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**INSIDE**



**Rajya Sabha MP, team meet rebel army in Myanmar**

**NEW DELHI**  
Weeks after a township of Myanmar near the Indian border was captured by the rebel Arakan Army, an Indian delegation led by Rajya Sabha member K. Vanlalvena on Thursday met with the Arakan Army inside Myanmar and held talks. » PAGE 3

**India to establish alliance to protect big cats**

**NEW DELHI**  
The Union Environment Ministry plans to set up and coordinate an International Big Cat Alliance. The Cabinet approved the proposal on Thursday. So far, 16 countries have given their written consent to be part of the alliance. » PAGE 3

**Thousands attend Navalny's burial in Moscow**

**MOSCOW**  
Thousands of people bade farewell on Friday to Alexei Navalny at his funeral in Moscow. Navalny, President Vladimir Putin's fiercest critic, died two weeks back in a penal colony. His supporters said several churches refused to hold the funeral. » PAGE 11

**46 killed in shopping mall fire in Dhaka**

**DHAKA**  
A six-storey shopping mall that caught fire in Dhaka had no fire exits, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said on Friday, as the death toll rose to 46. The fire started late on Thursday in a restaurant in the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall. » PAGE 11

# Blast at Bengaluru restaurant leaves 10 injured

All injured out of danger from the low intensity blast; Chief Minister confirms the use of an IED

An explosive material, yet to be identified, was left at the restaurant by a customer, say police

Probe is on and incident should not be politicised, says deputy CM while assuring safety of the city

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BENGALURU

Ten people were injured in a low-intensity bomb blast at The Rameshwaram Cafe, a popular restaurant in Brookefield in Bengaluru's Information Technology corridor on Friday afternoon. All the injured are said to be out of danger.

Police said the blast had been caused by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), which seemed to have been left at the restaurant by a customer. The blast occurred during the busy lunch hour, shocking customers and others in the vicinity with an ear-shattering explosion, followed by smoke engulfing the area. The quick-service eatery had over 200 patrons when the blast occurred, sources said.

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah confirmed that an IED had been used in the blast.

**Timer device**

Senior police officials said an explosive material, yet to be identified, was packed with nuts and bolts in a bag with a timer device, which has been recovered. The IED went off exactly at 12.55.32, as the CCTV footage shows. The footage also shows another explosion, five seconds later. However, police said that a single IED had been planted there. Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, who visited the spot, said a man aged around 30 years came to the restaurant at around noon, and left the bag near the hand wash area. It exploded nearly an hour later.

The police are now analysing CCTV footage to



**Turn of events:** A CCTV video grab shows the Rameshwaram Cafe before, during and after the low-intensity blast, in Bengaluru on Friday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

identify the accused. "There is no need to panic. Bengaluru is a safe city. Our police will crack the case soon," he assured.

A senior official said that it was a low-intensity blast. "Though the bag was packed with projectiles, the kind of injuries that victims suffered indicates that it was a low-intensity blast," he said.

This is the first IED explosion in the city in nearly a decade. The last such blast in the city, using an IED, occurred on Church Street, in the city's central business district, on December 28, 2014.

**'Result of appeasement'**  
The BJP said the blast was a result of the "appeasement politics" practised by the Congress government in the State, even as senior

police officials said that there were no leads so far on any group being responsible for the blast. The CM and his Deputy have said that the incident is being thoroughly probed and should not be politicised.

Ruling out earlier speculations of a fire accident, managing director and founder of The Rameshwaram Cafe, told *The Hindu* that

## Heard explosion, saw smoke, say eyewitnesses

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BENGALURU

"I was outside the restaurant and a little after 1 p.m., I heard a loud explosion inside. I saw smoke and fire near the hand wash area

and there was a pungent smell. I do not know how the blast occurred. I saw many injured," said Sachin Lamani, a security guard.

**FULL REPORT**  
» PAGE 2

staff members and customers had said that someone came and left a bag below the hand wash area.

Started in 2021, The Rameshwaram Cafe has four branches across the city and is known to be bustling with people.

Of the 10 injured, Swarnamba Narayanappa, 49, an accountant in an IT firm, suffered nearly 40% burn injuries and is being

treated at the Brookefield Hospital. The institute's medical director Pradeep Kumar said Ms. Narayanappa was out of danger but will need plastic surgery. "She has suffered cut injuries on the right side of her body and her eardrum is damaged due to the loud explosion. There are no rip-off injuries, indicating it was a low intensity explosion," he said.

## Set to shine



**Clay craft:** Potters prepare earthen lamps for sale ahead of the Maha Shivaratri festival, in Bhubaneswar on Friday. ANI

## Google delists several apps after row over platform fee

**Aroon Deep**  
NEW DELHI

Tech major Google on Friday delisted certain matrimonial and dating apps, including Bharat Matrimony, Truly Madly, and Quack Quack, and two streaming services, Balaji Telefilms's ALTT and the audio platform Kuku FM.

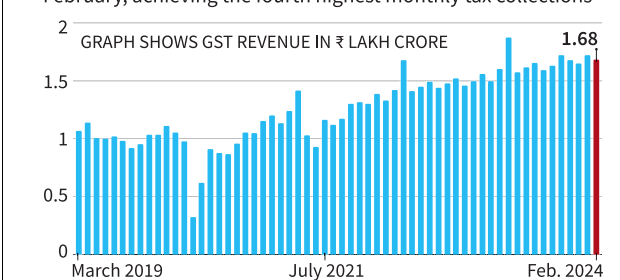
The move comes after the Supreme Court declined to provide the companies behind these apps interim relief in their battle against the search giant's platform fees for in-app payments on Google Play, the company's mobile app marketplace for the Android operating system.

**FULL REPORT**  
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## GST collections up 12.54% in February

### Top collection

India's GST gross revenues surpassed ₹1.68 lakh crore in February, achieving the fourth highest monthly tax collections



**Vikas Dhoot**  
NEW DELHI

India's gross revenues from the Goods and Services Tax (GST) grew at a three-month high pace of 12.54% in February to cross ₹1.68 lakh crore, marking the fourth-highest monthly collections from the tax.

February's GST revenue growth reflected the third highest uptick in 2023-24 and lifted the total collections so far this year to ₹18.4 lakh crore, 11.7% above the same period last year.

The gross GST kitty of ₹1,68,337 crore in February was 3.3% lower than January's updated collection numbers of ₹1,74,106 crore, the second-highest tally since GST was launched in July 2017.

**'Growth momentum'**  
The GST numbers "demonstrate continued growth momentum and positive performance", the Finance Ministry asserted, noting that collections from domestic transactions rose 13.9%, while goods imports delivered an 8.5% rise in revenues.

After refunds, the Ministry pegged last month's GST collection at ₹1.51 lakh crore, 13.6% over February 2023's collections.

Overall net GST revenues this year have grown at a sharper pace of 13% than gross revenues, and

stand at ₹16.36 lakh crore.

Among the States, five recorded contractions in revenues in February, while 18 States clocked lower upticks than the national average growth of 13.9% in revenues from domestic transactions. Revenues dropped 14% and 13% for Mizoram and Manipur respectively, while Nagaland (-5%), Bihar, and Jharkhand (both -1%) reported milder declines.

### Quicker growth

Revenues grew faster than the national average in 12 States, including the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir (23%), Assam (25%), Maharashtra (21%), as well as Kerala and Delhi (up 16% each). February's gross GST intake included ₹31,785 crore of Central GST (CGST), ₹39,615 crore of State GST (SGST) and ₹84,098 crore of Integrated GST or IGST, of which ₹38,593 crore was collected on imported goods. The GST compensation cess collections stood at ₹12,839 crore, with a little under a thousand crore rupees received on imported goods.

"The Central government settled ₹41,856 crore to CGST and ₹35,953 crore to SGST from the IGST collected. This translates to a total revenue of ₹73,641 crore for CGST and ₹75,569 crore for SGST after regular settlement," the Ministry said in a statement.

# China out, Bengaluru-based company inks pact with Sri Lanka energy body to build hybrid power project

**Meera Srinivasan**  
COLOMBO

Three years after objecting to a Chinese energy project in northern Sri Lanka, barely 50 km off Tamil Nadu's coast, India is set to implement a hybrid power project in three islands off Jaffna peninsula with a \$11-million grant.

The Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority, the Government of Sri Lanka, and Indian company U-Solar Clean Energy Solutions on Friday signed the contract for building "Hybrid Renewable Energy Systems" in Delft or Nedumtheevu, Nainativu and Analaivitu islands off Jaffna peninsula in the island's north.

"The project, which is aimed at addressing the energy needs of the people of the three islands, is being executed through grant assistance from the Government of India. The hybrid project combines various forms of energy including both solar and wind, towards optimising capacities," the Indian High Commission in Colombo said in a press release.

In a post on social media platform 'X' thanking the Government of India, Sri Lanka's Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekara said: "The project with 530 kw Wind power, 1,700 kw Solar power, 2,400 kw Battery power and 2,500 kw of stand by



**Joint effort:** Santosh Jha, India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, at the hybrid power project site in Nainativu island. X/@INDIAINSL

diesel power system will be constructed at the 3 Islands by U-SOLAR."

The Bengaluru-based company was chosen through a competitive bidding process conducted by

the Sri Lankan government for Indian firms, officials said.

### 3rd project in country

The initiative is the third India-backed energy pro-

ject coming up in Sri Lanka's north and east. The National Thermal Power Corporation is spearheading a solar venture in the eastern Sampur town, while the Adani Group is setting up renewable energy projects in Mannar and Pooneryn in the north.

The Sri Lankan Cabinet first cleared Sinosoar-Etchwin Joint Venture in China to execute renewable energy projects in the three islands. The company was chosen through a competitive bid backed by the Asian Development Bank. Concerned by the prospect of a Chinese project very close to India's southern coastline, New Delhi offered to implement the same project with a

grant instead of a loan, and Sri Lanka took it up.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in March 2022 during External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Sri Lanka. China's displeasure at the turn of events is no secret. The Chinese Ambassador in Colombo voiced rare criticism of Sri Lankan authorities for suspending the original projects for "unknown reasons" and sending out the "wrong message" to potential investors.

Meanwhile, Sino Soar Hybrid Technology, whose energy project was suspended in Sri Lanka in December 2021, signed a deal to implement a similar project in the Maldives.



## IN BRIEF



## Assam CM's security upped after threat from Sikh outfit

The Assam Police have strengthened the security of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma following a threat from a banned Khalistani outfit. A caller, claiming to be a supporter of pro-Khalistan leader Amritpal Singh, who is currently lodged in eastern Assam's Dibrugarh Central Jail, alleged that the latter was being tortured in captivity along with nine associates. He added that Mr. Sarma would face "consequences" if the 10 Sikhs, who are on a hunger strike, die in jail.

## Five arrested in connection with Haldwani violence

The Uttarakhand Police on Friday arrested five women in connection with the recent Haldwani violence in the town's Banbhoolpura area over the demolition of an illegal madrasa, officials said. This takes the total arrests in connection with the February 8 incident to 89. The five women arrested - Shahnaz, Soni, Shamsheer, Salma and Reshma - are all residents of Banbhoolpura, officials added. PTI

## VBA ready to contest 46 seats, says Prakash Ambedkar

Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi chief Prakash Ambedkar on Friday expressed confidence that his party could independently secure at least six Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra in the upcoming polls, and that it was ready to field 46 candidates if the alliance with the Opposition's Maha Vikas Aghadi didn't materialise. He added that MVA constituents Shiv Sena (UBT) and Congress were experiencing "tensions" over seat-sharing.

# Heard explosion, saw smoke, say witnesses of Bengaluru cafe blast

They report hearing a loud bang at 1 p.m., followed by clouds of dense smoke and an acrid smell after a blast at Bengaluru's popular Rameshwaram Cafe; bystanders band together to help

The Hindu Bureau  
BENGALURU

Like any other typical Friday afternoon, many had assembled at the Rameshwaram Cafe's Brookfield outlet in Bengaluru for lunch when a low-intensity blast occurred.

While 10 people, including three staff members of the cafe, suffered injuries, CCTV footage showed the remaining customers and employees at the restaurant running in panic.

## Help and rescue

Sachin Lamani, a security guard with the cafe, said, "I was outside the restaurant and a little after 1 p.m., I heard a loud explosion inside. As I rushed inside, I saw smoke and fire near the hand wash area and there was a pungent, burning smell. I do not know how the blast occurred. I saw many people injured and helped them rush to a hospital."

Suresh, an eyewitness who was near the restaurant when the blast happened, said he heard a huge explosion and immediately rushed to the cafe.

"There was dense smoke and none of us could go in. It took us over 10 minutes to get inside the



Moments after the blast at the cafe in Bengaluru on Friday. PTI

cafe. We saw at least eight people injured. We rushed them to a nearby hospital in auto rickshaws," he narrated.

Speaking to presspersons near the restaurant, Shabarish, another eyewitness, said, "There was a loud sound around 1 p.m. which must have been audible in one-kilometre radius. There was a lot of smoke around the cafe. When I went and checked there, a few customers and employees were injured and bleeding. Some tiles were also broken. Some of us who had gathered there

sent a few victims to the hospital."

The restaurant, which was founded by Raghavendra Rao and Divya Raghavendra Rao in order to make authentic South Indian food accessible beyond Bengaluru, has also been frequented by celebrities from across the country.

## 'Unattended bag'

Speaking about Friday's incident with *The Hindu*, Ms. Rao, said, "It is very clear that the blast has not happened because of any cylinder or any other kitch-

en-related equipment as none of them were near the blast site. All our equipment remains at the back of the restaurant. There is only a handwash area with a sink, dustbin, and a stand to collect plates. Some people told us that someone came and kept a bag there and left, and the blast happened after that. We have found a bag that exploded at the spot."

She also added that three of the staff members who were injured in the incident were "out of danger", according to the doctors.

# Assam braces for anti-CAA protests

The Hindu Bureau  
GUWAHATI

Assam is set to face another round of protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) of 2019, with a conglomerate of 16 political parties and about 30 NGOs announcing a series of agitations.

The anti-CAA programmes are scheduled to start with a motorcycle rally in every district, followed by the burning of the CAA rules after they are notified. The NGOs headed by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) will also observe a 12-hour hunger strike on March 9 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to the State.

The 16-party United Opposition Forum (UOF), headed by Congress, has threatened a mass agitation against the law. "Assam is already burdened with lakhs of foreigners. We cannot take any more. We shall seek an appointment with the Prime Minister to discuss the issue. We will protest if the Centre is insistent on pushing the CAA," State Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah said.

"The Assamese people will never accept the CAA and we will continue our democratic and legal fight against the Centre's bid to impose it on us," AASU president Utpal Sarma said on Thursday, slamming Home Minister Amit Shah for announcing that the rules of the CAA would be framed soon for



UOF leaders submitted a memorandum against the CAA to the Governor. ANI

implementation.

The Assam government has warned the anti-CAA groups against imposing shutdowns and damaging public property. Referring to a Gauhati High Court order on *bandhs*, State Director General of Police G.P. Singh said the State sustained a loss of ₹1,643 crore from a day of *bandh*. The loss would be recovered from those who call *bandhs*, he said.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said anti-CAA protests would be irrelevant as Parliament had passed the law. "People have the right to like or dislike the CAA but they should ideally approach the Supreme Court which has the authority to terminate legislation," he said.

The CAA seeks to provide Indian citizenship to Hindu, Jain, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and Parsi people who came to India from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan on or before December 31, 2014, after five years of living in the country.

# Congress disrupts Governor's address over farmers' agitation

Press Trust of India  
CHANDIGARH

Punjab Governor Banwarilal Purohit's address to the State Assembly on the opening day of the Budget Session on Friday was disrupted by the Opposition's Congress MLAs, who raised the issues of protesting farmers and resorted to sloganeering.

As soon as the Governor began his address, Punjab Congress chief Amrinder Singh Raja Warring raised the farmers' issue, saying that homage should be paid to 21-year-old Shubhkar Singh, who died during clashes between the protesting farmers and Haryana security personnel.

Leader of Opposition Partap Singh Bajwa added that Haryana had sealed its borders with Punjab. "You



Banwarilal Purohit

have not been able to protect your farmers," he said, drawing the Governor's attention to the matter.

As Congress MLAs insisted that farmers' issue be discussed first, the governor said, "As per the agenda and custom, I am supposed to deliver my speech. After my speech, you can raise any issue. There might be so many se-

rious questions. I agree. But this is the time to deliver my speech. I request you, this House is for debate, you will get ample time," Purohit said.

However, due to the uproar, Mr. Purohit cut short his address, leading State Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema to slam the unruly MLAs for disrupting the speech and "disrespecting" the House.

Dubbing the Congress MLAs' behaviour in the House as "drama", Mr. Cheema said that they did not want to hear about the achievements of the Bhagwant Mann government in the State.

"To gain cheap publicity, they boycotted the address," the Minister said, adding that the Congress party "did not believe in democracy".

# Priyanka Gandhi targets BJP over exam question paper leak

The Hindu Bureau  
LUCKNOW

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Friday targeted the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Uttar Pradesh over the question paper leak in the Class 12 board examination (mathematics and biology), accusing the saffron party of hollowing out the foundational education of crores of children while saving the examination mafia and other corrupt entities.

"Paper leaked once again. After all, under BJP rule, from job exams to board exams - almost every paper is getting leaked. Board examinations are the first challenges that children face when they

learn to build their future. If such a big betrayal happens to them right here, what will they do next? To save the examination mafia and the corrupt people sitting in the government, the BJP is also hollowing the foundation of crores of children and youth," alleged Ms. Vadra, in a post on X.

On Thursday, the District Inspector of Schools in Agra petitioned the police to register an FIR against the centre superintendent of Antar Singh Inter College and others for making viral the question papers in a WhatsApp group during the exam.

The Uttar Pradesh Board of Secondary Education, however, refuted allegations of the paper leak.

# In major victory for labourers, Rajasthan extends urban jobs scheme to new municipal bodies

The Hindu Bureau  
JAIPUR

In a big win for the villagers who lost employment opportunities after the conversion of village panchayats into urban local bodies, the BJP government in Rajasthan has agreed to launch the urban employment guarantee scheme in 42 newly created Municipal Councils. The decision came over the week-end after a month-long agitation at Bhim in Rajasmand district.

The Local Self Government Department has issued orders for starting the guaranteed employment works in the new Municipal Councils, situated in 27 districts, by designating the nearest urban bodies

## Villagers had lost out on employment after village panchayats were converted to urban local bodies

as the in-charge for the task. The regular posts of officials for operating the scheme in the newly constituted municipal areas are yet to be created.

The works under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme were stopped in the village panchayats converted into urban local bodies in July last year, posing a major challenge to the villagers who depended on the scheme for their livelihood. As the demand for restarting the

works went unheeded even after the change of government in the State, the villagers started an indefinite strike at Bhim in January-end.

The Devdungri village in Bhim tehsil, where the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan's (MKSS) headquarters are situated, is also known as the centre stage of the movement for right to information, which led to the enactment of the RTI Act in 2005.

MKSS executive president and RTI activist Shankar Singh said the agitation was aimed at securing the right to work as a guarantee. "We will continue to hold government officials accountable for equitable distribution of work," he said.

# Unrestrained poaching plays big role in decline of Odisha's leopards

Satyasundar Barik  
BHUBANESWAR

Odisha has witnessed a sharp decline in its leopard population - approximately one-fourth lost - primarily due to poaching between 2018 and 2022.

The 'Status of Leopards India' report released on Thursday presented a dismal picture of the big cat population in the State.

"The leopard population in Odisha is estimated at 568. The population has significantly declined since the last countrywide estimate of 760. However, the leopard densities from both the tiger reserves in the State have increased significantly. This indicates that the major efforts of recovery is restricted to tiger

reserves," said the leopard census. The drop of 192 leopards is estimated to be 25.26% of the population.

The report added that leopard occupancy has been reported exclusively within Protected Areas such as Similipal and Satkosia tiger reserves, Hirakud and Kotagarh wildlife sanctuaries, and their adjoining forest divisions.

"The leopard occupancy has declined from the previous occupied regions. Leopard presence was not recorded from Nayagarh and Ghumsur forest divisions in this cycle of countrywide monitoring," it observed.

## Widespread poaching

According to the report, the biggest threats to the



Three leopard hides seized by a Special Task Force of the Odisha Police last year. FILE PHOTO

dwindling leopard population are poaching of prey for bush meat, targeted poaching for tiger and leopard skins and body parts, and habitat loss due to mining and other human activities. Road accidents, incidentally, are also a significant cause for leopard

fatalities.

The high number of leopard skins seized by both the Odisha Police and the State Forest and Environment Department indicates how poaching remains the prime cause behind the disappearance of leopards in the State.

As per the information furnished by the Forest Department in the State Assembly, as many as 59 leopard skins were seized from wildlife smugglers between 2018 and 2023. Similarly, the Special Task Force (STF) of the State Police recovered 57 leopard skins from poachers and wildlife article dealers between 2019 and 2024. Put together, 116 leopards were killed for their skins. Wildlife experts added that in dozens of cases, leopard skins might have reached their destinations unnoticed and unintercepted.

## Need for State action

"The State should step up efforts towards effective patrolling, prey recovery and habitat management

outside tiger reserves, since a major population of the leopards, about 55%, lives outside the protected area network," suggested the census report.

J. N. Pankaj, Inspector-General of the police's STF, said, "After the seizure of leopard skins, we deliberately do not disclose the value of the contraband. As its value is greatly exaggerated by the media, wildlife criminals or locals get encouraged, and look at the poaching of leopards as a way of making money."

For Odisha, which has a forest cover of 52,156 sq. km, constituting 33.50% of the State's total area, effective patrolling and law enforcement are especially crucial.

# Case against M.P. MLA for 'extortion attempt'

Press Trust of India  
BHOVAL

Madhya Pradesh MLA Kamleshwar Dodiya, who heads the Bharatiya Adivasi Party (BAP), faced accusations of attempting to extort ₹1 crore from a medical store proprietor, a charge denied by him.

Facing possible arrest once police get clearance from the State Assembly Speaker, the 33-year-old legislator, in a defiant video statement, vowed to counter baseless charges, attributing them to a conspiracy by the ruling BJP government. He also affirmed his commitment to exposing deceptive medical practitioners, including

the one who filed the purportedly false complaint.

Ratlam Superintendent of Police Rahul Lodha said charges including extortion, assault for monetary gain, violence, use of offensive language, and criminal threats were filed against the MLA on Thursday.

"After following the legal procedure like informing the M.P. Assembly Speaker, the MLA will be arrested," the official said.

Mr. Dodiya, whose organisation represents tribal political factions in certain areas bordering Rajasthan, had stated in his political affidavit during the recent Assembly elections that he was contesting with a mere ₹10,000.



## RS member, team meet Myanmar rebels over road project

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

Weeks after a township of Myanmar near the Indian border was captured by the rebel Arakan Army, an Indian delegation led by Rajya Sabha member K. Vanlalvena on Thursday met with the Arakan Army inside Myanmar and held talks about the road network that is vital for a flagship Indian project aimed at firming up overland and water connectivity with Southeast Asia.

The Arakan Army revealed to the Indian side that the road corridor of the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project is at present just a muddy track. "The discussion with the Arakan Army was focused on the refugee problem that we have been facing as well as regarding the Kaladan project which is important for India. The part of the Kaladan project on the Indian side is ready



K. Vanlalvena

as the road infrastructure has been completed on our side but nothing has been done on the Myanmar side so far. We drove twelve kilometres inside Myanmar on the Kaladan road and saw that it is a dirt track," said Joseph Lalhmingthanga Chinzah, General Secretary, Central Young Lai Association (CYLA) of Mizoram who was part of the team that met the Arakan Army.

The Kaladan project is nearly \$484-million connectivity scheme which remains affected by the deteriorating security situation and technical challenges.

## JMM-Cong. govt. stands for 'jam kar ke khao', says PM at Dhanbad rally

The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and the Congress have looted the people of Jharkhand and created mountains of unaccounted assets for themselves, says Modi accusing both parties of promoting nepotism, politics of appeasement

**Amit Bhelari**  
PATNA

Accusing the ruling dispensation in Jharkhand of corruption, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday called the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM-Congress combine "anti-poor" and "anti-development", and said it believed in the "politics of nepotism and appeasement".

Speaking at a rally in Dhanbad's Sindri village as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) prepares for the Lok Sabha election, Mr. Modi said he could hear cries of "Abki baar, 400 paar (This time, above 400)" wherever he went.

