

6 WORLD Israeli strikes kill 12 in Gaza as war grinds into new year with no end in sight South Korea air crash investigators extract black box data 7 NATION Minister Munde's associate Walmik Karad surrenders, sent in 14-day police custody Kejriwal writes to RSS chief slamming BJP; 'scared of poll defeat': Sachdeva

Execution of Biplab Sarma panel's recommendations by April: CM India, Pak exchange list of nuclear installations

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday said there were some debatable issues like the cadastral survey of land in 'Char' (riverine) areas and discussions were being held with the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) for implementing the Justice (Retd) Biplab Sarma committee's recommendations on Clause 6 of the Assam Accord to protect the interests of the state's indigenous population.

discussions with the AASU on this and other issues", he said. A cadastral survey is a licensed surveyor's official measurement of a property's boundaries, dimensions, and other details. The survey results are used to create cadastral maps, which are a database of official information about land parcels.

The committee's report is divided into three parts -- 40 recommendations for exclusive state implementation, 12 to be jointly implemented by both central and state governments, and 15 exclusively for the Centre. Sarma had earlier said the state government and AASU will collaborate to implement the 40 recommendations related to land, culture, and linguistics along with the 12 others which are in the shared domain of the state and central governments.



NEW DELHI, Jan 1: India and Pakistan on Wednesday exchanged a list of their nuclear installations under a bilateral pact that prohibits the two sides from attacking each other's atomic facilities, in continuation of an over-three-decade practice. The exchange of the list took place under the provisions of an agreement on the prohibition of attack against nuclear installations and facilities, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said.



countries over the Kashmir issue as well as cross-border terrorism. The agreement was signed on December 31, 1988 and entered into force on January 27, 1991. The pact mandates the two countries to inform each other of the nuclear installations and facilities to be covered under the agreement on January 1 of every calendar year.

HT BRIEFS Drugs peddler GUWAHATI: Special Task Force (STF), Assam has apprehended an alleged drug peddler from Lalganesh area in Guwahati, said an official statement on Wednesday. The drug peddler identified as Jintu Mandal. As per the statement, the arrest was made during a raid at Lokhra road, Lalganesh under Dispur Police Station Jurisdiction. Apart from 37.15 grams of suspected heroin, two mobile phones were also recovered from Mandal. "Kamrup (M) Necessary formalities are being done," the statement concluded.

Cong to launch 'Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' campaign tomorrow



NEW DELHI, Jan 1: The Congress will launch its 'Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan Abhiyan' in all blocks, districts and states on January 3. The campaign will culminate in a public rally at Mhow on January 26. The campaign was to be launched on December 27 but was suspended in view of the demise of former prime minister Manmohan Singh on December 26 and the announcement of a seven-day mourning in his honour.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said the implementation of the CWC resolution of December 26 was suspended for a week as a mark of "deep respect and reverence for Singh. "It will take more time to get used to the fact that he is no longer with us," he said. "Even so the Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan Abhiyan will resume in blocks, districts and states, on January 3, 2025 leading up to rally in Dr Ambedkar's 'janmabhoomi' Mhow on January 26, 2025 which is also the 75th anniversary of the Constitution of India coming into effect and the Republic of India being created," Ramesh said.

'Majority community' not Hindus coming: Himanta

CM admits massive increase in infiltration from B'desh since unrest

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday said that the influx from Bangladesh into the state in recent months is mostly by the "majority community" of the neighbouring country and not by the minority Hindus there. Those who are entering India illegally are workers of the textile industry in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, which are in bad shape following the crisis there, and they want to go to Tamil Nadu to join the same sector, he claimed.

to help in creating conducive atmosphere for Hindus and minorities in that country, he added. "The situation is very alarming, and the Centre is very concerned about it," he claimed. There has been a massive increase in infiltration since the unrest in Bangladesh, and in the past five months, 20 to 30 people daily tried to enter Assam and Tripura illegally, Sarma said. The Assam government is not arresting these infiltrators but pushing them back to their own country, he said. This influx is primarily due to the collapse of the economy of the neighbouring country, he claimed.

BSF Guwahati GUWAHATI: Demonstrating exceptional dedication and service, the Border Security Force (BSF) Guwahati Frontier came to the rescue of a pregnant woman in a life-threatening situation in Kalaicharbari, Dhubri district, the BSF officials informed on Wednesday. Taking to the micro-blogging site X, the BSF Guwahati stated, "Bordermen of 150Bn @BSF\_Guwahati Ftr responded swiftly to a life threatening delivery emergency in Kalaicharbari (Dhubri)." Personnel from the 150 Battalion of the BSF swiftly responded to the emergency, navigating challenging riverine terrain to ensure the safety of the patient. The incident occurred when Munti Khatun, a resident of the border village, experienced a critical delivery emergency. With limited healthcare facilities available in the remote riverine area, the situation grew dire.

Reflect aspirations of youths, CM to media

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday said print and electronic media must reflect the aspirations of the state's youth to remain relevant in the present age. "Assam is now an aspirational state and the media, too, should be aspirational. It should not remain imprisoned in the decades of '70s, '80s and '90s of the last century and reflect the hopes and thoughts of the new generation", the CM said during an interaction with journalists here.

the print and electronic media as far as viewership is concerned, he added. "There has been a drastic fall in the circulation of Assamese language newspapers and it is a matter of deep concern for me as it provides employment to a large number of people", Sarma said. Advertisements are coming out of print and electronic media to social media and this is a matter of concern, he added. Referring to his social media posts, the CM said three of his recent videos on issues related to decline in accidents, the forthcoming 'Advantage Assam' conclave and possible investments in the line of the semiconductor assembly unit at Jagiroad had garnered one crore viewership each. "People, particularly the youth, are moving to social media as they don't get explanations or answers to their questions (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

BJP takes dig at Kejriwal over promise of ₹ 18,000 to priests

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: The BJP on Wednesday took a swipe at Arvind Kejriwal calling him a "bagula bhagat" (pretentious devotee) over his pre-poll promise of giving a monthly honorarium of ₹ 18,000 to priests of temples and granthis of gurudwaras. Addressing a press conference at the BJP headquarters, party national spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi claimed that Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) exemplifies "unreliability" in Indian politics, adding that the people of Delhi have understood its "antics."



He alleged that the AAP, which emerged with the promise of bringing change to the country's politics, has lost its "credibility" as it continues to pursue "the same old Congress politics."

There was no immediate response from the AAP to the BJP's charge. Asked about Kejriwal's pre-poll promise of providing an honorarium of ₹ 18,000 to priests of temples and granthis of gurudwaras, Trivedi wondered why he is making such an announcement instead of implementing it right away, when his party is still in power in Delhi. "You must have heard about 'bagula bhagat'. There is a 'bhakt' (devotee) and there is a 'bagula bhagat' (pretentious devotee)... (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Proposed dam in China to damage Brahmaputra ecosystem in Assam'

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: The proposed construction of the world's largest dam by China on Brahmaputra in Tibet will damage the ecosystem of the river in Assam, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Monday. During an interaction with journalists here, Sarma said the Centre has communicated to China the dangers posed by the dam in the lower reaches of the river. "The dam will pose a big problem for us as the riverbed will dry up and the entire river system will become (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Hasina's extradition is one of several bilateral issues with India: Touhid

DHAKA, Jan 1: Deposed premier Sheikh Hasina's extradition is one of the several issues with India that Bangladesh would pursue while strong bilateral ties with Washington, Delhi and Beijing are priorities of the interim government, foreign affairs adviser Touhid Hossain said on Wednesday. Hasina, 77, has been living in India since August 5 when she fled the country following a massive student-led protest that toppled her 16-year regime. Bangladesh-based International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against humanity and genocide". "This (Hasina's extradition) is one of the issues, but we have other issues of interest as well. We will pursue them simultaneously," Hossain told reporters while responding to a question. Hossain said Dhaka's efforts to bring Hasina back from Delhi and to uplift ties with India will proceed in parallel. "I believe both will proceed simultane-



ously". A former diplomat, Hossain, the de facto foreign minister in chief adviser Muhammad Yunus' interim government, said that maintaining strong bilateral ties with the US, India, and China alongside addressing the Rohingya crisis would be key priorities for Bangladesh in 2025. "Our priorities are to resolve the Rohingya crisis, keep good relations with those three countries, and to advance our economic and diplomatic efforts while ensuring stability," he said. On ties with the US, India and China, Hossain said neither of the countries were at the bottom of priority lists when asked whether there was any particular priority for one country over another. "We place equal priority on maintaining ties with these three countries as our various interests are deeply aligned with them," he said, adding that these countries also have their own interests in maintaining good relations with Bangladesh. The foreign adviser hoped that Dhaka's relations with these global powers would (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

1.25 lakh hectares of rubber plantation done under project INROAD

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Over 1.25 lakh hectares of rubber plantation have been completed in Northeast and West Bengal as part of a project by four leading tyre manufacturers of the country, an industry body said on Wednesday. As part of the project INROAD (Indian Natural Rubber Operations for Assisted Development), the Automotive Tyre Manufacturers' Association (ATMA) had planned to develop two lakh hectares of rubber plantation in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal at a cost of Rs 1,100 crore in five years. "In the first four years of the project, an area of 1,25,272 ha has been covered under new natural rubber (NR) plantations across 94 districts in North East and parts of West Bengal," a senior official of ATMA told PTI. This represents one of the highest NR plantations ever achieved in



the country in a span of four years, he added. "During the last four years of the project, a record 5.3 crore planting material has been distributed. The project has reached out to resource deprived populations in the designated states since farmers with land holding of less than one acre are being engaged in the project,"

ing plantations in additional two lakh ha under the INROAD is achieved, it is estimated that the share of NE states will increase to 38 per cent. Similarly, the share of Northeast in India's natural rubber production will go up to 32 per cent from 16 per cent," the ATMA official said. INROAD entails development of two lakh ha of rubber plantation in the Northeastern states and West Bengal, financially supported by Apollo Tyres, CEAT, JK Tyre and MRF, and it is being implemented by the Rubber Board of India. When contacted, ATMA director general Rajiv Budhbraja said: "Notwithstanding challenges, nearly 90 per cent of the plantation target for the first four years under project INROAD has been achieved." Beyond expanding planting areas, the project has seen significant progress in strengthening local nurseries and building grower (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

# Stock markets start 2025 on high note, snap two-day decline on buying in bluechips

**MUMBAI, Jan 1:** Benchmark Sensex and Nifty started the New Year on a high note with the key indices closing higher in a see-saw trade on Wednesday on buying in blue-chip stocks.

Snapping its two-day falling streak, the 30-share BSE Sensex rose by 368.40 points or 0.47 per cent to settle at 78,507.41 on the first trading session of 2025. During the day, it surged 617.48 points or 0.79 per cent to 78,756.49.

The NSE Nifty climbed 98.10 points or 0.41 per cent to 23,742.90 with 37 of its constituents ending higher and 17 closing lower.

Among Sensex shares, Maruti Suzuki rose the most by 3.26 per cent after the carmaker reported 30 per cent rise in total wholesales at 1,78,248 units in December 2024.

Mahindra & Mahindra spurted 2.45 per cent after the automaker reported a 16 per cent rise in overall auto sales at 69,768 units in December 2024.

Larsen & Toubro, Bajaj Finance, Tata Motors, IndusInd Bank, Asian Paints, Power Grid, HDFC Bank and Axis Bank were also among



the gainers.

Tata Steel, Adani Ports, Zomato, HCL Tech, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever and Tech Mahindra were among the laggards.

"The markets began the calendar year on a positive note, gaining nearly half a per cent. After an initial decline, buying interest in select heavyweight stocks across sectors quickly erased losses, gradually pushing the index higher," Ajit Mishra SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

The BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.03 per cent and midcap index climbed 0.50 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, capital goods surged 1.22 per cent, industrials (1.17 per cent), power (0.94 per cent), telecommunication (0.76 per cent), consumer discretionary (0.68 per cent), financial services (0.51 per cent) and healthcare (0.42 per cent).

Metal and realty were the laggards.

"An uptick in core sector data and prospect of ramp-up in capex

spending by the government in the remaining part of the fiscal aided sectors like capital goods, industrials, auto, and power," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services said.

As many as 2,741 stocks advanced while 1,241 declined and 89 remained unchanged on the BSE.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 4,645.22 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

Most of the Asian and European markets were closed for New Year holidays.

US markets ended lower on Tuesday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.88 per cent to USD 74.64 a barrel.

The BSE benchmark Sensex declined 109.12 points or 0.14 per cent to settle at 78,139.01 on Tuesday. The Nifty dipped marginally by 0.10 points to settle at 23,644.80.

In the entire 2024, the Sensex jumped 5,898.75 points or 8.16 per cent, and the Nifty surged 1,913.4 points or 8.80 per cent. (PTI)

# Govt will abide by apex court direction on farmers' protest: Agri Minister Chouhan

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Wednesday said the government will abide by the Supreme Court's decision on the ongoing farmers protest at Punjab-Haryana border and will take steps accordingly.

When asked about holding a dialogue with the protesting farmers to end the logjam, the minister said, "Supreme Court jaise nirnay de raha hai, uske hisab se karyavahi hogi (The action will be taken as per the direction of the Supreme Court)."

While the protesting farmers have requested the Centre to hold a dialogue with them, the minister said the apex court is currently looking into the matter.

The minister further said he otherwise has been meeting various farm bodies on every Tuesday and discussing their concerns.

The minister's remarks come a day ahead of the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear a plea seeking contempt action against the Punjab government for not complying with directions to hospitalise farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who has been on an indefinite fast for over a month.

Dallewal has been on an indefinite fast at the

Khanauri border between Punjab and Haryana since November 26 to press the Centre into accepting the agitating farmers' demands, including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) on crops.

Farmers under the banner of Sanyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have been camping at Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana since February 13 after their march to Delhi was stopped by the security forces.

On December 28, the Supreme Court came down heavily on the Punjab Government for not moving Dallewal to a hospital even as it doubted the intention of the agitating farmers for resisting medical aid for the septuagenarian.

The Punjab Government on December 31 informed the Supreme Court that Dallewal has agreed to accept medical aid given the Centre accepts his proposal to hold talks. The Union Minister said he held a series of meetings with his ministry officials on Wednesday, the first day of the New Year, and set focused targets for achieving goals set for the agriculture sector till March 31. (PTI)

# GST kitty rises 7.3 pc to ₹ 1.77 lakh cr in Dec

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** The gross GST collection rose 7.3 per cent year-on-year to ₹ 1.77 lakh crore in December despite significant increase in both domestic and export refunds. The Central GST collection stood at ₹ 32,836 crore, State GST at ₹ 40,499 crore, Integrated GST at ₹ 47,783 crore and Cess at ₹ 11,471 crore, according to government data released on Wednesday. The total gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue grew 7.3 per cent to ₹ 1.77 lakh crore in December as compared to ₹ 1.65 lakh crore in the same month a year ago, it said.

During the month under review, GST from domestic transactions grew 8.4 per cent to ₹ 1.32 lakh crore, while revenues from tax on imports rose about 4 per cent to ₹ 44,268 crore.

In November, GST mop-up was ₹ 1.82 lakh crore with 8.5 per cent annual growth. The highest-ever collection was in April 2024 at over ₹ 2.10 lakh crore.

During the month, refunds worth ₹ 22,490 crore were issued, registering 31 per cent increase over the year-ago period. After adjusting refunds, net GST collection increased by 3.3 per cent to ₹ 1.54 lakh crore.

MS Mani, partner, Deloitte India said, "While the overall GST collections are showing a y-o-y increase of 8.6 per cent, it needs to

be borne in mind that this is despite an increase of 13.5 per cent in respect of refunds, signifying the stability in GST collections and a good GST framework for refund processing." The significant increase in both domestic and export refunds indicates that the overall refund framework is now stable and its implementation on a sound footing, he said.

Further, the year-to-date growth by CGST formations in GST revenue is 10.8 per cent and SGST formations is 9.6 per cent, Vivek Jalan, partner Tax Connect Advisory Services LLP said.

This may reflect to the fact that possibly the division of taxpayers between the Centre and states may be scrutinized going forward by the GST Council, Jalan said.

