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● Ship runs aground in Strait of Hormuz, Iranian state TV reports

● Zelenskyy says Ukraine hits Russian oil refinery for second time in week

**8** NATION

● BJP slams Congress over Karnataka CM's remarks on linking state's welfare benefits to SIR

● Congress demands VB G RAM G repeal, says wages 'unjustifiably low'

## First budget of Himanta's 2nd term to be tabled on July 10

GUWAHATI, July 1: The first budget of the Himanta Biswa Sarma government's second term will be presented on July 10, according to the Assam Legislative Assembly.

Assam Finance Minister Jayanta Malla Baruah will table the annual financial statement for budget estimates for 2026-27, the provisional programme of business issued by Assembly secretary Rajib Bhat-tacharyya stated on Wednesday.

The session will begin on July 6 and continue till July 31, with a total of 16 sittings scheduled during the period.

In the previous session, Finance Minister Ajanta Neog had presented a vote-on-account budget on February 17 ahead of the Assembly elections.

She had tabled an interim budget of Rs 62,294.78 crore to enable the government to carry on routine expenditure pending the full budget.

The NDA, comprising the BJP, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and Bodoland People's Front (BPF), secured a sweeping mandate in the assembly polls, winning a record 102 seats (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Govt slaps notice on Meta; warns against WhatsApp username feature

NEW DELHI, July 1: The government on Wednesday slapped a notice on Meta over the controversial username feature on WhatsApp in India and warned it not to roll it out until consultations on the issue are completed, according to sources.

The government also directed Meta to furnish a detailed explanation on the username feature within three days, sources said.

According to sources, the government has issued a notice to Meta over the rollout of the username feature on WhatsApp in India - a key market where the messaging giant has over 500 million users.

The Meta-owned platform has been directed not to roll out the said feature until consultation on the matter is over, sources informed.

The notice to the tech giant

## Two Union ministers conduct aerial survey of affected areas

# Assam flood scene worsens, 50,000 people hit hard

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, July 1: The flood situation in Assam worsened on Wednesday, with nearly 50,000 people affected across four districts as Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Union Minister Kiren Rijiju visited the worst-hit areas of Dhemaji district and assured all possible assistance from the Centre for relief and rehabilitation.

According to the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), nearly 48,500 people have been affected by floods in Biswanath, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh and Nalbari districts.

Dhemaji remains the worst-hit district with more than 44,000 people affected, followed by Dibrugarh with around 4,000 and Biswanath with nearly 500.

The flood-affected population has risen slightly from nearly 47,000 reported on Tuesday.

Chouhan and Rijiju, accompanied by Assam Panchayat and



Rural Development Minister Atul Bora, conducted an aerial survey of the flood-ravaged areas of Dhemaji, which shares a border with Arunachal Pradesh, before interacting with affected families and reviewing the ongoing relief and rehabilitation measures.

Addressing reporters, Chouhan said the Centre, under the leader-

ship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, stands firmly with the people of Assam and will provide every possible assistance for relief, recovery and rebuilding. "The crisis is big, and we have seen the devastation. Houses have been damaged and roads have been washed away. Our priority is to restore normalcy and rebuild people's lives," he said.

The ASDMA said one person has lost his life in this year's floods. At present, 179 villages remain inundated and 2,117.34 hectares of crop land have been damaged. Floodwaters have also caused damage to embankments, roads, bridges and other public infrastructure across the affected districts.

The administration is operating 13 relief camps and relief distribution centres in two districts, sheltering 153 displaced people.

National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) personnel have rescued 713 people from different parts of Dhemaji district.

Relief materials, including rice, pulses, salt and mustard oil, were distributed among flood-affected families during the last 24 hours. The Brahmaputra River is flowing above the danger mark at Neamatighat, while more than 82,800 domestic animals and poultry have also been affected by the floods across the state. (With inputs from PTI)

## Centre assures full support for flood-hit Arunachal

ITANAGAR, July 1: Union ministers Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Kiren Rijiju, deputed to assess the flood situation in Arunachal Pradesh, assured the northeastern state of the Centre's full support in undertaking relief, rehabilitation and long-term flood mitigation measures.

Four people died, 21 were injured, and two remained missing as heavy rain triggered flash floods and landslides in Arunachal Pradesh over the past seven days, causing widespread damage to houses, roads, bridges and public infrastructure.

A day after the Union ministers undertook an aerial and ground assessment of the flood-ravaged Keyi Panyor district along with chief minister Pema Khandu, Chouhan said the Centre would work closely with the state government to pro-

vide succour to the state.

Rijiju, a Lok Sabha MP from the state, reaffirmed the Centre's commitment to supporting the affected people and stressed the need for permanent solutions to recurring floods.

He said the Centre stands firmly with the affected people and will continue to work closely with the state government to ensure timely relief, restoration and rehabilitation. The two ministers said recurring floods in the area require durable engineering interventions rather than temporary measures.

Union Agriculture Minister Chouhan met Governor K T Par-naik at the Lok Bhavan in the state capital and assured him of the Centre's full support to Arunachal Pradesh for flood recovery and the development of its agriculture sector.

Officials said the meeting focused on the damage caused by recent floods and measures to strengthen irrigation, rural connectivity, agricultural infrastructure, organic farming, high-value crops, agri-technology, skill development and market linkages.

Parnaik briefed the minister on the extensive damage caused by recent floods and sought continued central support for rebuilding essential infrastructure and restoring livelihoods.

After inspecting the flood-ravaged areas, Chief Minister Khandu said, "The damage caused by the Sibro Korong river, which is flowing at spate, is massive."

He said the state government would prepare a permanent flood protection plan for the Sibro Korong river basin in coordination with the Centre. (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Militants torch houses in Manipur's Kamjong district

Around 10 thatched houses were set ablaze at Phaimol village, a Kuki-Zo settlement



IMPHAL, July 1: Armed militants torched several houses in at least two tribal villages in Manipur's Kamjong district near the India-Myanmar border on Wednesday, officials said.

Around 10 thatched houses were set ablaze at Phaimol village, a Kuki-Zo settlement, around 12.30 pm. The village is located about 45 km northeast of Chassad police station near the international border, they said.

Officials said villagers were not present at the time of the incident as they had been taking temporary shelter in a nearby village for over a week.

The Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM), the apex body of the Kuki community in the state, strongly condemned the arson and claimed the attacks were carried out by outfits operating from across the border in Myanmar.

It said the continued destruction of villages cannot be dismissed as sporadic law-and-order incidents and reflects a serious security failure requiring urgent intervention.

KIM urged the Centre, the Manipur government and security agencies to take immediate action

to prevent further incidents.

In a separate incident, suspected to be a retaliatory attack, militants also torched around eight houses in Kongkan Thana and adjoining areas inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga community in the same district near the international border.

Phungyar MLA Leishiyoi Keish-ing said at least 12 houses belonging to the Tangkhul Naga community in Kongkan Thana were set on fire.

He said the Tangkhul villages along the Indo-Myanmar border in Kamjong district are among the most sensitive due to sparse population, poor road connectivity and proximity to armed groups operating from across the border.

Keish-ing alleged that militant outfits, including the Kuki National Army (Burma) and the People's Defence Force (PDF), are active across the border, while movement of state security forces remains limited on the Indian side.

The MLA said central security forces are reviewing the situation and attempting to bring the border area under control, and urged the state government to strengthen deployment in the region. (PTI)

## JMCH to introduce interventional cardiology, MCh Neurosurgery: Singhal



HT Correspondent

JORHAT, July 1: Assam Health Minister Ashok Singhal on Wednesday announced that Jorhat Medical College and Hospital (JMCH) will soon introduce interventional cardiology services and launch a Master of Chirurgiae (MCh) programme in Neuro-

surgery, marking a significant expansion of its super-specialty healthcare facilities.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of National Doctors' Day celebrations at JMCH, Singhal said he reviewed the functioning of the hospital and held discussions with the heads of the Cardiology

and Neurology departments, who informed him that preparations were underway to begin interventional cardiology and advanced neurosurgical services.

With the introduction of interventional cardiology, JMCH will become the fourth government medical college in Assam, after Assam Medical College and Hospital (Dibrugarh), Gauhati Medical College and Hospital, and Silchar Medical College and Hospital, to offer the specialised cardiac procedure.

The Health Minister said the proposed MCh programme in Neurosurgery would provide advanced super-specialty training in the surgical management of disorders affecting the brain, spinal cord and peripheral nerves, including brain tumours, aneurysms and severe traumatic injuries.

Singhal expressed satisfaction with the overall functioning of the medical (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Parliamentary panel members call for statutory status for NTA

NEW DELHI, July 1: Members of a parliamentary panel on Wednesday sought statutory status for the National Testing Agency (NTA) even as they lauded the successful conduct of the NEET-UG re-exam.

The panel members, however, expressed concern over the computer-based test (CBT) mode for the NEET-UG exam from next year and called for taking the interests of the marginalised sections into account.

Former ISRO chairman R Radhakrishnan, who is also the chairman of the high-powered committee set up by the government to suggest reforms in the examination system, appeared before the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports and discussed steps taken for the NEET re-exam.

NTA Director General Abhishek Singh and Secretary, Ministry of

Higher Education Vineet Joshi also appeared before the panel and discussed the lessons learnt from the NEET re-exam held on June 21.

The officials were called by the panel, headed by Congress member Mukul Wasnik, on the learnings from the NEET-UG re-examination and steps to strengthen the NTA as well as reforms required.

This was the first meeting under Wasnik's chairmanship. Earlier, Congress member Digvijaya Singh was the panel chairperson, but he has since retired.

The panel reviewed the conduct of the NEET-UG re-examination and Abhishek Singh briefed its members on the process and the outcomes.

Sources said the panel members asked the officials how the NTA will conduct the examination of this scale on its own next year, as the re-exam was successfully held

only after the entire government came into action. From the prime minister to the junior-most official, all were involved in its conduct, they noted.

The sources said the MPs suggested giving more powers to the NTA for independently handling an exam of this magnitude and suggested giving statutory status to the agency.

The Ministry of Education established the NTA as an independent, autonomous, and self-sustained premier testing organisation under the Societies Registration Act (1860).

The panel members also expressed concern over several examinees being left out as they arrived late at the exam centres. They also urged the NTA to take steps to help them, saying the visuals of the distraught aspirants being left outside the centre for arriving late were disturbing. With the NTA (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Drugs worth ₹ 13 cr seized in Assam, six held

GUWAHATI, July 1: Narcotic substances worth almost ₹ 13 crore were seized and six suspected drug traffickers were arrested from the Barak valley of Assam, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Wednesday.

In a post on X, Sarma said, "@sribhumpolice and @cacharpolice recovered 49,800 Yaba tablets, 535g heroin worth nearly ₹ 13 crore and apprehended six accused."

The state's fight against the drug menace will continue with full force, he added.

"This is business, they claimed. @assampolice replied, 'Not in Assam.' For business, choose our schemes, not drug peddling," the CM said.

Yaba or 'crazy medicine' in Thai is a tablet form of a mixture of methamphetamine, a powerful and addictive stimulant, and caffeine. (PTI)

## Professor Madhumita Barooah recognised globally for contributions to agricultural biotechnology

# AAU scientist ranked among world's top 5% researchers

HT Correspondent

JORHAT, July 1: Assam Agricultural University (AAU) has earned global recognition with Professor Madhumita Barooah of its Department of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology being ranked among the world's top five per cent scientists for her outstanding contributions to agricultural biotechnology research.

The ranking is based on global indicators including publication quality, citation impact and research productivity, placing Professor Barooah among the world's most influential researchers in her field.

Professor Barooah is widely recognised for her pioneering research in molecular biology, microbial and plant biotechnology, and sustainable agriculture.

Among her notable studies is the scientific validation that poita bhat—fermented water-soaked rice—has higher nutritional value than freshly cooked rice. She has also conducted research on extending the shelf life of Assam's traditional rice beer, xaaz.



Having joined AAU in 1991, Professor Barooah has devoted more than 35 years to teaching and research.

During her career, she has received several prestigious international fellowships, including the DBT Overseas Fellowship at the University of Reading, United Kingdom, in 2014, the Norman E Borlaug Fellowship at Pennsylvania State University, United States, in 2006, the Commonwealth Scholarship for her doctoral studies at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom, in 2001, and the Fulbright Fellowship at Texas A&M and Georgetown Universities in the United States in 1998.

She has guided numerous doctoral, post-graduate and postdoctoral scholars, many of whom are now serving in leading academic and research institutions in India and abroad.

Her research has also resulted in technology transfer agreements with start-ups and the development of farmer-oriented technologies aimed at promoting sustainable agriculture and improving rural livelihoods.

The Assam Agricultural University fraternity congratulated (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## CBSE asks schools to encourage students, parents to take cyber hygiene certification course

NEW DELHI, July 1: The CBSE has directed its affiliated schools to promote cyber safety by encouraging students, teachers and parents to enrol in a 2.5-hour cyber hygiene certification course and establish cyber clubs to organise monthly awareness activities, according to officials.

"The initiative, under a nationwide campaign by the Home Minister's Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), aims to strengthen cybercrime awareness and promote cyber hygiene among students, teachers and parents. This is crucial as children's increasing use of digital platforms exposes them to online risks, including grooming, cyberbullying, identity theft, online harassment, and financial cyberfraud," a senior board official said.

The board has advised schools to organise activities such as quizzes, speeches, poster-making competitions, pledge drives, debates, and awareness sessions on the first Wednesday of every month, observed as "Cyber Jagrookta Diwas". Schools may also integrate cyber awareness into annual events, parent-teacher interactions and special campaigns.

Officials have advised schools to circulate a cyber safety pledge among students, asking them to get their



parents' signatures. The pledge focuses on safe online practices, responsible social media use, and basic cyber hygiene.

CBSE has asked schools to display cyber awareness advisories on parent portals, share a cybercrime awareness comic book prepared by MHA, encourage students and parents to follow "Cyberdost" on social media and use interactive awareness material such as the cyber awareness "Snake and Ladder" game. "Awareness is our strongest preventive (CONTD. ON PAGE 2)

## Delhi govt notifies Delhi EV Policy 2026

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The Delhi government on Wednesday notified the "Delhi Electric Vehicles Policy 2026", which aims to accelerate electric vehicle (EV) adoption, improve air quality, and create a supportive ecosystem for electric mobility.

The Delhi Cabinet headed by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Monday approved the EV policy after which it was sent to LG Taranjit Singh Sandhu for final approval.

"... In exercise of the powers conferred by the enabling provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 and the rules made thereunder, the Lieutenant Governor of the National Capital Territory of Delhi hereby notifies the Delhi Electric Vehicles Policy, 2026 with effect from July 1, 2026," the notification states.

Under its EV policy, the Delhi government announced that all electric cars with an ex-showroom price of Rs 30 lakh or less registered in the National Capital will get full exemption on road tax and registration fees.

Besides, only electric auto rickshaws will be registered in Delhi from January 1, 2027, while registration of new petrol and CNG two-wheelers will be phased out, with only electric two-wheelers to be registered from April 1, 2028.

Under the new policy, people buying e-two-wheelers will get a subsidy of ₹ 30,000 in the first year, ₹ 20,000 in the second year and ₹ 10,000 in the third year.

The Policy will remain in force till March 31, 2030. (PTI)

## ATF, commercial LPG prices cut as softer oil eases costs; Nayara lowers petrol, diesel rates

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) and commercial LPG prices were cut on Wednesday as easing tensions in West Asia pulled down international oil prices, while private fuel retailer Nayara Energy lowered petrol and diesel prices, becoming the first retailer in more than two years to reduce pump rates.

ATF prices were reduced by about ₹ 5 per litre, bringing the price in Delhi to around ₹ 110 per litre, industry sources said. The reduction is the first since the recent spike triggered by the West Asia conflict.

Oil marketing companies also cut the price of commercial LPG by Rs 183.50 per 19-kg cylinder, the first reduction this year.

Commercial LPG will now cost ₹ 2,930 per cylinder after touching a record ₹ 3,113 last month as geopolitical tensions pushed up crude oil prices.

Alongside, the 5-kg marked-priced or Free Trade LPG (FTL) cylinder cost was also reduced by ₹ 13 to ₹ 808.50 per 5-kg cylinder.

Prices of domestic 14.2-kg LPG cylinders were left unchanged at ₹ 942. Last month, the government introduced an ATF price stabilisation scheme under which participating airlines could buy jet fuel at a fixed price of Rs 115 per litre for up to three years. Airlines that do not opt for the scheme continue to pay prevailing market rates.

Under the mechanism, if benchmark ATF prices rise above the base rate of ₹ 86.32 per litre - equivalent to a retail price of ₹ 115 per litre after airport charges, oil company margins and applicable taxes - the government will provide interest-free advances to oil marketing companies to bridge the difference.

When benchmark prices fall

### Royal Enfield to host first Himalayan basecamp in Ladakh

**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, July 1:** Royal Enfield has announced the inaugural edition of the Himalayan Basecamp (HBC) - Ladakh Edition, a three-day immersive adventure festival to be held in Leh from September 4 to 6.

Positioned as India's first multi-disciplinary adventure gathering, the event will bring together motorcyclists, climbers, overlanders, kayakers and outdoor enthusiasts at an altitude of 11,480 feet.

Hosted in Ladakh, regarded as the spiritual home of Royal Enfield's adventure motorcycling culture, the Basecamp will feature a range of guided expeditions, skill-based competitions, expert-led workshops and cultural experiences designed for adventure seekers.

The event will include challenges such as a roadbook-based navigation ride across Ladakh's rugged terrain, an off-road endurance competition, and a timed hill climb.

Participants will also have the opportunity to attend masterclasses on motorcycle overlanding, off-road riding, bush mechanics, vehicle recovery techniques, four-wheel-drive expeditions and wilderness cooking.

Adventure sports including rafting, kayaking, rock climbing, scrambling, mountain biking, hiking and paragliding will also form part of the programme, with activities conducted under the supervision of trained instructors.

Royal Enfield has curated seven expedition routes showcasing Ladakh's landscapes, heritage and culture.



below the base rate, the excess amount will be recovered from the companies and credited back to the Consolidated Fund of India.

It was not immediately known how many airlines had opted for the stabilisation scheme.

Industry sources said the ₹ 110 per litre jet fuel price is for domestic airlines.

State-owned fuel retailers revise ATF and commercial LPG prices on the first day of every month based on the average international benchmark price in the preceding month and foreign exchange rates.

Separately, Nayara Energy cut petrol prices by ₹ 5 per litre and diesel by ₹ 3 per litre across its network of more than 7,000 fuel stations, sources said.

The move follows a decline in global crude prices after concerns over supply disruptions eased with the de-escalation of hostilities in West Asia and the reopening of a key maritime route.

Nayara had been among the first retailers to raise fuel prices after the outbreak of the Iran conflict triggered a spike in international oil

prices. On March 26, it increased petrol prices by ₹ 5 per litre and diesel by ₹ 3 per litre.

State-run fuel retailers followed, raising petrol and diesel prices by a cumulative ₹ 7.50 per litre each in a series of revisions during the second half of May, reflecting higher international crude prices and elevated product costs.

State-owned Indian Oil Corp (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corp Ltd (HPCL), which together account for more than 90 per cent of India's fuel retail market, left prices unchanged. In Delhi, IOC continues to sell petrol at ₹ 102.12 per litre and diesel at ₹ 95.20 per litre.

The reduction effectively reverses Nayara's previous fuel price increase and marks the first retail price cut by any fuel retailer in more than two years.

Sources said Nayara, which operates a 20-million-tonnes-per-year refinery at Vadinar in Gujarat, has completed a refinery turnaround and is operating at full capacity to meet domestic demand. (PTI)

## WhatsApp username feature under govt scrutiny over impersonation, fraud risks

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The government is examining the legal framework and provisions in the law, as it scrutinises WhatsApp's proposed username feature, over fraud and impersonation concerns, according to sources.

The government is likely to send a notice to WhatsApp seeking full details about the features, questioning its implications and the company's plans. Law enforcement agencies may also examine the issue, an official said.

The government, as the statutory authority, will have to satisfy itself that the feature does not pose risks, given the legitimate concerns surrounding it, a source said, adding that the Meta-owned platform's latest announcement raises serious concerns.

Sources said officials will examine whether there are legal provisions to restrict the feature.

If WhatsApp's response is found to be unsatisfactory, the government may seek to prevent its rollout, they added. "They cannot go ahead, unless they can assure and convince," the sources said, adding that WhatsApp, on its part, has indicated that this is a privacy tool.

An email sent to WhatsApp did not elicit a response. Government sources said that the feature could allow users to adopt usernames resembling those of legitimate agencies, organisations or individuals, potentially enabling impersonation and fraud. This could, in turn, have adverse implications for public safety and society.

The government will not compromise on national security or public safety, they asserted.

Meta-owned messaging platform WhatsApp announced the introduction of usernames, a feature that will allow users to communicate without sharing their phone numbers. The company has started early reservations for usernames, which will be officially rolled out later this year. WhatsApp has around 500 million users in India, a significant market for the platform.

"Starting this week, you can reserve a username to use later this year when we launch this feature," WhatsApp said in a blog post.

According to the messaging platform, the move is aimed at enhancing user privacy, particularly in group chats or when connecting with new acquaintances by



eliminating the need to exchange phone numbers.

However, several startup founders, cybersecurity professionals and technology experts have voiced concerns over the proposed feature on X, arguing that usernames resembling those of businesses, government agencies or public figures could be exploited for impersonation and financial scams if adequate safeguards are not put in place. Paytm founder and CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma has warned that lookalike usernames could become a major vector for impersonation and scams if not properly protected.

"Soon you will have a verified username on WhatsApp, and then unverified similar-sounding usernames... which in turn will..." he posted on X.

Jasveer Singh, co-founder and CEO of KnotDating, also flagged risks and, in a social media post, wrote: "Privacy matters. So does accountability".

On social media, people are raising questions on how the platform would verify identities and prevent misuse of prominent names.

Experts believe that the feature may create confusion by making it easier for fraudsters or scammers to appear legitimate, by grabbing usernames that closely resemble bona fide brands or institutions.

Notably, WhatsApp recently got an Indian face at the helm, with tech giant Meta investing ₹ 8,550 crore (about USD 900 million) in the Indian fintech firm CRED, and appointing founder Kunal Shah as the new global head of the popular messaging platform. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## First budget of

in the 126-member House. The BJP alone bagged 82, its first single-party majority in the state, while AGP and BPP won 10 seats each. The Congress and Rajgor Dal, who were part of a six-party opposition alliance, won 19 and two seats respectively. The AIUDF and Trinamool Congress fought separately as single entities and have two and one MLAs, respectively. (PTI)

## Centre assures

Keyi Panyor is among the worst-affected districts, while East Siang, Papum Pare, Kra Daadi, Kurung Kumey, Lower Subansiri, Kamle, Upper Subansiri, Leparada, Lower Siang, Lower Dibang Valley and Anjaw have also suffered extensive damage.

