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Your legacy will inspire one and all, says Tendulkar on Ashwin's retirement

Legendary India batter Sachin Tendulkar said the legacy of retired off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin will continue...

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India's gold jewellery purchase poised to surge 18 per cent in 2024-25 : ICRA

The domestic gold jewellery consumption (in value terms) is expected to continue its momentum in the current financial year with an estimated growth of ...

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Irrigation and Civil Supplies Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy on Wednesday reiterated the Congress government's commitment to completing the Palamuru-Ranga Reddy...

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CM Revanth participates in 'Chalo Raj Bhavan' protest over Adani issue

Hyderabad, Dec 18 (NSS): Telangana Congress leaders, including Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, Deputy Chief Minister Bhatti Vikramarka, Ministers and MLAs participated in a "Chalo Raj Bhavan" protest programme over the Adani issue in Hyderabad on Wednesday. The protest was organised by the Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC) led by its president Mahesh Kumar Goud as per a call given by the All India Congress Committee (AICC).

Continued on pg 02

KTR dares Revanth Reddy for a debate on Formula E race in Telangana Assembly

Hyderabad, Dec 18 (IANS) : Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) working president K. T. Rama Rao on Wednesday dared Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy to initiate discussion on Formula E-race issue in the State Assembly.

Denying any irregularities or corruption in the Formula-E race, the former minister, in a letter to the Chief Minister, demanded discussion over it. Stating that the event brought goodwill to the state and Hyderabad city, he alleged that the event was sacrificed purely due to political vendetta. He believes that a detailed discussion in the Assembly will reveal the truth to everyone. BRS Legislature Party also wrote to Speaker Gaddam Prasad Kumar, seeking a debate on the Formula E race in the House. KTR, in his letter



to the Chief Minister, wrote that his government has been making several baseless allegations against "the previous BRS government, especially against me, for several months regarding the Formula-E race issue". "Reports suggest that even in the cabinet meeting held under your leadership this week, this topic was discussed for about one and a half hours. Additionally, there are various leaks from the Chief Minister's Office to the media, hinting at filing cases on this matter and claiming that the Governor has granted approval," wrote KTR. The BRS working president stated that instead of having closed-door discussions, the truth about this matter should come out before the four crore people of Telangana through a debate in the State Assembly.

Continued on pg 02

Second Mpox case detected in Kerala



Thiruvananthapuram, Dec 18 (IANS) : With another person turning positive for Mpox on Wednesday, the total number of such cases in Kerala have reached two, forcing state health authorities onto a high alert. State Health Minister Veena George said all those who have come into direct contact with the two positive cases and are having symptoms have to get in touch with the nearest health authorities.

Continued on pg 02



13 drown as Indian Navy speedboat bangs into passenger ferry in Arabian Sea off Mumbai coast

Mumbai, Dec 18 (IANS) : In a gruesome maritime disaster, at least 13 persons drowned, including three Indian Navy sailors plus another 99 were rescued from the Arabian Sea when a naval speedboat on engine-trials lost control and abruptly rammed into a chockful passenger ferry, near the Raigad Coast, off Gateway of India, here on Wednesday evening, officials said.

The passenger boat, reported to be a private catamaran named 'Neelkamal', was ferrying around 110 tourists plus five crew members to the world-famous UNESCO Heritage Elephanta Islands, and the disaster occurred around 5.15 p.m., said the BMC Disaster Control.

Continued on pg 02

Centre committed to development of India's rich linguistic heritage : Kishan

New Delhi, Dec 18 : The Government of India remains steadfast in its commitment to the preservation, promotion, and development of India's rich linguistic heritage. Addressing media persons today, Union Minister G. Kishan Reddy emphasized the government's vision for a developed India by 2047.



Musi Project a ploy to evict people for land sharks, says Kavitha

Hyderabad, Dec 18 (IANS) : Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) MLC K. Kavitha alleged on Wednesday that the Musi Riverfront Development Project is a ploy to evict thousands of people for real estate sharks.

Continued on pg 02



INS Nirdeshak commissioned into the Indian Navy

Visakhapatnam, Dec.18 (NSS): INS Nirdeshak, the second ship of Survey Vessel (Large) project, was commissioned into the Indian Navy, in a ceremony presided over by Raksha Rajya Mantri Sanjay Seth on Wednesday at Naval Dockyard, Visakhapatnam.

Vice Admiral Rajesh Pendharkar, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, hosted the commissioning ceremony marking the formal induction of the second of the four ships of Survey Vessel (Large).

Ponguleti introduces Telangana Bhu Bharati Bill- 2024 in Assembly

Hyderabad, Dec.18 (NSS): Minister for Revenue Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy on Wednesday presented the groundbreaking Telangana Bhu Bharati Bill-2024 in the Assembly, emphasizing its focus on protecting the land rights of common people. The Minister described this opportunity as a momentous achievement in his career. Speaking during the Bill's introduction, Minister Srinivas Reddy explained that the act is a comprehensive overhaul of the previous ROR Act, 2020. Following extensive consultations, including 40 days of public feedback via a dedicated website and suggestions from intellectuals, poets, retired officials, and public representatives, the revised act was crafted to address past shortcomings and provide a robust framework for land governance. Minister Srinivas Reddy assured landowners and stakeholders that Bhu Bharati is designed to last for at least a century, re-



flecting a strong commitment to protecting land rights. Moreover, the Minister stated that Bill will provide opportunity to reform the revenue records, including reduction of manual record errors by safeguarding both computerised and manual copies of revenue data. Similarly, six simplified modules are introduced for land records management, reducing the complexity of Dharani's earlier 33 modules. Moreover, the pahani records are expanded to 11 columns, restoring essential details omitted in the earlier single-column format, he disclosed. Ponguleti also promised that the rules will be drafted within three months to avoid delays seen under the previous government. The State government will organise revenue conferences at the village level to resolve issues swiftly.



Some MLAs coming drunk to Telangana Assembly, claims BRS leader Harish Rao

Hyderabad, Dec 18 (IANS): BRS leader T. Harish Rao on Wednesday made a sensational claim in the Telangana Assembly that some members are coming drunk to the House and proposed a breath analyser test for legislators. The former minister stated in the House that like a breath analyser test for drunk driving on roads, a test should be conducted on the legislators entering the House. Harish Rao re-

marked that some members are coming to the House after consuming liquor in the morning. These members don't know what they are speaking in the House, he said. Revenue Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy demanded Harish Rao apologise to the House for his comments.

Continued on pg 02

CM Revanth participates in 'Chalo Raj Bhavan' protest over Adani issue

Continued From pg 01 On the occasion, Congress leaders in large numbers reached the Raj Bhavan on foot from Necklace Road, raising slogans against Industrialist

Gautham Adani and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is not visiting violence-hit Manipur State. They demanded that these issues be discussed in Parliament. On the occasion, Chief Minister

Revanth Reddy said that Adani companies had offered bribes in America and the US government had initiated an action against him. "There should be an investigation

against Adani, who has tarnished the image of the country. The JCC should lead the investigation into the episode," Revanth Reddy demanded.

Some MLAs coming drunk to Telangana Assembly, claims BRS leader Harish Rao

Continued From pg 01 He said Harish Rao's remarks are disparaging not just for the House but the entire society. The minister lamented that

Harish Rao is making personal attacks and opined that no member either from the ruling party or the opposition should make personal remarks.

13 drown as Indian Navy speedboat bangs into passenger ferry in Arabian Sea off Mumbai coast

Continued From pg 01 Official sources said that an Indian Navy's rigid inflatable boat undergoing engine trials crashed into the 'Neelkamal' at high speed, overturning it and throwing most of the tourists into the Arabian Sea near Uran, Karanja on the Raigad coast, around 10 km from Gateway of India. The sources said that the ferry, 'Neelkamal', may have broken down with the sudden hit, overturned and started sinking with the passengers thrown into the sea. Videos of the tragedy, clicked by aghast passengers from other ferries in the vicinity showed gruesome shots of people screaming for help, flailing their arms and legs to remain afloat or attempting to hold their near and dear ones from sinking in chilly sea waters. On receiving the SOS from multiple sources on the disaster, a massive rescue operation was

launched by the Indian Navy's four helicopters and 15 other vessels including the Marine Police, Indian Coast Guard, Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority, along with local fishers and other ferry boats to save the victims. By 9 p.m., the authorities confirmed 13 deaths comprising three Indian Navy sailors and 10 civilians, several 'critical' in different hospitals, and over 100 other tourists whose condition is reported to be 'stable' in various hospitals, while search continues for another five still suspected 'missing' as darkness fell. It was not immediately clear whether the ill-fated 'Neelkamal' was carrying passengers as per the stipulated norms for load and other safety measures. The owner of the vessel, Rajendra Padte, said that the 'Neelkamal' had departed on its regular tourism voyage to Elephanta Islands around 3.15 p.m. and barely a couple of hours later the tragedy was reported, "but it was not our fault".

Second Mpxox case detected in Kerala

Continued From pg 01 The first case was reported last week when a Wayanad resident, coming from the UAE, turned positive and health authorities went on a high alert. The second case is of a Kannur resident, also arriving from the UAE. Both these people are now in isolation at the state-run Medical College hospital in Kannur. Under instructions from George, the emergency meeting of the Rapid Response Team decided to prepare a route map of the two people who turned positive. "All those who have had direct contact have to be under observation for 21 days. An alert has been sent to airports to ensure that people who arrive have to inform authorities.

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Palamuru-Ranga Reddy project to be completed by Dec. 2026 : Uttam Kumar Reddy

Hyderabad, Dec.18 (NSS): Irrigation and Civil Supplies Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy on Wednesday reiterated the Congress government's commitment to completing the Palamuru-Ranga Reddy Lift Irrigation Scheme (PRLIS) by December 2026. Replying to a question in the Council, Uttam Kumar Reddy assured that the

project remains a top priority for the government and dismissed allegations of neglect. He outlined the detailed status of the project, emphasising that significant progress has been made in both physical and financial terms. He informed the House that PRLIS is being executed in 18 packages, including four lift packages and 14 civil works packages. The main works include approach channels, open canals, tunnels, pump houses, and reservoirs, spanning four major stages. He stated that the Stage-I pumping station was successfully commissioned on September 16, 2023, while the Stage-II, Stage-III, and Stage-IV pumping stations are nearing completion and are expected to be commissioned shortly. These developments mark significant milestones in addressing irrigation and drinking water needs in Telangana's drought-prone areas. Uttam Kumar Reddy noted that Rs 32,305 crore has been spent on the project so far, against the initial administrative approval of Rs. 35,200 crore.