According to Pratik Jain, partner, PwC India, given the slowdown in GST collections, it will be interesting to see if the government takes specific measures to boost consumption in the upcoming budget. One of the ways to boost consumption is to rationalise the GST rates, which the GST Council is working on, Jain added.

GST collections growth of 7.3 per cent is in line with bit of a slowdown in GDP growth and it is expected to pick up in this quarter which would be mirrored by GST numbers, Abhishek Jain, partner, KPMG said. (PTI)

# Bhuvnesh Kumar takes over as UIDAI CEO

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Bhuvnesh Kumar has assumed charge as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), an official release said on Wednesday.

Kumar also continues to be an additional secretary in the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY).

He takes over from Amit Agrawal who has been appointed as the new pharma secretary.

"Bhuvnesh Kumar assumed charge as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) on Wednesday," an official release said.

Kumar is an IAS officer of the 1995 batch from the Uttar Pradesh cadre.

"A graduate and gold medalist from the National Institute of Technology, Kurukshetra, he held several important positions both at the Centre and in his cadre state," the release said.

Earlier, he also served as the Joint Secretary in MeitY.

In Uttar Pradesh, he served as the principal secretary in the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairy Development and Fisheries.

Previously, he was the Secretary Finance, Secretary MSME, Secretary Technical Education and Divisional Commissioner Department of Land Revenue in the Government of Uttar Pradesh. (PTI)

# Rupee ends flat at 85.64 against US dollar

**MUMBAI, Jan 1:** The rupee settled flat at 85.64 against the US dollar in the first session of 2025 on Wednesday, as gains from positive domestic equities were offset by unabated foreign fund outflows.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.63 and touched an intraday low of 85.72 against the greenback during the session.

The unit ended the session at 85.64 against the dollar, unchanged from its previous close.

On Tuesday, the rupee depreciated 12 paise to close at a fresh all-time closing low of 85.64 against the US dollar.

On December 27, the local currency touched its lifetime intraday low of 85.80 against the greenback.

The rupee remained well-bid on Wednesday. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) sold around 85.7250 and ensured no more fall in the currency, as it rose to 85.62 but closed lower in a low-volume day due to a holiday in the US and most corporates were absent from the scene, according to Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP.

"The rupee is still vulnerable to lower levels as dollar and yields remain well bid. The dollar index was at 108.4675 virtually unchanged from its morning level, while US 10-year yields were at 4.5730 per cent. Asian currencies generally remained stable..." Bhansali added. (PTI)

# Petrol, diesel sales soar on holiday travel

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** India's petrol and diesel consumption soared in December 2024 as holiday travel boosted demand, reversing the fall witnessed in previous months, preliminary data of state-owned fuel retailers showed on Wednesday.

While petrol sales had shown a year-on-year increase in recent months, diesel has been a laggard since monsoon. November was the first month that saw growth in diesel consumption and the trend continued into December.

Petrol sales of three state-owned firms, which control 90 per cent of the fuel market, soared 9.8 per cent to 2.99 million tonne in December compared to 2.72 million tonne of consumption in the same month last year.

Diesel demand during the month was up 4.9 per cent to 7.07 million tonne.

This is the second straight month of auto fuels posting handsome increase in consumption. Petrol demand was up 8.3 per cent year-on-year in November and diesel consumption rose 5.9 per cent.

Road trips as well as air and rail travel during the holiday season in the second half of December boosted fuel sales. Also, fuel demand in the agriculture sector due to kharif crop sowing contributed to the rise.

Petrol and diesel sales have been tepid during the monsoon months as rains reduced vehicular movement and demand for the agriculture sector. Petrol demand however soared once rains eased but diesel consumption lagged year-on-year.

Month-on-month petrol sales in December 2024 however slid 3.6 per cent when compared to 3.1 million tonne of consumption in November

2024. Similarly, diesel demand was 1.7 per cent less than 7.2 million tonne of consumption in November 2024.

Diesel is India's most consumed fuel, accounting for almost 40 per cent of all petroleum product consumption. The transport sector accounts for 70 per cent of all diesel sales in the country. It is also the predominant fuel used in agriculture sectors, including in harvesters and tractors.

Consumption of petrol during December was 8.4 per cent more than in December 2022, and 27.9 per cent more than in Covid-marred December 2020.

Diesel demand was 3.2 per cent lower than December 2022, but 48.7 per cent higher when compared to December 2020.

Jet fuel (ATF) sales rose 6.8 per cent year-on-year to 696,400 tonne during December 2024. This was 5.2 per cent higher month-on-month when compared with 661,700 tonne of fuel sold in November.

Like petrol and diesel, ATF demand too is now firmly above pre-Covid levels.

ATF consumption was 12.1 per cent more than in December 2022, but 40.8 per cent less than that in December 2020.

Cooking gas LPG sales were up 5.2 per cent year-on-year to 2.87 million tonne in December 2024. LPG consumption was 5.7 per cent higher than in December 2022, but 14.8 per cent less than in December 2020.

Month-on-month, LPG demand was up 4.1 per cent when compared to 2.76 million tonne of LPG consumption in November, the data showed. (PTI)

# Healthy growth set to return this fiscal; rate cut likely sooner

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** India will have to navigate geopolitical headwinds, tame domestic inflation and nudge the private sector to further loosen their purse strings as the world's fastest-growing major economy seeks more purple patches in 2025, leaving behind September quarter growth blues.

Economists at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) say that high-frequency indicators for the third quarter of 2024-25 indicate the economy is recovering, driven by strong festive activity and a sustained upswing in rural demand.

In what has been described as a "temporary blip" by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the country's economic growth slid to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent in the July-September period after clipping a healthy rate of 7-8 per cent.

With the growth versus inflation debate leaving the finance ministry and RBI on different pages, all eyes will also be on possible interest rate cuts in February when the central bank's monetary policy panel meets for the first time under the new Governor Sanjay Malhotra. The panel meeting will come close on the heels of the 2025-26 Union Budget that will lay out the Modi 3.0 government's economic and fiscal roadmap, especially in the context of global tensions and the upcoming Donald Trump presidency in the US.

All said, experts are of the opinion that India's prospects are bright as macroeconomic fundamentals



are strong.

For 2024-25, the real GDP growth is projected at 6.6 per cent and 6.9 per cent for the first quarter of 2025-26. In the next fiscal, the June quarter expansion is pegged at 7.3 per cent, as per the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Experts opined that the course of the global economy will also depend a lot on the policy initiatives of Trump who will take over as the US President on January 20.

And current volatility in securities and currency markets in India as well as other countries cannot be discounted.

"The prospects for the Indian economy look bright for the coming year and we can expect growth to cross the 7 per cent mark on top of 6.6-6.8 per cent expected for FY25," said Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda.

The smoothening of inflation in the coming months will be the one factor driving consumption in the upward direction, which in turn will help to increase private investment in the consumer goods segment - which has been missing so far, he added.

Experts also said that an interest cut, which has been on hold since February 2023, will be a big booster for the economy as and when the RBI decides to take a call on it. The benchmark short-term lending rate has remained unchanged at 6.5 per cent since February 2023.

Ira Chief Economist Aditi

Nayar noted that the economic outlook for the Indian economy appears quite bright from a domestic point of view, amidst rising uncertainty globally, stemming from geopolitics and conflicts, the pace of Central Bank easing and commodity prices, threats of tariffs etc.

"The upcoming FY2026 Union Budget, which is expected to reveal the new medium-term fiscal path, and later, the recommendations of the next Finance Commission will set the tone for the fiscal policy. Private sector capacity addition may remain somewhat circumspect given the global uncertainties, and their attendant impact on exports," she said.

The rupee may remain in the headlines, as it has in the last month, Nayar said. The government on its part is committed to fiscal prudence, according to the latest Finance Ministry report.

The Union Government is committed to pursuing the glide path of fiscal consolidation as announced in the Budget for FY 2021-22 and to attain a level of Fiscal Deficit lower than 4.5 per cent of GDP by FY2025-26, it added.

The thrust, the ministry said, will be on improving the quality of public spending, while at the same time, strengthening the social security net for the poor and needy.

"This approach would help further strengthen the nation's macroeconomic fundamentals and ensure overall financial stability," it said.

Finance Minister Nirmala

Sitharaman, while replying to a discussion in Parliament, said that the lower-than-expected GDP growth of 5.4 per cent in the second quarter was a "temporary blip" and the economy will see healthy growth in the coming quarters.

The latest RBI report, the Indian economy and financial system remain strong and stable underpinned by sound macroeconomic fundamentals, healthy balance sheets of banks and non-banks and low volatility in financial markets despite some qualms about global spillovers.

"Despite this recent deceleration, structural growth drivers remain intact. Real GDP growth is expected to recover in Q3 and Q4 of 2024-25, supported by a pick-up in domestic drivers, mainly public consumption and investment, strong service exports and easy financial conditions, the report added.

It is to be noted here that the Finance Ministry in its November Monthly Economic Review had raised concerns that the possibility that structural factors may also have contributed to the slowdown in H1 should not be ruled out.

RBI Governor Malhotra, in his foreword to the Financial Stability Report, said notwithstanding the uncertainties shrouding the global macro-financial ethos as it unfolds, prospects for the Indian economy are expected to improve after the slowdown in the pace of economic activity in the first half of 2024-25.

"Consumer and business confidence for the year ahead remain high and the investment scenario is brighter as corporations step into 2025 with robust balance sheets and high profitability," said Malhotra who took over as 26th Governor earlier in December.

According to the International Monetary Fund, downside risks, such as escalating geopolitical tensions, uncertainty about trade and industrial policies in the aftermath of major global elections, and potential tightening of financial conditions, however, could drag global output lower from baseline projections. (PTI)

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# Cong to launch 'Jai Bapu,

The CWC also said between January 26, 2025 and January 26, 2026, the Congress will launch a "massive", nationwide public outreach campaign called the Samvidhan Bachao Rashtriya Padayatra in which all leaders will participate.

"This padayatra will be from village to village, township to township in the form of a relay," the CWC said. Finally, it said, an AICC session will be held in Gujarat in the first half of April 2025. (PTI)

# Reflect aspirations of youths

in the print or the electronic media', he added. Asked about benefits for journalists, Sarma said if the media industry flourishes, the government will definitely provide them with the necessary benefits and incentives.

"The priority, however, is to collectively strive to ensure that the print and electronic media reorient and reinvent itself in a manner that reflects the hopes and aspirations of society and the youth in particular," he said. If a collective effort is made then definitely the circulation of print and viewership of the electronic media will definitely improve, the CM asserted. (PTI)

# BJP takes dig at Kejriwal over

He must implement it," he told reporters. Trivedi further questioned why Kejriwal, who once opposed temples and the Ram temple, is now filling out forms for the registration of prospective beneficiaries of the scheme. "They should implement it. You (AAP) are still in power, not a party aspiring for power," Trivedi said.

The BJP leader further listed 10 alleged failures of the AAP government during its term in Delhi, claiming that it failed to fulfill its promises, which included freeing the city from unsafe hanging electric wires, providing round-the-clock clean drinking water and creating a world-class education system.

He alleged that the AAP government also failed to deliver on Kejriwal's promise of a pollution-free environment in Delhi, a clean Yamuna river, improved healthcare, removal of garbage piles, women's safety, basic amenities for colonies and permanent pucca houses for people living in slums.

"They didn't do these things. AAP convener Kejriwal, former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia and others from the party have been arrested in connection with various corruption cases," the BJP leader said.

Trivedi further remarked, "This is not new politics, but the same old Congress politics" that the Arvind Kejriwal-led party has been pursuing. "There was a super PM there (during Congress-led UPA regime), here is a super CM (in AAP government)," he said, in an apparent reference to former Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Delhi chief minister Atishi. (PTI)

# 'Proposed dam in China to damage

fragile. We have already raised the matter with the Centre', he said. Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu has also written to the Centre about the matter, Sarma added.

Last week, China approved the construction of the world's largest dam, stated to be the planet's biggest infra project, on the Brahmaputra river in Tibet close to the Indian border, raising concerns in India and Bangladesh.

The hydropower project will be built in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo river, the Tibetan name for the Brahmaputra. The dam will be built at a huge gorge in the Himalayan reaches where the Brahmaputra river makes a huge U-turn to flow into Arunachal Pradesh and then to Bangladesh, an official release had said. (PTI)

# Hasina's extradition is one of

be strengthened further by the end of this year. The interim government recently sent a diplomatic note to New Delhi seeking the extradition of Hasina from India. The foreign ministry officials here said they awaited a response from India. Further steps would be taken once a response is received, it added.

Hossain said he plans to visit Beijing on January 20 for bilateral discussions on various matters. "I will be going to address the issues we share," he said, refraining from elaborating on specific topics to be discussed during his Beijing tour. He, however, described the visit as part of Dhaka's effort to maintain balanced relations with China, alongside the United States and India.

Asked if Dhaka considers the rapid development in Myanmar's Rakhine state bordering Bangladesh as a challenge since the rebel Arakan Army took virtual control of almost the entire region, Hossain said Dhaka acknowledged the newly emerged reality. "The situation in Myanmar's Rakhine is extremely challenging because the ground realities there have changed," he said. But he said Dhaka's main objective was to ensure the rights and security of the forcibly displaced Rohingya since over a million of them took refuge in Bangladesh, some 60,000 in the past few months.

"Without this (rights and security) they will not agree to return," he added. (PTI)

# 1.25 lakh hectares of rubber

capacities as a result of collaborative efforts among tyre companies and the Rubber Board of India, he added. "As the plantation reaches a critical stage, the next component of the project is development of infrastructure such as creation of model smoke houses and dissemination of new practices amongst rubber growers," Budhraj said. The project is the first of its kind in the world where the tyre industry is contributing directly towards development of rubber plantation. (PTI)

# Assam govt focusing on manufacturing, IT, tourism sectors to attract investments: Himanta

**GUWAHATI, Jan 1:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday said his government had taken several groundbreaking steps to unlock the state's potential and steer it towards the path of inclusive and sustainable growth.

The year 2024 has been a year of development that will chart the course of the state's future, guided by industrial progress, more investments and socio-economic uplift, the CM said during an interaction with journalists here.

"The start government will organise the 'Advantage Assam' conclave in February to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, aiming to create an ecosystem that supports innovation, provides easier access to capital, removing bureaucratic hurdles to create an atmosphere for businesses and industries to be set up in the state", he said.

The state government is focusing on strengthening manufacturing, IT, renewable energy and tourism sectors to attract investments that will not only boost the state's economy but also create jobs, he said.



He said the 'Advantage Assam' roadshow was held in Bhutan in December and similar ones are being planned in the UAE, UK, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, Japan and Singapore to put Assam in the global investment destination map. Sarma said the highlight of 2024 was the laying of the foundation stone for the ₹ 27,000 crore Tata semiconductor facility at Jagrood by the Prime Minister.

Last year, nearly a million people who had their Aadhar cards

locked due to the NRC process, got their biometrics unlocked due to the Centre's initiative, he said.

Under the Chief Minister's Atmanirbhar Asom Abhijan, one lakh start-up ideas were supported with seed money and mentoring during the year, he added.

Over one lakh got government jobs through a transparent recruitment model, over and above what was promised in the election manifesto, the CM said.

The state government also cre-

ated 39 co-districts to take the administration closer to the people and ending the demand for the creation of new districts, Sarma said.

Regarding women empowerment, the Orunodoi scheme financially supported 37 lakh beneficiaries. 10 lakh girl child were provided educational grants under the 'Nijut Molina' scheme and 39 lakh women were benefited under the 'Mukhya Mantri Manila Udyamita Abhijan', the CM said.

Referring to crime rate in the state, Sarma said it had declined by 65 per cent and due to the state government's focus on forensic capabilities, conviction rates are up by 270 per cent.

He claimed that the state government is on its way to eliminate child marriage by 2026 and have taken several steps in this direction, including ramping up of police force and fixing legal loopholes.

Sarma further said ₹ 350 crore was transferred to the bank accounts of 6.8 lakh people who were affected by the floods in 2024. (PTI)

# African swine fever leads to ₹ 336.49 cr loss in Mizoram in 2024

### 12,568 pigs were culled in 2021 as precaution to prevent the disease from spreading further

**AIZAWL, Jan 1:** Mizoram suffered a loss of ₹ 336.49 crore due to the outbreak of African Swine Fever (ASF) in 2024, officials of the state's Animal Husbandry and Veterinary department said. So far, the state has suffered ₹ 896.69 crore loss due to the dreaded pig disease since 2021, they said.

