain at India's failure to win a Test series in South Africa and breach the team's 'final frontier' but the skipper said on Thursday they "would take pride" from their seven-wicket victory in the second Test here.

Coming off an innings and 32-run mauling in the series-opener in Centurion, India fought back strongly to emerge victorious here inside five sessions and share the spoils in the two-match rubber.

"When you come to this part of the world, it's always difficult but we take pride in our performance outside of India. South Africa always challenge us and for us to come out here and win, we can take pride in this performance," Rohit said at the post-match presentation.

"We would have loved to win the series. We came back very well, especially our bowlers. Had some plans and the boys got rewarded."

"We knew that it's going to be a short game, we knew ever run matters, to get that first-innings lead was very important."

Asked about the remarkable turnaround after the poor performance in Centurion, the captain said, "Obviously a great feat, but having said that we have to learn from whatever mistakes we made."

"The bowlers still have to put the ball in the right areas and the boys got rewarded for it. We applied ourselves well and batted to get the 100-run lead, but not pleasing to see the last six wickets (fall for no runs)."

Pacer Mohammed Siraj rattled the hosts in the first session



of the opening day here, grabbing a sensational 6/15 to skittle South Africa out for 55. That set the tone for the series-leveling win.

"Siraj's spell is something you don't get to see often. We kept it simple and the pitch did the rest for us. You still have to

come and do it. Credit to Siraj and Bumrah and to Mukesh and Prasidh to support him in whatever way they did."

When asked about the long-serving, retiring Dean Elgar, Rohit complemented him for being a great servant of South African cricket.

"Such an important player for South Africa. Very, very gritty and his wicket — we spoke about how we want to get him out quickly. We appreciate what he has done for South Africa. Brilliant career — best wishes ahead."

Elgar, who led South Africa in this Test in the absence of injured Temba Bavuma, said he would have "liked to do more" in his farewell game.

"A tough one for us. Pretty positive coming into this game. The first innings killed us with the bat. India bowled fantastically and used the conditions to a T. Still a draw, still a lot of positives for the young players that we have within the side," Elgar said.

The former skipper was coming off an excellent outing in the opening Test but could not replicate that performance

here. "I would have liked to do more in this game. Still very proud of my performance I had in Centurion. Nice to contribute to a winning cause. Some really tough conditions throughout. It (3-Test series) would have been fantastic," Elgar said.

Elgar, who shared the Player of the Series Award with Jasprit Bumrah, added, "You want to challenge yourself, Bumrah is world-class, he deserves this award. You want to push yourself to limits. Glad that I don't have to face these guys again. Fond memories."

"We've come a long way. Very grateful to play against these guys. A lot of good memories, I received it (green cap) in 2012, I have missed only one series. It's got a special place. Only leaves for duty, that's done and dusted." (PTI)

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bovi

CAPE TOWN leader, will not tactician that restore parity against consequential points table who Wednesday.

India are six points (38.89 P) standing further Valuable Player back to add the balance and stability but it will and fourth speed embattled team

As harsh as more than Rohi undercooked to cricket and Shai ent will not win

But with the Jaiswal, Shubn pounding the tude while dea Shardul's presence of batting depth