HDB Financial Services Ltd. Registered Office: Radhika, 2nd Floor, Law Garden Road, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad-08. Branch Offices: M/s HDB Financial Services Ltd., Address: Shree Balaji PSR Tower, 1st Floor, H.No. 1-8-616, 1, Prakash Nagar, Begumpet, Hyderabad, Telangana-500016. AUCTION SALE NOTICE CUM E-AUCTION SALE NOTICE

Musi Project a ploy to evict people for land sharks, says Kavitha

Continued From pg 01 She declared that the BRS would fight for the rights of the people who would be evicted for the project. She told media persons that Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy himself had claimed that the cost of the Musi project would be a whopping Rs 1.5 lakh crore but the state government sought a loan of Rs 4,100 crore from the World Bank and made a request to the BJP government at the Centre for Rs 14,100 crore. Making public some key documents relating to the project, she termed it a project with zero clarity, no transparency, massive loans, and no compensation plan for those forced to rehabilitate. She alleged that Legislative Affairs Minister D Sridhar Babu misled the House by giving wrong information that no assistance was sought from the World Bank for the Musi project and that DPR was not ready. She said on September 19, the Congress party stated that the Detailed Project Report (DPR) was ready and sought Rs 4,100 crore from the World Bank.

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OPINIONmail



'Syrian Scenarios': What may lie ahead for Arab heartland nation, Middle East, world?

The quick fall -- and flight -- of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad has evoked triumph in certain quarters and disquiet in others, as it seems to have upended the political situation and strategic calculus of the Middle East. However, a look at the record of the key Arab country and others may suggest the last word on what follows remains to be said. Both Israel and the US have rushed to take claim for the overthrow of the over six-decade rule of the Ba'ath Party, Turkey is quietly exulting, and the end of the Russian and Iranian influence in the Arab heartland state is being celebrated. There are, however, reports that Assad, who had been moving family members out of the country quietly, had cut a deal with the rebels for a safe exit, given the problems in maintaining control over a fragmenting and impoverished country. Russia, involved in Ukraine, and Iran, weakened by attacks on its regional proxies, are perceived as not extending themselves over much in preserving Assad's rule, like earlier. They are also seeking to build bridges with the new rulers -- Russia has obtained guarantees on its bases in the country, and both Moscow and Tehran may be biding their time till the inherent contradictions in the situation bubble up. The Al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces, and other elements of what may become a toxic Syrian brew, may find ousting Assad was the easy part. Take the SDF, which is predominantly Kurdish -- a community which Turkey regards as its enemy incarnate -- what happens when they come close?

While Syria is predominantly Sunni, the power was long held by the Alawite sub-sect of Shias, from which the Assad family and its key personnel hail, and the country also has sizeable Kurd, Druze, Shia, and Arab Christian (divided into six major churches) segments of the populace.

Described as a tribal and fractious country by then Saudi Crown Prince Faisal in the mid-1950s, Syria has witnessed at least eight military coups and a short-lived union with Egypt in the first quarter century as a free country following independence from France in 1946. It was only after Air Force chief Hafez Al Assad seized power in 1970, after being a key part of the 1961, 1963, and 1966 coups, that there was a semblance of stability, though with an authoritarian bent, save the abortive Islamist revolt of the early 1980s. While Assad had groomed his eldest son Bassel as his successor, the latter's death in a 1994 accident forced him to choose his second son, Bashar, for the role. Bashar Al Assad succeeded his father in 2000 and governed without hitch till the Arab Spring affected his country too, leading to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. It was a tough time for him till Russian and Iranian military intervention turned the tide, leading to roughly another decade in power till the rebels' resurgence at the end of 2024 spelt a final finish.

Then, the Assads' long rule may have been despotic, but, here its end must be compared with the situation that arose after the violent overthrow of other 'despots' in the Middle East, spanning the entire region from the dusty plains of Iraq to the sandy expanses of Libya. Did the ouster of either Saddam Hussain of Iraq in 2003 or Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 meet the strategic aims of their adversaries or leave the countries a better place? The answer is evident -- in Iraq, the long-repressed Shia majority rose up and an alignment with neighbouring Iran was achieved, while sparking a Sunni insurgency that required the US and the regime a considerable time to stamp out. Scarcely had this been done, the spectre of the Islamic State -- which in some respects, outdid Al Qaeda in viciousness -- arose. While the US claims credit for countering and weakening it, the role of Iran-backed Iraqi militias, and Gen Qassem Soleimani as a strategist, was also key. In an unstable Syria, could either Al Qaeda or the IS regain strength? Israel, as a neighbour, will also face the blowback, irrespective of rumours of "common interests". And growing Turkish influence in an adjoining country, given the rising tension between the two over Gaza is not conducive to peace. On the other hand, the removal of Gaddafi's strong hand left the country divided and in chaos.

EDITORIAL
the indian mail



Centre sold 12.41 lakh tonne of Bharat dals at subsidised prices to ease inflation burden

The Centre has sold 12.41 lakh tonne of 'Bharat' dals at subsidised prices to consumers to ease the burden of inflation on households, the government told the Parliament on Wednesday. Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, B.L. Verma said in the

Lok Sabha that 12.35 lakh tonnes of Bharat chana dal, 5,663.07 tonnes of Bharat moong dal, and 118 tonnes of Bharat masur dal have been sold at subsidised prices till now. The government introduced Bharat dal in July 2023 by converting chana stock from the price stabilisation buffer into chana dal for retail sale to consumers at a

maximum retail price (MRP) of Rs 60 per kg for 1 kg pack and Rs 55 per kg for 30 kg pack till September 30, 2024.

Bharat chana dal has been extended and expanded by allocating another 3 lakh tonnes of chana stock for retail sale in the form of chana dal and chana whole at MRP of Rs 70 per kg and Rs 58 per kg, respectively, the Minister said in a written reply.

The Bharat brand has also been extended to moong and masur dals.

Moong stock has been converted into moong dal (Dhuli) and moong sabut for retail sale under the Bharat brand at MRP of Rs 107 per kg and Rs 93 per kg, respectively. Bharat masur dal is sold at Rs 89 per kg, he said.

Bharat atta and Bharat rice were also launched on Nov 6, 2023, and February 6, 2024, respectively, to provide atta (wheat flour) and rice to general consumers at subsidised rates.

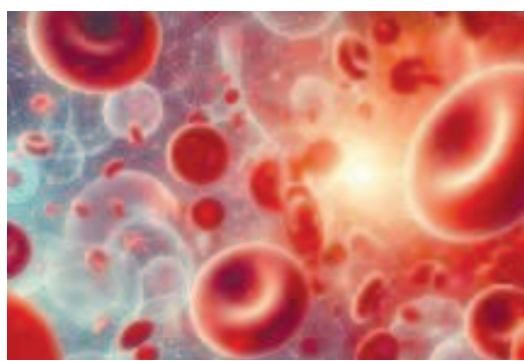
During Phase 1, Bharat atta and

Bharat rice were sold at MRP of Rs 27.50 per kg and Rs 29 per kg, respectively, till June 30, 2024. In Phase 2, these products are now being sold at an MRP of Rs 30 per kg for Bharat atta and Rs 34 per kg for Bharat rice. A total of 15.20 LMT of Bharat atta and 14.58 LMT of Bharat rice were made available to consumers during Phase 1 until June 30, 2024. In current Phase 2, 2,952.25 MT of Bharat atta and 3,413.35 MT of Bharat rice have been sold to general consumers, the Minister also added.

Bharat brand of food items are distributed through own retail outlets and mobile vans of the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd. (NAFED), Kendriya Bhandar and National Cooperative Consumers' Federation of India Limited (NCCF), e-commerce platforms, and big chain retailers, Minister Verma said.

Indian scientists develop 1st human gene therapy for Haemophilia A

In a significant medical feat, Indian scientists have developed the first-in-human gene therapy using lentiviral vectors for severe haemophilia A. The innovative therapy, developed by the Centre for Stem Cell Research (CSCR) at Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore -- a translational unit of BRIC-inStem, and supported by the Department of Biotechnology, has demonstrated transformational results. Early this year, scientists at the CMC-Vellore successfully conducted the country's first human clinical trial of gene therapy for haemophilia A (FVIII deficiency). The single-centre study, which enrolled five participants aged between 22 and 41 years, showed transformational results. "The therapy successfully produced zero annualised bleeding rates in all five enrolled participants while enabling prolonged production of Factor VIII.



Indian pharma companies set to make further progress in US market in 2025 : HSBC

Indian pharmaceutical companies, which benefited from sector tailwinds such as stable generic pricing and shortage-led opportunities and stable costs of raw materials in the past 18-24 months, will make further progress in differentiated and complex generics in the US market in 2025, a report showed on Wednesday.

According to a note by HSBC Global Research, these tailwinds are projected to continue in 2025 as well given that "we don't see major changes on the demand-supply dynamics." "In 2025, we assume Indian companies will make further progress in differentiated/complex generics (peptides, inhalers) in the US with the potential launches of gAbraxane, gAdvair inhaler and peptides, etc," according to the note. Progress in complex generics and biosimilars will likely remain in focus as

they will be crucial in navigating gRevlimid fall and sustain growth.

Amid the tailwind of steady generic pricing, "we believe the execution of key launches (gAbraxane for Cipla) will determine the course of the US sales in 2025." According to HSBC, Indian companies will start their journey in GLP-1 drugs with the launch of generic liraglutide (though generics for new-gen GLP-1 drugs are distant in the US).

"We assume the Indian pharma market (IPM) continues to grow by high-single digits, led by price increase and new launches," it added.

