

The management and editorial team of The Hills Times extend their sincere gratitude to our valued readers, dedicated hawkers, and all our well-wishers for their continued trust, support, and encouragement throughout the year. As we step into the New Year, we wish everyone a Happy and Prosperous New Year, filled with good health, peace, and success.

-Publisher

THE HILLS TIMES

26 YEARS OF DEDICATED JOURNALISM
www.thehillstimes.in
Voice of the hills people

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM GUWAHATI & DIPHU

Vol .No. XXVI

Issue No.346

RNI-ASSENG/2000/12862

DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 1, 2026

PAGES 8 PRICE ₹ 8

Life term for Assam-based terror module case

NEW DELHI, Dec 31: A man has been sentenced to life imprisonment for raising a module of Pakistan-based terror outfit in Assam to carry out terrorist activities, the National Investigation Agency said on Wednesday.

Md Kamruj Zaman alias Kamaruddin was awarded three separate punishments under provisions of an anti-terror law, with the maximum of life imprisonment, by an NIA special court in Guwahati, Assam, it said, adding, the sentences will run concurrently.

The court also fined Zaman Rs 5,000, with three months' additional simple imprisonment in case of default, in each of the three instances.

Zaman was convicted for raising a module of the proscribed Hizbul-Mujahideen (HM) terror outfit in Assam for carrying out terrorist activities during 2017-18, the NIA in a statement said. The conspiracy was aimed at striking terror in the minds of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Attackers set couple's house on fire • Legal proceedings initiated

Suspicion of witchcraft: Couple burnt alive in KA

DIPHU, Dec 31: In a shocking incident rooted in superstition, a married couple was brutally killed and burnt alive by a group of villagers at No 1 Belguri Munda village in the Howraghat area of Karbi Anglong.

Police said the incident occurred on Tuesday night when the couple was attacked inside their house by miscreants armed with sharp and blunt weapons.

After the assault, the attackers set the house on fire, resulting in the deaths of the couple, who were allegedly accused of practising witchcraft and bringing ill effects to the locality.

The deceased have been identified as Gardi Birua (43) and Mira Birua (33).

Villagers reportedly blamed the couple for a recent spate of illnesses in the area, reflecting the



continuing grip of superstition in some remote pockets of the district.

Senior police and civil adminis-

tration officials, including the Superintendent of Police and a magistrate from Diphu, visited the site on Wednesday to supervise foren-

sic examination and initiate legal proceedings.

A heavy police contingent has been deployed in the area to prevent any further violence, while investigations are underway to identify and arrest those involved in the crime.

Officials said witch-hunting is a punishable offence under Assam law, in addition to relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

"The area remains deeply influenced by superstition, where rumours often lead to tragic consequences," an official said.

The incident has sparked widespread outrage, with social activists stressing the urgent need for sustained awareness campaigns to combat witch-hunting and superstitious practices in interior areas of the state. (With inputs from PTI)

Atul not on same page with Prafulla Mahanta

'AGP to decide on seats it will contest in Assam polls considering practical realities'



GUWAHATI, Dec 31: Days after former Assam chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta advised AGP to contest 80 seats in the upcoming assembly polls, party president Atul Bora on Wednesday said a decision will be taken considering "practical realities".

Addressing a press conference, Bora said the ruling alliance member Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) will try to win more seats in the assembly elections, likely to take place in March-April next year, than the previous polls to have a strong position in (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

ABSU to protest over 'politically motivated' action

Nov 29 BTC incident: Registrars of 2 universities sent packing

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 31: The Registrars of Bodoland University and Kokrajhar University have been relieved from their respective posts with immediate effect following allegations linked to the November 29 incident at the BTC Secretariat, Bodofa Nwgr, in Kokrajhar.

According to official sources, Subung Basumatary, Registrar of Bodoland University, and Dimacha D Musahary, Registrar of Kokrajhar University, were removed through separate orders issued by the Vice-Chancellors of the two universities on Tuesday.

The action followed allegations

that the two officials instigated students who were allegedly involved in the November 29 incident during which parts of the BTC Assembly premises and furniture were reportedly damaged.

The incident had triggered widespread concern, prompting the Bodoland Territorial Council administration to initiate inquiries.

Earlier, BTC chief Hagrama Mohilary had alleged that the two Registrars played a role in instigating students and failed to maintain discipline in their respective institutions.

Subsequently, a meeting of the BTC Executive Council decided to relieve the (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Assam man arrested in Kerala over alleged extremist social media posts

THRISSUR (KERALA), Dec 31: Police in Kerala have arrested a 25-year-old man from Assam for allegedly attempting to spread extremist ideas through social media, officials said on Wednesday.

The accused, identified as Roshidul Islam, was arrested from the Kaipamangalam police station limits in this central Kerala district on Tuesday, they said. He had been living in the area for nearly two years and was working in a private firm, police said.

According to the police, Roshidul (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

All schools closed for week due to extreme winter weather in Guwahati

GUWAHATI, Dec 31: With mercury dipping 6.4 degrees Celsius below normal in daytime in the state capital, all schools in Kamrup Metropolitan district of Assam have been closed for a week due to harsh winter, according to an official order.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted light rain at isolated places over Assam with shallow to moderate fog till Thursday morning.

"In view of the ongoing extreme cold wave, the Kamrup (Metropolitan) district adminis-



tration has directed all government & provincialised schools to

remain closed from December 31, 2025 to January 6, 2026," the

Chief Minister's Office said in a post on Tuesday night.

Provincialised schools are private institutions taken over by the government.

The normal classes will resume from January 7, prioritising the safety and well-being of students, it added.

The Inspector of Schools (IS) of Kamrup Metropolitan district, which primarily comprises the capital city, issued an advisory asking the schools to close for one week, considering the health and (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



অসম চৰকাৰ

শুভ নৱবৰ্ষ ২০২৬

'আজি জনতাৰ নৱীন চেতনা
পৃথিৱী বিয়পি জাগে,
স্নেহী পোহৰত জগতৰ জনে
নতুন জীৱন মাগে।'

- ৰূপকোঁৱৰ জ্যোতিপ্ৰসাদ আগৰৱালা

অসমবাসীলৈ ইংৰাজী নৱবৰ্ষৰ আন্তৰিক শুভেচ্ছা যাচিছোঁ।
নৱবৰ্ষই কঢ়িয়াই আনক নতুন আশা, নৱ চেতনা।
সকলোৰে জীৱন মংগলময় হওক

১ জানুৱাৰী ২০২৬

ড° হিমন্ত বিশ্ব শৰ্মা
মুখ্যমন্ত্রী, অসম



Stock markets rally nearly 1 pc on last trading session of 2025 Nifty jumps 10.50 pc annually

MUMBAI, Dec 31: Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty jumped nearly 1 per cent on Wednesday, the final trading session of 2025, driven by sustained buying by domestic institutional investors and strong gains in Reliance, Tata Steel and Kotak Bank.

Following a subdued trend in equity markets recently, value buying emerged in energy, PSU banks, metal and consumer durable counters, which pushed indices higher, traders said.

After five days of decline, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 545.52 points, or 0.64 per cent, to settle at 85,220.60. During the day, it surged 762.09 points, or 0.90 per cent, to 85,437.17.

A total of 2,799 stocks advanced, while 1,413 declined and 162 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty soared 190.75 points, or 0.74 per cent, to end at 26,129.60 after four days of decline.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Tata Steel, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Reliance Industries, Axis Bank, Titan and Trent were among the biggest gainers.

However, Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Bajaj Finance and Sun Pharma were the laggards.

"Indian equity benchmarks re-



bounded sharply on Wednesday, snapping their recent losing streaks as strong buying in metal stocks lifted overall sentiment. Sentiment was further aided by a mild decline in crude oil prices, which helped ease inflation concerns, and a cooling in volatility, with India VIX slipping below 9.5.

"Value buying also emerged after the recent correction, as investors selectively accumulated stocks following multiple sessions of decline in the benchmarks," Gaurav Garg, Research Analyst, Lemonn Markets Desk, said.

In 2025, the Sensex rallied 7,081.59 points, or 9 per cent, and the Nifty zoomed 2,484.8 points, or 10.50 per cent.

The market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms surged by ₹

33.84 lakh crore to ₹ 4,75,79,238.11 crore (USD 5.29 trillion) in 2025.

The BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.19 per cent, and the mid-cap index climbed 1.01 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, oil & gas surged 2.73 per cent, energy (2.28 per cent), metal (1.51 per cent), consumer durables (1.39 per cent), utilities (1.25 per cent), PSU bank (1.22 per cent), capital goods (1.12 per cent) and power (1.12 per cent).

BSE Telecommunication, IT, and BSE Focused IT were the laggards.

This year, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 509.68 points or 1.09 per cent, while the BSE smallcap index dropped 3,655.14 points or 6.62 per cent.

"Indian equity markets concluded the final trading session of the year on a positive note, with sentiment turning decisively bullish while still respecting key resistance levels.

"The session reflected a gradual improvement in risk appetite into year-end, driven primarily by short covering and selective buying, rather than aggressive fresh positioning," Ponmudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index settled lower, while Shanghai's SSE Composite index ended in positive territory.

Markets in Europe were trading marginally lower.

US markets ended lower on Tuesday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 3,844.02 crore on Tuesday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth ₹ 6,159.81 crore, according to exchange data.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, climbed 0.31 per cent to USD 61.53 per barrel.

Falling for the fifth consecutive day on Tuesday, the Sensex dipped 20.46 points or 0.02 per cent to settle at 84,675.08. The Nifty skidded 3.25 points or 0.01 per cent to 25,938.85. (PTI)

IGL cuts piped cooking gas prices in Delhi, NCR

NEW DELHI, Dec 31: Indraprastha Gas Ltd, India's largest city gas retailer, on Wednesday announced a ₹ 0.70 cut in prices of natural gas piped into household kitchens for cooking in Delhi and NCR towns.

The reduction in rates will be effective January 1, the company said in a post on X.

"IGL has announced a substantial reduction in its domestic piped natural gas (PNG) prices, this coming New Year for its consumers in Delhi and NCR by ₹ 0.70 per standard cubic metre (scm)," it said.

"The revised price after reduction shall be ₹ 47.89 per scm in Delhi, ₹ 46.70 per scm in Gurugram and ₹ 47.76 per scm in Noida, Greater Noida and Ghaziabad."

The reduction follows the sector regulator Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board's (PNGRB) recent overhaul of pipeline tariffs. Think Gas has already announced reductions in CNG and domestic PNG prices across multiple states ahead of the new tariff regime taking effect on January 1, 2026.

PNGRB on December 16 announced a rationalised tariff structure for pipelines that move natural gas - the feedstock for generating electricity, producing fertiliser, making CNG and used as fuel in household kitchens. The revised tariffs, which are effective January 1, make natural gas transportation simpler, fairer and more cost-effective for consumers and the city gas distribution sector. (PTI)

Rupee plunges 5 pc in 2025 amid persistent foreign fund outflows, dollar strength

MUMBAI, Dec 31: The rupee slumped 5 per cent in 2025 as persistent capital outflows from foreign investors, alongside heightened dollar demand from importers, making it one of the worst-performing Asian currencies.

On the last trading session of 2025, the rupee depreciated 13 paise to close at 89.88 against the US dollar as month-end demand and FPIs' dollar buying kept it lower.

The domestic currency has exhibited a negative bias throughout the year, making it Asia's worst-performing currency in 2025, with foreign portfolio investors pulling out USD 16.5 billion from equities this year, further denting investor sentiments, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 89.89 against the dollar and touched an intra-day low of 89.95 and a high of 89.84 against the American currency.

At the end of Wednesday's trading session, the rupee was quoted at 89.88 against the greenback, registering a fall of 13 paise over its previous close.

On Tuesday, the rupee rose 23 paise to close at 89.75 against the greenback.

On a year-on-year basis, the rupee has plunged 4.95 per cent. It was quoted at 85.64 on December 31, 2024. Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said, "The rupee resumed its downward trajectory following Tuesday's pause, weighed down by a rebounding US dollar against major currencies. For the year 2025, the rupee emerged as the regional laggard, with spot prices whipsawed by tightening dollar liquidity, surging trade deficit, relatively high US Tariff and capital flows."

"Since the Trump Administration took over, the rupee has been the worst performing currency in the Asian Region, depreciating by more than 5 per cent during 2025, marking its highest depreciation in the last three years," said Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director, Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP.

Meanwhile, the Reserve Bank, in its Financial Sta-

bility Report (FSR) on Wednesday, said the rupee had depreciated against the US dollar, reflecting falling terms of trade due to the impact of tariffs and a slowdown in capital flows.

The report further noted that the Indian economy is likely to maintain strong growth, underpinned by robust domestic demand, benign inflation, and prudent macroeconomic policies despite an uncertain and challenging global economic backdrop.

"The domestic financial system remains robust and resilient, bolstered by strong balance sheets, easy financial conditions, and low financial market volatility. Nonetheless, there are near-term risks from external uncertainties -- geopolitical and trade-related," it said.

Bhansali further said that "consistent outflows by FPIs and stake sales by investors, demand from defence, oil and gold have all impacted the rupee as it fell to its lowest at 91.08 before reined in to control it and bring it up to current levels".

Parmar added, "We anticipate a period of range-bound consolidation for USD/INR, anchored between the 89.40 support and 90.26 resistance levels."

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.10 per cent higher at 98.33.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 0.13 per cent higher at USD 61.41 per barrel in futures trade.

Forex traders said the USD/INR pair is trading under pressure due to multiple factors, including a shift toward risk aversion, driven by persistent capital withdrawals from foreign investors ahead of the holiday break, alongside heightened greenback demand from importers.

On the domestic equity market front, benchmark-sensitive indices ended 2025 on a high, with the Sensex jumping 545.52 points to settle at 85,220.60, while the Nifty surged 190.75 points to 26,129.60.

Foreign institutional investors offloaded equities worth ₹ 3,597.38 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. (PTI)

E-com, food delivery services largely unaffected by gig workers' strike

NEW DELHI, Dec 31: A section of gig workers on Wednesday stopped work demanding better pay and work conditions but the agitation had little impact on services on e-commerce and online food delivery platforms that saw robust business on New Year's Eve.

While at some places gig workers staged demonstrations, firms like Zomato, Swiggy offered more incentives to delivery partners, a standard practice on festive periods, to ensure minimal disruptions in services on New Year's Eve.

Telangana Gig and Platform Workers' Union (TGPWU) and Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT) have claimed that lakhs of workers are set to join the nationwide strike to demand better payouts and improved working conditions.

While the workers' bodies claimed that many of their members, who are associated with food delivery and quick commerce firms like Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, Instamart, and Zepto, have stayed away from work, company insiders said it is business as usual for them on New Year's Eve. Amid the strike call, Zomato offered delivery partners payouts of ₹ 120-150 per order during peak hours between 6 pm and 12 am on New Year's Eve.

The platform has also promised earnings of up to ₹ 3,000 over the course of the day, subject to order volumes and worker availability, people in the know of the development said. In addition, Zomato has temporarily waived penalties on order denials and cancellations, they said, however, stressing that it

was a standard operating protocol followed during high-demand festive and year-end periods.

"This is part of our standard annual operating protocol during festive periods, which typically see higher earning opportunities due to increased demand," an Eternal spokesperson told PTI.

Eternal owns Zomato and Blinkit brands. Similarly, Swiggy has also increased incentives around the year-end period, offering delivery workers earnings of up to ₹ 10,000 across December 31 and January 1, according to people aware of the development.