Multiple agencies, including the State Disaster Response Force, National Disaster Response Force, Air Force, district administrations and local volunteers, have been engaged in rescue, evacuation and relief operations.

According to a State Emergency Operation Centre report, around 90,499 people in 251 villages were affected, with Upper Siang district being the worst affected.

Of the four deaths, one was due to a landslide at Sarti village in Anjaw district on June 28. The other three deaths occurred in a flash flood that struck Possa in Keyi Panyor district on June 24.

During his meeting with Chouhan, the governor said Arunachal Pradesh has immense potential to become a major hub of sustainable and high-value agriculture.

Strengthening infrastructure, promoting organic farming, adopting modern technology and improving market access would boost the rural economy and contribute to the vision of a developed and self-reliant Arunachal, he said. Highlighting the state's natural advantage in organic farming, Parnaik sought support for certified organic clusters, incentives for natural farming, promotion of high-value horticulture crops and branding of "Organic Arunachal" products in national and international markets.

He also requested assistance for setting up research centres, farmer training and climate-resilient farming practices through institutions such as ICAR and NABARD.

The governor also advocated the promotion of agri-startups, food processing and agro-based industries, along with stronger market linkages for farmers to create employment opportunities for the youth. (PTI)

## Govt slaps notice

feature is designed to enhance privacy, particularly in group chats and interactions with new contacts. However, cybersecurity experts and startup founders have raised concerns that users could create usernames resembling those of businesses, government agencies or public figures, potentially enabling impersonation, fraud and financial scams unless robust verification and anti-abuse safeguards are put in place.

"The government, as the statutory authority, will have to satisfy itself that the feature does not pose risks, given the legitimate concerns surrounding it," a source had told PTI.

If WhatsApp's response is found to be unsatisfactory, the government could consider steps to prevent the feature's rollout in India, the sources added.

"They cannot go ahead unless they can assure and convince," an official said, adding that WhatsApp has maintained that the feature is intended to strengthen user privacy.

An email sent to WhatsApp seeking comment did not receive an immediate response.

WhatsApp has already allowed users to reserve usernames.

Government officials said the feature could allow users to adopt usernames resembling those of government agencies or prominent public figures, increasing the risk of impersonation and scams.

The proposed feature has drawn criticism from cybersecurity experts and startup founders, who warned that lookalike usernames could be exploited unless robust verification and anti-impersonation safeguards are introduced.

Paytm founder and Chief Executive Vijay Shekhar Sharma said on X that similar-sounding usernames could become a vector for impersonation and scams. Jasveer Singh, co-founder and Chief Executive of Knot-Dating, also questioned how the platform would balance user privacy with accountability.

Technology experts said the feature could make it easier for fraudsters to impersonate trusted brands, institutions and public figures unless effective identity verification mechanisms are put in place. (PTI)

## JMCH to introduce

college and hospital, describing its performance as encouraging. He also announced that all clinical laboratories under the Radiology Department of JMCH have received accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL), one of the country's highest quality certifications for diagnostic laboratories.

## Parliamentary panel

now deciding to hold the NEET exam in a computer-based testing format, the members said the interests of marginalised sections should be kept in mind as some may not have access to computers.

Earlier, top officials told the committee about the successful conduct of the NEET re-exam on June 21 and listed several steps being taken. The Committee congratulated them on their efforts.

Some MPs also asked why separate tests for nursing and other exams are not held to reduce the number of examinees.

Radhakrishnan told the panel that the recommendations made by him are being implemented in a phased manner. The timeline for implementing the Radhakrishnan recommendations was, however, not given.

Some members, sources added, asked if such exams can be conducted in a graded manner, similar to the ones held by the UPSC.

The NEET-UG exam originally conducted on May 3 was cancelled by the government following reports of 'paper leak' and was re-conducted on June 21. The CBI is probing the paper leak in the NEET exam.

The panel had earlier summoned all top officials of the ministries of Higher Education and Health and officials of NTA and NMC over the NEET-UG exam paper leak case and the CBSE onscreen marking system.

The sources said a few former officials of the Indian Institute of Science and AICTE, besides Delhi School of Artificial Intelligence, also briefed the Committee on the impact of AI on education and suggested strategies to maximise employability of students.

The sources said the panel has called former head of NIEPA Arun C Mehta and former IIT Guwahati Director and former Chairman of AICTE T G Sitharam to brief the panel members on the impact of artificial intelligence on education.

Some members suggested that AI's use in the education system should be done while keeping the Indian traditions in mind. (PTI)

## CBSE asks schools

tool. By reaching students, teachers and parents through schools, we are creating a culture of cyber safety that can help protect families and communities from emerging online threats," said I4C director Nishant Kumar. (PTI)

## AAU scientist ranked

Professor Barooh on the achievement, describing it as a proud milestone that reflects the institution's growing reputation in global scientific research.

### CESS IMPROVEMENT AT TINSUKIA DIVISION

**E-Tender Notice No. TSK/Engg/31 of 2026 Dated: 26-06-2026.** Works tenders through "E" Tendering system for and on behalf of the president of India are invited for the works as detailed below:- **Item No. 1.**

**Brief Description of Item:** Cess Improvement under the jurisdiction of SSE/P-Way/North Lakhimpur under ADEN/Silapathar. **Tender Value:** ₹15,00,47,209/-. **Earnest Money:** ₹30,01,000/-. **Item No. 2.**

**Brief Description of Item:** Cess Improvement under the jurisdiction of SSE/P-Way/Silapathar under ADEN/Silapathar. **Tender Value:** ₹16,07,19,282/-. **Earnest Money:** ₹32,14,400/-. **Item No. 3.**

**Brief Description of Item:** Removal of PSR on curves (13 nos) through cess widening under the jurisdiction of ADEN/Silapathar. **Tender Value:** ₹16,13,44,771/-. **Earnest Money:** ₹32,26,900/-. **Date & time of Closing of tender:** At 15:00 hrs. & opening at 16:00 hrs. on 20-07-2026.

The complete information with tender documents of above e-tender will be available upto 15:00 hrs. on 20-07-2026 in the website [www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in)

**DRM (W), Tinsukia**  
**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**  
Serving Customers With A Smile

### NAME CORRECTION

I, Queeni Engtiti daughter of Harsing Engti vill-Rongmirdan PO-PS-diphu would like to mention that my name wrongly written as Queeni Engtiti, the correct name is Queeni Engtiti.

### AFFIDAVIT

I Anisha Afrin Siddika, D/O- Jasim Uddin, Vill- Sabajpur, P.O.- Murajhar Bazar, P.S. Murajhar, Dist. Hojai, (Assam) That, my father's actual and correct name is Jasim Uddin. That, in my school certificate where my father's name has been inadvertently recorded as Jashim Uddin instead of his actual and correct name is Jasim Uddin. That, Jasim Uddin and Jashim Uddin both are the names of same and one person i.e. my father's name.

Anisha Afrin Siddika

### NAME CHANGE

I have Changed my name from Tahera Begum choudhury to Tahera Begum by swearing a notarial affidavit at Srimanta Sankardevnagar, Hajoai (Assam) Tahera Begum, Vill-Sabajpur, Ps.-Murajhar, Dist-Hojai (Assam)

### NAME CHANGE

I have Changed my name from Mohammad Toyabur Rahman to Toyabur Rahman by swearing a notarial affidavit at Srimanta Sankardevnagar, Hajoai (Assam)

Toyabur Rahman S/o-Abdul Khaliq Vill-Rawarpar, PO-Karaiguri, PS-Murajhar, Dist-Hojai (Assam)

### NAME CORRECTION

I Matab Uddin, S/o-Late Noor Ahmed, Vill- Shibpur No. 1, P.O- Murajhar, P.S.- Murajhar, Dist-Hojai (Assam) do hereby declare that my name has been wrongly recorded as Mohammed Matab Uddin in my Passport Vide No- J1797140. My correct name is Matab Uddin. I have corrected my name by executing a Notarial Affidavit at Srimanta Sankardev Nagar, Hajoai, (Assam)

### ELECTRICAL WORKS IN LUMDING DIVISION

**Tender Notice No.:** Sr. DEE/ LMG/10 of 2026-27; **Dated:** 26-06-2026; **E-Tender** are invited by the undersigned for the following work; **Tender No.:** EL-LM-26-27-12; **Name of work:** Rectification of cable and switchboard connections for Mechanized Coach Cleaning Machines and Bio-Toilet Evacuation Machines at Pit No.-1, Pit No.-2, Pit No.-3 and Guwahati Pit, along with wiring of glow signboards at Guwahati, Kamakhya, Dimapur, Silchar and Badarpur stations for improvement of passenger amenities, including all associated electrical accessories and allied works in connection with shifting of High Mast Tower at Guwahati and other electrical works at UBZ.

**Tender Value:** ₹90,57,201.64/-; **Earnest Money:** ₹1,81,200/-; **Date & time of closing of tender at 11:00 hrs. and opening at 11:30 hrs. on 20-07-2026.** Complete information alongwith the tender document of above e-tender will be available upto 11:00 hrs. on 20-07-2026 in the website [www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in)

**Sr. DEE (G&Chg), Lumding**

**NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY**  
Serving Customers With A Smile

## BTC chief reviews development projects in Baksa

Hagrama Mohilary stresses timely completion, quality execution and regular monitoring of schemes

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, July 1:** Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Chief Executive Member Hagrama Mohilary on Wednesday reviewed the progress of various development schemes and infrastructure projects in Baksa district, stressing the need for timely completion, quality execution and effective monitoring.

The review meeting, held at the Cultural Complex in Mushalpur, assessed the performance of key departments, including the Public Works Department (Roads), Public Works Department (Buildings), Panchayat and Rural Development Department and the Municipal Board (Urban Development).

The meeting also reviewed the implementation of projects funded under the 15th Finance Commission and the 6th State Finance Commission.

Officials presented updates on major Central and State Government flagship schemes, including



Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajevika Mission (Gramin) [VB-G RAM(G)], Asom Mala and various urban development initiatives.

Expressing satisfaction over the overall progress of development works, Mohilary directed officials to ensure that ongoing projects are completed within the stipulated timeframe while maintaining high construction standards so that the intended benefits reach the public without delay.

The BTC Chief instructed

MLAs and Members of the Council Legislative Assembly (MCLAs) to undertake regular field visits to monitor the implementation of projects.

He also said he would personally inspect project sites to assess the quality and pace of work and announced that such review meetings would be held regularly to improve accountability, expedite implementation and resolve bottlenecks.

Mohilary urged officials of all departments to work with dedication, coordination and a sense of responsibility to strengthen infrastructure and fulfil the developmental aspirations of the people across the Bodoland Territorial Region.

The meeting was attended by MLAs Thaneswar Basumatary and Maneswar Brahma, BTC Executive Members Begum Aktara and Augustus Tigga, Secretary BTC-cum-Baksa District In-charge Manas Das, Project Director of DRDA Baharul Islam, and senior officials of the concerned departments.

## Gaurav demands PSU oil firms cut petrol, diesel rates following easing of West Asia crisis



**GUWAHATI, July 1:** Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi on Wednesday demanded immediate reduction of petrol and diesel prices by the state-run entities in the wake of easing of crisis in West Asia.

He said that international crude oil prices are falling due to an understanding between Iran and the United States to stop the war.

"They have reduced LPG prices, but they should also re-

duce the prices of petrol and diesel. When petrol and diesel prices were increased, it was said that the war between Iran and Israel was the reason," Gogoi told reporters here.

"Petrol and diesel prices should therefore be reduced immediately. Why are they not being reduced? Why are the oil marketing companies being allowed to benefit?" asked the Deputy Leader of Congress in Lok Sabha.

Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) and commercial LPG prices were cut on Wednesday as easing tensions in West Asia pulled down international oil prices, while private fuel retailer Nayara Energy lowered petrol and diesel prices, becoming the first retailer in more than two years to reduce pump rates.

ATF prices were reduced by about ₹ 5 per litre, the first since the recent spike triggered by the West Asia conflict.

PSU oil marketing companies also cut the price of commercial LPG by ₹ 183.50 per 19 kg cylinder, the first reduction this year.

Separately, Nayara Energy cut petrol prices by ₹ 5 per litre and diesel by ₹ 3 per litre across its network of more than 7,000 fuel stations.

State-owned Indian Oil Corp (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corp Ltd (HPCL), which together account for more than 90 per cent of India's fuel retail market, left prices unchanged. (PTI)

## Deluxe cabins become operational at Haflong Civil Hospital

**HT Correspondent**

**HAF LONG, July 1:** The newly constructed deluxe cabins at Haflong Civil Hospital became operational on Wednesday, offering affordable accommodation for patients and their attendants and reducing their dependence on costly private facilities.

The announcement was made by North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council Executive Member for Health and Family Welfare Probita Johari during the National Doctors' Day celebration at Haflong.

The 10 deluxe cabins, inaugurated earlier this year, have been constructed under the Chief Executive Member's pilot scheme and will be managed directly by the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council with dedicated staff appointed by the council.



Each cabin is equipped with an attached bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, along with air-conditioning and other essential amenities.

Hospital authorities said only a nominal fee will be charged, making the facility more affordable for patients and their families.

Revenue generated from the cabins will be credited to the council's fund.

Speaking on the occasion, Johari said the project was initiated by Chief Executive Member Debolal Gorlosa under the council's pilot scheme to improve healthcare infrastructure in the district.

She said the facility would particularly benefit patients and attendants from remote and economically weaker sections by providing comfortable accommodation at an affordable cost during treatment.

Johari expressed hope that additional healthcare facilities would be introduced in the future to further improve services and convenience for the people of Dima Hasao district.

## Kokrajhar celebrates District Day

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, July 1:** The Kokrajhar district administration on Wednesday celebrated District Day with a commemorative programme at the Conference Hall of the District Commissioner's Office, marking the formation of the district and highlighting its rich history, cultural heritage and developmental journey.

The programme began with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp, followed by the felicitation of distinguished guests and resource persons. Officials and staff of the District Commissioner's Office also presented a chorus celebrating the spirit, heritage and unity of Kokrajhar.

Addressing the gathering, Padma Shri awardee Dr Mangal Sing Hazowary reflected on his lifelong association with Kokrajhar and recalled the district's transformation over the years.

Stressing the importance of preserving its rich cultural heritage, he called for collective efforts to safeguard the region's traditions and identity for future generations.

National Best Teacher Award recipient Gautam Dev Sharma, who attended the programme as a resource person, traced the administrative evolution of Kokrajhar.

He noted that the area was originally part of the undivided Goalpara district before becoming a civil subdivision in 1957 and was subsequently upgraded to a full-fledged district on July 1, 1983.

He described Kokrajhar as a unique region where people from diverse communities, cultures and linguistic backgrounds have coexisted harmoniously. Resource person Anjalee Basumatary spoke on the historical evolution of the district and discussed various theories regarding the origin of the name "Kokrajhar."

She also highlighted the contributions of social reformer Rupnath Brahma, describing his legacy as a continuing source of inspiration for future generations.

The programme concluded with a vote of thanks delivered by Additional District Commissioner Banti Talukdar, who expressed gratitude to the guests, participants and officials for contributing to the successful observance of District Day. Additional District Commissioners Krishan Jyoti Deka, Suprava Roy, Himadri Sekhar Bordoloi and Palash Rajkumar Ahom. Assistant Commissioners and other officers and staff of the district administration were also present.

## APDCL announces morning power shutdown in Diphu till July 30

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, July 1:** Residents of Diphu and adjoining areas will experience scheduled power interruptions every morning from July 2 to July 30 as the Assam Power Distribution Company Limited (APDCL) undertakes infrastructure upgradation works.

According to a press release issued by the Information and Public Relations Department (IPRD), Karbi Anglong, APDCL's Diphu Electrical Sub-Division-1 will enforce a planned power shutdown daily from 4 am to 8 am during the period.

The scheduled outage will affect consumers in Diphu Town, Matipung, Doldoli and Dhansiri.

The temporary shutdown is required to facilitate the construction and stringing of a new 11 KV Covered Conductor (MVCC) line aimed at strengthening the local power distribution network.

APDCL has appealed to consumers in the affected areas to bear with the temporary inconvenience and extend their cooperation, stating that the project will help improve the reliability and efficiency of electricity supply in the region.

## Karbi literary stalwart Rev Harsing Engti passes away at 85

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, July 1:** Rev. Harsing Engti, one of Karbi Anglong's most revered literary and cultural figures and the composer of the iconic Karbi Cultural Society (KCS) anthem Kardom Deng' tha O Karbi An, passed away at his residence at Inglongcherop in Diphu in the early hours of Wednesday.

He was 85. Rev Engti, who had been suffering from diabetes-related health complications, breathed his last at around 12.25 am, leaving behind a rich legacy in the fields of Karbi language, literature, culture and Christian theology.

A member of Immanuel Baptist Church, Mentila, Rev Engti played a pioneering role in the revival of Karbi cultural activities and the early years of the Karbi Youth Festival during the 1970s.

He composed the KCS anthem in 1972 during the Roman Script movement. The song was later adopted as the official anthem of the Karbi Cultural Society and has since become an enduring symbol of Karbi identity and unity.

Apart from his cultural contributions, Rev Engti was a playwright, lyricist, composer of protest songs,

football player, student leader and theologian.

He became the first Karbi Baptist to earn a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Serampore College, West Bengal, in 1981.

Among his most significant contributions to the Christian community was the translation of the New Testament into the Karbi language, a project completed over five years at the NKBA Mission Centre in Manja.

Born in Mon (Mang) Timung village near Howraghat, Rev Engti overcame considerable hardships to pursue his education and went on to become a founding member of both the Karbi Cultural Society and the Karbi Youth Festival.

He also played an instrumental role in reviving the Karbi Students' Association. In recognition of his lifelong service, he was honoured with the Chief Executive Member's Lifetime Achievement Award during the 72nd Foundation Day of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council in June 2023.

His death has prompted an outpouring of grief across Karbi Anglong, with political leaders, cultural organisations and members of the public paying tribute to his immense contributions.

## Unidentified bodies at TMCH

**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, July 1:** Two destitute men who had been undergoing treatment at Tezpur Medical College Hospital (TMCH) after being found in an ailing condition near the hospital premises died on Tuesday night, police said.

According to local residents, the two had been living without permanent shelter and were found lying ill by the roadside near the hospital five days ago. Police personnel deployed at the hospital admitted them to TMCH for treatment, but both succumbed despite medical care. Police said one of the deceased is believed to be around 38 years old and had been taking shelter at a roadside shed in the locality. His identity has not yet been established.

## Two youths killed in Puranigudam road mishap; CCTV links crash to alleged assault

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, July 1:** Two youths were killed in a tragic road accident on National Highway at Kenyapatti under Puranigudam Police Outpost late on Tuesday night, with police also investigating an alleged assault that reportedly preceded the fatal collision.

The deceased have been identified as Rishikesh Bora and Bikash Mudoi, both residents of Karhali-gang village.

According to police and local sources, the two were returning home on a scooter when it collided head-on with a dumper truck coming from the opposite direction.

Rishikesh Bora, who was riding the scooter, died on the spot, while the vehicle was completely damaged in the impact.

Bikash Mudoi, who was riding pillion, sustained critical injuries and died while being taken to hospital.

Police reached the spot soon after the accident and sent the bodies to Nagaon Medical College and Hospital for post-mortem examination.

Investigators said the accident was allegedly preceded by an incident of moral policing involving the two deceased and another youth, Pal Saikia. According to reports, the three had travelled to Garhmur on a scooter to assist a friend when they were allegedly intercepted and assaulted by a group of unidentified

persons. While Pal Saikia reportedly managed to escape on foot, Bora and Mudoi fled the scene on their scooter.

Police suspect the fatal accident occurred while the two were attempting to escape from the alleged attackers.

The alleged assault and the subsequent events were captured on CCTV cameras installed at several commercial establishments in Garhmur.

## Emotional farewell marks retirement of Hawaipur School principal after 37 years

**HT Correspondent**

**KHERONI, July 1:** An emotional farewell was accorded to Khemanand Ghimire, Headmaster and Principal of Hawaipur High and Higher Secondary School in West Karbi Anglong, as he retired after serving the institution for 37 years.

Students, teachers, former students, well-wishers and local residents gathered in large numbers at the school to bid farewell to the veteran educator, whose long association with the institution has left a lasting impact on generations of students.

Speakers at the farewell programme lauded Ghimire's dedication to education, administrative abilities, compassionate nature and commitment to social service. They recalled his role in shaping the academic environment of the school and mentoring countless students over nearly four decades.

Colleagues described him as a dedicated teacher and administrator whose leadership and affection had earned him the respect and admiration of the entire community.

Following the formal programme, students, teachers and local residents organised a procession to honour the retiring principal. In a rare gesture of respect, the gathering accompanied Ghimire from the school campus to his residence, located around two kilometres away.

Members of the local community expressed confidence that Ghimire would continue to contribute to the region through his experience and guidance in educational and social initiatives even after retirement.

The programme concluded with participants wishing him good health, happiness and a fulfilling retired life.

## One held after attempted theft at Hojai temple

**HT Correspondent**

**HOJAI, July 1:** A man was apprehended by local residents and handed over to police following an attempted theft at Bishnu Temple in Bishnupally in the early hours of Tuesday.

According to police and local sources, the incident occurred at around 3 am when a group of four persons allegedly entered the temple premises with the intention of stealing batteries, a water motor and iron materials.

Alerted by the activity, nearby residents chased the suspects, managing to apprehend one of them, identified as Nazir Uddin, while the remaining three fled the scene.

Police took Nazir Uddin into custody and launched an investigation into the incident.

During preliminary questioning, the accused allegedly claimed that stolen items had been sold to a trader identified as Dabkar Kuddich.

Police said the claim is being verified as part of the investigation.

Residents alleged that thefts at temples and namghars in Hojai district have increased in recent months. They claimed that groups involved in such crimes often hire e-rickshaws from the railway station to transport themselves and the stolen property.

Gold medal-winning specialist dedicates National Doctors' Day to patients, urges greater awareness of neurological disorders

## Tezpur neurosurgeon marks Doctors' Day with 173 free consultations

**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, July 1:** While doctors across the country marked National Doctors' Day with celebrations and felicitations, a young neurosurgeon in Tezpur chose to observe the occasion by offering free consultations to 173 patients suffering from neurological disorders.

Dr Angirash Bhattacharyya, a Tezpur-born neurosurgeon and gold medalist in the Master of Chirurgery (MCh) examination in Neurosurgery from Gauhati Medical College, conducted the free consultation camp at Nemcare Hospital on Wednesday.