Malaria cases, deaths in India decline by 69pc between 2017-2023: WHO

India has seen significant progress in reducing malaria incidence and mortality rates, according to the latest World Malaria report, from the World Health Organization (WHO) on Wednesday. Malaria is a life-threatening disease spread to humans by female Anopheles mosquitoes. It is preventable and curable. The report showed that the number of estimated malaria cases in India decreased to 2 million cases in 2023 from 6.4 million in 2017 (69 per cent decrease). Similarly, the estimated malaria deaths decreased to 3,500 from 11,100 (68 per cent decrease) during the same period. As a result, "India exited the High Burden to High Impact

(HBHI) group officially in 2024", the WHO said. The HBHI approach is a targeted malaria response that is used in several countries to accelerate the pace of malaria elimination in countries with high malaria burden. India joined the HBHI initiative in July 2019. The HBHI initiative was launched in four states in India: Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal. Further, the report showed that in 2023, India accounted for half of all estimated malaria cases in the WHO South-East Asia Region, followed by Indonesia, which accounted for just under one-third. The Region had eight malaria endemic countries in 2023 -- accounting for 4 million cases and contributing 1.5 per cent of the burden of malaria cases globally. Just over 48 per cent of all esti-



ated cases in the region were due to P. vivax. However, from 2000 to 2023, malaria cases reduced by 82.4 per cent, from 22.8 million in 2000, and incidence reduced by 87.0 per cent, from 17.7 to 2.3 per 1000 population at risk, the report said "The decrease can mainly be accounted for by a decrease in India of 17.7 million estimated cases and a decrease in incidence by 93 per cent, from 20 to 1.5 per 1000 population at risk," the WHO reported. At the same time, India and Indonesia accounted for about 88 per cent of all estimated malaria

deaths in this region in 2023. Notably, Bhutan and Timor-Leste, from the Region, reported zero malaria deaths since 2013 and 2015, respectively, while Sri Lanka was certified malaria-free in 2016. "The progress follows the highest ever political commitment by Member countries, matched by tangible actions and unstinted efforts over the years down to the sub-national level," said Saima Wazed, Regional Director WHO South-East Asia.

South Korea voices hopes for 'peace, stability' in Syria after fall of Assad's dictatorship

Seoul, Dec 18 (IANS) : South Korea on Wednesday voiced hopes for the end of all violence, as well as the establishment of peace and stability in Syria following the recent fall of the Assad family's half-century-long dictatorship. On Wednesday, rebel fighters toppled the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad after 13 years of civil war, bringing an end to half a century of dictatorship by the Assad family, Yonhap news agency reported. "Taking this change as an opportunity, we hope that all violence will be brought to an end in Syria and Syrians will move toward peace and stability."



French forces begin withdrawal from Chad

Yaounde, Dec 18 (IANS) : France started the withdrawal of its troops from Chad, with some fighter jets taking off from a French base in the Chadian capital of N'Djamena, according to the Chadian army. In a brief statement, Chanane Issakha Acheikh, Chadian army spokesperson, said on Wednesday that the public would be informed of each

stage of the withdrawal until the final departure of all French forces, Xinhua news agency reported. Last month, Chad announced that it had ended a security and defence cooperation agreement with France, stressing that it was time for Chad to assert its full sovereignty and redefine its strategic partners according to national priorities.

South Africa's business confidence index increases significantly

Johannesburg, Dec 18 (IANS) : Business confidence has significantly improved in South Africa since the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in June 2024, the South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SACCI) said on Wednesday. SACCI released its Business Confidence Index (BCI) on Tuesday following a survey of the business community across various sectors. The latest survey indicated that business confidence has improved on a monthly, annual and six-month basis. South Africa held elections in May 2024, which resulted in no outright winner and led to the formation of the GNU by 10 political parties. "The broader political representation in the administration of the national government has facilitated a positive assessment of economic prospects by businesses. This positive assessment has spilled over into the business climate, improving sentiment and stability," SACCI said in a statement, Xinhua news agency reported. The chamber said the BCI has improved steadily since the formation of the GNU, rising from a low of 107.8 in May 2024 to 118.1 in November 2024. Over the year to November 2024, the BCI improved by 6.6 points. "SACCI's BCI increased by 6.6 index points year-



on-year in November 2024 -- the largest year-on-year improvement for a single month since Covid-19 restrictions were lifted in December 2022," SACCI said, noting that increased tourist arrivals, higher precious metal prices and stronger new vehicle sales made the most notable positive contributions to the BCI in November. However, the survey also found that lower merchandise import volumes had the only significant negative impact on the BCI. "SACCI noted with concern and disappointment the slow economic growth of 0.4 per cent year-on-year for the first nine months of 2024, which reflects the challenging situation the South African economy finds itself in," the statement said, adding that nonetheless, the strong upward momentum in business confidence confirms the private sector's resolve and commitment to improving economic performance.

Trump names Harmeet Dhillon, ?critic of India, supporter of farmers' protest, as top civil rights official

New York, Dec 18 (IANS) : President-elect Donald Trump has named Republican Party activist Harmeet Dhillon, who is a supporter of the farmers' protest in India and raised allegations of "Indian death squads", to be the assistant attorney general for civil rights. "In her new role at the DOJ (Department of Justice), Harmeet will be a tireless defender of our Constitutional Rights, and will enforce our Civil Rights and Election Laws FAIRLY and FIRMLY", Trump said on Truth Social announcing on Wednesday. Trump also noted that she "is a respected member of the Sikh religious community". On social media X, Dhillon who goes as "@pnjaban", has

expressed support for the farmers' protest and raised what she said were "apparently Indian death squads operating in North America targeting Sikh activists". In a criticism of the administration of President Joe Biden, she virtually accused it of a cover-up, writing, "Our government refuses to provide details. Why?" The mention of "death squads" was an apparent reference to the case filed against an Indian citizen and a former RAW official accusing them of plotting to kill a Khalistani activist in the US and echoes Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's accusations against India. Mentioning her family's agrarian roots, another post by Dhillon said, "I stand with the #FarmersProtests!"

In yet another post she urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to meet with the protesters and make a compromise. "As the Punjab-born descendant of farmers, my heart breaks to see Punjabi farmers assaulted for protesting Indian gov't's pro-big-corporation farm bill that will destroy their farms, way of life, and culture. Hear them, meet with them, & compromise, PM Modi", she posted. The post of assistant attorney general for civil rights, for which she has been named, does not directly have international responsibilities and it does not oversee the two controversial cases involving India. The ongoing case alleging the conspiracy against the Khalistani will not come under her purview as it will be the domain of the as-

sistant attorney general of the national security division. The case alleging bribery by Indian business leaders is under the deputy assistant attorney general in charge of the Criminal Division. Trump has not announced names for those positions. "Throughout her career, Harmeet has stood up consistently to protect our cherished Civil Liberties", Trump said in his Truth Social post. He added, "Harmeet is one of the top Election lawyers in the Country, fighting to ensure that all, and ONLY, legal votes are counted". If her appointment is approved by the Senate, Dhillon will become the second Indian American to hold the top civil rights position after Vanita Gupta, who held that position in former President



Barack Obama's administration and was the associate attorney general for two years under President Biden. Dhillon ran unsuccessfully for the chair of the Republican National Committee last year. She has been a member of the Republican National Committee and said a Sikh prayer at the Republican National Conventions in 2016 and 2024.



Top US commander in Mideast meets Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria

Washington, Dec 18 (IANS) : The top commander of the US military in the Middle East visited the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria to be briefed on ongoing efforts to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the US military said. The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a post on X that General Erik Kurilla, the CENTCOM commander, "visited US military commanders and servicemembers, as well as our Defeat-ISIS partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces, at several bases in Syria." "He received a firsthand assessment of force protection measures, the rapidly evolving situation, and ongoing efforts to prevent ISIS from exploiting the current situation," CENTCOM said.

PM Modi could soon embark on a historic visit to Kuwait

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Enhancing ongoing close cooperation and solid partnership, Prime Minister Narendra Modi could soon visit Kuwait in what would be the first visit by an Indian PM to the key West Asian country, which also holds the current presidency of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in more than 43 years. Last week, as he called on PM Modi at his Lok Kalyan Marg residence during his visit to New Delhi, Kuwait's Foreign Minister Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya had extended an invitation to the Prime Minister from the Kuwait leadership to visit the country "at the earliest opportunity which the PM had graciously accepted. A few hour later, as he held the delegation-level talks with External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar at the Hyderabad House, Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya called India as a "very important partner" and Prime Minister Modi as "one of the wisest persons" in the world. "I would like to thank you for



the invitation and also for the opportunity of meeting Prime Minister Modi, who we believe is one of the wisest persons worldwide. I am sure that the Prime Minister puts India on a better level, and I am sure that he will continue that... India is a very important partner and we count on our relationship," the visiting Foreign Minister said in the meeting held on December 4. Kuwait remains the only GCC member country - also comprising the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar - that PM Modi has not visited so far since assuming office in 2014.

Pakistan: Former ISI chief Faiz Hameed indicted on political meddling, creating unrest

Rawalpindi, Dec 18 (IANS) : In a major development, Pakistan's former chief of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General (Retd.) Faiz Hameed has formally been charged for engaging in political activities, paving the way for his Field General Court Martial (FGCM). Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of Pakistan's military establishment, announced Tuesday that Hameed has been arraigned on charges of engaging in political activities, highlighting that the retired General would now be facing serious investigation on his activities as DGISI. This would also include his involvement and extended hidden support to the country's former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his government while planning and execution of violent assaults and attacks on military installations on May 9, 2023 by the workers and supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. "On August 12, 2024, the process of FGCM was initiated against Lt. General Faiz Hameed (Retd) under provision of Pakistan Army Act and in first place Lt General Faiz Hameed (Retd) has been formally arraigned on charges of engaging in political activities, violation of Official Secret Act detrimental to safety and interest of the state, misuse of authority and government resources and causing wrongful loss to a person(s)," read a statement issued by the ISPR. "During the process, involvement of Lt. Gen Faiz Hameed, in events related to creating agitation and unrest, leading upon multiple incidents including



but not limited to 9th May 2023 incident for fomenting instability; at the behest of an in collusion with vested political interests, are also being separately investigated. Lt. Gen Faiz Hameed (Retd) is being afforded with all legal rights as per the law," the ISPR added. The latest development comes nearly four months after the Pakistan Army announced that its ex-spy chief was arrested to initiate FGCM proceedings on allegations of violating the Army Act. Hameed was arrested from Rawalpindi city and summoned to a meeting with the in-service senior military officials. He had allegedly misused his powers as DGISI against an owner of a private housing society. Later on, reports surfaced that former DGISI was also being investigated and interrogated for his involvement in the May 9 riots of last year when PTI workers stormed military installations across the country, attacking, vandalizing and damaging military properties besides also desecrating monuments of Pakistan Army and Pakistan Air Force (PAF) heroes, in response to the arrest of PTI founder Imran Khan.