"At Swiggy, we are committed to empowering our delivery partners. As part of our standard process, enhanced incentives are offered on special occasions such as festivals, allowing delivery partners to benefit from increased earning opportunities during peak demand periods across the year," the company said.

On New Year's Eve, the platform is advertising peak-hour earnings of up to ₹ 2,000 for the six-hour period between 6 pm and 12 am, in a bid to ensure adequate rider availability during one of the busiest ordering windows of the year, they said, maintaining that increased payouts were a standard practice during such periods.

In a joint statement, TGPWU and IFAT said, "As of last night, over 1.7 lakh delivery and app-based workers across India have confirmed participation, with numbers expected to rise further by evening." On the other hand, people in the know said that following the massive December 25 strike, which

saw thousands of delivery workers log off platforms across Telangana and other regions, gig workers have announced an escalated nationwide strike on December 31, 2025, said the joint statement of TGPWU and IFAT. "The December 25 action sent a clear warning to platform companies about falling earnings, unsafe delivery pressure, and loss of dignity at work."

"However, companies responded with silence -- no rollback of reduced payouts, no dialogue with workers, and no concrete assurances on safety or working hours. This continued indifference has made today's strike unavoidable," it added. The Gig and Platform Service Workers Union also announced a nationwide strike on December 31, 2025 to collectively raise demands concerning the rights, welfare and dignity of gig and platform workers across India.

Giving a call to action, it said, "All gig workers, platform workers, digital platform workers, app-based workers, and online freelancers are earnestly requested to participate in the national strike by shutting down all work-related applications and abstaining from providing services on December 31, 2025, thereby making the strike united and effective." Supporting the gig workers, AITUC general secretary Amarjeet Kaur said they must be given the status of industrial workers.

They are usually referred to as partners by the platforms they are associated with, she said, adding there is no mention of gig workers in three out of four labour codes. (PTI)

Govt rolls out ₹ 4,531-cr market access support for exporters

NAME CORRECTION
My actual and correct name is OBAIDUR RAHMAN s/o- Abdus Sattar Which is recorded in my all documents but my Academic Documents i.e. Leaving certificate issued by principal Kharupetia college bearing Roll code A- 12248, Roll no-0571 my name has been recorded as MD. OBAIDUR RAHMAN instead of OBAIDUR RAHMAN. Actual fact is both name are single and one person i.e. me. Obaidur Rahman S/o- Abdus Sattar Vill- panikhaiti Po- AminparaPs- Rowta Dist- Udalguri BTR Assam.

NEW DELHI, Dec 31: The government on Wednesday launched ₹ 4,531 crore market access support for exporters under which financial support will be provided to participate in activities such as international fairs and exhibitions. It will help exporters at a time when they are facing a steep 5 per cent tariff by the US.

The measure is a part of the ₹ 25,060-crore export promotion mission, which

is aimed at enhancing competitiveness of Indian exporters. It has 11 components. Market Access Support (MAS) is the first component of the mission that has been operationalised from Wednesday and the remainder will be rolled out by January-end, Director General of Foreign Trade Ajay Badhoo said.

Under this, ₹ 4,531 crore is being allocated for six years (2025-31). Out of

this, ₹ 500 crore has been earmarked for 2025-26 as only three months remain in the fiscal year. Of the ₹ 500 crore, ₹ 330 crore is for clearing dues of the Market Access Initiative (MAI), which functioned as a standalone scheme until the last financial year. Under the MAS, structured financial and institutional support will be provided for activities including Buyer-Seller Meets (BSMs), participation in international trade fairs and exhibitions, Mega Reverse Buyer-Seller Meets (RBSMs) organised in India. For BSM, ₹ 5 crore assistance per event will be provided, while for RBSM support has been capped at ₹ 10 crore. For trade delegations the cap is ₹ 5 crore.

For each event, the government will bear 60 per cent of the costs and 40 per cent will be shouldered by the private sector. For priority areas the government support can go up to 80 per cent, Badhoo said. He added that for participating in BSM and trade delegations, 35 per cent has been reserved for Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Priority sectors under the MAS are agriculture and allied industries, handicraft, handlooms, leather, sports goods, telecom, defence, tourism, medical, logistics, legal, audio visual, communications, construction and environment-related services. A new component for proofs-of-concept and product demonstrations to potential overseas buyers, particularly in technology-intensive, emerging and sunrise sectors, will be notified shortly to complement existing market access interventions, the DGFT said. This has been brought in on the request of ministries of telecom, IT and electronics. "Mandatory online feedback mechanisms will be instituted for exporters participating in each supported event, covering parameters such as buyer quality, business leads generated and market relevance. Based on feedback and implementation learnings, the MAS guidelines will be progressively refined and institution-alised," Badhoo said. A forward-looking three-to-five-year calendar of major market access events will be prepared and approved in advance, enabling exporters and organising agencies to plan participation well ahead of time and ensuring continuity of market development efforts. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Atul not on same

the government. "Prafulla Mahanta is the founder of the party. What he said was his personal wish and the party respects that. There is internal democracy within AGP and everyone can air their opinions," he added.

Bora, the state agriculture minister, said the party will discuss various options regarding the number of seats in the coming days.

"We will take a practical decision regarding the forthcoming elections. We cannot overrule the ground realities of the present times," he added.

Earlier this month, two-time CM Mahanta had said the AGP should contest 80 seats on its own despite being in an alliance led by the BJP.

Presently, the ruling BJP's strength in the 126-member Assam Assembly is 64, while its allies AGP has nine MLAs, UPPL has seven and BPF has three members.

In the opposition camp, the Congress' strength is 26, AIUDF has 15 members and CPI(M) has one MLA. There is one Independent legislator as well.

Bora said 2026 is an important year for the party as it will face the assembly polls and look to strengthen its organisation at the ground level.

"We are looking for a better result this time. That will help expand regionalism in the state and governance. Assam's condition has improved a lot since 2016. Still, it is lagging behind many other states in different parameters. We need to do more," he added. (PTI)

Life term for

the people, it said. According to the agency's investigation, Zaman recruited Sahnawaz Alom, Saidul Alam, Omar Faruk, and a few more for the purpose.

The anti-terror agency had in March 2019 chargesheeted five people, including the four men. While Sahnawaz, Saidul, and Omar were convicted after they pleaded guilty, the fifth accused, Jaynal Uddin, died of an illness during the course of the trial, the NIA said. (PTI)

ABSU to protest

two Registrars and sought a judicial inquiry by a retired judge of the Gauhati High Court. A judicial inquiry committee headed by retired Gauhati High Court judge Hiren Nath Sarma has since been constituted to examine the incident.

The development has drawn a strong reaction from the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), which termed the removal of the two Registrars as unjustified and politically motivated.

ABSU Central General Secretary Khanindra Basumatary alleged that the orders were issued without any concrete evidence, internal university inquiry or findings of the judicial inquiry committee, calling the action a violation of university rules and norms.

ABSU maintained that the protest rally held on November 29 by tribal students against the granting of Scheduled Tribe status to six communities was organised with prior permission from the Vice-Chancellors of both universities.

The organisation demanded immediate withdrawal of the removal orders in the interest of the universities and students, warning of democratic protest demonstrations if the decision is not reversed.

Meanwhile, senior United People's Party Liberal leader and Assam Cabinet Minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma also reacted to the issue related to the removal of the two Registrars.

Assam man arrested in

allegedly shared social media posts that promoted religious hatred and showed an inclination towards terrorism. Investigators claimed that he was in contact with individuals outside the country, including Bangladesh, through phone calls and social media platforms.

Police further alleged that he had attempted to procure AK-47 rifles from Pakistan, based on information gathered during the preliminary investigation. Officials said further investigation is underway. (PTI)

All schools closed

safety of students. "All heads of schools are hereby advised to inform students, parents and staff accordingly. Ensure that no academic or co-curricular activities are conducted during this period. Take necessary steps for the smooth resumption of classes after the reopening," it added.

The IS also advised the private schools to decide for themselves in the interest of students.

According to the MET Department, the state capital recorded a maximum temperature of 18.1 degrees Celsius on Tuesday, which was 6.4 degrees below the normal. The minimum temperature was, however, 4.3 degrees above normal at 15.1 degree Celsius.

It predicted cloudy skies with light rain or drizzle in the state capital, with maximum and minimum temperatures likely to be 19 degrees Celsius and 14 degrees Celsius, respectively.

"An upper air cyclonic circulation lies over Northeast Assam at 1.5 km above mean sea level. The upper air cyclonic circulation over north Bangladesh at 1.5 km above mean sea level has become less marked," the daily weather report on Northeast said on Tuesday.

In the last 2-3 days, the weather remained cloudy with many parts of the state, including Guwahati city, witnessing drizzles during the daytime.

People are seen warming up with woodfires on roadsides throughout the day, while demands for heavy woollens soared in the market.

Though the extreme winter has made life difficult, especially for the poor people, many have welcomed it, saying a perfect mood has been created for the new year celebrations. (PTI)

GOVT. OF ASSAM

OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER (PHE), DIPHU RURAL
W/S DIVISION, DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

Expression of Interest
No 1 of 2025-26 Date: 29/12/25

Expression of Interest is invited from registered Contractors/Firms of PHED, KAAC any class for the construction of End of Drainage Treatment plant at different Location in Karbi Anglong District as per approved drawing and rate (fixed) of the Chief Engineer(PHE) Sanitation, Govt of Assam. Within 7(Seven) days from the date of this EOI.

Nos of End of Drainage Treatment plant of 68 nos (sixty eight)@ 1,02,000/Each (Rupees one lakh two thousand)

List of End of Drainage Treatment plant is available in the office of the undersigned

Sd/-
Member secretary, DWSC
Cum Executive Engineer(PHE)
Diphu Rural W/S Division
Date 29/12/25

Memo no. No. EE/PHE/DIP/RWS/SBMG-35/2025-26/6513-17

Jorhat Congress delegation meets Forest Man Jadav Payeng over forest fire

Leaders urge strict action against perpetrators and call for protection of Molai Kathoni forest



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, Dec 31: Near the ever-green forest "Molai Kathoni", created through the lifelong efforts of Forest Man Padma Shri Dr Jadav Payeng, a new project named "2.0" was launched.

Under the leadership of his daughter Munumuni Payeng, a team of 70 members has been planting valuable saplings across nearly 700 hectares of land since

2022.

However, miscreants set fire to the area, burning down more than 5,500 saplings, causing deep distress to Dr Payeng.

Following the directions of Putul Burhagohain, president of the Jorhat District Congress Committee, a delegation led by Vikash Gogoi, General Secretary of the Jorhat District Congress Committee, met Dr Payeng.

The delegation included Krisnanu Baruah, former president of Assam Pradesh NSUI, Shekhar Malu, General Secretary of the Jorhat District Youth Congress and Dhruvajyoti Bora, among others.

They discussed the situation with Dr Payeng and demanded strict action against those responsible for setting fire to the forest.

Dr Jadav Payeng informed the delegation that sand mafias, allegedly operating with the patronage of the Forest Department under the BJP government have been creating terror in the area.

He also stated that he has lodged a complaint regarding this matter with the Assam Forest Minister.

Inspired by the ideals of Assam's son Jadav Payeng, who is globally renowned for his contribution to biodiversity conservation, the delegation urged the government to immediately stop forest destruction and illegal sand mining in the area where the forest has been developed under the leadership of Munumuni Payeng and others.

Protest over Lakhpati Baideu scheme exclusion in Bilasipara

Women allege corruption, warn of poll boycott if benefits denied

HT Correspondent

BILASIPARA, Dec 31: Tension prevailed at Noonmati village under the Nayer Alga Development Block in Assam's Bilasipara area on Tuesday as women belonging to several self-help groups (SHGs) staged a protest alleging corruption in the implementation of the Assam government's flagship 'Lakhpati Baideu' scheme.

The protest erupted after three SHGs from Noonmati village under Tilapara gram panchayat were reportedly excluded from the final list of beneficiaries, leaving around 36 economically backward women without benefits under the scheme. The aggrieved women alleged large-scale irregularities in the selection process and demanded immediate intervention from the authorities.

According to the protesters, money was allegedly collected from members of the three SHGs in the name of enrolment under the scheme. They claimed that the



women were also provided training, which raised hopes of their inclusion in the final beneficiary list. However, none of the members from the concerned groups found their names in the final list, triggering anger and resentment. Left with no alternative, the

women took to the streets and raised slogans against the authorities, accusing them of betrayal. They further alleged the involvement of certain departmental officials in the irregularities and demanded a transparent and impartial inquiry into the matter.

Expressing their anguish, members of the protesting groups said they had always supported Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma and trusted his vision for women's empowerment. "We believed this scheme would change our lives. But today, despite fulfilling all requirements, we have been deprived," they said.

The protesters also issued a strong warning, stating that if they are not included under the Lakhpati Baideu scheme, they may be compelled to boycott voting in the 2026 Assam Assembly elections.

The incident has sparked concern in the area, as the scheme is considered a crucial support mechanism for improving the livelihoods of poor women. The agitation continued peacefully with women holding placards and demanding accountability, while urging the state government to intervene immediately, conduct a fair investigation and ensure justice for the deprived beneficiaries.

Basanta Kumar Goswami to receive Rongbong Terang Samanway Award

HT Correspondent

BAKALIAGHAT, Dec 31: Chingthar Publication on Tuesday announced that Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami, president of the Axom Sahitya Sabha, has been selected for the 11th Rongbong Terang Samanway Award 2026.

The announcement was made at a press conference held at the Bakaliaghat Anchalic Yuva Sangha.

The award ceremony is scheduled to be held on January 11, 2026, in collaboration with Deichthar Government Adarsha Mahavidyalaya. The date has special significance as it precedes the birth anniversary of Padmashree Rongbong Terang on January 13.

The press meet was attended by several literary and social personalities, including writer and Bakaliaghat Press Club president Bhaben Koch, secretary of Bakaliaghat Branch Sahitya Sabha Dhiren Bora, former headmaster of Rajapathar High School Munimanta Saikia and KUIH central committee members Purnima Devi and Riju Kakati.

According to a press communique issued by Chingthar Publication, the award ceremony will be attended by Padmashree Rongbong Terang, Jayanta Baruah, proprietor of the Sadin-Pratidin Group, Dr Numal Momin, Deputy Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Karbi Anglong deputy commissioner Aaranyak Saikia and Kamsing Hanse, president of Karbi Lammet Amei (KLA), among others.

The Rongbong Terang Samanway Award was instituted by Chingthar Publication to recognise outstanding contributions to literature and the promotion of social harmony. The list of past awardees includes Dr Dharendra Nath Dutta (2017), Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi (2018), Homen Borgohain (2019), Dr Nagen Saikia (2020), Phaniendra Kumar Debchaudhary (2021), Dr Pitambar Deva Goswami (2022), Biren Singha (2023), Dr Karabi Deka Hazarika (2024) and an environmental activist in 2025. Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami will be the recipient for 2026.

Sarupathar sees rapid development under MAC Kadom Terangpi

Residents praise proactive leadership and infrastructure projects improving flood resilience

HT Correspondent

SARUPATHAR, Dec 31: Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) Kadom Terangpi has drawn widespread praise from the residents of the Sarupathar constituency for her proactive leadership and the successful implementation of various infrastructure projects.

Despite having 26 constituencies within the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), the Sarupathar region is currently witnessing a distinct transformation. Residents noted that while the area has been represented in the Council for years, the current pace of "people-centric" development is unprecedented.