The day's programme began with Dr. Bhattacharyya presenting greeting cards to nurses and



healthcare workers, followed by an awareness meeting attended by patients, hospital staff and guests.

Hospital Director Dr Satyaprasad Deka, along with

media persons Deep Kumar Kalita and Pankaj Baruah, lauded the initiative and highlighted the importance of compassionate healthcare.

Explaining his decision to spend

the day with patients, Dr Bhattacharyya said the initiative was intended to honour the trust that patients place in doctors.

He also sought to dispel a common misconception that neurosurgery is limited to brain tumour operations, explaining that neurology and neurosurgery are distinct medical specialties requiring different approaches to diagnosis and treatment.

Recalling that patients with brain and spinal disorders from Tezpur earlier had to travel outside the town for specialised treatment, he said bringing advanced neurosurgical care closer to home was his way of giving back to the community.

During interactions with the

media, Dr Bhattacharyya expressed concern over the increasing number of neurological cases, attributing the trend largely to a lack of public awareness.

He noted that many people tend to ignore persistent pain or mistake symptoms for common ailments such as gastric problems, often relying on over-the-counter painkillers. By the time they seek medical attention, he said, their conditions become more complicated and expensive to treat.

Representatives of several pharmaceutical companies felicitated Dr Bhattacharyya on the occasion by presenting him with a gamosa, phulam japi, xorai, floral garlands and mementoes in recognition of his service.



# Small modular reactors: Promise, progress and risks in the global energy transition

By: Rajib K Mishra

For countries such as India, where electricity demand continues to rise, SMRs offer intriguing possibilities but also significant uncertainties. The technology's future will depend not on its theoretical promise, but on whether governments and industry can demonstrate that it can be deployed safely, affordably and at scale.

As countries pursue ambitious decarbonisation goals while seeking reliable electricity supplies, Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) have emerged as one of the most discussed technologies in the global energy landscape. Promoted as a cleaner and more flexible alternative to conventional nuclear power plants, SMRs are increasingly being viewed as a potential complement to renewable energy systems. Yet despite growing policy enthusiasm and a long list of announced projects, commercial deployment remains limited, highlighting the importance of assessing both their promise and their risks.

SMRs are generally defined as nuclear reactors with a capacity of up to 300 MW per unit. Unlike conventional nuclear plants, which are typically built as large, site-specific projects, SMRs are designed for factory-based manufacturing and modular deployment. Their smaller size allows capacity to be added incrementally, reducing up-front capital requirements and potentially shortening construction timelines. Advocates argue that this approach could make nuclear energy more accessible and financially manageable, particularly for countries with moderate demand growth or constrained fiscal resources.

The growing interest in SMRs is closely linked to the changing structure of electricity systems. Rapid expansion of solar power has created a familiar challenge in many countries: abundant electricity during daylight hours but shortages during evening peak demand. Wind power, while valuable, remains variable. In this context, SMRs offer a source of firm, low-carbon electricity capable of operating around the clock and supporting grid stability when renewable generation is unavailable. Their role is therefore not to replace renewable energy but to complement it by providing reliable power when needed.

SMRs are also being explored as a tool for industrial decarbonisation and the repurposing of retiring coal-fired power plants. Many coal sites already possess transmission connectivity, cooling infrastructure and skilled workforces, making them attractive locations for future deployment. Beyond electricity generation, several advanced SMR designs can provide industrial process heat, district heating and hydrogen production, broadening their potential contribution to energy-transition strategies.

Technologically, SMRs encompass several reactor families. The most advanced are light-water reactors, based on technologies already used in conventional nuclear plants and therefore more familiar to regulators. Countries including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, China and South Korea are pursuing such designs. Other concepts include high-temperature gas-cooled reactors, which are well-suited for industrial heat applications, and fast reactors that promise improved fuel efficiency and waste reduction but remain further from commercial maturity. A niche category of floating reactors has also emerged, led by Russia's pioneering efforts.

However, the gap between ambition and reality remains striking. As of the end of 2025, only two SMR projects worldwide are operating commercially for electricity generation. The first is Russia's Akademik Lomonosov, a floating nuclear power plant located in the Arctic town of Pevek. Equipped with two small pressurised-water reactors producing about 70 MW of electricity, it has been supplying power and district heating since 2020. The project demonstrated that nuclear generation can be deployed in remote regions, but it also highlighted challenges related to marine safety, security and emergency response.

The second operational project is China's HTR-PM at Shidao Bay. This high-temperature gas-cooled reactor, producing approximately 210 MW of electricity, entered commercial operation in 2023. It represents the world's first grid-connected advanced SMR using non-light-water technology and is widely regarded as an important milestone for future industrial heat and hydrogen applications.

Beyond these two examples, most SMR projects remain under construction or in various stages of licensing and financing. China's ACP100, also known as Linglong One, is under construction and expected to become the first commercial land-based light-water SMR. Argentina's CAREM project has faced delays, while leading projects in North America and Europe continue to navigate regulatory approvals, financing requirements and supply-chain development. This limited deployment experience underscores the central challenge facing SMRs: while the technology is technically credible, its commercial viability remains largely unproven.

The most significant risk is economic. Although SMRs are smaller than conventional reactors, they remain capital-intensive projects. First-of-a-kind deployments have frequently experienced cost overruns and schedule delays, eroding the anticipated advantages of modular construction. Until multiple units are manufactured and deployed at scale, it remains uncertain whether the promised cost reductions can be achieved.

Regulatory uncertainty presents another major obstacle. Nuclear licensing is inherently rigorous and often time-consuming. Because regulatory frameworks differ across countries, reactor vendors frequently face repeated design reviews and approval processes, increasing costs and delaying deployment. For many developers, obtaining regulatory certainty remains as important as overcoming technical challenges.

Fuel supply is another area of concern. Several advanced SMR designs depend on specialised fuels such as High-Assay Low-Enriched Uranium (HALEU), for which global production capacity remains limited. Supply chains for nuclear-grade components and specialised manufacturing are also still developing, creating potential bottlenecks for future expansion.

Operational risks should not be overlooked. Unlike conventional nuclear plants, which benefit from decades of operating experience, many SMR technologies have little or no commercial track record. Questions remain regarding long-term reliability, maintenance costs and the ability of some



designs to operate flexibly in renewable-dominated power systems.

Safety and security considerations continue to be central to the debate. While modern SMRs incorporate advanced passive safety features intended to reduce accident risks, nuclear energy remains a technology where low-probability events can have significant consequences. Cybersecurity, physical protection and nuclear safeguards become particularly important if large numbers of small reactors are eventually deployed across multiple locations. Waste management also remains unresolved. Although some advanced designs promise improved fuel utilisation and reduced waste generation, all reactors produce radioactive waste requiring long-term management and disposal.

For India, the SMR story is one of strategic preparation rather than deployment. The country does not yet have an operational SMR project, but recent policy initiatives, including the Nuclear Energy Mission, indicate growing interest in the technology as part of India's long-term energy transition.

India's position is strengthened by its extensive

designs to operate flexibly in renewable-dominated power systems.

Safety and security considerations continue to be central to the debate. While modern SMRs incorporate advanced passive safety features intended to reduce accident risks, nuclear energy remains a technology where low-probability events can have significant consequences. Cybersecurity, physical protection and nuclear safeguards become particularly important if large numbers of small reactors are eventually deployed across multiple locations. Waste management also remains unresolved. Although some advanced designs promise improved fuel utilisation and reduced waste generation, all reactors produce radioactive waste requiring long-term management and disposal.

For India, the SMR story is one of strategic preparation rather than deployment. The country does not yet have an operational SMR project, but recent policy initiatives, including the Nuclear Energy Mission, indicate growing interest in the technology as part of India's long-term energy transition.

India's position is strengthened by its extensive

nuclear ecosystem. Institutions such as NPCIL, BARC and AERB provide capabilities across reactor design, fuel-cycle management, regulation and operations. This institutional depth gives India advantages that many aspiring SMR countries do not possess. Rising electricity demand, increasing renewable penetration, future coal retirements and growing land and transmission constraints all point towards the need for reliable low-carbon capacity. SMRs could potentially serve industrial clusters, support coal-site repowering and provide firm power in regions where grid flexibility becomes increasingly valuable.

India's private sector is also better prepared for SMR deployment than is often recognised. Over the past two decades, Indian companies have developed significant capabilities in heavy engineering, precision manufacturing, modular fabrication, construction, instrumentation and large-scale power project execution. Several domestic firms already participate in nuclear supply chains through the manufacture of forgings, pressure vessels, turbines, electrical equipment and specialised industrial components. As SMRs move towards commercial deployment, these capabilities can support reactor manufacturing, balance-of-plant systems, modular assembly and civil works under a government-led framework. This industrial preparedness not only strengthens India's prospects for domestic deployment but could also position the country as a competitive supplier of components and engineering services to the emerging global SMR market.

Nevertheless, SMRs are unlikely to follow a fully privatised path in India. Nuclear power remains a strategic sector under government control, and the financial, liability and safety risks associated with nuclear projects make purely private ownership improbable. A more realistic model is state-led deployment supported by private participation in manufacturing, construction, supply chains and long-term industrial offtake arrangements.

The global experience to date offers a clear lesson. SMRs should be viewed neither as a silver bullet nor as an immediate solution to power shortages. Their greatest potential lies in providing firm, low-carbon electricity, industrial heat and long-term system reliability in increasingly complex energy systems. Whether they become a major component of future energy transitions will depend not on the number of announced designs, but on the ability of governments and industry to demonstrate safe, affordable and repeatable deployment at commercial scale. For India, that journey is only beginning, but the foundations technical, institutional and industrial, are already taking shape. (Courtesy: The Pioneer)

## Delayed monsoon, extreme heat, data centres and India's future

By: Vishal

This year, the monsoon has been delayed in India, and extreme heat has reached risky levels in many parts of the country even before its arrival. This has once again underscored how climate change is impacting our lives and livelihoods at a national level. While its impact on farmers and water sources has been documented from time to time, recent research points to an important and futuristic area: building digital infrastructure around the country's AI potential.

**Extreme Heat Challenges and India's AI Ambitions**

India is eager and committed to become a hub for artificial intelligence to ensure the country's progress and future. However, one significant challenge facing this is extreme heat.

In the modern digital age, data centers are playing the role of warehouses. In the context of India, cloud computing, AI applications, online banking, streaming services, and government platforms are spreading rapidly across the country. Latest data shows that India received US\$7 billion in foreign investment in data centers in 2025. This makes it abundantly clear that the demand for AI infrastructure and digital services is growing day by day. Despite this, new research points to the fact that India's AI ambitions are clearly in conflict with climate realities.

According to a recent report by the Cross Dependency Initiative (XDI), the threats posed by climate change, particularly the rise in extreme heat, can significantly result in the performance and reliability of data centers. The report studied thousands of planned data centers worldwide, found that South Asia faces the most severe climate-related challenges across the globe.

India occupies a particularly vulnerable position. XDI's research indicates that 12% of planned data centers in India are already in a challenging situation and are classified as high risk. The average climate risk for Indian data centers is projected to increase by 269 percent under high emissions scenarios by the end of the century.

"The question is no longer simply where the next generation of digital infrastructure gets built, but whether those assets can remain operational, insurable and economically resilient over their intended life," said Dr Karl Mallon, Founder and Head of Science and Technology at XDI. While recurring cyclones and floods already pose significant threats, extreme heat has emerged as an equally significant threat, posing even greater operational challenges.

Unlike climatic events like storms and floods that affect India, extreme heat doesn't directly damage a data center building. Instead, it harms the digital activities on which even the digital economy has become dependent today. Let's understand this with an example: Servers generate a large amount of data. To function uninterrupted, they need continuous cooling. If the ambient temperature exceeds a particular

standard or the cooling system designed to cool them fails, it can lead to obvious issues like overheating, and poor performance.

If we directly quote a part of the XDI report, this important fact emerges, "India among the countries with some of the highest projected operational disruption risks from extreme heat globally. The report notes that more than 75 percent of analyzed assets in countries including India, Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia face elevated heat-related operational risks, with those risks expected to intensify rapidly over time."

India has experienced repeated and prolonged heat waves in recent years. Temperatures in many urban areas have reached their highest levels, with some regions confronting temperatures exceeding 45 degrees Celsius. This is why scientists have again and again reminded that climate change is increasing both its impact and duration, contributing to the current trend of extreme heat events.

Roxy Mathew Koll, climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, says, "Heatwaves in India are becoming longer, more frequent and more intense because of climate change. Any infrastructure designed for

standard or the cooling system designed to cool them fails, it can lead to obvious issues like overheating, and poor performance.

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**Climate Risk Must Shape India's Digital Future**

Another important and concerning aspect is that as data centers do not operate in isolation, they are dependent on existing electricity supplies, water availability, telecommunication networks, as well as transport-related infrastructure and global supply chains. According to the XDI research report, "Indirect risks—such as disruptions to surrounding infrastructure and supply chains—are included, productivity losses can become ten times greater than estimates based solely on direct physical damage."

This finding is more vital for India because as heat waves escalate, energy consumption also surges accordingly, putting extra pressure on grids and leading to local energy shortages. Water scarcity is already a key issue in many cities, which could significantly affect cooling operations. "Climate resilience should now be treated as a strategic infrastructure consideration alongside power availability, connectivity and land access," the XDI report noted.

However, there is a positive side to this. The report also highlights that these future risks are not certain. If resilient design standards are followed and location selection is carefully considered, adaptive investments can significantly mitigate climate risks even before construction begins. Combining cutting-edge cooling technologies with renewable energy, combined with a variety of data center locations, can significantly mitigate the situation.

"Future risk is not fixed. Decisions made today about site selection, engineering standards and resilience investment may materially influence future performance, insurability and operational continuity," Dr Karl Mallon said.

India's digital future will heavily depend how efficiently it integrates climate concerns into infra planning. Indian aspiration to become an AI powerhouse cannot be separated from the realities of a warming world. India's digital infrastructure will depend heavily on its integration with climate action. If India really aspires to become an AI powerhouse, it cannot ignore rising temperatures. It's important to add that political will—will play a key role in addressing all of this. As Christiana Figueres said:

"We already have the technologies and solutions needed to address climate change. What we need is urgency and political will." (Youth Ki Awaaz)

## Ground-level ozone is Delhi's next big Environmental crisis

By: Lalit Garg

India's capital, Delhi, has long been battling the grave menace of air pollution. Every winter, a thick blanket of smog, toxic air, and suffocating atmospheric conditions become a matter of national concern. Until now, public discourse on this crisis has largely revolved around PM2.5, PM10, stubble burning, and vehicular emissions. However, a new and even more insidious threat is rapidly emerging—ground-level ozone pollution. A recent report by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has revealed that not only Delhi-NCR but also cities such as Jaipur, Chandigarh, and Ahmedabad are increasingly falling into the grip of ozone pollution. Unlike visible smog, ozone pollution is invisible, yet its effects gradually undermine human health, agriculture, and the environment. Ironically, even such a critical issue is often reduced to political blame games. At times, farmers are held solely responsible because of stubble burning; at others, vehicles become the exclusive target. The truth, however, is far more complex. If we genuinely seek to address the root of the problem, we must critically reassess unplanned urbanisation, unchecked industrialisation, current patterns of energy consumption, and the prevailing model of development.

Today, Delhi is not merely the nation's capital; it has also become one of India's largest pollution hotspots. During summer, rising temperatures, intense sunlight, and chemical reactions between nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds emitted by vehicles and industries lead to the formation of ground-level ozone. This is fundamentally different from the ozone layer high in the stratosphere, which shields the Earth from harmful ultraviolet radiation. Ground-level ozone is a toxic gas that reduces lung function, aggravates asthma, irritates the eyes, and increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases. Across Delhi-NCR, an increasing number of people are suffering from breathing difficulties, allergies, and respiratory illnesses, with ozone pollution playing an increasingly significant role.

The Delhi Government has undertaken several commendable initiatives to curb pollution. Incentives for electric vehicles, a comprehensive EV policy, expansion of public transportation, development of charging infrastructure, and the phased withdrawal of highly polluting vehicles are all positive steps. If effectively implemented, these measures could bring meaningful improvements in air quality over the coming years. However, vehicle policies alone cannot solve the crisis. The deeper challenge lies in unplanned urbanisation. Over the past two decades, vast stretches of agricultural land, ponds, and green spaces in Delhi and its surrounding regions have been transformed into sprawling concrete landscapes. This has severely disrupted the ecological balance. Areas where rainwater once naturally percolated into the soil are now covered with cement and asphalt. Traditional water bodies have disappeared, tree cover has declined, and urban temperatures have risen significantly. Consequently, cities now remain several degrees warmer than neighbouring rural areas—a phenomenon that accelerates the formation of ground-level ozone.

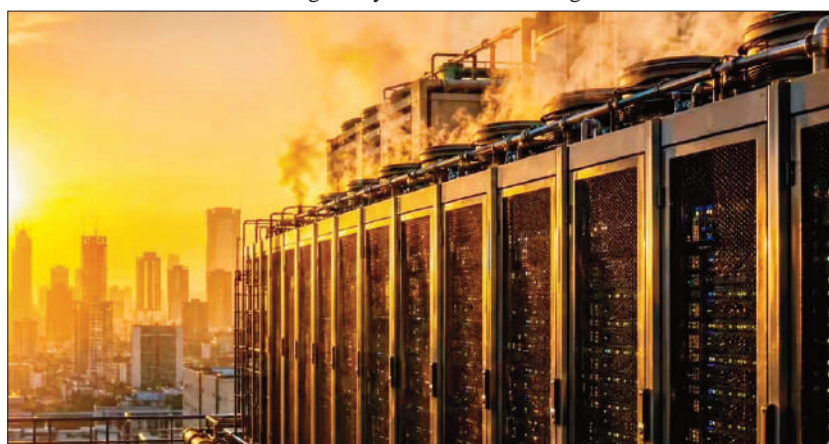
Urban expansion is often celebrated as a symbol of progress, yet this development has come at the expense of nature. Cities demand more roads, electricity, housing, and industries. To meet these needs, forests are cleared, farmland disappears, and water bodies are destroyed. As a result, pollution is no longer confined to

the air; it has also contaminated water resources, degraded soil quality, and threatened biodiversity. Such a trajectory of development ultimately works against human well-being. The number of private vehicles in Delhi continues to rise. Public transportation, despite significant improvements, has yet to become efficient and convenient enough to persuade large numbers of people to abandon private vehicles. Promoting electric mobility is undoubtedly welcome, but one crucial question remains: if the electricity powering these vehicles is generated primarily from coal-fired thermal power plants, pollution is merely shifted from city streets to power generation sites. Therefore, the transition to electric mobility must be accompanied by a simultaneous expansion of renewable energy, particularly solar power, along with investments in sustainable public transport.

Ozone pollution is not merely a public health issue; it also poses a serious threat to agriculture. Scientific studies have shown that ozone interferes with photosynthesis, thereby reducing crop productivity. At a time when farmers are already struggling with climate change, erratic monsoons, and rising temperatures, ozone pollution could further intensify the agricultural crisis. India's National Clean Air Programme has established ambitious targets for improving air quality in numerous cities. However, the time has come to broaden its scope. Instead of focusing exclusively on particulate matter, equal attention must be given to secondary pollutants such as ozone through enhanced monitoring, scientific research, and targeted mitigation strategies. Air quality monitoring systems must become more comprehensive, technologically advanced, and transparent.

Citizens also have a vital role to play. Practices such as open burning of waste, construction dust, burning of biomass and plastic, and improper disposal of industrial waste must be eliminated. Greater use of public transport, cycling, and walking should be actively encouraged. Large-scale afforestation, expansion of urban green belts, and restoration of traditional water bodies must become integral components of pollution-control strategies. Air pollution is not merely an environmental challenge; it is also an economic and social crisis. Rising pollution-related illnesses place enormous pressure on healthcare systems, reduce workforce productivity, and inflict billions in economic losses. Most alarming of all is its impact on children and young people, whose health and future are increasingly at risk. Unless decisive action is taken today, future generations will bear an even heavier burden.

The initiatives undertaken by the Delhi Government deserve appreciation and offer hope for meaningful progress. Yet lasting success will require coordinated efforts involving the Union Government, state governments, local authorities, industry, scientists, and civil society. Pollution cannot be attributed to a single government, a single season, or a single source. It is the cumulative outcome of our development model, our lifestyle choices, and our relationship with the environment. The need of the hour is not political blame but visionary policymaking and collective responsibility. If we truly aspire to breathe clean air, we must move beyond pollution-control measures alone and embrace a new model of development that is in harmony with nature. Otherwise, invisible pollutants such as ground-level ozone will continue to silently poison our cities, turning the very model of modern development into one of the greatest threats to human civilization.



# Ship runs aground in Strait of Hormuz, Iranian state TV reports

**DUBAI, July 1:** A ship ran aground in the Strait of Hormuz while using a route not approved by Iran, state television in Tehran reported Wednesday. The report identified the affected vessel as a foreign container ship, but offered no other immediate details.

The report appeared aimed at underlining Tehran's claims to control the strait, which has long been considered by the world as an international waterway and saw a fifth of all oil and natural gas pass through it in peacetime.

Iran has used its ability to choke off the narrow waterway as a key source of leverage since the war began, disrupting global markets for energy and other critical goods.

The report also came as US Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, US President Donald Trump's son-in-law, were in Doha, Qatar, for talks over reaching a permanent end to the Iran war.

Technical talks between diplomats began Wednesday in Qatar, said two regional officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door discussions.

Those discussions see negotiators aiming to nail down specifics to pave the way for top leaders to seal an agreement, though the differences over the

strait and Lebanon still loom large.

Iran offered no immediate acknowledgment of the negotiations starting.

**The Strait of Hormuz is a key sticking point in talks**

Iran and the United States agreed as part of an interim deal to allow ships to pass uncharged for 60 days, but Tehran insisted it must control the routes of the vessels and later charge fees for passage, upending decades of practice in the waterway.

The US and many Gulf Arab states say they won't agree to the charges. An effort by Oman and a UN agency to launch a new route near Oman's shore sparked attacks across the Mideast over last weekend, highlighting the tensions still gripping the Mideast.

Iranian state TV said the ship "ran aground with its cargo because of shallow waters along the route it had chosen and was unable to continue sailing." It said shippers needed to follow the instructions of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in the strait.

The Guard's navy "has repeatedly warned captains, shipowners and officials of shipping companies around the world that any entry or exit through routes other than the Route of Authority"



in the Persian Gulf could lead to irreparable incidents," it said.

The report did not mention the two ships Iran attacked in recent days for daring to head out through the strait without Tehran's permission, including one that was carrying crude oil from Qatar.

**US negotiators are in Qatar and Iranians are expected**

Witkoff and Kushner arrived in Qatar on Tuesday ahead of talks with Qatar mediating. While Iran has insisted it planned no meetings with the Americans, their comments left open the possibility of so-called "indirect negotiations," in which the two nations pass messages through Qatari officials. That has happened multiple times during

negotiations in the second Trump administration.