Two seminal works on PM Modi's governance & leadership presented to Pope Francis

Rome, Dec 18 (IANS) : Pope Francis has been presented with two works highlighting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governance and leadership, it was announced on Wednesday. "A moment of immense pride for Bluekraft Digital Foundation as 'Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery' and 'Mann Ki Baat.





TN transport dept cracks down on bike taxis after circular from commissioner

Chennai, Dec 18 (IANS): The Tamil Nadu Transport Department on Wednesday launched a crackdown on two-wheelers being used for commercial purposes. This follows a circular issued on December 10 by the Tamil Nadu Transport Commissioner, directing all Zonal Officers and Regional Transport Offices (RTOs) to conduct a special drive to enforce the Motor Vehicles Act and Rules. The Tamil Nadu Road Transport Workers Association had earlier submitted a memorandum alleging widespread violations of the Motor Vehicles Act by two-wheelers being used for commercial purposes. Auto and taxi drivers also raised concerns, complaining that vehicles with permits for personal use were being misused for commercial activities. A related case

is currently pending before the Madras High Court. In the circular, the commissioner instructed field officers to ensure strict compliance with existing rules and regulations. Zonal officers and district transport officers have been directed to submit daily reports on the enforcement activities. The Auto-Taxi Thozhilalar Sangam, affiliated with the CITU, also demanded a ban on bike taxis. Its General Secretary, S. Balasubramaniam, stated, "We want the state government to ban bike taxis and instead launch an auto ride-hailing app." Taxi, autorickshaw, and van drivers in popular tourist destinations like Yercaud have echoed similar concerns, claiming that bike rentals adversely impact their livelihoods.

Kerala local body polls : Cong-led UDF performs better, Left slumps

Thiruvananthapuram, Dec 18 (IANS) : The winning streak of the Congress-led UDF Opposition in Kerala continues in elections. At the 31 by-elections held across the state in various local bodies, for which results came on Wednesday, the Congress-led UDF won 17, the CPI-M-led Left won 11 and the BJP-led NDA won in three wards. The Congress-led UDF regained four seats, which was previously held by the Left. Consequent to the 17 wins for Congress-led UDF, they will regain control of three panchayaths in Palakkad, Idukki and Thrissur districts. Inciden-

tally, this winning streak is an extension of what happened first in the April Lok Sabha polls when the UDF won 18 out of the 20 Lok Sabha seats, with the BJP and CPI-M winning one each. Then came the three by-elections held last month and Congress candidate Priyanka Gandhi had a staggering win at Wayanad, bettering her brother's winning margin of 3.60 lakh to 4.10 lakh. Likewise, at the Palakkad Assembly by-election, the Congress candidate won raising the margin from around 4,000 votes to over 18,000 votes. At the Chelakkara Assembly constituency, the margin of the CPI-M candidate came



down from over 39,000 votes to less than 13,000 votes. Even though victory at Wayanad and Palakkad was certain, the increased margin in these constituencies and the slide in the victory margin of the CPI-M candidate at Chelakkara had sent shockwaves

to the Pinarayi Vijayan-led Left government. Even though the Left tried to put a brave face stating that the UDF just retained their seats, the discussions in the ongoing CPI-M party meetings, there has been criticisms against the style of functioning of Vijayan.

Ayushman Vaya Vandana card proving to be boon for elderly in UP's Maharajganj

Maharajganj (Uttar Pradesh), Dec 18 (IANS) : The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PM-JAY) has proven to be a boon for senior citizens in Uttar Pradesh, particularly those above the age of 70 who often struggle with the high cost of medical treatment. Under the newly-introduced Ayushman Vaya Vandana cards, elderly citizens can now access health benefits worth Rs 5 lakh, providing them with crucial support during their sunset years. The scheme, launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, is part of an ongoing effort to enhance healthcare accessibility and protect the health of senior citizens. Many beneficiaries of the scheme have expressed their deep gratitude to both leaders, recognising the initiative as a much-needed intervention for those unable to afford expensive medical treatments. Vindhyaal Shrivastava, one of the first beneficiaries, shared his appreciation: "I got my Ayushman card today. I am happy that I will get Rs 5 lakh for my medical expenses. It is a very good initiative by CM Yogi Adityanath and PM Modi. We are very satisfied with this. Poor people like us cannot afford to buy medicines, which are very costly." His words reflect the sentiments of



countless others who now have access to healthcare benefits they once thought were out of reach. The launch of Ayushman Vaya Vandana cards for those over 70 is a part of the Central government's and Uttar Pradesh's broader strategy to improve healthcare infrastructure and ensure that medical services are available to all, especially vulnerable populations. The Rs 5 lakh cover is designed to ease the financial strain on elderly citizens who often face overwhelming healthcare costs in their later years. In Maharajganj district, the distribution of Ayushman Vaya Vandana cards is well underway, thanks to the efforts of the Uttar Pradesh government. District Magistrate Anunay Jha highlighted the progress of the initiative, saying, "For the last 15 days, we have been organising daily camps in five villages of each block area to help senior citizens avail their Ayushman Vaya Vandana cards."



Two-member UNHCR team meets Rohingyas in Jammu

Jammu, Dec 18 (IANS): Officials said here on Wednesday that a two-member team of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) met the members of the Rohingya community staying illegally in J&K's Jammu city. "A two-member team of UNHCR met Rohingya Muslims at a slum here on Monday," officials said. The meeting took place in the aftermath of a heated controversy over the continuation of basic amenities like water and electricity to these illegal settlers. Senior Protection Officer, Tomoko Fukumura along with Protection Associate, Ragini Trakroo Zutshi on Monday met the Rohingya Muslims and some local residents in the Kiryani Talab area of Narwal in Jammu City.

Surge in construction of illegal farmhouses in Aravallis, Sohna Council issues notice

Gurugram, Dec 18 (IANS): After the illegal farmhouse construction issue was raised at the Municipal Council Sohna, it started a campaign to re-identify such structures in Aravalli Hills adjacent to Raisina village. Officials said in the last week, show cause notices have been put up outside nine farmhouses regarding illegal construction. The farmhouse owner will have to reply to the notice within seven days. After that rampant illegal construction, the council's team

is now surveying the Aravalli area to stop the construction of illegal farmhouses. According to information, about 450 farmhouses have been sold in Aravalli by private builders who developed one or two acres of area.



Delhi has decided to elect BJP CM, oust AAP govt : Harsh Malhotra

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : BJP MP from Delhi and Union Minister of State (MoS), Harsh Malhotra, on Wednesday expressed confidence that the people of the national Capital have decided to oust the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government and elect a BJP chief minister in the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections.

Speaking to IANS, Malhotra dismissed the impact of candidates switching parties, asserting that such developments would not affect the BJP's prospects. He also slammed the AAP's candidate selection strategy, calling it a sign of the party's declining credibility. "AAP's ship seems to be sinking. Out of the 31 candidates an-

nounced so far, they've cut tickets for 15 sitting MLAs, including veterans like Manish Sisodia, who once touted his so-called 'education model', which is nothing but a third-class model. Sisodia has abandoned his constituency and moved to another seat. Even Rakhi Birla has run away from her seat. This clearly indicates that they know their MLAs have failed to

deliver on the ground," Malhotra claimed. The BJP leader alleged that the AAP government has failed Delhi over the past decade. "Even after 10 years, they haven't delivered clean drinking water. People in slum areas who were promised free electricity are getting bills of Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000. The public has seen through their

tall claims and decided to elect a BJP chief minister this time," he added. On Tuesday, the AAP's Seelampur MLA Abdul Rehman became the first sitting MLA to quit the party after being denied a ticket. He has since joined the Congress. Reacting to this, Malhotra remarked, "Opportunists are leaving AAP to join parties they think



might help them win. But this doesn't affect the BJP. Our focus is on serving the people and continuing the development.

Tejashwi Yadav questions Nitish Kumar over expensive Mahila Samvad Yatra

Patna Dec 18 (IANS) : Tejashwi Yadav, the former Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, criticised Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Wednesday, ahead of his Mahila Samvad Yatra, questioning the substantial allocation of Rs 225.78 crore for the initiative. The Mahila Samvad Yatra is scheduled to begin on December 15 in Bagaha, West Champaran, and will span 15 days during which Nitish Kumar will interact with women and children across Bihar's districts. Yadav's critique centred on the financial outlay, framing it as an extravagant use of taxpayer's money. He remarked, "Money makes

business deals, not dialogue. For communication, it requires love, not money." He further questioned how such a massive expenditure for a 15-day event, accusing the government of using public funds for political endeavours. The significant budget allocation has drawn sharp scrutiny from the Opposition, with claims that the initiative may prioritise optics over meaningful outcomes. However, the Bihar government has defended the yatra as a platform to strengthen dialogue with women and address their concerns at the grassroots level. Tejashwi Yadav accused the Chief



Minister of prioritising an "expensive election picnic" over addressing the state's pressing issues when it is grappling with chronic challenges. "In the last 20 years, unemployment, migration, infla-

tion, crime, and massive corruption have increased drastically. Bihar remains a backward state, yet the Chief Minister of such a state is going on an expensive election picnic," he said.