The MAC's office has prioritised connectivity and flood resilience, focusing on several critical projects that are already underway, including the construction



of a major RCC bridge at Langroi, connecting the area to the Saripathar PWD road. Additionally, another RCC bridge is being built to link NH-39 with Paklangso and construction of an RCC bridge near Balipathar HS School is in progress to ensure safe passage for students and faculty. To tackle the perennial issue of muddy roads during the monsoon season, sand-graveling projects have also been initiated. Key routes, including the stretch from Balipathar NH-39 to Jewelston Terang's residence and various internal roads within

Saphapani village are being constructed.

For years, the people of Sarupathar struggled with poor road conditions, particularly during the rainy season. Local residents expressed their gratitude, noting that MAC Terangpi's dedication to understanding the "pulse of the people" has led to tangible improvements in their daily lives. "We have seen many representatives, but the way Kadom Terangpi is working for the poor and focusing on the essential needs of every village is remarkable," a local resident shared during a field visit.

The MAC's office has indicated that these projects are only the beginning. With more development schemes in the pipeline, the Sarupathar constituency is poised to become a model of progress within the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.

NFR rolls out new timetable with improved connectivity and passenger-friendly services

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 31: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has introduced a new timetable, effective January 1, 2026, featuring several passenger-centric and operational improvements to strengthen railway connectivity in the Northeast and beyond.

The new timetable regularises 20 train services introduced during 2025, including Mail, Express and Passenger trains connecting key destinations such as Guwahati, Sairang, Dibrugarh, Agartala, North Lakhimpur, Katihar, Joghani and Anand Vihar. This provides additional travel options for long-distance journeys and improves access to previously underserved routes. Passenger convenience has been further enhanced with increased frequency of certain services. For instance, passenger trains between Silchar and Mahishashan, previously running two days a week will now operate six days a week, benefiting commuters and travelers in the Barak Valley region.

Special trains have also been formally incorporated into the timetable with 12 pairs running on important

long-distance routes to manage seasonal rush during festivals and high-demand periods.

A major highlight is the addition of over 170 new stoppages at stations across Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Bihar and adjoining areas. These new stops will improve accessibility for passengers in semi-urban and rural regions, reducing the need for long road journeys to major stations.

In a significant step toward modernisation and energy efficiency, NFR has shifted several traction changing points, enabling many trains—including Rajdhani and other premium Express/Mail services to operate under end-to-end electric traction. This is expected to improve punctuality, reduce reliance on diesel locomotives, lower carbon emissions and ensure smoother train operations.

Collectively, these measures are expected to enhance connectivity, reduce travel time, increase operational efficiency and improve overall passenger satisfaction, reinforcing NFR's commitment to safe, efficient and environmentally friendly rail services while supporting socio-economic development in the Northeast.

₹ 8 lakh frozen after renowned Jorhat doctor duped of ₹ 49 lakh

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Dec 31: The Cyber Police Station of the Crime Investigation Department (CID), Assam has taken swift action following an FIR filed by Dr Sadagar Deuri, a senior surgeon and professor of surgery at Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (JMCH), who was targeted in a sophisticated "digital arrest" cyber scam.

Dr Deuri, widely respected for his dedicated service to underprivileged patients was allegedly duped by cybercriminals impersonating law enforcement officials. The fraudsters managed to siphon off approximately ₹ 49 lakh from the victim through a series of deceptive financial transfers.

In a significant early breakthrough, the investigating team has successfully placed a hold on more than ₹ 8 lakh of the defrauded amount during the initial phase of the probe. CID officials said coordinated efforts are underway with banks and financial institutions to freeze additional accounts linked to the scam and to facilitate the recovery and reversal of funds to the vic-

tim's account.

A formal case has been registered at the Cyber Police Station, CID Assam and a detailed investigation is in progress. The CID is deploying all available resources, including technical analysis and inter-agency coordination, to trace the money trail, identify those involved and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Cyber Cell of CID Assam has cautioned citizens to remain alert against such cyber frauds, reiterating that no legitimate law enforcement agency carries out arrests through phone or video calls, or demands money transfers for verification or clearance. Members of the public have been advised to immediately report any suspicious calls or messages claiming legal action by contacting the National Cyber Crime Helpline at 1930 or by filing a complaint online at cybercrime.gov.in.

Assam Police reaffirmed its commitment to combatting cybercrime and protecting citizens from emerging digital threats.

Commercial layer farm 'Sona Egg' inaugurated in Nagaon

MLA urges youth to embrace entrepreneurship for self-reliance

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 31: Rupak Sarma, MLA of Nagaon Batadroba constituency, inaugurated a new commercial layer farm, named "Sona Egg" at Gatanga village on the outskirts of the town on Tuesday.

The farm was established a few months ago by local entrepreneur Kankan Bora with the aim of promoting poultry farming and creating local employment opportunities.

Addressing the gathering, MLA Sarma praised the state government under Chief Minister Dr Hi-

manta Biswa Sarma for its initiatives in the industrial sector, which he said are providing a strong platform for unemployed youth to become self-reliant.

He encouraged young people to take up entrepreneurship as a means of self-employment instead of relying solely on government jobs.

Following the inauguration, a public feast was organised, which was attended by hundreds of villagers and well-wishers, celebrating the new venture and its potential impact on the local economy.

KAAC extends school holidays amid cold wave

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 31: The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) on Tuesday announced an extension of school holidays across the district in view of the prevailing cold wave conditions.

According to an official directive issued by the KAAC, all educational institutions, including government, provincialised, aided and private schools under its jurisdiction will remain closed until January 7, 2026.

The decision was taken as a precautionary measure to safeguard the health and well-being of students, particularly young children, as the district continues to experience a sharp drop in

temperature.

Authorities expressed concern over the impact of the severe cold wave on students travelling to and attending schools.

The order was issued with the formal approval of the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. Officials reiterated that ensuring the safety of the student community remains the top priority during the ongoing extreme weather conditions.

School authorities have been asked to keep students and parents informed about the resumption of classes and any necessary adjustments to the academic calendar in due course.

Ajmal Foundation felicitates 550+ NEET, JEE toppers

Dr Ashok Pansari urges students to set clear life goals for success

HT Correspondent

HOJAI, Dec 31: Over 550 meritorious students of Ajmal Super-40 were honoured at a grand felicitation ceremony held at Maryam Ajmal Women's College of Science and Technology in Hojai on Wednesday, celebrating their outstanding performance in NEET and JEE 2025 examinations. The students have secured admission to some of India's top medical and engineering institutions, marking a historic achievement for the region.

The event was graced by Amiruddin Ajmal, Chairman of the Ajmal Group of Companies, as chief guest; Dr Ashok Pansari, Vice-Chancellor of Royal Global University, as chief speaker; Maulana Badruddin Ajmal, Trustee of Ajmal CSR and Ajmal Foundation; Sirajuddin Ajmal, Chief Trustee of Ajmal Foundation and Maulana Mustaq Anfar, Chairman of the Anfar Group of Companies, among other dignitaries.

Launched in 2016, the Ajmal Super-40 initiative aims to help talented yet financially disadvantaged students pursue careers in medicine and engineering. Over the years, it has gained national recognition for academic excellence and social up-



liftment. Most of the students come from economically backward families and the Foundation provides free coaching, study materials, meals and mentorship, ensuring financial constraints do not hinder their academic ambitions.

In NEET 2025, Himanta Parana Saikia topped the list with 606 marks, securing admission to AIIMS Raipur. Other top achievers include Pollo Paite (588), Minhaj Uddin Barbhuiya (587), Ali Haider Hussain (586), Nabid Nawaz Choudhury (576) and Mustak

Ahmed (570), many gaining admission to premier medical colleges including AIIMS and GMCH. Ajmal Super-40's JEE 2025 batch also saw students like Indrajit Timung, Shaunak Dutta Choudhury, Gautam Deuri and Chinam Jhaipabi Chanuwa securing seats at IIT Guwahati, IIT Kharagpur, IIT Dhanbad and IIT Indore, respectively.

Chief Speaker Dr Ashok Pansari praised the philanthropic work of the Ajmal family and urged students to set their life goals with clarity, emphasising purposeful living.

Drawing on shlokas from the Shri-mad Bhagavad Gita and real-life examples, he encouraged students to pursue meaningful and goal-oriented lives. Maulana Mustaq Anfar highlighted the importance of working for societal welfare irrespective of religion and appreciated the Foundation's efforts.

Amiruddin Ajmal, Maulana Badruddin Ajmal and Sirajuddin Ajmal lauded the contributions of teachers and staff, including Dr Khasrul Islam Director of Ajmal Foundation, Dr MRH Azad, General Manager and Abdul Kadir Project Head of Ajmal Super-40. The Foundation felicitated both students and faculty in recognition of their hard work and dedication.

The ceremony also honoured outstanding students from Ajmal Law College, Nazir Ajmal Memorial College of Education, Maryam Ajmal Women's College of Science and Technology and Ajmal IAS Academy, celebrating the Foundation's broader impact on education and social transformation. The event highlighted Ajmal Super-40 as a beacon of hope, perseverance and excellence for aspiring students across India.

Excise Department cracks down on illegal alcohol sales in Lahorijan

HT Correspondent

LAHORIJAN, Dec 31: In a major move to curb the illegal sale of alcohol, the Excise Department, led by Alberto Rongpi, Assistant Inspector of Excise, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, conducted a series of intensive raids on December 30 along National Highway 39.

Acting on specific intelligence regarding the unauthorised sale of liquor, the Excise team launched a sweep at approximately 1:30 PM.

The operations focused on hotels and eateries situated in the Lahorijan area.

During the drive, officials inspected numerous "Line Hotels" and roadside dhabas. A significant amount of illicit liquor was seized from several establishments operating without valid permits.

The Excise Department identified several hotels and restaurants involved in the illegal trade. Establishments found selling alcohol without a valid

license included Salty Hotel, Shivam Hotel, Foresta Hotel, Assam Plaza Hotel, Blue Diamond Restaurant and Hotel Chop Cha, among others in the vicinity.

Accompanied by law enforcement, officials thoroughly searched the premises.

While seizures were made, the department also issued a stern final warning to hotel owners, stating that any future violations would result in severe legal consequences.

Alberto Rongpi emphasised that this crackdown is part of a broader effort to ensure a peaceful and "dry" transition during the New Year celebrations.

The department aims to eliminate public disturbances and accidents caused by unregulated alcohol consumption during the holiday season.

The Excise Department confirmed that surveillance will remain heightened in Bokajan, Khatkhati and Lahorijan to ensure that no unlicensed liquor trade continues.

Gauhati University faculty commissioned as Flying Officer in IAF

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 31: Gauhati University Assistant Professor Dr Hemen Kumar Kalita has been commissioned as a Flying Officer in the Indian Air Force, becoming the first faculty member of the University to achieve this distinction while serving in an academic role.

Dr Kalita completed the rigorous Pre-Commission Training (PRTC) in two phases—Phase I at the Officers Training Academy (1–20 September) and Phase II at Air Force Station Tambaram (27 October–27 December) earning an 'A' grade for overall performance. His commissioning was formalised in a piping ceremony at Tambaram on 26 December.

As the University's first Associate NCC Officer (ANO) of the NCC Air Force Wing to hold this rank, Flying Officer Dr Kalita will mentor NCC cadets, promoting leadership, discipline and national service. The achievement has been widely welcomed as a matter of pride, highlighting Gauhati University's commitment to combining academic excellence with civic and military engagement.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

And now we welcome the new year. Full of things that have never been. —Rainer Maria Rilke

Gold's race to \$5000 likely in 2026

Gold's surge has turned a long-running Indian household instinct into a global macro trade. With spot prices pressing above the \$4,500 an ounce mark late in 2025 and year-to-date gains running above 70 percent, the metal is headed for its strongest annual performance since 1979. The question now animating dealing rooms as much as Indian jewellery hubs is straightforward: when does the "magic" \$5,000 level arrive, and does 2026 deliver it quickly enough to feel inevitable rather than speculative? From an Indian perspective, the \$5,000 conversation is not just about global price charts. It is about what the price means in rupees, how it reshapes household balance sheets, what it does to the current account through imports, and how it influences the Reserve Bank of India's reserve composition at a time when central banks worldwide have been accumulating bullion. India's own reserves illustrate the point: gold's share of the country's foreign-exchange reserves has climbed sharply over the past year, a shift attributed to both valuation effects from higher prices and ongoing reserve management choices. In other words, India is not only consuming gold; it is increasingly carrying gold risk—and reward—on the sovereign balance sheet too.

So, what does the range of credible 2026 paths look like? One influential view places \$5,000 within reach by late 2026 rather than as a distant, multi-year aspiration. J.P. Morgan's research note published in mid-December projects gold pushing towards \$5,000 an ounce by the fourth quarter of 2026, with even higher levels presented as plausible over a longer horizon. It suggests a structural repricing story: sustained official-sector buying, persistent demand for hedges, and a world in which policy uncertainty is not episodic. To pull \$5,000 forward into the first half of 2026, the market would likely need an intensification of the same catalysts that powered 2025: sharper-than-expected US easing, a renewed down-leg in the dollar, and continuing central-bank accumulation without a meaningful supply response. The World Gold Council has described 2025's move through \$4,000 as unusually fast, noting the pace at which successive milestones were cleared. A market that can traverse \$3,500 to \$4,000 in little more than a month can, under the right conditions, cover another 11 percent quicker than many assume—especially if momentum traders and systematic funds join what began as a macro hedge.

But India has to weigh the opposite scenario with equal seriousness: a cooling phase that delays \$5,000 into late 2026 or beyond. Gold is not immune to valuation fatigue. A year of 70% gains increases the risk of abrupt drawdowns if the macro narrative changes—if inflation cools faster than expected, if real yields rise, or if the Federal Reserve signals restraint longer than markets anticipate. Even without a dramatic policy shift, positioning can become crowded. The result is a complicated domestic demand pattern rather than a simple "higher price equals higher buying" story.

2026: New Hope and Possibilities

With the new glow of light, the year 2026 has arrived at our doorstep. Every new year brings us fresh aspirations for living and renewed enthusiasm. The wheel of time keeps turning, the old fades away and new buds emerge; this is the eternal law of nature. Accepting this law, we should bid farewell to all the sorrows, pains, and disappointments of the past and welcome the new year with a refreshed mind. Hope is the supreme strength that keeps human beings alive. For the person whose heart harbors hope, no darkness can remain permanent. The year 2026 is not merely a change of calendar for us; it is a golden opportunity to revive our dreams. We must believe that in the days to come, tides of happiness, prosperity, and peace will flow into our lives. This optimism is not a luxury of the mind, but rather the foundation of our self-confidence. We see that the world is changing rapidly, yet amidst it all, human affection, love, and warmth still survive. If we make these positive forces our charioteers and begin the journey of the new year, we will surely reach our destination. The dark clouds gathered in the sky of our minds will soon disperse, and the light of a new sun will shine; this belief will be the main mantra that propels us forward in 2026.

We usually think that happiness lies only in acquisition, but in reality, happiness resides in sacrifice and contentment. In the new year, we should endeavour to change our perspective and discover the pure joy hidden in a simple and uncomplicated life. The happiness found in sitting together with family to share a meal, playing with children, or chatting with old friends is no less than any precious wealth. We are hopeful that in 2026, people will emerge from mechanisation and give greater importance to human relationships. A smile is like a contagious disease; if you smile, the hearts of those around you also feel good. Therefore, in the new year, we should strive not only to keep ourselves happy but also to bring smiles to the faces of others. When we can appreciate the good deeds of others and share in their happiness, feelings of envy and hatred will vanish from our minds. This mental peace is true happiness. We hope that in this year, the courtyard of every home will resound with laughter and joy. Sorrow and suffering are part of life, but the joy of living that comes from overcoming them is the real essence of life. We cherish the hope that in 2026, we will master the art of transforming sorrow into strength.