Qatar early Wednesday morning acknowledged a meeting between the Americans and its foreign minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. A readout from Qatar's Foreign Ministry said the men talked about the interim deal "along with the efforts aimed at promoting security and stability in the region through dialogue and diplomacy."

Lebanon also was discussed, another key point in a final deal as Iran has been insisted that all fighting between the Iranian-backed militia Hezbollah and Israeli military forces end.

Iran also has called for Israel to give up the land it occupies in southern Lebanon now. Israel insists it must hold the territory and have a free hand to attack Hezbollah, which has been launching attacks into northern Israel.

Iran did not immediately acknowledge any talks on Wednesday. However, Iranian parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a key negotiator, told Iranian state television overnight that work continues to try to reach a permanent end to the war.

"We are engaged in dialogue, but if they refuse to implement what has been agreed through dialogue, we are prepared for war," Ghalibaf said.

**More ships get out of Strait of Hormuz**

While ship traffic in the strait dropped after this weekend's attacks, more countries say their vessels have gotten out.

Thailand's Foreign Ministry said Tuesday that 10 out of 11 Thai-flagged vessels or vessels chartered by Thai operators have departed the Strait of Hormuz safely. South Korean officials say all but two of the country's 26 vessels that were stranded have left safely.

**Iraq shoots down drone over Baghdad**

Also Wednesday, Iraqi authorities shot down a small drone over Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, where many embassies and government buildings are located, two Iraqi security officials said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly. One of the officials said the drone was unarmed and likely was being used for surveillance. No group immediately claimed the drone as theirs.

After the US and Israel launched their war on Iran in late February, Iranian-backed Iraqi militias launched frequent attacks on US military and diplomatic facilities in Iraq.

The drone being shot down overnight Wednesday was the first security incident in Baghdad since the US and Iran agreed to a ceasefire. (AP)

## Zelensky says Ukraine hits Russian oil refinery for second time in week

**KYIV, July 1:** Ukrainian forces struck Russia's major Ufa oil refinery for the second time in a week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Wednesday.

Almost daily long-range attacks on Russian oil facilities have created a fuel crisis and heaped political pressure on the Kremlin as its all-out invasion of Ukraine stretches into its fifth year.

The Ufa refinery is one of Russia's largest producers of lubricants and is located more than 1,000 kilometers from Ukraine, Zelenskyy said on social media.

Ukraine also struck a plant producing missile components in Russia's Penza region southeast of Moscow, some 500 kilometers from Ukraine, Zelenskyy said.

Russian officials did not confirm the strikes, which could not be independently verified. The Russian Defence Ministry reported intercepting 179 Ukrainian drones over 16 Russian regions, the annexed Crimea and waters of the Azov and the Black Sea.

Penza Gov Oleg Melnichenko said only that downed drone debris damaged a power line and fell on a building under construction.

**Ukraine says drone strikes slow Russian advance**



Ukraine's domestically developed and manufactured drones and missiles have been hammering Russian oil facilities, including refineries, terminals, storage depots and pipeline pumping stations, for months.

Many regions of Russia, one of the world's biggest energy producers, have introduced fuel rationing. Ukraine has developed new weaponry and in recent months has gained an edge, according to Western officials. Its strikes on supply routes behind the front line have robbed the Russian army of momentum on the battlefield, officials and analysts say.

"Russians now have great problems with delivering infantry to the front line and supplying it," Ukrainian Minister of Defence Mykhailo Fedorov said Wednesday.

Ukraine sees growing interest in its military technology

Ukraine has become a provider of military technology sought by countries around the world, especially drones.

With European countries fearing what Moscow's territorial ambitions might lie beyond Ukraine, leaders have described Kyiv as a bulwark against Russian advances.

Ukraine is "becoming a security provider for the whole of Europe," Swedish Minister of Defence Paul

Jonsson said in Kyiv, where he held talks with Fedorov.

Ukraine signed an agreement on Tuesday for Sweden to provide Kyiv with Gripen fighter jets. They will help Ukraine stop Russian aircraft carrying powerful glide bombs, Fedorov said.

Jonsson said European countries want Ukraine to be integrated into Euro-Atlantic defences, although Ukraine's NATO membership has been a contentious issue and likely will be discussed at an alliance summit in Turkey next week.

"The sooner it happens, the better it is for you, the better it is for our security and prosperity as well," Jonsson told a press conference.

Ukraine also wants to join the European Union, though the process could take years. Zelenskyy arrived Wednesday in Ireland, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency.

"Ukraine proves every day that it deserves to be an equal partner of our common European home. And we hope that during Ireland's presidency of the EU Council, we will be able to achieve tangible progress on the path to membership and open all negotiations clusters," Zelenskyy said. (AP)

## President Xi directs PLA to speed up modernisation

**BEIJING, July 1:** President Xi Jinping on Wednesday directed the military to speed up the goal of elevating its capabilities to world-class standards to protect China's sovereignty and development interests.

Xi, who heads the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), the military and the Presidency, made the remarks at a gathering to celebrate the party's 105th founding anniversary, during which he asked the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to accelerate its modernisation process.

He called for efforts to achieve the goals set for the military's 100th anniversary in 2027 and elevate the armed forces' capabilities to world-class standards, which is widely interpreted as matching the standards of the US military in weaponry, equipment and training.

Xi also called for efforts to resolutely safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests, and make greater contributions to safeguarding world peace and development, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

He also spoke of China's "unshakable" commitment to unify Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. Resolving the Taiwan question and realising China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment for the CPC, he said.

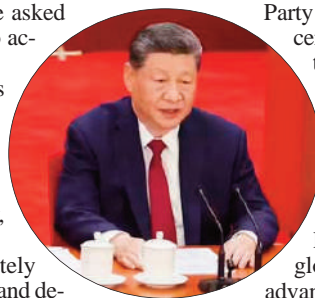
He pledged resolute actions to fight secessionists seeking "Taiwan independence," oppose external interference, and advance national reunification.

China claims Taiwan, a self-governing island, is part of the Chinese mainland and rigorously advocates the 'One China' policy in its relations with other countries.

Xi hailed the 105-year history of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as the "most magnificent epic" of the Chinese nation and urged the party to press ahead to build China into a modern socialist country.

Founded in 1921 against the backdrop of a weak China plagued by foreign humiliation and poverty, the CPC has grown from a small group of just over 50 members into the world's largest governing party with tremendous global influence, he said. Xi also stressed advancing full and rigorous Party self-governance with sustained efforts to win "the tough, protracted and all-out battle against corruption."

Since he took over power in 2012, Xi has made the campaign against corruption his main political plank, which critics say helped him to consolidate his power. The campaign has resulted in disciplinary actions and punishments for over a million officials, including top military officials. (PTI)



## Pakistan, India exchange list of prisoners

**ISLAMABAD, July 1:** India and Pakistan on Wednesday exchanged lists of prisoners, including fishermen, in each other's custody, the Foreign Office here said Wednesday.

According to the Foreign Office (FO), the two countries exchanged through diplomatic channels the lists of prisoners in pursuance of the bilateral Agreement on Consular Access.

Under the Agreement, signed on May 21, 2008, both sides are required to exchange these lists on January 1 and July 1 every year.

"The Government of Pakistan handed over a list of 250 Indian prisoners in Pakistan (52 civilian prisoners and 198 fishermen) to the Indian High Commission in Islamabad," FO said.

"Simultaneously, the Government of India provided a list of 439 Pakistani or believed-to-be-Pakistani prisoners, including 386 civilian prisoners and 53 fishermen, who are in Indian jails," it added. (PTI)

## Forecasters cite 'dangerous' conditions

# Heat scorches Midwest while on its way to the East

**DETROIT, July 1:** Nature's oven was on high Tuesday for millions of people in the Midwest and Great Lakes states as intense heat and humidity baked the regions with no immediate relief before the misery shifts to the eastern US.

The National Weather Service was blunt: Conditions were "dangerous" as the heat index, a combination of air temperature and humidity, exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius) in some areas. It warned about a risk for heat-related illnesses, especially among people without air conditioning.

Detroit's air temperature was in the high 90s, the Weather Service said, and could even reach 100 at some point through Thursday. The city said a dozen recreation centers were open, some until 11 p.m., for people to cool off. Big chunks of Michigan, as well as Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and much of Iowa, were under an extreme heat warning.

The Northeast, including New York City and Boston, will next feel major heat through the Fourth of July holiday. Norristown, Pennsylvania, 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Philadelphia, canceled a Saturday



parade because of the weather.

Philadelphia declared a heat emergency, Wednesday through Saturday, and said 50 cooling centers will operate with extended hours. The city said visitors will find misting tents, water refill stations and medical stations at the free World Cup fan festival at East Fairmount Park.

**When the heat's on, people adjust**

The Chicago History Museum offered free admission to state residents who

wanted a cool space Tuesday. Roads in a few places in Illinois buckled under the heat. When the surface has no room to expand in the heat, it can rise and crack.

At 9:15 a.m., window washer Stephen Mason, 72, was wiping mayflies off glass at a Detroit convenience store. He got an early start to avoid the worst conditions of the day, but it was already 85 (29.4 C).

"It's the only way to beat it. But it's already starting to cook out here," Mason said.

Adam Schubatis, 36, a runner who was shirtless in Detroit's Indian Village neighborhood, said he was cutting his route to 6 miles (9.6 kilometers).

"I know where all the drinking fountains are," he said. "My wife thought I was crazy. She offered to pick me up if I got tired or if there was anything I was doing that wasn't safe."

**A dog's day can be miserable**

In Milwaukee, more than 100 firefighters spent hours controlling a fire at a school in the extreme heat. Fire Chief Aaron Lipski said crews were rotating and shedding their thick coats while they rehydrated.

Overnight low temperatures were in the

70s (21-26.7 C) in many places, which doesn't give the body a chance to cool down naturally, said Dr. Kisha Davis, health officer for Montgomery County, Maryland.

"The heat stress will compound day after day," said Davis, who added that alcohol and soda, popular holiday drinks, are dehydrating.

In Jackson, Mississippi, where the afternoon heat index exceeded 100 F (37.7 C), massive fans tried to keep about 100 dogs cool at an old mattress warehouse that serves as a shelter for Community Animal Rescue and Adoption.

"It's miserable. ... We try to keep everybody hydrated back there. Dogs and people," said kennel manager Raquel Burney.

**Cooling it forward**

George Liller, 64, was a hero in Grosse Pointe Park, a Detroit suburb. He added air conditioning to his home, so he offered a window unit for free on Facebook — extension cord and remote control included.

"It was probably on my porch maybe 15 minutes," Liller said. "That air conditioner was given to me. I thought, Somebody needs it. I know how it feels to be in an old house when it's this hot." (AP)

## Xi touts Chinese wisdom, solutions as model for developing nations

**BEIJING, July 1:** China's leader held up his country's rapid industrialisation as a new pathway for developing nations in a speech Wednesday that projected a growing confidence both at home and on the world stage.

Xi Jinping, now in his 14th year in power, noted that China achieved in a few decades what it took centuries for rich countries to do.

"We advocate the building of a community with a shared future for humanity, providing Chinese wisdom, Chinese solutions and Chinese strength for addressing major issues facing humanity," he said at an event marking the 105th anniversary of the founding of the ruling Communist Party.

China, which has long bristled at US dominance of the international system, has said it doesn't want to replace the global order but change it to better represent the interests of developing countries.

Xi's government went head-to-head with the US

last year and forced President Donald Trump to scale back import tariffs that he had imposed on imports from China.

The world has entered a new period of turbulence and transformation, putting humanity at a crossroads, Xi said. He repeated past pledges to push forward the construction of a new type of international relations to promote world peace and development.

His remarks at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing echoed many of the themes of his speech on the party's 100th anniversary in 2021, including the importance of a strong military and of bringing Taiwan under China's control.

He emphasized the need to elevate the military more quickly to world-class standards, while also upholding the Communist Party's leadership of the armed forces. Several senior generals have been removed in recent years in a corruption purge that is also seen as a way to ensure loyalty in the military. (AP)

## Nepal resumes tea export to India

**KATHMANDU, July 1:** The export of tea from Nepal to India has resumed after a gap of two months following ease of regulations by New Delhi, Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal said Wednesday.

Export of Nepalese tea to India was halted from May 1 after the Indian Tea Board introduced strict regulation on its import. It resumed on Tuesday.

Foreign Minister Khanal informed the National Assembly that the export of Nepalese tea to India has now been eased.

India reviewed its policy regarding import of tea from Nepal, which made it possible, he said, adding that he too had held discussion with high officials regarding the matter during his recent visit to India.

India is the major market for tea produced in Nepal.

"Export of Nepalese tea to India resumed from Tuesday, June 30, after India eased the regulation (to import Nepalese tea)," said Kamal Mainali, president of Nepal Tea Association.

With the easing of the regulation, trucks carrying Nepalese tea consignments have started heading towards India, Mainali said. Nepal had taken diplomatic initiative to ease regulation to export tea to India. Nepal's tea manufacturers had halted their production for about two months after India introduced strict regulation on the import of Nepalese tea.

Now, as against the 100 per cent sampling test, the Indian authorities will take a sample of only 20 per cent tea being exported from Nepal and allow the consignment if it meets the required standard.

As per the new arrangement, samples will be taken from only one out of five trucks for testing purposes before issuing export permits, Mainali said. (PTI)

## Spotless uniforms, stalled cranes: Inside Venezuela's faltering quake rescue effort

**LA GUAIRA (VENEZUELA),**

**July 1:** Angelica Mundrain wants the bodies of her son, niece and nephew to be pulled from the rubble of her flattened beachfront apartment. She has spent every minute of the past six days waiting for the heavy machinery needed to remove the slabs of concrete and twisted metal that trapped them.

So have other Venezuelan earthquake survivors.

They, like others across the northern state of La Guaira, have the same question: Who is in charge? Venezuela's self-described socialist government, which long prided itself on being protector and provider, has been neither when it mattered most, many said.

The powerful back-to-back earthquakes on June 24 have brought to the forefront the inability of the party that has ruled the country for 27 years -- now with acting President Delcy Rodriguez at the helm -- to carry out basic governmental functions.

"We've been abandoned," Mundrain said, sitting in a chair on the street Tuesday in front of what remained of the 11-story building she once called home. "We feel helpless. What we have seen is a lack of organisation, a lack of empathy, a lack of everything."

In the critical 72 hours after residential buildings, food joints, pharmacies, hotels and convenience stores imploded in La Guaira state, Caracas and surrounding regions, the on-the-ground response was primarily focused on directing traffic, with police officers, intelligence agents and members of the armed forces manning intersections.

**Residents take on rescue and recovery amid government failure**

Civilians, mostly alone and some with the help of foreign rescuers, searched for loved ones among piles of rubble. Ambulances were stuck in kilometres-long traffic jams. Hospitals were undersupplied and understaffed. Emergency personnel responded with little to no equipment.

A week later, many residents in coastal communities of La Guaira were attributing most rescues and recoveries to fellow Venezuelans and foreign teams with know-how and equipment like thermal cameras and sound detectors as well as trained dogs. They also pointed out that while civilians and foreign rescuers worked, men and women in Venezuelan uniforms stood watching and state workers took selfies.

Tulane University professor David Smilde, who has studied Venezuela for three decades, said the tragedy has made clear that the stunning Jan. 3 capture of then-President Nicolas Maduro by US forces was not a one-off "in which the Venezuelan state was not able to defend itself at all."

"It also can't do anything like get started with digging people out," he said, adding that it should be a worrying concern for Ro-



driguez, who was sworn in after Maduro was deposed and taken to New York to face drug trafficking charges.

Smilde said the dismal response is linked to the huge numbers of people who have left the public sector because of extremely low pay as well as corruption, such as the many people who are included in the government's payroll but who have not worked in months or years. In a functioning government, he added, people have specific duties to design protocols spelling out procedures in case of emergencies, including earthquakes.

"It's like trying to have a baseball team with three people on the field. You're not sure who's going to be the pitcher, who's going to be catching, and who's going to be outfielder," he said of the government's lack of organization.

**Wealth and government connections mean some get help**

Wealth and government connections also influenced the government's response, with some sites given preferential treatment.

When one collapsed building was teeming with police and military school students, people accurately guessed that officials or politically connected individuals must have lived there. The police officers from a neighbouring state were indeed searching for a captain, while the students and a few members of the national guard were hoping to locate a major general.

A telescopic crane, like the one Mundrain needs for the recovery of her family, was parked for several hours in what was that building's entrance. The relatives of the well-off families who lived in the building were able to rent it. Mundrain cannot.

"I think that if there were someone in a position of authority in each of these apartments, there would be a well-oiled machine working like they have in other residences," Mundrain said pointing to her building.

People's anger over the response has also led to altercations between residents and machine operators. In one instance, when a government-provided excavator tried to leave the site of a flattened public housing building, people blocked traffic to keep it in place and even pulled the operator from the cab.

The government has reported that 1,943 died and more than 10,500 were injured in the 7.2 and 7.5 magnitude earthquakes that struck June 24. Thousands more have been reported missing. (AP)

# The camp at Phayeng was established in 2023 after ethnic violence broke out in the state Manipur: UNLF(P) militants shifted from unauthorised camp

**IMPHAL, July 1:** Several cadres of a proscribed militant outfit, who had been staying at an unauthorised camp in Manipur's Imphal West district, were relocated to a designated camp on Wednesday, officials said.

The 294 battalion of the United National Liberation Front (Pambei) based at Phayeng in Imphal West district has been shifted to a different location, officials said.

The number of cadres relocated was not disclosed officially, though local people claimed that around 100 members of the UNLF lived in that camp. The Meitei outfit is the oldest Imphal valley-based armed group in the state which signed a peace agreement in 2023.

Personnel of state forces, including 10th Indian Reserve Battalion and 5th Manipur Rifles, have also been moved to Phayeng to provide security in the area, they said.

The camp at Phayeng was established in 2023 after ethnic violence



broke out in the state. In 2023 and 2024, Phayeng witnessed intense gunfights with militants from neighbouring Kuki Zo majority Kangpokpi district, leading to multiple deaths and injuries on both sides. The relocation came a day after nearly 80 cadres of the same outfit were also moved from another unauthorised camp at Nongsum in Imphal East district.

However, it was also not declared where the militants were

shifted. The outfit has at least one designated camp at Kakching Khunou in Kakching district.

Meanwhile, several people at Phayeng and nearby areas expressed anxiety over the relocation, stating that the UNLF (P) camp had provided them with a sense of security and confidence.

Locals had previously appealed to the authorities to allow the UNLF(P) camp in Phayeng to ensure adequate security measures in

the area. UNLF(P) signed a peace pact with the Centre in 2023, but their cadres continue to be arrested for unlawful activities, including alleged involvement in extortion and sale of arms.

Ethnic clashes between the Meitei and Kuki communities have left at least 260 people dead and thousands of residents homeless since May 2023.

Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur's population and live mostly in the Imphal Valley, while tribals, which include Nagas and Kukis, constitute 40 per cent and reside mainly in the hill districts.

President's rule was imposed in the state on February 13, 2025, after the BJP-led government headed by N Biren Singh resigned on February 9, following months of ethnic violence. It was revoked on February 4 this year, hours before the formation of a new state government with BJP leader Y Khenchand Singh as the chief minister. (PTI)

# Nagaland to groom 750 MSMEs to become leading entrepreneurs

**HT Correspondent**

**DIMAPUR, July 1:** Nagaland adviser to industries & commerce department Hekani Jakhlu on Wednesday said 750 MSMEs have been identified for a six-month mentoring programme to help them scale up and become leading representatives of Nagaland's entrepreneurial sector, particularly under the Naturally Nagaland initiative, which focuses on promoting Made-in-Nagaland products.

Jakhlu was addressing the Entrepreneur Award 2025 ceremony at the conference hall of the industries & commerce department in Kohima. Nine entrepreneurs of the state were awarded during the programme for their outstanding contributions in various sectors.

She said the state recognition was intended not only to honour their achievements but also to encourage them to expand their businesses at the state, national and global levels.

Highlighting the department's efforts under the RAMP (Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance) programme, Jakhlu said extensive outreach activities,



including village-level workshops, have been conducted to promote entrepreneurship across the state.

Jakhlu urged entrepreneurs to avoid the "founder's trap" where business owners become overly dependent on handling every aspect of operations themselves, making it difficult to step away for training or learning opportunities.

Emphasising that continuous learning is essential for growth, she asked the entrepreneurs to build systems, delegate responsibilities and invest in networking, stating that strong business ecosystems

help enterprises grow. The awardees were Pisala Sangtam, founder of Forever Handmade 21, Kiphire; S Khumo, proprietor of Art & Craft Unit, Noklak; Liying-beni Odyuo, founder of Liying Clothing, Dimapur; Vitoli Achumi, proprietor of Aasuto Enterprise, Dimapur; Imtinson Longchar, founder of Ilando Services, Dimapur; Ajung Yaden and Atem Longkumer, founders of TRIBOLT, Dimapur; Supongtola Aier, proprietor of Zonee Food Products, Dimapur; and Alem Konyak, founder of Beads Jewellery, Mon town.