ED raids three places in Bengal in online forgery scam case

Kolkata, Dec 11 (IANS): The Enforcement Directorate (ED), on Wednesday, was conducting a marathon raid and search operation at three different locations in West Bengal in connection with an online forgery scam case. The raid operation began on

Tuesday night. Sources said that one of the three places was the residence of Hasan Ali at Lashkardighi in the East Burdwan district. Although Ali was known in the locality as a tailor by profession, the investigating officials have clues about his involvement in online forgery.

Indian firms raise over Rs 3 lakh crore from stock market in 2024

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The year 2024 has been historic for the Indian stock market as companies have raised a record capital of over Rs 3 lakh crore so far this year through Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), Qualified Institutional Placements (QIPs), and Rights Issues, breaking the previous record of raising capital - Rs 1.88 lakh crore in 2021. According to reports, 90 companies have raised or announced fundraising of Rs 1.62 lakh crore so far this year.



Mortgage finance AUM in India projected to grow 16-17 pc in FY25 and FY26

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The assets under management (AUM) of mortgage finance loans in the country is expected to grow at a healthy 16-17 per cent this fiscal and the next (FY25 and FY26), a report said on Wednesday. Trends in the sub-segments like home loans, loans against property (LAP), and wholesale loans will vary. Over the current and next fiscals.



India's gold jewellery purchase poised to surge 18 per cent in 2024-25 : ICRA

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The domestic gold jewellery consumption (in value terms) is expected to continue its momentum in the current financial year with an estimated growth of 14-18 per cent year-on-year, according to an ICRA report released on Wednesday. This follows the sharp growth of 18 per cent in 2023-24, which was primarily driven by realisations even as volume growth was subdued.

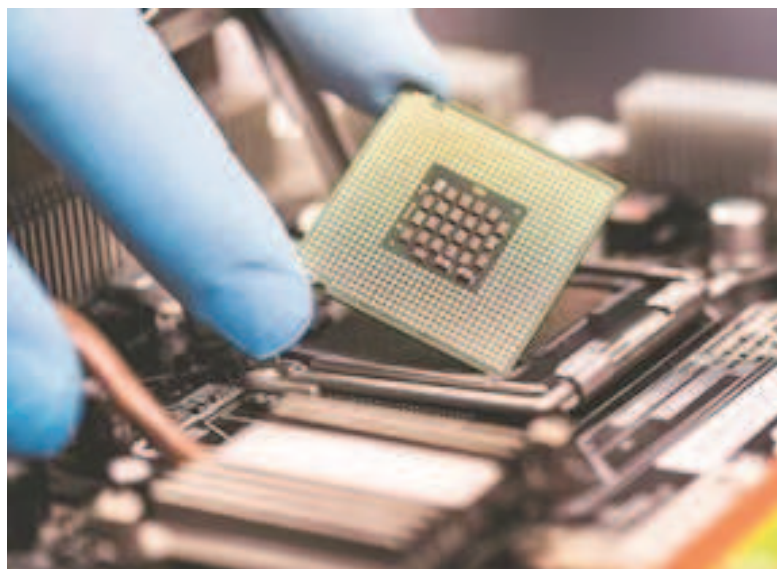
A sharp 900 basis points (bps) cut in import duty in the Union Budget in July 2024 and consequent correction in gold prices for a brief period led to some pre-buying of jewellery as well as bars and coins during Q2 FY2025, which is generally a seasonally weak quarter, the report said. "While gold prices were volatile, improving consumer sentiments and festive-led demand aided consumption growth in recent months. This, coupled with a higher number of auspicious and wedding days, and favourable monsoons aiding better rural output, is likely to help jewellery demand growth in H2 FY2025," the report opined.

Revenue growth for organised jewellery in FY2024 had



been supported by realisations with gold prices rising by 14 per cent year-on-year. The same trend is expected to continue this fiscal as well. So far in the current fiscal, the average gold price has risen by a sharp 25 per cent vis-à-vis FY2024 average price, despite occasional corrections – first, after the cut in customs duty in late July 2024 and then in November 2024, following the US elections and currency movements. The continuing uptick in the gold prices for the last seven quarters has been stimulated by the evolving global economic and geopolitical scenario, and rising investment demand for gold, the report observed.

On the supply side, organised jewellers are expected to add 16-18% to their existing retail network in FY2025.



MSI begins laptop production at manufacturing facility in Chennai

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Leading electronics company MSI on Wednesday announced the beginning of its India production with its first manufacturing facility now operational in Chennai. In line with the objective of the "Make in India" initiative, MSI will introduce Indian-made versions of two of its popular models -- 'MSI Modern 14' and 'MSI

Thin 15' laptops, the company said in a statement. "India has long been a key focus for MSI, and the country's growing demand for high-performance laptops has been integral to our decision to begin manufacturing locally," said John Hung, NB General Manager, MSI India.



Coal PSUs have created 16 eco-parks on 10,942 hectare green cover in 5 years : Govt

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Coal & Lignite public sector undertakings (PSUs) under the Ministry of Coal have established 16 eco-parks during the last 5 years in and around coal mining areas to promote environmental regeneration as well as tourism and recreational activities, Minister of Coal and Mines G. Kishan Reddy informed the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday. To increase green cover in and around coalfields, Coal India Limited (CIL), NLC India Limited (NLCIL) and Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL) have created a green cover of 10,942 hectares as part of their plantation and bio-reclamation efforts in and around coal and lignite mining areas, the minister said.

The PSUs have adopted innovative techniques in addition to tra-

ditional methods of plantation. These include three-tier plantations, seed ball plantation, Miyawaki plantation, high-tech cultivation, bamboo plantation, and plantation on overburden dumps using drip irrigation, he explained.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) prescribes various specific and general conditions related to plantation in the Environmental Clearance (EC) of coal mining projects. These conditions encompass measures for plantation on reclaimed degraded forest and non-forest lands. As per the EC conditions, for reclamation and green belt development, plantations are carried out in coal mining areas, including external overburden dumps and reclaimed degraded forest as well as non-forest lands, the minister said.

Indian share market opens lower, all eyes on US Fed meet

Mumbai, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Indian stock market opened in red on Wednesday as selling was seen in Nifty's PSU Bank, financial service, FMCG and metal sectors.

At around 9:33 am, Sensex was trading at 81,548.45 after declining 200.12 points or 0.24 per cent, while the Nifty was trading at 24,605.5 after dropping 62.70 points or 0.25 per cent. The market trend remained positive. On the National Stock Exchange (NSE), 1,263 stocks were trading in green, while 989 stocks were in red. Nifty Bank was down 133.10 points or 0.25 per cent at 53,448.25. Nifty Midcap 100 index was trading at 59,587.30 after rising 144.25 points or 0.24 per cent. Nifty Smallcap 100 index was at 19,575.45 after rising 44.40 points or 0.23 per cent. In the Sensex pack, Reliance, Nestle India, Bharti Airtel, JSW Steel, HDFC Bank and Infosys were the top losers. Tata Motors, Adani Ports, Hindustan Unilever Limited, HCL and Tech Mahindra were the top gain-

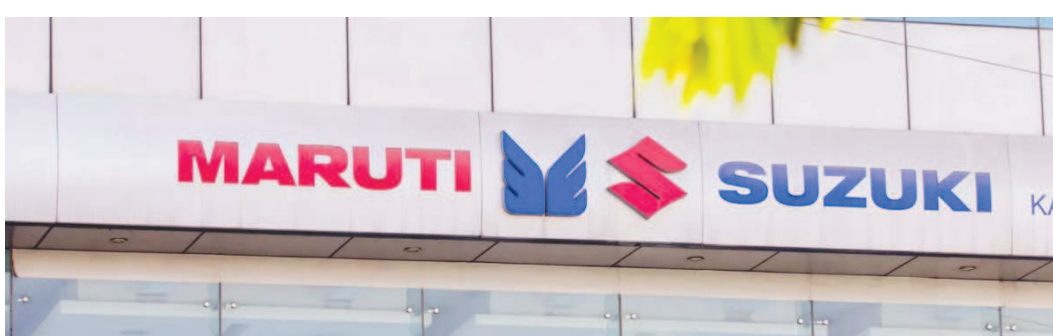


ers. Globally, markets will be looking forward to the Federal Open Market Committee outcome on Wednesday. Markets have already discounted a 25bp rate cut and, therefore, the focus will be on the Fed chief's commentary, said experts. The US services PMI coming strong at 58.5 per cent indicates a resilient economy, which augurs well for the market. In the Asian markets, except Japan, the markets of China, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Seoul and Jakarta were trading in red. In US stock markets, the Nasdaq Composite and S&P 500 ended 1.24 per cent and 0.38 per cent higher respectively and Dow Jones Industrial Average ended 0.25 per cent down in the previous trading session.



HPCL inks pact with NLDS to integrate API with Unified Logistics Interface Platform

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Public sector oil major Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) has signed an agreement with NICDC Logistics Data Services Ltd (NLDS) to integrate its APIs with Unified Logistics Interface Platform (ULIP), the Commerce and Industry Ministry announced on Wednesday. The HPCL API of ULIP provides Fuel Station & Pricing Visibility, which offers real-time visibility into the location and pricing of HPCL fuel stations across India. This API is expected to address critical logistics challenges, such as lack of clarity on refuelling options and fluctuating fuel costs along various routes. By utilising this data, logistics service providers, traders and transporters can optimise their planning and operations, ultimately reducing costs and inefficiencies, the ministry said in a statement. Further, the visibility into fuel station locations helps logistics operators avoid unplanned stops and ensure smoother, more efficient operations. Fleet operators can also plan long-haul trips more effectively by identifying fuel stations along key routes, minimising downtime and ensuring timely deliveries. ULIP is a digital gateway that allows industry players to access logistics-related datasets from various Government systems through API-based integration.



Maruti Suzuki India achieves 2 million units in a calendar year for 1st time

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Maruti Suzuki India on Wednesday announced a production milestone of 2 million vehicles in a calendar year for the first time in its history. The automaker also became the first among Suzuki Motor

Corporation's global automobile manufacturing facilities to reach this landmark. Of the 2 million vehicles, almost 60 per cent were manufactured in Haryana and 40 per cent in Gujarat. "The 2 million production milestone is a testament to India's

manufacturing potential and our dedication to 'Make in India' initiative," said Hisashi Takeuchi, Managing Director and CEO, Maruti Suzuki India.