We hope that in the new year, every individual in our society will find the path to economic self-reliance. The innovative energy and zeal for work seen among our youth give us indications that the future is bright. New possibilities will open in the



fields of agriculture, commerce, and industry. When a person earns through his own labour, the sense of self-respect that arises in his heart is the true foundation of prosperity. We believe that in 2026, the darkness of poverty in our society will gradually recede,

Respecting everyone's opinions and moving forward together is the mindset that helps build a peaceful society. We dream of a world where people do not fear one another, but rather trust each other. May the flowers of affection prove stronger than the gunpowder of violence in 2026, and may the white dove of peace fly fearlessly in our skies.

The increase in environmental awareness over the past few years is an auspicious sign. We hope that in the new year, people will adopt activities such as planting trees, conserving water, and avoiding plastic as a mass movement. If we express gratitude for what nature has given us and care for it, nature will bless us with both hands. In 2026, we will make every effort to turn our dream of a green world into reality. The interest shown by our new generation in environmental protection fills us with hope. When small habits like setting up gardens on rooftops, harvesting rainwater, and cycling become mass movements, we will be able to confront major problems like climate change. We believe that in 2026, our rivers will become clear again, the air will be pure, and our surroundings will be filled with greenery. Resting in the lap of nature, people will once again savour the taste of life. This green revolution will improve both our physical and mental health.

We must accept the ease and convenience that technology has brought to our lives in a positive manner and move forward. Instead of being apprehensive about the misuse of technology, we are optimistic that people will use it properly for the welfare of human civilisation. Improved communication systems have turned the entire world into a small village. We hope that through these means of communication, the distances between people will decrease and bonds of af-

fection will strengthen. The application of technology in education, health, and agriculture will usher in a new awakening. Our students will be able to acquire the best knowledge in the world while sitting at home with the help of the internet and computers. Advances in medical science will protect people from many incurable diseases. We believe that in 2026, technology will remain a servant of humanity rather than its ruler. When we can combine the power of science with human values, building a beautiful future will become easier. Taking advantage of the digital world, we will improve our quality of life, but at the same time, we will not allow our emotions and feelings to be lost. May the light of technology dispel our darkness; that is our wish.

Our society is diverse, and this diversity is our beauty. We hope that in the new year, people will rise above narrow self-interests and work together for the greater good of society. When the stronger sections of society extend a helping hand to the weaker ones, an unprecedented transformation will occur. Through festivals and gatherings, the bonds of harmony among people will be revived. We believe that our youth will not stray onto wrong paths; they will shoulder the responsibility of building society. In 2026, we aspire for a social system where old-age homes will no longer be needed, where parents can spend their days in affection with their children. Help, empathy, and cooperation—these will be the main foundations of our society. When we all sing together in the tune of unity, no power in the world can defeat us. May this year be a celebration of unity for us, where we all live like one family under the same sky.

Finally, our hearts are filled with countless hopes and good wishes for the year 2026. Life does not always move in a straight line; there will be ups and downs. But we believe that every problem has a solution and that after every dark night comes a beautiful morning. This optimism is what inspires us to keep living. We pray to God that the new year brings pure happiness, immense prosperity, and lasting peace to everyone's life. May disease, grief, and poverty depart from our society. May our minds be filled with light, and may we gain the strength to always walk on the path of truth and justice. Come, let us all welcome the new year together with a new resolution—we will be good people, we will do good deeds, and we will build a beautiful world. May 2026 be counted as the best year of our lives. May the dreams of you, me, and all of us come true. With these good wishes, we step toward the future. Victory will be ours, because we have hope, faith, and courage with us.

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Himanshu Ranjan Bhuyan

and a healthy environment of equitable distribution of wealth will take shape. Moreover, enrichment in knowledge and health is equally important. A society becomes truly rich only when its people are educated and healthy. We hope that in the coming days, a revolutionary change will occur in the sectors of education and health, the benefits of which will reach even the last person in society. When everyone recognises the dignity of physical labour and engages in productive work, our country will naturally advance on the path of prosperity. May 2026 be counted as a year of diligent work and success for us; that is our earnest wish.

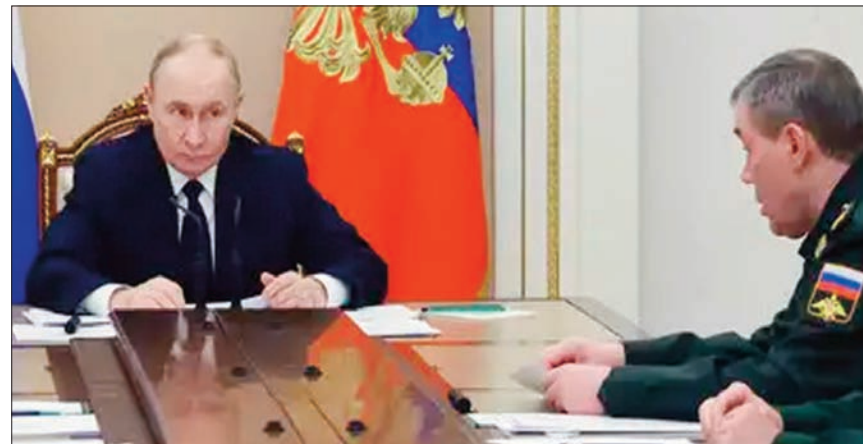
Amidst the instability visible in the present world, we remain optimistic that one day people will understand the true value of peace. In the new year, we must resolve to keep our own minds calm and restrained. Only when peace resides in our own minds can we contribute to establishing peace in family and society. Forgiveness and tolerance are the two key pillars of peace. We hope that instead of quarrelling over trivial matters, people will choose the path of discussion and understanding to resolve problems. We believe that in 2026, a new tide of love and brotherhood will rise. Differences in religion, caste, or language will always exist, but we must remain vigilant so that these differences do not build walls between

Putin's Residence Targeted? The disputed drone incident

By: Satyabrata Borah

On December 29, 2025, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a startling announcement that Ukraine had launched a massive drone assault targeting one of President Vladimir Putin's official residences in the Novgorod region, northwest of Moscow. According to Lavrov, 91 long-range drones were deployed in the overnight attack on December 28-29, all of which were intercepted and destroyed by Russian air defense systems, resulting in no damage or injuries. The residence in question is widely believed to be the secretive Valdai estate, also known as Dolgiye Borody, a lavish compound on the shores of Lake Valdai that has long been associated with Putin. Lavrov described the incident as an act of state terrorism and warned that such reckless actions would not go unanswered, hinting at potential retaliation while asserting that Russia would revise its negotiating position in ongoing peace talks but remain engaged in diplomacy.

The timing of the allegation raised immediate suspicions, coming just hours after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had concluded a meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump in Florida, where progress was reported on efforts to end the nearly four-year war. Putin himself discussed the claimed attack during a phone call with Trump on December 29, informing the American leader that Russia would reassess certain agreements in light of the incident. Trump, in public remarks, expressed anger, stating he was very upset upon hearing about it from Putin directly and calling it inappropriate amid delicate negotiations. He emphasized that attacking a leader's home crossed a line, though he later acknowledged the possibility that the event might not have occurred, saying intelligence would clarify the matter. Ukraine swiftly and categorically denied any involvement. Zelenskyy labeled the Russian claim a complete fabrication designed to sabotage diplomatic momentum and provide pretext for further aggression against Ukrainian cities, including potential strikes on government buildings in Kyiv. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba pointed out that nearly a day after the announcement, Moscow had provided no plausible evidence, such as footage of drone interceptions, debris, or damage. Independent analysts and observers echoed this skepticism. The Institute for the Study of War noted inconsistencies, including Lavrov's figure of drones downed over Novgorod clashing with the Russian Defense Ministry's own report of far fewer interceptions in the area. Local residents in the nearby town of Valdai reported hearing no explosions, air defense activity, or alerts, despite the scale of the alleged assault requiring significant defensive operations. No



geolocated evidence, smoke plumes, or resident accounts emerged to corroborate the story, leading many to conclude it was a manufactured narrative. This is not the first time Russia has accused Ukraine of targeting Putin personally. In May 2023, drones struck the Kremlin dome in Moscow, an event Russia called an assassination attempt but which independent experts often viewed as a possible false flag to justify escalation. The pattern repeated here, with the claim surfacing precisely when U.S.-led peace initiatives appeared to gain traction under the Trump administration. Trump had been pushing for a resolution, meeting Zelenskyy and speaking with Putin, focusing on thorny issues like territorial control and security guarantees. By alleging an attack on Putin's residence, Moscow appeared to test Trump's resolve, portray Ukraine as intransigent, and create justification for hardening its demands or delaying concessions.

The international community responded with caution and calls for restraint. U.S. officials noted the positive tone of Trump's call with Putin but awaited verification. European leaders, including those in Germany and France, expressed concern that the allegation could serve as a pretext for Russian escalation, while urging de-escalation. Among non-Western powers, reactions highlighted strategic alignments. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi voiced deep concern over the reports, urging all parties to exercise restraint and prioritize dialogue as the path to stability. India's position reflects its balanced diplomacy, maintaining strong ties with Russia for energy and defense while supporting peace efforts. China, Russia's closest strategic partner, emphasized that dialogue and negotiation remain the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis. Beijing's foreign ministry spokesperson called for avoiding battlefield spillover and escalation, aligning with its consistent advocacy for political settlement without directly endorsing Moscow's narrative.

The broader impact of this disputed incident could be significant for the trajectory

of the war and global geopolitics. If perceived as credible, even partially, it risks derailing the fragile U.S.-brokered peace process. Trump's administration has prioritized ending the conflict quickly, viewing it as a drain on resources and a distraction from other priorities like China. The allegation allowed Putin to signal toughness without fully abandoning talks, potentially extracting concessions on issues like Donbas control or neutrality for Ukraine. For Kyiv, it underscores the challenge of negotiating while under military pressure, as Russia continues advances in eastern regions and strikes Ukrainian infrastructure.

Geopolitically, the episode reinforces divisions. Allies of Ukraine see it as propaganda to justify prolonged conflict, while nations like India and China, wary of Western dominance, advocate neutrality and diplomacy, avoiding condemnation of Russia. Economically, lingering uncertainty sustains high energy prices and food insecurity, as the war disrupts global markets. Militarily, it may embolden Russia to intensify operations, claiming defensive necessity, or prompt Ukraine to escalate long-range strikes if peace stalls. In the absence of evidence, the alleged drone attack appears more as a diplomatic maneuver than a verified event. It illustrates the information warfare that has defined the conflict, where narratives shape perceptions as much as battlefield outcomes. As 2025 draws to a close, the incident serves as a reminder that peace remains elusive, dependent not only on military realities but on trust, verification, and the willingness of major powers to bridge deep divides. With Trump pushing for resolution, Modi and Beijing calling for talks, and no concrete proof emerging, the world watches warily, hoping rhetoric does not spiral into renewed violence. The true casualty may be momentum toward ending a war that has claimed countless lives and reshaped international relations. Ultimately, sustained dialogue, backed by verifiable actions, offers the best hope for de-escalation, but incidents like this highlight how fragile that path remains.

Child marriage and India's fight for girls' futures

By: Satyabrata Borah

In a small village nestled among the fields of rural India, a fifteen-year-old girl named Priya adjusts the heavy dupatta over her head, her hands trembling slightly as she prepares for a wedding that no one asked if she wanted. Her childhood, filled with games under the banyan tree and dreams of becoming a doctor, is slipping away at this moment, replaced by the expectations of a life she is too young to fully understand. Priya's experience is shared by countless others across the country, where child marriage persists as a deeply entrenched social issue, even as India makes strides toward modernity and equality. This age-old practice, driven by poverty, tradition, and gender biases, continues to cast a long shadow over the lives of young girls, undermining their health, education, and chances to escape poverty.

The roots of child marriage in India run deep, woven into cultural fabrics that have endured for generations. In many communities, especially in rural areas, families see early marriage as a way to safeguard a daughter's honor or alleviate economic strain. With limited resources, parents might believe that marrying off a girl reduces household expenses or secures alliances through dowry. Gender norms play a huge role too: girls are often viewed as burdens rather than assets, their value tied to early motherhood rather than personal achievement. Where schools are scarce or too expensive, education takes a back seat, making marriage seem like the only viable path. Fears of elopement or scandal in conservative settings further push families toward hasty arrangements, ignoring the fact that these unions often bring more harm than protection.

The impacts are heartbreaking and multifaceted, starting with health. Girls married young are physically unprepared for marriage and motherhood, facing grave risks during pregnancy and childbirth. Complications like obstetric fistula, severe bleeding, and infections are far more common among adolescents, contributing to India's stubbornly high maternal mortality rates in some regions. Their infants suffer too, with higher chances of low birth weight and developmental issues. Beyond the physical, the emotional toll is immense; many child brides endure isolation, anxiety, and depression, cut off from friends and trapped in relationships with much older partners where power dynamics leave them voiceless and vulnerable to abuse.

Education bears a heavy blow as well. The moment a girl marries, school usually ends for good. Books are swapped for household chores, and ambitions fade into the daily grind. This dropout cycle perpetuates illiteracy across generations, as mothers without education struggle to advocate for their own children's schooling. On the economic front, child marriage locks families into poverty. Young brides have little opportunity to learn skills or earn income, remaining dependent and unable to contribute fully to household prosperity. Larger families from early births strain limited resources, slowing progress out of deprivation. In a nation pushing for development, this drains potential; empowered women drive growth, but child marriage keeps half the population sidelined.

Despite these grim realities, there is real cause for optimism. India has witnessed a steep decline in child marriages over recent years. Data from the latest National Family Health Survey shows the proportion of women aged 20-24 who married before 18 falling from nearly half

in the mid-2000s to about 23 percent by the early 2020s, with further improvements reported into 2025. This shift comes from dedicated laws, government programs, and grassroots activism. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 sets a clear legal boundary, criminalizing the practice and offering mechanisms for intervention and annulment. Enforcement has ramped up, with authorities preventing thousands of ceremonies each year through tip-offs and raids.

Government efforts have been instrumental. Campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao celebrate girls and promote their education, while conditional cash transfers reward families for keeping daughters in school and delaying marriage. In 2025, initiatives such as the intensified Bal Vivah Mukh Bharat drive have mobilized entire communities, from schools to religious leaders, in pledges to eradicate the practice. States like Assam have reported over 80 percent drops in cases through vigilant policing and public deterrence, setting examples for others.

Organizations on the ground deserve immense credit too. NGOs like Child Rights and You, along with broad alliances, work directly with families, offering counseling, legal aid, and alternatives like vocational training. They run awareness drives with street plays, posters, and media spots that highlight the benefits of educated daughters: healthier families, stronger economies, and prouder communities. Increasingly, girls themselves lead the charge, forming peer groups to support one another and challenge outdated norms.

Picture a vibrant classroom in an Indian village, where girls in uniform lean over desks, giggling as they solve problems together, their faces lit with curiosity and confidence. This scene, once rare, is becoming more common as education emerges as the strongest weapon against child marriage. Girls who stay in school longer marry later, bear fewer and healthier children, and lift their families out of poverty. Successes in places like Rajasthan and Bihar demonstrate what's possible with targeted investments in schools, scholarships, and community engagement. Villages proudly declaring themselves child-marriage-free are on the rise, a testament to collective will.

Progress isn't uniform, though. Pockets of high prevalence linger in states with deeper poverty and weaker infrastructure, where economic pressures and cultural inertia hold firm. The pandemic set back some gains by closing schools and heightening family stresses. Yet, India's pledge under global goals to eliminate child marriage by 2030 fuels ongoing commitment.