"The only motive of the BJP is fast development. However, the Congress and its allies are the biggest enemies of development. The JMM-Congress com-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Minister of Tribal Affairs Arjun Munda during a meeting in Dhanbad on Friday. ANI

bine stands for 'jam kar ke khao' (eat until you are full). They have looted the people of Jharkhand and created mountains of unaccounted assets for themselves," he alleged.

The PM also alluded to the seizure of cash and gold worth nearly ₹350 crore last year from the premises of Congress Raja-

Sabha member from Jharkhand Dhiraj Sahu, saying he had "never seen such a huge amount of money in my entire life".

Mr. Sahu reportedly revised his Income Tax returns to explain the seized income and paid taxes on some of the assets.

"I had seen mountains of coal, but never such

mountains of currency notes. This money belongs to the poor tribals of Jharkhand. Would you accept if anyone takes your money? There should be strict action against such people and the looted money has to be returned," Mr. Modi told the gathering.

Sharing the stage with Union Minister of Tribal Affairs Arjun Munda, BJP State chief Babul Marandi, and other party leaders, Mr. Modi accused the JMM-Congress combine of using the people of the State as vote banks.

### 'Modi's guarantee'

"The JMM is run by one family. They think about their own children, not your children. The future of your children is my guarantee and the country trusts in Modi's guarantee. The JMM and the Congress are anti-development and

anti-people. The more they throw mud on us, the more the lotus (the BJP's symbol) will bloom," he added.

The PM also listed various development works undertaken in the State by the BJP-led Centre, including the airport and an AI-IMS in Deoghar.

"Hundred per cent electrification of railways has been done and three Vande Bharat trains have been given to Jharkhand," the PM said.

Earlier in the day, the PM inaugurated projects worth nearly ₹36,000 crore in the State, including the revived Sindri fertilizer plant. Monitored by Hindustan Urvarak and Rasayan Limited, the plant is expected to produce around 12.7 lakh tonnes of urea per annum.

He also flagged off the Deoghar-Dibrugarh train service.

## India 'deeply shocked' at attack on Gaza civilians

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

India has expressed "extreme concern" after more than 100 Palestinians were killed in an alleged Israeli shooting and bombing in northern Gaza on Thursday. India has maintained a cautious position so far, calling for a two-state solution to the crisis, and expressing opposition to terrorism since the beginning of the conflict.

India has been in contact with multiple stakeholders in this conflict, which has so far claimed more than 30,000 lives.

"We are deeply shocked at the loss of lives in Northern Gaza yesterday during delivery of humanitarian assistance. Such loss of civilian lives and the larger humanitarian situation in Gaza continues to be a cause for extreme concern," the External Affairs Ministry said in a statement on Friday.

## Displaced persons in Manipur can vote at camps

**The Hindu Bureau**  
GUWAHATI

The Election Commission (EC) of India has notified a scheme for internally displaced persons of Manipur to vote at the relief camps, the State's Chief Electoral Officer Pradeep Kumar Jha announced on Friday.

More than 60,000 people were displaced due to the violence. Most of them are lodged in relief camps.

An EC statement said that the displaced electors were still enrolled at the places where they were ordinary residents before the conflict started. After due consultations with the Union and State governments, it was decided that these electors would "continue to be borne on the electoral rolls of the Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies concerned" in Manipur, it said.

Referring to "past precedent", the EC said the internally displaced electors would be provided with the facility to vote at "special polling stations" to be set up in the relief camps.

## Centre signs five contracts to procure arms and ammunition for ₹39,125 cr.

**Dinakar Peri**  
NEW DELHI

The Union Ministry of Defence on Tuesday signed five major capital acquisition contracts worth ₹39,125.39 crore for the three services. Of the five contracts, one was with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for procurement of aero-engines for MiG-29 aircraft, two with Larsen & Toubro (L&T) for procurement of Close-in Weapon System (CIWS) and High-Power Radar (HPR) and two with BrahMos Aerospace Private Limited (BAPL) for procurement of BrahMos missiles and ship-borne BrahMos cruise missile systems.

"These deals will further strengthen indigenous capabilities, save foreign exchange and reduce dependency on foreign origin equipment manufacturers in future," the Ministry said in a statement. The contracts were exchanged in the presence of Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at South Block.

The contract for RD-33 aero engines for MiG-29 aircraft was signed with



Important pact: Rajnath Singh signing contracts with HAL for procuring aero-engine for MiG-29 aircraft. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

HAL at a cost of ₹5,249.72 crore and will be manufactured by the Koraput Division of HAL manufactured under a Transfer of Technology (TOT) licence from the Russian OEM. The programme will focus on the indigenisation of high value critical components, which would help increase the indigenous content of future Repair and Overhaul (ROH) tasks of RD-33 aero-engines, it said.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) operates three squadrons of Mi-29UPG which have been upgraded. "These aero engines are expected to fulfil the need of the IAF to sustain the operational capability of the

MiG-29 fleet for the residual service life."

Of the two contracts with L&T, the contract for CIWS is worth ₹7,668.82 crore while the deal for HPR is at a cost of ₹5,700.13 crore. The CIWS will provide terminal air defence to select locations of the country, the statement said, adding that direct and indirect employment generated by this project would be approximately an average of 2,400 persons per year for five years.

The HPRs contracted will replace existing long-range radars of the IAF with modern active aperture phased array-based HPR with advanced sur-

veillance features, according to the statement and will significantly enhance the terrestrial air defence capabilities of IAF with integration of sophisticated sensors capable of detection of small radar cross-section targets. "It will be a boost to indigenous radar manufacturing technology as it would be first of its kind radar built by the private sector in India," the statement said. "The direct and indirect employment generated by this project would be approximately an average of 1,000 people/year over five years."

Two contracts were signed with BAPL, one for the procurement of missiles for ₹19,518.65 crore and procurement of ship-borne BrahMos system for ₹988.07 crore.

"These missiles would be utilised to meet combat outfit and training requirements of the Navy. This project is likely to generate employment of nine lakh man-days in Joint Venture entity and around 135 lakh man-days in ancillary industries [including MSMEs]," the Defence Ministry said.

## India to establish international alliance to protect big cats

**Jacob Koshy**  
NEW DELHI

The Union Environment Ministry plans to set up and coordinate an International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA), along the lines of the International Solar Alliance, an India-headquartered initiative to promote solar installations globally. The Union Cabinet approved the proposal on Thursday.

"India's global leadership in tiger conservation has been recognised. The IBCA, which will be headquartered in India and to which India has already committed ₹150 crore [for five years], will lead initiatives to disseminate good practices in conserving big cats," Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav said on Friday.

Globally, the 'big cats' include the tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, puma, jaguar, and cheetah.

### 16 nations

There is currently a gap in many 'big cat' countries in availing resources, and in the optimal use of practices and processes. There is



So far, as many as 16 countries have given their written consent to be part of the IBCA. AFP

no international body addressing the conservation challenges of big cats across their range of habitats. The pioneering tiger and other big cat conservation good practices which have been evolved in India may be replicated in many other range countries, Mr. Yadav said.

So far, 16 countries have given their written consent to be part of the IBCA. There are 96 countries that harbour 'big cats' and the alliance is also open to other countries, conservation organisations, scientific organisations, businesses, and corporates interested in supporting 'big cats'.

The advantages of membership, an accompanying document noted, are a central common repository for technical know-how and a corpus of funds. The alliance will strengthen existing species-specific inter-governmental platforms, networks, and transnational initiatives on conservation and protection. Frontline staff in member-countries will be trained in eliciting local support for big-cat conservation, and research and development in wildlife monitoring. Communities living near forests will be trained in developing ecotourism and livelihood opportunities.

## Centre's housing scheme for tribal groups facing hurdles due to lack of accurate data

**Sobhana K. Nair**  
NEW DELHI

Trying to collect data on possible beneficiaries while simultaneously implementing the project is slowing down the housing component of PM Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyaan (PM-JANMAN).

Of the nearly five lakh houses that were to be constructed, the government had set a target of sanctioning 2.5 lakh by February 15. But more than a fortnight later, only 1.59 lakh houses could be sanctioned.

Going into an election year, this scheme is being implemented at a lightning speed. The PM-JANMAN was announced in the Union Budget in 2023 and was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on November 15, with the target of rolling it out by January 15.

As *The Hindu* reported on February 17, the government relied on the PM Gati



A tribal house at Lanjigarh block in Kalahandi district of Odisha. BISWARANJAN ROUT

Shakti portal to estimate the total population of 75 tribes, which have been grouped under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) across the country. The government has three different estimates for the total PVTG population - 28 lakh to begin with in November, which increased to 36.5 lakh by mid-January and ballooning further to 44.64 lakh by January-end.

Based on the numbers given by the Gati Shakti app, the State governments were given a month to conduct their own survey be-

ginning from December 15. They were asked to come back to the Centre with an action plan by January 15, so that the sanctioning of houses could begin from January 25.

A majority of the States, according to sources, began work with half-completed surveys to meet the deadline. "As we are going along, there are many discrepancies between the data with the Tribal Affairs Ministry and ours. We have been told that for now, we can sanction houses only in the villages notified by the Centre, till the two databases are reconciled," a senior official from Kerala explained.

For example, Madhya Pradesh, in multiple letters to the Union government, has flagged the fear that many beneficiaries will be left out. The State government has listed out several instances where the PVTGs are found in villages outside the ones notified by

the Centre. Kedar Singh, Director, Madhya Pradesh Rural Development Department, explained that since the count started, PVTGs have been found in 24 district against the initial figure of 16 districts. Fifty thousand additional households have been identified by the State which are eligible for the scheme. Tripura also has pointed out similar problems.

"The population is never static. Especially since these groups fall under the most vulnerable category, they migrate regularly looking for employment. We are trying to ensure that every eligible household is covered," Sandeep Rathore, Secretary of Tripura Rural Development Department, explained.

The scheme has a total outlay of ₹24,104 crore to be spent over three years, of which nearly 80% is only for construction of houses and roads.

## Food Corporation to spend ₹15 crore in five States to buy foodgrain bags with PM photo

**Maitri Porecha**  
NEW DELHI

In the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the Union government is spending around ₹15 crore in five States to procure bags with the photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that would be used to distribute foodgrains under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY).

Activist Ajay Bose received replies under the Right to Information (RTI) Act that the regional offices of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) in Rajasthan, Sikkim, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya have finalised tenders for procuring "woven laminated bags with an indicative logo of Mr. Modi" to distribute foodgrains.

Under the PMGKAY, the government distributes free foodgrains to about 81.35 crore beneficiaries of Antyodaya Anna Yojana



The Rajasthan office of the FCI has ordered 1.07 crore bags at an estimated cost of ₹13.29 crore. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

and Priority Households. The Union government claims that over 75 crore people benefited each year under the PMGKAY in 2020-21 and 2021-22.

According to the reply, the Rajasthan office of the FCI has ordered 1.07 crore synthetic bags, each capable of holding 10 kg of grain, at a cost of ₹12.375 per bag, with the total expenditure being ₹13.29 crore. Similarly, the Meghalaya office has awarded

the tender to procure 4.22 lakh bags at ₹12.5 apiece, to Plascom Industries LLP, with the total spending being ₹52.75 lakh.

Another company named S.S.S. Services has bagged tenders for both Mizoram and Tripura at a slightly higher price of ₹14.3 per bag.

The FCI's regional office in Shillong stated in the RTI reply that Mizoram would procure 1.75-lakh Modi-branded bags for ₹25 lakh,

while Tripura spent ₹85.51 lakh on 5.98 lakh bags.

The FCI's regional office in Sikkim said Injecto Polymers Pvt. Ltd. has been selected for supply of PMGKAY bags in the State, but the process is pending as bags are still being produced. For Sikkim, the FCI is looking to procure 98,000 bags at ₹14.65 apiece, while spending ₹14.35 lakh.

"For West Bengal region, selection of company for production of bags is under process," the RTI reply stated.

"During the free grain distribution under PMGKAY that started in 2020 when the pandemic began, unbranded 50-kg jute sacks were used to disburse grain. The branding of bags with faces of political figures has begun in 2024, ahead of the election," said an official in the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.



# PM questions silence of INDIA bloc leaders on Sandeshkhali

Modi says Opposition leaders have closed their eyes, mouth, and ears; accuses Trinamool of betraying the women of Sandeshkhali; he urges people to teach the party a lesson in LS election

**Shiv Sahay Singh**  
KOLKATA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday targeted the Trinamool Congress government in West Bengal over the developments at Sandeshkhali, where a Trinamool leader and his supporters have been accused of sexually abusing women, attacking Enforcement Directorate officials, and grabbing land in the area.

Mr. Modi asked why the leaders of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) were silent on the issue. The Trinamool is a member of the Opposition bloc.

"All the big leaders of the INDIA alliance have closed their eyes, mouth, and ears on Sandeshkhali like the three monkeys of Gandhiji. They held meetings together at Patna, Bengaluru, and Mumbai but the leaders of the Left and the Congress sought no answers from the Chief Minister and the government [on Sandeshkhali]. They did not even spare a sight



Face to face: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee calls on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in Kolkata on Friday. ANI

for the women at Sandeshkhali," Mr. Modi said at a public meeting at Arambagh in Hooghly district. He also accused Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge of allegedly saying that "such things happen in Bengal".

"The whole country is sad and angry after seeing what Trinamool, which beats the drum of 'Maa, Mati, and Manush', has done to the sisters of Sandeshkhali. They should be ashamed of what they have done at Sandeshkhali," Mr. Modi said.

Referring to Sheikh Shahjahan, prime accused in the Sandeshkhali incident who was on the run

for two months, Mr. Modi said: "There must have been someone who was trying to protect him. Will you forgive such a Trinamool? We have to reply to every hurt with votes," Mr. Modi said.

He said the West Bengal ruling party had become arrogant because it felt that it had the support of a particular vote bank. "On this occasion, Muslim women and children will throw away the Trinamool," he said. He added the Trinamool had introduced a "new model of corruption in West Bengal, which the party has institutionalised with the active protection of the administration".

## Bengal CM meets Modi, terms it a 'courtesy call'

**Shiv Sahay Singh**  
KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Friday called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Raj Bhavan in Kolkata and said the meeting was less about politics and that they had engaged in a chat.

The Prime Minister is on a two-day visit to the State.

The leaders met amidst heightened political tension in the State over the Sandeshkhali unrest. Speaking to mediapersons outside Raj Bhavan, the Chief Minister said, "It was a courtesy call. Since I could not go to RCGC (Royal Calcutta Golf Club to receive the Prime Minister), I came here." She also added that since election has not been announced, she can call on the Prime Minister.

# Himachal remains on the boil as Congress Minister visits Delhi

**Vikas Vasudeva**  
CHANDIGARH

A day after the Congress's central observers asserted that "all is well" within the party's Himachal Pradesh unit, it appears the crisis could be far from over with Cabinet Minister Vikramaditya Singh on Friday rushing to New Delhi, seeking a dialogue with the party "high command".

## 'Get act together'

Mr. Vikramaditya's move came even as Pratibha Singh, the State Congress chief and his mother, indicated that the Congress needs to get its act together ahead of the Lok Sabha election. He also met the rebel Congress MLAs in Haryana on Monday. As per his official programme, he is slated to meet Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari on Saturday as part of his two-day visit to Delhi.

The political turmoil in Himachal Pradesh started when six Congress legislators cross-voted in favour of the BJP in the Rajya Sabha elections on February 27. They were later disqualified from the Assembly by

Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania.

After the cross-voting, Mr. Vikramaditya announced – and then took back – his resignation, bringing the leadership tussle in the State Congress unit to the fore.

On Thursday, the party asserted that differences had been resolved and the government would complete its tenure. However, a day after the assurances, a meeting of Mr. Vikramaditya with some of the disqualified Congress MLAs in Haryana's Panchkula at a private hotel on Friday was being keenly watched. The presence of Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar's publicity advisor Tarun Bhandari with Mr. Vikramaditya too raised eyebrows. Mr. Vikramaditya later went to Delhi, where he was expected to meet the party's central leadership.

In Shimla, Ms. Singh acknowledged that at the moment, the BJP is better placed than the Congress in terms of poll preparedness. She also expressed support for the six disqualified Congress MLAs, pointing out that they would have been hurt.

## INBRIEF



## Centre, Gujarat govt. failed the youth, says Congress president

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Friday expressed his concern over the "high suicide rate in Gujarat", and questioned the "defeating" silence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In a statement, Mr. Kharge said the data presented in the Gujarat Assembly showed that 25,000 people died by suicide in the past three years, with 500 of them being students. The Congress chief alleged that the BJP-ruled State and the Centre had failed to create new job opportunities for youths, and the data presents a "grim picture of a populace grappling with despair".

## Supreme Court rejects plea to 'digitally monitor' MPs, MLAs

The Supreme Court on Friday disagreed with a petitioner's view that Members of Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies should be "digitally monitored" to prevent instances of corruption and horse trading. Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud said lawmakers were not "convicted felons" who needed watching 24x7 lest they may flee from justice. Surely, the petitioner did not want microchips on legislators to keep track of their every movement. "There is also something called 'privacy'. They too have families," Chief Justice Chandrachud told petitioner S.N. Kundra.

# Don't make appeal on basis of caste, religion, EC tells parties

**Sreeparna Chakrabarty**  
NEW DELHI

Ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha election, the Election Commission (EC) has directed political parties, especially star campaigners, to maintain decorum while campaigning and refrain from making appeals on the basis of caste or communal politics or make false statements, which can mislead voters.

In an advisory issued to all political parties on Friday, the EC cited previous examples of such indirect violations using known methodologies to avoid strictures under the model code of conduct (MCC), and conveyed that "stern action would be taken against direct or indirect MCC violations".

The advisory comes days before the schedule for elections to the Lok



The Election Commission also asked parties not to make false statements to mislead voters.

Sabha and four State Assemblies is expected. The MCC comes into effect with the announcement of the poll dates.

The EC said in the advisory that political parties, candidates and star campaigners should not make any appeal on the basis of caste or communal feelings of the electors. No activity, which may aggravate existing differences or create mutual hatred or cause tension between dif-

ferent castes or communities, religious and linguistic groups, should be attempted.

"The political parties and leaders shall not make false statements and utterances without factual basis aimed at misleading the voters. Criticism of other parties or their workers on the basis of unverified allegations or on distortions shall be avoided," the advisory further said.

## 'No personal attacks'

It said that no aspect of the private life, not connected with the public activities, of the leaders or workers of other parties is to be criticised.

Low-level personal attacks to insult the rivals shall not be made. It also warned the parties against giving advertisements masquerading as news items in the media.

# U.S. drone sales to India progress to the next stage

**Sriram Lakshman**  
WASHINGTON DC

The possible sale of 31 MQ-9B high altitude long endurance armed unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) from U.S. company General Atomics to India progressed to the next stage after a 30-day Congressional notification period concluded on Friday. The deal, pegged at an estimated \$3.99 billion, was announced in June last year during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's State visit to Washington DC.

"The next step after the conclusion of Congressional review is for the parties to agree upon and sign a Letter of Offer and Acceptance," a U.S. State Department official told *The Hindu*. The procurement decisions and timelines were now with the Govern-



Eye in the sky: The United States approved the sale of armed drones to India at an estimated cost of \$3.99 billion. FILE PHOTO

ment of India, according to the official. With general elections looming in India, it is possible that the next steps will be on hold until May, when the poll results are expected.

The sale had run into difficulties in January, in the U.S. Congress, before the formal notification period began over allegations that Indian government agents were involved in a plot to kill Khalistani sepa-

ratist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a U.S. citizen, on American soil.

The head of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Ben Cardin, gave his approval for the deal to progress after receiving assurances from the Joe Biden-led administration that India would probe the alleged plot and cooperate with the U.S. in its own investigation.

## Will invest ₹75,000 cr. in M.P., says Adani Group

**Mehul Malpani**  
BHOPAL

The Adani Group will invest about ₹75,000 crore in Madhya Pradesh, including ₹5,000 crore in building the Mahakal Expressway between Ujjain and Bhopal, Pranav Adani, its Managing Director (Agro, Oil and Gas) and Director of Adani Enterprises, said on Friday. Mr. Adani made the announcement on the first day of a two-day investors summit, "Invest Madhya Pradesh: Regional Industry Conclave 2024", in Ujjain in the presence of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav.

Mr. Adani said that investment in the State would be made in various sectors, including roads, natural resources, cement, food processing, logistics and agri-logistics, defence manufacturing, thermal power, and renewable energy.

# Delhi HC sets aside CIC order on Ram Temple trust

**Ishita Mishra**  
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court has set aside an order issued by the Central Information Commission (CIC) that directed the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) to provide information related to tax exemptions/ deductions sought by the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, which manages the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust was set up by the Union government in February 2020 for the construction and management of the Ram Mandir, following the orders of the Supreme Court. The trust, which has 15 members, has collected about ₹3,500 crore in donations since its establishment. The temple trust disclosed that it had received donations of up to ₹25 crore since January 22, when the temple was con-



Court directive: The CIC directed the CBDT in November 2022 to share the complete details of applications filed by the Ram Temple Trust for getting Income Tax exemptions/deductions. PTI

secrated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Following a query under the Right to Information Act (RTI Act), the CIC directed the CBDT in November 2022 to share the complete details of applications filed by the Ram Temple Trust for getting exemptions/ deductions under Section 80G(2) (b) of the Income Tax Act for its donations.

The RTI application was filed by Kailash Chandra Moondra. He had also sought a copy of the trust deed, which was filed with

the applications for the above mentioned purposes.

The judgment was delivered by the single-judge Bench of Justice Subramonium Prasad on February 28, which said that it is open to the petitioner to approach the appropriate authority under the Income Tax Act Counsel representing the government maintained that the information pertaining to an assessee cannot be granted under the RTI Act in view of Section 138(1)(b) of the Income Tax Act, 1961.

# NBDSA raps 3 news channels for violating Code of Ethics

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA) has directed three TV news channels to remove videos of certain programmes on communal issues as they violated the Code of Ethics and other guidelines. Penalties have also been imposed on two of them.

With respect to a programme broadcast by *Times Now Navbharat* on May 31, 2023, the NBDSA had received a complaint alleging that it violated the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards and the principles relating to impartiality, objectivity, neutrality, and accuracy. The NBDSA imposed a fine of ₹1 lakh on the broadcaster and also directed it to remove the video from its website, YouTube, and its hyperlinks within seven days.

The second matter involved four programmes broadcast by *News18 India* in November 2022 on the issues of the Shradha Walker murder case and alleged "love jihad". Taking cognisance, the NBDSA decided to admonish the broadcaster, particularly the anchors, and imposed a fine of ₹50,000. It also directed the broadcaster to get the video removed from all online platforms within seven days of the order.

Yet another programme broadcast by *Aaj Tak* on March 31, 2023, attracted a complaint alleging a violation of the Code of Ethics. It was alleged that in the programme, the anchor failed to mention that a mosque was burnt down in Nalanda, Bihar, that Muslim shops and houses around the mosque were also burnt down, and that the cops did not arrive for several hours.

# Kamal Haasan keen on contesting on torch symbol: MNM

**The Hindu Bureau**  
CHENNAI

The suspense over which Parliamentary constituency Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) founder Kamal Haasan will choose to contest from continues, even as a number of options, including Coimbatore, have been mooted by party sources.

Mr. Haasan, last year, had expressed his wish to contest from the Coimbatore constituency. While the DMK has reportedly asked the Tamil Nadu Congress to accommodate Mr. Haasan within their quota of seats and let him contest on the Congress' 'Hand' symbol, MNM sources insist that Mr. Haasan would prefer to contest on the 'Battery Torch' symbol, as he did during the last Assembly election.

The second-rung leaders of the MNM say that



Kamal Haasan

they are not aware of the seat-sharing arrangement. Though it would be easy for Mr. Haasan to contest on the 'Hand' symbol and win, it would not benefit MNM in any way, party insiders said, adding that he was unlikely to take that route.

Political analysts, however, pointed out that it might be easier for the leader to contest on the 'Hand' symbol particularly to appeal to people in rural areas across a large Parliamentary constituency.



**IN BRIEF**



**India to see warmer summer as El Nino conditions continue**

India is likely to experience a warmer summer this year with El Nino conditions predicted to continue at least until May, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Friday. More heatwave days than normal are predicted over northeast peninsular India – Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and north interior Karnataka – and many parts of Maharashtra and Odisha, it said. The country is likely to record above-normal rainfall in March. India is likely to see above-normal maximum and minimum temperatures in most parts of the country in the March to May period, IMD Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said.