India's total exports rise to \$67.8 billion in November

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : India's total exports (merchandise and services combined) during November 2024 are estimated at \$67.79 billion, registering a growth of 9.59 per cent vis-à-vis November 2023, the Commerce and Industry Ministry announced on Wednesday.

The cumulative value of merchandise exports during April-November 2024 was \$284.31 billion, as compared to \$278.26 billion during April-November 2023, registering a positive growth of 2.17 per cent. However, merchandise exports during November 2024 were \$32.11 billion as compared to \$33.75 billion

in November 2023, registering a marginal decline. This was largely due to the drop in petroleum exports.

Non-petroleum merchandise exports in November touched \$28.40 billion which represents a 7.75 per cent increase in comparison with \$26.36 billion in November 2023, according to official figures.



Govt spends over Rs. 147 cr to skill 1.42 lakh disabled

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Union government on Wednesday said it has spent more than Rs. 147 crore to skill 1.42 lakh Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) since 2015. In a written reply to a question in Lok Sabha today, Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment B.L. Verma that skill training was provided to persons with disability through the government and non-government organisations, across the country under the National Ac-

tion Plan for Skill Development of Persons with Disabilities (NAP-SDP). NAP-SDP was launched by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in March 2015. "Since the launch of the scheme, Department has provided the skill training to 1.42 lakh PwDs at a cost of Rs. 147.78 crore. Out of these PwDs, 28000 have been placed in wage-employment/self-employment," Verma said. "It is a demand-driven scheme and funds are released to empanelled training partners based on their proposal. The Department has re-



quested State Skill Development Mission (SSDM) of all States/UTs, including Uttar Pradesh, to encourage conducting skill training for PwDs," he added. The main objective of the scheme is to enhance the skills of the disabled; and provide quality vocational Skill Training to Divyangjans

to enable them to have gainful employment and to become self-reliant and productive. Further, the MoS informed that the number of disabilities under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 "has been increased from 7 to 21". Section 34 of the Act provides for a 4 per cent reservation in government employment to the persons with benchmark (40 per cent or above) disabilities. Further, Section 32 of the said Act provides a 5 per cent reservation in government or government-aided higher educational institutions for persons with benchmark disabilities.



Singapore to be first country partner at 'Utkarsh Odisha -- Make In Odisha Conclave 2025'

Bhubaneswar, Dec 18 (IANS) : Singapore will be the first country partner at the 'Utkarsh Odisha -- Make In Odisha Conclave 2025', scheduled to be held in Bhubaneswar from January 28 to 29. As per the press statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office (CMO), Simon Wong, the High Commissioner of Singapore to India, told Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, when he met him at Lok Seva Bhawan here on Wednesday. Wong also said during the meeting that Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam will visit Odisha during his trip to India in January next year. Singapore and India are celebrating 60 years of the establishment of diplomatic ties in 2025. The CMO also added: "Both nations enjoy deep historical, cultural, and economic ties. This relationship has now evolved

into a strategic partnership encompassing areas like trade, defence, technology, and cultural exchange. Singapore is one of the largest sources of FDI in India. India, too, has a strong presence in Singapore through its companies in IT, banking, and manufacturing." "With shared values of democracy, innovation, and sustainable development, both nations are keen to strengthen ties for mutual growth and regional stability. To commemorate this bilateral tie, the Singapore President is visiting India next," the CMO said. Besides, CM Majhi during his recent visit to the island nation last month had requested the Singapore government to arrange a visit of their country's President to Odisha too. Accepting the invitation of CM Majhi, the Singapore President has decided to visit Odisha during his India visit.



Assam : Convention held to equip youth with skills to mitigate disaster risks

Guwahati, Dec 18 (IANS) : A two-day state convention on "Empowering the Next Generation for a Resilient Future" organised by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), began on Wednesday, aimed at equipping youth and community volunteers with skills to mitigate disaster risks and promote resilience at the grassroots level. The event is being held at the Birinchi Kumar Barua (BKB) Auditorium, Gauhati University. The convention was inaugurated by Assam's Sports and Youth Welfare Minister,

Nandita Gorlosa, who highlighted the need for sustainable living and disaster preparedness to minimise the impact of natural and human-induced calamities. She emphasised the importance of using lessons from past disasters to build a safer future for humans, animals, and ecosystems. An exhibition showcasing disaster management activities by various stakeholders, volunteers, and students was also inaugurated by the Minister. ASDMA's Chief Executive Officer, Gyanendra Dev Tripathi, said that empowering young responders through initiatives like Aapda Mitra, Circle Level Quick Response Teams (CQRTs), and integrating disaster preparedness into school curriculums is a priority. He stressed that trained youth can act as first responders and agents of change in their communities during emergencies.



Cong and BJP in MP trade barbs over Scindia's 'old' letter

Bhopal, Dec 18 (IANS) : A war of words has erupted between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Opposition Congress in Madhya Pradesh over Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia's letter. Scindia had purportedly written a letter to Sheopur District Collector for helping a farmer in January. The war of words erupted after MP Congress unit chief Jitu Patwari took a jibe at Scindia while addressing a public gathering in the Vijaypur Assembly seat on Wednesday. The seat was won by Congress in the recently held bypoll. While addressing a gathering, Patwari called a senior citizen on stage, took a letter from him and showed it to the audience. The Congress leader claimed that this senior citizen (pointing towards the man on stage) had approached Scindia to seek help to get back his land, which was illegally occupied by some land-grabbers.

Drug peddler's property worth Rs 50 lakh seized in J&K's Anantnag

Srinagar, Dec 18 (IANS) : The property of a drug peddler worth Rs 50 lakh was attached on Wednesday by police in J&K's Anantnag district, officials said. "In a significant crackdown on drug trafficking, Anantnag Police has attached a residential property worth Rs 50 lakh belonging to a notorious drug

peddler, Gh Hassan Bandro alias Qasim, son of Wali Mohammad, a resident of Sotkipora.



Govt released Rs 122 crore to over 1,700 agri-startups: Minister

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The government has released Rs 122.50 crore to over 1,700 agri-startups in the last five years under the Innovation and AgriEntrepreneurship Development programme, Parliament was informed. The programme, implemented in 2018-19 under the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), aims to promote innovation and agri-entrepreneurship, by providing financial and technical support for nurturing startups. A financial assistance of Rs 122.50 crore has been released to 1,708 agri startups from 2019-20 to 2023-24. The funds were released through five Knowledge Partners (KPs) and 24 RKVY Agribusiness Incubators (R-ABIs).

SC frowns upon 'glaring state of affairs' in Mathura's temples

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Supreme Court has frowned upon "the glaring state of affairs" prevailing in Uttar Pradesh, particularly, in Mathura, with regard to the administration of the trusts of temples. A bench, headed by Justice Bela M Trivedi, said that the issues of temple administration, and the appointment of receivers in the suits pertain-

ing to the temple administration, have become the "most difficult conundrum for the courts and very lucrative court proceedings for the advocates". "The courts, which are considered to be the temples of justice, cannot be permitted to be used or misused for the benefit of a group of people, who would have vested interest in prolonging the litigations. Nobody should be permitted to abuse or misuse the process of law

under the guise of prolonged litigations," added the Bench, also comprising Justice S.C. Sharma. In its order, the Justice Trivedi-led Bench ordered Mathura's Principal District Judge to submit a report listing temples in Mathura in respect of which the litigations are pending and in which the receivers have been appointed by the courts. It also sought the details of when such litigations are pending and the status of such proceed-

ings, the names and status of the persons, particularly of the advocates appointed by the courts as receivers, and the remuneration, if any, being paid to the receivers appointed in such proceedings. The Principal District Judge is required to file the report through the Registrar (Nazir) on or before December 19. The apex court was considering a special leave petition filed by one of the committee members against

an order of the Allahabad High Court setting aside the trial court decision for the management and operation of a temple in Mathura.



Working as AAP's B-team: Delhi BJP slams Owaisi over Tahir Hussain's candidature

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Delhi BJP on Wednesday blasted AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi for fielding Tahir Hussain, an accused in the 2020 Delhi riots, as a candidate for the upcoming Assembly elections. Hussain, a former Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) councillor, has been nominated by the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM) to contest from the

Mustafabad constituency. The announcement drew sharp criticism from the BJP, which accused AIMIM of acting as the AAP's "B-team" and warned of serious consequences if any attempt was made to incite communal unrest in the national capital. Expressing outrage, BJP State Vice President Kapil Mishra said, "Tahir Hussain is not just an accused in the riots. His house was found stocked with petrol bombs, stones, and weapons intended to



kill Hindus in Delhi. Young IB officer Ankit Sharma was brutally stabbed 400 times in his house, and his body was dumped in a drain." Speaking to IANS, Mishra further accused Owaisi and other "secular parties" of provoking Hindus in Delhi by fielding Hussain. "This is a clear attempt to disrupt the peace in Delhi. Last time, Shaheen Bagh protests were staged before the elections.

Centre brought Rohingya to J&K: Farooq Abdullah

Jammu, Dec 18 (IANS) : Former J&K Chief Minister and President of the ruling National Conference (NC), Farooq Abdullah said on Wednesday that Rohingyas were brought to Jammu by the Central government and providing them basic amenities was the responsibility of the J&K government.