Bold posters in villages declare the message clearly: education over early marriage, rights over customs. Stories of women who waited, studied, and succeeded inspire the next generation. To finish the job, India needs continued focus on accessible schooling, financial safety nets for the poorest, strict enforcement, and patient conversations to reshape attitudes.

Ending child marriage isn't just about protecting girls; it's about unleashing India's true strength. Each girl allowed to grow fully becomes a force for better health, reduced poverty, and shared prosperity. For every Priya whose story ends differently, with books in hand and choices ahead, the nation moves closer to the equitable future it deserves. With persistence from governments, communities, and individuals, that day feels within reach.

2025 and the Waning Resolve of India's Opposition

By: Dipak Kurmi

The year 2025 will be remembered as a decisive moment of political unravelling for India's Opposition. After the relative resurgence witnessed during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, when the Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance managed to dent the aura of invincibility surrounding the Bharatiya Janata Party, expectations were high that the Opposition would consolidate its gains and emerge as a credible, long-term alternative. Instead, the year unfolded as an electorally disastrous and politically dispiriting period marked by fragmentation, incoherence and the absence of a unifying vision. The BJP, far from being on the defensive, used the Opposition's internal contradictions and strategic confusion to reassert its dominance, tightening its grip on both narrative control and organisational reach. What became increasingly evident over the year was that the Opposition's challenge in 2024 had been more conjunctural than structural, driven by tactical unity rather than a shared political imagination.

The erosion of Opposition momentum began early in the year with the Delhi Assembly elections in February, where the BJP registered a decisive victory over the Aam Aadmi Party. This outcome carried symbolic and strategic significance. Delhi had long been projected as AAP's fortress and as a laboratory for an alternative model of governance rooted in welfare delivery and urban reform. However, anti-incumbency, persistent allegations of corruption, and the visible gap between promises and outcomes in urban infrastructure provided the BJP with ample ammunition. Equally damaging was AAP's strategic overreach. Its leadership had invested considerable political capital in national expansion, aspiring to become a pan-Indian challenger, while neglecting the quotidian governance concerns of Delhi's electorate. This left political space open for the BJP to reclaim relevance in the capital and punctured the image of AAP as the enfant terrible of Indian politics that could disrupt established power equations.

If Delhi marked the beginning of the Opposition's slump, the Bihar Assembly elections in November delivered its most devastating blow. The National Democratic Alliance, led by the BJP, secured a massive victory that went beyond mere seat arithmetic to inflict a profound psychological setback. The INDIA bloc, which had appeared



formidable in 2024, unravelled under the pressure of competing ambitions and weak organisational coordination. Its regional appendage in Bihar, the Mahagathbandhan, failed to present a coherent front. In a striking political reversal, Nitish Kumar, widely assumed to be nearing political irrelevance and even senility by detractors, staged a remarkable comeback. The BJP complemented this resurgence with an extraordinary 90 per cent strike rate, winning 90 of the 101 seats it contested. The Bihar verdict exposed not only the Opposition's inability to read the electorate's mood but also its failure to convert anti-incumbency against the Centre into a persuasive state-level narrative.

Maharashtra offered a parallel story of Opposition disarray. In the local body elections, the BJP-led Mahayuti comprehensively outperformed the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi, which had once been held up as a model of Opposition unity transcending ideological divides. The results were stark. Out of 288 municipal council and Nagar Panchayat presidents' posts, the Mahayuti secured 207, while the MVA managed a paltry 44 collectively. Even more damaging was the spectacle of MVA constituents frequently contesting against each other, underscoring the hollowness

of their alliance. This pattern of disunity reinforced the perception that Opposition coalitions were driven more by expediency than by a shared commitment to governance or policy. Across states, the absence of a nationally recognisable challenger to Prime Minister Narendra Modi further compounded the Opposition's woes.

At the centre of this leadership vacuum stood the Congress, still formally the principal Opposition party but increasingly unable to command authority within the broader alliance. Rahul Gandhi, despite remaining the most visible and arguably the boldest Opposition voice in Parliament, failed to translate rhetorical aggression into electoral traction. His Vote Adhikar Yatra in Bihar did not generate the resonance that had accompanied earlier mobilisations, and his sharp critiques of the Narendra Modi government often remained confined to elite political discourse. While Gandhi retained the symbolic mantle of Opposition leadership, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge struggled to project decisive authority within the INDIA bloc. The Congress' deeper problem lay in its electoral irrelevance in crucial states such as Delhi and Bihar, which weakened its bargaining power and diminished its capacity to act as a force-multiplier rather than a liability.

The Congress' strategic inconsistency further alienated both allies and voters. Over the year, its campaign agenda shifted restlessly from crony capitalism and unemployment to social justice through a caste census, and later to allegations of electoral manipulation framed as vote chori. This constant recalibration created an impression of vacillation and unreliability. Each new issue appeared to displace the previous one before it could mature into a sustained political campaign. Rahul Gandhi's recent rhetorical turn away from structural critiques of governance towards procedural grievances concerning the Election Commission exemplified this drift. While institutional integrity is undeniably important, the substitution of substantive issues that shape people's everyday experiences with abstract procedural complaints failed to capture public imagination. For many voters, especially those grappling with economic insecurity, such arguments appeared distant and elitist.

More fundamentally, the Congress' political imagination seemed anchored in a backward-looking framework that sought to restore the pre-2014 institutional equilibrium. Its emphasis on reviving a secular consensus, an independent judiciary and a broadly neutral Election Commission addressed genuine democratic concerns but lacked aspirational content. For India's young electorate, which has come of age in a period defined by rapid technological change, precarious employment and sharpened social polarisation, this appeal to the status quo ante offered little inspiration. Defending old norms, however necessary, does not by itself constitute a transformative vision. Without articulating a compelling idea of a new India grounded in jobs, quality education, accessible healthcare and meaningful representation for the marginalised and minorities facing the pressures of aggressive Hindutva, the Opposition's democratic rhetoric remained politically anaemic.

These weaknesses were not confined to the Congress alone. The broader INDIA bloc suffered from an acute leadership crisis exacerbated by the competing ambitions of powerful regional leaders such as Mamata Banerjee, Sharad Pawar, Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, Arvind Kejriwal, Uddhav Thackeray and Rahul Gandhi himself. None was willing to concede primacy, and their ideological orientations ranged from caste-based mobilisation to Leftist and centrist positions, complicating the prospects of sustained

unity. Crucially, the non-Congress Opposition parties also failed to articulate a forward-looking national plan. This reinforced the damaging perception that the INDIA bloc was little more than an opportunistic anti-BJP arrangement devoid of a proactive, policy-driven agenda. In the absence of a shared vision, the Opposition found itself unable to confront the government effectively on structural challenges such as joblessness, widening income and wealth inequality, unequal access to quality education and the right to decent healthcare.

Instead of shaping national policy debates, the Opposition repeatedly found itself fighting on symbolic or tactical terrain where the BJP's narrative dominance and grassroots organisation were overwhelming. Even when it believed it had identified vulnerabilities in the government's record, it struggled to translate these into issues that resonated with the public. The result was a year characterised by drift, disorganisation and strategic exhaustion. As 2025 draws to a close, the Opposition faces a series of crucial state elections in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry that will determine whether it can arrest its decline. With the exception of Assam, Opposition parties currently dominate these states, offering a potential opportunity to rebuild momentum. Yet these contests will also test whether strong regional narratives can withstand the BJP's expanding national frame, from Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu and welfare-driven governance in Kerala to the contest between ethnic and tribal identity and Hindutva in Assam, and in West Bengal the portrayal of the BJP as a culturally disruptive outsider against Mamata Banerjee's welfare schemes and personal charisma.

The danger, however, is that persistent disunity could once again hand the BJP an advantage. In states such as West Bengal and Kerala, INDIA bloc allies may have no option but to fight each other, fragmenting the Opposition vote and amplifying the BJP's prospects. If 2025 has demonstrated anything with clarity, it is that electoral arithmetic without ideological coherence and organisational discipline is insufficient to challenge a party as deeply entrenched as the BJP. Unless the Opposition can move beyond reactive politics and articulate a credible, future-oriented vision that speaks to India's social and economic anxieties, it risks remaining trapped in a cycle of episodic unity and repeated defeat. (The writer can be reached at dipakkurmipltd@gmail.com)

New Year: Not a changing date, but a changing vision is needed

By: Dr. Priyanka Saurabh

With the New Year's arrival, a strange buzz begins in our society. The calendar changes, mobile phones are flooded with greetings, TV channels start airing "New Year Special" programs, and we all try to reassure each other that "everything will be fine this year." But, as every year, the question remains: is anything truly new, or are we simply changing the date and continuing in the same old ways? In a country like India, New Year's Day shouldn't be just a celebration, but an occasion for introspection. Because New Year's Day isn't the same for everyone. For some, it's a time of holidays, parties, and resolutions, while for others, it's the same old routine—four-a-morning naps, unfulfilled desires, and a constant stream of responsibilities. For mothers, working women, daily wage laborers, farmers, teachers, nurses, drivers—New Year's Day often becomes just another date on the calendar.

On New Year's Eve, as we celebrate with lights, fireworks, and music, a mother goes to bed early, worrying about the next day's lunch. A laborer tosses and turns, wondering if he'll find work the next morning. A farmer looks to the sky, calculating whether this year will bring rain or debt. We often say, "New Year, new beginning." But is this new beginning possible for everyone?

As long as societal structures remain the same, mindsets the same, and inequalities persist, the New Year remains merely an emotional illusion. Real change comes when, amidst the celebratory noise, we begin to listen to the voices that are often suppressed. The New Year gains true meaning only when we acknowledge that not everyone's life is the same, and that equal opportunities are impossible without equal vision. Most New Year's wishes are addressed to women. They are expected to smile in every situation, manage everything, and never complain. But rarely does anyone ask them if they are tired or if they need a break. A working woman's New Year often begins with old struggles. She is expected to manage the home, her job, her emotional balance, and, amidst all this, forget herself. Society glorifies her tolerance as her strength, but avoids seeing the fatigue hidden behind that tolerance. If this New Year is to be truly new, then first and foremost, we must recognize women not as embodiments of sacrifice but as equal citizens. We must give them the right to feel tired, speak out, disagree, and even ask for time for themselves.

The New Year isn't just about personal resolutions; it's also a time for collective responsibility. We often make resolutions for ourselves—to work harder, earn more, live better lives. But we rarely make resolutions for society. Can we decide to treat household chores as a "responsibility," not "help"? Can we think about teach-

ing children compassion, not just competition? Will we accept that not everyone's trajectory is the same?

The family is society's first school. If there's no equality at home, how can there be equality in society? If a woman's fatigue is accepted as normal at home, then talk of her rights outside will ring hollow. If there's one true resolution we should make this New Year, it's to start change from our own homes.

For the younger generation, the New Year symbolizes dreams and hopes. New goals, new plans, and new flights. But today's youth are also surrounded by many pressures—competition, unemployment, social comparison, and the mental burden of the digital world. Every New Year, they are told to do something big, to prove something. But rarely does anyone say that it's okay to stop if they get tired, that their life doesn't end if they fail.

May this New Year reassure young people that their worth isn't solely measured by their achievements. Mental health, self-esteem, and balance are just as important as success. Society must recognize that every young person is not a machine, but a sensitive human being. On New Year's Day, governments, institutions, and the media announce new development plans. Roads, buildings, statistics, and targets—everything is touted in the name of development. But development cannot simply mean material progress. True development occurs when even the last person in society feels that they are not alone, that their suffering matters.

Unless empathy becomes part of the language of development, the new year will simply be a list of new plans. We need to consider whether, in the pursuit of development, we are forgetting our human nature. Is there something beyond profit and gain that needs to be preserved?

The greatest meaning of the New Year is introspection. The courage to question ourselves about where we went wrong, what injustices we witnessed and what we remained silent about. This introspection must be both personal and societal. Because until we recognize our role, it is futile to expect any change.

It's our responsibility to decide what the New Year will be like. If this year is limited to just good wishes, it will be like any other year. But if it can make us a little more humane, a little more responsible, and a little more just, that will be its greatest achievement.

The New Year doesn't draw a magical line that transforms everything. Change comes from within—from our thoughts, our behavior, and our small decisions. If this New Year can give us the opportunity to see, understand, and be sensitive to the suffering of others, that will be its true celebration.

Because the New Year is new only when

When the vision of society is new.

2025: A Year of transformation for the World, India, and Assam

By: Lalit Nath

The year 2025 was a landmark one marked by political shifts, persistent conflicts, devastating natural disasters, groundbreaking technological advances and profound cultural milestones.

In the United States, Donald Trump was inaugurated for a second term, introducing significant changes to global politics through stringent border policies, tariff escalations and withdrawals from international agreements. In August, the US imposed an additional 25% tariff on Indian goods—bringing the total to 50%—as a response to India's continued imports of Russian oil, creating tensions in bilateral trade relations.

The Russia-Ukraine war entered its fourth year, with ongoing hostilities and no resolution despite mediation efforts. Conflicts also intensified in regions like Gaza, Sudan and Myanmar.

Natural disasters struck hard. California's wildfires destroyed thousands of homes, South Asian heatwaves affected millions, a major earthquake hit Myanmar and widespread floods and cyclones ravaged Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Yet, 2025 shone brightly in artificial intelligence, with multimodal AI systems transforming business, healthcare and daily life through enhanced efficiency, precise diagnostics, faster drug discovery, and personalised experiences—marking it as a pivotal year in AI history. Greater global awareness of climate

change emerged, though full consensus remained elusive at forums like COP30. Through resilience, innovation and collaboration, the world navigated these changes, emerging stronger.

For India, 2025 blended spirituality, cultural pride, political change and economic resilience. The Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj became the world's largest religious gathering, attracting over 660 million devotees over 45 days and astonishing the world with its scale while boosting tourism and the economy. Politically, the February Delhi Assembly elections saw the BJP win 48 of 70 seats, returning to power after 27 years.

Economically, India surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy, with strong growth in digital sectors and renewables exceeding 50% of energy production. Indian athletes excelled, with the women's cricket team winning their first ODI World Cup and the men's team claiming the Champions Trophy, alongside Neeraj Chopra's feats and numerous international medals.

In space, successful missions reinforced India's elite status, including advancements toward Gaganyaan. Despite frequent disasters and trade uncertainties, 2025 showed India that harmonising tradition with modernity, resilience and innovation strengthens its global standing.

For Assam, 2025 focused on women's empowerment, youth skilling, infrastructure, investment and heritage preservation. Schemes like Orunodoi pro-

vided monthly aid to lakhs of women, while Lakhpati Baideo and women's entrepreneurship programmes spurred business creation. Youth initiatives reduced unemployment and cultural sites like namghars received conservation funding.

The Nijut Moina scheme advanced girls' education and child marriage prevention. Atmanirbhar Assam and skill missions offered financial support and training. Advantage Assam 2.0 secured nearly Rs 4.91 lakh crore in investment commitments—a major economic milestone.

Infrastructure highlights included Prime Minister Modi's December inauguration of the new terminal at Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, featuring bamboo and orchid designs reflecting Assam's biodiversity, alongside an 80-foot statue of Gopinath Bordoloi.

Culturally, Assamese gained classical language status, Charaideo Moidams received UNESCO recognition, and the Boragaon Shahid Smarak Kshetra honoured Assam Movement martyrs.

Tragically, September brought profound grief for the death of beloved singer and cultural icon Zubeen Garg in a drowning incident while swimming in Singapore during the North East India Festival.