**ED freezes ₹580.78-crore assets in betting app case**

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has frozen assets worth ₹580.78 crore in connection with the “Mahadev Online Book” app case, following searches at multiple locations. The total value of attached/frozen assets in the case now stands at ₹1,296.05 crore. The fresh round of searches were carried out in Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Gurugram, Indore and Raipur. According to the agency, Hari Shankar Tibrewal from Kolkata has partnered with the promoters of Mahadev Online Book. “Security holdings worth ₹580.78 crore in the name of the entities beneficially owned by Hari Shankar Tibrewal have been frozen by the ED,” said the agency.

**SC to hear petition by Uddhav camp on March 7**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court will hear an appeal filed by the Shiv Sena Uddhav Balasahab Thackeray (UBT) party challenging the decision of the Maharashtra Assembly Speaker to dismiss disqualification petitions against Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's camp while declaring them the “real” Shiv Sena. Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud on Friday indicated that the appeal will be heard on March 7. Meanwhile, lawyers for both sides sought an early hearing. On an earlier occasion, Mr. Salve informed the court about an identical petition filed by the UBT camp in the Bombay High Court. He had questioned how the UBT could agitate an identical cause in two courts at the same time.

**Ahead of Ambani wedding bash, Jamnagar airport gets international tag for 10 days**

**Jagriti Chandra**  
NEW DELHI

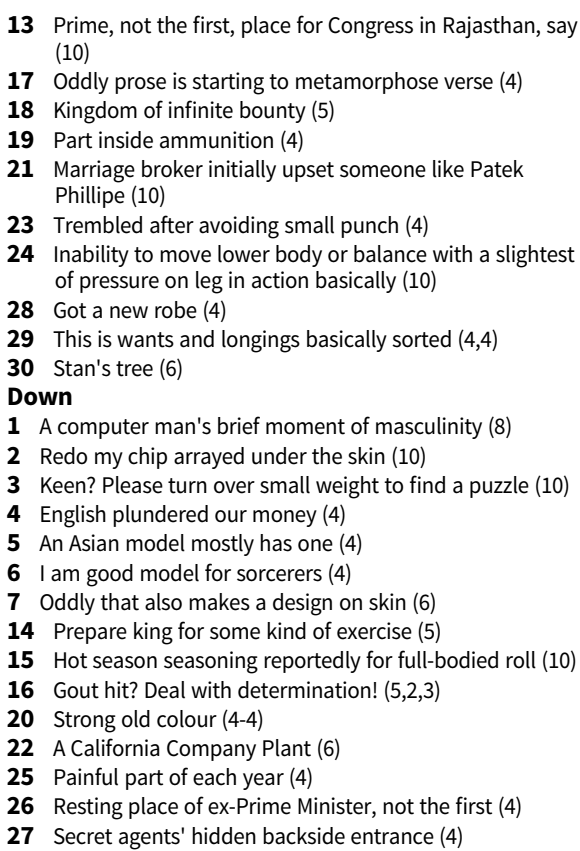
The Jamnagar airport has been declared an international airport for 10 days as global bigwigs such as Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Rihanna, Ivanka Trump and leaders from various countries descend on the Gujarat city for the three-day pre-wedding bash of Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant. Anant Ambani is the son of Reliance Industries Ltd. CMD Mukesh Ambani and Radhika Merchant is the daughter of Viren Merchant, CEO of Encore Healthcare. The airport was allowed to receive international flights from February 25 to March 5, said an airport official. The Union Health Ministry, the Finance Ministry, and the Home Ministry

have pressed in resources to set up a Custom, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) facility at the airport. Jamnagar is a defence airport where commercial flights are allowed; the Airports Authority of India (AAI) has erected a passenger terminal building for the purpose. However, for the wedding, the Air Force has permitted access to its sensitive “technical” area as well. “Up to three aircraft are being accommodated in the technical area at a given time,” said an airport official on the condition of anonymity. The civilian area of the airport can accommodate six small aircraft such as Falcon-200s or three big ones such as the Airbus A320. On Friday, a total of 140 aircraft movements (arrival and departures)

were expected, up from the usual six movements the airport witnesses, the official said. In preparation for the massive inflow of guests, the AAI has also expanded the size of its passenger building from 475 sq m to 900 sq m, allowing it to accommodate nearly 360 passengers during peak hours as compared to 180 earlier. “Expansion work was planned much earlier but were expedited for the event,” the official said. The airport has also enhanced manpower in “every vertical”. Thirty-five housekeeping staff have been added to the existing strength of 16; the State government has also doubled the deployment of security personnel from 35 to 70; ground handling agencies have raised the strength of their staff from 65 to 125.

- Across**
- Not a real way out for an argumentative guy (6)
  - Indian state, partly holy with almost every disorder (8)
  - State of love, partly joyful, leads to nothing (4)
  - Appease, support and spoil without slightest of validity (10)
  - One small piece of land, middle of sea (4)
  - Prime, not the first, place for Congress in Rajasthan, say (10)
  - Oddly prose is starting to metamorphose verse (4)
  - Kingdom of infinite bounty (5)
  - Part inside ammunition (4)
  - Marriage broker initially upset someone like Patek Philippe (10)
  - Trembled after avoiding small punch (4)
  - Inability to move lower body or balance with a slightest of pressure on leg in action basically (10)
  - Got a new robe (4)
  - This is wants and longings basically sorted (4,4)
  - Stan's tree (6)
- Down**
- A computer man's brief moment of masculinity (8)
  - Redo my chip arrayed under the skin (10)
  - Keen? Please turn over small weight to find a puzzle (10)
  - English plundered our money (4)
  - An Asian model mostly has one (4)
  - I am good model for sorcerers (4)
  - Oddly that also makes a design on skin (6)
  - Prepare king for some kind of exercise (5)
  - Hot season seasoning reportedly for full-bodied roll (10)
  - Gout hit? Deal with determination! (5,2,3)
  - Strong old colour (4-4)
  - A California Company Plant (6)
  - Painful part of each year (4)
  - Resting place of ex-Prime Minister, not the first (4)
  - Secret agents' hidden backside entrance (4)

To solve this puzzle online, get across to our crossword site. @ <https://qr.go.page.link/jjpTn>



**Google removes matrimony, streaming apps over fee row**

The company's long conflict with Indian developers over in-app payment fees enters new chapter with many apps booted out after the Supreme Court declined the developers' interim relief

**Aroon Deep**  
NEW DELHI

Tech major Google on Friday delisted certain matrimony and dating apps, including Bharat Matrimony, Truly Madly, and Quack Quack, and two streaming services, Balaji Telefilms's ALTT and the audio platform Kuku FM, after the Supreme Court declined to provide the companies behind these apps interim relief in their battle against the platform fees for in-app payments on Google Play, the company's mobile app marketplace for the Android operating system. The development is likely to come as a shock to the firms concerned, which offer a rare segment of digital services where Indian consumers are willing to spend money for entertainment and companionship. Bharat Matrimony says it has a market cap of over ₹2,300 crore. The app's founder Murugavel Janakiraman was quoted by the news outlet TechCrunch as saying that this was a “dark day” for the Internet in India and that the company would



**New requirements:** Google requires apps to pay a platform fee that could range from 11–30%. REUTERS

explore legal options. Kuku FM cofounder Vinod Kumar Meena said in a statement that Google was behaving like a ‘monopoly,’ and that the search giant was “on [a] hunt to collect rent” from developers. QuackQuack founder Ravi Mittal said in a statement that the company would comply with Google's rules to get back on the marketplace. “Unfortunately, we will have to comply with Google's current policies as there is no alternative or immediate remedy,” Mr. Mittal told *The Hindu*. “This shows the control Google has over the app

economy in a growing country like India.” In a statement, Google said that only a small number of firms have to pay any fees over 15% on payments users made in-app and that the companies that it was acting on had a long window of opportunity to comply with its rules. Google requires digital services to pay a platform fee that could range from 11-30%, depending on what payment method is used, and the size of the app's user base. Disney+ Hotstar and exam prep service Testbook, for whom the interim relief granted by the Supreme

Court came later, and is still valid, have not yet been delisted. “Today, we have over 200,000 Indian developers using Google Play who adhere to our policies ... however, for an extended period of time, 10 companies, including many well-established ones, have chosen to not pay for the immense value they receive on Google Play by securing interim protections from the court,” Google said in a statement. “After giving these developers more than three years to prepare, including three weeks after the Supreme Court's order, we are taking necessary steps to ensure our policies are applied consistently across the ecosystem, as we do for any form of policy violation globally,” the company added. Many of these developers coalesced around a rival app store effort by the Walmart-owned payments company PhonePe last month, where Sameer Nigam, the firm's CEO, boasted that no app would be required to pay platform fees and that the app marketplace would find other ways of monetising itself.

**Corporate tax cuts bring in investments, jobs, says Sitharaman**

**Vikas Dhoot**  
NEW DELHI

The government's decision to slash corporate tax rates in late 2019 was a well-considered move to attract investments that has made a lot of difference, and a major transition is under way in the industry-labour relationship, Union Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Friday. She was replying to a query on the efficacy of corporate tax cuts and the production linked incentive schemes, some of which may be fuelling capital-intensive investments that create fewer jobs, during an interaction with students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. Noting that India had a very high level of taxation for companies, the Minister said tax rates were cut with a view to bring in more investments, which in turn would create jobs and trigger a “virtuous cycle” in the economy. Many countries were “contemplating” such tax structure changes to attract investments at the time, she said, stressing that greenfield as well as brownfield investments are now happening. “Even now, I think that is the way to go forward

and ensure additional capacities are coming in areas that are going to be job-creators. If there is a perception that it may not have resulted in as many jobs as was in the olden days of investments, it is also because... even as we took this decision, we were aware the industrial revolution called 4.0 was setting in, Web 3.0 was coming in, which is now talked about as AI and GPT.”

**‘Upskilling must’**  
“The matter of fact is that industry, particularly in manufacturing, is going through a huge transition, a reset. And when resets happen, the labour force is also catching up with skills required to meet with that reset. So there will be requirement of labour... that is why the government has ramped up skilling and upskilling [for] people to get into industry,” she said. The industry, she said, wants labour to be at a different level now, as it has introduced robotics, and digitised the operations. “There is a transition and reset happening between industry and labour. If we are looking at only the old-fashioned [sectors] like cement and iron and steel... no, there are newer industries coming,” she said.

**Elephants take dead calves to be buried in untrodden paths: study**

**Rahul Karmakar**  
GUWAHATI

Elephants in the eastern Himalayan floodplains bury their calves in a ‘legs upright’ position, a new study has found. Through long-term observation, the researchers also found that elephant herds tend to avoid the paths where the carcasses were buried and take parallel routes. “We aimed to understand the peri-mortem strategy and post-mortem behaviour of the Asian elephants. The major findings reflect that the carcasses were carried by trunks and legs for a distance before being buried in a ‘legs upright’ position,” researchers said in the study published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Threatened Taxa*. Rampant environmental changes and forest destruction push Asian ele-



**Strong bond:** Elephants taking the carcass of an elephant calf for burial. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

phants (*Elephas maximus*) and their African counterparts (*Loxodonta africana*) to explore human spaces to fulfil their dietary and ecological requirements, leading to ‘novel’ elephant behaviours in shared spaces. While elephant calf burial is mentioned in African literature, it has hardly been documented in the Asian context. Parveen Kaswan, an Indian Forest Service officer posted in Alipurduar of West Bengal and Akashdeep Roy of the

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Pune studied five such cases in the northern Bengal landscape. The study area covered fragmented forests, tea estates, agricultural lands, and military establishments in the vicinity of the Gorumara Wildlife Division and Buxa Tiger Reserve. It explains the burial strategy of elephants in the irrigation drains of the tea estates. Marks on the bodies of the calves – the youngest

weighing 160 kg was three or four months old while the oldest was about 12 months and weighed 350 kg – suggested the elephants dragged them from a distance to be buried at preferred locations. The locations were irrigation drains of the tea estates where many elephants are born too, the study said. The “strange” positioning of each carcass with the legs upright could be because one or more members of a herd needed a better grip to hold and lay the calf delicately in the trench. “This strategic behaviour also reflects the care and affection of the herd member(s) towards the deceased. The behaviour suggests that in a situation of space crunch, the herd member(s) prioritise the head for the burial before the feet,” the study said.

**SUDOKU**

1								
			9	2	8	4	3	
					3		9	8
								2
			4	2		5	7	
2	6							
8	1	5		9				
	4	9	8	5	6			2

**Solution to previous puzzle**

B	I	G	A	I	S	B	E	A	T	U	P		
T	O	O	T	G	E	O	T	H	E	R	M	A	L
F	E	H	L	I	N	O	F						
N	U	T	R	I	A	A	V	I	A	T	I	O	N
E	N	R	C	I	C	W							
F	L	Y	W	E	I	G	H	T	R	A	I	L	
I													
E	R	N	E	C	A	R	P	E	D	I	E	M	
S	H	I	P	I	N	G							
A	O	S	A	C	E	W							
S	N	O	M	O	B	I	L	E	T	H	I	N	
O	E	W	N	D	E	N							
L	A	R	R	I	N	X	D	E	C	R	E	E	

**Solution to yesterday's Sudoku**

7	8	1	2	6	5	3	4	9
4	2	6	3	7	9	8	5	1
3	5	9	1	8	4	7	2	6
1	9	5	7	3	2	6	8	4
6	7	3	8	4	1	5	9	2
8	4	2	5	9	6	1	7	3
5	3	4	9	1	7	2	6	8
2	6	8	4	5	3	9	1	7
9	1	7	6	2	8	4	3	5

**FAITH**

**The message from Rama**

Dasaratha asks Sumantra to recount all that happened after he drove the chariot taking Rama, Lakshmana and Sita from Ayodhya to the forest. Sumantra conveys Rama's message to the royal family, said Navalpakkam Vasudevachariar in a discourse. “Rama wanted me to convey His respects to His father. He wanted His mother Kausalya to know that He was safe. She is the wife of Dasaratha, an Agnihotri. Thus, she must see Agni as her son, and not cry over Rama's absence. She must not harbour negative feelings against the other wives of Dasaratha,” says Sumantra. Rama's message to Bharata is that, as the future king, he must act in accordance with stipulated rules. He must obey his father and treat all the royal mothers alike. As for Lakshmana, Sumantra says the prince was very angry. He had asked what wrong Rama had done to deserve exile. Was it right to exile Rama, to please Kaikeyi? It was a decision taken without due thought. What would be the reaction of people to Dasaratha's decision to banish Rama from the kingdom, Lakshmana had wondered. The whole world would be against Dasaratha's decision, and having earned the displeasure of the whole world, could he continue to be king? Lakshmana had declared that he could no longer consider Dasaratha as his father. Rama was everything to him – brother, king, relative and father. Sita had had no words to utter. She had just shed tears, Sumantra says.





## Decoding the script

Findings from the genome sequencing must be shared widely

The Genome India Project, a project funded and coordinated by the Department of Biotechnology, announced that it had finished sequencing 10,000 Indian genomes. This means that the complete genomes – the DNA blueprint that constitutes and maintains human bodies – from 10,000 individuals were analysed to create a ‘reference’ Indian human genome. India first sequenced a human genome in 2006. In a way, the latest enterprise would be akin to the creation of the first ever detailed map of India – with all political units, key geographical and topographical features – as opposed to a world map prepared elsewhere, with India just one of several countries and devoid of granular detail. Are 10,000 individuals representative of a country of over a billion? Surely not. But for now, it is the best there is and forms a vital template, the basis on which many more insights can be prised. The most immediate application is in combating disease. In 2009, geneticists in India, as part of an international collaboration, discovered that an aberration in a protein, MYBPC3 (cardiac myosin binding protein C), was correlated with a high risk of heart failure. This genetic variant was present in approximately 4% of those of Indian ancestry – a higher than expected number given that this problematic variant is rare.

India has close to 4,500 population groups and the subcontinent’s history of being ordered along caste lines through endogamy implies that rare genetic variants, many harmful, that ordinarily through the course of evolution ought to have died out, persist. When the Human Genome Project published its reference ‘human genome’ in 2003, at a cost of nearly \$3 billion, it rang with a ‘brave-new-world’ promise of humanity having finally decoded the secrets of the genome, mapping every awry gene to a disease and a future of ‘personalised medicine’. Much of Genome India’s sales pitch reflects similar promises. However, the subsequent decades have tempered such expectations. For one, only a small fraction of disease is monogenic (determined by a single gene). Despite advances in knowledge of how rare, inherited genes caused debilitating disease, little could be done as the necessary medicines, if discovered, were usually too expensive for those in need. In other words, genome sequencing only opened up new realms of complexity. While Genome India should go beyond the 10,000 mark, it must also be truly democratic. The findings ought not be locked up in the ivory towers of academia and should involve imaginative collaborations with scientists, students, technology companies, ethicists and social scientists to push forward India’s understanding of itself.

## Vulnerable to criticism

ED’s low credibility casts a doubt on its intent behind summoning TN Collectors

The structure of the law against money laundering is bound to throw up perplexing questions about the possible violation of federal principles. One such question has arisen in Tamil Nadu, where the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is trying to find out whether illegal sand mining in the State is due to corruption and if the “proceeds” are being laundered. The Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) allows the ED to probe the money laundering aspect of crimes registered by the police in various States. Allegations of rampant illegal sand mining, either by extraction in excess of permitted limits or without any permission, are quite common in Tamil Nadu. In ruling that District Collectors are obliged to respond to summonses issued by the ED, the Supreme Court of India has underscored Tamil Nadu’s duty to cooperate with investigations under central laws. However, this may not necessarily mean that the ED’s attempt to assess the likely loss to the exchequer as a result of unchecked mining is within its jurisdiction. A final determination may be required on this. The top court has stayed the operation of a Madras High Court order, which had earlier stayed the summonses to the Collectors. The State government and the District Collectors concerned had filed writ petitions in the High Court against the “usurpation” of the State’s powers by the central agency and the validity of the summonses.

The Court has now described these petitions as thoroughly misconceived and that the High Court’s order was due to “utter misconception of law”. It has cited Section 50 of PMLA on the ED’s power to summon any person to give evidence or produce any record necessary for the investigation. It has noted that the probe is based on first information reports registered in Tamil Nadu, and some of the sections in those cases were scheduled offences under the PMLA. However, it does not take into account the High Court’s reasoning, based on the Court’s verdict upholding the PMLA in *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary vs Union of India* (2022), that the summonses indicated that the “proceeds of crime” have not been identified at all, and that the probe was nothing more than a “fishing expedition” to find out whether any scheduled offence has been committed. The High Court had cited the 2022 judgment on the point that the ED cannot pursue cases on a notional basis, on the assumption that an offence has been committed. While asking officials to cooperate with an investigation is unobjectionable in itself, it cannot be forgotten that the ED’s low credibility and obvious lack of independence make its actions vulnerable to the criticism of being biased against States ruled by the political adversaries of those in power at the Centre.

# Change and continuity in India’s Palestine policy

Historically, India has been a firm supporter of the Palestine cause. And even when India’s relationship with Israel flourished in the past three decades, New Delhi has maintained a careful balance between its new partnership and historical commitment towards Palestine. In recent years, there have been questions on whether India is abandoning this balance and tilting towards the Jewish state in a changing West Asia, where even Arab nations have been ready to sidestep the Palestine question for better bilateral ties with Israel.

Immediately after the October 7 Hamas attack in Israel, in which at least 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a post on X, said he was “deeply shocked by the news of [the] terrorist attack”. He said, “We stand in solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour.”

Mr. Modi, who became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel in 2017, has a good personal chemistry with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Supporters of Mr. Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hardly conceal their admiration towards Israel’s aggressive security model. On October 26, barely three weeks after the Hamas attack, India abstained from a vote at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that called for an “immediate, durable and sustainable humanitarian truce” in Gaza. India explained its stand by saying that there was no explicit condemnation of the October 7 “terror attack in the resolution”. All these factors suggested that India’s historical policy towards Palestine was undergoing a paradigm shift.

### Evolving approach

India’s Palestine policy has evolved over the years. When the UN General Assembly voted on a resolution to partition Palestine into a Jewish state, an Arab state and an international city (Jerusalem) in November 1947, India, along with Pakistan and the Arab bloc, voted against it. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had compared the settler Zionists in historical Palestine to the Muslim League of undivided India. His position was that India, having gone through the horrors of Partition, should not support the partition of Palestine. But when the state of Israel was declared in May 1948, India swiftly adopted a pragmatic line: in 1950, it recognised Israel, but stopped short of establishing full diplomatic relations. Throughout the Cold War, India, an advocate of Third World autonomy, was one of the most vocal supporters of the Palestine cause.

After it established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, bilateral ties between New Delhi and Tel Aviv began to deepen and broaden (today, Israel is one of India’s major defence and technology partners). But India publicly



Stanly Johny

maintained its support for “a negotiated solution, resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel, as endorsed in the Arab Peace Initiative, the Quartet Road map and relevant UNSC Resolutions” – this means that India supported the creation of a Palestine state with East Jerusalem as its capital and based on the 1967 borders.

This position has evolved further after Mr. Modi became Prime Minister. In February 2018, when he visited Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, he called for dialogue to find a permanent solution to the crisis, but stopped short of saying anything on the status of Jerusalem or borders. It does not mean that India supports Israel’s claim over the whole of Jerusalem (New Delhi voted against the U.S. decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital), but it will not talk about the contentious issues such as the capital and border any more, while remaining a partner of Israel and a supporter of the two-state solution. Realpolitik displaces the moral content of India’s Palestine policy.

### After October 7

A close analysis of India’s voting record at the UN, post-October 7, and the statements made by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) suggests that this position of balancing has not changed. It is neither a strong moral critic, like Brazil or South Africa, of the way Israel is conducting the war, nor a mute spectator or enabler of Israel, like the United States or the United Kingdom.

A few days after Mr. Modi’s tweet declaring solidarity with Israel over the “terror attack”, the MEA stated that India backed “a sovereign, independent viable state of Palestine”. After its first abstention, there were at least four votes at the UNGA on Israel.

On November 12, 2023, India voted in favour of a resolution that condemned Israeli settlements “in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan”. Two weeks later, New Delhi voted in favour of another resolution that expressed “deep concern” over Israel’s continuing occupation of Syria’s Golan Heights. On December 12, India supported a resolution that called for “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire”. And on December 19, it voted for the Palestinian right to self-determination.

The voting record speaks for itself. One cannot have a two-state solution if Israeli settlements continue in Palestinian territories. And the only path towards a solution is diplomacy, not war, as there is no balance of power between Israel, the mightiest military in West Asia, and the Palestinian militants. So, in essence, if one supports the two state-solution, there should be a

India’s historical policy towards Palestine has been evolving, but a permanent fix to the Palestine question should not be lost sight of

# India’s burgeoning death penalty crisis

With 561 prisoners on death row at the end of 2023, India’s death row population has continued to rise to reach its highest-ever numbers since 2004. In an unprecedented trend, the Supreme Court of India acquitted nearly 55% of the death row prisoners (six prisoners) in the cases it heard in 2023. This development must be understood alongside the Court initiative (in September 2022) to convene a Constitution Bench to reform death penalty sentencing. However, given the continued evidence of the broken state of sentencing in India’s courts, the potential of this Bench to truly turn things around appears uncertain. Instead, the high rate of acquittals with a skyrocketing death row population must compel the Court to consider whether India’s death penalty reform can ever be limited to the question of sentencing.

### More commutations and acquittals

Data from Project 39A’s 2023 annual statistics on the death penalty show that the Court’s attempts to reform sentencing through its directions in *Manoj vs The State Of Madhya Pradesh* (May 2022) have failed to trickle down to trial courts for the second year in a row. In 2023, trial courts imposed 86.96% of death sentences in the absence of information pertaining to the accused that was mandated in *Manoj*.

Additionally, the High Courts continued their reluctance in confirming death sentences in 2023. While the Supreme Court did not confirm the death sentence in any of the 10 cases it decided, only one death sentence was confirmed across High Courts. This follows the findings from the Death Penalty India Report (2016) that ultimately, 4.9% of the death sentences imposed by trial courts between 2000-15 were confirmed at the appellate level. Over the years, a majority of the death cases before the Court have resulted in the Court upholding convictions, but commuting the



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Death penalty sentencing reform initiated by the Supreme Court of India has failed to percolate to trial courts

death sentences to life imprisonment.

The acquittals of death row prisoners by the Supreme Court deserve particular attention. Despite comprising a smaller proportion of death cases at the Court in previous years, these decisions underscore systemic failures by the police, prosecution, and trial courts. Acquittals have been outcomes of fabricated evidence, manipulated first information reports, the possibility of tampered forensic evidence and dubious recoveries of incriminating evidence by the police. What made the year 2023 particularly striking is the dominance of acquittals in the Court’s death penalty decisions in the year.