Sadhvi Ritambhara urges Indian govt to put pressure on Bangladesh over atrocities on Hindus

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Religious leader Sadhvi Ritambhara on Wednesday demanded that the Indian government exert pressure on Bangladesh to end the ongoing atrocities against minorities, particularly Hindus in the neighbouring country. Speaking to IANS, Sadhvi Ritambhara emphasised that the international community, particularly the Indian government, must not allow Hindus to be seen as weak or cowardly in the face of violence and oppression. "The Hindu minority in Bangladesh, including women, children, and young sages, are being subjected to horrific treatment. Houses are being destroyed, livelihoods are being stolen, and women, aged 8 to 80, are being subjected to rape and humilia-



tion," Sadhvi Ritambhara said. She called for immediate intervention to stop the violence against Hindus and warned that the patience of the Hindu community should not be mistaken for weakness. "The simplicity and innocence of a Hindu should not be seen as cowardice. We have strength, and

we will not stay silent," she added. The Sadhvi emphasised the unity of Hindu society, underscoring that it is vital for the community to stand together in the face of such injustices. "Hindus in Bangladesh were persecuted earlier. Then the Hindus of Kashmir faced similar fates, and now again it is the turn of the

Hindus in Bangladesh. These attacks on Hindu communities — whether in Bangladesh or Kashmir — must not go unnoticed," she asserted. Ritambhara called on Hindus to protect themselves and their communities. "Your women are being insulted and persecuted, their honour is being defiled. This must not happen. Hindus must unite and rise against such atrocities," she concluded. Sadhvi Ritambhara's statements came as various civil society groups, including Delhi-based organisations, held a protest march to the Bangladesh High Commission on Tuesday. The march aimed to bring global attention to the ongoing persecution of Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh.



Meghalaya govt allocates major portion of state budget to education : CM

Shillong, Dec 18 (IANS) : Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma on Wednesday said that the state government has allocated a major portion of the budget to bring changes in the education sector and the challenges in this field will be addressed by the ruling dispensation. Sangma attended the Closing Ceremony of the Golden Jubilee Celebration of Nativity Higher Secondary School in Mawkyrwat in the South West Khasi Hills. He said: "The government has focussed on the education sector with a major allocation of the state budget to this sector. The complexities in the education sector are being addressed. A lot of challenges are there and we need to work in a structured manner and the government will ensure that higher education opportunities are given to our students. We

have sanctioned Science and Commerce streams in government colleges of Sohra, Willamngar and Baghmara and this will gradually be extended to people's colleges and I am hopeful that with these interventions we will be able to see a difference and improvement in the education sector." In his speech, the Chief Minister also praised and appreciated the efforts of the founders namely Fr. Aron the Parish Priest of Nativity Higher Secondary School of our Lord Parish, along with Brixuis Marwein who established the school on the 15th March 1974. He also spoke on the role of the past and the present governing members, faculty and staff who have not just helped in the creation of infrastructure but in the lives they have helped to shape, transform and touch through the institution.

LoP in LS tool of foreign powers; contributes to bring instability in nation: Nadda

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Leader of the House in Rajya Sabha and Union Minister J.P. Nadda on Wednesday accused Congress leader and Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi of acting as a "tool" for foreign forces and contributing to bring instability in the nation. The BJP has intensified its attack on the Congress, particularly targeting the Gandhis, over alleged ties with an organisation reportedly funded by the George Soros Foundation. The foundation has been accused of backing narratives challenging India's sovereignty, including advocating for Kashmir's independence. Addressing the Rajya Sabha, Nadda stated that an organisation called the "Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) works to destabilise and harm the sovereignty of various countries," including India. Without naming Rahul Gandhi, he said, "It is concerning that the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha has raised issues reported by this organisation.



This proves that by acting as a tool of foreign powers, they are contributing to bring instability in the country." Union Minister J.P. Nadda also referred to the Forum for Democratic Leaders in Asia-Pacific (FDL-AP), alleging that it questions India's sovereignty and identifies Jammu and Kashmir as a separate state. "A senior-most Congress leader co-chairing such an organisation is a big threat to the internal and external security of the nation," he said. Highlighting its funding sources, Nadda added, "This organisation is funded by George Soros. I want to understand the connection between Soros and the Congress party." He warned against tolerating external interference, saying, "History shows that nations which allowed attacks on their sovereignty have suffered. We are answerable to the common man, the poor villager, who is asking us whether we stand for the security of our country. I want to assure them that the BJP stands firm in its commitment to safeguarding India's sovereignty."



K'taka Lokayukta raids 10 locations in DA case

Bengaluru, Dec 18 (IANS): The Karnataka Lokayukta was, on Wednesday, conducting raids at more than 10 locations across Karnataka, including Bengaluru, in a disproportionate assets case. The raids are underway at the houses of officers attached to the BBMP, Bescom, Health, Excise and police departments. Sources in Lokayukta said the raids were being conducted following the tip-off regarding the amassing of disproportionate assets and huge illegal money transactions by officers. According to sources, the raids are being conducted at the residences and offices belonging to more than 10 government senior staffers in Bengaluru, Bengaluru Rural, Gadag, Kalaburagi, Raichur and Chitradurga districts. High drama prevailed when the Lokayukta team arrived at the doorstep of a District Health Officer (DHO) in the Manjunathnagar locality of Bengaluru early in the morning. The officer and his family members refused to open the door for hours. Sources further stated that the Lokayukta team had to wait from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. When the officer finally opened the door, the Lokayukta sleuths began a search and seizure operation.

World Bank to assess MP's healthcare system for upgradation: Dy CM

Bhopal, Dec 18 (IANS) : Madhya Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Rajendra Shukla on Wednesday said he has urged the World Bank to conduct a thorough assessment of the state's current healthcare challenges. He said the World Bank's study would provide a solid foundation for understanding the existing gaps in the healthcare system and implementing corrective measures.



Shukla, who is also the Health minister of Madhya Pradesh, informed that the delegation has assured to conduct an in-depth study on the state's healthcare system and will provide its report by March 2025.



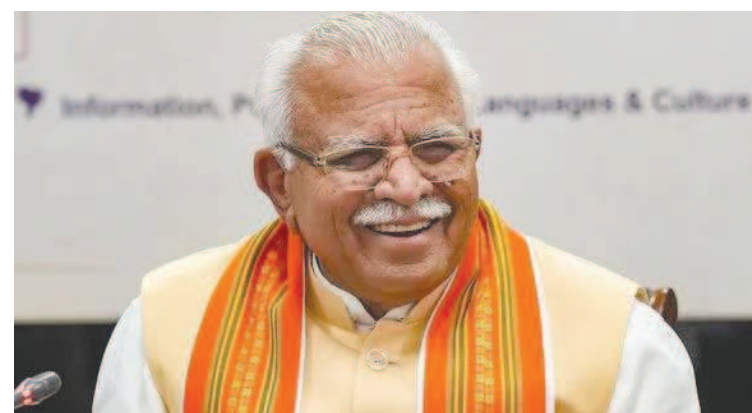
Australia: Two teens arrested over shooting, car fire in Sydney

Sydney, Dec 18 (IANS) : Two Australian teenagers were arrested on Wednesday after police believe they are linked to a crash, car fire and shooting in western Sydney. Police in Australia's state of New South Wales said in a statement on Wednesday that officers responded to reports of gunshots fired at a barbershop in Mount Druitt, about 40 kilometres west of central Sydney, at about 2:20 a.m. local time on Wednesday, reports Xinhua news agency. Upon arrival, police found several bullet holes in the shop's window.

Govt keen to develop new cities to meet rapid urbanisation needs : Manohar Lal

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The government is focussing on developing new cities to meet the growing needs of rapid urbanisation, Union Minister for Housing and Urban Development, Manohar Lal, said on Wednesday, adding that under Modi government 3.0 urban infrastructure projects are being undertaken at a record speed. In the first six months of Modi 3.0, water treatment plants with 549 MLD capacity have been sanctioned and 752 MLD capacity sewage treatment plants have been sanctioned, he said. "The government is focussed on developing new cities to match the demand of urbanisation," he said, addressing media persons. In a presentation comparing the milestones achieved during 2014-2024 and the pre-

2014 era, Manohar Lal said, "The number of cities with operational Metro Rail Network has touched 23 between 2014-24, as compared to five till 2014." His presentation also showcased that in the last ten years the length of the operational Metro Rail network in the country grew to 993 km, as compared to 248 km till 2014. "The average Metro rail line commissioned per month in the last 10 years was 6 km/month as compared to 0.68 km/month up to 2014," said the Minister. In the field of urban transport, the minister added that in the last ten years 19,752 buses were sanctioned as compared to 14,405 buses sanctioned between 2004-2014. Highlighting the achievements under PM Street Vendors' Atma Nirbhar Nidhi (PM Svanidhi), Manohar Lal said 94.3 lakh loans had been disbursed to over 67 lakh beneficiaries. "Under the scheme, 43 lakh digitally



active street vendors have carried out transactions of over Rs 4,23,275 crore," said the minister's presentation. Under the Smart Cities Mission, 8,076 projects in 100 cities were taken up with a cost of Rs 164,706 crore, said the presentation. These include 1,556 projects on Smart Mobility completed with a spending of Rs 36,449 crore, 636 Smart Governance projects completed at a cost of Rs 16,035 crore, 1,284 projects on Vibrant Urban Spaces completed with a spending of Rs 10,120 crore, 829 projects on Social Infrastructure completed with a spending of Rs 11,847 crore and 667 Smart En-

ergy projects completed with an investment of Rs 13,712 crore. Highlighting the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana 2.0, Minister Manohar Lal said in principle approval has been speeded up and given for more than 6 lakh houses in 29 States and Union Territories with a view of speeding up urbanisation. Sharing details of some of the states which have been sanctioned over 50,000 houses this year, he said UP has been sanctioned 1.10 lakh houses, Maharashtra has been sanctioned 92,000 houses.

Assam govt promoting tourism around Kamakhya temple: Minister Dass

Guwahati, Dec 18 (IANS) : Assam Tourism Minister, Ranjeet Kumar Dass, on Wednesday said that the state government is giving priority to promoting tourism to the Kamakhya temple which attracts a huge number of devotees from across the country. In the recent Cabinet expansion in the Himanta Biswa Sarma-led government, Dass has been given the tourism department. On Wednesday, the minister went to the Kamakhya temple and took blessings there.