2025 taught the world resilience and innovation; India, spiritual-cultural-economic upliftment; and Assam, renewed momentum in empowerment, development, and heritage. Amid challenges, unity and determination pave the way for a prosperous future.

Sensation building up around country's biggest ever arbitration award

By: K Raveendran

As Indian corporates step into the new year buoyed by stronger growth momentum and easing inflationary pressures, a sense of anticipation is spreading across boardrooms and policy circles alike over a dispute that dwarfs most corporate battles seen in the country's history. At the heart of this confrontation lies the Indian government's demand of nearly \$30 billion from Reliance Industries and its erstwhile partner BP, linked to alleged losses caused by underproduction of natural gas from the Krishna-Godavari Basin. The scale alone makes it unprecedented: no earlier compensation claim pursued by the state against a corporate entity comes close, not even the settlement extracted from Union Carbide after the Bhopal gas tragedy, which amounted to \$470 million.

The dispute is rooted in the expectations that surrounded the Krishna-Godavari gas discoveries when they were first brought to public attention. At the time, the project was presented as a cornerstone of India's energy strategy, one that would reduce dependence on imported fuels, stabilise domestic energy prices and provide a long-term boost to industrial competitiveness. The vision was compelling: a large offshore basin producing enough natural gas to alter the country's energy balance and insulate the economy from volatile global markets. For policymakers, the KG basin symbolised the possibility of self-sufficiency; for investors, it represented one of the most ambitious upstream energy ventures ever attempted by a domestic private company.

Reality, however, diverged sharply from those early projections. Production from the basin fell well short of promised levels, declining rapidly after an initial peak and settling at a fraction of expected output. Government estimates suggest that actual gas extraction has been less than one-fifth of the volumes that were initially committed. This gap between promise and performance forms the core of the government's argument. Officials contend that valuable natural resources were effectively wasted and that the shortfall forced the country to rely more heavily on costly imports, imposing a broader economic burden. The compensation demand is framed not merely as a contractual claim but as restitution for lost national opportunity.

For Reliance and BP, the matter has always been more complex than simple underperformance. The companies have argued that production declines were driven by geological challenges that could not have been fully anticipated at the time of bidding and development. They maintain that natural gas reservoirs, particularly in deep-water settings such as the KG basin, are inherently uncertain and that output projections are estimates rather than guarantees. From this perspective, the dispute highlights the risks involved in large-scale energy exploration and the difficulty of holding operators financially accountable for outcomes shaped by nature as much as by management decisions.

The arbitration process, expected to reach a conclusion by mid-year, thus sits at the intersection of contractual interpretation, resource economics and public policy. Whatever the outcome, the implications extend far beyond the immediate parties. For the government, a favourable ruling would reinforce its authority to enforce produc-

tion commitments and protect national interests in strategic sectors. It would send a clear message that underperformance in resource extraction carries financial consequences, potentially reshaping how future contracts are structured and monitored.

For the corporate sector, particularly companies involved in infrastructure and natural resources, the case represents a moment of reckoning. A ruling against Reliance and BP could heighten perceptions of regulatory and contractual risk in India's energy landscape. While the country has made strides in improving its ease-of-doing-business rankings and attracting global capital, investors remain sensitive to retrospective claims and high-stakes disputes with the state. The sheer magnitude of the \$30 billion demand ensures that the verdict will be closely studied by domestic and international investors alike, not only for its financial impact but also for what it signals about the balance of power between the state and private enterprise.

The timing of the dispute adds another layer of significance. India enters the year with macroeconomic tailwinds that few large economies can currently claim. Growth has remained resilient despite global headwinds, inflation has moderated, and corporate earnings have shown signs of broad-based recovery. Against this backdrop, the KG basin arbitration stands out as a reminder that structural challenges persist beneath the surface of headline optimism. Energy security remains a pressing concern, and the gap between ambition and execution in critical sectors continues to shape policy debates. The comparison with the Bhopal gas tragedy, though arising from vastly different circumstances, underscores how extraordinary the current claim is. Bhopal was one of the world's worst industrial disasters, resulting in immense human suffering and long-term environmental damage. Yet the compensation extracted then was a fraction of what the government is now seeking over lost gas production. This contrast highlights how the valuation of economic opportunity and resource utilisation has evolved, with governments increasingly willing to quantify and pursue claims linked to foregone national benefits rather than direct physical harm alone.

Beyond the legal and financial dimensions, the dispute also raises broader questions about India's energy strategy. The KG basin was once seen as a catalyst for transforming the domestic gas market, encouraging downstream investments in power, fertilisers and city gas distribution. Its underperformance forced policymakers to revisit assumptions about the pace at which domestic production could replace imports. In the years since, the government has diversified its approach, emphasising renewable energy, liquefied natural gas imports and strategic petroleum reserves. The arbitration outcome will inevitably feed into future thinking on how aggressively the state should rely on private players to deliver strategic resources.

No matter which side prevails, the decision is poised to become the biggest corporate event of the year, if not the decade. A ruling in favour of the government would mark a landmark assertion of state power in enforcing resource contracts, potentially reshaping the risk calculus for major infrastructure projects. A ruling that significantly reduces or dismisses the compensation claim would reinforce the principle that commercial and geological risks cannot be retroactively transformed into punitive liabilities. (IPA Service)

Bangladesh's first woman Prime Minister laid to rest

Thousands of mourners bid emotional farewell to BNP patriarch

DHAKA, Dec 31: Hundreds of thousands of people on Wednesday bid an emotional farewell to former prime minister and BNP patriarch Khaleda Zia as she was laid to rest near the parliament building amid tight security.

Zia, the three-time prime minister and a towering political figure, died on Tuesday at the age of 80 after a prolonged illness.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, several senior leaders from Pakistan, Nepal and other neighbouring countries, diplomats and top political and military brass of Bangladesh attended Zia's funeral at Manik Mia Avenue.

Zia's coffin, draped in the national flag, was brought to the funeral site in a convoy from her residence. Thousands of mourners gathered outside the parliament complex to have a last glimpse of their beloved leader.

Many Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters were seen carrying flags featuring Zia's photographs.

Bangladesh's interim government chief Muhammad Yunus, Chief Justice Zubayer Rahman Chowdhury, and Zia's son and BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman were among those joining the funeral prayers.

"Please pray to Allah seeking her place in heaven," Zia's elder son, Rahman, told the crowd ahead of the prayers.

Baitul Mokarram National Mosque's chief cleric Mohammad Abdul Kader led the funeral prayers (namaz-e-janaza) held at the Manik Mia Avenue of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban (parliament building).

BNP's Standing Committee Member Nazrul Islam Khan read out a brief biography of Zia.

Mourners from all walks of life offered prayers seeking forgiveness for the departed soul, as they burst into tears, being emotional with the passing of their beloved leader.

After the funeral prayers, she was laid to rest



beside her husband's grave with state honour at around 4:30 pm (local time).

Bhutan's Foreign Affairs and External Trade Minister Lyonpo DN Dhungyel joined the funeral, while the Maldives was represented by its Higher Education and Labour Minister Ali Haidar Ahmed.

Ambassadors, high commissioners, and heads of international organisations stationed in Dhaka also attended Zia's funeral prayers.

In a televised address to the nation, Chief Adviser Yunus on Tuesday announced a three-day state mourning and a one-day general holiday.

Zia had been suffering from multiple complex and chronic health conditions, including liver and kidney complications, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis and infection-related problems.

She last appeared in public on November 21 when she joined the Armed Forces Day recep-

tion at Dhaka Cantonment. Two days later, she was admitted to Evercare Hospital for routine tests, during which doctors detected a chest infection and decided to keep her under observation.

Her political journey, spanning over four decades, was one of tremendous highs and lows: from leading a major party and governing the country to being convicted on corruption charges and later receiving a presidential pardon. Her appearance as a public figure in the political arena at the age of 35 was not a planned debut; rather, she was thrust into politics after the 1981 assassination of her husband, a military ruler turned politician who founded BNP in 1978.

In 1991, BNP won the elections, and Zia became the first woman prime minister in Bangladesh and second in the Muslim world after Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto. (PTI)

China flexes blockade capabilities near Taiwan on second day of military drills

TAIPEI (TAIWAN), Dec 31: China's People's Liberation Army staged a second day of large-scale military drills around Taiwan on Tuesday, unleashing a live-fire show of force as part of what it called "Justice Mission 2025" to demonstrate its ability to deter any external support for the island it claims as part of its sovereign territory.

Taiwanese officials said some of China's live rounds landed closer to the island than before.

The maneuvers increased tension around the Taiwan Strait as 2025 drew to a close, but the impact extended beyond military pressure into everyday life. Taiwan's Civil Aviation Administration was notified that seven temporary "dangerous zones" had been set up around the strait. The schedules of Taiwan's four international airports on Tuesday afternoon showed over 150 international and domestic flights had revised times, delays or cancellations.

Xinhua, China's official news agency, posted a commentary late Monday saying the drills sent an unequivocal message: That Beijing is always ready to prevent anything that tries to split Taiwan from China. Each escalation, it said, would be met with stronger countermeasures.

"By currying favor with the United States through obsequious loyalty gestures and promoting arms purchases, the DPP is binding the entire island of Taiwan to its catastrophic secessionist chariot, disregarding public opinion," it wrote, referring to Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party.

The PLA's Eastern Theater Command sent destroyers, frigates, fighters and bombers to the waters to the north and south of the island to test its ability in sea-air coordination and blockading. Its ground forces carried out long-range, live-fire drills in the waters to the island's north. They also organized live-fire training alongside simulated long-range joint strike with air, navy and missile units, in the waters to Taiwan's south, achieving what command spokesperson Li Xi called "desired effects."

Hsieh Jih-sheng, deputy chief of the general staff for intelligence at the Taiwanese Defense Ministry, said some of the 27 rockets detected in the waters near Taiwan fell within its 24-nautical-mile (44-kilometer) line. "The landing points of rounds definitely were closer to Taiwan compared to the past," he said. "This is a message it deliberately wants to convey."

Aircraft, vessels and a Chinese balloon detected

Taiwan President Lai Ching-te said Tuesday his territory would act responsibly by neither escalating conflict nor provoking disputes. He condemned the drills.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said it had detected 130 aircraft, including fighters and bombers, 14 military ships and eight other official



ships around the island between 6 a.m. Monday and 6 a.m. Tuesday. Its forces kept monitoring and deployed aircraft, navy ships and coastal missile systems in response. Ninety of the Chinese aircraft crossed the median line of the strait. A Chinese military balloon was also spotted, it said.

It also detected 77 aircraft, 17 military ships and eight official ships around Taiwan between 6 a.m. Tuesday and 6 a.m. Wednesday. Thirty-five of the aircraft crossed the median line. A total of 941 flights were affected by Tuesday's drills, it said.

"The military power is not necessarily the strongest, but the scale of the drills has become larger each time compared to the last," Hsieh said. He accused Chinese forces of trying to influence public morale and undermine trust in the Taiwanese military and government. China has vowed to seize the island, by force if necessary. Beijing sends warplanes and navy vessels toward the island on a near-daily basis.

Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang said the drills served as a stern warning to "Taiwan independence" separatist forces and external forces, without naming any countries.

He criticized Lai's administration for what it called pandering to external forces and pursuing independence, saying that was the root cause of disrupting the status quo in the strait and escalating tensions.

Last week, Beijing imposed sanctions against 20 defense-related U.S. companies and 10 executives, following a Washington announcement of large-scale arms sales to Taiwan valued at more than \$10 billion.

Under U.S. law, Washington is obligated to assist Taipei with its defense, a point that has become increasingly contentious with China over the years.

Beijing slams Japan

On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump said that while he was not informed of the military exercise in advance, neither was he particularly worried about it. He touted his "great relationship" with Chinese President Xi Jinping and

suggested he didn't think Xi was going to attack Taiwan.

The Taiwan issue also heightened China-Japan tensions. Beijing has expressed anger at a statement by Japan's prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, saying its military could get involved if China takes action against the democratically ruled island. There remains widespread overall suspicion in China about Japan that goes back generations to when imperial Japan brutally took over parts of China in the years before World War II.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi slammed both Japan and Taiwan's "pro-independence forces."

"Japan, which launched the war of aggression against China, not only fails to deeply reflect on the numerous crimes it committed, but its current leaders also openly challenge China's territorial sovereignty, the historical conclusions of World War II, and the post-war international order," he said Tuesday during an event in Beijing. China, Wang added, "must be highly vigilant against the resurgence of Japanese militarism."

China and Taiwan have been governed separately since 1949, when the Communist Party rose to power in Beijing following a civil war. Defeated Nationalist Party forces fled to Taiwan, which later transitioned from martial law to multiparty democracy.

Stoking the tensions, China's Eastern Theater Command posted a series of online images and videos carrying provocative language throughout the exercises. It posted a video of live rounds being fired from ships and a ground-based launcher on Tuesday.

Chen Wen-chin, chairman of the Keelung District Fishermen's Association in Taiwan, said the group started radio broadcasting every hour from Monday to inform fishermen about where China's exercises took place, urging them to avoid danger.

"The Chinese military exercises have prevented fishermen from fishing, which is their livelihood," Chen said. "The inability to fish has had a significant impact on them and caused economic losses." (AP)

Envoys of Quad countries hold rare publicised meeting in Beijing

BEIJING, Dec 31: Ambassadors of the Quad nations, consisting of the US, India, Australia and Japan, held a rare publicised meeting in Beijing.

The meeting took place on Tuesday at the US Embassy in Beijing, according to a post on X with a photo by the American Ambassador to China, David Perdue.

"The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is a force for good in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region," Perdue said in his post.

"It is a pleasure to meet with the ambassadors of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue countries in Beijing," he said.

"The relations among the four countries—the United States, Australia, India, and Japan—continue to be stable and strong," he said and posted a photo of the four envoys, including Indian Ambassador to Beijing Pradeep Kumar Rawat.

The Indian Embassy here has not yet commented on the meeting. China, over the years, has been a strong critic of the Quad and has not yet reacted to the meeting.

Beijing, in the past while reacting to the Quad meetings, stated that it is opposed to countries forming cliques, engaging in group politics and bloc confrontation.

In her reaction to the Foreign Ministers meeting of the Quad countries held in January this year, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said China has always advocated that cooperation among countries should not target third parties.

"China believes that cooperation between countries should not target any third party," she said.

"Engaging in group politics and bloc confrontation will not bring lasting peace and security, and is not conducive to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific and the world as a whole," she said. (PTI)

Thailand releases 18 Cambodian prisoners of war as part of ceasefire agreement

BANGKOK, Dec 31: Thailand on Wednesday released 18 Cambodian prisoners of war held for five months, fulfilling the terms of a ceasefire agreement the two countries signed to end bitter fighting along their border.

The release was stipulated in the ceasefire agreement signed Saturday by the defence ministers of the two countries at the same border checkpoint between Thailand's Chanthaburi province and Cambodia's Pailin province where the soldiers were released. "The repatriation of the 18 Cambodian soldiers was undertaken as a demonstration of goodwill and confidence-building, as well as in adherence to international humanitarian principles," Thailand's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

EAM Jaishankar hands over PM Modi's letter to BNP's Tarique Rahman

DHAKA, Dec 31: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday handed over to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rahman a letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi as thousands of people bid farewell to former prime minister Khaleda Zia at her funeral.

Shortly after landing in Dhaka, Jaishankar met Rahman, the acting chairman of BNP and the eldest son of Zia, and conveyed India's deepest condolences over the death of the iconic leader who dominated the country's politics for over three decades. The top BNP leader died on Tuesday following a prolonged illness. The external affairs minister is representing India at Zia's funeral. "Handed over to him a personal letter from Prime Minister @narendramodi. Conveyed deepest condolences on behalf of the Government and people of India," Jaishankar said on social media.