At least 14,950 pigs have died due to ASF and 24,177 others culled in the hilly state from January to December, 2024 according to the data provided by the department to PTI.

The ASF outbreak was first reported at Lungsen village in south Mizoram's Lunglei district near the Bangladesh border on March 21, 2021 and 33,417 pigs died during that year, officials said.

Additionally, 12,568 pigs were culled in 2021 as a precaution to prevent the pig disease from spreading further, they said.

While 12,795 pigs died and 11,686 others were culled in 2022, last year saw a smaller toll with



1,139 deaths and 980 pigs culled, they said.

The total monetary loss incurred due to ASF in 2021 was estimated at ₹ 334.14 crore, ₹ 210.32 crore in 2022 and 15.77 crore in 2023, they said.

Officials said the ASF outbreak has shown signs of receding with fewer pig deaths and culling reported since mid-December.

Usually, the ASF outbreak shows respite during winter and resurgence during warmer weather, they said.

Mizoram was also hit by Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) in 2013, 2016, 2018 and 2020 killing thousands of pigs and piglets causing a loss to the tune of ₹ 10.62 crore. (PTI)

## Jadav Payeng nominated for Rongbong Terang Samanway Award



**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, Jan 1:** Environmental activist and forestry worker Jadav Payeng has been nominated for the 'Rongbong Terang Samanway Award, 2025'.

Chingthur Publication, Bakaliaghat informed the media here in a press meet held at Bakaliaghat Anchalic Yuva Sangha on Tuesday last.

The 9th edition of the Samanway Award will be presented to Payeng in a function to be held at Bakaliaghat Anchalic Yuva Sangha on January 13, which marks the birthday of Padmashree Rongbong Terang.

Writer Khoyasing Hanse; Bhaben Koch president of Bakulia Press Club (BPC); Biresh Hazarika, president and Dhiren Bora Secretary of Bakaliaghat Branch Sahitya Sabha; Munimanta Saikia

former Headmaster, Rajapathar High School attended the press meet.

On the other hand, the Chingthur Publication informed that the president Dr Surjakanta Hazarika and secretary, Dr Uprendrajit Sarmah of Axom Sahitya Sabha, Central Committee and newly elected president Dr Bashanta Kumar Goswami and general secretary, Debajit Bora of Axom Sahitya Sabha will grace the award distribution function.

Padmashree Rongbong Terang will also attend the function, and Chingthur Publication will be informed through a press communiqué.

The owner of Chingthur Publication has also mentioned the names of awardees of Rongbong Terang Samanway since its inception.

Dr Dharendra Nath Dutta was the recipient in 2017, followed by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi in 2018, Homen Borgohain in 2019, Dr Nagen Saikia in 2020, Phanindra Kumar Debchoudhary in 2021, Dr Pitambar Deva Goswami in 2022, Biren Singha in 2023 and Dr Karabi Deka Hazarika in 2024.

## ABSU urges for successful implementation of BTR accord clauses

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, Jan 1:** The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) expressed its wishes for 2025 to mark for a successful implementation of the historic third Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Peace Accord signed on January 27, 2020 and significant advancements in the quality of education, particularly in mother-tongue medium schools, through the effective implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

In a press statement, ABSU president Dipen Boro and general secretary Khanindra Basumatary, extended their warm greetings to the people of Assam and the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) for the New Year. The students union prays that the almighty blesses the state with peace, prosperity, and happiness for all its citizens in days to come ahead.

"The ABSU wishes for 2025 to mark the successful implementation of the 3rd Bodo Peace Accord and significant advancements in the quality of education, particularly in mother-tongue medium schools, through the effective implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. We urge the Government of Assam to address the challenges faced by Bodo medium schools, including the appointment of sufficient teachers for both elementary and secondary education", the students union leaders said.

"We also call upon the state government to fulfill its commitment to the provincialisation of venture schools as stipulated in clause 6.3 of the 3rd Bodo Accord. We also urge the government to implement policies aimed at eliminating school dropouts in remote and underdeveloped areas in the state", they further said.

"Given the concerning rise in educated unemployment, ABSU appeals to the State, Central, and BTR Governments to create additional employment opportunities for youth in 2025. We also encourage young people to pursue entrepreneurship and self-employment as viable career options. To address the recurring devastation caused by floods and erosion in Assam, ABSU calls on both the central and state governments to adopt comprehensive long-term and short-term strategies to minimise loss of life and property", they further added.

The students union also urged the Government of India and the Government of Assam to expedite the implementation of the key provisions of the 3rd Bodo Peace Accord, as these measures have the potential to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity in the region. With violence now eradicated from the Bodoland region and the cessation of conflicts between the Boro and Non-Boro communities, ABSU calls on the 3.5 million people of BTR to remain united and sustain peace in the BTR and across Assam.

In accordance with the spirit of the Peace Accord, the students' association urged the Government of India and the Government of Assam to release all former NDFB members who have completed over 14 years of incarceration and withdraw the charges against them.

ABSU envisions 2025 as a year free from violence, marked by harmony and coexistence in diversity. We appeal to all citizens of BTR and Assam to reject violence and hatred, and to respect the rights of individuals and communities, in line with the principles of the Indian Constitution. Together, let us work towards building a more inclusive and developed society", the students' union leaders said.

## Lord Shani idol desecrated in Bangladesh-Tripura border village



**HT Correspondent**

**AGARTALA, Jan 1:** Tensions flared in Tamsa Bari, a village under Sonamura sub-division of Sepahijala District, after the idol of Lord Shani at a bamboo-fenced shrine was found dislodged and overturned late on the night of December 31. Sonamura, situated along the India-Bangladesh border, is a mixed-population area comprising both Hindus and Muslims.

Locals reported that the idol, worshipped daily by a family, was discovered damaged and lying upside down. The family informed nearby residents, who gathered at the shrine to assess the situation.

"We called our neighbors and elders after finding the idol in this state. We don't know who could have done this, but we've informed local leaders and the police," said one of the residents. Some locals alleged that the act was intended to disrupt the communal harmony in Sonamura. "There are people trying to create unrest between Hindus and Muslims. This seems like the handiwork of miscreants with vested interests," they claimed.

Sepahijala District Superintendent of Police, Bogati Reddy, addressed the media regarding the incident. "Upon receiving the information, we rushed to the spot to manage the situation and have initiated a probe. The shrine is located near the national highway, and some miscreants have damaged the idol. We are analyzing CCTV footage to identify those responsible and will take strict action against them," he assured.

## Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha observes Arunodoi Day

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Jan 1:** In commemoration of the first Assamese newspaper 'Arunodoi', the Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha, along with its Upashana branch organised a ceremony to celebrate Arunodoi Day at Milanpur Khagarijan High School on Wednesday.

Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami, the newly elected president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, attended the event as the chief guest and delivered a speech.

He emphasized the importance of balancing tradition and modernity, saying that the Assam Sahitya Sabha needs to adapt to the changing times while preserving its core values.

During the event, the district body of the literary organisation also felicitated Dr Basanta Kr Goswami and newly elected vice president Padum Rajkuhwa.

Goswami also highlighted the significance of Arunodoi, which played a crucial role in promoting nationalism and intellectual discourse in Assam praising the newspaper's contribution to the state's cultural and literary heritage.

The event also included the felicitation of newly elected office-bearers of the Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha, including its president, Dr Sarat Borkatoki, and vice-president, Mrinal Kumar Hazarika.

## CM Sarma flags off 56 new electric buses

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 1:** In a move to promote eco friendly transport, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday flagged off 56 new AC electric buses for Guwahati.

He also dedicated the newly constructed Mini Inter-State Bus Terminal at Khanapara.

Speaking on the occasion, chief minister announced that in a significant step towards a greener and sustainable Assam, state government will go for phased replacement of diesel buses in Guwahati's public transport system with electric alternatives.

He also said that by 2026, the diesel buses in Guwahati will entirely be phased out and add over 356 electric buses. Under PM e-Bus Sewa, 100 more buses will be added by 2026.

He further said that the diesel buses will be phased out helping Guwahati to become a green corridor.

Sarma said that Assam is now one of the top performing states in digitising the transport system. "Assam has secured the number one position in the country in terms of complete digitisation of the transport system. With digitization, the work is being carried out on a random basis, ensuring the distribu-

tion of tasks and resolving issues. This has helped in reducing the involvement of middlemen", the CM said.

He also said that 90 per cent of 'middle men nexus' has been eliminated from Assam Transport Corporation.

Announcing bold measures of transformation, the chief minister said that to streamline fitness certificate issuance, six vehicle fitness centres will be set up.

State government is also planning Motor Driving Institutes in every LAC with Principals empowered to issue driving licenses.

In the beginning, the inauguration programme observed two minutes silence in the honour of former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh.

Panchayat and rural development minister Ranjeet Kumar Dass, transport minister Jogen Mohan, industries and commerce minister Bimal Bora, finance minister Ajanta Neog, minister of information, public relations, printing & stationery, water resources, social justice and empowerment Pijush Hazarika, sports and youth welfare minister Nandita Gorlosa, MP Bijulee Kalita, chief secretary Ravi Kota and a host of other dignitaries were also present on the occasion.

## Huge cache of arms, ammunition seized

**IMPHAL, Jan 1:** Security forces seized a huge cache of arms and ammunition during search operations in Manipur's Bishnupur and Thoubal districts, a police statement said on Wednesday.

From Thongkhonglak village in Bishnupur district, security forces on Tuesday seized one SLR with a magazine, one .303 rifle, one 12 bore single barrel gun, two 9mm pistol with magazine, one anti-riot gun, two INSAS LMG magazine, two INSAS rifle magazine, four hand grenades, one detonator, five anti-riot shell, ammunition and other articles, the statement said.

The security forces seized one anti material rifle (AMR) sniper modified with sight scope and magazine, two single bolt action rifle, three 9mm pistol (country made), one hand grenade, four MK-13T, and ammunition from Leishangthem Ikop Pat area of Thoubal district, it said.

Meanwhile, police arrested a member of the banned outfit Kangleipak Communist Party (People's War Group) involved in extortion from Mantripukhri Bazaar near Bengali crossing in Imphal East district on Tuesday.

One 9mm pistol with magazine, two money receipts of KCP (PWG) and other articles were seized from his possession, the police said. (PTI)

## ASTA meets Guv on the occasion of New Year Day

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 1:** Assam SepakTakraw Association on Wednesday met Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya at Raj Bhavan, Guwahati.

"It was a moment of great pride and honor to meet His Excellency, the Honourable Governor of Assam, Shri Lakshman Prasad Acharya, at Raj Bhavan to extend New Year greetings on behalf of the Assam SepakTakraw Association", an official statement said.

General secretary of ASTA, Bisnu Ram Nunisa said, "on this occasion, we had the privilege of felicitating His Excellency with a letter of appreciation on behalf of ASTA".

Speaking about the meet he further said that they were delighted by His Excellency's genuine interest in SepakTakraw, as he shared encouraging thoughts on the sport's development and its potential in Assam.

"His insightful words and support have inspired us to work with renewed dedication to promote SepakTakraw and contribute to the growth of sports in the state", the statement concluded.

# Sarbananda celebrates New Year with children

**HT Correspondent**

**DIBRUGARH, Jan 1:** The Union Minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways, Sarbananda Sonowal, marked the beginning of 2025 by celebrating New Year's Day with children at the Prerana Shishu Griha in Dibrugarh on Wednesday.

Spending time with the children, the Member of Parliament for Dibrugarh, Sarbananda Sonowal said, "The pure and innocent smile of children brings unparalleled joy and happiness. I wholeheartedly wish them the confidence to move forward in life and achieve success. I also extend my heartfelt New Year's greetings to everyone."

Sonowal reflected on the past year and shared aspirations for the year ahead.

"The New Year signifies new hopes, aspirations, opportunities, and achievements," he said.

"As we bid farewell to 2024, we celebrate a year of progress that accelerated the development of Assam, the Northeast, and the nation as a whole," added Sonowal.

Sonowal also highlighted the



development of Assam and the Northeast, saying the region is undergoing an era of unprecedented growth and transformation under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Sonowal said, "The mighty Brahmaputra flows not only as a lifeline but as a symbol of the boundless energy of the people, embodying the newfound confidence of a rising New India. Under Modiji's inspiring leader-

ship, we continue to work towards harnessing the immense potential for the cause of Nation Building towards a 'Viksit Bharat' that has been made available due to an efficient and effective good governance since 2014."

Sonowal highlighted milestones achieved under the Prime Minister's leadership, particularly in the maritime sector.

"Under the dynamic leadership

of Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modiji, the year 2024 was a landmark for India's maritime ambitions," he said, "from laying the foundation of the country's 13th and largest major port to opening new global trade routes, we took significant strides to establish India among the top 10 maritime nations in the world."

Sonowal emphasised India's progress in 2024 as a testament to the nation's rising stature on the global stage.

"Under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we continue to forge a path driven by aspirations to become one of the most powerful nations in the world. Our seas are surging with potential, and the maritime sector—a cornerstone of India's economic future—is connecting us to the world and unlocking new gateways to prosperity," he said.

Sonowal also reflected on his personal journey in 2024, calling it a significant year.

He said, "The year 2024 was important for me, as it brought an outpouring of love and blessings from the people, inspiring me to

serve the nation with renewed enthusiasm and dedication. It was also a year of gaining new experiences, for which I remain eternally grateful to people from all walks of life."

As 2025 begins, Sonowal called for collective dedication & urged everyone to commit to the cause of nation building.

"Let us resolve to work with unity and determination in 2025 to build a self-reliant, developed, and prosperous India. Each of us has a role to play in shaping a future where India leads globally—economically, culturally, and spiritually. Together, as custodians of our rich heritage and champions of a brighter tomorrow, let us build an India that stands tall in its 'Amrit Kaal,'" said Sarbananda Sonowal.

Sarbananda Sonowal was joined by Dibrugarh deputy mayor, Ujjal Phukan, chief executive member of the Sonawal Kachari Autonomous Council, Tonkeswar Sonowal, Tinsukia Development Authority chairman Kajal Gohain, among other local leaders.

## Tripura Assembly session to commence from Jan 10



**HT Correspondent**

**AGARTALA, Jan 1:** The winter session of the Tripura Legislative Assembly is set to take place over three days, starting January 10. Two key bills are expected to be tabled during this session. On Wednesday, Speaker Biswabandhu Sen chaired a Business Advisory Committee (BAC) meeting with MLAs from various political parties to finalise the session's schedule. Parliamentary affairs minister Ratan Lal Nath, addressing the media, confirmed that the session will be held on January 10, 13, and 15.

"The Governor, Indrasena Reddy Nallu, has called for the session, following which the Speaker convened the BAC meeting. After detailed discussions, it was unanimously decided to hold a three-day winter session," Nath said. On the first day of the session, Governor Reddy will deliver an address outlining the state government's achievements over the past year and its plans for the future.

"There will be a question-and-answer session, and two confirmed bills will be tabled, including one concerning pensions and honorariums for MLAs and former MLAs. Another bill may also be introduced. This session will mark a significant step forward as it will be conducted paperlessly, with MLAs set to visit Parliament to learn about managing online questions and responses. The Budget session is scheduled for March," Nath added.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

I think in terms of the day's resolutions, not the years - Henry Moore

Competition on freebies

Delhi Chief Minister Atishi gets lost in the awesome presence of AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal, who was Chief Minister when Atishi was minister, Kejriwal's advantage is, he went to jail. Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia also went to jail. So did AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh. Also health minister Satyendra Jain. Atishi did not get the honour but Kejriwal says Atishi too will be hauled up on trumped up charges. Atishi is a stop-gap. Kejriwal wants to be CM like kids candy! But this time it is not easy. The 'jail-bird' tag might cost Kejriwal a third (fourth?) in a row shot at the CM's chair. But Arvind Kejriwal has a protective 'kavach' though how that will help the AAP win the elections is a mystery. The issues and promises Kejriwal has picked up point to a shift. From being 'secular', Kejriwal has moved to what's called 'soft-Hindutva'. Uncertainty does that to politicians. Kejriwal isn't the confident-self he used to be. In this edition of the Delhi elections, Kejriwal is afflicted with doubts. And the zeitgeist of the times, a shift to Hindutva, is in Modi and Yogi's favour, forcing Kejriwal to go soft-Hindutva. Kejriwal, contrary to general thought, is close to Hindus, is the well-wisher of Hindus, and helpful, too! Whoever would have thought Kejriwal would make Bharatiya Janata Party eat crow on issues Hindu?