The Court has confined itself to case-specific reprimands in acquittal decisions, without acknowledging systemic problems within which the death penalty is being administered. When it comes to sentencing, the Court has been more willing to recognise systemic concerns plaguing the death penalty. The decision of the Court in September 2022 to send crucial issues surrounding death penalty sentencing to a Constitution bench reflects that acknowledgement. However, the growing number of acquittals by the Supreme Court in death penalty cases creates an urgency to recognise the very high chances of error in our criminal system. Repeated instances of acquittals from death row must force us to reconsider the risk we are taking in a system such as ours.

### State of the prisoner

Death row prisoners live in constant distress due to an ever-looming fear of execution. They are subjected to constant violence, ridicule and humiliation within prisons. Prison policies segregating them from work, education and leisure remove the little means available for them to cope under such dehumanising circumstances. The death row experience comes with life-long

call for an immediate end to violence, support dialogue, condemn settlements and, in principle, back Palestinian right to self determination. This is what India has done, unlike the U.S., which claims to be supporting the two-state solution while voting against all resolutions at the UN and refusing to back the ceasefire call.

### India’s interests

The support for the Palestine cause, even if limited, is rooted in tangible national interests. Israel’s ongoing offensive in Gaza, which has killed over 30,000 people, wounded some 70,000 and displaced nearly 90% of Gaza’s population of 2.3 million, is one of the gravest humanitarian tragedies of the 21st century. Israel, despite this rogue behaviour, manages to avoid the wrath of the international laws and system mainly because of the unconditional support it enjoys from the U.S. But America’s support for Israel and Tel Aviv’s disregard for Palestinian lives and international laws have created strong reactions in the Global South. South Africa took Israel to the International Court of Justice, while Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva accuses Israel of committing “genocide” in Gaza. China has repeatedly called for a ceasefire, while Russia is hosting different Palestinian factions, including Hamas.

India, which aspires to be a leader of the Global South, cannot ignore these voices and sentiments. That is why External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said at the Munich Security Conference last month that Israel “should be and should have been mindful of the civilian casualties in Gaza”, which is India’s sharpest criticism of the Israel war till now.

The October 7 attack and Israel’s retaliatory war have also turned the strategic clock in the region back. Before October 7, India was gearing up to work in the post-Abraham Accords strategic reality through its cooperation with the Arabs, Israelis and Americans. But further Arab-Israel reconciliation is now on hold. The U.S.’s reputation stands as tarnished as that of Israel. If Saudi-Israel normalisation is not taking place, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) will have to wait. If the crisis persists and Houthis continue to target vessels in the Red Sea, it would create lasting economic pains for India. A prolonged war in Gaza would also enhance risks of a wider conflict in the region, involving Iran, Israel and America, who are all India’s partners. An immediate end to the war, restoration of order and stability in West Asia and a permanent fix to the Palestine question are as much in India’s interests as anybody else’s in West Asia. This should be the guiding core of India’s Act West policy.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### ‘Drive’ for one-party rule

Since the formation of the government by the BJP in 2014, the party seems to have launched a full-fledged drive to ‘organise’ defections especially from Congress governments. There seems to be both coercive tactics and the carrot and stick policy. The aim of the BJP leadership seems to be to eliminate the Opposition, come what may, and establish a one-party regime. One has

the Rajya Sabha elections in Himachal Pradesh besides the election of Mayor in Chandigarh Municipal Corporation as examples. The Opposition parties should understand that there is an existential fight to save democracy. **S.K. Khosla**, Chandigarh

The Rajya Sabha elections saw the spectacle of legislators brazenly giving vent to their dissidence by

cross-voting in favour of the BJP’s candidates, signifying the decline in the internal structure of the parties in the Opposition bloc. It is wrong to blame the Bharatiya Janata Party for ‘engineering and exploiting’ the internal strife in the Opposition bloc. Instead, these parties have to shift gears to gain the confidence of their cadres and face emerging challenges. **Ravi Mathur**, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

### Health and industry

The verdict against the reopening of the Vedanta Sterlite copper unit in Thoothukudi is a great victory for the people, social activists (like Professor Fatima Babu) and political leaders who were involved in this struggle for over two decades. One cannot forget the ‘gunning down of a protest’ that led to the killing of 13 people. The fight has been a long one with constant threats from

vested interests.

**Tharcus S. Fernando**, Chennai

### Study on obesity rates

*The Lancet* study (Inside pages, March 1) confirms what is known. Work pressure, a lack of time and an advertising of ‘wrong foods’ are what make fast foods enticing. A main reason for the popularity of western junk food is that celebrities endorse these products. Policymakers

should give incentives to healthy products.

**Veena Shenoy**, Thane, Maharashtra

### The course of life

It is ironic that Santhan, a convict in the Rajiv Gandhi case, breathed his last in a hospital named after the very leader whose assassination he was associated with. Life is strange.

**P.G. Menon**, Chennai



# GROUND ZERO



The Vrushabhavathy river in Bengaluru city. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

# India's parched IT capital

Households in Bengaluru, dependent on water supply from the Cauvery river or water tankers, are preparing for the current water crisis to worsen as the city stares at a long, hot summer. **K.C. Deepika** and **K.V. Aditya Bharadwaj** report on the worries of the people at a time of drought across the State



**S**harfunnisa, 70, a resident of Varthur in south-eastern Bengaluru, has been struggling for the last one month to arrange for water for her family's daily needs. As the prices of water tankers have shot up exponentially over the last one month, a few houses in the neighbourhood, all one-room tenements, have now decided to order one water tanker and share the costs.

"A 4,000-litre tanker was about ₹500-₹600 a month ago; now it costs ₹1,000. Over and above this, we need to buy drinking water cans. Our water expenses grew to over ₹4,000 in February. And this is just the beginning of summer. The water tanker operators have been warning us that the costs may double soon," says Samina Taj, 35, another resident of the area.

Households in Bengaluru, dependent on water supply from the Cauvery river or water tankers, are preparing for the situation to worsen as the city stares at a severe summer.

Ganga P., a senior citizen who lives in an independent house in east Bengaluru, says she washes clothes less often, preferring instead to hang them out to dry in the hot sun if they have been worn only for a few hours. She also hand-washes clothes as far as possible, to save water. "I have stopped using water to clean the veranda of my house. I do not mop the floor daily to save water so I don't have to buy a tanker," she says.

Whitefield and Varthur, which house the Information Technology corridor in eastern Bengaluru, are some of the worst-affected areas by the drinking water crisis. The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the city's civic body, has directed officials to dig borewells in 58 areas which are reeling under the crisis. Of them, 16 are in Mahadevapura, 25 in R.R. Nagar, five in Bommanahalli, and three each in the Yelahanka and Dasarahalli zones.

No one has been spared; water has become a rare commodity even for those who live in posh apartments and can afford to buy it easily. Unlike the older parts of the city where, despite the drought, the State government has prioritised drinking water needs over irrigation and assured supply till the next monsoon, these areas are not yet serviced by piped water supply from the Cauvery river. On account of unplanned growth over the last two decades, these regions have been stretched beyond their capacity. Basic infrastructure such as drinking water and underground drainage are absent, so they rely on borewells and water tankers.

Karnataka saw a few consecutive years of surplus rain until 2023 when the monsoon failed. The underground water table levels are depleted,



A 4,000-litre tanker was about ₹500-₹600 a month ago; now it costs ₹1,000. Over and above this, we need to buy drinking water cans.

**SAMINA TAJ**  
Resident, Varthur

aggravating the water crisis. The borewells of the BBMP are the source of water ATMs, or easy access points to vend safe water. As they have also dried up, the civic body has put up posts at several water ATMs stating that one person can take only one pot of water a day.

### Down to a trickle

In these areas, water is the most commercialised and politicised commodity. Even before these neighbourhoods joined the city's civic limits in 2007, the local panchayats had dug borewells and laid pipelines to supply water; these are now overseen by the BBMP. But many of these borewells have gone dry or the force of water is down to a trickle, disrupting service in many areas.

"The water man (who is in charge of releasing water in specific areas) acts like a king. We need to go and beg at his house for water. We pay the water board. But he doesn't give us water unless we pay him," says Radha S., 45. She adds that the local MLA and former councillor also target blocks that have not voted for them. In such a scenario, water tankers have become ubiquitous.

In the absence of any regulatory mechanism, the prices of water tankers have been erratic. Tankers usually come in three capacities – 4,000 litres, 6,000 litres, and 12,000 litres. The prices of these have shot up to ₹1,000, ₹1,500 and over ₹2,000, respectively. For the first time, the price has crossed the ₹2,000-mark in the city.

The cost of water tankers has shot up to such an extent that even residents of apartments have



Women and children collect potable drinking water from a public tap at Nayandahalli off Mysuru road, in Bengaluru. The water is supplied by the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board. K. MURALI KUMAR

been complaining that sourcing water is becoming increasingly hard and their monthly maintenance costs are going up. Many of them have started rationing water to flats. They use recycled water for gardening and have stopped filling up their swimming pools. Recently, an internal note by an apartment on Kanakapura Road, south of Bengaluru, went viral. It notified its members that water would be supplied only after 11.30 a.m. after the morning peak hours, to conserve water.

Prasad, a resident of an apartment community in Whitefield, says their borewells have dried up, forcing them to rely on water tankers. "A few days ago, the tankers that used to supply water stopped taking our calls. They suggested we contact other operators. When we did that, those operators quoted far higher prices. We had no option but to buy water at the new rates," he says.

### Price cap for water tankers

Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar recently said that 25% of the city's water needs are met by water tankers. The civic administration has made registration of all water tankers in the city, an estimated 3,500, mandatory by March 7. It has announced that it will cap the tanker prices after a meeting with stakeholders in the next few days.

But water tanker dealers dispute the 'tanker mafia' tag, used by citizens and even political parties. They argue that as borewells have gone dry, water tankers are now going at least 40 kilometres away from the city to fetch water.

Praveen Reddy, a water tanker businessman in Marathahalli, an eastern suburb, says on average, a water tanker's journey to the source and to the customer has gone up to 50 km from less than 30 km a year ago. "If we were taking half an hour to fill a 12,000 litre tanker from a borewell earlier, now it takes over three hours as the water has depleted. The prices that landowners are charging for digging borewells have also shot up. We are working under tremendous pressure and are unable to meet the rising demand," he says. He narrates the story of how the residents of an apartment recently waylaid a tanker demanding that it unload the water to them at any cost.

Jagadish Reddy, a social activist from Varthur, says a decade ago, their village had been the site of commercial extraction of water. Varthur had been supplying water to the entire IT corridor and beyond, including areas 15-20 km away.

"We did not realise how it would affect the village resources then. Today, the underground water table in the village has depleted extensively and water tankers have to go nearly 20 km beyond Varthur, up to Chikka Tirupati, to fetch water now," he says.

Reddy adds that due to rapid development of the region, the residents had no choice but to allow commercial extraction of water to cater to the burgeoning population. "Some villages will have to pay the price. Now a few surrounding villages are not allowing commercial extraction, forcing tankers to move farther away," he says.

The civic administration has now stepped in to provide some solace to the poor. Bengaluru's Chief Civic Commissioner Tushar Giri Nath has announced that invoking the Disaster Management Act, 2005, the administration will commandeer 200 water tankers over the next few days to supply free water to 58 dry patches identified by the administration.

Of the 10,955 borewells drilled by the civic administration in the city, 1,214 have completely dried up. In 3,700 others, the water levels have dropped. The civic body has now released ₹131

crore to redrill some of these borewells and dig new ones in the outer zones. But as the aquifer levels have depleted, this may be too little too late.

### The changing face of the city

While the IT capital reels under a water crisis not seen in recent times, experts say this was only waiting to happen. Rashmi Kulranjan and Shashank Palur, hydrologists at WELL Labs under the Urban Water Programme, point out that though there are reports of water shortages in other cities due to the variability of rainfall from the southwest monsoon last year, cities such as Delhi and Kolkata are not as vulnerable due to their proximity to major rivers. "Bengaluru is not situated near a major river or coast. So, it relies on an expensive and unreliable source of water that is located 90 km away and 350 metres below the city's elevation. Half its supply is still provided by groundwater sources. And this fluctuates significantly according to the season," says Shashank.

Bengaluru was not always dependent on networks of pipelines or borewells pumping water from afar or from below the ground, says Rashmi. "Most of the city's water bodies were originally 'tanks', rainwater harvesting structures constructed mainly to serve irrigation and livestock purposes. The undulating terrain of the city allowed for man-made cascading lake systems to be built; these played a critical role in managing the availability and surplus of water. Despite centuries of effort that went into building the region's water resilience, lakes eventually began to lose their importance with the introduction of piped water supply," she says.

Shashank says with rapid urbanisation, lakes have been directly encroached on or are drying out. "This has not only resulted in a more parched city, but also aggravated the risk of flooding. The lakes and storm water drains have also become a dumping ground for treated and untreated sewage from the buildings around them. This affects the possibility of using them to capture rainwater or storm water," he says.

The loss of the city's blue-green infrastructure – water bodies and parks and green spaces that allow water to percolate – has resulted in a significant underutilisation of rainwater harvesting and capture methods, he adds. The highly polluted Bellandur lake, one of the largest in the city, is a prime example.

Ironically, as the two of them point out, Bengaluru is situated between two river basins. To its west are Vrushabhavathy and Arkavathy, tributaries of the Cauvery, and on its east is the Ponninar or Dakshin Pinakini. But Vrushabhavathy, the only river originating in the city, has become polluted due to sewage and effluent discharge.

T.V. Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, says Bengaluru receives annual rainfall of 700-850 millimetres, which amounts to 15 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) of rainwater. The city requires 18 TMC of water, which means that 70% of the water required comes from rainwater.

"We need to make rainwater harvesting mandatory, rejuvenate lakes on priority so that we can store rainwater, ensure complete treatment of domestic sewage, apply the 'polluter pays' principle to industries discharging untreated industrial effluents as per the Water Act of 1974, create mini forests of 1-2 hectares with native species in each ward, and re-establish inter-connectivity among lakes by evicting all encroachments of storm water drains," he says.



If we were taking half an hour to fill a 12,000 litre tanker from a borewell earlier, now it takes over three hours as the water level has depleted. The prices that landowners are charging for digging borewells have also shot up.

**PRAVEEN REDDY**  
Owner of a water tanker business

Rashmi says the Cauvery currently supplies 1,460 million litres per day (MLD). An additional 775 MLD will be added to the supply when the latest stage of infrastructure is completed.

"However, water levels in the river fluctuate seasonally. The reservoir capacity in the Cauvery basin has decreased to 40%, even before the onset of summer. The Bengaluru water board spends huge amounts as electricity charges to pump the water into the city. Additionally, the feasibility report for the construction of the Mekadatu reservoir, aimed at augmenting water supply to the city, reveals that the project entails the submergence of 4,996 hectares of wildlife, forest, and revenue land," she says.

Instead of expending huge resources to source water from afar, other options must be considered, including those within the city, Shashank says. "The city produces 1,941 million litres of waste water every day. This is likely to go up as the population increases. Treating and reusing it could significantly cut down on freshwater demand and reduce the city's vulnerability to water scarcity. Bengaluru, notably, is unique for its number of on-site sewage treatment plants at apartment buildings and commercial establishments, but there is a need for better standards and mechanisms to treat and reuse this water more effectively. Bengaluru could also benefit from adopting strategies employed by other water-scarce cities like Chennai, which have proactively implemented indirect potable reuse by harnessing surface water bodies," he says.

Replenishing groundwater is another crucial step to improve the city's water security, says Rashmi, adding that to address the seasonal fluctuations in groundwater levels, utilising open spaces such as fallow land and green areas to recharge shallow aquifers with rainwater during the monsoon season could prove beneficial.

Finally, environment literacy should be enhanced, Ramachandra adds. "Conservation, waste minimisation, and nature-based solutions should be part of our daily routine," he says.



## MADHYA PRADESH



**Swift action:** A building belonging to Pyare Miyan, a 68-year-old man accused of raping minor girls and running a sex racket, being demolished by the district administration in Bhopal on July 14, 2020. He was convicted in the case and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2022. A.M. FARUQUI

# Fast-tracked bulldozer justice

The heavy-duty vehicle's sharp teeth have become a symbol of control and dominance, and are allegedly being used as a political instrument in Madhya Pradesh; **Mehul Malpani** speaks to victims, who say the administration and police do not follow due legal procedures before the earth movers arrive at their doorstep

In the early hours of December 13, 2022, when Rahul Langri, a 42-year-old money-lender in Madhya Pradesh, was in jail in connection with an alleged case of abetment to suicide, bulldozers arrived at two houses his family members lived in, and broke down about 20 feet of their front portions. The properties were owned by Langri's mother, Vimla Gurjar, 65, and wife, Radha, 38. The Ujjain Municipal Corporation (UMC) said they had been built without government clearance.

"They had served notices to my family on the night of December 12, and arrived just a few hours later. My mother, wife, and three children kept crying in front of the officials, but nobody listened to them," says Langri, adding that the authorities came with several police personnel, forcing the neighbours into silence.

Bulldozers have been the symbol of hasty 'justice' in several BJP-ruled States in north India, with the administration and security forces swooping down to demolish a person's home, days or sometimes hours after they are accused of a crime. The wrath of the bulldozer in M.P. has been largely faced by the socially and economically vulnerable. In August 2022, news website *Newslandry* had published a report saying that 332 properties had been demolished in the State since March 2020, of which 223 belonged to Muslims; 92 in April 2022 alone, after Ram Navami.

On February 12, 2024, the Madhya Pradesh High Court came down heavily on the UMC over the demolition of properties owned by Langri's family, and ordered the administration to pay ₹1 lakh each to the owners as compensation.

"My elderly mother and wife did the rounds of the court and government offices when I was behind bars," says Langri, adding that he gets emotional just thinking about it. In his observations, Justice Vivek Rusa of the Indore Bench of the High Court noted that it had become "fashionable" for local administrations to demolish houses "without complying with the principle of natural justice" and then publicising them in the press. The High Court also pulled up civic officials, including the Municipal Commissioner and the Building Officer, flagging the violation of norms.

The court added that previous notices for "illegal construction" had been sent in the name of Parvez Khan in October 2023, and not to the owners of the properties. "Had the Building Officer gone to the spot, he would have been informed about the name of the petitioner and the ownership. There is no such person in the name of Parvez Khan," the court said. Disciplinary action against the government employees was advocated. The court also permitted Vimla and Radha to approach the local court to claim the "actual compensation" for their houses.

## Bulldozers turn saffron

Just 2 km from Langri's house is 52-year-old Ashraf Hussain's Indian Soda Shop. Above the ground floor, a green curtain shrouds the two demolished floors of his ancestral home. Most of it was bulldozed in July 2023, days after his sons –



They served notices to my family on the night of December 12, and arrived just a few hours later. My mother, wife, and three children kept crying in front of the officials, but nobody listened to them

**RAHUL LANGRI**  
Home bulldozed when in jail

Adnan Mansoori, 18, and a minor – were among three arrested in the Ujjain Mahakal procession spitting case. The alleged incident took place on July 17 when the trio, standing on the terrace of a building, was accused of spitting at Mahakal Sawari, a Hindu religious procession.

Hazy videos, purportedly showing the boys spitting on the procession, went viral on the Internet. Hussain says the videos spread in the area, and some Hindutva outfits created an uproar. "Within an hour, an FIR was registered, and the boys were arrested," he says.

Just as the family was struggling to deal with the shock of police station visits, the authorities issued a notice "saying that the house was old, in a poor condition, and was a safety threat". An hour later, the bulldozers arrived at the family's door, a heavy police force accompanying them. "My two young sons had been arrested. I was running around to get them out, and suddenly they came to demolish my house. I had no clue what to do and whom to approach at that time," Hussain says with tears in his eyes. His wife had not eaten for days since the arrests. Hindutva outfits played drums as the rubble came tumbling down, he remembers.

Sultan, a neighbour who ran a paan shop, tried to reason with the officials about documents and legalities. A bulldozer, Hussain recalls, turned towards his small shop and tore it down. "This scared other neighbours too, and the fear of being seen as close to us still lingers in most minds in the locality," he says.

Ashish Pathak, who assumed office as the Commissioner of UMC in December 2023, denies that the demolitions had anything to do with a person being accused in a criminal case. "It could just be a coincidence," he says. "A property or its portions are only razed if they were built without permission or more than what was permitted or illegally on encroached land." Pathak says the civic body serves notices to the owner to break the illegal structure themselves.

While Sultan has since gone to work in Indore, his brother, who runs the paan shop now, says the two neighbours have not been on talking

terms since the incident. He says he has filed a petition against the demolition of the shop in the High Court.

## Politics at play

There is still palpable tension in the neighbourhood, with people asking *The Hindu's* team questions in hushed voices about its motive behind speaking with Hussain or taking pictures of the demolished structure. Farhan Gori, a local independent journalist and another neighbour of Hussain, says, "The whole incident was created to benefit the ruling party. At the time, the BJP was believed to be losing the upcoming Assembly election [in November 2023]. All the surveys were against them. Incidents like these were used to breathe some air into their prospects."

Neither the government nor the police are interested in the case now, but local BJP leaders referred to the incident during the election campaigning and thumped their chests, says Gori.

While the two minor boys in the spitting case secured bail two months after being arrested, Hussain's elder son, Mansoori, was granted bail by the High Court only on December 15. The order came after the complainant, Sawan Lot, and the prime witness, Ajay Khatri, said they were



We were just used in a political game before the [Assembly] election

**ASHRAF HUSSAIN**  
Home bulldozed when son in jail

The duo, along with many others in the crowd, was asked by the police to come to the local police station.

Now, Hussain's family of five (including their youngest son) live with his brother. They don't intend to fight for their rights. "We can't afford to mess with the government. I just want to help my father at the shop, so we can meet our daily needs," says a subdued Mansoori. Hussain smiles sadly and adds, "We were just used in a political game before the election."

## Muslim population in M.P.

Senior journalist, author, and political observer Rasheed Kidwai says demolitions have become a way of political messaging. "You resort to such actions against the members of one community so that the majority community feels politically pumped and gratified," he says. The minority Muslim community has long felt alienated and disempowered due to the lack of Statewide representation. Comprising just 6.57% of the State's population, as per the 2011 Census, the community is not a formidable political force, except in districts like Bhopal and Burhanpur. In the 16th Assembly, the community is only represented by two MLAs – Atif Aqueel and Arif Masood, both from the Congress, from seats in Bhopal.

While in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is called 'Bulldozer Baba' by his supporters, the first Statewide usage of the machine to demolish properties in M.P. can be traced to the 15-month Congress government of former CM Kamal Nath. Soon after coming to power in 2018, Nath had launched a campaign called 'Shuddh Ke Liye Yuddh (War for purity)' against the sand and land mafia, those running dairy adulteration rackets, and others engaged in crime. Several properties were demolished, especially in the Gwalior-Chambal region.

In March 2020, the Congress government was toppled and the BJP's Shivraj Singh Chouhan returned to the CM's chair. In his earlier stint, Chouhan was known for his moderate image. "After 2020, Chouhan was compelled to resort to the practice [using bulldozers] for two main reasons. One, he wanted to follow Adityanath, like most BJP CMs. Two, his own Home Minister, Narottam Mishra, had become very proactive with demolitions," Kidwai explains. In an internal handbook published just weeks before the Assembly election, the Chouhan-led government claimed that it had freed around 23,000 acres, worth about ₹15,000 crore, from the land mafia.

## Rubble heaps

In April 2022, over 50 properties of people accused of rioting, mostly from the Muslim community, during a Ram Navami procession, were demolished in Khargone district. Mishra had given the slogan: "Jis ghar se pathar aaye hain, us ghar ko hi patharon ka dher banaenge (We will turn the houses from where the stones were pelted into a heap of rubble)."

In June 2023, five months before the election, portions of Ganga Jamuna Higher Secondary School in Damoh district were razed, with the local municipal body terming the construction "illegal". The school had been facing allegations of forcing non-Muslim students to wear hijabs (headscarves). There were also reports of the recital of Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal's over-a-century-old poem, 'Lab pe aati hai dua ban ke taman-na meri (A prayer on my lips becomes my desire)', about the hope of the soul. Iqbal had propagated the idea of Pakistan.