"Expressed confidence that Begum Khaleda Zia's vision and values will guide the development of our partnership," he said. On



Tuesday, PM Modi condoled Zia's death and recalled his meeting with her during his visit to Dhaka in 2015.

"Deeply saddened to learn about the passing away of former Prime Minister and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. Our sincerest condolences to her family and all the people of Bangladesh. May the Almighty grant her family the fortitude to bear this tragic loss," Modi said on social media. "I recall my warm meeting with

her in Dhaka in 2015. We hope that her vision and legacy will continue to guide our partnership. May her soul rest in peace," he said.

Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka comes amid frosty ties between India and Bangladesh.

The relations came under strain after the interim government headed by Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus came to power. India has been expressing concerns over attacks on minorities, especially Hindus, in that country. (PTI)

Mali, Burkina Faso impose retaliatory travel ban on US nationals

BAMAKO (MALI) Dec 31: Mali and Burkina Faso said late Tuesday they would ban U.S. citizens from entering their countries in retaliation for U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to ban Malian and Burkinabe citizens from entering the United States.

The announcements, made in separate statements by the foreign ministers of the two West African countries, marked the latest twist in the frosty relationship between West African military governments and the U.S. On Dec. 16, Trump expanded earlier travel restrictions to 20 more countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, which are run by juntas and have formed a breakaway association from the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States.

"In accordance with the principle of reciprocity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation informs the national and international community that, with immediate effect, the Government of the Republic of Mali will apply the same conditions and requirements to US nationals as those imposed on Malian citizens," the Malian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement. (AP)

Cambodia's Defence Ministry said the release "creates an environment conducive to peace, stability, and the full normalisation of relations for the benefit of both nations and their people in the near future." The soldiers' release removes a major impediment toward that goal after two rounds of destructive combat over competing territorial claims. Thailand had insisted it was allowed to hold the men under provisions of the Geneva Conventions governing the rules of war, which says they could be detained until the end of hostilities. The prisoners were allowed visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross and other rights covered under international humanitarian law, Thai au-

thorities said. Their continued detention was used effectively by Cambodia's government to rally nationalist sentiment in the conflict against Thailand. Wednesday's statement from Cambodia's defence ministry said the government "has remained steadfast in the promise made to the families of the 18 soldiers and the Cambodian people: that no soldier would be left behind." The ceasefire agreement said the soldiers would be freed if the end of combat was sustained for 72 hours after it came into effect at noon on Saturday. The 72 hours passed on Tuesday, but Thai authorities said they needed to evaluate the situation, claiming that 250 Cambodian drones had been active along the border. (AP)

New Zealand's Auckland kicks off 2026 celebrations with fireworks

Subdued celebrations in Indonesia and Hong Kong

WELLINGTON, Dec 31: Auckland rang in 2026 with a downtown fireworks display launched from New Zealand's tallest structure, Sky Tower, making it the first major city to greet the new year at a celebration dampened by rain.

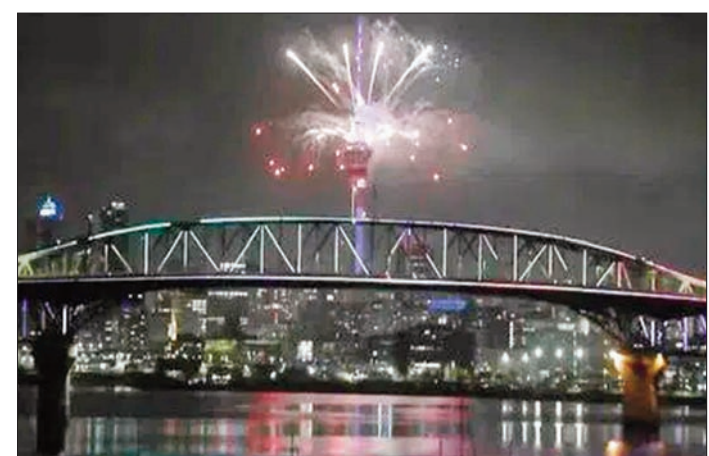
South Pacific countries are the first to bid farewell to 2025. Clocks strike midnight in Auckland, a population of 1.7 million, 18 hours before the famous ball drops in New York's Times Square.

The five-minute display involved 3,500 fireworks launched from various floors of the 240-metre Sky Tower. Smaller community events were cancelled across New Zealand's North Island on Wednesday due to forecasts of rain and possible thunderstorms.

Australia plans defiant worst mass shooting

Australia's east coast welcomes 2026 two hours after New Zealand, but in Sydney, the country's largest city, celebrations will be held under the pall of Australia's worst mass shooting in almost 30 years. Two gunmen targeted a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach on December 14, killing 15 and wounding 40.

A heavy police presence monitored the thousands who thronged to the downtown waterfront on Wednesday to watch a fireworks show centred on the Sydney Har-



bor Bridge. Many officers openly carried rapid-fire rifles, in a first for the annual event.

An hour before midnight, the massacre victims will be commemorated with one minute of silence while images of a menorah are projected on the bridge pylons. The crowd has been invited to show their solidarity with Australia's Jewish community by shining their phone torches across the harbour.

New South Wales Premier Chris Minns urged Sydney residents not to stay away through fear, saying extremists would interpret smaller crowds at New Year's Eve festivities as a victory.

"We can't be in a situation where this horrible, criminal, terrorist event changes the way we

live in our beautiful city," Minns told reporters on Wednesday.

"We have to show defiance in the face of this terrible crime and say that we're not going to be covered by this kind of terrorism," he added.

Indonesia and Hong Kong hold subdued events

In Indonesia, one of Australia's nearest neighbours, cities scaled back New Year's Eve festivities as a gesture of solidarity with communities devastated by catastrophic floods and landslides that struck parts of Sumatra island a month ago, claiming more than 1,100 lives.

The capital, Jakarta, will not ring in 2026 with its usual fanfare, choosing instead subdued celebrations with a calm and reflective

programme centred on prayers for victims, city Gov. Pramono Anung said last week.

Makassar Mayor Munafri Ari-fuddin urged residents of one of Indonesia's largest cities to forgo parties altogether, calling for prayer and reflection instead. "Empathy and restraint are more meaningful than fireworks and crowds," he said. Concerts and fireworks on Indonesia's tourist island of Bali have been cancelled and replaced with a cultural arts event featuring 65 groups performing traditional dances.

Hong Kong, too, will ring in 2026 without the usual spectacular and colourful explosions in the sky over its iconic Victoria Harbor, after a massive fire in November killed at least 161 people.

The city's tourism board will instead host a music show featuring soft rock duo Air Supply and other singers in Central, a business district. The facades of eight landmarks will turn into giant countdown clocks presenting a three-minute light show at midnight. Many parts of Asia welcome the new year by observing age-old traditions.

In Japan, crowds will gather at a Buddhist temple in Tokyo for a bell striking at midnight. In the South Korean capital Seoul, a bell tolling and countdown ceremony will be held at the Bosingak Pavilion. (AP)

Arunachal Guv meets Vice President, highlights state's development and security

KT Parnaik apprises Radhakrishnan of progress in education, health, social welfare and youth engagement



HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, Dec 31: The Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Lt General KT Parnaik, PVSM, UYSM, YSM (Retd), called on the Vice President of India, Chandrapuram Ponnusami Radhakrishnan, at New Delhi. The Governor conveyed the good wishes of the people of Arunachal Pradesh to the Vice President.

During the interaction, the Governor shared an overview of the State's steady and inclusive development, highlighting the government's commitment to contributing to the national vision of Viksit Bharat through a localised, people-centric roadmap of Viksit Arunachal. He emphasised balanced growth, improved connectivity, human development and equal opportunities for all sections of society.

The Governor apprised the Vice President about progress in education, health and social

welfare and also briefly discussed the security dynamics of the North East States in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular.

He highlighted the vibrant spirit of Arunachal's youth, noting their growing engagement in entrepreneurship, respect for art and culture and strong sense of nationalism. The Governor said their energy, creativity and discipline are emerging as key drivers of the State's transformation and future leadership.

Lt Gen Parnaik presented the Vice President with a copy of 'Orchids of Arunachal Pradesh', a visually rich reference showcasing the State's rare and endemic orchid species, reflecting its rich natural heritage and commitment to ecological conservation.

The Governor extended an invitation to the Vice President to visit Arunachal Pradesh, which he graciously accepted.

Party demands fresh elections, citing failure of current government in addressing grievances

Peace, normalcy can be restored in Manipur only if assembly is dissolved: Congress



IMPHAL, Dec 31: Manipur Pradesh Congress president Keisham Meghachandra on Wednesday said the only means to restore peace and normalcy in the ethnic strife-torn state in 2026 is to dissolve the assembly and hold fresh elections.

Keisam told reporters, "While everyone else is celebrating the New Year everywhere, in Manipur, we are not seeing these celebrations. The only solution for the welfare of the people of the state is to dissolve the present assembly. Our demand is the dissolution of the assembly and a fresh mandate. It's the only means to bring peace and normalcy in the state."

The Wangkhem legislator also said, "The ongoing crisis has exposed the failure of the present dispensation to address the aspirations and grievances of the

people."

The Congress leader also expressed hope that the New Year would bring clarity, justice and a people-driven political change for lasting peace in Manipur.

Meanwhile, BJP MLA Tongbram Robindro told reporters, "We have had several festivals and celebrations, including the Sangai festival, Orange festival, Christmas and Meitei's own Emoinu festival in November and December."

"At such festive time, I appeal to all the people across the communities to forgive and forget all differences and misunderstandings and return to earlier peace, normalcy and cordial relations with the coming of the new year," he said.

Manipur has been under President's rule since February 13, after then chief minister N Biren Singh, who was heading a BJP-led government, resigned on February 9 following ethnic violence that claimed over 260 lives since May 2023.

The 60-member state assembly, which has a tenure till 2027, has been put under suspended animation.

After the imposition of the President's rule, Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla had taken a number of steps to restore peace and bring back normalcy, including asking those who looted arms from security forces to surrender them.

The violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities started after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. (PTI)

Komkar village backs PFR studies for SUMP, inks MoU with state govt

ITANAGAR, Dec 31: Komkar village in Upper Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the state government for preparation of the pre-feasibility report (PFR) of the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP). The project was declared of national importance by the Centre in 2008.

The MoU was signed on Tuesday with the

consent of 245 out of 257 households in Komkar village, representing over 95 per cent of the community, reflecting broad-based support for conducting PFR-related studies, a statement from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said here.

The agreement was finalised in the presence of Chief Minister Pema Khandu (virtually), state Rural Development and

Panchayati Raj Minister Ojing Tasing, Mariyang-Geku MLA Oni Panyang, Chief Secretary Manish Kumar Gupta and senior officials. Village representatives said the decision underscores the community's commitment to national interest and the long-term safety and prosperity of the Siang belt and the Adi community.

They also appreciated the state govern-

ment's sustained consultations and awareness programmes, particularly on the strategic, ecological and water-security aspects of the project. Addressing the gathering, Khandu thanked the people of Komkar for becoming the first village in Upper Siang district to formally support the PFR process, following similar agreements by four villages in Siang district earlier. He clarified

that the current MoU is strictly limited to the preparation of the PFR and assured that no construction decision would be taken without extensive consultations and the consent of all project-affected families.

Khandu also flagged emerging hydrological concerns, including the possibility of diversion or reduction of water flow in the Siang River due to upstream activities.

He said the project is important to safeguard ecological flow and ensure long-term water security for the region.

The chief minister further expressed gratitude to the Centre for approving a Rs 350 crore special development package for Siang and Upper Siang districts to strengthen education, healthcare, livelihoods and infrastructure. (PTI)

GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM					
OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR OF SCHOOL::KARBI					
ANGLONG DISTRICT CIRCLE,					
DIPHU					
No. IS/Sec. Teachers/Appt/2025/12688			Dated Diphu the 31/12/2025		
CORRIGENDUM OF ADVERTISEMENT OF POST GRADUATE					
TEACHER UNDER HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION.					
In continuation of the previous advertisement of this office no. IS/Sec. Teachers/Appt/2025/03 Dated 24 December, 2025, Corrigendum/Correction has been made regarding requirement of qualification for the post of Post Graduate Teacher (PGT) under Higher Secondary Education are stated below:-					
Name of the post and eligibility criteria:					
Sl. No.	Name of post	Required qualification	Pay Band	Grade Pay	No. of Posts
1	Subject Teacher (Accountancy)	M.Com in Accountancy or Finance from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/-to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
2	Subject Teacher (Assamese)	M.A. in Assamese from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	07 nos.
3	Subject Teacher (Botany)	M.Sc. in Botany or M.Sc. in Biotechnology (Plant Biotechnology) from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
4	Subject Teacher (Business Studies)	M.Com in Management or MBA with BBA from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/- (PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
5	Subject Teacher (Commercial Mathematics)	M.A./M.Sc. Mathematics or Statistics from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
6	Subject Teacher (Economics)	M.A. in Economics from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	07 nos.
7	Subject Teacher (Education)	M.A. in Education from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/-to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	06 nos.
8	Subject Teacher (English)	M.A. in English from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	08 nos.
9	Subject Teacher (History)	M.A. in History from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	07 nos.
10	Subject Teacher (Mathematics)	M.A./M.Sc. in Mathematics from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
11	Subject Teacher (Physics)	M.Sc. in Physics from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/- (PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
12	Subject Teacher (Political Science)	M.A. in Political Science from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/-(PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	08 nos.
13	Subject Teacher (Zoology)	M.Sc. in Zoology or M.Sc. in Biotechnology (Animal Biotechnology) from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/- (PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	01 no.
14	Vocational Teacher (Maintenance and Repairing of Domestic Electrical Appliance)	respectively in the relevant field from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s). OR NTC/NAC in the Trade of "Electrician"/BBBT in Electrical Sector & Advanced module in "Repair and Maintenance of Domestic Appliances"/NAC in Mechanic-Electrical domestic appliances, With 3 years post qualification experience in the relevant field from any UGC recognized University with at least 50% and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) from NCTE recognized Institution(s).	Rs. 22,000/- to 87,000/- (PB-3)	Rs. 11,800/-	02 nos.
Grand Total					52 posts.

N.B: The other terms and conditions stipulated in the earlier advertisement will remain the same.

Sd/-
Inspector of Schools,
Karbi Anglong District Circle,
Diphu.

Afghanistan recall Naveen, Naib for T20 World Cup; Rashid to lead

KABUL, Dec 31: Afghanistan on Wednesday recalled pacer Naveen-ul-Haq and all-rounder Gulbadin Naib in a 15-member squad for the T20 World Cup to be held across India and Sri Lanka from February 7.

Star spinner Rashid Khan will continue to lead the side, with Ibrahim Zadran named as his deputy.

Naveen returns after recovering from a shoulder injury. He last featured in an international match in December 2024.

Naib, meanwhile, was left out of Afghanistan's white-ball tour of Bangladesh in October as was the experienced left-arm pacer Fazal-haq Farooqi, who has also been included in the squad.

"We had good discussions over the past few days and finalized the squad. Gulbadin Naib is a big-match player, and his return boosts our team. We are also pleased to have Naveen Ul Haq back, which enhances the quality of our fast bowling," chief selector Ahmad Shah Sulimankhil said.

The squad also features off-spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman. His inclu-



sion has pushed mystery spinner AM Ghazanfar to the reserves.

Afghanistan enjoyed their best-ever run in an ICC event at the previous edition of the T20 World Cup in 2024, where they reached the semifinals.