The AAP is working hard to appear more Hindu than the notoriously Hindutva BJP. On New Year eve, Kejriwal announced Rs 18000 honorarium for Delhi's Hindu priests and Sikh 'granthis', now why didn't the BJP think of that, he asked, challenging the BJP to follow suit in BJP-ruled states. Is Delhi dotted with temples and priests; gurudwaras and 'granthis'? Ironically, this Kejriwal scheme was announced even as Delhi maulan and maulvis were protesting the non-distribution of their AAP Government-granted "salaries" for the past 18 months. Kejriwal's Maulana outreach was part of AAP's Muslim-first policy, which the BJP could not match. Today, the BJP is complaining against AAP's Hindu outreach. Is Kejriwal giving the BJP the creeps? Isn't the BJP feeling safe in its Hindutva-skin now that Kejriwal has taken a softer Hindutva hue? Doesn't the BJP have powerful Hindutva-icons such as the 'Ek hai toh safe hain' Narendra Modi and the 'Batenge toh katenge' Yogi Adityanath?

Will Arvind Kejriwal prove to be the poltergeist the RSS Chief wants; be a Hindutva leader without being a Hindu zealot? Kejriwal is a Hanuman-bhakt and he will be the last politician/leader to look for a 'Shivling' under a mosque, any mosque. Atishi last week accused the Delhi Lt. Governor VK Saxena of ordering the demolition of temples in Delhi, which Saxena said was a lie. Atishi wouldn't back-off, she was articulating AAP's soft-Hindutva, which has many interpretations including the one which frequently crops up - AAP's nervousness going into these elections. The unbeatable-in-Delhi AAP is floundering from one issue to another. If it isn't about Bangladeshi, Rohingya and Purvanchali, then it is about water and corruption or about schemes targeting women. Arvind Kejriwal is giving the impression he is crowded and claustrophobic, worried of what awaits the party and him, realizing that it cannot wait on Muslims and freebies to dole out victory!

Political row over suicide of DCC treasurer and his son in Kerala

By: P. Sree Kumar

There seems to be no end to the problems plaguing the Congress in Kerala. The latest jolt to the party, already rocked by internecine factionalism, has come in the form of a flaming row over the suspected suicide of Wayanad District Congress Committee treasurer, N M Vijayan, and his son, Jijesh. The unfortunate deaths have put the Congress on the defensive. Vijayan and Jijesh are said to be the victims of the Congress-controlled Cooperative Bank job scam involving party MLA I C Balakrishnan. Vijayan, who was also the former SulthanBathery panchayat president, and son Jijesh, a former SulthanBathery Co-operative Bank employee, were found in a critical condition on December 24, allegedly after consuming poison. They were admitted to the Government Medical College in Kozhikode. Reports have it that Vijayan had accepted money from those aspiring for a job in the SulthanBathery Co-operative Bank on the directions of Balakrishnan. The demand for invoking abatement of suicide charges against Balakrishnan has since gathered momentum with allegations that the Wayanad district leadership of the Congress had carried out a scam similar to the one in the Pulpally Co-operative Bank.

On its part, the CPI(M) Wayanad district leaders said complaints about the recruitment issues in the bank had come up earlier but job aspirants were scared of speaking out openly in view of threats. Leader of the Opposition V D Satheesan has, however, welcomed the demand for a police enquiry, saying that the party does not have to protect anyone, nor was there any wrongdoing. MLA Balakrishnan said he would face the allegations legally. The acute discomfiture of the party has come at a time when the ugly head of groupism has reared once again with redoubled vigour. The tussle between Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) president K. Sudhakaran and the leader of the opposition V D Satheesan has come out in the open. The party is vertically divided over the leadership of the Congress in Kerala.

Senior leaders like K. Muralidharan and Ramesh Chennithala have extended their support to Sudhakaran whose removal is being sought by the rival group led by Satheesan. There is no need to replace Sudhakaran, they have said, thwarting Satheesan camp's one-point agenda: Remove Sudhakaran. Satheesan thinks his position in the party has gotten following in the Congress' Lok Sabha election victory. Sudhakaran's supporters are in no mood to oblige. As if all this was not enough, Satheesan suffered a setback with the Nair Service Society (NSS), the powerful organisation of the Nair community, openly supporting senior Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala. NSS chief G. Sukumar Nair has invited Chennithala to inaugurate the 148th MannamJayanti celebrations. MannathPadmanabhan is the founder of NSS. This is a clear snub to Satheesan who is not in the good books of the NSS boss. Satheesan suffered a second setback when the chief of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP), Yogam, the powerful organisation of the Ezhava community, VellappallyNatesan also backed Chennithala. Vellappally does not see eye to eye with Satheesan, whom he accused of being the personification of arrogance. Natesan is on record that Congress Working Committee (CWC) member and former home minister of Kerala Ramesh Chennithala was the best candidate for the post of Chief Minister if the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) wins the assembly elections in 2026. Meanwhile, Chandu Oommen, MLA from Puthupally, and son of former chief minister Oommen Chandu, accused the leadership of sidelining him during the Palakkad assembly by-election. The party had assigned him only a day in the constituency. Chandu Oommen does not belong to any faction and has scrupulously avoided assuming the leadership mantle of his late father's A team. Significantly, Cheriyan Philip, a senior Congress leader has urged the party leadership not to ignore or sideline Chandu Oommen. That will not be in the long-term interests of the party. Incidentally, Chandu Oommen has voiced his objection to replacing KPCC chief Sudhakaran and other top leaders with younger leadership. (IPA Service)

India's pessimism threatens historic ties with Bangladesh

India's current political maneuvers, particularly those involving religious factors, are akin to pouring cold water on a relationship that has endured for over half a century. Such actions risk tarnishing the two nations' deep-rooted historical, cultural, and mutual respect. It's crucial to recognize that India and Bangladesh have shared a resilient relationship that has weathered many hiccups over the last fifty years. However, recent political maneuvers in India, particularly those influenced by religious factors, create tensions that could undermine this precious bond. In India, a wave of negativity has emerged, fueled not only by certain media outlets but also by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which champions the Hindutva ideology.

The rhetoric challenges the legitimacy of the Interim Government headed by Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, who has promised to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in early 2026. As Prof Yunus stated, "The Bangladesh-India relationship is deep and multifaceted. We can have our differences but that cannot define it." Delhi is reluctant to engage positively with the new government after Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime has fallen and fled to India. The narrative being propagated suggests that Yunus has strayed from Bangladesh's secular premises, leaving the door ajar to radicalized Muslims that have unfortunately perpetrated violence against the Hindu community, vandalizing Hindu business establishments and desecrating temples. The Godi Media, a term used to describe sensationalist and biased Indian print and TV news media, has been instrumental in perpetuating this misinformation.

They have broadcasted/posted several fake videos showing attacks on Hindus and the killing of scores of Hindus, further exacerbating the tensions. The Godi Media described the religious tensions as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing", which is far from the accepted definition by academics. Despite the diligent efforts of fact-checkers in both Bangladesh and India, including the BBC, has debunked these fabrications, the negative portrayal of Bangladesh continues. But that did not stop or even slow down the tirade of stories demonizing Bangladesh. An investigation by fact-checker Rumor Scanner identified 13 misleading reports published by Indian media between August and December following the collapse of the Awami League government. According to Rumor Scanner, 49 media outlets, including well-known names such as the Republic Bangla, Hindustan Times, Zee News, Live Mint, Republic TV,

blamed Islamist parties and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for the sectarian violence. Rana Dasgupta, a former General Secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Christian Buddhist Unity Council, noted the unfortunate reality that some grassroots leaders of the Awami League were found in the company of rioters during incidents of violence. At a press conference in Chittagong (formerly Chittagong), his organization lamented the political leadership's failure to safeguard Hindu temples and communities during crucial festivals. Despite these challenges, it's vital to recognize the diversity that exists within Bangladesh, where nearly 9% of the population identifies as Hindu, alongside smaller communities of Buddhists, Christians, and others within a predominantly Sunni Muslim landscape. Each year, civil society groups, human rights advocates, and concerned citizens reflect on how they can uphold secularism and pluralism principles essential for a collective future. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, a Bangladeshi human rights organization, at least 3,600 similar attacks have occurred in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2021.

Such violence had prompted Prof Robaet Ferdous of Dhaka University, an outspoken defender of religious freedom, to say, "It's a failure of the local administration, police or the ruling party to protect the Hindus, but I see the collapse of the society during a national crisis, which contradicts the legacy of the glorious liberation war in 1971 which promised to establish secularism, pluralism, and freedom of expression in Bangladesh." According to Rana Dasgupta, "... a culture of impunity has been created in Bangladesh for attacks on Hindus. Those involved in these attacks have never been prosecuted, and as a result, it continues..." India's conspicuous silence over the atrocities, persecution, and vandalism against Hindus and other religious communities during the 15 years of Hasina's era has been ignored. The South Block, which looks after the Indian foreign policy in New Delhi, probably did not want to embarrass Sheikh Hasina when the sectarian violence was prominently published in mainstream media and human rights groups identified her Awami League, which she inherited from her father, Sheikh Mujib was the prime accused. India, despite having a functional democracy and pluralism,

never advised Hasina to hold an inclusive, free, fair, and credible election. Delhi's indulgence has encouraged Hasina to grow into a Frankenstein and dare to rig the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections, angered the West and the core reason for voters' outrage with her regime. Re-elected for the third consecutive term through holding sham elections, she instead received feathers on her hat and congratulatory messages from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Hefazat-e-Islam, launched in 2010 to "protect Islam", was spurred particularly by a proposed policy to confer equal inheritance rights to women and women's empowerment, which is lauded in international media and the United Nations.

During her tenure (2009-2024), she placed the radicalized Islamic organization Hefazat-e-Islam on her lap to defuse their anger against women's empowerment and women's rights. Despite protests from secularists and civil society, her government consciously amended the school textbooks with an Islamic coating. Based on the musical tunes of the Madrassa (Qawmi Islamic schools), the network introduced Islamic culture and tradition into the secular fabric of the society. She kept the Hefazat in good humor in a bid to shield her authoritarian regime from the dreaded Islamists and jihadists outfits - Jamaat-e-Islami, outlawed Harkatul Jihad al Islam (HuJI), Hizb ut-Tahrir and other fringe outfits. Bangladesh's acclaimed political historian Mohiuddin Ahmad said the appeasement of Hasina was never to hurt her counterpart Modi by mentioning that the rights of the Dalits (low caste Hindus), Christians, Muslims and ethnic communities also impact Bangladesh.

Not surprisingly, the South Block's so-called Look East Policy has placed Bangladesh as a delinquent state like that of Pakistan, said Ahmad. India arbitrarily stopped issuing visas to Bangladesh nationals after Hasina's fall in early August, citing security reasons. Bangladesh's number of tourists and visitors to India was 2.12 million in 2023. The figure has dwindled to less than half and will decline when many Bangladesh multiple visas expire in December. The non-issuance of visas has caused tension among Bangladesh nationals who regularly visit India for medical purposes. Some go on pilgrimage to Ajmer and other holy sites. A significant percentage of people visit India for business and pleasure. The visa restrictions have stopped direct buses from Dhaka to Kolkata and Dhaka to Agartala. Direct train services from Dhaka to

Kolkata, Dhaka to Siliguri, and Khulna-Kolkata have also reached a screeching halt. Similarly, both Bangladesh and Indian airlines have reduced flights by one-third in the absence of passengers who failed to avail of Indian visas. Ahmad said people-to-people contact has been severely hampered due to visarestrictions imposed by India to punish the people of Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the Boycott India campaign on social media, which was joined by fringe political parties, melted after Bangladesh planned to import 50,000 tons of rice from India. The Interim Government recently imported eggs, green chilies, onions, and potatoes to stabilize the kitchen market. On the other hand, India-Bangladesh bilateral trade is lopsided. Bangladesh's exports are nearly \$2 billion, while imports from India as of 2023 stood at \$12 billion. This is also a contention with Indian policymakers and Bangladesh's industrial, manufacturing, and exporters bodies. As long as India hosts the fugitive Sheikh Hasina, who lives in exile at an official safe house near Delhi, it will be difficult for India-Bangladesh relations to reach a new height. Unless she is extradited to Bangladesh to face trial for crimes against humanity, the relations will turn from sour to bitter. Fortunately, Bangladesh and India signed an extradition treaty in 2013. The prestigious Indian Express newspaper argues that "India also has the option of refusing Hasina's extradition because the accusations against her are not "in good faith in the interests of justice." However, Delhi's newspaper realizes the refusal to extradite Hasina may further strain ties between New Delhi and Dhaka. Well, India has no option left but to take the risk to save Hasina from walking to the gallows for crimes for ordering the law enforcement agencies to shoot and kill hundreds of students and protesters during the July-August Monsoon Revolution, says former Ambassador Humayun Kabir, who served as a diplomat in India and the United States.

He also said Bangladesh should develop a contingency plan if India decides not to deport her. The government will also have to calculate the risk factor of whether Bangladesh can live without the most prominent neighbor's fraternity, which had helped achieve the bloody birth of Bangladesh in 1971. (The author is an award-winning independent journalist based in Bangladesh. A media rights defender with the Reporters Without Borders (@RSF\_inter). Recipient of Ashoka Fellowship and Hellman-Hammett Award. He could be reached at saleemamad@hotmail.com)

DEGREE OF THOUGHT By: Saleem Samad

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Farmer's agitation may turn unprecedentedly aggressive in 2025

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

The second leg of farmers' movement that had begun in the beginning of 2024, with a call for a March on Delhi from Punjab on February 13, is set to spillover into 2025, since the PM Narendra Modi led Centre was not even ready to talk to the agitating farmers until December 31. The farmers have displayed commendable patience so far but there are signs that the movement may turn startlingly aggressive in 2025. On December 31, the vacation bench of the Supreme Court was informed by Gurminder Singh, the Advocate General of Punjab, "As per the negotiators, there is a proposal given by the farmers to the Central Government that if they get an invite for a talk, then Dallewail is ready to take medical aid as desired." Solicitor General of India Tushar Mehta, however, submitted that he has no instructions on the submissions made by the AG of Punjab. Farmers' leader Jagjit Singh Dallewail has been on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border since November 26, demanding that the Union Government accept the farmers' demands including a statutory guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP) for their agricultural produce. His fast entered 36th day on December 31, and his health is in precarious condition, since he is 70 years old and suffering from prostate cancer. At the beginning of the farmers' movement this year, on January 27, he had already lost his wife. On December 18, the Supreme Court bench had recorded the statement of the AG of Punjab that Dallewail needed immediate hospitalisation. Thereafter, on perusal of the medical reports, the bench had ordered on December 20 that the Punjab State authorities either shift Dallewail to a makeshift hospital (temporary hospital, which is said to have been set up at a distance of 700 meters from the site) or to any other well-equipped Hospital. On December 31, AG of Punjab reported to the Supreme Court that the farmers are in "siege" of the area and there are constant



calls to the youth to join the protest site. The vacation bench of Justice Surya Kant and Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia of the Supreme Court said that the court is concerned with the compliance of the earlier order, while expressing strong remarks against the farmers who resisting any move to shift Dallewail to a hospital. Affidavits filed by both Punjab and Haryana plead that there could be a possibility of "collateral damage" of lives and property if there are attempts to move Dallewail from his current location. The AG of Punjab also informed the bench that interveners and negotiators had gone to the protest site. Efforts for compliance were made by mobilizing about 7000 personnel at the protest site. However, due to the Punjab Bandh held on December 30 by farmers' organisations, there were traffic blockades and hindrances. On December 28, the Court had orally had that it was "absolutely unsatisfied" with the compliance report filed by the Chief Secretary of the Punjab Government and the Director General of Police (DGP) of Punjab on the hospitalisation of Dallewail. Nevertheless, the bench has given two-days to comply with its orders and the contempt case has been posted for January 2, 2025. A call for a shutdown on December 30 was given last week by Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor

Morcha over the Centre not accepting the demands of protesting farmers, which crippled the movement of people and their economic activities in the state, which is another indication of the time to come which may witness very aggressive farmers movement in the country. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) (non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KKM) had given a call for Delhi March on February 13, 2024 from Punjab. However, the farmers of Punjab were stopped by Haryana government on Shambhu and Khanauri border points. Farmers then tried to cross the police barricade which resulted in police using force, even firing. The farmers have been on a sit-in protest until now. The protests triggered farmers' protests in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. A total of 5 deaths and injury of as many as 10 protestors have been reported. Many farmers were taken into custody and many FIRs have been registered against the agitating farmers. Farmers also tried to enter Delhi border but were stopped by the vigilant Delhi Police. Farmers' sit-in and other demonstrations continued throughout 2024. It gathered a fresh momentum in December when SKM and KKM gave a call for Delhi March on December 6, 2024. A series of protest followed from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. Farmers have been agitating since

they felt cheated by the Narendra Modi led government since the day the first phase of the farmers movement was called off in December 2021, after withdrawal of the three controversial farm laws and assurances by the Modi government on many of their demands. The farmers' unions say the assurances remained unmet. And as many as 750 farmers had lost their lives and numerous FIRs were registered against the farmers. Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar recently asked Union Minister of Agriculture Shivraj Singh Chouhan why the Centre was not holding a dialogue with the protesting farmers. "Every moment is critical for you. I urge you, and as the person holding the second-highest constitutional position in India, I request you to please tell me, was any promise made to the farmers, and why has it not been fulfilled? What are we doing to fulfil the promise? There was an agitation last year, and there is one this year as well, and time is passing, but we are doing nothing."