In July 2023, just a day after a viral video showed Pravesh Shukla, an alleged local BJP leader, urinating on a tribal man, his properties were demolished in front of several media cameras. The BJP also distanced itself from Shukla. As Kidwai points out, atrocities against tribals bring "too much bad press to the BJP".

Independent journalist and activist Kashif Kakvi, who has reported on demolitions in the State, says, "During Kamal Nath's tenure, local courts used to be vocal about demolition practices. They even imposed penalties against senior officials in case of a violation. Now, everyone is silent." He adds that many such cases on the outskirts of the State don't make it to the news.

Advocate Aashar Warsi, a lawyer practising in the M.P. High Court who has taken up the cases of about 20 people whose homes were razed in the mass demolition drive following clashes during Ram Navami processions in 2022, says the administration takes no time in declaring as "illegal" a structure existing for years and razes it "without following any procedure". "Just see the irony. Many of these houses were built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana," he says.

Warsi points out that the courts do take these cases seriously, "but the respondents in such cases, usually government bodies, do not reply in time or give a proper response". This forces many petitioners to give up on their cases, he adds.

Following the BJP's victory, Mohan Yadav, the newly elected CM, spoke of providing meat sellers with a designated space rather than having them in main markets in his first Cabinet meeting on December 13, 2023. Over the next few days, bulldozers ran through several meat shops in cities like Indore and his hometown of Ujjain. The CM had not issued orders for demolitions.

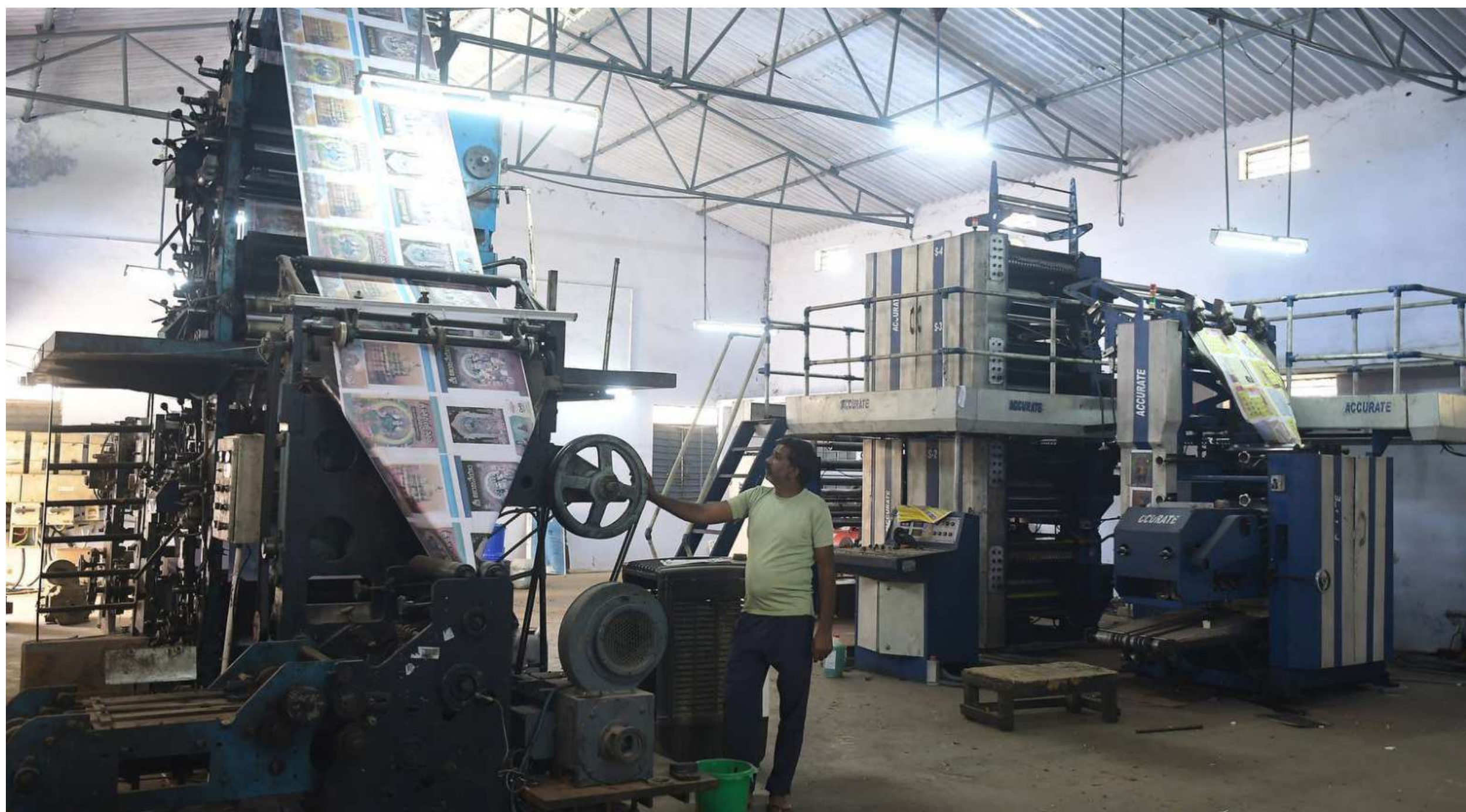


A house in Dimani, Morena district, that was demolished days ahead of the Assembly poll in November 2023 after its residents were named in a murder case; (right) the razed home of Ashraf Hussain, whose sons were accused of spitting on a Hindu procession in Ujjain. A.M. FARUQUI





# ANDHRA PRADESH



A printing press in the Industrial Estate near Nunna, on the outskirts of Vijayawada, wears a deserted look due to the uncertainty caused by a tender issued by the State government inviting printers from outside Andhra Pradesh to take up textbook printing work. K.V.S. GIRI

## Textbook printers caught in the tender tangle

For the first time in 25 years, the Andhra Pradesh government has invited tenders from across the country to print textbooks of State-run schools; **Nellore Sravani** assesses the impact of this unprecedented move on the 60-odd establishments who rely on the government's annual order

It has been nearly three years since Krishna Rao's printing press at Ajith Singh Nagar in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, saw any activity. Set up in a rented space, the unit was once a source of employment for 40 semi-skilled and skilled workers, most from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

With mounting expenses and no income, he had to shut it down for two years, in 2022 and 2023. After clearing all his debts gradually over three years, Krishna Rao, whose main business was printing and supplying textbooks to the Andhra Pradesh government, was looking forward to opening his unit again in February.

But his hopes were dashed last month. On February 2, the State government issued a notification inviting tenders from across the country to print the textbooks for students in State-run schools. Printers would also need to procure paper on their own. Earlier, the A.P. government would supply paper to establishments like Krishna Rao's to print textbooks. This is the first time in 25 years that such a tender has been put out.

In all, 60 printers, 50,000 employees, and more than 2 lakh people indirectly connected with the trade in the State will be affected by the tender floated by the Department of Andhra Pradesh Government Textbook Press (APGTBP), the printers say. After the deadline to bid for printing of 3.60 crore textbooks, valued at ₹190.31 crore came to a close on February 16, three printers, two from Uttar Pradesh and one from Maharashtra, have reportedly been awarded the work, the printers say.

### Shuttered units, unpaid bills

Krishna Rao and his peers, engaged mainly in textbook printing in A.P., start the bulk of their work in mid-January, after they receive paper from the government. The hectic run ends before the start of the academic year in June.

For some, what they earn at this time sustains them and their families for the rest of the year, even though the profit margin is only 5-10%, they claim. Some others, who can afford it, occasionally take up other printing work, such as pamphlets, posters, and wedding cards. Printing of textbooks and that of cards is done on different machines.

Usually in February, the presses in Vijayawada-Guntur, a region historically associated with printing, come alive. Workers are hired on a contractual basis from other States, all of whom work towards achieving the target and deadline set by the government.

All the textbooks and workbooks prescribed for students from Class I to X in government schools across the State are printed here and then transported to the Collectorates of all 26 districts. They are then distributed to children in government schools free of cost under the Centre's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme.

This time round, many units, including Krishna Rao's, remain shuttered even in the fourth week of February. One reason is the delay by the



If we are to procure paper from the mills ourselves, we have to spend ₹1.5 crore individually... If the government does not supply the paper, we have no option but to close our shops.

**DHYAN CHAND,**  
Proprietor of a printing press in Vijayawada

State government in paying their bills for the last two years, amounting to ₹56 crore. The other is due to the uncertainty over their livelihoods caused by the tender.

"There are two main points in the tender," says Dhyan Chand, proprietor of another printing press in Vijayawada, which is also on the verge of being shut down.

"Until last year, each of us required about 140 tonnes of paper and printed 5-6 lakh books. If we are to procure paper from the mills ourselves, we have to spend ₹180 crore and ₹1.5 crore individually. Where will we get this money from? With turnovers not crossing even ₹50 lakh a year, how can we arrange for paper ourselves? If the government does not supply the paper, we have no option but to close our shops," he adds.

For printing the requisite number of textbooks, around 18,000 tonnes of paper are procured by the State government from mills every year. Earlier, a private mill in Bhimavaram, along with Tamil Nadu Newsprint and Papers Limited (TNPL), was supplying the paper to the government. After the former shut down four-five years ago, the bulk is being supplied by the TNPL.

According to a letter sent by the TNPL to the judicial preview committee, the government owes them nearly ₹200 crore. The tender 'with paper' has been floated in a bid to circumvent payment of dues to the TNPL, Dhyan Chand says.

While TNPL officials refused to comment on the issue, the letter, written in response to the tender put up by the APTGPB, said the dues needed to be cleared before any more paper was

supplied.

"Against the previous year's supply of 16,514 tonnes of paper and 1,326 tonnes of board, the APTGPB has to settle a total outstanding of ₹199.68 crore to TNPL. We have not received payment for a single bill against the previous year's supplies starting from January 2023," the letter says, adding that the TNPL was informed that the reason for the delay of payment by A.P. was due to "lack of funds". In the letter, the TNPL goes on to say that if the APTGPB still proceeds with the tender, the company would have to take legal recourse for collection of dues.

Asked about this, APTGPB Press Director Ravindranath Reddy said the Tamil Nadu government owed some amount to the State in lieu of the Krishna river water sharing. "We had asked them to see if the amount can be adjusted. Discussions are on. Our main priority is supplying textbooks on time for the 2024-25 academic year," the official said.

However, printers feel if the government wants timely distribution of books, inviting outsiders is the last thing it should do. "How can they ensure timely delivery, when the printer has his unit outside the State? Here, the department officials conduct regular checks on our units between January and June to monitor the work," points out Dhyan Chand.

A printer receives around 150 tonnes of paper for one machine every year. Each of them prints around 6 lakh books in four months, incurring expenses of ₹35 lakh, while the income hovers around ₹50 lakh per machine. As per today's rate, the cost of printing one page is 7 paise.

**CHANDRASEKHAR RAO,**  
Member of Andhra Pradesh Web Offset Printers' Association

"Two years ago, the government emphasised distributing books with high-quality pages. Most of us spent our savings on upgrading the machines. It cost us ₹10-15 lakh. Now when we have

all the machinery and workforce, how can the government give the work to someone else," asks Chandrasekhar Rao, a member of the Andhra Pradesh Web Offset Printers' Association.

Besides, 45 of the 60 printers in the State have small-scale units, with no more than two machines. All are part of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) classification of the Central government (micro being those with no more than an annual turnover of ₹5 crore, small with no more than ₹50 crore, and medium being those with no more than ₹250 crore annual turnover). The most affected are those solely dependent on the textbook printing work and those who had only one or two printing machines.

### Balancing act

At first, the department had promised local printers that they would be given 25% of the total work this academic year (2024-25). After repeated pleas, the State government said only 33% of this year's work would be given to the 'outsiders', while the rest would come to local printers.

"After multiple discussions with the government, they have agreed to give us 67% of the work. While this is better than not getting any work at all, we want the government to revert to the old system of supplying paper to us. We will still lose ₹6-7 lakh worth of work because of the participation of outsiders," rues Chandrasekhar Rao.

But, the discussions did not yield much on their request for supply of paper from the government. If 67% of work goes to them, each of them may need around 120 tonnes of paper, which would cost them ₹1.20 crore.

Printers say it takes three to four months of continuous work, with around 150 machines, to print around 4 crore books every year. "The same cannot be done by two or three units. If the government wants quality in textbooks and timely delivery, it is only better that the old system continues, as the three may all use paper of different quality," Chandrasekhar Rao explains.

### Livelihoods at stake

Krishna Rao says he had set up the unit in 2019 after working for years in supervisor and managerial roles in the printing industry. The following year, the pandemic broke out. As if that was not enough, the State government did not clear bills for the expenses he had incurred in two years.

The expenses included wages to the labourers, water charges, electricity bills, repair work, and more. While income per machine is anywhere between ₹40 and ₹50 lakh, the expenses come to around ₹35 lakh.

Forty unskilled, semi-skilled and highly skilled labourers are employed at a unit to run one printing machine, to bind books, stack and pile them, to load and unload them from the truck, among other jobs. They are paid anywhere between ₹400 and ₹1,000 per day.

When Krishna Rao shut down his unit, Nagaraju, who used to work as the machine operator there, was forced to hunt for a similar job at other units within the city. "I entered the printing business in 1992. I know no other work and have no other skill. It is not just us who will be affected by the new tender, but the families dependent on us - the sweepers, the woman selling chai to us during the February-June season and her family, the truck drivers who transport the books to other districts. They all will be equally hit if work does not come to printers in the State," Nagaraju says. He is yet to receive three months' salary, close to ₹1.2 lakh, from his new employer.

"In the good old days, my employer came to work by car, which he later had to sell. Now he comes on a two-wheeler. This is proof of the grim situation we are in," he shares.

(Names of all printers changed on request)







Despite not receiving stipend, foreign medical graduates pursuing internship at General Hospital, Ernakulam, play a key role in the health care services being offered by the institution. H. VIBHU

# Courage under fire

Foreign medical graduates who are Indian citizens are fighting on many fronts: for an easier licentiate exam that will qualify them as doctors, for a quicker turnaround time to get their provisional and permanent registration certificates, and a stipend during their internship. **G. Krishnakumar** tracks their travails in Kerala, even as some Indian medical professionals allege that the students are just not good enough

**M**ahesh. K (name changed to protect identity) continues to be haunted by the night of February 24, 2022. The thunderous noise and the sound of shattering glass continues to ring in his ears to this day. The next morning, he learnt that Ukraine was under attack by Russian forces. At 21, Kumar had experienced an aerial bombardment, something most people don't in a lifetime. He was evacuated in a week, going back in January last year to finish the six-year MBBS programme at Odessa National Medical University.

"Bombs were raining literally and even the neighbourhood was not visible in the resultant dust and smoke. I almost stared at death in the eyes. When I eventually made it back, my parents were relieved to see me in one piece," he recalls.

Sitting now in the safety of his home at Thrikakara in Ernakulam district, Kerala, the 23-year-old remains tense, though. This time, the worry is over his future career as a doctor.

Mahesh could not clear the Foreign Medical Graduates Exam (FMGE) conducted twice a year by the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences. "I fell agonisingly short just by two marks in my first attempt," says Mahesh, who took the exam in January, adding that he will now have to wait another five months for his next chance.

"There is no option for revaluation. Besides, the exam costs about ₹7,000 for every appearance. The only benefit is that there are no negative marks," he rues. "But clearing the exam is just the beginning of a long road ahead filled with hurdles before I can secure the permanent registration to practise as a doctor in India," he says glumly.

Mahesh was one among an estimated 3,400 students from Kerala who were pursuing medicine and engineering programmes in Ukrainian universities at the time of the Russian invasion two years ago, according to estimates by the State government.

A licentiate exam, FMGE, is conducted for Indians and Overseas Citizens of India earning primary medical qualifications from foreign countries and desirous of practising medicine in the country. Clearing it is a prerequisite to register with the National Medical Commission (NMC) or any State medical council. A computer-based test consisting of 300 objective-type multiple-choice questions, candidates need to score a minimum of 150 out of 300 marks to pass the exam. Though not against the screening test, aspirants such as Mahesh are upset about the lack of answer keys and sample question papers for the exam.

As per the guidelines for registration of foreign medical graduates by the NMC, State medical councils can grant provisional registration for a



FMGE is an arbitrary examination purposefully devised and designed to hassle us as there is no prescribed syllabus for the exam.

**SANJAY MUKUNDAN**  
Joint Secretary,  
AFGP - Kerala

12-month internship after they clear the FMGE and other conditions stipulated by the council, including submission of documents related to their qualifying examinations

## Navigating obstacles

Besides Ukraine, medical aspirants from Kerala have been fanning out to places such as Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Armenia, Philippines, Bangladesh, and Malaysia to study. Costs there, over private medical colleges in India, are the primary consideration in choosing these destinations.

The many hurdles strewn along their wards' academic and career paths have left parents stressed about their children's future. "Our children are paying a big price for opting for a medical programme abroad. Not all could score marks in the NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) that would make them eligible for admission considering the limited number of seats for undergraduate medical programmes in government colleges," says Silvi Sunil of the All-Kerala Ukraine Medical Students and Parents Association, a collective formed to address the problems faced by over 3,000 aspirants following the confusion that emerged after the Ukraine war.

She claims parents will have to incur around ₹1 crore to complete the MBBS programme in a private medical college in Kerala or in other States, whereas the total expenses, including tuition fee, for an undergraduate medical pro-

gramme in a country such as Ukraine come to about ₹60 lakh.

An analysis of the pass percentage in the FMGE shows that only a small section of the students has been able to clear it. As per the results compiled by the Association of Foreign Graduated Physicians (AFGP) - Kerala, in 2021, 23.9% of the students who appeared passed; in 2022, it went up to 30.8%, and slipped to 10.2% in June 2023, and improved to 20.5% in December.

Sanjay Mukundan, Joint Secretary of the AFGP - Kerala, says FMGE was introduced in 2002. "It is an arbitrary examination purposefully devised and designed to hassle us as there is no prescribed syllabus for the exam. Questions are set at par with postgraduate standards for assessing undergraduate medical graduates. No question paper or answer key is published after conducting the exam," he says adding that exam results get delayed regularly without any specific reasons.

Dr. Mukundan explains that once students pass the exam, they are issued the pass certificate from the NMC in New Delhi. Foreign medical graduates have to then apply for provisional registration. "This usually takes 8-10 months in Kerala," he says.

## A hard day's night

Paul Antony, a native of Manjali, near Nedumbassery, in Ernakulam who completed the MBBS programme in the Philippines and doing his internship at General Hospital, Ernakulam, shares a long list of grievances faced by the foreign medical graduates who work as house surgeons in government hospitals in the State.

"There are around 120 foreign medical graduates pursuing their internship at General Hospital, Ernakulam. Unlike the Indian medical graduates, we are not paid a stipend despite clear instructions from the NMC. Around 1,000 foreign medical graduates are at present pursuing internships in various district general hospitals and medical colleges in the State. None of us has received a stipend yet, while the Indian medical graduates doing their internship receive about ₹25,000 monthly. Why are we being treated as second class citizens even after qualifying the equivalency examination?" he asks, amidst his arduous 12-hour duty in the casualty ward.

Foreign medical graduates cite a circular issued by the NMC to all the State medical councils and Directorates of Medical Education on March 4, 2022. It directs that stipend and other facilities as fixed by the appropriate authority applicable to the institution/university or the State be provided to foreign medical graduates on par with Indian medical graduates.

The council had also clarified that the medical colleges shall not collect any amount/fee from fo-

reign medical graduates for the internship.

A senior official at the Department of Health says no decision has been taken on whether to provide stipend to foreign medical graduates undergoing internship in government hospitals.

Taking a much-needed break from his hectic duty at General Hospital, Alappuzha, Sandeep T.M., who completed his MBBS programme from State Medical University in Tajikistan, says: "After completing our internship, there is a further delay in getting permanent registration. On an average, foreign medical graduates lose around one year of their career to bureaucratic delays. The majority of foreign medical graduates have taken bank loans to complete their study abroad and the hurdles being faced after clearing the FMGE add to our woes," he says.

## Arguments, this way and that

In March 2022, at the peak of the evacuation of the stranded students from Ukraine, the Union government had stated that 90% of the Indian medical students who graduate from foreign universities are being found unable to clear the qualifying exam to practise medicine in India.

"The standard of medical education abroad, except U.S. and U.K., is no match to the quality standards in our country. The lack of adequate clinical and patient exposure is a major drawback. Students from our country, who enrol for medical programmes abroad, also face the problem of language hurdles to converse with the patients there," says senior neurologist P.A. Fazal Ghafoor, president of the Muslim Educational Society.

He also cites curriculum shortcomings in other countries and the differences in diseases being reported there and in India as another impediment for foreign medical graduates.

"The standard of an exam like FMGE cannot be diluted on the ground that it is tough to clear. The Indian medical education has a robust standard and the equivalency exam will have to test the knowledge of the aspirants in various areas, including clinical-case scenarios," says Dr. Ghafoor.

B. Ekbal, a public health expert and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kerala, refers to the gaps in the hands-on training for foreign medical graduates as a key factor for the falling pass percentage levels in the FMGE. "Clinical experience is crucial. For Indian medical graduates, the high number of patients in government hospitals is a major advantage, as it provides them with necessary clinical exposure. I doubt foreign medical graduates are getting a similar exposure in their institutes," he says.

Dr. Mukundan says the first year of medical degree in foreign countries is devoted to basic general science subjects and languages.

"They teach the language so that we can communicate well with the people of the place. The first, second, and third years are non-clinical subjects, while the last three years of study are focused on clinical subjects. Nearly 52-56 subjects have to be learnt in a total of 12 semesters," he says.

Foreign medical graduates admit to the difference in standards of education, curriculum, and methods followed in the countries they opt for, but oppose the sweeping generalisation of all foreign medical graduates lacking merit.

They also question the double standards of those who voice support for a stringent FMGE but oppose the National Exit Test (NexT) proposed by the NMC as the common final exam for all medical graduates. "Is it not a contradiction that they are opposing it by raising the argument that one test for the entire country will not be feasible due to the lack of uniform standards of medical education across institutions in the country?" asks Gopika Suresh, pursuing internship at General Hospital, Ernakulam.

Caught in this policy and academic mess, Mahesh feels he is in the middle of a war of a different kind; one that will decide his future. That is a battle that he can hardly afford to lose.





**COPENHAGEN**

**Auction wraps up for Danish cartoon on Prophet Mohammed**



Bidding closes on Friday in the online auction of the original edition of a Danish cartoon by Kurt Westergaard depicting the Prophet Mohammed that provoked riots in Muslim countries. Published in September 2005 by the conservative Danish daily Jyllands-Posten, the cartoon shows the prophet with a bomb-shaped turban. AFP

**GENEVA**

**Myanmar is now a 'never-ending' nightmare, says UN rights chief**



Three years of military rule in Myanmar have inflicted unbearable cruelty, leaving people trapped in an unending nightmare as the conflict spreads, the UN human rights chief said on Friday. The junta is crushing all forms of dissent with total impunity, Volker Turk told the UN Human Rights Council, asking it to salvage the situation. AFP

**COLOMBO**

**Maldives parliamentary elections rescheduled for April 21**



The Maldives' parliamentary elections has been rescheduled for April 21, after President Mohamed Muizzu ratified a Bill that allowed for the postponement of the polls. The elections were originally set for March 17 this year, but the Opposition sought a deferment, citing Ramadan — from March 10, 2024 to April 9, 2024. THE HINDU

**ISLAMABAD**

**Pakistan parliament elects Speaker as Imran Khan's supporters protest**



Pakistan's new parliament elected PML-N's Sardar Ayaz Sadiq as Speaker on Friday, despite protests from lawmakers loyal to jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan three weeks after an election they claim was brazenly rigged. The 336-seat National Assembly convened on Thursday for the first time since the polls. AFP

**Pope Francis labels gender ideology 'dangerous'**

**Agence France-Presse**  
VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis launched a fresh critique on Friday of gender ideology, saying it was "the worst danger" which "erases differences".  
"It is very important that there is this meeting, this meeting between men and women, because today the worst danger is gender ideology," the 87-year-old told a meeting with participants of an international conference on marriage and faith.  
"I asked for studies into this ugly ideology of our time, which erases differences and makes everything the same." "Erasing differences is erasing humanity," the pontiff added.