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**EKLAVYA MODEL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL, HOWRAGHAT**  
Block-Howraghat District - Karbi Anglong State - Assam  
Email: emrs.howraghat@gmail.com

**ENGLISH MEDIUM**

School Estd Year: 2025  
School UDISE+ No:- 18190410306  
No. EMRS/Phuloni/2026-27/01

CBSE Affiliation No:-  
School No:-  
Dated: 23/06/2026

**OFFICE OF THE EMRS PHULONI:- KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM**  
**Short Tendor Notice**

Sealed quotations affixing non-judicial court stamp worth Rs. 8.25 (Rupees Eight and Twenty-Five Paise) only are hereby invited from reputed vendors/ firms/individuals having valid GST registration for managing/running the mess facility as per the food menu/diet chart specified below for the students of EMRS Howraghat, Karbi Anglong for the academic session of 2026-2027. The Quotations will be received up to 3:00 PM on the 9 July 2026 at the O/o the EMRS Howraghat and will be opened on the next day in the presence of the procurement committee and the quotationers. The details are as follows:-

**Food Chart Menu for the students of EMRS.**

Meals & duration	Items to be served	Timings	Maximum Rate Per student/per day
Pre-Breakfast	Milk 100ml, Nuts (Almonds-4 nuts per student), Tea & Biscuit	06:30 AM-07:00AM	Rs. 82.88/-
Breakfast	Fried Rice with G. nuts & potato cubes/Puri/Bread (with Butter/Jam) Lentils (Kabuli, Chana Dal, Rajma), Pickle, Khichri Milk, Boiled Egg, Tea/Juice, Honey, Fruits	08:55 AM 09:30 AM	
Lunch	Rice/Roti, Lentils (Kabuli chana, Chana Dal, Rajma), Mixed Vegetables (Boiled/Fry), Aalo +Green Veg, Onion, Lemon, Green Chilly, Salad, Pickle, Papad	01:40 PM 03:00 PM	
Evening Meal	Biscuits/Jhall murhi/Rusk/Noodles/Cake/Samosa/Kachori/Pakoda with Milk or Red Tea/Coffee	06:00 PM-06:20 PM	
Dinner	Rice/Lentils (Kabuli chana, Chana Dal, Rajma), Mixed Vegetables (Curry/Fry), Soup/ Aalo+ 1 green veg Pickle, green chilly, lemon, Onion, Tomato, Papad, Fish/Chicken/Egg curry/Paneer curry * Fish/Chicken/Egg curry to be served on alternate days. * Paneer curry to be served once a week.	08:00 PM-08:45 PM	

Terms & Conditions:-

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- Copy of GST Registration Certificate and PAN Card must be submitted along with quotation papers.
- The Sealed cover should be superscribed with the name of the firms/individuals.
- Earnest money of Rs. 3000/- should be enclosed in the form of demand draft in favour of Principal, EMRS Phuloni.
- The successful quotationer will have to supply the items within the period of given time failing which the offer will be treated cancelled and the earnest money will be forfeited.
- The earnest money of Rs. 3000/- for unsuccessful quotationer will be refunded.
- The Undersigned does not bind himself to accept the lowest rate or quotations or to assign any reason for accepting or rejection of any quotations.
- Payment of bills against all the items rendered will be done subject to availability/allotment of fund from Govt. under appropriate head of account.
- The successful vendor will be responsible for running the mess in entirety including the periodic refilling/supply of LPG cylinders.
- You can contact the EMRS Howraghat office to request the Tendor form. You can also ask via phone or email how to obtain the form. Email id:- emrs.howraghat@gmail.com

Sd/-  
Principal  
EMRS Howraghat, Karbi Anglong  
Cum  
Member Secretary, EMRS Howraghat & EMRS Phuloni

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**ENGLISH MEDIUM**

School Estd Year: 2025  
School UDISE+ No:- 18190410306  
No. EMRS/Phuloni/2026-27/02

CBSE Affiliation No:-  
School No:-  
Dated: 23/06/2026

**OFFICE OF THE EMRS PHULONI:- KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM**  
**Short Tendor Notice**

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Name of items: Stationary items.

Sl. No.	Name	Frequency	Quantity (per student)	Maximum rate per student
1	Note books A4 size 160 pages Minimum quantity	Yearly	12	Rs. 1975
2	Gel/Ink Pen(Minimum Quantity)	Yearly	10	
3	Pencil Minimum Quantity	Yearly	10	
4	Geomatry Box	Yearly	1	
5	Atlas	Yearly	1	
6	Map for Practice	Monthly as per need	1	
7	Eraser	Yearly	5	
8	Graph Notebook	Yearly	1	
9	Drawing Book	Yearly	1	
10	Water colour/Colour pencil/crayon	Yearly	1	
11	Practical Notebook	Yearly	1	
12	Activity Book	Yearly	1	
13	Scale	Yearly	1	
14	Identity Card	Yearly	1	
15	School diary	Yearly	1	
16	Books	Yearly	1	

Name of items: Uniform

Sl. No.	Name	Frequency	Unit for Boy	Unit for Girls	Maximum rate per student
1	Full Pants.(as per colour scheme	Yearly	2		Rs. 3890 for Boys Maximum Rs. 3580 for Girls Maximum
2	Full sleeve Shirt(as per colour scheme)	Yearly	2		
3	Tie	Yearly	1		
4	Sweater full sleeves	Yearly	1	1	
5	Blazer	Yearly	1	1	
6	Track Suit (House Colour)	Yearly	1	1	
7	House T-Shirt (Sports) (House Colour)	Yearly	1	1	
8	Sports Half pant (as per colour scheme)	Yearly	1	1	
9	Socks (as per colour scheme)	Yearly	3	3	
10	Belt with monogram Buckle	Yearly	1	1	
11	School shoes (Black)	Yearly	1	1	
12	Sports Shoes (White)	Yearly	1	1	
13	Woolen Cap(as per colour scheme)	Yearly	1	1	
14	Kurta (As per colour Scheme)	Yearly		2	
15	Salwar (As per colour Scheme)	Yearly		2	
16	Waist coat/Dupatta (As per colour Scheme)	Yearly		2	
17	House Colour Ribbon	Yearly		2	

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Sd/-  
Principal  
EMRS Howraghat, Karbi Anglong  
Cum  
Member Secretary, EMRS Howraghat & EMRS Phuloni

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**ENGLISH MEDIUM**

School Estd Year: 2025  
School UDISE+ No:- 18190410306  
No. EMRS/Phuloni/2026-27/03

CBSE Affiliation No:-  
School No:-  
Dated: 23/06/2026

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Name of items: Dining Utensils.

Sl. No.	Name	Frequency	Quantity (per student)	Maximum rate per student
1	Stainless plate 5 compartment	Yearly	1	Rs. 380.00
2	Steel glass	Yearly	1	
3	Steel bowl	Yearly	1	
4	Steel spoon	Yearly	1	
5	Plastic Bucket & Mug (for Bathroom use)	Yearly	1	

Name of items: Toilet Items

Sl. No.	Name	Frequency	Quantity (per student)	Maximum rate per student
1	Bathing soap (75 gm) Branded	Monthly (10 month)	2	Rs. 223.00/-per month for per boys student Rs. 283.00/- per month for per girls
2	Washing Soap (100gm) branded	Monthly (10 month)	3	
3	Tooth paste 50gm branded	Monthly (10 month)	1	
4	Tongue cleaner-steel	yearly	1	
5	Tooth brush branded	Monthly (10 month)	1	
6	Shoe Polish branded	Bi Monthly (10 month)	1	
7	Shoe brush	Yearly	1	
8	Hair cutting	Monthly (10 month)	1	
9	Sanitary napkin for girls branded	Monthly (10 month)	30	
10	Hair oil (50ml) branded	Monthly (10 month)	1(girls)	
11	Shampoo 30ml branded	Monthly (10 month)	1 (boys)	
12	Shampoo 1 bottle 50 ml branded	Monthly (10 month)	1(girls)	

Name of items: Bedding Items.

Sl. No.	Name	Frequency	Quantity (per student)	Maximum rate per student
1	Coir mattress (6x3 feet) 3 inch coir and 1 inch foam	On joining (in class VI/through Lateral entry)	1	Rs. 4620.00/-
2	Bed Sheet (Chadar)	Yearly	1	
3	Bed Sheet	Yearly	1	
4	Pillow	Yearly	1	
5	Pillow cover	Yearly	2	
6	Mosquito Net	Yearly	1	
7	School Bag	Yearly	1	

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Name of items: Contingency items.

Sl. No.	Name of items	Quantity	As per Requirement by supply order
1	All Housekeeping Items (Broom, mop, soft broom, wiper, floor duster, Harpic, colin, phenyl etc.		

Name of items: Office & academic stationary items.

Sl. No.	Name of items	Quantity	As per Requirement by supply order
1	All items related to office stationary (Pen, pencil, whitener, fevicol, stapler, pin etc & refill of cartridge of printer and any other items as per requirement in office use		

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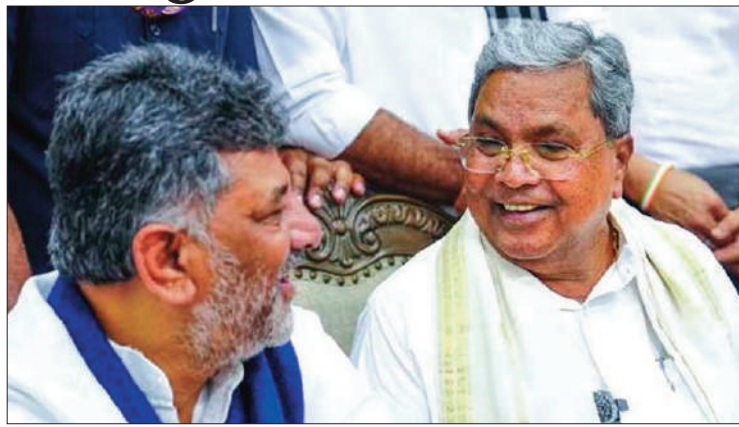
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## BJP slams Congress over Karnataka CM's remarks on linking state's welfare benefits to SIR

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The BJP on Wednesday slammed the Congress after Chief Minister D K Shivakumar said that only voters registered in Karnataka voting the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) would benefit from welfare schemes of the state, alleging that his remarks have exposed the party's "hypocrisy" on the SIR issue. If SIR is illegitimate, as the Congress has alleged, why use it as the gateway to welfare, BJP IT department head Amit Malviya said and claimed that the Congress' objection to the intensive revision of electoral rolls was "not driven by principles but politics".

The reaction came a day after Shivakumar, while urging voters in the state to actively participate in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, said that some states have already stopped extending benefits to people who were not eligible to be on the electoral rolls.

"If a person is no longer a voter



here, why should we continue giving guarantee benefits?... We intend that the benefits should go only to the people of our state," Shivakumar said. "The right to vote is the right to live," he said. Malviya said the Congress "cannot have it both ways", alleging that while Congress leader Rahul Gandhi calls the SIR a "citi-

zenship test" and attacks it as unconstitutional, the Karnataka government is relying on the same process to decide the distribution of welfare schemes.

"The Congress's hypocrisy stands exposed. When the Election Commission conducts the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) to ensure only

eligible citizens are on the electoral roll, Rahul Gandhi calls it a 'citizenship test' and attacks it as unconstitutional," Malviya said in a post on X.

"But in Karnataka, CM D K Shivakumar says the very same SIR electoral roll will determine who gets government schemes, guarantees, pensions and welfare benefits," he added. Malviya alleged that the conflicting stands of Gandhi and the Karnataka chief minister have exposed the Congress and shown that its objection is driven by politics rather than principle.

"So which Congress should India believe? If SIR is illegitimate, why use it as the gateway to welfare? If it is reliable enough to decide who receives taxpayer-funded benefits, why oppose it when the Election Commission uses it to protect the integrity of the electoral roll?"

"Their objection was never about the process. It was about politics," he added. (PTI)

## Congress demands VB G RAM G repeal, says wages 'unjustifiably low'

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** As the VB-G RAM G Act came into effect on Wednesday, the Congress demanded the repeal of the rural employment scheme and that a strengthened MGNREGA be brought back, claiming the wages under the new law are "unjustifiably low".

The opposition party asserted that a just minimum wage for India's workers would be ensured by adopting the 2019 recommendation of the expert committee headed by Dr Anoop Satpathy and accommodating the increase in prices since then. It alleged that the only guarantee the new law offers is that of extreme centralisation and weakening of the bargaining power of rural labour, and demanded that the wage rate be fixed at ₹ 500 per day.

The Centre had stated that the Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, or the VB G RAM G Act, will come into force across the country from July 1, replacing the two-decade-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), introduced by the Congress-led UPA.

Congress general secretary and former rural development minister Jairam Ramesh said the Modi Government has notified the VB-G RAM G and the daily wage rate due to workers under the scheme. "The injustice of the Modi Government's new law aside, the wages due to workers are also unjustifiably low - largely at ₹ 300 per day," he said on X. In the 2024 Lok Sabha campaign, the Congress as part of its Shramik Nyay campaign had guaranteed a ₹ 400 national daily minimum wage to all workers - including for MGNREGA, he pointed out.

"The Expert Committee headed by Dr Anoop Satpathy, set up by the Modi Government, had also recommended a national minimum wage floor at ₹ 375 per day, back in 2019," he said.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development under the Chairmanship of Saptagiri Ulaka has also consistently recommended higher wages for MGNREGA workers, Ramesh said.

Given the "widespread minimum wage protests in industrial hubs like Noida, and at a time when the stagnation of rural wages is widely recognised as a key constraint on our economic growth", this notification is both a "snub to India's workers and an unwise economic policy", Ramesh said.

"A just minimum wage for India's workers would adopt Dr. Satpathy's recommendation and accommodate the increase in prices since then," he asserted.

Congress leader and MP Saptagiri Ulaka said his party has been fighting the VB G RAM G Act from streets to Parliament and will continue to do so.

"We appeal to the government that the VB G RAM G be repealed and a strengthened MGNREGA be brought back," Ulaka said at a press conference here.

MGNREGA was a rights-based, demand-driven employment guarantee scheme which the government has converted into a supply-driven, government-driven scheme under which the Centre will decide which state would get what money



based on the normative allocation that is adopted by the 16th Finance Commission to distribute the single divisible pool of taxes among states, he said. Ulaka, who is the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, said the government is changing the whole nature of the original scheme which is "very unfortunate".

"We will continue to press for our issues. We will continue to fight till MGNREGA is restored," Ulaka said, asserting that the Congress' struggle from streets to Parliament would continue.

The Congress wants the minimum wage rate to be fixed at ₹ 500, he said.

Ulaka said the normative allocation will not work and must be reconsidered.

"It is a very sad day because the Modi government has scrapped the MGNREGA scheme. By abolishing MGNREGA, the government has dealt a blow to the country's poor, as this was a demand-based employment scheme," Ulaka said.

Under the "supply-based model", the Central government allocates funds and approves the labour budget in advance, he said.

Consequently, the state government must align its funds and administrative capacity to ensure the work is executed, Ulaka said.

"Previously, funds under MGNREGA were allocated based on the demand for employment; however, under the VB G RAM G scheme, a fixed budget is provided within which the work must be completed," he pointed out.

Ulaka said a key issue is cost-sharing as under MGNREGA, the central government used to cover nearly 100 per cent of the labor cost, while material costs followed a 60:40 ratio, placing a minimal financial burden on the states.

However, under VB G RAM G, the combined labor and material costs are now subject to a 60:40 ratio, he said.

"If additional work needs to be provided beyond this, the financial burden will fall on the state government," he said.

The Modi government claims that 125 days of employment will be provided under the scheme, but that is not the reality, Ulaka claimed.

"The allocation for Haryana, for example, stands at ₹ 984 crore, of which the state must contribute 40 per cent - amounting to ₹ 393 crore. Despite this expenditure, only 13.78 days of work are currently being generated in Haryana. If this were to be increased to 125 days, Haryana would have to spend an additional ₹ 5,786 crore," he said. (PTI)

## CBI arrests IPS officer on central deputation in ₹ 3 crore bribery case



**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The CBI has arrested a senior IPS officer posted on central deputation in the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS), in connection with an alleged ₹ 3 crore bribery case linked to the agency's probe into a fake drug manufacturing racket, officials said on Wednesday.

Deepak Gahlawat, a 2012-batch IPS officer of Haryana cadre, was serving as BCAS regional director at the time of the alleged offence. He is accused of assuring a Pudukcherry-based businessman a favourable outcome in the CBI probe by using his purported influence over agency officials in return for the bribe, they said.

"Searches have been conducted

at multiple premises linked to the IPS officer and multiple digital devices, hard disks, and documents have been seized," a CBI spokesperson said.

The arrest stems from an FIR registered by the CBI on June 8 against Delhi Police Crime Branch Inspector Pradeep Singh, alleged middleman Rajkumar and businessman N Raja.

Last month, the agency arrested Singh, Rajkumar and five others in a trap operation, recovering ₹ 25 lakh as trap money and another ₹ 90 lakh, besides incriminating documents, the spokesperson said.

"During investigation, it was disclosed that the IPS officer had demanded illegal gratification

claiming that he could exercise his personal influence and obtain relief for private persons in the cases being investigated by CBI in relation to the sale of counterfeit drugs in Pudukcherry," the officer said.

According to officials, Raja was facing a CBI investigation in an alleged fake drug manufacturing case registered earlier this year and got in touch with Singh, who allegedly gave an assurance that he would be able to influence the probe. Singh then arranged a meeting between Raja and Gahlawat at his office in Aerocity, where the IPS officer allegedly demanded ₹ 3 crore, including an upfront payment of ₹ 1.5 crore, in return for a "favourable investigation".

The businessman arranged ₹ 1 crore through a hawala transaction, which was allegedly handed over to Singh, who in turn passed on ₹ 50 lakh to another middleman, Prabhat, who was known to the suspect public servant, officials said.

"Accused Pradeep Kumar Singh kept the remaining ₹ 25 lakh in his office. Thereafter, on June 8, 2026, accused Rajkumar and Pradeep Kumar Singh were apprehended," an official said. (PTI)

## BJP welcomes cut in commercial LPG prices, credits PM Modi's policies

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The BJP on Wednesday welcomed the reduction in commercial LPG prices, saying the decision reflects the Modi government's commitment to protecting citizens' interests despite global uncertainties.

The remarks came after oil marketing companies cut the price of commercial LPG by ₹ 183.50 per 19-kg cylinder, the first reduction this year.

Commercial LPG will now cost ₹ 2,930 per cylinder after touching a record ₹ 3,113 last month as geopolitical tensions pushed up crude oil prices. Alongside, the price of the 5-kg Free Trade LPG (FTL) cylinder is reduced by ₹ 13 to ₹ 808.50.

Prices of domestic 14.2-kg LPG cylinders are left unchanged at ₹ 942.

BJP national spokesperson Syed Shah Nawaz Hussain said that even when the Iran-Israel-US conflict and tensions in the Gulf region disrupted global energy markets, India was largely shielded from a sharp increase in fuel prices because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "prudent policies".

"When the Iran-Israel-America war took place and the entire Gulf region got involved, the Strait of Hormuz was closed. Petrol, diesel and gas prices doubled in many countries. Even then, because of the prime minister's prudent policies, prices in India did not increase significantly," he told PTI Videos. (PTI)

## Ritabrata-led TMC faction to meet EC full bench today



**KOLKATA, July 1:** The Ritabrata Banerjee-led faction of the Trinamool Congress is scheduled to meet the full bench of the Election Commission in New Delhi on Thursday, amid an intensifying battle over the ownership of the party, funds and its twin-flower symbol.

A 10-member delegation of the faction will meet Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and the other election commissioners at noon, leaders of the camp said on Wednesday.

A leader of the camp said the faction would argue that it enjoys the support of a majority of the party's organisational functionaries and elected representatives, and therefore has a rightful claim over the party's name and symbol. The meeting comes days after leaders aligned with Banerjee met officials of the West Bengal CEO's office here and conveyed their position regarding the dispute over the party's symbol.

The internal tussle within the TMC escalated after a large section of its legislators broke ranks with the Mamata Banerjee-led camp following the party's defeat in the West Bengal assembly elections.

The rival faction has since been locked in a bitter contest over control of the party organisation, legislative wing and political identity, with both sides staking claim to being the authentic Trinamool Congress. (PTI)

## Army Chief unveils 'VIJAY' roadmap, aims to build future-ready force to operate in multiple domains

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The Indian Army is a combat-ready, battle-hardened force and the aim is to build a technology-enabled, future-ready army capable of operating in multiple domains, Army Chief General Dhiraj Seth said on Wednesday, as he coined the acronym "VIJAY" to achieve that goal.

The letters in the acronym stand for - 'V' for vigilance, 'I' for innovation, 'J' for jointness and integration, 'A' for Atmanirbharta and 'Y' for 'Yodha first'.

Gen Seth, an accomplished military officer with the rare distinction of heading two operational Army commands along the western front, took charge as the Army chief on Tuesday, succeeding General Upendra Dwivedi, who retired on June 30 after an illustrious career spanning over 40 years.

Speaking to reporters after receiving a guard of honour on the lawns of the South Block on Wednesday, Gen Seth said the Indian Army is a combat-ready and battle-hardened force, which is "always ready to face all challenges in a battlefield".

"To assume charge as the 31st

Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) is a moment of pride and humility for me. I accept this responsibility with deep commitment to the ideals of duty, honour and nation first," he said.

He also offered tribute to the brave soldiers who made the supreme sacrifice for the nation.

"Their courage, commitment to duty and selfless dedication will continue to inspire generations to come," he said. Gen Seth is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla. He was commissioned into the Armoured Corps in December 1986.

Prior to becoming the 31st COAS, he served as the Vice Chief of the Army Staff.

"To meet the challenges of a changing security environment, we must take forward the modernisation of the army with new vigour and firm determination.

"Our aim is to forge a technology-enabled, future-ready army which is powerful in all forms, and capable of operating in multiple domains," the general officer asserted.

In keeping with this vision, Gen Seth said he has identified some



"focus areas" inspired by the 'Decade of Transformation' (2023-2032), a modernisation and restructuring roadmap envisaged by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh for the Indian Army.

"I have put them together in an acronym - 'VIJAY'. 'V' stands for vigilance, 'I' for innovation, 'J' for jointness and integration, 'A' for Atmanirbharta and 'Y' for 'Yodha first'," Gen Seth said. (PTI)

## 'Education can't wait': 6 young voices at the heart of student protest



**NEW DELHI, July 1:** For six student activists sitting on an indefinite hunger strike at Delhi's Jantar Mantar, the protest is not only about the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan but also about what they describe as a deeper crisis in the country's education system -- from paper

leaks and examination uncertainty to rising fees and shrinking public education spaces.

Sitting on a separate stage at the protest venue, away from the main platform, the six students associated with the All India Students' Association (AISA) entered the fourth day of their

indefinite fast on Wednesday.

The students on hunger strike are Neha, AISA All India President and a PhD scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University; Danish, JNUSU Joint Secretary; Manish, AISA Uttar Pradesh President and PhD scholar at Allahabad University; Deepak Kumar Verma, AISA Delhi University Vice President; Hrishikesh, President of Barak Hostel, JNU; and Aameen, former CC member of AUD Students Council and a PhD scholar at Ambedkar University Delhi.

AISA stated that JNUSU Joint Secretary Danish's blood sugar level had dropped to 61 mg/dL, while Aameen and Deepak Kumar Verma were advised by doctors to stop fasting due to health concerns. Nevertheless, the students have chosen to continue their hunger strike.

For Neha, who is pursuing a PhD in the School of Arts and Aesthetics at JNU, the decision to join the hunger

strike came from a belief that students had been fighting these issues long before the current protest.

"Sonam Wangchuk sir was on a hunger strike with two issues: Ladakh and Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation. But our struggle for Pradhan's resignation has not started today. We have been raising these issues since 2021, when he became education minister and the series of paper leaks began," she said.

Neha, who grew up in military cantonments due to her father's service in the Army, told PTI that entering university exposed her to inequalities she had not previously encountered.

"Politics gave words to experiences that we thought were individual to us. It made us realise that many things we considered personal were actually part of a larger system," she said.