The Vice-President had even recalled Jagjit Singh Dallewail and cautioned the Centre that the government couldn't fight with its own people or put them in a situation where they were left to fight on their own. "We cannot hold the ideology that their struggle will be limited and they will eventually tire out. We should not disturb the soul of India, we should not hurt its heart. Can we create a boundary between the farmer and the government? Those whom we need to embrace cannot be pushed away." The utterings of the Vice-President of India show the seriousness of the farmers' movement, which is set to spill over to 2025. Additionally, there are new dangers coming, through the new agriculture market policy of the Modi government to be implemented soon, which seeks to bring back the provisions of the three controversial farm laws through the backdoor, which PM Modi had unilaterally withdrawn in November 2021, after one year of the farmers' movement. The new agriculture market policy may trigger a more intensified and aggressive spate of farmers' protests in 2025. (IPA Service)

# What gets measured, gets managed? The case of climate change adaptation

By: Tom Kerr & Dhriti Pathak

As we are witnessing delayed monsoons followed by severe rainfall and subsequent flooding, along with sizzling summers across most parts of the globe with temperatures almost touching 50 degrees Celsius, we are experiencing the accelerating impacts of climate change first hand. This comes against the backdrop of the failure to meet the 1.5 degree Celsius temperature goal set out in the Paris Agreement, with global temperatures projected to exceed 2 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century. With developing countries grappling with both human and financial resources to deal with these impacts, reports show that the most vulnerable communities in these countries are bearing the brunt of the situation.

Peter Drucker, the management theorist, had once famously quoted, "What gets measured, gets managed", wherein he argued that the ability to track, monitor and/or quantify something tends to make it more likely to attract notice with actions undertaken to improve it. This phenomenon has been observed to be true in several cases, where a shift from an abstract and vague concept to a well-defined and quantifiable target has produced the desired results. Take, for example, the Montreal Protocol of 1987; it developed a robust monitoring mechanism to measure the concentration of ozone depleting substances (ODS) in the atmosphere that led to collective action taken by the global community. Recent reports show that the recovery of the ozone layer is on track, with the UN-backed Scientific Assessment Panel to the Montreal Protocol on Ozone Deplet-

ing Substances quadrennial assessment report confirming the phase out of nearly 99 percent of banned ozone-depleting substances. The key point here is that resolving global issues requires significant amounts of finance, and leveraging finance becomes easier with an absolute target that is well defined and quantifiable as it provides more clarity to investors in terms of the end result of their investments.

The world faces a similar challenge today with regard to finance for climate change. While there are differences between the ozone layer depletion challenge and the climate challenge, the need to be able to measure the progress made, essentially in quantitative terms, is vital for bringing the international community together on this. The issue of climate change is tied to the increasing emission of green-house gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, thereby leading to substantive warming of the earth's climate. While ODSs such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) found replacements in other gases that do not affect the ozone layer, we are yet to find GHG alternatives that are economical and viable for use with lesser impact on the earth's climate. The major challenge in bringing down the emission of GHGs has been the fact that they are linked to production.

Addressing the issue of climate change necessitates two crucial aspects—one, to work towards the mitigation of the issue by reducing GHG emissions; and two, to reduce the impacts of climate change on economic systems and communities. In terms of undertaking action to contain the impacts of climate change, climate finance constitutes a key element—one which is highly contentious in international negotiations. A re-



port by Climate Policy Initiative (CPI) in 2023, showed that global climate finance approached US\$ 1.3 trillion on annual average in 2021/2022 compared to US\$ 653 billion in 2019/2020. However, significantly more still remains to be done.

## Financing adaptation along with mitigation

The contentions among countries in international negotiations with regard to climate finance have primarily been around the concept of 'additionality'. 'Additionality' of climate finance refers to the idea that funds raised for climate change should not be diverted to address other issues, particularly socio-economic ones. The measure of additionality then becomes quite straightforward for activities aligned towards mitigation of climate change as they are measured by one common metric—the reduction in GHG emissions in the atmos-

phere. But in the case of adaptation to climate change, its localised and context specific nature makes it difficult to arrive at a consensus as to what defines adaptation activities. Climate adaptation is a moving target; one that is also not currently well defined. The current financing gap for adaptation, according to the UNEP Adaptation Gap Report, has been estimated to be in the tune of US\$ 194-366 billion per year. The World Bank, at COP28, committed to increase their climate finance to 45 percent of all financing with a 50:50 ratio for adaptation and mitigation. However, it has to be noted that increasing finance for adaptation would require an improved access to grant-based or concessional financing to all developing countries in addition to a significant increase in the financing from non-concessional sources including the private sector.

Scaling up non-concessional sources of financing in this sector could be a boon but has been severely limited so far due to the overlapping nature of adaptation and development. Investors claim that the lack of clarity of the impact of investments or the 'additionality' is a major limitation in this regard. This can then perhaps be addressed with the development of a taxonomy for adaptation action. But, adaptation action, as mentioned previously, is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It comes with dimensions that are affected by aspects such as the availability of local resources, local and traditional knowledge, and local vulnerabilities among other things, thereby making the list endless. For mitigation, there were several approaches too, but the one thing that they all had in common was the 'end' result, which was the reduction in GHG emissions. Similarly, such a

Machiavellian approach, that focuses on the 'ends' of adaptation over its 'means' could be a possible way out. While there is a lack of consensus on the exact definition of adaptation to climate change, or what actions come under its ambit, there is a general understanding of its primary objective—to minimise the impact of climate risks on communities and systems. This means that an agreement on what the outcomes of adaptation can be is possible even at the global level. A focus on measuring the outcomes of adaptation in quantifiable terms can be the game changer that this sector needs.

Result Based Financing (RBF) for climate change essentially implies tying payments to the achievement of pre-agreed upon results. The terminology of RBF is diverse with multiple terms that refer to the same instrument but they all centre on the idea that payments should be linked to results and not to the process of obtaining them. The World Bank defines Result Based Climate Finance (RBCF) as finance that is paid when results are achieved, and occasionally upon meeting interim milestones. As most funds, grants and even a large part of the global capital market are intrinsically linked to the achievement of results; the development of RBF for climate action can pave the way for bringing in private finance. For adaptation, it then goes on to imply that the measurement of results and outcomes in quantifiable terms will enable the mobilisation of result-based financing mechanisms, not just from Multilateral Development Banks and bilateral sources, but also from the global capital markets and the private sector, essentially through blended finance and

the creation of more innovative instruments.

RBF can bring in financing instruments such as bonds that have the potential to leverage the market for financing adaptation by bringing in the private sector. This presents a huge opportunity for any multilateral organisation to lead the work on developing RBF for adaptation. Issues such as spending inefficiencies and the lack of an understanding of what can be used to track progress in a project include some of the roadblocks that have long plagued financing for adaptation. This can be remedied through the use of result-based financing (RBF) mechanisms as payments will be made on the achievement of pre-agreed results or outcomes. The rationale behind this financing framework is to link payments to outputs and outcomes of actions, rather than inputs and processes. RBF can bring in financing instruments such as bonds that have the potential to leverage the market for financing adaptation by bringing in the private sector. This presents a huge opportunity for any multilateral organisation to lead the work on developing RBF for adaptation.

The RBF will help opening up adaptation for the private sector. Besides, once it takes off, the World Bank Group and the World Economic Forum respectively have stated that investing in climate adaptation can lead to returns with a benefit cost ratio of 4:1 and that the adaptation market could be worth US\$2 trillion by 2026. The transparency provided by the RBF presents a massive opportunity to direct private investors towards investing in adaptation to climate change as the end result of their investments is clear. (Courtesy: ORF)

## Excessive rainfall in Rajasthan's arid districts has a silver lining — rise in groundwater level

By: Madhav Sharma

2024's unusual rainfall in Rajasthan has proven to be a boon for the state's languishing groundwater levels. Due to the excessive rainfall across the state, the groundwater levels have increased by about six metres in all districts. These figures have been revealed in the Post-Monsoon Assessment Report 2024 from the Rajasthan Groundwater Department.

According to the report, before the monsoon, groundwater was found at an average depth of 28.83 metres across the state. Now, it has improved to 23.01 metres. In other words, groundwater in Rajasthan has risen by 5.82 metres.

This preliminary report currently provides district-level data only. The department has stated that after analysing these figures, data will be provided for different zones. This will indicate how much groundwater has risen in each zone. After this analysis, it will also be possible to determine whether the groundwater levels have increased or decreased in the dark zones.

### Extreme rainfall in 27 districts

During this year's monsoon season, 27 out of the 50 districts in Rajasthan experienced abnormally high rainfall. In 15 districts, there was excessive rainfall, while eight districts received average rainfall. No district reported below-average or drought conditions.

Abnormal rainfall in Rajasthan means receiving 60 per cent or more rainfall than the normal average of 417.46 mm. According to the report, all districts, except Churu, saw a rise in groundwater levels. Despite receiving more than the normal rainfall, Churu district experienced a decrease of 0.19 metres in groundwater levels.

The highest increase in groundwater was recorded in Chittorgarh district, where it rose by 14 metres. This was followed by Sawai Madhopur (13.32 metres), Bundi (11.50 metres), Bhilwara (10.89 metres), Dungarpur (9.96 metres), Pratapgarh (9.96 metres), Alwar (9.87 metres), Baran (9 metres), Kota (8.23 metres), and Banswara (6.68 metres). In the state capital Jaipur, the groundwater level improved by 4.70 metres.

Surajbhan Singh, Chief Engineer of the Rajasthan Groundwater Department, told Down to Earth that the department has gathered groundwater data after the monsoon rains. These are preliminary figures, and further analysis is needed. The zonal data will be extracted from this analysis. After this, data regarding groundwater levels in the state's dark zones will also be available, though this will take a few months to complete.

### Deluge in desert

This year, the western, desert regions of Rajasthan, including Bikaner, Barmer, Jaisalmer, and Jodhpur, also received abnormal rainfall—60 per cent or more than the usual amount. Jalore district recorded rainfall 20-59 per cent above average. Due to the increased rainfall, the groundwater level in Jaisalmer, which was at 49.79 metres before the monsoon, has decreased by 2.50 metres to 47.29 metres. In Barmer, the groundwater level increased by 1.73 metres, in Bikaner by 0.81 metres, and in Jodhpur by 1.51 metres. In Jalore, which received average rainfall, the

groundwater level rose by 2.31 metres.

Down to Earth analysed the monsoon data released by the Rajasthan Water Resources Department. According to the analysis, the state received 63 per cent more rainfall than average from June 1 to October 1 this year. The highest rainfall in a district during the season was recorded in Karauli, with 1931 mm. On August 11, 2024, Karauli also saw the highest rainfall in a single day during the monsoon season. The groundwater level in Karauli, which was at 32.69 metres before the monsoon, rose by 6.20 metres to 26.49 metres by the end of the season.

Groundwater levels in Rajasthan have been in a worrying state. The state has 299 groundwater blocks, and due to excessive extraction and inadequate recharge, only 38 blocks (around 12 per cent) were deemed safe before the monsoon.

The remaining 88 per cent of the blocks are critical, semi-critical, or overexploited. Groundwater extraction has increased by 114 per cent over the last three decades. In 2023, Rajasthan's groundwater extraction was at 149 per cent, up from 35 per cent in 1984. These figures show the extent of groundwater exploitation in the state. However, department officials are optimistic that this year's increased rainfall could lead to some improvement in the groundwater levels, especially in some of the dark zones.

**Larger implications**  
Rajasthan accounts for 10 per cent of India's land area but has only about one per cent of the country's water resources. According to the 2019 'Reassessment of Average Annual Per Capita Water Availability for 2021 and 2031' report by the Central Water Commission, per capita water availability in India is estimated to be 1486 cubic metres in 2021 and 1367 cubic metres in 2031.

Water availability of less than 1,700 cubic metres is considered a water crisis, and less than 1,000 cubic metres is a water scarcity situation.

Rajasthan is far behind both of these thresholds. According to the 2009 Vyasa Committee report, the state has only 800 cubic metres of water available per person annually.

In Rajasthan, 87 per cent of drinking water comes from groundwater sources, including wells, borewells, and handpumps. In rural areas, these are the primary sources of drinking water. As the groundwater level drops, harmful minerals like salinity, total dissolved solids (TDS), nitrates, fluoride, sodium carbonate, zinc, lead, iron, and arsenic increase in the water, making it unsafe for consumption and harmful to health.

Experts say that 80 per cent of illnesses are caused by poor-quality water. According to a recent response in the Lok Sabha, 95 villages in 12 districts of Rajasthan are affected by dangerous levels of fluoride in drinking water, with approximately four million people suffering from fluorosis, the highest such number in the country.

Improved groundwater levels will ensure that people, especially in rural areas, have access to clean drinking water. This will reduce health-related issues and lower the amount of money spent on healthcare. As a result, families will have more savings and improved prosperity. (Courtesy: Down to Earth)

## Impact of plastic waste on Assam's ecosystem

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuvan

This has come to be a serious environmental issue with which the world is currently challenged and no exception with Assam. The rapidly growing consumption of plastics, especially single-use plastics, has wreaked havoc with deep effects on regional ecosystems. The richest biodiversity, rivers, and forests, together with several cultures, present challenges no other region would have in countering the massive expansion of plastic waste in this particular region. It is something very deep within the natural and cultural fabric of the region rather than a nuisance of cities. One ill effect of plastic waste in Assam does not even look at urbanization, such as within Guwahati limits, but goes straight to those rural landscapes, river systems, and forests in which plastic waste creates an even problem for the disturbed habitat with the livelihood of the respective local communities.

Assam is also rich in wetlands, national parks, and protected areas. Kaziranga National Park and Manas National Park among the rest, where plastic pollution can easily be seen. Some wild animals are vulnerable to consuming plastic wastes that enter their habitat, one-horned rhinoceros and tigers included. Ingestion of plastic waste causes asphyxiation and injuries to the inner parts. Plastics from bags to bottles decompose very difficultly. Non-biodegradable accumulation leads to an amassment of waste in the critical ecosystems and poses an issue to the biodiversity of the region, further creating more severe implications for its ecological balance.

The Brahmaputra and Assam's many tributaries support the lives of millions. Rivers are, therefore, very important cultural icons, symbolizing sources of water supply, transport routes, and habitats for aquatic species.