**Call for probe grows as Gaza 'massacre' sparks outrage**

Israel's attack on a crowd of Palestinians killed 112 and injured more than 750; China, France, Italy and Germany slam the strike; U.S. looking into 'two competing versions' of the incident, says Biden

**Agence France-Presse**  
GAZA STRIP

World leaders on Friday called for an investigation and a ceasefire nearly five months into the Gaza war, a day after dozens of desperate Palestinians were killed rushing an aid convoy.  
Israeli troops opened fire as Palestinian civilians scrambled for food aid during a chaotic incident on Thursday. An Israeli source acknowledged troops had opened fire on the crowd, believing it "posed a threat".  
Gaza's Health Ministry called it a "massacre" and said 112 people were killed



Agonising wait: People sit next to the body of a Palestinian killed in the Israeli bombardment on Deir al-Balah on Friday. AFP

and more than 750 others wounded.  
The fatalities helped push the total number of Palestinian war dead in Gaza to 30,228.  
"The Israeli Army must fully investigate how the mass panic and shooting could have happened,"

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said.

**'Independent probe'**  
Her French counterpart Stephane Sejourne said "there will have to be an independent probe to determine what happened", and Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani urged Israel "to protect the people in Gaza and to rigorously ascertain facts and responsibilities".  
"China is shocked by this incident and strongly condemns it," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said.  
U.S. President Joe Biden said Washington was checking "two competing versions" of the incident.

**Alexei Navalny laid to rest after his death in prison**

**Associated Press**

Under a heavy police presence, thousands of people bade farewell on Friday to Alexei Navalny at his funeral in Moscow after his still-unexplained death two weeks ago in an Arctic penal colony.  
The service followed a battle with authorities over the release of the body of President Vladimir Putin's fiercest critic. His supporters said several churches in Moscow refused to hold the funeral.  
Navalny's team eventually got permission from the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God Soothe My Sorrows.  
As his coffin was removed from the hearse and taken inside the church, the crowd waiting outside broke into respect-



Overflowing support: Mourners react as the hearse carrying the coffin of Alexei Navalny leaves for a cemetery in Moscow. AFP

ful applause and then chanted: "Navalny! Navalny!" Some also shouted, "You were not afraid, neither are we!" and later "No to war!"  
Western diplomats, including U.S. Ambassador Lynn Tracy, were among those who attended, along with presidential hopefuls Boris Nadezhdin and Yekaterina Duntsova. Both wanted to run against Mr. Putin in the upcoming elections and opposed his war in Ukraine; neither was allowed on the ballot.  
Navalny's father was also present, but it was not clear who else in his family attended.

**At least 46 killed in mall fire in Dhaka**

**Associated Press**  
DHAKA

A six-storey shopping mall that caught fire in the Bangladeshi capital had no fire exits, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said on Friday, as the death toll climbed to at least 46 and rescuers searched for more victims.  
The fire started late on Thursday in a restaurant on the first floor of the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall in downtown Dhaka.  
More than a dozen fire-fighting units were deployed.  
Health Minister Samanta Lal Sen said the toll could rise as at least a dozen critically injured people were being treated in

**The six-storey shopping mall had no fire exits, says Bangladesh PM**

two state-run hospitals.  
Ms. Hasina expressed her shock at the loss of lives and said that it was a result of negligence.. "What could be more painful than this?" she said, speaking at an unrelated event in Dhaka.  
"We always request our architects, at least when they design homes or buildings, (to) keep a small open balcony, a fire exit or ventilation. But architects ... will not design that properly and also the owners do not want to leave an inch of space," she said.

**Escape from Sudan**



A girl who has fled from the war in Sudan gets off a truck loaded with Sudanese families arriving at a centre for refugees in Renk. AFP

**Left-wing firebrand wins U.K. byelection**

**Agence France-Presse**  
ROCHDALE

Left-wing firebrand George Galloway was elected to the U.K. parliament on Friday after tapping into anger over the Israel-Hamas war in a chaotic by-election marred by anti-Semitism allegations.  
Mr. Galloway, 69, first became an MP in 1987 and will return to the House of Commons for the first time since 2015 after winning the seat of Rochdale by 6,000 votes. The turbulent vote saw the main opposition Labour party withdraw its candidate, Azhar Ali, after he touted a conspiracy theory that Israel had allowed Hamas to carry out its deadly attack on October 7.



George Galloway

Mr. Galloway, accused of stoking community tensions, focussed on the Gaza war during his campaign in Rochdale, which has a 30% Muslim population.  
"Keir Starmer, this is for Gaza," Mr. Galloway, leader of the fringe Workers Party of Great Britain, said in his victory speech, referring to Labour's leader.

**Iranians vote in parliament election as conservatives try to tighten their grip**

**Agence France-Presse**  
TEHRAN

Iranians voted on Friday in elections for parliament and a key clerical body, amid fears of a low turnout and with conservatives expected to tighten their grip on power.  
Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has called for a strong turnout, was the first to cast his ballot, at a polling station in central Tehran, state television reported.  
The elections are the first in Iran since widespread protests erupted after the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, following her arrest for an alleged breach of the country's strict dress code for women.  
Since the last elections, Iran has also been badly af-

fectured by international sanctions that have led to an economic crisis.  
More than 61 million people out of Iran's 85-million population are eligible to vote for members of parliament as well as the clerics of the Assembly of Experts, the body in charge of selecting Iran's supreme leader. A low turnout is expected, however, after a state TV poll found more than half of respondents were indifferent about the elections.  
"Suppose that I vote: what would it change?" said a 21-year-old from western Kurdistan province who only gave her name as Hanna, out of fear of reprisals. "They (the elected officials) do not respect their promises."  
Her comments were echoed by Hashem, a 32-

year-old from the southwestern province of Khuzestan. "The problem with the elections is that people are not happy with this system because of the political and economic situation," he said.  
Another voter, Moradiani from southern Tehran, said she would heed Khamenei's call to vote.  
"The leader said that participating in the elections is an obligation," she said, "just as it is obligatory for us to pray."  
**Candidates vetted**  
Iran's last parliamentary elections in 2020 had a voter turnout of 42.57% — the lowest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.  
Hadi Tahan Nazif, spokesman for the Guardian Council which vets candidates, voiced optimism



Fate of future: Iranian women fill out their ballots before casting their vote in Tehran on Friday. AFP

about Friday's turnout, saying it was "even better" than four years ago.  
Mr. Khamenei had on Friday appealed for people to vote, saying "onlookers from all over observe the affairs of our country; make (Iran's) friends happy and ill-wishers disappointed".  
The supreme leader had previously warned that Iran's "enemies want to see if the people are present", adding that otherwise "they will threaten your security in one way or another".  
Those watching, he

said, included the U.S., "most of the Europeans, evil Zionists, and big companies". Iran considers the U.S., its Western allies and Israel "enemies" of the state and accuses them of seeking to intervene in its internal affairs.  
On the eve of the elections, the U.S. said they would be unfair. "I have no expectation that Iran's elections will be free and fair, and I suspect that a great number of Iranians have no expectation that those elections will be free and fair," U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters in Washington.  
Candidates for parliament are vetted by the Guardian Council, whose members are either appointed or approved by the supreme leader.

They have approved a total of 15,200 candidates, out of nearly 49,000 applicants, to run for seats in the 290-member parliament.  
Conservatives and ultra-conservatives, who hold 232 out of 290 seats in the 2020 parliament after reformist and moderate candidates were disqualified from running, are expected by analysts to dominate once again.  
A coalition of parties called the Reform Front said it would not take part in "meaningless elections".  
Former Iranian President, the reformist Mohammad Khatami, was quoted in February by the conservative Javan daily as saying that Iran was "very far from free and competitive elections".

Conservatives are also expected to maintain a firm grip on the Assembly of Experts, an 88-member body exclusively made up of male Islamic scholars.  
A total of 144 candidates are running but many hopefuls were disqualified, including former moderate President Hassan Rouhani.  
Meanwhile, the Israel-Hamas war has sent tensions in the region soaring, with pro-Tehran groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen all involved in clashes with either Israel or its Western allies.  
The elections also take place amid crippling international sanctions and mounting economic hardship in Iran, where inflation has hovered around 50% and the rial has sharply declined against the dollar.





Site of a rain-induced landslide in Davao de Oro province on Mindanao island in the southern Philippines on Feb. 7. AFP

## 'Deadly' Philippines rain not caused by nature alone: study

Agence France-Presse  
MANILA

Faulty warning systems, poverty and deforestation of mountains in the southern Philippines turned recent unseasonably heavy rain into deadly disasters, scientists said in a report on Friday.

More than 100 people were killed in landslides and floods in January and February on the country's second-largest island of Mindanao as the northeast monsoon and a low pressure trough brought downpours.

A study by the World Weather Attribution group found the unusually heavy rain in eastern Mindanao was not "particularly extreme". But with people living in landslide-prone areas and shortcomings in weather alerts, the rain became "devastating". "We can't just blame the rain for the severe impacts," said Richard Ybanez, chief science research specialist at the University of the Philippines' Resilience Institute. "A range of human factors is what turned these downpours into deadly disasters."

In the deadliest incident, more than 90 people were killed when the side of a mountain collapsed and smashed into a gold mining village on February 6, burying buses and houses.

"Compared to the pre-industrial climate, the heaviest five-day periods of rainfall now drop around 50% more rainfall on Mindanao island in the December to February period," said Mariam Zachariah of the Grantham Institute at Imperial College London. The scientists found that a higher-than-average rate of poverty in the mountainous region had left people vulnerable to the impacts of heavier rainfall, while "intensified deforestation" had increased the risk of landslides.

# Internal tumult affects Republicans in Michigan with presidential poll ahead

With the fight to oust the party chair turning bitter and personal, turmoil in Michigan Republican Party raises concerns among some Republicans that support for Donald Trump's re-election bid could suffer in a battleground State that President Joe Biden won by 2.8 percentage points in 2020

Reuters  
MOUNT PLEASANT

A threat of dueling party conventions to choose a presidential nominee this weekend. Accusations of adultery, corruption and incompetence. A barrage of social media attacks and a police investigation. The Michigan Republican Party is in turmoil, raising fears among some Republicans that support for former President Donald Trump's re-election bid could suffer in a battleground State that Democratic President Joe Biden won by 2.8 percentage points in 2020.

The fight to oust Kristina Karamo, elected as Republican party chair in Michigan last year, has become increasingly bitter and personal, leaving deep divisions in the local party, according to some party members.

At the centre of that battle is Bree Moeggenberg. The 44-year-old member of the Republican State committee helped organise a January 6 vote by some committee members to remove Ms. Karamo.

Ms. Moeggenberg and others blame Ms. Karamo — a fiery grassroots activist who backs Mr. Trump's false claims of election fraud — for stifling dissent within the party, a lack of transparency in decision making, and driving away wealthy donors.

The Republican National



Tense state: Supporters attend a campaign rally for Donald Trump in Michigan, on February 17. REUTERS

Committee ruled in February that Ms. Karamo's removal was legitimate and recognised Pete Hoekstra, Ambassador to the Netherlands during Mr. Trump's presidency, as the new chair. Mr. Trump has thrown his support behind Mr. Hoekstra.

Ms. Karamo has contested the vote and the rival factions have announced dueling conventions on Saturday to choose a presidential nominee and award delegates to the party's national convention in July.

Ms. Karamo retains a loyal following among a contingent of the party's roughly 2,000 precinct delegates and its 107-person State committee, but a court ruling this week affirming her removal as chair has put her convention and future with the

party in doubt.

### Party 'fractured'

"We are so very fractured," said Kelly Sackett, one of two persons from the rival factions claiming to be the party chair in Kalamazoo County, where a battle for control has been playing out in courtrooms and police reports. "I don't see it all coming back together."

A judge in Kent County, Michigan, on Tuesday issued a preliminary injunction saying that Ms. Karamo was properly removed and preventing her from representing herself as chair of the party in Michigan.

going appeal.

Despite the rulings, Ms. Karamo has yet to call off Saturday's planned convention in Detroit. Mr. Hoekstra has convened a meeting the same day in Grand Rapids, confident his delegates will be recognised at the national convention in July. The tensions in Michigan are driven as much by personal animus as any ideology. Ms. Karamo and her supporters describe "establishment" Republicans — those aligned with business interests and traditional donors — as corrupt, and tend to be very conservative in their policy beliefs.

The members backing Mr. Hoekstra are also conservative but said that they are willing to work with wealthy donors. They ac-

use Ms. Karamo of incompetence.

Among Republican activists, the fighting has become personal. Several Karamo supporters and anonymous online trolls have, without evidence, accused Ms. Moeggenberg of having an affair with a married man, Andy Sebolt, another State committee member.

Ms. Moeggenberg denies the allegations and has accused Ms. Karamo and her supporters of character assassination. "Such destructive behavior has been a core cause of division in the party," Ms. Moeggenberg said.

Ms. Karamo's signature was on an official email newsletter in January that directed party members to a Telegram messaging chatroom with a series of anonymous posts repeating the adultery allegations, some uploaded days before the crucial party vote.

A number of the three dozen party members in Michigan who spoke to Reuters expressed concern that the acrimony risked leaving Republican activists disillusioned and less likely to volunteer or vote. Among the disenchanted are many grass-roots donors Ms. Karamo courted with promises of breaking the party's reliance on the moneyed elite.

Daniel Harrington, 62, who wrote two \$1,776 checks last year in support of Ms. Karamo, says he

won't be donating to the party or helping it get out the vote in November if she is ousted.

### 'Upset with Trump'

"We are upset with Trump, absolutely," said Mr. Harrington, who voted for the former President in 2016 and 2020 but was angry at how he abandoned Ms. Karamo. "I'd like to send a message wherever the convention is going to be to not elect Trump."

A conservative, Mr. Harrington said he would probably still vote for Mr. Trump in November, if given the choice of him and Democratic President Joe Biden. Mr. Trump won Michigan's primary convincingly on Tuesday, securing 12 of 16 delegates up for grabs. The remaining 39 of Michigan's 55 delegates are due to be allocated on Saturday. The impact of the turmoil within the party has already hit campaign coffers. Donations into a state-level account came to just under \$20,000 from the start of Ms. Karamo's tenure to the end of 2023, down sharply from \$6,90,000 during the same period four years earlier, according to a review of filings.

Contributions to the State party's federal account also suffered, with reported fundraising totaling about \$9,00,000 last year, down from about \$1.5 million four years earlier in 2019.

## South Korean President calls for unification efforts after Pyongyang threats

Agence France-Presse  
SEOUL

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol called on Friday for the international community to back "unification efforts" after Pyongyang earlier this year declared Seoul its "principal enemy".

Ties between the two Koreas have been in a deep freeze as Pyongyang accelerates its weapons development programmes and Seoul ramps up military cooperation with Washington and Tokyo.

Mr. Yoon, who has consistently taken a firm stance against nuclear-armed North Korea, has rarely discussed the topic of unification since assuming office in 2022.

"Our unification efforts must become a source of hope and a beacon of light



Yoon Suk Yeol

for the people of North Korea," he said at a ceremony marking the anniversary of Korea's 1919 uprising against Japanese colonial rule. "We must come together on a path that leads ultimately to unification" of the Korean peninsula, he said, stressing that the international community "must pool its strength in a responsible manner".

Mr. Yoon emphasised better ties with Tokyo were helping to counter the

North's ever-increasing military threats.

"The security cooperation between the two countries against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats has been strengthened further," he said, adding that the countries were "working together to overcome the painful past".

Last month, the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un powerful sister Kim Yo Jong said her country would be open to improving ties with Tokyo, even hinting at a possible future invitation to Pyongyang for Japan's leader.

Her comments came after Mr. Kim said in December that he would no longer seek reconciliation and reunification with the South, blaming Seoul and Washington for creating an "uncontrollable crisis".

## Silencing evil



Fresh start: Hindu youth lift up an ogoh-ogoh effigy, symbolising the evil spirit, during the Kasanga Festival held to welcome Nyepi Day, a day of silence for self-reflection marking the Balinese Hindu new year, in Denpasar, Indonesia on Friday. REUTERS

## 'Finland took final step into the West by joining NATO'

Associated Press  
HELSINKI

Alexander Stubb was sworn in on Friday as Finland's new President and said the Nordic country has taken "the final step into the Western community of values" by becoming a NATO member.

The 55-year-old former Prime Minister replaced President Sauli Niinistö, who held the job for two six-year terms.

Mr. Stubb, a conservative, was elected head of state in a narrow February 11 run-off victory against independent candidate and former Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto of a left-leaning party.

The President of Finland, a nation of 5.6 million people, holds executive power in formulating foreign and security policy together with the government. The President also commands the military.

Finland joined NATO in April 2023 following Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine. It has the military alliance's longest land border with Russia — 1,340 km — and is one of the most active European providers of military and civilian aid to Ukraine.

Mr. Stubb said in a speech that "as a result of allying ourselves militarily and joining NATO we have taken the final step into the Western community of values" to which Finland has belonged "in spirit throughout its independence." "We will see regionalisation of power as well as unholy alliances," Mr. Stubb said. "In other words, a kind of an à la carte world, where allies are cherry-picked. We must remain alert."

## Tower of London gets new ravenmaster, keeping the 'prophecy' alive

Associated Press  
LONDON

If an ancient prophecy is right, Michael "Barney" Chandler has just got the most important job in England.

The 56-year-old former Royal Marine is the new ravenmaster at the Tower of London, responsible for looking after the feathered protectors of the 1,000-year-old fortress. According to legend, if the ravens leave the 11th-century tower beside the River Thames, its White Tower will crumble and the Kingdom of England will fall. In

the 17th century, King Charles II was told of the prophecy and decreed that there must always be six ravens at the tower.

"Serious responsibility" "We take that responsibility very seriously," Mr. Chandler said. "And now that I'm ravenmaster, there's that extra responsibility on my shoulders."

As for the prophecy, he said "we don't know if it's true or not, because we have never let the number drop below six — and it's not going to happen while I'm here."

Mr. Chandler, who offi-



Extra care: Barney Chandler, newly appointed ravenmaster, feeds one of the ravens at The Tower of London on Thursday. AP

cially takes up the post on Friday, is one of the tower's famous Yeoman Warders, part of a corps founded in the 15th century. Also

known as Beefeaters, the warders are all military veterans who dress in distinctive black and scarlet Tudor-style uniforms and

perform a hybrid role: providing security, leading tours of the tower, and performing ceremonial duties.

He heads a team of four other Beefeaters looking after the tower's seven ravens — the six decreed by Charles II and a spare.

The official title of ravenmaster is only 50 years old, though the role is far older, and Mr. Chandler is the sixth holder of the post. He is in charge of the health and welfare of the birds, who usually roam freely around the tower grounds by day and sleep in cages at night.

Duties include main-

taining the birds' enclosures, arranging veterinary checkups and keeping them fed on their preferred diet of raw meat supplemented by the occasional treat of a hard-boiled egg or a hard-tack biscuit soaked in blood.

"They are carrion birds," said Mr. Chandler. "They will eat almost anything." The birds' feathers are trimmed to prevent them from flying away, although they occasionally escape.

Mr. Chandler, who served in Afghanistan and around the world during 24 years in the Royal Ma-

rines, has been on bird handling courses and had other formal training for his role. But he says "all the courses in the world doesn't replace actually being amongst the birds and knowing their habits."

"You never know what they are going to do," Mr. Chandler said. "They are all totally different, personality-wise. Some will play ball, but others won't. It's just the unpredictability, which is also the interesting part of the job." "They are always trying to catch us out," he said fondly. "They know what we are up to."



**IN BRIEF**



**RBI appoints S. Ravindran as TMB's part-time chairman**

The Reserve Bank has appointed Tamilnad Mercantile Bank Ltd.'s independent director S. Ravindran as part-time chairman of the bank from February 29 till August 2, 2026. Currently, Mr. Ravindran is an independent director on the boards of NSE, LTIDPL Invit Services, Shriram Finance and Bandhan AMC, the lender said in a regulatory filing. The non-executive part-time chairman post in TMB fell vacant after the exit of S. Annamalai on February 2, 2020.

**NMDC iron ore output, sales race past 40 million tonnes**

State-owned NMDC reported 40.24 million tonne iron ore production and 40.48 MT sales for the 11 months ended February. These are the best ever cumulative volumes for the 11-month period and an almost 13% and a more than 21% increase, respectively, over the year-earlier period, India's largest iron ore producer said on Friday. Output and sales in the corresponding period of FY23 were 35.62 MT and 33.42 MT, respectively. February sales rose almost 6% to 3.99 MT (3.78 MT) and was a record for the month.

**Dr. Reddy's, its unit named in antitrust complaint in the U.S.**

Dr. Reddy's Laboratories and a step down subsidiary have been named defendants in an antitrust complaint related to cancer drug Revlimid in the U.S. The complaint, before U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey, asserts claims under federal antitrust law, alleging Dr. Reddy's, with Celgene Corp., Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., Natco Pharma and Teva Pharmaceuticals USA, improperly restrained competition, the Hyderabad-based firm said.

**FIU imposes ₹5.49 cr. fine on Paytm bank for PMLA lapses**

The payments bank arm was found to be in breach of KYC, anti-money laundering and terrorism financing norms, letting some entities route their illegal activities' proceeds through its accounts

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Financial Intelligence Unit-India has fined Paytm Payments Bank Ltd. (PPBL) ₹5.49 crore for violations of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, after finding substantial proof of money generated from illegal activity being routed through accounts held by entities with the bank.

The FIU-IND had initiated a review of PPBL's operations after receiving "specific information"



**In breach:** The FIU said it found substantial proof of money generated from illegal activity being routed through PPBL. REUTERS

from law enforcement agencies about a few entities and their network of businesses engaging in "a number of illegal acts, including organising and facilitating online gambling", the FIU said in a statement

on Friday about the order issued on March 1.

"Further, the money generated from these illegal operations, i.e. proceeds of crime were routed and channelled through bank accounts maintained by these entities with PPBL, it said. "Based on the voluminous material available... the charges against Paytm were substantiated," the FIU said.

"The penalty pertains to issues within a business segment that was discontinued two years ago," a PPBL spokesperson said.

**Sensex, Nifty surge almost 2% on 'better' GDP data**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
MUMBAI

Key benchmark stock indices surged almost 2% higher on better-than-expected third-quarter (Q3) Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth data.

The National Statistical Office (NSO) had on Thursday revised upwards India's FY24 growth estimate to 7.6% from 7.3% projected in January. The S&P BSE Sensex surged 1.72%, or 1,245.05 points, to an all-time high of 73,745.34 backed by gains in metal and banking stocks.

**Paytm decides to cut ties with beleaguered banking arm PPBL**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
MUMBAI

As part of a process to cut dependencies, One 97 Communications, One 97 Communications Ltd. (Paytm) and Paytm Payments Bank Ltd. (PPBL), mutually agreed to end various inter-company agreements, Paytm said in a filing to the stock exchanges.

**'Boost governance'**

Further, the shareholders of PPBL had agreed to simplify the Shareholders Agreement (SHA) to enhance PPBL's indepen-

dence and governance. "One 97 Communications Ltd.'s Board approved the termination of agreements and amendment of SHA on March 1," the company added.

Sources monitoring the development said whatever was being done now was 'too little and too late'.

**₹2,000 notes worth about ₹8,470 cr. still in circulation**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
MUMBAI

More than 9 months since the Reserve Bank of India announced the withdrawal of the ₹2,000 banknotes, about ₹8,470 crore worth ₹2,000 banknotes were still in circulation as on February 29, as per the RBI.

"The total value of ₹2,000 banknotes in circulation, which was ₹3.56 lakh crore on May 19, 2023 has declined to ₹8,470 crore on February 29, 2024," the RBI said. "Thus, 97.62% of the ₹2,000 banknotes has been returned."

**CG Power to set up Gujarat chip unit for ₹7,600 crore**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
CHENNAI

CG Power and Industrial Solutions Ltd. (CG) said it would invest ₹7,600 crore over five years in a joint venture with Japan's Renesas Electronics and Thailand's Stars Microelectronics to build and operate an outsourced semiconductor assembly and test (OSAT) facility in India.

The unit would come up at Sanand in Gujarat. The capacity would be ramped up to 15 million units per day, CG Power said.

CG would hold 92.3% stake in the JV followed by Renesas (6.8%) and Stars Microelectronics (0.9%). The project would be financed via subsidies, equity and bank borrowings.

**Automakers register robust sales in Feb. on strong SUV demand**

**Press Trust of India**  
NEW DELHI

Leading automakers Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai and Tata Motors on Friday reported robust sales for February as demand for sports utility vehicles continued to remain strong.

Mahindra & Mahindra, Toyota Kirloskar Motor and Honda Cars also witnessed higher vehicle dispatches to dealers last month.

February turned out to be the third-best month for sales for the industry ever.

The highest-ever passenger vehicle wholesales in a month was reported in January this year with dispatch of 3,94,500 units.