She emphasised that today's students are striving to protect opportunities created by previous generations. (PTI)

## Punjab's financial woes forced Mann govt's U-turn on VB-G RAM G: BJP

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** The BJP on Wednesday claimed that the "deteriorating" financial condition and "mounting" debt in Punjab compelled the Bhagwant Mann government to make a policy U-turn and implement the Viksit Bharat for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G), the Centre's rural employment scheme, in the state.

Speaking to reporters at the BJP headquarters here, party national spokesperson Prem Shukla alleged that the Punjab government decided to roll out the scheme after sensing its "imminent defeat" in the assembly polls early next year.

The AAP government had convened a special assembly session in December last year and passed a unanimous resolution opposing the VB-G RAM G Act. However, the state government notified the scheme's implementation on June 26, and it came into force on Wednesday.

Taking a swipe at the AAP, Shukla said, "The government of 'guru dokhi' Bhagwant Mann has done yet another U-turn. Effective today, July 1, 2026, the Bhagwant Mann government has decided to implement the central government's 'Viksit Bharat BBG Ram Ji' scheme."

He claimed that the Mann government had initially opposed the scheme on the instructions from AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal.

"What exactly changed in these six months that a scheme once branded as anti-poor, anti-farmer and anti-Dalit is now being embraced by the Punjab government?" the BJP spokesperson asked.

"It appears that the Bhagwant Singh Mann government has become convinced of its impending defeat in the upcoming Punjab Assembly elections. That is why they have now started praising the central government's scheme," he added.

Shukla alleged that the ruling AAP changed its stand on the VB-G RAM G scheme because the state is drowning in debt.

He said Punjab's total outstanding debt currently stands at ₹ 4.07 lakh crore and is projected to increase to ₹ 4.47 lakh crore by the end of the current financial year. (PTI)

## Plea in SC refers to '₹ 370 biryani' remark at standup comedy show, seeks regulatory framework

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Referring to a controversial "₹ 370 biryani" remark during comedian Pranit More's show in Gurugram, a plea was filed in the Supreme Court on Wednesday seeking direction to formulate a comprehensive regulatory framework for stand-up comedy, podcasts, social media platforms and artificial intelligence generated content.

The plea filed by advocate Vishal Tiwari also mentioned some recent "false" information being spread online that several Indian judges and Union ministers participated in a badminton tournament in London earlier this month at taxpayers' money.

The petition said that misleading material attained extraordinary circulation within a short span of time and generated extensive public commentary, criticism and speculation concerning the functioning, independence and propriety of constitutional institutions, before any official clarification could effectively reach the public domain.

Tiwari in his PIL said that existing legal mechanisms are predominantly

reactive and become operational only after false information has already achieved irreversible virality.

"By the time fact-checks or official clarifications are issued, millions of users may have consumed, shared and relied upon inaccurate information, causing lasting reputational injury and erosion of public trust," the plea said.

"Regardless of whether the statement originated as humour, satire, improvised interaction or entertainment content, its algorithmic amplification transformed an isolated expression into nationwide digital discourse concerning the dignity of women, consent, privacy, public morality and constitutional responsibility," it said.

The petition has sought constitution of an expert committee for enquiry against misleading, degrading and scandalising material circulated on various social media platforms and digital publications as allegedly depicting a foreign badminton event attended by the Chief Justice of India and judges of the top court.

It has also sought constitution of

an independent judicial commission headed by a retired Judge of the apex court to examine dissemination of false and manipulated digital narratives. A Gurugram firm had earlier sacked one of its employees, who recently went viral for making the controversial "₹ 370 biryani" remark during More's show after widespread social media outrage over the incident.

Gurugram-based web developer Himanshu Jangra faced a backlash for his comment, prompting Starvik Design, his employer, to fire him from his job. Vivek Vishwakarma, the founder of the firm, had confirmed in a video posted on X. The controversy began after Jangra during the show recounted a date when he spent ₹ 370 on a plate of chicken biryani. When the woman asked him to drop her home, he sought sexual favours for the money he spent on the biryani, Jangra said.

More was seen laughing at Jangra's comment. Later, both More and Jangra apologised for the incident after facing backlash on social media, with the latter also deactivating his Instagram account. (PTI)

## Bihar govt council seeks financial reports from registered temples, mutts to ensure transparency

**PATNA, July 1:** A Bihar government council, responsible for supervising activities of registered temples and mutts, has sought financial reports of the last one year from around 4,500 such religious establishments, officials said Wednesday.

The decision assumes significance in the backdrop of controversy over the alleged embezzlement of donations received at the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

"To ensure financial transparency, the Bihar State Religious Trust Council has sought the financial reports for the period from April 2025 to May 2026 from around 4,500 registered temples, mutts, dharmasalas and Kabir mutts across the state," BSRTC chairman Ranbir Nandan told PTI.

All these religious establishments will have to submit their financial reports within a month, he said.

The BSRTC will audit the financial records of these religious es-



tablishments, Nandan said. "All registered temples, mutts, dharmasalas and Kabir mutts must furnish details of their income, expenditure, bank balances and deposits in their reports," he said.

They must submit the financial details to the BSRTC every three months, and such compliance will be made mandatory, he added.

"If they fail to submit their financial reports, the BSRTC will be forced to consider reconstituting

the management committees of the non-compliant establishments," the chairman said.

All public temples/mutts, trusts and dharmasalas in Bihar must be registered with the BSRTC, according to the Bihar Hindu Religious Trusts Act, 1950, and they are bound by the council's directives.

According to the latest data compiled by the BSRTC, the registered temples/mutts in the state

own more than 18,456 acres of land.

A large number of unregistered temples and mutts also exist in the state.

Large-scale irregularities have been found where priests of such temples/mutts have been selling and buying immovable assets by claiming ownership, another BSRTC official said.

According to the latest compilation by the state law department, the maximum number of unregistered temples/mutts are in Vaishali at 438, followed by Kaimur Bhabhua (307), West Champaran (273), Bhagalpur (191), Begusarai (185), Saran (154), and Gaya (152).

Around 813 acres of land are owned by 307 unregistered temples/mutts in Kaimur Bhabhua, and 722 acres belong to 100 unregistered public temples and mutts in Khatgaria.

In Banka district, around 332 acres of land belong to 78 unregistered temples and mutts, the official added. (PTI)

## PM Modi greets medics, CAs on Doctors' Day, Chartered Accountants' Day

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday conveyed greetings to doctors and chartered accounts on the occasion of Doctors' Day and Chartered Accountants' Day, and said their tireless efforts have earned the trust and gratitude of countless people.

In separate messages, Modi said as the government works towards building a 'Viksit Bharat', the country's doctors will continue to play a pivotal role in promoting preventive healthcare, advancing medical research, embracing innovation and delivering affordable, accessible healthcare for all.

The prime minister said as the country moves towards becoming a developed nation, efforts of the CAs help create an environment where enterprises can flourish and opportunities can expand for all.

"On Doctors' Day, greetings to our dedicated doctors, whose hard work, compassion and commitment form the backbone of India's healthcare system. Their tireless efforts, often in the most challenging circumstances, have earned the trust and gratitude of countless people," Modi said in a post on X.

The prime minister said that over the last decade, India has made significant strides in strengthening the healthcare ecosystem.

The number of medical colleges has more than doubled, while undergraduate and postgraduate medical seats have expanded substantially, he said.

"This unprecedented growth is creating greater opportunities for aspiring doctors, building a stronger healthcare workforce and ensuring that quality medical care reaches every corner of the country," Modi said.

Conveying greetings to the entire CA fraternity, Modi said they have long been trusted partners in India's economic journey. (PTI)

## Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit takes charge as new Vice Chief of IAF



**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit, who served as the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff during Operation Sindoor, took charge as the new Vice Chief of the Air Staff on Wednesday, officials said.

He succeeded Air Marshal Nagesh Kapoor, who superannuated on June 30 after four decades of service in the Indian Air Force (IAF). --Air Marshal Dixit was accorded a guard of honour at the Vayu Bhawan -- the headquarters of the IAF -- as he took charge as the new Vice Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS).

Prior to the ceremony, the air officer visited the National War Memorial and laid a wreath to pay homage to the fallen heroes of the armed forces.

Before being appointed as VCAS, he was serving as the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff (CISC) at the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HO IDS) here.

Air Marshal Dixit assumed the appointment of CISC on May 1, 2025, which he relinquished on June 30. (PTI)

## Exemption to Sikhs from wearing helmets not based on religion but reasonable classification: HC

**MUMBAI, July 1:** The exemption granted to Sikh men wearing turbans from wearing helmets while riding two-wheelers is not on the basis of religion but "reasonable classification", the Bombay High Court has said, dismissing a petition challenging the same.

Justices Urmila Joshi-Phalke and Nivedita Mehta of the Nagpur bench on Monday dismissed the petition filed by Kirtesh Chaudhari, a 23-year-old student.

The plea challenged a proviso to section 129 of the Motor Vehicles Act which grants this

concession, claiming that it violated the right to equality.

The high court said the plea was misconceived, and Article 14 of the Constitution (right to equality) prohibits class legislation and not reasonable classification.

"Article 14 permits reasonable classification, meaning thereby the government can make distinct class for different groups if there is a valid and logical basis and a public purpose," the HC said.

"Exemption given to the Sikhs is not on the

basis of caste or creed or religion," the court said.

Under section 129 of the Motor Vehicles Act, every person riding a two-wheeler has to wear a helmet. A proviso to the section says it shall not apply to a Sikh person wearing a turban.

The petition claimed that equality before the law means no person or class should have a special privilege.

The Union government opposed the plea, claiming that the exemption was a reasonable classification. (PTI)

of employment and were being similarly exploited, indicating the existence of an organised interstate human trafficking racket, he said.

Acting on specific information, a team of Gajapati police, with the assistance of Hyderabad Police, raided the premises of the accused woman in Hyderabad and rescued seven victims -- six minor girls and a woman -- who were allegedly being held there.

The rescued victims were brought back safely and reunited with their families, police said.

Sahoo said the two accused -- Iswar Kusulia and Chandra alias Sarita Jain alias Saritha Lunawat -- were arrested and produced before a court, which remanded them to 14 days' judicial custody. (PTI)

## Odisha Police busts interstate human trafficking racket, rescues woman, 6 girls

**BHUBANESWAR, July 1:** Odisha Police has busted an interstate human trafficking racket and rescued a woman and six girls from Hyderabad, while arresting two alleged traffickers, officials said on Wednesday.

The action followed an investigation into the disappearance of a woman from Adava police station area in Gajapati district, police said.

According to the complaint lodged by a relative, the woman had been missing since June 21.

Police said the victim contacted her family over phone on June 24 and alleged that one Iswar Kusulia of Rayagada had lured her and a friend with the promise of jobs.

"He asked me to come to Birikote under Adava police station and then took me to his res-

idence at Gumukudi village under Muniguda police station limits. Later, he sent me to Hyderabad on the pretext of arranging employment," the rescued woman said.

R Udayagiri SDPO Rakesh Sahoo said the investigation revealed that instead of providing jobs, Kusulia allegedly sold a woman and a girl to Chandra alias Sarita Jain alias Saritha Lunawat for ₹ 70,000.

"The victims alleged that they were wrongfully confined, subjected to physical and mental torture, deprived of their mobile phones and forced to engage in immoral activities," Sahoo said.

During questioning, the victims also disclosed that several other girls had been brought from different places on the false promise

## 5 officials suspended over demolition of slum that civic body did not order

**SURAT (GUJARAT), July 1:** Five officials of the Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) have been suspended over the 'mysterious' demolition of about 80 shanties in Nasiragar area in May, days after the civic body denied that it had any role in the operation.

A departmental inquiry has been initiated based on the findings of an internal inquiry committee which probed the demolition carried out on May 30, the SMC said in a release on Wednesday.

Executive Engineers Sujalkumar Prajapati and Jayang Jivanramjiwala, Deputy Engineer Arpan Parmar, Assistant Engineer Monik Gadhiya and Junior Engineer Nareshkumar Galchar were placed under suspension with immediate effect to ensure that the inquiry is



conducted in a neutral and impartial manner, it added.

The civic body, however, did not disclose the findings of the inquiry committee or specify the role allegedly played by the suspended officials in the demolition.

The razing of nearly 80 shanties in Nasiragar triggered a controversy with the SMC denying any involvement and ordering a probe

following media reports.

SMC Standing Committee Chairman Rajan Patel had said preliminary findings suggested that civic officials had gone to the site only for road demarcation.

The Congress alleged that the action was carried out at the behest of the ruling BJP for the benefit of a builder interested in the land. The BJP has not responded to the allegation.

A resident also moved the Gujarat High Court challenging the demolition, claiming that due process was not followed.

Congress leader and former corporator Aslam Cyclewall had alleged that most of the demolished houses were 40 to 50 years old and the owners had been paying property tax to the SMC. (PTI)

## NFR introduces digital training tools for loco pilots in Katihar division

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, July 1:** Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has introduced a range of interactive digital technologies at crew lobbies across Katihar Division to modernise the training of loco pilots and enhance operational safety.

The initiative aims to provide technology-driven and practical learning opportunities to improve operational knowledge, decision-making skills and overall efficiency in train operations.

As part of the programme, interactive touch panels have been installed in all crew lobbies of the division.

The digital platforms will support daily learning, counselling sessions and provide quick access to important operational information, making the training process

more engaging and user-friendly.

Katihar Division has also introduced interactive quizzes on the Automatic Signalling System, enabling loco pilots to regularly assess and strengthen their understanding of signalling principles. A physical working model of the signalling system has also been installed to provide hands-on demonstrations and improve conceptual understanding.

To enhance route familiarisation, the division has introduced interactive route videography covering both daytime and night-time conditions.

The videos offer realistic visual exposure to railway routes, allowing loco pilots to identify signals, landmarks, gradients and other operational features under varying visibility conditions.

Officials said the initiative is expected to improve route knowledge and operational preparedness before train operations.

In addition, the division has launched a dedicated podcast series on railway operational topics, including the functioning of the RS Valve, to promote continuous learning among crew members.

The crew lobby at Malda Town has also been upgraded with improved digital infrastructure and modern facilities to support technology-enabled training and counselling.

NFR said the initiatives reflect its continued commitment to leveraging digital technology for building a highly skilled workforce, strengthening safety standards and promoting operational excellence across the railway network.

**PUNE, July 1:** Lieutenant General Rajesh Pushkar, who commanded the 2 Corps during Operation Sindoor, on Wednesday assumed charge as the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Southern Command.

He succeeds Lieutenant General Sandeep Jain, who has taken over as the Vice Chief of the Army Staff, according to a defence release.

An alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Lt Gen Pushkar was commissioned into the 74 Armoured Regiment in December 1988 and has served in a wide range of command, staff and instructional appointments during a military career spanning more than four decades.

The release said Lt General Pushkar most recently commanded the 2 Corps during Operation Sindoor, where he provided "decisive leadership and strategic foresight"

Lt Gen Pushkar has commanded an armoured regiment in an operational area, an independent armoured brigade, an infantry division and a strike corps in the western sector.

His staff appointments include Colonel, Military Secretary, in a strike corps; Colonel, General Staff, of an armoured division; Brigadier, Quartermaster General, of a strike corps; Brigadier, General Staff, of an operational command; Additional Director General of the Armoured Corps; and Director General of the Territorial Army.

Lt General Pushkar has also served as an instructor at the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, and has had overseas



assignments with the Indian Military Training Team in Bhutan and as Defence and Military Attache at the Embassy of India in Moscow, with accreditation to Armenia and Belarus, the release said.

Lt Gen Pushkar is also an alumnus of the Defence Services Staff College, the College of Defence Management and the National Defence College. He holds master's degrees in Defence and Strategic Studies and Management Studies, besides an MPhil in Defence and International Relations.

He has been awarded the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal, Vishisht Seva Medal, the Chief of Army Staff Commendation and three Army Commander's Commendations, according to the release.

After assuming command, Lt Gen Pushkar paid tribute to fallen soldiers at the Southern Command War Memorial and received a Guard of Honour at its headquarters.

Lt General Pushkar reaffirmed the command's commitment to maintaining high operational readiness and stressed greater jointness, indigenous capability development and rapid integration of emerging technologies, the release said. (PTI)

## Kerala to fast-track battery storage projects to tackle power crisis: Minister

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, July 1:** Kerala will expedite battery energy storage projects and strengthen long-term power procurement to address recurring electricity shortages, Minister Sunny Joseph told the Assembly on Wednesday.

Speaking under Rule 300 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business, the state electricity minister said the power restrictions imposed on certain days in recent weeks had become necessary because of an unprecedented gap between electricity demand and supply. He attributed the situation to poor inflows into hydel reservoirs due to deficient rainfall, persistently high temperatures, and a nationwide reduction in power availability triggered by the El Nino phenomenon.

Although the southwest monsoon reached Kerala on June 1, rainfall has remained inadequate, prevent-

ing any significant drop in temperatures and keeping electricity consumption unusually high, he said.

While the state had expected a peak demand of around 4,100 MW, it touched nearly 4,900 MW, resulting in a shortfall of around 900 MW despite receiving 1,700 MW from its own generation, 1,701 MW from Central Generating Stations, and 612 MW through long-term power purchase agreements.

Joseph said Kerala had borrowed electricity from other states during March and April under swap arrangements to meet summer demand and has been returning 6.58 million units every day since June 16 under the agreement, which will continue until September 2026.

The minister said water storage in the state's reservoirs has dropped sharply to 870 MU, or 21 per cent of capacity, compared with 2,475 MU (59 per cent)

during the corresponding period last year.

Against a daily average consumption of 88-90 million units, Kerala currently generates only 15-16 million units internally, while around 74-75 million units are procured from outside the state.

Consequently, only 17-18 per cent of the state's daily power requirement is met through domestic generation, with the remaining 82-83 per cent sourced externally, he said. Joseph noted that Kerala's dependence on hydel power makes generation highly vulnerable to variations in rainfall.

Despite an installed hydel capacity of 2,196 MW, only 150.636 MW has been added over the past decade through new hydel projects, accounting for just 6.8 per cent of the state's hydel capacity and around three per cent of the state's peak demand of nearly 5,000 MW. (PTI)

## SIT probing Ram temple donation matter granted 15-day extension

**LUCKNOW, July 1:** The Uttar Pradesh government has given a 15-day extension to the Special Investigation Team probing allegations of embezzlement of donations at the Ram temple in Ayodhya, officials said on Wednesday.

The tenure of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) has been extended to probe the matter deeply and widen the scope of the probe, they said.

"Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has extended the deadline until July 15 for the SIT probing the donation-related case in the Ayodhya. The SIT had sought additional time from the Chief Minister to conduct a comprehensive examination of the various aspects of the case. Accepting the request, he directed the SIT to submit its report by July 15," an official statement issued here said.

The three-member SIT was constituted on June 13 to probe the allegations and was initially given 15 days to probe the allegations.

Following the submission of the preliminary SIT report on June 23, an FIR was registered on June 25 and eight accused -- Avinash Shukla, Anukalp Mishra, Lavkush Mishra, Manish Kumar Yadav, Karunesh Pandey, Ramashankar Mishra, Subhash Srivastava and Ramashankar Yadav alias Tinnu Yadav -- were arrested.

The SIT comprises Vijay Vishwas Pant, IAS, Divisional Commissioner, Lucknow; Kiran S, IPS, Inspector General of Police; and Neel Ratan, Special Secretary, Finance Department. (PTI)

## Hirani tried to dissuade son from acting career, was told about '3 Idiots' instead



The philosophy of "Do what you like" in "3 Idiots" came back to haunt filmmaker Rajkumar Hirani in a funny way when son Vir Hirani used it to justify his decision of choosing acting over filmmaking as a career.

Hirani, who had initially nudged his son towards direction, said he was taken aback when the latter decided to pursue acting despite showing promise behind the camera.

"He was in school, he learnt (filmmaking) by himself, and he was making short films, and very good short films. I was surprised when one day he came and said, 'I don't want to make a film'. So, I said 'Okay, don't make it, no problem, what do you want to do?'"

"I thought he wanted to do something else but he said he wants to act. I was like, 'What has happened?' because he had worked with me on 'Sanju' for six months, so I think something happened to him, watching Ranbir (Kapoor) perform and all," Hirani told PTI in an interview.

The director, who has now launched Vir in the upcoming series "Pritam and Pedro", admitted that he tried to "dissuade" his son from acting.

"I had never seen him act, so I was totally pushing him to this side (filmmaking). He heard me out and then he said, 'You made '3 Idiots' in which you said that you should do what you like,' so it came and hit me," Hirani recalled.

Left with little to argue, the filmmaker, an alumnus of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), where he studied film editing, said he asked Vir to learn the craft.

"After that I couldn't (tell him anything). I just told him don't just get up and say that I want to do it, do theatre, go and learn somewhere. So, then he spent five to six years doing all that."

When asked if he gave any piece of advice to his son as a senior director, Hirani joked, saying, "I can give a piece of advice to every actor, but not to my son. Kids don't listen to their father, that's the truth."

In "Pritam and Pedro", Vir, who earlier acted in short films such as "Yoon Hota Toh", "The Doctor Will

See You Now" and "Apna Apna Andaz", will feature alongside Arshad Warsi and Boman Irani, who were an integral part of Hirani's "Munna Bhai" franchise.

"Pritam and Pedro" is the first OTT project from Hirani, known for movies such as "Munna Bhai MBBS", "Lage Raho Munna Bhai", "3 Idiots", "PK", "Sanju" and "Dunki". The show, based on cyber security, is directed by Avinash Arun of "Paatal Lok" fame.

The filmmaker, who serves as a creator, co-writer and producer, described exploring long-format storytelling as challenging and said the streaming platforms demand a certain pace and style to maintain the audience's fleeting attention span.

"I realised that you have to write it differently. Like, you have the liberty to open up multiple tracks as you will see later (in the show), which you can't do in a film. Also, you have to keep creating hooks so that people don't leave the show, every 10 minutes something important has to happen, or at least something very important has to happen at the end of the episode," Hirani said.

"Pritam and Pedro" revolves around two people: a seasoned cop (Warsi) who prefers old-school methods and a tech-savvy guy (Vir Hirani) who relies on modern technology for investigations, as they navigate their partnership in solving crimes.

Hirani said he is not a frequent consumer of the crime genre and watches very little content overall, whether on the big screen or on OTT. Instead, he was drawn purely by the stories penned by Amit Dubey in his books, "Hidden Files" and "Return of the Trojan Horse".

"I got fascinated with the short stories I read about crime, like how it's done. But after writing it, I had shown it to people to ensure this hasn't been made earlier... As you progress in the series, you will see that there's a subtext," he said.