In today's world, plastic is becoming evident along the banks and in rivers. Experiments conducted have shown that the tiny granules present in the water are, in fact, nothing but the broken shreds of large plastics, which are termed microplastics. There has been proof of the existence of microplastics in the marine system as they will find themselves in the chain and thus reach human beings as people eat fish, for example, as their food source. This is further compounded by weak waste management infrastructure in most parts of rural Assam where the practice of open dumping or putting plastic waste in the water sources has become commonplace. Even lesser awareness of the harmful effects of plastics exists in Assam, where there have been a few instances of fighting against plastic usage, mainly from the urban sections. The economy of Assam is almost wholly agrarian, relying nearly totally on the natural environment to carry on farming, fishing and other livelihoods. Most villages use plastic bags and wrappers to pack agricultural produce or, worse still, carelessly discard them after use. Plastic can be spread as mulch over crops, but the farmers seldom bother to get them disposed of properly. Such disposal contaminates soil and water. Therefore, it is turning out to be a threat to agriculture in the state. As plastics take years to dissolve, leakage of toxic chemicals is occurring in the environment, again posing a threat to crop yield and soil and water quality. Plastic wastes are scattered all over the Assam tea gardens. This does not only litter the landscape but also litter the quality of the product. It makes a commodity export like



tea hazardous to contamination by plastic wastes.

Plastic pollution is an enormous nuisance both in social and economic terms. In the tourist industry, it is directly associated as thousands are invited to the sanctuaries of Assam's wildlife, tea gardens, and natural scenery. It added increased environmental sensibility of tourists toward Assam which hitherto degraded pristine beauty plastic litter to its degradation. Thus, more visitors visited the protected areas in Assam, and thus, the state had to maintain ecological soundness there also. More health impact of plastic litter to be left unattended. The burning of plastic wastes in rural areas leads to many emissions of toxic poisons into the air and creates respiratory disorders, amongst various other causes. Continued accumulation of plastic waste coupled with inappropriate and non-existent means to manage the same creates an evil circle for health amongst the people and non-environmental sustainability.

This means that there is a weakness in the infrastructure of waste management at Assam, so the plastic waste disposal problem becomes complex.

One of the numerous cities of the country but with augmented waste in this city, the waste management systems of the state are not appropriately developed. This is Guwahati, the largest city of Assam, which is watching tremendous growth in population with terribly poor infrastructure in terms of waste disposal system. This cannot be borne by local governments since their ability to handle this rise in waste management demands is being overtaken. Landfills get overfilled, and wastes end up on tin rivers and forests through dumping illegally. Places away from cities are the worst affected incidents, which also reflect unorganized collections of waste. For example, in waste, there is highly unorganised disposal, while plastic waste, its collection, is not separated from other wastes. There are very few available recycling plants at a low rate, thus opening to dumping or, worse, natural habitats.

Strict regulation, proper waste management practices, and public awareness can easily con-

trol plastic pollution in Assam. Some of the steps taken by the state government in the last two years include banning single-use plastics in some places, though the challenge persists regarding its implementation. Public education is driven by the ills of plastic waste besides its alternatives like reusable bags. Encouragement of local community and industries goes hand in glove with incentives based on recycling and curbing plastic waste generation.

This is cascaded to the community, down to local people, even rurally-based individuals. This would be engaging a nongovernmental organization and community-based organization to help in sensitizing on how to get rid of garbage.

There needs to be the development of biodegradable plastics and packaging alternatives on a one-time basis so that their usage at large can come down. Since Assam is rich in its natural resources, it can be one of the forerunners to develop such alternatives. A rejuvenation effort for decelerating plastic pollution will be brought forth through a massive coordination of local governments, business circles, and environmental organizations. Assam's cultural heritage also gives an avenue to link environmental sustainability to local practices. Packaging in a natural material like bamboo or leaves can be restitched as a viable substitute to replace plastic. While plastic pollution in Assam is astronomical in proportion, it is not at all an insurmountable one. This kind of harmful plastic waste can be controlled and reduced through focused actions by the government, industries, and communities in Assam. Combating plastic pollution will ensure the protection of rich biodiversity and natural resources along with a cleaner, healthful Assam environment for posterity. If this environment of Assam is to beat back the scourge of plastic, all-in collective responsibility will be required. Only a collective effort has the potential to surpass plastic as an environmental crisis in Assam. A sustainable Assam is fighting plastic pollution against rivers, forests, and wildlife getting preserved by relying on its own hands. (The author can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)

# Israeli strikes kill 12 in Gaza as war grinds into new year with no end in sight

**DEIR AL-BALAH, Jan 1:** Israeli strikes killed at least 12 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, mostly women and children, officials said Wednesday, as the nearly 15-month war ground on into the new year with no end in sight.

One strike hit a home in the Jabaliya area of northern Gaza, the most isolated and heavily destroyed part of the territory, where Israel has been waging a major operation since early October. Gaza's Health Ministry said seven people were killed, including a woman and four children, and at least a dozen other people were wounded.

Another strike overnight in the built-up Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza killed a woman and a child, according to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies. The military ordered people to evacuate an area near Bureij overnight, saying it would strike there in response to recent rocket fire by Palestinian militants.

A third strike early Wednesday in the southern city of Khan Younis killed three people, according to the nearby Nasser Hospital and the European Hospital, which re-



ceived the bodies.

The war began when Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel on October 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people and abducting around 250. About 100 hostages are still held in Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel's air and ground offensive has killed over 45,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. It says women and children make up more than half the

fatalities but does not say how many of those killed were militants.

The Israeli military says it only targets militants and blames Hamas for civilian deaths because its fighters operate in dense residential areas. The army says it has killed 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The war has caused widespread destruction and displaced some 90 per cent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million, many of them multiple

times.

Hundreds of thousands are living in tents on the coast as winter brings frequent rainstorms and temperatures drop below 10 degrees Celsius (50 F) at night. At least six infants and another person have died of hypothermia, according to the Health Ministry.

American and Arab mediators have spent nearly a year trying to broker a ceasefire and hostage release, but those efforts have repeatedly stalled. Hamas has demanded a lasting truce, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to keep fighting until "total victory" over the militants.

Military blames weakening of discipline in death of archaeologist who entered Lebanon with troops

In a separate development, the Israeli military blamed "operational burnout" and a "weakening of discipline and safety" in the death of a 70-year-old archaeologist who was killed in southern Lebanon along with another soldier while visiting a combat zone in November.

According to Israeli media reports, Zeev Erlich was not on active duty when he was shot, but was wearing a military uniform and had a weapon. The army said he was a reservist with the rank of major and identified him as a "fallen soldier" when it announced his death.

Erlich was a well-known West Bank settler and researcher of Jewish history. Media reports at the time of his death said he entered Lebanon to explore an archaeological site. The family of the soldier who was killed with him has expressed anger over the circumstances of his death.

The military launched an investigation after they were killed in a Hezbollah ambush. A separate probe is looking into who allowed Erlich to enter.

The military said the entry of civilians who are not military contractors or journalists into combat zones is not widespread. Still, there have been multiple reports of Israeli civilians who support a permanent Israeli presence in Gaza or Lebanon entering those areas. (AP)

# South Korea air crash investigators extract black box data as grieving families mourn victims



**SEOUL, Jan 1:** Grieving relatives of the victims of the South Korea plane crash gathered at the site to pay respects to their loved ones on New Year's Day, as officials said they've extracted data from one of the retrieved black boxes to find the exact cause of the crash.

All but two of the 181 passengers and crew on board the Boeing 737-800 operated by Jeju Air died when it crashed at Muan International Airport, in southern South Korea, on Sunday.

Video showed the aircraft without its landing gear deployed landing on its belly at high speed and then skidding off the end of the runway into a concrete fence and bursting into flames. The footage showed the plane was experiencing an apparent engine problem in addition to the landing gear malfunction.

Investigators say the pilot received a warning from air traffic controllers of possible bird strikes and the plane issued a distress signal before the crash.

The Transport Ministry said in a statement Wednesday that it has completed works to extract data from the cockpit voice recorder — one of the two black boxes recovered from the wreckage. It said the data would be converted into audio files. A damaged flight data recorder will be sent to the United States for an analysis, the ministry added.

All of the victims were South

Korean, except for two Thais nationals, with many returning from Bangkok after Christmas holidays.

The bereaved families visited the site on Wednesday for the first time since the crash for an emotional memorial service. They were bused to the site where they took turns laying white flowers. Many knelt and bowed deeply before a memorial table laid with food, including "ddeokguk," a Korean rice cake soup eaten on New Year's Day.

The Transport Ministry said authorities have completed the complicated process of identifying all 179 victims. It said the government has so far handed over 11 bodies to relatives. The country is observing seven days of national mourning following the deadliest disaster in South Korea's aviation history in decades.

The government has begun safety inspections of all 101 Boeing 737-800s operated by the country's domestic airlines. On Tuesday, a team of US investigators, including representatives from Boeing, examined the crash site.

Officials have said they will consider whether the airport's localizer — a set of antennas housed in a concrete fence at the end of the runway designed to guide aircraft during landings — should have been constructed with lighter materials that would break more easily upon impact. (AP)

# Germany, France and Poland condemn violence in Georgia



**BERLIN, Jan 1:** The foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland on Tuesday expressed concern about "the political crisis" in Georgia, two days after former soccer player Mikheil Kavelashvili was formally inaugurated as president of the South Caucasus nation, cementing the ruling party's grip in what the opposition calls a blow to the country's European Union aspirations and a victory for former imperial ruler Russia.

"We strongly condemn last week's violence against peaceful protesters, media and opposition leaders and recall Georgian authorities' responsibility to respect human rights and protect fundamental freedoms, including the freedom to assembly and media freedom," the three ministers wrote in a joint statement.

In reaction to the Russia-friendly course of the ruling Georgian Dream party, the three countries said they would "implement the EU decision on ending visa-free travel for Georgian diplomatic and service passport holders and consider additional measures on EU and national level."

They also stressed that "the political course of repression and democratic backsliding by the

Georgian Dream has in reaction led to a downgrading of our relationship at European and national level and a reduction of our assistance to and cooperation with Georgia's authorities."

The Georgian Dream party retained control of Parliament in the South Caucasus nation in the Oct. 26 election that the opposition alleges was rigged with Moscow's help. The party has vowed to continue pushing toward accession to the European Union but also wants to "reset" ties with Russia.

Georgia's outgoing president and main pro-Western parties have boycotted the post-election parliamentary sessions and demanded a rerun of the ballot.

Critics have accused the Georgian Dream — established by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a shadowy billionaire who made his fortune in Russia — of becoming increasingly authoritarian and tilted toward Moscow, accusations the ruling party has denied. The party recently pushed through laws similar to those used by the Kremlin to crack down on freedom of speech and LGBTQ+ rights.

Georgian Dream's decision last month to suspend talks on their country's bid to join the EU added to the opposition's outrage and galvanized protests. (AP)

# Trump says he is planning to attend Jimmy Carter's funeral

**PALM BEACH, Jan 1:** President-elect Donald Trump said Tuesday that he's planning to attend the funeral of former President Jimmy Carter.

Asked about it as he walked into a New Year's Eve party at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida, Trump responded, "I'll be there." Pressed on whether he'd spoken to members of Carter's family, Trump said he'd rather not say.

Funeral services honouring Carter, who died Sunday at age 100, will be held in Georgia and Washington, beginning January 4 and concluding January 9.

Trump was a frequent and fierce critic of Carter on the campaign trail ahead of November's election, using the rising inflation rates of the 1970s to unfavourably compare President Joe Biden to Carter and his administration. But the president-elect was gracious about the former president in posts on his social media site after Carter's death Sunday, writing that the nation "owed him a debt of gratitude."

"While I strongly disagreed with him philosophically and politically, I also realised that he truly loved and re-

spected our Country, and all it stands for," Trump wrote of Carter. "He worked hard to make America a better place, and for that I give him my highest respect."

Wearing a tuxedo as he entered the festivities, Trump took a few minutes of questions from reporters on various topics. He was asked about the possibility of a ceasefire in Israel's war with Hamas in Gaza, but said only, "We're going to see what happens."

The president-elect added of hostages seized more than a year ago by Hamas, "I'll put it this way: They better let the hostages come back soon."

Trump also said he thought 2025 would be a "great year" and "we're going to do fantastically well as a country." "There's a whole light over the whole world, not just our country. They're a lot of happy people," Trump said of recent weeks.

Asked about his resolutions for the new year, Trump said, "I just want everybody to be happy, healthy and well." Trump later took the stage to briefly address the crowd ringing in the new year at Mar-a-Lago and promised "to do a great job as your president." (AP)

# Ukraine halts transit of Russian gas to Europe after prewar deal expired

**KYIV, Jan 1:** Ukraine on Wednesday halted Russian gas supplies to European customers that pass through the country, almost three years into Moscow's all-out invasion of its neighbour, after a prewar transit deal expired.

Ukraine's energy minister, Herman Halushchenko, confirmed on Wednesday morning that Kyiv had stopped the gas flows "in the interest of national security."

"This is a historic event. Russia is losing markets and will incur financial losses. Europe has already decided to phase out Russian gas, and (this) aligns with what Ukraine has done today," Halushchenko said in an update on the Telegram messaging app.

Russia's Gazprom said in a statement on Wednesday morning that it had been "deprived of the technical and legal ability to supply gas for transit through Ukraine," due to Ukraine's refusal to extend the deal.

Even as Russian troops and tanks moved into Ukraine, Russian natural gas kept flowing through the country's pipeline network — set up when Ukraine

and Russia were both part of the Soviet Union — to Europe, under a five-year agreement that ran through the end of last year. Gazprom earned money from the gas and Ukraine collected transit fees.

Before the war, Russia supplied nearly 40 per cent of the European Union's pipeline natural gas. Gas flowed through four pipeline systems, one under the Baltic Sea, one through Belarus and Poland, one through Ukraine and one under the Black Sea through Turkey to Bulgaria.

After the war started, Russia cut off most supplies through the Baltic and Belarus-Poland pipelines, citing disputes over a demand for payment in rubles. The Baltic pipeline was blown up in an act of sabotage, but details of the attack remain murky. The Russian cutoff caused an energy crisis in Europe. Germany had to shell out billions of euros to set up floating terminals to import liquefied natural gas that comes by ship, not by pipeline. Users cut back as prices soared. Norway and the US filled the gap, becoming the two largest suppliers. (AP)

# Pak begins its two-year tenure as non-permanent member of UNSC

**ISLAMABAD, Jan 1:** Pakistan began its two-year tenure as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on Wednesday, with Ambassador Munir Akram saying that the Pakistani delegation will play an "active and constructive" role in addressing key challenges facing the world.

"Our presence will be felt in the Security Council," Ambassador Akram, Pakistan's top diplomat at the UN, told state-run APP (Associated Press of Pakistan) news agency.

Pakistan will sit in the Security Council for the 2025-26 term as a non-permanent member — the eighth time that the country has had a seat on the 15-member body's horseshoe table.

In June, Pakistan was elected to the council with a massive majority as a non-permanent member, polling 182 votes in the 193-member General Assembly — far more than the required 124 votes representing a two-thirds majority.

"We enter the council at a time of great geopolitical turbulence, intense competition between the two largest powers, raging wars in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere and a sharply escalating and multi-dimensional

arms race," Akram said.

"As a responsible State — the fifth largest by population — Pakistan will play an active and constructive role, in accordance with the UN Charter, to halt wars, promote the pacific settlement of disputes and contain the negative impacts of great power rivalries, the arms race, new weapons and domains of conflict as well as the spreading scourge of terrorism," he said.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Ishaq Dar said that Pakistan begins its term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC with a rich legacy of experience and commitment to the principles and purposes of the UN Charter.

He was addressing a reception hosted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Foreign Office said in a statement.

The event was attended by the heads of resident missions of the UN Security Council Member States in Islamabad and senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dar highlighted Pakistan's contributions to international peace and security, especially through its active role in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding endeavours around the world. (PTI)

# World welcomes 2025 with light shows, embraces and ice plunges

**NEW YORK, Jan 1:** From Sydney to Mumbai to Paris to Rio de Janeiro, communities around the world welcomed 2025 with spectacular light shows, embraces and ice plunges.

The New Year's Eve ball dropped in soggy Times Square, where thousands of revellers stuck it out in heavy rain to celebrate the start of 2025 in New York City.