Maruti Suzuki India said its total domestic passen-



ger vehicle sales grew 9% to 1,60,271 units in February against 1,47,467 units in the month a year earlier.

Sales of utility vehicles rose 82% to 61,234 units last month compared to 33,550 units in February 2023.

However, dispatches of mini segment cars declined to 14,782 units against 21,875 units in February 2023. Similarly, sales of compact cars also declined by 10%.

**LIC pays Govt. ₹2,441-crore in interim dividend**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
HYDERABAD

The Life Insurance Corporation of India on Friday paid an interim dividend of more than ₹2,441 crore to the Centre.

LIC Chairperson Siddhartha Mohanty presented a cheque for ₹2441.44.91.124 to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the State-owned insurer said in a release.

Ms. Sitharaman also virtually inaugurated the LIC International Business Centre at GIFT City, Gandhinagar. The opening of the facility is a strategic move aligned with LIC's commitment to providing world-class insurance and financial services on a global scale, the insurer said.

**At WTO meet, members still bicker over farm sops**

**Amiti Sen**  
NEW DELHI

WTO members struggled to narrow differences in crucial areas such as agriculture, fisheries and the e-commerce moratorium at the on-going 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) in Abu Dhabi which went into extra time on Friday.

But India stayed firm in its attempt to protect the livelihoods of farmers and fishermen and kept issues without a mandate, such as investment facilitation, formally out, sources said.

"India is fighting attempts from various quarters to make it dilute its demands in the negotiations for both agriculture and fisheries subsidies," a source told *businessline*. "It is also under pressure to allow the inclusion of investment facilitation for development into the WTO as a plurilateral pact and extend e-com tax moratorium. But, so far, it has held its ground."

Going by the draft floated on agriculture floated and the members reaction to it, there is an attempt to equalise all deadlines, including for domestic support and market access, though there is a mandate flowing from the Nairobi Ministerial Conference for developing-country issues, including public stockholding (PSH) and special safeguard measures (SSM).

"The EU and the U.S., it seems, want no deadlines at all. For India, it is vital to get a deadline for PSH, SSM, and cotton. But Brazil seems to be pushing for deadlines on domestic support and market access as well," said the source.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

**SEBI's concerns mount with small, mid-cap fund flows**

**Suresh P. Ivengar**  
MUMBAI

Inflows into small-cap funds have surged by a whopping 92% in the first 10 months of this fiscal to ₹27,360 crore against ₹22,103 crore logged in the whole of FY23, raising concerns at SEBI about froth in the market.

Apart from this, most small- and mid-cap mutual fund schemes have enhanced cash holdings as they could not find an investment opportunity at the right valuation.

Following the Securities and Exchange Board of India's diktat, the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) has asked MFs to make more disclosures on the schemes and put in place in 21 days a policy to protect investor interest.

**AUMs surge**

The overall AUM of small-cap funds climbed by 89% to ₹2.48-lakh crore in January against ₹1.31-lakh crore registered in the same month last year, while that of mid-cap funds rose 58% to ₹2.90-lakh crore against ₹1.83-lakh crore, according to the AMFI data.

Nirav Karkera, Head of Research at Fisdcom, said, "While the SEBI move will enable investors make more informed decisions, there may be limited impact on aggregate flows. A few investors may rotate investments based on new the disclosures."

**Small-cap funds expand**

While the inflows and returns have increased multi-fold, the number of new small-cap stocks added to the portfolio of small-cap funds was up by 78 to 506

**India's manufacturing PMI inched up to 56.9 in February**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

India's manufacturing sector continued its recovery in February from an 18-month low in December, with production levels and sales rising at the fastest pace in five months, as per the seasonally-adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI).

A reading of over 50 on the PMI, which rose from 56.5 in January to 56.9 last month, indicates an expansion in activity. New export orders grew at the highest pace in 21 months, but employment levels changed little as firms felt existing staff strengths were enough to cope with the workload.

"The upturn in manufacturing output was the strongest seen for five months and led by the capital goods category... [However] capacity pressures at goods producers in India remained mild [and] the uptick was softer than that registered in January," a statement noted.

Output price increases slowed down to their joint-weakest since March 2023, while input cost rose only fractionally at the weakest rate since July 2020.

"Qualitative evidence highlighted higher prices for iron, paper and plastics parallel to reductions for cotton and steel," the statement said. About 8% of firms which raised prices referred to the need to pass on higher costs to clients.

**MARKETS**

**MARKET WATCH**

	FRIDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	73,745	1.72
US Dollar	82.91	-0.02
Gold	63,320	0.55
Brent oil	83.80	0.19

**NIFTY 50**

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter	3318.75	33.35
Adani Ports	1322.10	1.60
Apollo Hosp	6085.40	-16.20
Asian Paints	2831.75	9.85
Axis Bank	1099.25	24.15
Bajaj Auto	8040.05	130.70
Bajaj Finserv	1613.40	19.60
Bajaj Finance	6571.45	76.10
Bharti Airtel	1128.70	-5.35
BPL	623.30	-19.45
Britannia Ind	4927.70	-37.50
Cipla	1470.90	-9.45
Coal India	446.35	-9.65
Divis Lab	3482.40	-4.40
Dr Reddys Lab	6193.55	-230.70
Eicher Motors	3843.55	51.15
Grasim Ind	2254.90	63.50
HCL Tech	1644.10	-19.75
HDFC Bank	1430.75	27.35
HDFC Life	589.95	7.95
Hero MotoCorp	4507.10	80.60
Hindalco	519.10	15.25
Hind Unilever	2409.70	-2.60
ICI Bank	1086.90	34.70
Indusind Bank	1526.65	51.75
Infosys	1254.70	-13.20
ITC	409.50	3.20
JSW Steel	836.20	36.10
Kotak Bank	1727.70	38.25
L&T	3633.50	155.95
LTIMindtree Ltd.	5273.55	-27.30
M&M	1972.95	40.55
Maruti Suzuki	11620.95	332.60
NestleIndia	2601.45	5.25
NTPC	343.50	7.90
ONGC	270.55	5.95
PowerGrid Corp	287.70	4.85
Reliance Ind	2984.25	62.65
SBI Life	1542.15	-10.40
State Bank	769.15	21.05
Sun Pharma	1559.25	-18.70
TataConsumerProduct	1201.00	10.95
Tata Motors	977.40	27.20
Tata Steel	149.95	-9.10
TCS	4094.35	-0.75
Tech Mahindra	1271.80	-2.05
Titan	3765.90	141.50
UltraTech Cement	10135.50	243.10
UPL	474.55	4.85
Wipro	519.10	0.50

**EXCHANGE RATES**

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on March 01

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.70	83.02
Euro	89.31	89.66
British Pound	104.37	104.78
Japanese Yen (100)	54.98	55.20
Chinese Yuan	11.49	11.53
Swiss Franc	93.33	93.70
Singapore Dollar	61.40	61.65
Canadian Dollar	60.90	61.13
Malaysian Ringgit	17.42	17.50
Australian Dollar	53.77	53.99

Source:Indian Bank

**Adanis plan ₹75,000-cr. investment in MP**

**Janaki Krishnan**  
MUMBAI

The Adani Group plans to invest ₹75,000 crore in Madhya Pradesh across sectors such as power generation, pump storage and cement providing direct and indirect employment to about 15,000 people.

Announcing the investments at a Regional Industry Conclave in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, Pranav Adani, Director, Adani Enterprises, said, "I see infinite possibilities for infinite growth - especially in energy and infrastructure - and the Adani Group is excited about investing in M.P."

So far, the group has invested about ₹18,000 crore in the State, creating 11,000 jobs, but now it intends to ramp it up.

The group will be investing close to ₹30,000 crore to ramp up power generation capacity at its Mahan Energen plant in Singrauli, from the current 1,200 MW to 4,400 MW. It will also invest about ₹28,000 crore to set up 3,410 MW pumped storage projects.

In the road sector, ₹5,000 crore will be utilised to build the Mahakaal Expressway connecting Ujjain to Bhopal via Indore.

A sum of ₹5,000 crore will be invested in 4-million-tonne a year clinker unit in Chorgadi and two cement grinding units in Dewas and Bhopal with 8 mtpa capacity in total.

In the natural resources sector, the group would invest more than ₹4,000 crore and ₹600 crore to expand its presence in food processing, logistics, agri-logistics, and defence manufacturing.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

**Undersea cable disruptions expose India's crucial telecom vulnerability**

**Aroon Deep**  
NEW DELHI

In the past week, three undersea cables connecting India to global telecom networks - Asia-Africa-Europe-1, Europe India Gateway, and Tata Global Network - have been damaged as a possible result of targeted attacks, forcing telecom operators such as Bharti Airtel, Reliance Jio and Tata Communications to reroute traffic to other cable systems.

The damage to the cable systems in the Red Sea as a result of the ongoing conflict in the region exposes the grave vulnerabilities of India's Internet and over-



seas telecom connectivity systems if infrastructure passing through the region is further impacted.

While Bharti and Jio declined to comment, Tata said in a statement it was "keeping a close watch on the situation and [had] initiated immediate and ap-

propriate remedial actions".

Two network experts said there would be minimal, if any, impact from the cable damage, as traffic could be rerouted to alternative systems.

**Choke point**

While the disruptions highlight a choke point in subsea connections between Europe and Asia, they are of particular concern to India because of the relatively few connections India has to such cables, and stiff regulatory limits on growing India's submarine cable industry for private firms that are not full-fledged telecom operators.

"It would be very bad for India" if there were further damage to subsea cable systems landing in India, remarked Sunil Tagare, a former telecom industry executive.

Mr. Tagare, who shared on social media the news of the damage, said the regulations put India among the "unfriendly jurisdictions in the world" to build undersea cable systems.

The difficulties, he told *The Hindu*, would hamper the ability of Indian Internet providers and telecom operators to rely on adequate redundant back-ups, a worrying prospect if more cables in the Red Sea were to get damaged.



## DOMINATION

## Australia takes charge after New Zealand collapses



Australia dismissed New Zealand for 179 to take control of the first Test on Friday's second day after Cameron Green had scored 174 not out in a final-wicket stand to drive the visitor to 383 all out. **The scores:** Australia 383 (Green 174 not out, M. Henry 5-70) & 13/2 in 8 overs vs New Zealand 179 in 43.1 overs (Phillips 71, Lyon 4/43).

## SPECIAL WIN

## Ireland downs Afghanistan to claim maiden Test victory



Ireland won its first Test match on Friday when it defeated Afghanistan by six wickets in Abu Dhabi, ending a streak of seven losses. It reached its target of 111 in the final session of day three. **The scores:** Afghanistan 155 & 218 (Shahidi 55) lost to Ireland 263 & 111/4 in 31.3 overs (Balbirnie 58 n.o.).

## PRODIGY

## Bashir is the new Ashwin, hails former England captain Vaughan



Michael Vaughan feels England has discovered a world-class superstar in off-spinner Shoaib Bashir, who has the skills to emulate the success of R. Ashwin. He impressed with a match haul of eight wickets in Ranchi. "Celebrating another world-class superstar that we've unearthed, Bashir. He's the new Ashwin," said Vaughan.

## MUCH-NEEDED STEP

## Kapil backs BCCI's decision to protect First-Class events



"A few players will suffer, but let it be," said Kapil Dev on Friday as he backed the BCCI's decision to terminate central contracts for lack of commitment to domestic cricket, calling it a much-needed step to protect First-Class events like the Ranji Trophy. He said the decision to assert importance of domestic cricket was long overdue.

## Ecclestone and Harris sizzle as Warriorz brush off Giants

The former spins a web around the Gujarat batters with a three-wicket haul before the Australian's unbeaten 60 takes the Uttar Pradesh side home with six wickets and 26 balls to spare

## WPL SEASON 2

**Mayank Chaudhary**  
BENGALURU

'Spin it to win it' was the mantra for the UP Warriorz, led by Sophie Ecclestone (4-0-20-3), before Grace Harris' unbeaten fifty (60, 33b, 9x4, 2x6) powered it to a six-wicket win over Gujarat Giants in the Women's Premier League game at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium here on Friday.

Chasing 143, Harris added valuable runs with Chamari Athapaththu and Deepti Sharma, taking the Warriorz to the finish line with 26 balls to spare for its second consecutive win.

Earlier, spinners capitalised on a turning track to help the Warriorz restrict the Giants to 142 for five after choosing to bowl.

Laura Wolvaardt used Anjali Sarvani's pace and exploited the short off-side boundary, hitting her for three back-to-back fours.

Skipper Beth Mooney, who had two poor performances with the bat, showed the right intent at the start. She stepped out to Rajeshwari Gayakwad and smashed a straight four.

She then welcomed Ecclestone with a boundary, executing a flawless reverse lap, as Giants got off



**Clinical:** Ecclestone's spell set up the easy chase, which Harris & Co. took care of. K. MURALI KUMAR



to a brisk start.

But, as the openers looked to change gears, Ecclestone dismissed Mooney, who was caught by Harris at mid-off.

Ecclestone picked up one more wicket, removing Wolvaardt in similar fashion. This time, it was Athapaththu who caught the South African at

mid-off.

Harris and Ecclestone bowled in tandem, choking the batters and stopping the boundary hits.

Alyssa Healy's ploy to operate with the off-spinners paid off, as the Giants could only manage 29 in six overs after scoring 33 in the first four.

Harleen Deol had another

underwhelming outing, scoring 18 off 24 before holding out to Anjali off Rajeshwari's bowling.

Ashleigh Gardner (30, 17b, 4x4, 1x6) provided the impetus, her 52-run association with Phoebe Litchfield powering Giants close to the 150-mark but it was never enough once Harris took charge.

## SCOREBOARD

**GUJARAT GIANTS**  
Laura Wolvaardt c Athapaththu b Ecclestone 28 (26b, 4x4), Beth Mooney c Harris b Ecclestone 16 (16b, 2x4), Harleen Deol c Anjali b Rajeshwari 18 (24b, 1x4), Phoebe Litchfield run out 35 (26b, 4x4, 1x6), Ashleigh Gardner c Athapaththu b Ecclestone 30 (17b, 4x4, 1x6), D. Hemalatha (not out) 2 (4b), Kathryn Bryce (not out) 5 (7b); Extras (b-4, lb-4); 8; Total (for five wkts. in 20 overs): 142.

**FALL OF WICKETS**  
1-40 (Mooney, 5.2 overs), 2-61 (Wolvaardt, 9.3), 3-83 (Harleen, 12.6), 4-135 (Gardner, 18.1), 5-135 (Litchfield, 18.3).

**UP WARRIORZ BOWLING**  
Athapaththu 4-0-19-0, Anjali 1-0-13-0, Rajeshwari 4-0-33-1, Harris 3-0-21-0, Ecclestone 4-0-20-3, Deepti 4-0-28-0.

**UP WARRIORZ**  
Alyssa Healy b Bryce 33 (21b, 7x4), Kiran Navgire c Hemalatha b Tanuja 12 (8b, 2x4), Chamari Athapaththu c Wolvaardt b Tanuja 17 (11b, 4x4), Grace Harris (not out) 60 (33b, 9x4, 2x6), Shweta Sehrawat b Meghna 2 (7b), Deepti Sharma (not out) 17 (14b, 3x4); Extras (lb-1, w-1); 2; Total (for four wkts. in 15.4 overs): 143.

**FALL OF WICKETS**  
1-42 (Kiran, 4.3), 2-50 (Healy, 5.2), 3-86 (Athapaththu, 8.5), 4-90 (Shweta, 10.4).

**GIANTS BOWLING**  
Meghna 4-1-39-1, Bryce 2-0-19-1, Gardner 3-0-30-0, Tanuja 3-0-23-2, Mannat 1-0-14-0, Sneha 2-4-0-17-0.

**Toss:** UP Warriorz.  
UP Warriorz won by six wickets with 26 balls to spare.  
**Saturday's match:** RCB vs. MI, 7.30 p.m.

## Puneri Paltan reigns supreme against Haryana Steelers, clinches its first crown



**Well-earned win:** Paltan's title triumph made up for its heartbreaking loss in last season's final.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## PKL

**Saikat Chakraborty**  
HYDERABAD

Puneri Paltan emerged victorious in the Pro Kabaddi League Season 10 final, defeating Haryana Steelers 28-25 in a nail-biting encounter here at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium on Friday.

The low-scoring encounter, which ended with Paltan winning its maiden title, was built as a defensive battle between the strongest backlines of the season.

However, it was Puneri Paltan's raider Pankaj Mohite who emerged the hero on the night, scoring a crucial nine points and leading his team's offensive charge, particularly in key

do-or-die moments.

The first half was a close contest, with Paltan maintaining a narrow lead.

A crucial four-point raid by Mohite near halftime pushed Haryana to the brink of an all-out, but substitute raider Vishal Tate kept the Steelers in the game with a crucial touch point.

The second half continued to be a tense affair. Paltan eventually pulled away to an eight-point lead in the final two minutes. Strong defensive play by right corner Gaurav Khatri, who secured four tackle points, helped Paltan slow down the game and secure a historic victory.

On the other hand, it was a disappointing night for Haryana, which struggled defensively – only managing six tackle points

throughout the match.

It was tough for coach Manpreet Singh, whose luck in finals as a coach remains poor. He lost two consecutive finals with Gujarat Giants (previously Gujarat Fortune Giants) before this gutting loss with the Steelers.

Paltan captain Aslam Inamdar was named the Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the season for 142 raid points and 23 tackle points. The side's vice-captain Mohammadreza Chiyaneh was adjudged the season's best defender, but fell short of a record-equalling 100 tackle points by one solitary point, while Dabang Delhi's Ashu Malik bagged the best raider honour for his haul of 276 raid points.

**The result:** Puneri Paltan 28 bt Haryana Steelers 25.

## Odisha CM Patnaik releases Sportstar's coffee table book on Hockey World Cup

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BHUBANESWAR

Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik released a coffee table book titled 'FIH Odisha Hockey Men's World Cup 2023' brought out by Sportstar, the sports magazine of The Hindu Group, here on Friday.

Sportstar meticulously captured every on-field and off-field moment of the 15th chapter of the FIH Odisha Hockey Men's World Cup 2023, showcasing the grand celebration of the sport in Odisha. The captivating coffee table book has preserved the memories of the World Cup for eternity.

The State had successfully organised the Hockey Men's World Cup 2023 at two venues – Bhubaneswar and Rourkela.

In a message, Mr. Patnaik said, "having played host to top officials and players from 16 nations, global artists, sports champions and hockey lovers from across the world, it was indeed a bigger, more



Odisha CM Patnaik releasing the book in the presence of Ayon Sengupta, Editor of Sportstar and Sridhar Aranala, Vice President of The Hindu group, in Bhubaneswar on Friday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

exciting, engaging and unforgettable Hockey World Cup. It was absolutely delightful to see the people of India and Odisha becoming part of what was a hockey festival like no other."

"The two state-of-the-art venues – the iconic Kalinga Hockey Stadium, in Bhubaneswar as well as the brand-new Birsa Munda Hockey Stadium in Rourkela – stand testimony to Od-

isha's strong commitment and love towards hockey," he remarked.

Odisha CM hoped the success of this World Cup would inspire the younger generation towards hockey and revive the glory days of Indian hockey.

The 252-page coffee table book has vividly captured sporting actions, cultural extravaganza and spectators' excitements. Outstanding photographs

and rich printing production has made the coffee table lively.

"The right to host back-to-back FIH World Cups stands as a testament to Odisha's long-standing support for hockey and its commitment to promote sports at every level. Under the dynamic leadership of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, the State has witnessed a sporting revolution," said Ayon Sengupta, Editor of Sportstar.

"Sportstar and The Hindu feel privileged to be part of this endeavour to spread the story of the State's love for hockey through this book. The book not only provides a visual treat, but also an insight into the works that made the miracle happen," said Mr. Sengupta.

Odisha's Sports and Youth Services Department Secretary R. Vineel Krishna and Sridhar Aranala, Vice President, SDT Rao, General Manager, of The Hindu Group were present at the release of coffee table book.

## Boyer gets the better of fourth seed Svrčina

## DELHI OPEN

**Kamesh Srinivasan**  
NEW DELHI

Tristan Boyer knocked out the fourth seed Dalibor Svrčina 7-6(2), 7-6(1) in the quarterfinals of the Dafa News \$82,000 Delhi Open Challenger tennis at the DLTA Complex on Friday.

The 22-year-old Boyer, ranked 242 in the world, allowed his Czech opponent to fight back, as the two exchanged eight breaks of serve in the match. However, the American handled the tie-breaks with authority, thanks to his strong serve, to pull through in straight sets.

In the semifinals, Boyer will play Geoffrey Blacaneaux of France. The Frenchman unleashed his energetic game after a hesitant start to beat qualifier Philip Sekulic of Australia 7-6(3), 6-2. The Aussie had not dropped a set in four matches including two in the qualifying event. More-



**Untroubled:** Boyer handled the tie-breaks with authority, thanks to his strong serve, to pull through in straight sets. KAMESH SRINIVASAN

over, Sekulic had not dropped more than six games in any of those matches. Blacaneaux, who had outplayed second seed Adam Walton for the loss of three games in the second round, found a way to break Sekulic's resistance and pulled through with ease after winning the first set.

The other semifinal will be between Yuta Shimizu of Japan and Coleman Wong of Korea.

## The results:

**Singles: Quarterfinals:** Yuta Shimizu (Jpn) bt Enrico Dalla Valle (Ita) 7-5, 7-5; Coleman Wong (Hkg) bt Tristan Schoolkate (Aus) 7-6(10), 6-3; Tristan Boyer (USA) bt Dalibor Svrčina (Cze) 7-6(2), 7-6(1); Geoffrey Blacaneaux (Fra) bt Philip Sekulic (Aus) 7-6(3), 6-2.

**Doubles: Semifinals:** Jakob Schnaitter & Mark Wallner (Ger) bt Ray Ho (Tpe) & Calum Puttergill (Aus) 3-6, 7-6(6), [10-5]; Piotr Matuszewski (Pol) & Matthew Romios (Aus) bt Constantin Kouzmine & Maxime Janvier (Fra) 7-6(4), 6-1.

## GERMAN OPEN

**Press Trust of India**  
MÜLHEIM AN DER RUHR

Fourth-seeded Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand crashed out of the German Open Super 300 badminton tournament, after losing to Li Yi Jing and Luo Xu Min in the women's doubles quarterfinals in Mülheim an der Ruhr on Friday. The Chinese duo, seeded sixth, prevailed over the Indians 21-16, 21-14 in 41 minutes.

Treasa and Gayatri had defeated the Czech pair of Sona Horinkova and Kateřina Zuzaková 21-10, 21-11 in a round of 16 match on Thursday. However, it was curtains for India in both women's and men's singles events.

**Other results (round of 16):** Men: Nhat Nguyen (Iri) bt Sathish Kumar Karunakaran 2-18, 24-22. Women: Mia Blichfeldt (Den) bt Aakarshi Kashyap 21-13, 21-14.



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# Bull runs, a Mercedes farewell tour, driver churn: F1 storylines to keep an eye on

Racing fans will have to wait until next year to savour the tasty prospect of Lewis Hamilton turning out for Ferrari, but that doesn't mean 2024 is merely the lull before the storm



I'm very fortunate at Mercedes. I've been able to be myself. And that will be no different at Ferrari... I'm 100% a Mercedes driver now, and I don't want this distracting me from doing a job  
LEWIS HAMILTON



S. Dipak Ragav

At the start of this decade, Formula One was on the precipice of a big crisis with the onset of the global pandemic in 2020. That year, the season shut down days before the first race in Melbourne after a few members of the McLaren team tested positive for the COVID-19 virus.

The economic fallout could have been catastrophic for one of the most expensive sports on the planet. However, F1 struck gold in a bleak time when a humble documentary series about the 2019 season got a new set of people – cooped up in their homes because of lockdowns – to discover the sport.

In 2021, when things returned to normalcy, F1 had a season for the ages where the title was controversially decided on the last lap of the last race in favour of Max Verstappen. Since that season, which further boosted the sport's popularity, Red Bull and Verstappen have only grown in strength. A cruise to the drivers and constructors' titles in 2022 became an obliteration of the field in 2023. Red Bull won all but one race last year, Verstappen claiming 19 of the 22.

And so, the 2024 season finds F1 at a crossroads again. It may not be facing an existential threat but it's certainly nursing some headaches. Ahead of the 75th year of the F1 World Championship, *The Hindu* explores the storylines set to play out over the next 10 months.