"Pritam and Pedro" will premiere on JioHotstar on July 3. It also stars Vikrant Massey and Mona Singh, with cameo appearances by Sanjay Dutt and former Indian cricketer Virender Sehwag. (PTI)

## SOMETIMES AUDIENCE RECOGNISE AUTHENTICITY BEFORE EXPERTS DO: MAHESH BHATT ON 'MAIN VAA-PAS AAUNGA'

At a time when cinema is increasingly driven by spectacle and testosterone, Imtiaz Ali's "Main Vaapas Aaunga" pauses to listen to the "deeper movements of human heart", says filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt, praising the Partition drama and its miraculous turnaround at the box office.

The film, which released to tepid response initially only to grow in numbers at the box office as word of mouth spread, features Naseeruddin Shah as a 95-year-old man sifting through his muddled memories to recall his unfulfilled love.

Vedang Raina and Sharvari play young lovers in Sargodha (now Pakistan), who are forced to part ways, while Diljit Dosanjh essays the grandson to Shah's character. Since its release on June 12, the film has grossed Rs 70.8 crore at the global box office.

In a note shared with the makers, Bhatt was effusive in his praise for the movie and the audiences who responded to its story that makes a case for love and kindness even in the worst of times.

"We live in an age where cinema is increasingly driven by velocity, spectacle and testosterone. The marketplace rewards certainty, noise and instant gratification. In such a climate, a film that pauses to listen to the deeper movements of the human spirit is almost an act of rebellion," Bhatt said.

The director said while many had dismissed the film on arrival as it refused to "conform to prevailing fashions", audiences showed the way by embracing the story.

"Cinema, at its most powerful, does not provide answers. It illuminates questions that we secretly carry within ourselves. The audience recognises those questions and, for a few hours, feels less alone.



That is what this film seems to have achieved. "...The marketplace is entitled to its verdicts. It speaks the language of numbers, and numbers matter. But audiences possess a mysterious intelligence of their own. Sometimes they recognise authenticity before the experts do," Bhatt said.

Calling "Main Vaapas Aaunga" as that rare film which arrived quietly, "carrying only the fragile cargo of a human heart", Bhatt said he was not merely moved by its story but by the thirst that runs beneath it.

"The response to this film suggests that beneath all our cynicism, beneath the noise of our times, there remains a hunger for stories that speak to something deeper than our appetites. Because beneath our politics, beneath our achievements and failures, beneath

our carefully assembled identities, there runs a common current. A shared human thirst," he said.

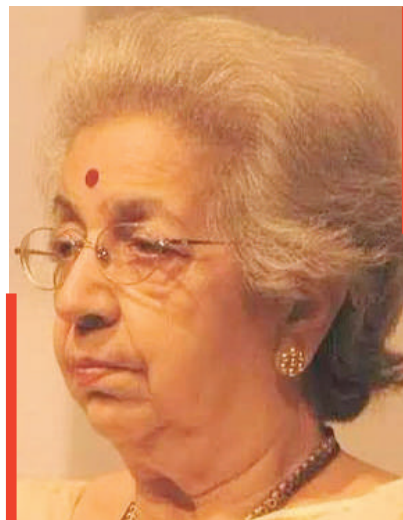
The filmmaker, known for movies such as "Arth", "Saaransh" and "Zakhm", said he first recognised Ali's instinctual storytelling in "Highway", which revolved around a woman who finally confronts her family for staying silent on the sexual assault she faced when young. The movie featured Bhatt's daughter Alia Bhatt in the lead role.

"Films will come and go. Trends will come and go. Algorithms will come and go.

What remains are works that bear the fingerprints of the human being who made them.

Main Vaapas Aaunga bears those fingerprints. And for that reason alone, it deserves to be celebrated," he added. (PTI)

## Anupam Kher, Shabana Azmi pay tribute to theatre legend Vijaya Mehta: 'She defined an art form'



Veteran actors Anupam Kher and Shabana Azmi on Wednesday remembered veteran theatre director and actor Vijaya Mehta as a visionary who transformed Indian theatre and inspired generations of actors, directors and storytellers.

Mehta, affectionately known as "Bai", passed away on Tuesday night at her South Mumbai residence due to age-related ailments. She was 92.

Kher, who worked with the veteran filmmaker in her acclaimed films "Rao Saheb" (1986) and "Pestonjee" (1988), described Mehta as "one of the finest theatre minds India has ever produced".

"Vijaya Mehta - The iconic legend! Deeply saddened to learn about the passing of #VijayaMehta. One of the finest theatre minds India has ever produced, an exceptional filmmaker, and above all, a remarkable human being," he wrote on Instagram.

The actor said working with Mehta was a transformative experience.

"I had the privilege of working with Vijaya Bai in 'Rao Saheb' and 'Pestonjee'. I had already done a few films by then and thought I understood something about acting. But every rehearsal with her reminded me how vast the ocean of this craft really is.

Despite her wisdom and understanding of human behaviour, Kher said Mehta never imposed her knowledge. "Her discipline came wrapped in grace, her warmth in humility, and her brilliance in simplicity.

"The cruelest thing about death is that within moments of hearing the news, we are forced to speak about someone we love in the past tense. The heart takes much longer to accept what the mind has just been told," he added.

Azmi said Mehta redefined Indian theatre through her fearless creativity and artistic vision. "When you talk of artists that don't just perform, they redefine an art form. #Vijaya Mehta is the first name that comes to mind. A visionary who transformed Indian theatre with curiosity and fearless creativity, she inspired generations of actors, directors, and theatre lovers.

"Her work wasn't merely about the stage; it was about truth, humanity, and the limitless power of storytelling," Azmi wrote on Instagram.

Mehta co-founded the influential theatre group Rangayan along with playwright Vijay Tendulkar, actor Dr Shirram Lagoo and theatre practitioner Arvind Deshpande. (PTI)

## Ujjwal Nikam praises Rajkumar Rao in biopic 'Prahaar', says film captures his untold story

Renowned public prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam has lauded Rajkumar Rao, who plays the lead in his upcoming biopic "Prahaar", saying the actor has brought authenticity and emotional depth to the film.

Directed by Avinash Arun of "Three of Us" and "Paatal Lok" fame, the film revolves around Nikam's prosecution of Ajmal Kasab, the lone surviving terrorist captured after the 2008 attacks.

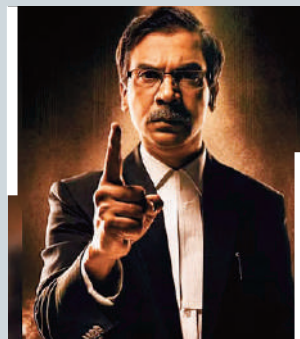
"Rajkumar Rao has delivered a remarkable performance, and Avinash Arun's direction is deeply impressive. 'Prahaar' authentically portrays not only my journey as a public prosecutor but also my life as a husband and a father," Nikam told PTI.

The senior advocate and Rajya Sabha MP said the movie will shed light on the unseen side of his life that rarely made it to headlines.

"People remember the verdicts. They rarely remember the nights before them, 'Prahaar' shows that side, the part no headline ever carried," he said. Nikam, who prosecuted several high-profile cases, including the 1993 Mumbai serial bomb blasts and the 26/11 terror attacks, said the responsibility of handling such sensitive cases often left him feeling isolated, a sentiment he was sharing publicly for the first time through the film.

"I've argued cases where the whole country was watching, and the loneliness of that responsibility is something I never spoke about. This film does. It stays honest to what happened, and in doing so, it tells a story I myself struggled to put into words," he said.

Also featuring Wamiqa Gabbi, Sikander Kher and Jaideep Ahlawat in pivotal roles, "Prahaar" will release in theatres on August 7. The movie is produced by Dinesh Vijan of Maddock Films. (PTI)



## Rajkumar Hirani says Munna Bhai-Circuit bond special, promises to come back with third part

Filmmaker Rajkumar Hirani says the bond shared between the characters of Munna Bhai and Circuit is behind the enduring appeal of his "Munnabhai" franchise and promises that the third chapter in the story will be out as soon as he comes up with a crackling idea.

Hirani made his directorial debut with "Munnabhai MBBS" 2003 and followed it up with the sequel "Lage Raho Munnabhai" in 2006. In the two movies, Sanjay Dutt played the affable goon Munna, while Arshad Warsi essayed the role of his loyal sidekick, Circuit.

"Circuit was always there and he was a funny character, but obviously he (Arshad) brought so much life into it. Then for the second one it became very important to make it stronger, and so you'll see Circuit in the second one has got more to do," Hirani, who has reunited with Warsi for his upcoming series "Pritam and Pedro", told PTI in an interview.

The writer-director said the role of Circuit was conceived as a symbol of unwavering devotion to his friend Munna, and likened their relationship to that of Lord Ram and Lord Hanuman, and Sherlock Holmes and Dr John Watson.

"Whatever Sherlock wants to say he needs a friend to say that... So, this character was written like if Munna has something to say, there is a gang but he (Circuit) is his loyal friend. We

had, in our heads, thought Circuit is like Hanuman, and he (Munna) is Ram for him. He won't ask questions, if Bhai has said it, he will do it," he added.

Warsi summed up the enduring appeal of the character, saying, "Everybody wants a Circuit in their life. Even I want one."

The actor said he didn't know much about Hirani at the time, but was impressed by the filmmaker's storytelling sensibility when he heard the script of "Munnabhai MBBS".

"I loved the story of what he narrated to me. I was like I wish I could do Munna Bhai's role, it's such a nice role. I think there is so much of heart in this man and I don't know if people will like it or not.

"But my first impression (about Hirani) was, he is a great guy, great sensibility, writes a beautiful story, that was enough for me (to do the film)," Warsi said.

Hirani revealed that the casting process for the film including Circuit's character went through some changes.

Initially, Shah Rukh Khan and Makrand Deshpande were to play Munna and Circuit but the cast kept changing, Hirani recalled.

"This film went through a major journey; many other people were supposed to do it. There

was a time when Shah Rukh was supposed to do it, and at that time Makrand was to play Circuit. Then it kept getting delayed, so that time Makrand started directing a film, he said he couldn't do this, and then of course (we got Arshad)."



Hirani, who had been following the actor's work since his 1996 debut film "Tere Mere Sapne", said he was unsure if Warsi would take up the part of Circuit, given it was the hero's friend role.

"I was very keen for him to do it because I thought it would be fun. I still remember the day he agreed to it. I have the memories of the first day of the shoot," the director, also known for films like "3 Idiots", "PK", "Sanju" and "Dunki", said.

Hirani was surprised and not quite on board with Warsi's improvisation and addition of quirky one-liners, but was soon won over.

"I remember the first shot and the flair with which he did it, I thought he was doing something wrong because there was no laughter in the script. Then after two or three shots, I discovered he was actually bringing something of his own to it," Hirani

said.

In one of the scenes, Warsi improvised a line and referred to a character as "Hakka noodles". Encouraged by the spontaneity of it, Hirani asked the actor to come up with similar quirky names and so a character of a doctor became "dispensary."

The franchise's third installment didn't quite move ahead beyond a teaser trailer, which was

released more than 15 years ago, but the director assures that he will bring back fan-favourite duo one day.

"If you ask me, one film which I most want to do is 'Munnabhai' because, more than any other film, these are the most lovable characters. I've always admired them. So, when I talk about doing '3 Idiots' (sequel), people ask, 'You're not doing Munnabhai?'," he said.

"I really want to do it, and I know how much Sanju wants to do it. Sanju wants to do it with so much love and affection. He keeps calling and keeps calling. It will happen someday," he said.

Multiple plot ideas including titles like "Munna Bhai Chale America" and "Munna Bhai LLB" have been explored over the years, but a final script is yet to be locked in.

"I've also given it to other writers to write. So, at this moment, they are also sitting and writing. So, someday, if we crack the story, then the very first thing that I'll make will be this (Munnabhai 3)."

"Pritam and Pedro" marks the acting debut of Hirani's son, Vir Hirani, and also the filmmaker's foray into the OTT space. Hirani serves as the creator and producer of the cybercrime comedy-thriller series.

Directed by Avinash Arun of "Paatal Lok" and "Three of Us" fame, the show is set to debut on July 3 on JioHotstar. (PTI)

## France forward Mbappé scores his 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> World Cup goals, one back of Messi

**EAST RUTHERFORD, July 1:** Kylian Mbappé felt the heat and turned up the temperature on Lionel Messi in the race for the most goals at the World Cup this year and in the tournament's history.

Thriving on a hot, humid afternoon, Mbappé scored his 17th and 18th career World Cup goals in France's 3-0 rout of Sweden on Tuesday, moving one back of Messi's record of 19. With six in the tournament, Mbappé tied the Argentina star in the race for the Golden Boot.

Asked coming off the field if he was already looking forward to facing Paraguay, Mbappé quipped, "I'm looking forward to the changing room and the AC." It was 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 degrees Celsius) for the 5 p.m. kickoff, so steamy that Lucas Digne let himself be doused by a sprinkler during the first-half hydration break.

Before halftime, Mbappé scored one for the highlight reel. In the 45th minute, Mbappé engaged in a give-and-go with Ousmane Dembélé, crossed over Viktor Gyökeres and fired his shot past goalkeeper Jacob Widell Zetterström.

"It goes without saying that Mapp is an absolute top, top player," Sweden coach Graham Potter said. "His goal was a fine



example of the speed and the change of direction and the way he can get the shot off quick. It's an incredibly high level."

That broke a tie with Brazilian greats Leonidas and Ronaldo for the most goals in the knockout stage of the World Cup with nine. Mbappé added to his record with

his 10th, scoring in the 74th minute off a feed from Michael Olise.

Celebrating the first goal, Mbappé ran immediately to coach Didier Deschamps after scoring. This was Deschamps' first game back on the sideline after missing the group stage finale to fly back to Europe for his mother's funeral.

"We know that the head coach had to face a really tough, tough challenge," Mbappé said. "Everyone will go through that one day. It goes beyond football. He knows that he will never be alone with us, and we will support him."

With 18 goals in 18 World Cup games, Mbappé has scored at an even faster clip than Messi, who has played in 29 games at the tournament. Deschamps bowed to Mbappé when he was substituted out in the 85th minute.

That kept Mbappé from chasing a hat trick, but he also could have scored in the 32nd minute. Instead, the 27-year-old banged a shot off the left post and even began to celebrate before watching it bounce back.

Scoring twice later allowed Mbappé not to regret that missed opportunity at a World Cup he is trying to soak in while playing some of his best soccer.

"I did say that I wanted to enjoy this World Cup to the fullest," Mbappé said. "I'm not saying that the other World Cup I didn't enjoy, but I was younger. I was focused then into delivering the best performances, and today I believe I can do both: delivering great performances and obviously enjoying." (AP)

## Brar, Suthar set to bolster India A line up in the second 'Test'

**GALLE, July 1:** Rising stars Gurnoor Brar and Manav Suthar are expected to get a look-in in the India A playing eleven when they take on Sri Lanka A in the second 'Test' starting here on Thursday.

The first four-day 'Test' ended in a draw with opener Sai Sudharsan and skipper Dhruv Jurel scoring centuries. Jammu and Kashmir pacer Auqib Nabi marked his India 'A' debut with a match-haul of five wickets, including four in the first innings.

Since this an exposure tour with an idea of giving every India A player an opportunity, the team management, headed by Hrishikesh Kanitkar, could be ringing in a few changes in order to ensure playing time for every squad member.

Hence, one can expect that Brar, who recently made an impressive debut in the ODI against Afghanistan, will be included as India senior team looks to prepare its second line of pacers ahead of the tour of New Zealand and home series against Australia early next year.

Since Gurnoor is expected to play, Yash Thakur might be asked to sit out.

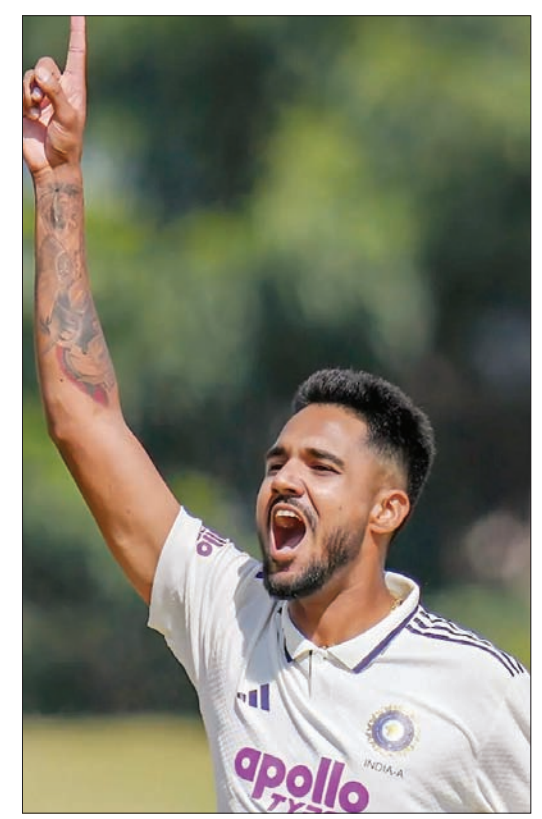
Similarly Suthar, who made his Test debut against Afghanistan with a 10-wicket haul, followed by a short and successful county stint for Warwickshire, will also headline the slow bowling attack.

In that case, left-arm spinner Harsh Dube will be rested.

The other two players who didn't get a look-in in the first game are opener Aman Mokhadde and leg-spinner Zeeshan Ansari.

To play Ansari, India A team management will need to drop off-spinner Saransh Jain while Mokhadde can replace Ayush Pandey, who failed to score a half-century in both India A innings.

However, Ayush could still get another game in



case Sai Sudharsan is deemed unfit after he retired hurt in the India A second innings. He didn't take any further part in the second innings and also while fielding. (PTI)

## Orjan Nyland's spectacular late save will live in Norwegian lore



**ARLINGTON, July 1:** Orjan Nyland fell to his hands and knees, his face resting on the AT&T Stadium turf with a half-dozen Ivory Coast players strewn about him after Norway's 2-1 World Cup victory that was preserved by the goalkeeper's spectacular last-minute save.

It was relief for Nyland and pain for those orange-clad opponents after a leaping, twisting, left-handed stop that's sure to live in Norwegian lore. It was, after all, the final image of the country's first win in the knockout round on soccer's biggest stage.

There's little doubt the moment wasn't lost on Nyland, based on the shouts and chest bumps he shared with several teammates immediately after the save.

"He's been looking great for a long time," coach Stale Solbakken said through a translator after the victory in the round of 32. "I think he'll play better and better."

Norway took the lead in the 86th minute on striker Erling Haaland's fifth goal of this year's World Cup, and the team spent the rest of regulation and injury

time turning back several surges from the suddenly desperate Elephants.

In the sixth of what was supposed to be seven minutes of injury time, Norway captain Martin Odegaard took down Ibrahim Sangare not far from the top of the penalty area.

Amad Diallo, who scored the equalizer for Ivory Coast in the 74th minute on a stellar individual effort in the penalty area, took the free kick and sent a shot whistling toward the left post. Nyland took two quick steps in that direction, jumped and reached his left hand across his body to deflect the ball over the net.

Earlier in the first half, Nyland stopped a point-blank shot from Nicolas Pepe, who scored both Ivory Coast goals in the group stage finale against Curacao. Nyland, who plays for Spanish club Sevilla, made his 74th appearance for the national team, but this is the first World Cup for all of the Norwegians. The 35-year-old Nyland was only 7 years old when Norway last played at the World Cup in 1998.

Nyland's four saves against Ivory Coast were his most in three starts. He also had to contend with 14 corner kicks.

Next for Nyland, Haaland and their teammates is five-time champion Brazil, which lost to Norway in the group stage 28 years ago. The rematch is Sunday in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

"Amazing achievement to go through to the next round," Odegaard said. "So let's enjoy the day, let's enjoy the moment and then it's time to prepare for Brazil, which is going to be a tough game. But in football everything is possible, and we're going to give it a good try and we'll see."

They have their keeper to thank for the chance. (AP)

## Coventry manager Frank Lampard signs new contract to 2029

**COVENTRY (ENGLAND), July 1:** Coventry City manager Frank Lampard has signed a new deal until 2029 ahead of the club's return to the Premier League. The 48-year-old former England midfielder helped the Sky Blues earn promotion to the Premier League last season by winning the Championship.

Coventry announced the new deal on Tuesday. "I'd like to thank everyone at the football club," Lampard said. "The fans first and foremost for how they've supported the team, myself and my staff in allowing us to get to where we've got to. The spirit and togetherness we created last year was something great to be part of and now we want to continue it." Coventry travels to defending champion Arsenal on Aug. 21 in the first match of the league's 2026-27 season.

Lampard took over at Coventry in November 2024 and helped the club to a playoff finish in his first season in charge before losing out to Sunderland in the semifinals. (AP)

## FIFA explains World Cup ruling that led to controversial disallowed Germany goal

**ATLANTA, July 1:** FIFA explained the tighter regulations that resulted in Germany having a potentially game-winning goal disallowed in its shock elimination from the World Cup.

Defender Jonathan Tah's headed goal in extra time against Paraguay on Monday was ruled out after a video review because of a foul on goalkeeper Orlando Gill.

Replays showed Germany's Waldemar Anton push Gill to the ground, but the minimal contact led to criticism of the decision.

Germany went on to lose the round of 32 game in a penalty shootout, with Tah firing a deci-

sive spot kick over the bar.

FIFA's referees chief Pierluigi Collina said officials had been told to punish incidents when players try to block opponents and make no attempt to play the ball, especially where goalkeepers are concerned.

"Although keeping a position is not a foul per se, when an attacking player is not interested in the ball and deliberately moves, even marginally, with the clear intention of obstructing opponents' movement and prevents him from defending, then referees, and VAR when needed, should carefully analyze the incident and intervene," Collina said.

"This is especially the case when the tactic aims to prevent the opposing goalkeeper from being able to defend the goal.

"Coaches and players were informed so it should come as no surprise that referees will punish these fouls."

Collina said moves to curb time-wasting had been successful. There are now time limits on goal kicks, throw ins and substitutions, while players are forced to leave the field for one minute after an injury.

"These measures have all been very effective and unanimously considered as very positive innovations," Collina said. (AP)

## Vishvanath Suresh, Chandrika to lead India's charge at U-19 & U-23 Asian Boxing C'hips



**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Reigning Asian Champion Vishvanath Suresh (50kg) and World Boxing Futures Cup gold medalist Chandrika Bhoresh Pujari (51kg) will spearhead India's campaign at the U-19 and U-23 Asian Boxing Championships, starting in Jakarta on Friday.

The Boxing Federation of India (BFI) has named a strong and balanced squad across both

age groups. The championships will serve as a key platform for India's young boxers to test themselves against Asia's best.

In the men's U-23 category, Vishvanath (50kg) leads a strong lineup that includes Ganga (55kg), Sagar Jakhar (60kg), Vanshaj (65kg), Hitesh (70kg) and Neeraj (75kg).