Countries in the South Pacific Ocean were the first to ring in the New Year, with midnight in New Zealand striking 18 hours before the ball dropped in Times Square. Auckland was the first major city to celebrate, with thousands thronging downtown or climbing the city's ring of volcanic peaks for a fireworks vantage point.

Conflict muted acknowledgements of the start of 2025 in places like the Middle East, Sudan and Ukraine. American Samoa will be among the last to welcome 2025, a full 24 hours after New Zealand.

**Earliest fireworks**  
A few hours after Auckland, fireworks blasted off Australia's Sydney Harbour Bridge and across the bay. More than a million people gathered at iconic Sydney Harbour for the celebration. British pop star Robbie Williams led a sing-along with the crowd.

The celebration also featured Indigenous ceremonies and perform-



ances that acknowledged the land's first people.

**American traditions, old and new**

In New York City, crowds cheered and couples kissed when the ball weighing almost 6 tons (5.4 metric tons) and featuring 2,688 crystal triangles descended down a pole in Times Square. The celebration included musical performances by TLC and Jonas Brothers. The revelry culminated with a dance party and a carpeting of soggy confetti as attendees left singing along to Frank Sinatra's version of "New York, New York."

Angie Cuadrado, from Virginia, said she hopes 2025 is going to be great. "We're sending positive vibes everywhere," she said.

Las Vegas' pyrotechnic show will be on the Strip, with 340,000

people anticipated as fireworks are launched from the rooftops of casinos. Nearby, the Sphere venue will display for the first time countdowns to midnight in different time zones.

In Pasadena, California, Rose Parade spectators were camping out and hoping for prime spots. And some 200,000 people flocked to a country music party in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Seaside celebrations and beyond**

In India, thousands of revellers in the financial hub of Mumbai flocked to the city's bustling promenade facing the Arabian Sea. In Sri Lanka, people gathered at Buddhist temples to light oil lamps and incense sticks and pray.

In Dubai, thousands attended a fireworks show at the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper. And in Nairobi, Kenya, scattered fire-

works were heard.

**A Holy Year begins**

Rome's traditional New Year's Eve festivities have an additional draw: the start of Pope Francis' Holy Year, the once-every-quarter-century celebration projected to bring some 32 million pilgrims to the Eternal City in 2025.

On Tuesday, Francis celebrated a vespers at St. Peter's Basilica. During Mass on Wednesday he is expected to again appeal for peace in Ukraine and the Middle East.

January 1 is a day of obligation for Catholics, marking the Solemnity of Mary.

In Saint Paul, Minnesota, about 400 Catholics joined the archbishop for a rare 11 pm Mass followed by a champagne reception in the city's monumental cathedral.

"People have the tradition to stay up and toast the new year, so we said, Ok, let's build on that," said the Rev. Joseph Johnson.

**Paris recaptures the Olympic spirit**

Paris capped a momentous 2024 with its traditional countdown and fireworks extravaganza on the Champs-Élysées. The city's emblematic Arc de Triomphe monument was turned into a giant tableau for a light show that celebrated the city's landmarks and the passage of time, with whirring clocks. (AP)

16 Bangladeshi nationals held for illegally staying in Maharashtra



MUMBAI/THANE, Jan 1: Maharashtra police have arrested 16 Bangladeshi nationals staying illegally in Mumbai, Thane and three other districts of the state, officials said.

As part of a special drive, the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) with the help of local police arrested nine Bangladeshi nationals from Mumbai, Nashik, Nanded and Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar in the last four days, an official said.

The accused — eight males and one female — got Aadhaar cards made using forged documents, he said, adding that police have registered five cases against them under the Foreigners Act and other relevant legal provisions.

With this, the ATS has arrested 43 Bangladeshi nationals in 19 cases last month as part of the special drive, the official said.

In another action, the police in the state's Thane district, raided a godown at Prerna Complex in Mankoli area on Tuesday after receiving a tip and found seven Bangladeshi persons working there.

The accused, in the age group of 26 to 54 years, could not produce any valid documents for staying in India, an official from Narpoli police station said.

The police seized mobile phones and other goods valued at ₹ 35,000 from their possession, he said. An FIR was registered against them under provisions of the Foreigners Act, the Passport Act and the Passport (Entry into India) Act, the official said. (PTI)

40-year-old toxic waste of Union Carbide ready for shifting to disposal site

BHOPAL, Jan 1: Some 377 tons of hazardous waste from the defunct Union Carbide factory in Bhopal has been sealed and loaded on trucks, ready to be carried off to a disposal site about 250 km away, an official said on Wednesday.

The site chosen for this purpose is the Pithampur industrial area in Dhar district, 30 km from Indore.

As many as 12 container trucks carrying the waste will set off for the journey by Wednesday night, sources said. A green corridor will be created along the route for a smooth journey.

"We are done. A hundred people in 30-minute shifts have packed the waste since Sunday. They underwent health check-ups and were given rest every 30 minutes," said Swatantra Kumar Singh, director of the state's Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation Department.

The Madhya Pradesh High Court had recently rebuked the authorities for not clearing the Union Carbide site in Madhya Pradesh's capital despite directions from even the Supreme Court, saying this apathy could lead to another tragedy.

Highly toxic methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas leaked from the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal on the intervening night of December 2-3, 1984, killing at least 5,479 people and leaving thousands with serious and long-lasting health issues. It is considered to be among the worst industrial disasters in the world.

"If everything is found to be fine, the waste will be incinerated within three months. Otherwise it might take up to nine months," Singh told PTI on Wednesday morning.

The MP High Court had on December 3 set a four-week deadline to shift the toxic waste, observing that even 40 years after the gas tragedy, the authorities were

Minister Munde's associate Walmik Karad surrenders, sent in 14-day police custody

No 'goonda-raj' will be tolerated in the state: Fadnavis

BEED, Jan 1: Maharashtra NCP minister Dhananjay Munde's close associate Walmik Karad, wanted in an extortion case linked to the murder of a sarpanch in Beed district, has been remanded in 14-day police custody after he surrendered in Pune.

Karad, with his associates, arrived at the Crime Investigation Department's (CID) office in Pune in a car on Tuesday morning.

A preliminary inquiry was conducted and he was handed over to the Beed CID team, which is investigating the murder and extortion cases. Inspector General of Police Sarang Awad said.

He was later taken to a court at Kej in Beed district. The court, in a late night sitting, remanded him in 14-day police custody as sought by the CID.

Before turning himself in, Karad posted a video on social media, claiming he was being linked to the murder for reasons of political vendetta.

Santosh Deshmukh, sarpanch of Massajog village in Kej tehsil of Beed district, was abducted last month and brutally killed on December 9, allegedly for opposing an extortion bid by some persons who had demanded money from a windmill company.

Four persons were earlier arrested in the murder case, while



Karad was named as a wanted accused in the extortion case.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, facing heat over the law-and-order situation, on Tuesday said no "goonda-raj" will be tolerated in the state, but the opposition questioned the police's failure to nab Karad for about three weeks.

During the recently held winter session of the Maharashtra legislature, the opposition alleged that Karad was the "mastermind" of the murder.

The Fadnavis-led coalition government, sworn in on December 5, finds itself in a tricky situation because of Karad's links with Dhananjay Munde, who hails from Beed, and also because of the caste angle.

While the victim was a Maratha,

the accused are from the OBC Vanjari community.

Fadnavis, who holds the Home department, on Tuesday said he spoke with Deshmukh's brother over phone, and assured him that justice will be done.

"Until the guilty are hanged to death, the police will continue to do their duty. All individuals involved in the Beed case will face prosecution. We will not tolerate 'goonda raj' (rule of criminals)...Nobody will be spared," he told reporters.

Congress spokesperson Atul Londhe questioned the police's failure to track down Karad, and said Fadnavis had no moral grounds to remain chief minister.

A sitting judge should oversee the investigation in the Deshmukh murder case, the Congress leader

demanding. NCP (SP) MLA Jitendra Awhad said Food and Civil Supplies Minister Dhananjay Munde should be sacked, asking how a suspect linked with him could be questioned while Munde remains in the cabinet.

NCP (SP) working president Supriya Sule said Karad posting a viral video and the police still remaining clueless about his whereabouts was shocking.

Beed BJP MLA Suresh Dhas congratulated CM Fadnavis over Karad's surrender, but targeted Munde.

Karad and Dhananjay Munde were "two sides of the same coin," he claimed, adding that Munde's resignation has been sought by his own party leaders.

Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange indicated that the Maratha community, to which Deshmukh belonged, would launch an agitation if the government failed to take action against supporters of the accused, whether they be ministers, MLAs or MPs.

Former Rajya Sabha member Sambhaji Rajee Chhatrapati demanded that Karad be booked for the sarpanch's murder and the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) be invoked against him.

It is difficult to secure bail under the MCOCA. (PTI)

Kejriwal writes to RSS chief slamming BJP; 'scared of poll defeat', says Sachdeva



NEW DELHI, Jan 1: AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal has written a letter to RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, alleging distribution of money and deletion of names of Purvanchali and Dalit voters by the BJP ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls.

The BJP has hit back at Kejriwal, saying his letter to Bhagwat is a reflection of his "political frustration" and "fear of defeat" in the polls due next month.

The war of words between the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Delhi has heated up, with prominent leaders from both sides trading barbs on various issues. Kejriwal has sought Bhagwat's clarification on reports that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) will campaign for the BJP in the Delhi election.

"There have been media reports suggesting that the RSS will campaign for votes for the BJP in the Delhi elections. Is this true? Before this, people wish to know whether the RSS endorses the recent wrongful actions taken by the BJP," he has written in his letter to Bhag-

wat. The AAP convenor has raised several questions in his letter dated December 30, asking if the RSS supports money being "openly distributed" by BJP leaders to "buy" votes and "large-scale" deletion of names of Purvanchali and Dalit voters by the saffron party.

This is the second letter written by Kejriwal to Bhagwat in recent months. In a previous letter to the RSS chief in September, the former Delhi chief minister had trained guns at Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP, questioning the politics pursued by the party.

The BJP has accused the AAP and Kejriwal of helping illegal Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis stay in Delhi with documents and money, to use them as vote banks in elections.

The polls to the 70-member Delhi Assembly are due in February.

Kejriwal has alleged that efforts are being made for mass deletion of votes of people, including Purvanchalis, Dalits and slum dwellers, and asked Bhagwat whether the BJP is not "weakening" the country's democracy in this manner. (PTI)

Struggling to meet target, Bangladesh turmoil gives Bengal BJP's membership drive a fillip

KOLKATA, Jan 1: The violence against Hindus in Bangladesh has provided a fillip to West Bengal BJP's membership drive, as the party struggles to meet its ambitious one crore target, while campaigning against the atrocities on minorities across the border to consolidate Hindu support in the state.

Attacks on the minority community on the other side of the border has provided the party with a rallying point, as it seeks to counter challenges posed by organisational gaps, internal discord, and the ruling Trinamool Congress's (TMC) political dominance.

Both TMC and BJP are leveraging the Bangladesh issue to shape the political narrative ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections.

"The Bangladesh turmoil, where Hindu minorities have been at the receiving end, has accelerated the membership drive, as people see the BJP as the only party capable of ensuring stability and are afraid of similar events under TMC's rule, which is known for its minority appeasement," state BJP president Sukanta Majumdar told PTI.

Top BJP leaders have launched an aggressive campaign across West Bengal for the last one month, focusing on the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh. They have accused the TMC of providing shelter to jihadists and fundamentalists as part of its vote-bank politics. "West Bengal's future is at stake under TMC rule. If we allow the TMC to continue its appeasement politics, we are inviting the same crisis we see unfolding in Bangladesh. The

BJP is the only party capable of providing true security for our people," Leader of the Opposition Suvendu Adhikari had said at rallies.

A senior BJP leader, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said, "The fiery speeches, focusing on the protection of Bengal's cultural identity and Hindu community, are aimed at energising party workers and gaining momentum for the membership drive. They yielded positive results, as youngsters are taking up membership in huge numbers, especially in bordering districts." The BJP has been charging the TMC with overlooking the suffering of persecuted Hindus across the border.

"The attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh directly affect Bengal. The Hindus in Bengal know that as long as BJP is here, they are safe, left to the TMC, they would meet the same fate like Bangladesh," BJP MP and general secretary Jyotirmay Singh Mahato said.

The BJP has linked the crisis to its push for the CAA, which promises citizenship to persecuted minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah had set a one-crore membership target during his visit to Kolkata on October 27, intending to galvanise the BJP's organisational base in Bengal. However, the party is still far from the target, with around 35 lakh members enrolled in the last week of December, days before the drive's deadline was extended to first week of January 2025. (PTI)

Naxalism nearing its end in Maharashtra: Fadnavis

GADCHIROLI, Jan 1: Maharashtra will soon become free of Naxal menace given the rise in the number of Maoists laying down their arms and the movement failing to attract new recruits, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said on Wednesday.

The dominance of Naxalites in remote areas of Gadchiroli district was waning, Fadnavis told reporters in Gadchiroli. "Naxalism is nearing its end," the chief minister said responding to a query.

The government has started the process to make Gadchiroli the "first district" by eliminating the dominance of Maoists, he said.

Gadchiroli is often referred to as the last district of Maharashtra as it is on the state's eastern border.

Fadnavis inaugurated the 32-km-long Gatta-Gardewada-Wangeturi road and bus services of the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) on the Wange-turi-Gardewada-Gatta-Aheri route in the district, located in Vidarbha region.

Gadchiroli is not the last, but "first district" for the government (on the priority list), the chief minister said. The road link inaugurated today will connect Maharashtra directly to Chhattisgarh, he said.

Besides, the part dominated by Naxalites is being liberated with people getting the MSRTC bus services after 75 years of Independence, he said.

Fadnavis hailed the Gadchiroli police for their work against Naxalism.

He said people no more support Naxalites and not a single person is now willing to join the outlawed movement which is "very significant".

The chief minister conducted an aerial review of the Gatta-Gardewada-Todgatta-Wangeturi road and the Tadguda bridge. (PTI)

TMC observes foundation day, Mamata reaffirms party's commitment to service over power

KOLKATA, Jan 1: The TMC on Wednesday observed its 28th foundation day, with party supremo and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asserting that after over two decades of protests, victories, and challenges, the party's core belief remains that politics is not about power, but about service to people.

Banerjee said the party's struggle for the rights of the people of the state is ongoing and will continue in the future.

In her message, Banerjee extended her New Year greetings and highlighted the dual significance of the day — the dawn of the New Year and the 28th anniversary of TMC's formation.

Reflecting on the party's formation on January 1, 1998, the TMC supremo emphasised the party's commitment to the welfare of the country's people. "Our struggle for the rights of the people of Bengal is ongoing and will continue in the days ahead," she said.

She also posted a song that she wrote and composed herself, which was sung by renowned artist Indraneel Sen, adding a personal touch to the celebration.

In the afternoon, Banerjee shared a message on X, "Roshni chand se hoti hai, sitaron se nahi, Mohabbat Trinamool Congress se hoti hai, aur kisi se nahi!" (Light comes from the moon, not from stars, love is for Trinamool Congress and no one else), as she expressed gratitude to every single



member of the party and thanked them for their dedication and resilience, highlighting the importance of unity and service.

Reflecting on the party's core principles, Banerjee wrote, "On Trinamool Congress Foundation Day, I wholeheartedly thank every single member of our extended family. Over the course of two decades, every protest, every victory, and even every challenge has reaffirmed our core belief: politics is not about power but about SERVICE. As we celebrate this milestone, I urge every Trinamool soldier to renew their pledge to fight for the people, and remember that the soul of our party is rooted in the ethos of 'Maa, Mati, Manush'."

TMC's national general secretary and MP Abhishek Banerjee also took

to social media to express gratitude toward the party's workers. He emphasised the critical role of TMC workers, calling them "the backbone of our party."

"TMC is dedicated to the welfare of the people of the country and the state. I salute the hard work and sacrifices of all the TMC workers," Abhishek wrote, encouraging them to face the future with renewed vigour as the party prepares for upcoming struggles. Across the state, the TMC Foundation Day was celebrated with cultural programmes, flag-hoisting ceremonies, and public gatherings.