## Can anybody tame the Bull?

The big question on everyone's mind is, who can stop – or even challenge – the Verstappen-Red Bull juggernaut? In sport, nothing good ever comes from predictability. When an audience feels that the result is a foregone conclusion, is there any incentive to tune in?

While it is essential to acknowledge, appreciate and even celebrate such feats of excellence, extended periods of dominance eventually turn



Time will tell if they [the other teams] are fast enough or not. I also don't know if we are fast enough. In general it's better not to think about it  
MAX VERSTAPPEN

off the neutral and casual fans.

Even for Red Bull and Verstappen, their achievements will have more lustre if they are made to work for it rather than just disappearing into the distance once the five red lights go out.

So, a lot rides on Mercedes, Ferrari, and McLaren finding the means to help both themselves and the sport by taking the fight to Red Bull. But it will be challenging as they have to first douse fires in their own backyards.

Moreover, Red Bull hasn't stood still. Thanks to its significant pace advantage in 2023, the team didn't need to update the car and was able to focus its resources on 2024. This season's car is a fairly drastic evolution of its predecessor. Despite the potential to trip up, it looked quick right out of the box in testing. If it has uncorked new potential, it could be another long, dreary year for the rivals.

## How the challengers measure up

It has been a chastening experience for Mercedes over the last two years after winning almost everything from 2014 to 2021. The car the team produced for the new regulations in 2022 looked visually different from the rest of the grid, but was neither fast nor driver-friendly, winning just one race.

The team retained the concept last year but made no headway and was forced to discard it. There were also changes within the team after its technical director, Mike Elliott, resigned and his predecessor, James Allison, returned to a day-to-day role.

The evidence from pre-season testing was reasonably promising, especially the feedback from the drivers. However, the headline times suggest it is probably third-fastest behind Red Bull and Ferrari, perhaps not enough for Lewis Hamilton to work with in his farewell Mercedes season.

Ferrari had a far more encouraging testing experience, and the drivers expressed happiness



SAINZ

HAMILTON

about the car's handling. The drivability was something both Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz had complained about last year. However, Ferrari has in the past won a few pre-season testing championships before coming a cropper when the serious business got underway.

In 2022, the Scuderia had a race-winning car that was in the title hunt for half a season before things went down a spiral. It took until the second half of 2023 for Ferrari to get things back on track when it showed decent form in the final few races. This season is also a test of team boss Fred Vasseur's leadership. The Italian marque needs to be regularly sniping at Red Bull's heels this year to set the stage for a title assault from 2025 when Hamilton arrives at Maranello.

## Open seats, closed doors and the domino effect

The driver market was expected to be buzzing this year, with a lot of contracts running out in 2024. However, that balloon was pricked at the start of the year with three big announcements. Leclerc and Lando Norris decided to extend their stay at Ferrari and McLaren. But the big

bombshell, the Hamilton-Ferrari deal, dropped a few days later.

Though the principal actors are off the table, a handful will drive for their futures this year. The two drivers on top of that list are Sainz and Sergio Perez.

Sainz, who will make way for Hamilton at Ferrari next year, has to show that he is still a top player in the paddock. He was the only non-Red Bull driver to win a race last year and has done well against Leclerc. The Spaniard will, no doubt, attract the attention of any team that wants a seriously fast driver with a great work ethic. Where Sainz goes next could well decide the career trajectories of many others.

On the other hand, it is a make-or-break year for Perez. Occupying the fastest car on the grid, the Mexican has underperformed Verstappen, which is putting it mildly. Red Bull hasn't needed Perez's help in the constructors' battle or in taking points off Verstappen's rivals in the last two years. But this will change if there is a threat from another team. It is the last chance for the six-time Grand Prix winner to step up and show what he can do.

## The ever-changing sprint conundrum

The sprint format was introduced in 2021 at select events to liven up the proceedings on all three days of a weekend. The venues are chosen based on the circuit's overtaking potential, and there will be six events this year.

It has undergone two format changes already. For this year, the format remains the same, but the flow of the events has changed. Sprint qualifying will now be held on Friday evening and the sprint race on Saturday morning, followed by qualifying for the main Grand Prix.

Last year, sprint qualifying and the sprint race were held on Saturday, making the middle day of the weekend a bit pointless. This is the latest attempt to make the sprint appealing, but the jury is still out on whether it adds to the spectacle.

## STACKING UP



### ATP Men's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Novak Djokovic	36	9,855	19
2	Carlos Alcaraz	20	8,805	18
3	Jannik Sinner	22	8,270	20
4	Daniil Medvedev	28	8,015	19
5	Andrey Rublev	26	5,110	24
6	Alexander Zverev	26	5,085	26
7	Holger Rune	20	3,700	23
8	Hubert Hurkacz	27	3,395	24
9	Alex de Minaur	25	3,210	25
10	Taylor Fritz	26	3,150	25
11	Casper Ruud	25	3,120	24
12	Stefanos Tsitsipas	25	3,080	24
13	Grigor Dimitrov	32	2,925	23
14	Tommy Paul	26	2,375	27
15	Karen Khachanov	27	2,260	23



### English Premier League Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Liverpool	26	18	6	2	63	25	38	60
2	Man. City	26	18	5	3	59	26	33	59
3	Arsenal	26	18	4	4	62	23	39	58
4	Aston Villa	26	16	4	6	56	35	21	52
5	Tottenham	25	14	5	6	52	38	14	47
6	Man. United	26	14	2	10	36	36	0	44
7	Brighton	26	10	9	7	49	41	8	39
8	West Ham	26	11	6	9	40	46	-6	39
9	Wolves	26	11	5	10	40	40	0	38
10	Newcastle	26	11	4	11	54	45	9	37
11	Chelsea	25	10	5	10	42	41	1	35
12	Fulham	26	9	5	12	36	42	-6	32
13	C. Palace	26	7	7	12	31	44	-13	28
14	Bournemouth	25	7	7	11	33	47	-14	28
15	Everton*	26	8	7	11	28	34	-6	25
16	Brentford	26	7	4	15	37	48	-11	25
17	N. Forest	26	6	6	14	34	48	-14	24
18	Luton Town	25	5	5	15	35	51	-16	20
19	Burnley	26	3	4	19	25	58	-33	13
20	Sheffield	26	3	4	19	22	66	-44	13

\* Everton deducted six points following a breach of the Premier League's Profitability and Sustainability Rules



### Spanish LaLiga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Real Madrid	26	20	5	1	54	16	38	65
2	Girona	26	18	5	3	57	32	25	59
3	Barcelona	26	17	6	3	56	34	22	57
4	Atletico Madrid	26	16	4	6	52	28	24	52
5	Athletic Bilbao	26	14	7	5	46	26	20	49
6	Real Betis	26	10	12	4	31	26	5	42
7	Real Sociedad	26	10	10	6	35	26	9	40
8	Las Palmas	26	10	6	10	26	26	0	36
9	Valencia	25	10	6	9	29	29	0	36
10	Getafe	26	8	10	8	33	38	-5	34
11	Osasuna	26	9	6	11	30	37	-7	33
12	Alaves	26	7	8	11	25	32	-7	29
13	Villarreal	26	7	8	11	38	48	-10	29
14	Rayo Vallecano	26	5	10	11	22	36	-14	25
15	Sevilla	26	5	10	12	30	38	-8	24
16	Real Mallorca	26	4	12	10	23	34	-11	24
17	Celta Vigo	26	4	9	13	29	39	-10	21
18	Cadiz	26	2	12	12	17	37	-20	18
19	Granada	25	2	8	15	27	49	-22	14
20	Almeria	26	0	9	17	25	54	-29	9

### German Bundesliga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Leverkusen	23	19	4	0	59	16	43	61
2	Bayern	23	17	2	4	63	26	37	53
3	Stuttgart	23	15	2	6	52	29	23	47
4	Dortmund	23	11	8	4	46	30	16	41
5	RB Leipzig	23	12	4	7	49	30	19	40
6	Eint. Frankfurt	23	8	10	5	36	30	6	34
7	Hoffenheim	23	8	6	9	41	43	-2	30
8	Werder Bremen	23	8	6	9	32	35	-3	30
9	SC Freiburg	23	8	5	10	30	42	-12	29
10	Heidenheim	23	7	7	9	33	40	-7	28
11	FC Augsburg	23	6	8	9	33	41	-8	26
12	M'gladbach	23	6	7	10	41	45	-4	25
13	Wolfsburg	23	6	7	10	28	36	-8	25
14	Union Berlin	23	7	4	12	23	37	-14	25
15	Bochum	23	5	10	8	28	46	-18	25
16	Cologne	23	3	8	12	16	37	-21	17
17	Mainz	23	2	9	12	18	37	-19	15
18	Darmstadt	23	2	7	14	24	52	-28	13

### Test Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Kane Williamson	893	919
2	Steve Smith	818	947
3	Joe Root	799	923
4	Daryl Mitchell	780	804
5	Babar Azam	768	882
6	Usman Khawaja	765	847
7	Dimuth Karunaratne	750	783
8	Marnus Labuschagne	746	937
9	Virat Kohli	744	937
10	Harry Brook	743	773

### Test Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Jasprit Bumrah	867	861
2	R. Ashwin	846	904
3	Kagiso Rabada	834	902
4	Pat Cummins	828	914
5	Josh Hazlewood	818	864
6	Ravindra Jadeja	785	899
7	Prabath Jayasuriya	783	783
8	Nathan Lyon	746	799
9	Kyle Jamieson	743	836
10	James Anderson	742	903

### ODI Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Babar Azam	824	898
2	Shubman Gill	801	847
3	Virat Kohli	768	909
4	Rohit Sharma	746	882
5	Daryl Mitchell	728	750
6	Harry Tector	723	729
7	David Warner	723	869
8	David Malan	707	730
9	Rassie van der Dussen	701	796
10	Heinrich Klaasen	697	757

### ODI Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Keshav Maharaj	716	741
2	Josh Hazlewood	688	727
3	Adam Zampa	686	695
4	Mohammed Siraj	678	736
5	Jasprit Bumrah	665	838
6	Mohammad Nabi	653	657
7	Shaheen Afridi	650	688
8	Rashid Khan	647	647
9	Kuldeep Yadav	645	760
10	Trent Boult	643	775

### T20I Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Suryakumar Yadav	861	910
2	Philipp Salt	802	802
3	Mohammad Rizwan	800	875
4	Babar Azam	764	896
5	Aiden Markram	755	796
6	Yashasvi Jaiswal	714	739
7	Rilee Rossouw	689	724
8	Finn Allen	686	723
9	Jos Buttler	680	687
10	Reeza Hendricks	660	674

### T20I Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Adil Rashid	726	746
2	Wanindu Hasaranga	702	797
3	Maheesh Theekshana	669	684
4	Akeal Hosen	664	683
5	Axar Patel	660	667
6	Ravi Bishnoi	659	699
7	Josh Hazlewood	654	806
8	Tabraiz Shamsi	654	821
9	Fazalhaq Farooqi	646	692
10	Mitchell Santner	645	724

Top Indians  
Sumit Nagal Rank 97 ▼ 4 spots

Ramkumar Ramanathan Rank 407 ▲ 13 spots

WTA Women's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Iga Swiatek	22	10,105	19
2	Aryna Sabalenka	25	8,725	17
3	Coco Gauff	19	6,975	19
4	Elena Rybakina	24	6,848	19



# Has Dusan Vlahovic finally found his feet at Juventus?

The 24-year-old's reputation as one of Europe's hottest attacking talents had begun to erode after a big-money move to Turin. But a goal-rich start to 2024 has altered the mood among the Bianconeri. Can he sustain this form and join the ranks of the truly elite?

Reuters  
Agence France-Presse

**W**hen Dusan Vlahovic scored his second goal against Frosinone last weekend, creating space in the box by wrong-footing his marker before producing an exquisite finish to level the game at 2-2, the official Juventus social media handle exclaimed: "Dusan!! He just can't stop scoring can he?!" It was a sentiment the Bianconeri fans ardently agreed with.

This marked a change – in both the tone and mood in Turin – from much of 2022 and 2023, when Vlahovic's reputation as one of Europe's hottest talents was fast eroding. Juventus had acquired the Serbian hitman's services during the January transfer window in 2022, beating serious competition from Arsenal and forking out €80 million.

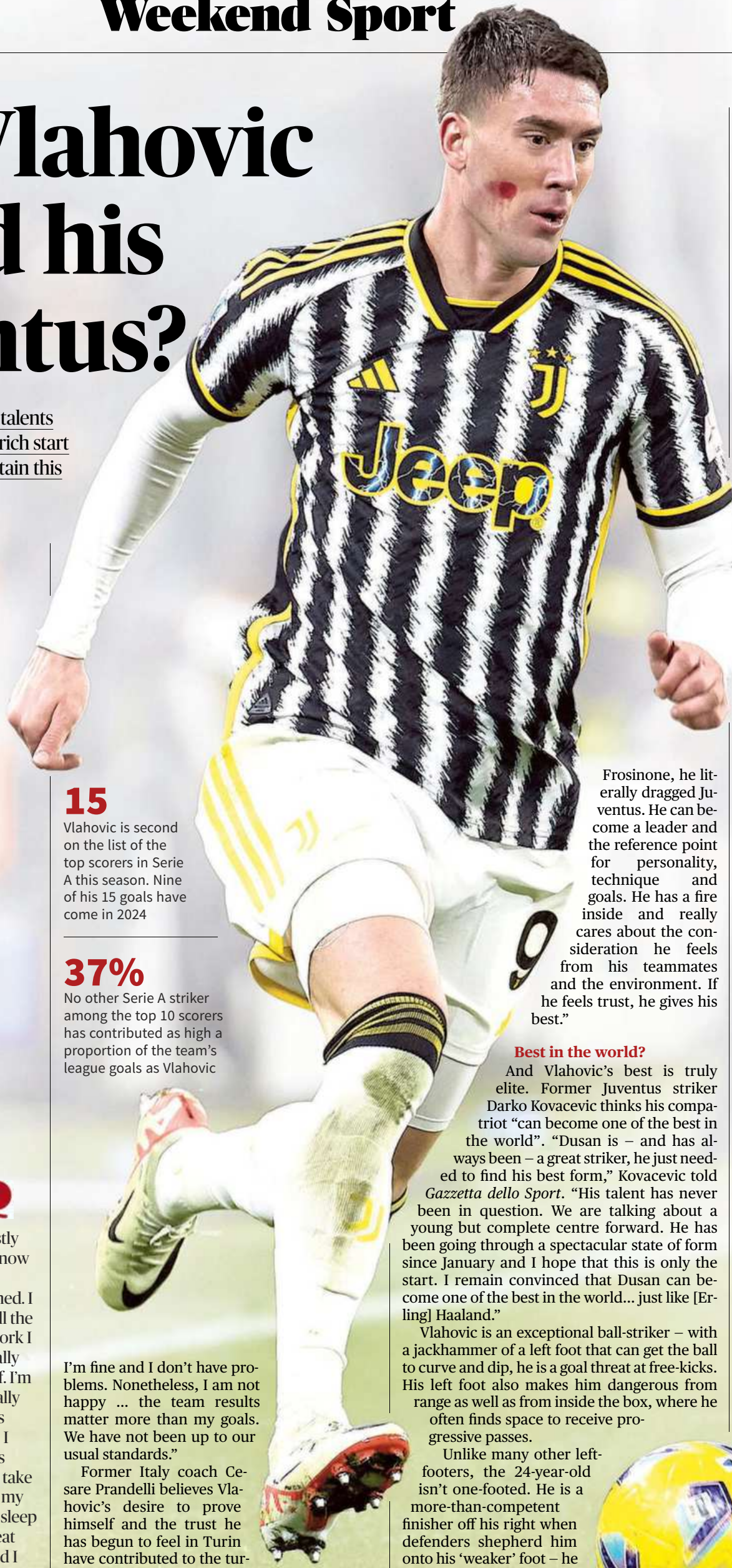
### Price-tag pressure

But Vlahovic struggled to reproduce the sort of form that saw him score 38 goals in 58 games across one and a half seasons before Juventus signed him. There was a growing feeling at the Turin-based club that the output was not living up to the price tag. By the 2023 summer window, the Italian powerhouse was courting wealthy clubs, hoping to recoup its investment. Juventus even reportedly offered him to cash-splash Chelsea in the hope of securing Romelu Lukaku. But with no club willing to part with the kind of money Juventus wanted, Vlahovic stayed put. And now many Juventus fans are thanking their lucky stars.

The brace against Frosinone took Vlahovic's Serie A tally this season to 15, second only to Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez. Even more impressively, they made Vlahovic the leading scorer in Europe's top five leagues in 2024, his nine goals in seven Serie A games having no equal. In addition to deciding matches – he also assisted Daniele Rugani's stoppage-time winner against Frosinone – Vlahovic is looking like a leader at The Old Lady. He has scored 37% of Juventus' goals this season; no one among Serie A's top 10 scorers has a higher proportion.

Vlahovic is also setting the tone for the supporters of a club struggling to keep pace in a title race. Juventus is second in the Serie A standings but trails Inter by a large margin. The Serbia international celebrated his first goal against Frosinone by placing his hand under his chin, as if to say the Bianconeri must hold their heads high and soldier on.

What has changed for Vlahovic? "I honestly don't know what happened. I think all the hard work I did finally paid off," he said. "I'm physically well, it's simple. I work as usual, I take care of my body. I sleep well, I eat well and I train well, the difference with the past season is that



GETTY IMAGES

**15**  
Vlahovic is second on the list of the top scorers in Serie A this season. Nine of his 15 goals have come in 2024

**37%**  
No other Serie A striker among the top 10 scorers has contributed as high a proportion of the team's league goals as Vlahovic

Frosinone, he literally dragged Juventus. He can become a leader and the reference point for personality, technique and goals. He has a fire inside and really cares about the consideration he feels from his teammates and the environment. If he feels trust, he gives his best."

### Best in the world?

And Vlahovic's best is truly elite. Former Juventus striker Darko Kovacevic thinks his compatriot "can become one of the best in the world". "Dusan is – and has always been – a great striker, he just needed to find his best form," Kovacevic told *Gazzetta dello Sport*. "His talent has never been in question. We are talking about a young but complete centre forward. He has been going through a spectacular state of form since January and I hope that this is only the start. I remain convinced that Dusan can become one of the best in the world... just like [Erling] Haaland."

Vlahovic is an exceptional ball-striker – with a jackhammer of a left foot that can get the ball to curve and dip, he is a goal threat at free-kicks. His left foot also makes him dangerous from range as well as from inside the box, where he often finds space to receive progressive passes.

Unlike many other left-footers, the 24-year-old isn't one-footed. He is a more-than-competent finisher off his right when defenders shepherd him onto his 'weaker' foot – he is capable of both striking across his body and opening up his hips and side-footing



Against Frosinone, he literally dragged Juventus. He has a fire inside ... If he feels trust, he gives his best. He can become the reference point for personality, technique and goals

**CESARE PRANDELLI**  
Former Italy coach

the ball.

The 3-1 win over Lazio earlier this season showcased the variety of finishing Vlahovic possesses. He opened the scoring by sweeping home a cross with a technically supreme first-time finish. He later restored the two-goal cushion when he chested down a long ball, opened up space in front of two defenders with a touch and fired home from the edge of the box.

At 6'3", Vlahovic has enough of an aerial presence. He can outjump most defenders and score off towering headers. He is also brave enough to attempt diving headers, his poacher's instinct often getting him to balls other strikers may have given up chasing.

At Juventus, Vlahovic doesn't always get to show off his all-round game. He does not participate in the build-up as often as Lautaro does at Inter, for instance, but the Serb has the skill and touch to roll his defenders under contact. This makes him a good bouncing board for passes to release runners from deep, a facet of his game that makes him an ideal option for both one-striker setups and the two-striker system he almost always plays in at Juventus.

### What the future holds

But for all of Vlahovic's undeniable qualities, he will be judged on the numbers he puts up and their influence on Juventus' pursuit of titles. The question both player and club will want the answer to is whether this run of goal-scoring form is consistently replicable or a one-off – this will also have a bearing on their future together.

With Vlahovic's contract set to run until June 2026, this summer could prove pivotal. A 25-goal season will attract interest from top clubs, with several big-name strikers set to shift. Juventus will need to ascertain whether cashing in when Vlahovic's value has risen again is the right move; the risk of losing his potentially elite peak years is fairly high as well.

For now, though, the focus is on closing the gap to Inter and keeping the others behind. If Juventus and Vlahovic can manage that, it's unlikely anybody in Turin will ever question the €80 million price tag again.



I honestly don't know what happened. I think all the hard work I did finally paid off. I'm physically well, it's simple. I work as usual, I take care of my body. I sleep well, I eat well and I train well

**DUSAN VLAHOVIC**

I'm fine and I don't have problems. Nonetheless, I am not happy ... the team results matter more than my goals. We have not been up to our usual standards."

Former Italy coach Cesare Prandelli believes Vlahovic's desire to prove himself and the trust he has begun to feel in Turin have contributed to the turnaround. "He has more self-esteem and is convinced about his role inside Juventus," Prandelli told *Tuttosport*. "Against

## GAME THEORY

Gone in 60 metres: the fastest hurdlers and sprinters

Devynne Charlton came within 0.01 seconds of equalling her world indoor 60m hurdles record in Madrid last week. The Bahamian athlete is set to threaten her mark again at this weekend's World Athletics Indoor Championships in Glasgow. But Tia Jones, who shares both the world record and the second-best time, is out with an injury and won't face off against Charlton. It's a good opportunity then to take a look at the top times in the women's 60m hurdles as well as those in the 60m flat sprint:

### 60 METRES HURDLES: BEST TIMES (WOMEN)

Mark (sec)	Competitor	Venue	Date
7.67	Devynne Charlton	New York	11 Feb 2024
7.67	Tia Jones	Albuquerque	16 Feb 2024
7.68	Susanna Kallur	Karlsruhe	10 Feb 2008
7.68	Tia Jones	Albuquerque	16 Feb 2024
7.68	Devynne Charlton	Madrid	23 Feb 2024
7.69	Lyudmila Narozhilenko	Chelyabinsk	04 Feb 1990
7.70	Lyudmila Narozhilenko	Madrid	11 Feb 1993
7.70	Sharika Nelvis	Albuquerque	18 Feb 2018
7.70	Kendra Harrison	Birmingham	03 Mar 2018
7.71	Lyudmila Narozhilenko	Chelyabinsk	04 Feb 1990

### 60 METRES: BEST TIMES (WOMEN)

Mark (sec)	Competitor	Venue	Date
6.92	Irina Privalova	Madrid	11 Feb 1993
6.92	Irina Privalova	Madrid	09 Feb 1995
6.93	Irina Privalova	Lievin	13 Feb 1994
6.94	Irina Privalova	Lievin	19 Feb 1995
6.94	Aleia Hobbs	Albuquerque	18 Feb 2023
6.94	Julien Alfred	Albuquerque	11 Mar 2023
6.95	Gail Devers	Toronto	12 Mar 1993
6.95	Irina Privalova	Wien	06 Feb 1994
6.95	Irina Privalova	Moskva	14 Feb 1995
6.95	Marion Jones	Maebashi	07 Mar 1998
6.96	Merlene Ottey	Madrid	14 Feb 1992
6.96	Irina Privalova	Madrid	11 Feb 1993
6.96	Katerina Thanou	Maebashi	07 Mar 1999
6.96	Mujinga Kambundji	Beograd	18 Mar 2022
6.96	Julien Alfred	Albuquerque	10 Mar 2023



DEVYNNIE CHARLTON



IRINA PRIVALOVA

SOURCE: WORLD ATHLETICS

## PICTURE THIS



GETTY IMAGES

### Sand tussle

Brazil prevailed over Italy in a keenly contested final to win a record sixth title at the 2024 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Dubai last Sunday.

With the 6-4 victory, the Brazilians added to the crowns won in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009,

and 2017. Iran defeated Belarus in the third-place playoff.

The Beach Soccer World Cup, first staged in 2005, was preceded by the Beach Soccer World Championships, which was conducted under the supervision of Beach Soccer Worldwide (BSWW) and its predecessors.

FIFA partnered with BSWW, took over the running of the tournament in 2005 and rebranded it as an official FIFA event. Beach football's roots can be traced to the sands of Rio de Janeiro, so Brazil's dominance isn't a surprise.

A game of beach football spans 36 minutes, with teams

consisting of five players (including a goalkeeper) each. The field is considerably smaller than a regular football pitch and great care is taken to clear the sand of pebbles, seashells and other objects that can cause injuries.

Seychelles is set to host the 2025 edition of the tournament.