The squad also features Aryan Malik (80kg), Rocky Chaudhary

(85kg), Hemant Sangwan (90kg), and Ishan Kataria (+90kg).

The women's U-23 team is led by Nidhi (48kg) and Tanu (51kg), with the likes of Nisha (54kg) and Prachi (57kg) forming the core.

The squad is strengthened by Nikita Chand (60kg), Kajal (65kg), Shivani (70kg), Muskan (75kg), Naina (80kg), and Priyanka (+80kg).

In the U-19 category, Futures Cup gold medalist Chandrika Bhoresh Pujari (51kg) headlines the girls' squad, which includes promising names like Gunjan (48kg), Chirom Joyshree Devi (54kg), and Prachi (57kg).

While the boys' squad features a strong mix of talent across weight divisions, including Larenlakpam Ambekar Meetei (50kg), Aditya (55kg), and Sikander (60kg), among others.

The team has been training at the national camp with focus on technical refinement, conditioning, and tactical execution ahead of the championships. (PTI)

## Vimath Dinsara to lead Sri Lanka U-19 vs India

**COLOMBO, July 1:** Vimath Dinsara will lead the Sri Lanka Under-19 team in the upcoming home series against India Under-19 with Kaveeja Gamage named its vice-captain. The tour will feature a three-match one-day series and a two-match four-day series. The one-day matches will be played in Hambantota on July 4, 6 and 9, while the four-day matches will begin in Galle from July 13 and in Colombo from July 20.

The one-day squad features promising young talent from across the country.

Wicketkeepers Chamarindu Nethsara and Jason Fernando have also been included in the squad alongside skipper Dinsara and deputy Gamage. Sri Lanka U-19 One-Day squad: Rehan Peiris, Dimantha Mahavithana, Senuja Wekunagoda, Vimath Dinsara (captain), Kaveeja Gamage (vice-captain), Chamika Heenatigala, Chamarindu Nethsara (wicket-keeper), Dulnith Sigeru, Sethmika Seneviratne, Vigneshwaran Akash, Kugathas Mathulan, Jason Fernando (wicketkeeper), Gimhan Mendis, Dimath Abeyasinghe, Kithma Vidanapathirana. (PTI)

## Sebastián Beccacece steps down after World Cup exit

**MEXICO CITY, July 1:** Sebastián Beccacece has stepped down as coach of Ecuador following World Cup elimination.

The 45-year-old Argentine confirmed it after Tuesday night's 2-0 defeat to host Mexico.

"My contract has to end with the end of the World Cup. For us, we are leaving now," Beccacece said. "I believe the dressing room is full of brotherhood. I'm taking the love, respect, commitment and admiration from the boys, from this group of warriors, the Ecuadorian national team."

Beccacece was in charge for two years. He led Ecuador, which was making its fifth World Cup appearance, to the knockout round for just the second time after a memorable win over four-time champion Germany in the group stage. (AP)

## Entrepreneur's wanderlust fuels marathon firsts for India

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Ram Gopal Kothari insists he is not a runner but a traveller. And his insatiable hunger to explore has taken the Kolkata entrepreneur from the North Pole to one of the world's most remote inhabited islands, Rapa Nui in Chile, where he became the first Indian to complete the Volcano Marathon.

Less than a year after becoming the first Indian to complete a marathon at the Geographic North Pole, the 45-year-old Kothari has scripted another first, this time on Rapa Nui, also called the Easter Island, famed for its mysterious Moai statues and dramatic volcanic landscape.

The journey involved travelling more than 24,000 kilometres from India. It was also the 80th country that Kothari set foot on in his eventful life. "I have become the first Indian to complete the Volcano Marathon on Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Chile, one of the world's most remote inhabited islands. The journey involved travelling over 24,000 kilometres from India via Mumbai, Istanbul and Santiago before reaching Rapa Nui..." he told PTI in an interview.

"As with my previous expedition, this journey was about pushing the boundaries of endurance and inspiring others to dream beyond limits," he added.

The records are, however, merely significant milestones in a much larger journey.

"You used the right word, hunger. Now, it has become a little like hunger," he said when asked what keeps drawing him to some of the world's most unusual marathons.

That hunger first took him to Antarctica in 2022. While travelling there, he became fascinated by the idea of visiting the Geographic North Pole and stumbled upon a marathon organised in the Arctic.

The original event was held at 89 degrees North before participants were flown to the Pole by helicopter. When organisers later introduced a format that staged the race directly at 90 degrees North, Kothari signed up and became the first Indian to complete the event. But another destination still remained to be checked in his bucket list.

"Easter Island was one of my dream places. So, I had to go to Easter Island one day because I was seeing Easter Island for a long time. There are statues of Moai. Nobody knows who installed them," he said excitedly.

The mystery surrounding the giant stone statues had fascinated him for years.

When he learnt that adventure marathon organisers Runbuk conducted the Volcano Marathon



## From North Pole to Easter Island

there, combining travel with another endurance challenge became an easy decision.

Unlike his North Pole expedition, Kothari says he approached the Easter Island run with far greater preparation.

Earlier, he mostly ran half marathons, including the Tata Mumbai Marathon and the Kolkata Marathon. This time, however, he tailored his training specifically for the demanding terrain, which features nearly 600 metres of elevation gain and long stretches of rugged volcanic trails.

"I took the marathon very seriously this time," he said. He completed several practice runs of 25 to 26

kilometres and stretched his longest training run to 30 kilometres. Knowing the course involved steep climbs, he repeatedly trained on the ramps at Kolkata's Salt Lake Stadium.

Evenings were spent walking for an hour on an inclined treadmill to simulate elevation gain, while he also focused on improving endurance rather than simply increasing speed.

"Practice makes a man perfect. This time, I took the marathon with a different and more confident approach."

Much of that preparation was shaped by North Kolkata Runners' group captain Vikas Duggar, whom Kothari credits for transforming his approach to marathon running.

"He told me that because your elevation is 600 metres, you should do ramp running. He also guided me on using energy gels for long-distance running."

The advice paid off. "I was the only one, believe it or not, among all the people, who did not get any cramp," he said proudly.

"My room partner from China had done around 70 marathons throughout the world. They were also getting cramps and obviously I finished much before him."

The Volcano Marathon itself proved every bit as

demanding as its reputation.

The opening 21 kilometres were on paved roads but featured continuous elevation changes that steadily tested the runners.

Beyond that, the route changed dramatically as it entered rugged volcanic terrain strewn with loose rocks, potholes and uneven surfaces, demanding complete concentration with every step.

"The problem started after 21 kilometres. As soon as you turned there, the road started to become rough." The scenery, however, was unlike anything Kothari had experienced before.

"There were horses, there was a valley of yellow flowers and the Pacific Ocean all around. People got distracted and I saw four or five runners slipping."

The steep climb to the Rano Kau volcanic crater became the defining challenge of the race.

"The toughest part was when we started climbing on the Volcano Crater. That hill was so steep that it was very difficult to walk there. This five kilometres was the most difficult part for me," he recalled.

If the climb tested endurance, the closing stages demanded resilience.

"The last two kilometres, yes, it was the most difficult part of the run because the raw road was also broken. I don't know how I reached the last two kilometres." (PTI)

40-year knockout drought ended

# Mexico beats Ecuador 2-0 to reach the round of 16

**MEXICO CITY, July 1:** The 40-year wait is over. Mexicans had learned to live with defeats in the knockout stages of the World Cup. On seven occasions, El Tri fans were left heartbroken at this stage.

Not anymore. Julián Quiñones and Raúl Jiménez scored within a nine-minute span in the first half and Mexico defeated Ecuador 2-0 on Tuesday night to break a four-decade drought in the knockout stage and progress to the round of 16.

Quiñones opened the scoring in the 22nd minute and Jiménez added a goal in the 31st for the Mexicans, who had not won a knockout-stage match since defeating Bulgaria in the round of 16 when they hosted the tournament in 1986. Mexico coach Javier Aguirre was one of the starting midfielders in that team in '86.

"It means a lot to me because I am one of those who could not progress in the knockout stage," Aguirre said. "We are in the round of 16 and it is happening a great connection with the fans. We are like a family. It is spectacular."

Mexico lost seven consecutive times at that same stage from 1994 to 2018 and didn't advance past the group stage in 2022.

Aguirre, who returned as Mex-



ico's head coach in August of 2024, was an assistant in 1994 and was the coach in 2002 and 2010.

"We will be on high alert from here until Sunday. We will try to have the players recover from this and we will see if we are able to win again," Aguirre said.

For Quiñones, it was a third goal in the tournament and he is now El Tri's second-highest scorer in

World Cup history behind Luis "Matador" Hernández and Javier "Chicharito" Hernández, who scored four each.

Quiñones, who was the scoring leader in the Saudi Pro League last season, has become the spark in the attack that Mexico lacked in previous World Cups.

"I am just happy with the result, that is all that matters now," said

Quiñones, who is playing in his first World Cup with Mexico.

The 29-year-old forward arrived in the country from Colombia at age 17 and became a naturalized citizen in 2023.

"Life is about struggle and fight until you get what you want," he said, "and I am taking full advantage of the opportunity that I got."

Jiménez scored his second goal

of the tournament and has 47 with the national team to break a tie with Jared Borgetti. He is five away from tying "Chicharito" Hernández as the all-time leading scorer for Mexico.

Mexico will play another home match Sunday against the winner of Wednesday's match between England and Congo.

Playing at the iconic Azteca Stadium, the Mexican squad boasts an undefeated record across 10 World Cup matches. Mexico has just two official losses at the venue — the last being a World Cup qualifying defeat to Honduras on Sept. 6, 2013.

With the win, Mexico extended its unbeaten run to 12 games, dating back to a friendly loss against Paraguay in November.

Mexico also became the first CONCACAF side to eliminate a team from CONMEBOL in a World Cup knockout match. Teams from South America won the previous five meetings.

The match started one hour after the original scheduled time due to a thunderstorm. It was the second match of the tournament delayed by weather. A storm during the France-Iraq match at Philadelphia on June 22 caused a 2-hour, 11-minute suspension at the end of the first half. (AP)

# Ivory Coast beaten 2-1

Norway wins its 1st World Cup knockout game



**ARLINGTON, July 1:** Erling Haaland scored the deciding goal in the 86th minute and Norway won a knockout game at the World Cup for the first time, advancing to the round of 16 with a 2-1 victory over Ivory Coast on Tuesday.

Three defenders converged on Patrick Berg as he moved into the penalty area with the ball. He kicked it over to a wide-open Haaland, who scored his fifth goal in three games at this year's tournament.

Antonio Nusa scored in the first half with a curling kick for Norway, which is in its fourth World Cup and will next play five-time champion Brazil in the round of 16 on Sunday at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

The match comes 28 years after what many considered the greatest win ever for the Norwegians against Brazil.

Norway is playing in its first World Cup since that 1998 appearance, when the team got to the knockout round only after scoring goals in the 83rd and 89th minutes for an incredible 2-1 comeback win over then-reigning World Cup champion Brazil in the group finale.

Amad Diallo, who had kept Norway from taking a two-goal lead earlier in the second half, evened the match for Ivory Coast with a left-footed kick in the 74th minute.

After Haaland's goal, his Norway-record 60th in 53 matches, Ivory Coast kept pressing and had a chance to equalize with a direct free kick by Diallo in the sixth minute of stoppage time. Orjan Nyland made a leaping stop, the last of his four saves, when he de-

flected the ball away as he extended his left hand across his body.

Haaland, who won the Golden Boot in the Premier League last season with 27 goals for Manchester City, has scored in 13 straight competitive international games — a total of 25 goals in that span.

The Elephants, ranked 31st by FIFA, had never before won twice in the same World Cup. This was the fourth World Cup appearance for the West African nation, the same as Norway.

Nusa scored his first World Cup goal in the 39th minute when he took a few strides past the left corner of the area and sent a right-footed kick between two defenders toward the far post.

Ivory Coast goalkeeper Yahia Fofana made a diving attempt at the ball that was just beyond his extended reach, and he was still in air when he turned his head back to see the ball curl into the net. It was Nusa's ninth international in 28 games for Norway.

Diallo evened the score at 1-1 after a give-and-go with Nicolas Pepe, who scored both Ivory Coast goals in its previous game and was stopped by Nyland in the 55th minute. Diallo found space in the area for his left-footed blast.

That came only about eight minutes after Torbjorn Hegggen had a shot for Norway that was deflected away by Diallo, who was right next to his keeper.

Ivory Coast had one more good scoring chance before halftime after Nusa drew a yellow card in stoppage time. Pepe took the free kick but the ensuing header inside went left of the post. (AP)

## Team management needs to fit Sooryavanshi in playing eleven: Sarandeep

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Former India selector Sarandeep Singh wants to see Vaibhav Sooryavanshi in the Indian playing eleven for the T20 series opener against England in Durham. Sooryavanshi did not get to play in the series against Ireland that world champions India lost 0-2. If he plays against England on Wednesday, he would become the youngest cricketer to play for India.

"He should have played (against Ireland). The team management has to see how it should place him in the playing eleven. Sometimes tough calls have to be made. Give some senior players rest and he might get his opportunity. 'If you are building the team for the future, then a rotation policy must come into play. Then you have to sit some players out and give them an opportunity,'" Sarandeep told PTI on the sidelines of the DPL auction here.

The 15-year-old was in stellar form in the IPL before scoring a match winning 94 off 29 balls for India A in Sri Lanka.

Sarandeep backed Sooryavanshi to carry that form at the highest level. "This is the time to test him; don't leave him out. If there is an opportunity, just play him in the XI. The form which he is in right now, this is the right time to start playing with him as soon as possible. The way he is batting, he can win matches on your own," the former India spinner observed. (PTI)

# Serena Williams 'enjoyed the moment' despite 3-set loss at Wimbledon in comeback at age 44

**LONDON, July 1:** The roars began even before Serena Williams stepped on Centre Court. Then they grew louder when the 23-time Grand Slam champion arrived to play her first singles match in nearly four years.

And when it was all over and the 44-year-old Williams had performed admirably in a three-set defeat to an opponent less than half her age in the opening round of Wimbledon with her two daughters cheering her on, Williams smiled as she walked off to a loud round of applause.

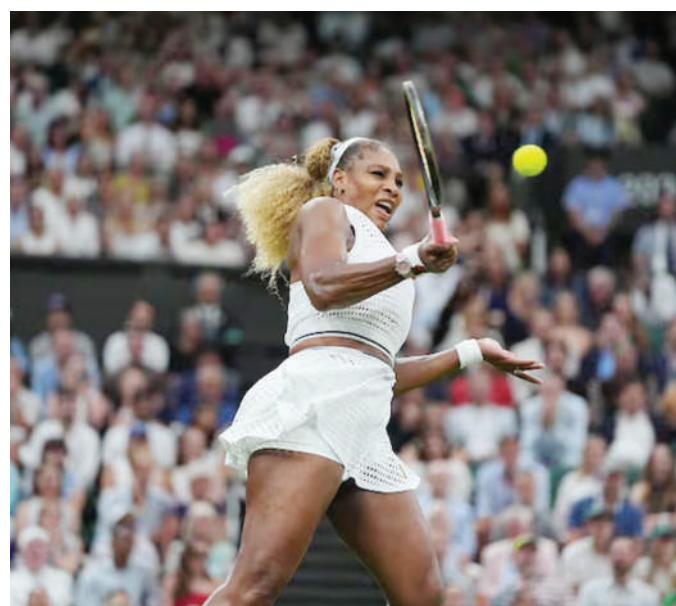
"It was really great to be back at Wimbledon. I never expected to be here," Williams, who did not meet with media after the match, said in a statement released by Wimbledon organizers. "The atmosphere was amazing. Walking out was amazing. I definitely relished it and missed it and enjoyed the moment more than anything."

In a 6-3, 6-7 (6), 6-3 loss to 20-year-old Maya Joint of Australia on Tuesday, Williams showed she can still crank out serves faster than 120 mph and dictate points with her heavy groundstrokes.

Movement was an issue for Williams, though, and the 87th-ranked Joint was able to handle Williams' pace and win more of the big points by hitting beyond the American's reach.

While Williams played two doubles matches just before Wimbledon to announce her comeback to the sport she once dominated, she hadn't played a singles match since the 2022 U.S. Open.

"She has such an aura, she's just a legend and this court has so many huge names that have played on it," Joint added. "I've been dreaming about this moment since I was a little kid, so this is



pretty crazy."

Williams has 98 career victories and seven titles in singles on the hallowed grass of the All England Club. By contrast, it was Joint's first Wimbledon victory in just her second appearance at the All England Club after losing in the opening round last year.

But Joint won a Wimbledon warmup in nearby Eastbourne last year and knows how to play on grass.

**Doubles match still to come** Williams, who has no singles ranking after being out for so long, was given wild card invitations by Wimbledon organizers to play singles and also doubles with older sister Venus. Her doubles match will come later in the week.

Williams has said that having her two daughters off from school inspired her comeback and it marked the first time that her youngest daughter, Adira, who is almost three, saw her play singles.

Adira sat next to her 8-year-old sister, Olympia in the front row of Serena's players' box.

**Standing ovation** Fans started cheering when Williams' name was announced as the next match on Centre Court and then they gave her a standing ovation as she walked out before the match started under a closed roof. Several supporters held up signs with messages like "Welcome Back" and one wore a T-shirt that said "Unstoppable Queen."

Williams executed a delicate topspin lob winner early on and then cranked out a 121 mph ace to hold for 3-3 in the first set. But Williams also had a costly double-fault which led to the only break of the first set.

In the second set, Williams came back from 0-40 and saved four break points to hold for 6-5. Then Williams saved a match point in the tiebreaker with a big

# My record in Australia phenomenal but England feels like second home: Pujara after MCC honour

**NEW DELHI, July 1:** Standout performances of Cheteshwar Pujara's exemplary Test career came in Australia but the former India number three, who was recently honoured with the MCC life membership, says he only got the home away from home feeling in England.

Having toured with the Indian team thrice and played for multiple teams in county cricket, Pujara has spent the most amount of time outside Rajkot driving across the length and breadth of England.

Now bestowed with the honorary life membership of Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), the owner of the fabled Lord's stadium, Pujara has another reason to visit the "Home of Cricket".

"I've played a lot of county cricket in the UK. So when you end up playing a lot of cricket over there, you feel like you're at home. And for me, it's a great pleasure and privilege to be part of the MCC.

"And getting this honorary membership, it means a lot. As a cricketer, when you have worked hard throughout your career and when that effort is recognised, you feel proud about your achievements as a crick-

eter," the 38-year-old told PTI in an interview.

In the three Test matches he was part of at Lord's, India won two. He could not get a hundred at the iconic venue for his national team but he looks back fondly at his double hundred for Sussex at a ground steeped in history.

Pujara, a veteran of 103 Tests, has played at all famous grounds around the world but there is something different about turning up at Lord's

"So I've got some fond memories of being at Lord's, playing cricket, also watching cricket there. When I had my second ACL reconstruction, that was in 2011, when I was playing for RCB and I got injured. And then my knee surgery was actually in London.

"So when I was there consulting a doctor, I went to the Lord's cricket ground just to have a feel of it. Because before that, I'd never played at Lord's.

"So when you walk into that ground, it has a different aura, different vibe. And now when you become a lifetime member at MCC, so you have this privilege of



going there and watching cricket. But as a child, I always dreamt of playing cricket there," he said.

Lord's has a vibe like no other venue but as a batter, being out in the middle has its fair share of challenges.

"The best part about it is the historical

balcony, which we have seen for many, many years, which hasn't changed even now. When you walk into the field from the long room, everyone appreciates your effort, whether you're walking in or coming out during the lunch break or a tea time break or end of day's play.

"It doesn't matter how you have performed, but they will always appreciate good cricket on the field. And that's the best part about being at Lord's," said Pujara.

**What about the challenges?**

"Firstly, it's a pitch where you have to settle in. You have to spend enough time as a batter on the crease and then start playing your shots. So it's a slightly challenging pitch for any batter. With the slope around, if you are not very familiar with the slope, you struggle to take the stance early on.

"You have to make a few adjustments in your stance as a batter. But once you get used to it, it's a phenomenal pitch to bat on. And it's a great outfield as well. You have value for your shots.

"But you always put a lot of pressure on

yourself as a cricketer. When you're playing at Lords, you want to get your name on the honours' board. Overall, if I could change something in my cricketing journey, I think scoring a 100 at Lord's would have been a great achievement," said Pujara whose only Test hundred in England came in Southampton.

Australia has been great for his overall statistics, but it is England where Pujara has enjoyed his cricket the most outside India.

"...when it comes to international cricket, yes, my record in Australia has been phenomenal. And I enjoy batting over there. Because Australia, I would say is slightly easier to bat on once you have your eye in.

"In England, it has always been challenging. I mean, things have changed. Now, if you look at the kind of pitches which are produced in England, it's slightly different now," he said.

Of all the bowlers he has faced in England, Pujara said he cherishes his battles with James Anderson and Stuart Broad the most. (PTI)

## 24 teams, including seven debutants, to feature in Durand Cup starting July 25



**KOLKATA, July 1:** The Durand Cup football tournament this year will feature 24 teams, including seven debutants, with matches to be played across five cities from July 25 to August 23.

The tournament begins in Kolkata on July 25 before it is played in Ranchi, Imphal, Shillong and Guwahati over the next four weeks. The final will be held at the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan in Kolkata.

The competition will once again bring together Indian Super League clubs, I-League sides, Services teams, emerging domestic outfits and overseas teams.

Among the seven debutants are Defenders FC of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and Meghalaya Premier League champions Nongskh Sports, Social and Cultural Club (SS&CC).

Kolkata will once again serve as the tournament's hub, hosting two groups, the opening match, two quarter-finals, one semi-final and the final after the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan and Kishore Bharati Krirangan.

The city will play host to record 17-time champions Mohun Bagan Super Giant, 16-time winners East Bengal FC, Mohammedan SC, South United FC, CISF, Indian Army and debutants Baghpat FC and Samaleswari Sporting.

Ranchi will make its debut as a Durand Cup host, with the Birsa Munda Stadium staging league matches from July 26 to August 16 and one quarter-final. The city will host Jamshepur FC, Sporting Club Delhi, Indian Air Force and debutants Defenders FC.

Imphal's Khuman Lampak Stadium will host league matches from July 28 to August 17, besides a quarter-final. The group features local clubs TRAU FC and NEROCA FC, Indian Navy and debutants FC Raengdai.

Shillong's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium will stage league matches from July 31 to August 20 before hosting one of the semi-finals. The venue will feature Shillong Lajong FC, Nongskh SS&CC, Langsning FC and debutants Mumbai FC.

The Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati will host league-stage fixtures from August 1 to 13. Defending champions NorthEast United FC headline the group, alongside FC1, Bodoland FC and Karbi Anglong Morning Star FC. (PTI)