In Kolkata, the party's headquarters was a hub of activities where senior leaders hoisted the TMC flag, paid tribute to the party's martyrs, and addressed party workers. Youth wings

organised rallies, and women supporters showcased Bengal's rich cultural heritage through music and dance performances.

The celebrations in districts like North 24 Parganas, Nadia, and Purulia included traditional dance performances, sweets distribution, and interactive sessions, where party leaders and workers discussed the future course of action.

Streets were adorned with TMC's signature blue and white colours, as party workers took part in these grassroots celebrations, reinforcing the party's message of unity and progress.

Founded on January 1, 1998, as a breakaway faction of the Indian National Congress, the TMC gradually gained prominence, particularly after its historic victory in the 2011 West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections.

The victory ended more than three decades of CPI (M)-led Left Front rule and marked a turning point in the state's political landscape. Under Banerjee's leadership, the TMC has secured three consecutive terms in power, with a decisive victory in the 2021 Assembly elections, further cementing her position as the undisputed leader of the state.

Abhishek Banerjee also shared an optimistic vision for the New Year on social media, urging party workers and supporters to remain hopeful and determined in the face of future challenges. (PTI)

REVISION OF TIMINGS OF 05638/05637 SILCHAR-NAHARLAGUN-SILCHAR & 05628/05627 AGARTALA-GUWAHATI-AGARTALA SPECIAL TRAINS. It has been decided to revise the timings of 05638/05637 Silchar-Naharlagun-Silchar & 05628/05627 Agartala-Guwahati-Agartala Special Trains. The details are as under:

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM OFFICE OF THE ADDITIONAL CHIEF ENGINEER (PHE) KARBI ANGLONG AUTONOMOUS COUNCIL : : DIPHU Postponement of Interview In reference to the advertisement No. Add. CPHE/DIP/Misc-10/2024-25/1812, dated - 24/12/2024, the date for interview for the post of Microbiologist, Technical Officer (TO)-I- SBM (G) and Laboratory Assistant as advertised before is hereby postponed to 13/01/2025, at 11.00 A.M. in the same venue as earlier notified. Inconvenience caused is hereby regretted. Sd/- Additional Chief Engineer (PHE) KAAC Zone, Diphu, Karbi Anglong

# Vaishali clinches women's world blitz bronze

NEW YORK, Jan 1: India's R Vaishali clinched a bronze in the women's section of the World Blitz Championship, capping another strong performance by the country's chess players after stalwart Koneru Humpy's title-winning show in the rapid event here.

Vaishali defeated China's Zhu Jiner 2.5-1.5 in the quarter-finals before losing to another Chinese opponent Ju Wenjun 0.5-2.5 in the semi-final.

In an event completely dominated by the Chinese, Ju Wenjun went on to snare the world title defeating compatriot Lei Tingjie 3.5-2.5.

Five-time world champion and International Chess Federation (FIDE) vice president Viswanathan Anand congratulated Vaishali for her efforts, saying it was a great way to end the year.

"Congratulations to Vaishali for taking bronze. Her qualification was truly a power packed performance. Our Waca Chess mentee (WestBridge Anand Chess Academy) has done us proud," Anand



India sign off on a high

wrote on 'X'.

"We are so happy to be supporting her and her chess. What a way to wrap up 2024. In 2021, we thought we would get stronger chess players but here we have it a World

Champion (Humpy) and a Bronze medallist (Vaishali)!" he wrote.

In the 'Open' section, world number one Magnus Carlsen and Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi shared the Blitz title after three sud-

den-death games failed to produce a winner. This was the first time that the title was awarded to two players after Carlsen asked whether it could be shared given the deadlock.

"We were both tired, some will like it some will not," Carlsen said during a media interaction.

"We reached a point where it had been a long day. We played many games, we had three draws and I felt that I could keep playing. But it was a nice solution to share the win, it was a good way to end it," said Carlsen.

This was Carlsen's second big win this week as the world body was forced to bring him back after his withdrawal from the Rapid championship just a couple of days back due to dress code violation.

Carlsen came wearing jeans for the Rapid event and refused to wear formal trousers, prompting FIDE to disqualify him. However, the world governing body allowed him to wear jeans in the Blitz event. (PTI)

# Djokovic and Kyrgios lose in doubles at Brisbane International



BRISBANE, Jan 1: The new doubles team of Novak Djokovic and Nick Kyrgios are out of the Brisbane International in the second round.

The pair, granted a wild-card entry by tournament organizers, lost 6-2, 3-6, 10-8 Wednesday to the top-seeded team of Nikola Mektic of Croatia and New Zealander Michael Venus.

A Djokovic double-fault with the duo leading 8-6 in the match tiebreak was key to the defeat as they lost the last four points of the match.

"Incredible," Mektic told the sold-out crowd. "I was very happy when I saw them, I could

play them on the first of January. It's an amazing feeling to start the year like this and we knew there would be points like that against players like this."

Djokovic and Kyrgios won their opening doubles match, a crowd-pleasing, fist-pumping affair by both players at Pat Rafter Arena.

Kyrgios lost his opening singles match on Tuesday after an 18-month absence from the tour due to injuries. Djokovic won his first singles match on the same day and will next play Gael Monfilis, who he has a 19-0 record against. (AP)

# Konstas' knock at MCG unlikely to become a blueprint: Carey

SYDNEY, Jan 1: Australian wicketkeeper-batter Alex Carey said on Wednesday that he was mesmerised by the way young opener Sam Konstas scored an audacious half-century in the Boxing Day Test against India but insisted that it was unlikely to become a "blueprint" for future matches.

Making his debut in front of a near sell-out crowd at the MCG on December 26, 19-year-old Konstas didn't show any nerves during his scintillating 60 off 65 balls, which was studded with two sixes off India's best bowler Jasprit Bumrah.

"I was a spectator that first session," Carey told reporters ahead of the fifth Test against India beginning at the SCG on Friday.

"I probably had the emotions of the 90,000 (spectators) that were there. At times I couldn't watch it, at times I was cheering," said Carey.

Konstas, who was handed the Test cap after Nathan McSweeney's unimpressive performance in the first three games, brought an ultra-aggressive approach to Australia's batting but Carey said he didn't expect the teenage opener to go all guns blazing in every match he plays.

"Just the energy he brought, it was something different. Probably wasn't expecting that amount of difference, but he played a style of cricket that was probably new to India as well."

"We'll wait and see how he plays out here (SCG). I don't think that's his blueprint every Test match, but to be able to throw a few punches early and get a bit of momentum for us, the opening partnership was probably just lacking that intensity," he added.

He said that while the opening pair in the first three Tests, McSweeney and Usman Khawaja, had done a decent job in "tough situations", Konstas brought something more to the table.

"I thought Nathan and Usman got us through tough situations as well by facing lots of balls. Sam was able to score a little bit, so hopefully another opportunity in front of his home fans."

Carey also rejected talk of any animosity between Konstas and Virat Kohli after their brief physical altercation on the opening day of the Boxing Day Test, which led to the Indian stalwart coping a 20 per cent fine on his match fee. (PTI)

# Bumrah eclipses Ashwin's rating-point record in latest ICC rankings

DUBAI, Jan 1: India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah on Wednesday bettered spin stalwart Ravichandran Ashwin's all-time rating-point record by an Indian in the latest ICC rankings when he touched the 907-point mark. Ashwin's highest rating was 904, achieved in December 2016. The 907 ranking points also placed Bumrah as joint-17th in the all-time list with Derek Underwood of England.

Ahead of the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne last week, Bumrah had equalled the record (904) held by Ashwin in the ranking for bowlers.

However, another superb performance at the MCG, where he got nine wickets, albeit in a losing

cause, helped him consolidate his lead as the No. 1 Test bowler in the recent update. Australia skipper Pat Cummins earned 15 rating points following his six wickets at MCG to jump a place to No. 3.

He also secured a third place in the Test all-rounder rankings after he notched up 90 vital runs across two innings during Australia's 184-run win in the fourth Test.

Opener Yashasvi Jaiswal's 82-run first-innings knock in the Boxing Day Test saw him jump a spot to a career-best fourth with 854 rating points, while Nitish Kumar Reddy's maiden Test century leapfrogged him 20 places to 53rd in the Test batting rankings. (PTI)



# Sweeney looking to return to Test side once Khawaja retires



MELBOURNE, Jan 1: A "devastating" omission after below-par performances in the Border-Gavaskar series notwithstanding, Australian opener Nathan McSweeney has not given up hope of returning to his country's Test setup, saying he would try his luck as a long-term replacement for Usman Khawaja once the batting stalwart retires.

McSweeney opened the innings with Khawaja in the first three Tests but a series of disappointing scores saw him being replaced by Sam Konstas in the Boxing Day Test with the 19-year-old making an immediate impact by scoring a blazing half-century.

Pakistan-origin cricketer Khawaja, 38, has reportedly indicated that the Ashes next summer could be his ideal swan-song, given the likes of Konstas and McSweeney are staking claim for the

opener's slot.

"I'd love to (be back in the Test setup), there's no doubt about that. Ussie (Usman Khawaja) has been awesome, but when the opportunity comes -- or if it does -- I would love to do that," McSweeney was quoted as saying by "Sydney Morning Herald".

"I haven't had heaps of time to think about it, to be honest, it all kind of happened fairly quickly, and then I was back here playing T20 cricket (in Big Bash League)," said McSweeney, who was heartbroken after being dropped from the fourth Test here which Australia won to take a 2-1 lead in the five-match series.

McSweeney said he would speak to the selectors to discuss his future, adding that he would be "flexible" about his batting position.

"Those conversations will be

had, and I've got to work out and speak with the selectors about where my opportunity may come and what I need to do to get back there.

"I'm flexible to bat wherever and wherever I see my role to, hopefully, one day again play Test cricket," he said.

McSweeney was thrust into the opener's role for the BGT Tests despite playing most of his domestic cricket at No.3 or No.4. He struggled against the quality pace of Jasprit Bumrah, averaging just 14.40.

"I think what I've done really well over the last couple of years is trusting my game and being able to bat long periods of time is where I've been able to make big runs," McSweeney said.

He said that Test debutant Konstas had made full use of the faith reposed by the selectors to make an impact in the Melbourne Test.

"It's quite a unique game, and it's very individual at times. You've got your own way to go about it, and he (Konstas) obviously did it really well in that first innings."

"I think I've been able to play spin pretty well here in Australia over the last few years. It's a fair bit different over there... (but) if I got the nod to go over there I'd feel really confident in my game against spin," said McSweeney, explaining he could be a good choice in the team to handle spin. (PTI)

# Kazakhstan is into the United Cup semifinals

PERTH, Jan 1: Kazakhstan has advanced to the United Cup mixed teams tennis tournament semifinals with an unassailable 2-0 lead over a German team playing without the injured world No. 2-ranked Alexander Zverev.

Zverev was a late scratch for Germany on Wednesday due to a biceps injury. He was scheduled to face Alexander Shevchenko but withdrew at the last minute with



Kazakhstan leading the tie 1-0 after Elena Rybakina beat Laura Siegemund 6-3, 6-1.

Shevchenko beat Zverev's replacement, Daniel Masur, 6-7 (5), 6-2, 6-2 to clinch the tie for Kazakhstan while Zverev watched from the sidelines.

Shevchenko took a medical timeout due to heat exhaustion while leading 1-0 in the second set. He came back from the break to dominate the rest of the match.

"It was a heat problem for sure," Shevchenko said. "I had a bit of a headache, my head was spinning. It was a struggle this match. To play in this heat was so tough."

The United States will play

China on Wednesday night in the second quarterfinal in Perth. Coco Gauff and Taylor Fritz led the U.S. into the final eight with a win in their final round-robin match on Tuesday.

In Sydney, Iga Swiatek and Hubert Hurkacz won their deciding mixed doubles match over the Czech Republic to qualify Poland for the quarterfinals.

World No 2 Swiatek and Hurkacz beat Tomás Machác and Karolína Muchová 7-6 (3), 6-3 in the decider at Sydney's Ken Rosewall Arena. The Polish team led 5-2 before allowing the Czechs back into the set.

In earlier singles, Machác gave the Czech Republic the lead with a 7-5, 3-6, 6-4 win over Hurkacz before Swiatek evened the tie with a 6-3, 6-4 win over Muchová.

Later Wednesday in Sydney, Britain was scheduled to play Australia for a place in the quarterfinals.

In Sydney, Italy earlier won Group D to qualify for the quarterfinals. Winners of the past two Davis Cups and runners-up two years ago to the U.S. in the inaugural edition of the season-opening mixed teams' event, Italy won its group without world No.1 Jannik Sinner.

All tournament play shifts to Sydney from Thursday through to Sunday's final. (AP)

# Barcelona fails to register Olmo for the rest of the season

BARCELONA, Jan 1: The Spanish league said Tuesday that Barcelona has failed to meet Financial Fair Play rules in the latest blow to the club's hopes of keeping playmaker Dani Olmo.

The league said Barcelona "did not present any alternative" on adhering to the regulations, which was required for the club to "register any player beginning on Jan. 2."

Barcelona needed to have another financial lever approved by the league in order to register Olmo after a judge ruled against the club on Monday in the second consecutive court setback ahead of the end-of-year deadline.

Without the court's backing or the league's approval, Olmo's contract can't be registered beyond the end of 2024. The Spain international moved from Leipzig to Barcelona in August.

Barcelona had reportedly reached a deal to sell VIP seats at the renovated Camp Nou stadium for 100 million euros (\$104 million). That would reportedly be enough for the club to add Olmo and forward Pau Víctor to the squad.

Spanish media said Barcelona was still hopeful of reaching a deal with the league to have Olmo registered even if it misses the end-of-year deadline.

Each Spanish league club has a salary cap which is calculated based on a series of factors, including revenues, costs and debts. It is proportional to roughly 70% of a club's revenues. (AP)

# Gambhir's handling of India's transition raises eyebrows

SYDNEY, Jan 1: As Indian cricket deals with the fading form of its two stalwarts in captain Rohit Sharma and senior batter Virat Kohli, head coach Gautam Gambhir and his support staff's role in handling a team in transition has also come into focus.

The ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy has been a difficult ride for the side has struggled to get the right combination in the face of an aggressive and highly-driven Australian team. The visitors will be playing the must-win fifth and final Test here from Friday.

The on-field roller-coaster is causing some off-field issues as well with murmurs of unrest in the dressing room beginning to grow.

It is learnt that Gambhir is not on the same page with most of the players in the team and the communication isn't as good as it used to be during the time of Ravi Shastri and Rahul Dravid.

Skipper Rohit Sharma has maintained that he speaks individually to the players about selection issues. But after Gambhir took charge in July, Rohit, it is said, hasn't actually given clarity to some of the not-so-junior players about why they were being excluded at times from the side.

His own poor form hasn't helped Rohit's cause. But it is also reliably learnt that Gambhir, who is considered a more assertive person, hasn't earned a

lot of confidence from the group of players, who aren't as old as Kohli or Rohit but are also not rookies like Harshit Rana or Nitish Reddy.

"There is a Test match to be played and then there is Champions Trophy. If the performance doesn't improve, even Gautam Gambhir's position wouldn't be safe," a senior BCCI official told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

Gambhir's equation with the selection committee is also not particularly clear at this point.

There are players in the team, who are feeling insecure because of his proclivity to experiment with the playing eleven. In the ongoing BGT, a punt like Nitish Reddy has worked out brilliantly but the handling of Shubman Gill is still being debated.

BCCI secretary Jay Shah has now been elevated to the ICC chief's position and the Board will have his full-time successor only after January 12. Once that administrative stability is in place, the BCCI brass will have some thinking to do.

Till Shah was in-charge of BCCI, he called the shots. Former India seamer Roger Binny, who is the current president of the Board, hasn't been seen taking any policy related calls.

But if India's performance is not drastically better in the Champions Trophy in February-March, Gambhir will cer-



tainly have his wings clipped.

"He was never BCCI's first choice (it was VVS Laxman) and some of the well-known overseas names didn't want to coach all three formats, so he was a compromise. Obviously, some other

compulsions were also there," the official said.

Gambhir has already been asked a few tough questions after the 0-3 defeat at home to New Zealand and if the Border-Gavaskar Trophy is also lost, it

can all go downhill for the feisty former opener from Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar.

Already there is a school of thought that Gambhir should only be given charge of the T20 team, a format in