This time, they have been drawn in a group alongside New Zealand, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and Canada.

Afghanistan will open their campaign against New Zealand on February 8 in Chennai.

The same squad will also play a three-match T20I series against the West Indies in the UAE ahead of the World Cup, starting January 19.

"Afghanistan had a terrific run in the previous edition of the T20 World Cup. We cherish excellent memories from the past, and hope for even better results this year, which will be played in Asian conditions," Afghanistan Cricket Board CEO Naseeb Khan said.

"Hosting the West Indies team provides us with an incredible opportunity to fine-tune our combination, and prepare adequately for the World Cup."

Afghanistan Squad

Rashid Khan (Captain), Ibrahim Zadran (VC), Rahmanullah Gurbaz (WK), Mohammad Ishaq (WK), Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Shahidullah Kamal, Azmatullah Omarzai, Gulbadin Naib, Mohammad Nabi, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Naveen Ul Haq, Fazal Haq Farooqi and Abdullah Ahmadzai.

Reserves: AM Ghazanfar, Ijaz Ahmadzai and Zia Ur Rahman Sharifi. (PTI)

Life begins at 59 for the globe's oldest professional soccer player



TOKYO, Dec 31: He turns 59 in February, and the globe's oldest professional soccer player has a new club as he gets set for his 41st season.

This is of course Kazuyoshi Miura who is known in Japan as "King Kazu."

Miura announced his signing this week with third-division J-League team Fukushima United. He is moving on loan from Yokohama FC and spent last season on loan with fourth-division club Atletico Suzuka.

He failed to score in seven matches with Suzuka.

Miura has played professionally in Brazil, Italy, Croatia, Australia and Portugal. And of course in Japan. He made his debut in 1986 with Santos in Brazil, a club made famous by Brazilian star Pelé.

In 2017 at age 50, he became the oldest player to score in a professional match. That topped the record held by highly decorated England international Stanley Matthews.

Miura was one of the first big names in Japanese soccer. He scored 55 goals in 89 appearances and was a star with Japan's national team in the 1990s. (AP)

Olympic champion Andre De Grasse named ambassador for Tata Mumbai Marathon

MUMBAI, Dec 31: Two-time Olympic gold medalist sprinter Andre De Grasse was on Wednesday named the international event ambassador for the 21st edition of the Tata Mumbai Marathon, set to take place here on January 18.

One of the most accomplished sprinters of his generation, De Grasse brings his presence and inspiration to the World Athletics Gold Label Race.

Renowned for his electrifying finishes, composure under pressure, and ability to deliver on the sport's biggest stages, De Grasse is a global athletics icon whose journey continues to inspire millions worldwide.

Rising from a humble beginning, he discovered sprinting at a local meet wearing basketball shoes and borrowed spikes, a moment that marked the beginning of an extraordinary career.

Today, De Grasse stands among the elite of world athletics, with an exceptional tally of seven Olympic medals, including gold in the men's 200m at the Tokyo Games and the 4x100m relay in Paris 2024.

"Running teaches discipline, belief, and resilience - values that stay with you long after the race is over. The Tata Mumbai Marathon embodies the power of sport to unite people, inspire courage, and encourage everyone to take the first step towards their own goals," De Grasse said.

"I am honoured to be part of the 21st edition of this iconic event as the International Event Ambassador, standing alongside runners of all abilities who are driven by purpose, passion, and the joy of movement." (PTI)

Racing prodigy Atiqa Mir caps off 2025 as India's most successful karter on global staged

DUBAI, Dec 31: Eleven-year-old racing prodigy Atiqa Mir capped off a ground breaking 2025 by becoming the most successful Indian karter in the international arena in her category.

Atiqa, the first Indian to be supported by the Formula 1 Academy, made some record breaking moves on the track during the year including four pole positions, two final wins, six heat wins, six podiums and eight fastest laps driving against strong male-dominated international grid in the mini category.

Also backed by the Akcel GP Academy, Atiqa said the season gone by pushed her to the limit and made her a better driver. She is looking forward to an even more competitive 2026.

"So much has happened and I have tasted international success. I have also received great support from my fans here in India and abroad. My motivation is

higher than ever tonight and I can't wait for the new season to start," said the Mumbai-born driver.

Atiqa's ultimate goal is to break into Formula 1, something that has not been done by a female racer for decades. It remains to be seen if she stays in the mini category or moves up the ladder.

Her father Asif Mir, India's first national karting champion, was satisfied with how the year panned out for his talented daughter.

"Atiqa has worked tirelessly throughout the year to improve and has shown winning results. She has driven all her races internationally against the world best drivers and has done well," he said.

"It is encouraging and gives us a lot to look forward to for the future. There are a lot of exciting developments for 2026 and we will continue her rigorous development to reach our ultimate goal: Formula 1," summed up Mir. (PTI)

Lee, Kapp start training with DC for WPL

MARGAO (GOA), Dec 31: Veteran South Africa all-rounder Marizanne Kapp along with compatriot Lizelle Lee, who played a key role in Hobart's recent WBBL title triumph have joined the Delhi Capitals training session ahead of upcoming Women's Premier League.

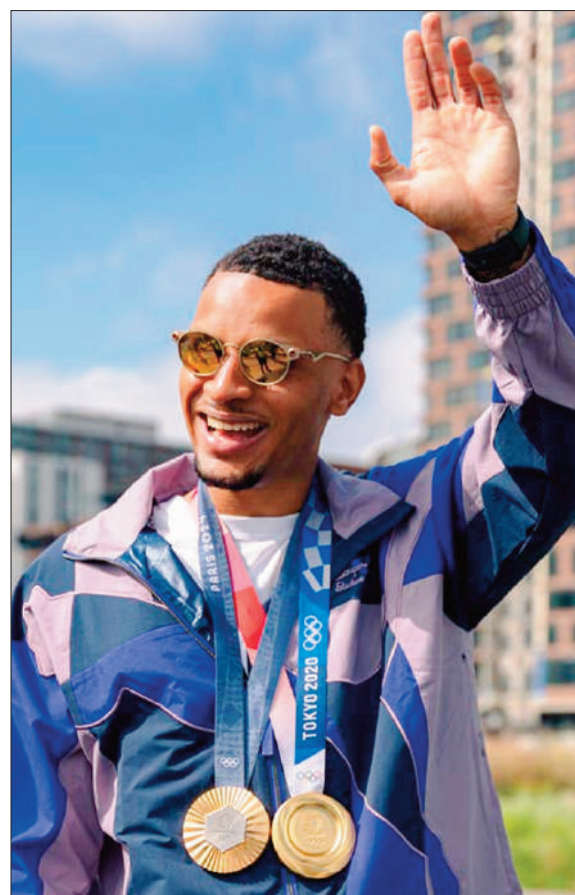
Indian players Taniyaa Bhatia, Niki Prasad, Minnu Mani, Mamatha Madiwala, Deeya Yadav, and Nandini Sharma have also joined the camp.

The team is training under the watchful eye of Head Coach Jonathan Batty, with other Indian national team players set to join after the conclusion of the Sri Lanka series on Tuesday.

Speaking about the pre-season camp, Batty said, "We have some fresh faces in the team, so it will be exciting to see them blend with our philosophy. Goa's weather is perfect for preparations.

"The remaining players will join in a couple of days, and we'll begin training in full swing with the complete squad before heading to Mumbai to start our season and take it match by match toward our objectives."

Three-time finalists Delhi Capitals will begin their WPL 2026 campaign against Mumbai Indians on January 10 in Navi Mumbai. (PTI)



World Blitz: Carlsen wins record-extending 9th title, Erigaisi settles for bronze



DOHA, Dec 31: Relieved after defending his world blitz crown, chess megastar Magnus Carlsen acknowledged it was an extremely tough field and admitted he was fortunate to win a record-extending ninth title following the reverses in the early rounds of the tournament.

World No.1 Magnus Carlsen showed his endgame genius yet again to add the Blitz crown to the Rapid gold medal he won last week by defeating Uzbek Grandmaster Nodirbek Abdusattorov 2.5-1.5 in the title showdown on Tuesday.

Indian Grandmaster Arjun Erigaisi, impeccable in the 19-round qualification (Swiss), suffered a massive meltdown in the semifinal to settle for a bronze medal in the World Blitz Championship.

The third-place finish for 22-year-old Erigaisi on Sunday, not only helped him win the Blitz and Rapid bronze, it also made him only the second male chess player from India after the legendary Viswanathan Anand to win a World Blitz medal.

"This was a very tough event for me. It could have gone either way. But when we got to the knockouts, I thought I should really enjoy it, and it worked out," Carlsen, who ended up winning both the Rapid and Blitz gold, told FIDE.

Carlsen refused to accept a draw in the final against young Uzbek GM Abdusattorov and came up with a unique pawn move out of nowhere in the fourth game of the title clash to win the contest after both the players were tied at 1.5 points each.

The victory was all the more

AIFF asks clubs to confirm participation in delayed ISL



NEW DELHI, Dec 31: The All India Football Federation (AIFF) on Wednesday asked the clubs to confirm their participation in the delayed season of the Indian Super League (ISL) and the proposed format within a day so that it can inform the continental body the exact number of matches to be played in the competition.

With the ISL 2025-26 yet to start, it is certain that the clubs will not be able to play the mandatory 24 matches in the season -- including top division league and domestic cup -- to be eligible to feature in the AFC Champions League 2.

In that regard, the ISL clubs had urged the AIFF to request the Asian Football Confederation for a one-time relaxation in the minimum requirement of 24 matches so that they can play in the ACL 2.

The representatives of the clubs and a committee formed by the AIFF have had five meetings since December 24 on how to hold the 2025-26 ISL season.

"... the meetings held on 28th December 2025, wherein the ISL Clubs requested the All India Football Federation to take up the matter with the Asian Football Confederation regarding a one-time relaxation in the minimum requirement of 24 matches," the AIFF said in a letter to the ISL clubs.

"AIFF asks ISL clubs to confirm participation and the proposed competition format in ISL 2024-25 by January 1, 2026. The AFC, the Sports Ministry and the Supreme Court will be informed accord-

ingly.

"Considering the urgency of the matter, it would be highly appreciated if the above confirmation is received by tomorrow, i.e., 1st January 2026. We trust you will appreciate the seriousness and time-sensitive nature of the situation."

The AIFF also said it is required to submit the outcome of the meetings it had with the ISL clubs to the Sports Ministry before January 2, 2026.

"Further, the Hon'ble Supreme Court is scheduled to resume after vacation on 5th January 2026, and all stakeholders may be required to file relevant documents in accordance with legal advice."

The AIFF had proposed two competition formats for the ISL 2025-26 season, which it wants to start in the first week of February.

The first option is a conference-based league structure where the 14 participating teams would be divided equally into East and West groups. Teams would play against each other only within their respective conferences. The top four sides from each group will advance to a single-leg championship round to decide the ISL winner. All the matches would be played at two centralised venues.

Under the second option, all the teams would compete in a single-leg format without conferences. There would be no playoffs, with the league table alone determining the champion at the end of the season.

A resurgent Abdusattorov turned things decisively his way in the second game by playing Rcs' on the 75th move and finishing the game in 83 moves.

With the Uzbek needing only half-a-point to seal his place in the final, Abdusattorov settled for a quick draw with black pieces after just 33 moves despite being in a winning position, rendering the fourth game redundant.

Carlsen courts controversy, penalised

Carlsen suffered a serious setback in the 14th round (Swiss) on Tuesday when he dropped a piece in time trouble - his second time in the tournament - and ended up losing. But despite the incident, the Norwegian kept his composure and rebounded in the following rounds.

With both Carlsen and Armenia's Haik Martirosyan in a tense position, the Norwegian lost his composure and accidentally knocked off most pieces on the board with just two seconds left on his clock. As Carlsen scrambled to reset them, he also pressed the clock, thus gaining two more seconds, before all the pieces were placed correctly, which was illegal.

The arbiters were called and Martirosyan declared winner.

As per FIDE rules, "If a player brings the game into disrepute with the intention of preventing their time expiring, the player should expect to be penalised by losing the game."

Carlsen accepted the decision and shook hands with Martirosyan.

Assaubayeva takes women's Blitz title

Kazakhstan's Bibisara Assaubayeva defeated Ukrainian Grandmaster Anna Muzychuk 2.5-1.5 to claim her third World Blitz title and qualify for the 2026 Candidates tournament.

Assaubayeva capitalised on the white pieces in the final game to beat Muzychuk, who stumbled in time trouble.

"It was hard, but it feels great. It's not easy to do this once, let alone three times. And also to qualify for the Candidates - it's thrilling. Now I will rest a bit, and in February start my preparation for the Candidates," said Assaubayeva who won her first two titles in 2021 and 2022. (PTI)

India has two spots in the ACL 2 -- one in group stage for ISL Shield winners and another in playoff round for Super Cup winners.

Each club in the domestic top division also needs to play a minimum of 24 matches in a season -- including top division league and domestic cup -- to be eligible to feature in the ACL 2.

FC Goa, who had won the Super Cup earlier this year, could be disqualified from participation in ACL 2 play-off round if they do not play the mandatory number of matches.

It is, however, learnt that the AIFF will push for the top-tier league to happen this season, though truncated, even if the AFC does not agree with the one-time relaxation, thereby missing the ACL 2 slots because of not fulfilling the mandatory number of matches.

On Friday last, the AIFF proposed a new structure for the ISL, under which the league would be owned and operated by the national body in accordance with its new constitution for the next 20 seasons. According to the new proposal, the league will implement a promotion and relegation system from the upcoming season.

On December 20, a proposal from 10 ISL clubs for "perpetual" operational and commercial ownership of the country's top-tier competition had failed to get the approval of the AIFF's General Body, which formed a committee to look into the matter.

The 2025-26 ISL season was put on hold in July due to the uncertainty over the renewal of the Master Rights Agreement (MRA) between the league's former organisers, Football Sports Development Limited (FSDL), and the AIFF. The deal expired on December 8, creating a contractual impasse that also required Supreme Court intervention.

Under the supervision of a Supreme Court-appointed committee, a tender was floated for ISL's commercial rights but there was no taker for it. (PTI)

Injured Pak pacer Shaheen Afridi to return home from BBL; doubtful for T20 World Cup

KARACHI, Dec 31: Experienced Pakistan left-arm pace bowler, Shaheen Shah Afridi will return home from Australia later on Wednesday with doubts over his availability for the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka early next year.

Shaheen has been called by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) for treatment and rehabilitation at the High Performance Centre in Lahore after he sustained a knee injury while fielding for Brisbane Heat in the Big Bash League (BBL).

Shaheen, who has struggled in his maiden appearance in the BBL, had spent a long time out from cricket in 2021-22 after undergoing a knee surgery following an injury while fielding in a Test in Sri Lanka.

A PCB official said that Shaheen had been called back after discussions with Cricket Australia (CA) as the initial feedback was that he required complete rest and time to recover from the injury.

He said that the seriousness of the injury and the potential timeline for recovery will be determined after his meeting with the board's doctors.

Shaheen expressed disappointment on social media at leaving the tournament prematurely.

"I have enjoyed myself a lot playing for Brisbane and I am sad that I will not be able to finish the season with the team," he said in a statement released by the BBL side.

"Hopefully, I will be back in the fields soon," he wrote.

Shaheen featured in four matches for Brisbane Heat, claiming two wickets at an average of 76.50. In his first match, he was taken off the attack after bowling two full-toss deliveries.

Shaheen was not included in the Pakistan squad for a three-match T20I series in Sri Lanka (January 7-11) even before he sustained the injury. (PTI)