Leadership tussle in INDIA bloc sparks political debate

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), a coalition of Opposition parties, is facing mounting questions and internal debates over its leadership structure, sparking diverse reactions from several political leaders. While leaders from the bloc while speaking to IANS pointed to unity and strength

in the coalition of Opposition parties, those aligned with the BJP highlighted discord, raising questions about the alliance's readiness to present a united front. Addressing reports of leadership disputes in the INDIA bloc, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Priyanka Chaturvedi dismissed claims of discord within the Opposition alliance. Speaking to IANS, she said, "The

INDIA bloc is robust and united, with a pool of capable leaders who can not only lead this coalition but also steer the nation forward." She drew a sharp comparison with the BJP, challenging whether the ruling party leaders and Union ministers like Nitin Gadkari, Rajnath Singh, Kiren Rijiju, or J.P. Nadda could openly suggest an alternative leadership to Prime Minister Narendra Modi without fac-



ing dire consequences. She asserted, "If such discussions were to arise within the BJP, institutions like the ED and CBI would immediately be weaponised against those involved. In our alliance, democratic processes are re-

spected, and any decision will be collectively made in official meetings." However, JD-U MLA Saryu Rai pointed to what he referred as visible cracks in the alliance. Rai remarked, "The contradictions

within the INDIA coalition are becoming evident, particularly regarding leadership, rather than policies. This indicates that the alliance is not yet a cohesive or solidified front. It resembles an orange — seemingly whole from the outside but divided within." Shiv Sena leader Raju Waghmare, too, offered a stark critique of the INDIA bloc's current state, particularly in response to reports of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee expressing interest in leading the coalition.



Mother tongue is key to creative and critical thinking : Union Education Minister pens article

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Amidst the week-long 'Bharatiya Bhasha Utsav' celebrations, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Wednesday said that the mother tongue remains a key to learning in young children, as it helps them develop their creative and critical thinking. The Union Minister, penning an article on 'Bharatiya Bhasha Utsav', wrote that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 will serve as a catalyst to reclaim our linguistic pride and how our linguistic diversity will be the cornerstone of educational excellence. He also reiterated Prime Minister Narendra Modi's commitment on preserving the country's linguistic diversity. Notably, schools across the coun-

try are organising programs under the Bharatiya Bhasha Utsav to promote linguistic heritage and also to commemorate the birth anniversary of Mahakavi Subramania Bharati on December 11. "Linguistic pride lies at the core of Bharat's civilisational ethos. All Indian languages are national languages, constituting the soul of Bharatiyata. Linguistic diversity strengthens national unity and helps realise the goal of "Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat". Each one of our people, therefore, must wear linguistic pride as a badge of honour," Pradhan pointed out. He stated that 80 per cent of Bharat's population identifies itself as non-English, native language speakers and hence have a natural trait to master the skills in mother tongue. "Mother tongue lies at the core of deep learning, because our languages are not just tools of communication — they are repositories of history, tradition and folklore, preserving the collective wisdom of generations and offering a unique worldview," he wrote.

No one better than Uddhav Thackeray to lead INDIA bloc, says Shiv Sena (UBT)

Mumbai, Dec 18 (IANS) : The question of leadership in the INDIA bloc has sparked intense debate after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee recently expressed dissatisfaction with the alliance's current leadership and her willingness to take charge. Shiv Sena (UBT) spokesperson Anand Dubey on Wednesday stated that while Mamata Banerjee is a capable leader, party chief Uddhav Thackeray would be the most suitable person to lead the Opposition alliance. "Mamata Banerjee has proven her mettle by halting PM Modi's political surge in Bengal twice.



India evacuates 75 nationals from Syria after rebel forces overthrow Assad regime

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS): India evacuated 75 of its nationals from Syria on Wednesday, two days after rebel forces overthrew President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian government, said the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Wednesday. The evacuation was carried out amid a rapidly deteriorating security situation in the country following the collapse of the Assad regime. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) confirmed the successful operation, stating that the evacuees had safely crossed over to Lebanon and would soon return to India via commercial flights. "The evacuees included 44 'zaireen' from Jammu & Kashmir who were stranded at Saida Zainab. All Indian nationals have safely crossed over to Lebanon and will return by available commercial flights to India," the MEA said in an official statement. India's embassies in Damascus and Beirut coordinated the operation, prioritizing the safety of its citizens in the conflict-ridden nation. "The Government of India accords the highest priority to the safety and security of Indian nationals abroad," the statement added.

Oppn afraid of me; does not let me speak: BJP MP Dubey

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : BJP MP Nishikant Dubey on Wednesday alleged that the Opposition is "afraid" of him after he alleged that the Zero Hour in the Lok Sabha was disrupted for the fourth consecutive day due to the sloganeering of Opposition MPs. This follows stormy sessions in the Parliament after a heated exchange took place between Dubey and Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi after the BJP on December 5 accused the Congress of being complicit in "attacks on national interest by foreign forces." Since then, Dubey claimed, the Opposition has consistently disrupted proceedings whenever his name is mentioned. Speaking to IANS, Dubey said, "The Opposition is afraid of me. The Congress doesn't even have the courage to listen to my voice. Let me raise my ten questions -- it's my right. For the fourth day now, Zero Hour is being wasted. Every time my name is called, they start creat-



ing a ruckus." Commenting on Opposition MPs staging a protest outside Parliament by distributing roses and Indian flags to NDA MPs, while Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi recorded the protest on video, Dubey dismissed the actions as "childish." "These are children. Have you ever seen a Leader of Opposition making videos like this?" Dubey remarked.

Both Houses of Parliament have been witnessing stormy sessions after the BJP accused the Congress, particularly the Gandhis, of having connections with US businessman and philanthropist George Soros. Earlier, Dubey had accused the Congress of colluding with foreign forces to undermine the country and derail its growth trajectory.



High alert sounded in TN's in Valparai as elephant rampage continues

Chennai, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Tamil Nadu Forest Department has issued a public advisory urging residents near the forest in Valparai, Coimbatore district, to avoid venturing out at night due to the increasing threat posed by wild elephants straying into human habitats. Forest officials are patrolling the area after three elephants, separated from a 17-member herd, raided human settlements in Valparai on Wednesday, injuring several people. Four individuals sustained fractures to their hands and legs in the attacks and have been admitted to a government hospital. This incident follows the death of 18-year-old S. Mukesh a few months ago. Mukesh, a resident of Puthukad near Valparai, was fatally attacked by a wild elephant while travelling

on a two-wheeler through an estate road on his way to the Sholayar Dam. Despite being rushed to the Valparai General Hospital, he was declared dead on arrival. The death Mukesh came just days after a tribal man, Ravi, was trampled to death by a wild elephant at the Anamalai Tiger Reserve (ATR), near Valparai. Over the past year, there have been several incidents of wild elephants damaging property, including houses and shops, in the Valparai region.



2025 Delhi election: No possibility of any alliance with Cong, says Arvind Kejriwal

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) convener and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said on Wednesday that his party will go solo in the upcoming Assembly elections in the national capital and there was no possibility of any alliance with the Congress. Setting aside the murmurs of an alliance between Congress and the AAP, Kejriwal posted on X that his party will be fighting the elections on its own. "Aam Aadmi party will be fighting this election on its own strength in Delhi. There is no possibility of any alliance with congress." For the past some time there were speculations that the two would be joining together to take on the BJP in Delhi.

Opposition repeatedly disrupting Parliament proceedings, says Anurag Thakur

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : BJP MP and former Union Minister Anurag Thakur on Wednesday accused the Opposition of repeatedly "disrupting Parliament proceedings" and alleged links with foreign forces to "undermine India's democracy." Thakur made these remarks while participating in the BJP's Mera Booth Sabse Majboot campaign in Delhi's Shahdara, where he placed stickers and flags to energise BJP workers. During the event, he raised the slogan 'Mera Booth Sabse Majboot' and reaffirmed the party's commitment to victory in the upcoming elections. Taking a dig at the Opposition during the event, Thakur said, "The House does not function as

soon as some individuals step in, repeatedly disrupting proceedings. These are the same people who once spoke of upholding democracy but are now allegedly taking foreign funding to weaken it." "Why do they not want the House to function? Why are they obstructing the voice of 140 crore Indians? On whose direction is Congress doing this? With whom does Congress have such connections?" the BJP MP added, indirectly referencing the Gandhis and raising questions about alleged

foreign links. The former Union Minister also commented on the leadership tussle within the INDIA bloc, particularly after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee expressed her willingness to lead.





Lagging behind in development, Pakistan now also has slowest internet speeds

Islamabad, Dec 18 (IANS) : The slow internet speed has become a nightmare for people in Pakistan, especially IT professionals and businessmen, as the country ranked 141st out of 158 nations that had the worst broadband speed in the month of October, the latest data has revealed. Ookla's Speedtest Global Index ratings have put Pakistan on the 100th position out of a total of 111 countries in mobile internet speeds and has ranked the country on 141st position out of 158 countries with the slowest broadband speeds for the month of October 2024. The continuous slow speed of

internet and data connectivity has made it almost impossible for users to send and receive messages, images, videos or voice notes on social media applications. Moreover, IT professionals, business houses, digital marketers, content creators, remote job workers and students getting online education have been severely affected by the ongoing internet disruption. "We have lost clients after being unable to communicate, coordinate and deliver our tasks on time because of the reeling internet connectivity. I have two 100mb connections in my office and also a backup that is very costly. Yet, the inconsistent internet connec-

tivity has damaged our work and clients, forcing us to lose major business contracts," said Khurram Ali, owner of a software company in Karachi. IT experts maintain that inconsistency in internet connections is denting the country's economy with sectors like IT and telecom, which generate daily profits worth billions, getting directly affected. Restrictions - including installation of a 'National Firewall' - imposed by the government and blockage of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) has majorly affected the netizens of the country.

Zambia's top court bars ex-leader from contesting future elections

Lusaka, Dec 18 (IANS) : Zambia's Constitutional Court has ruled that former President Edgar Lungu is barred from contesting the 2026 general elections and any future elections, as he has already served the constitutionally mandated two terms in office. The court determined Wednesday that Lungu is not eligible to run again, having been elected twice -- first from 2015 to 2016 and again from 2016 to 2021.

In a landmark judgment delivered by six judges, the court dismissed Lungu's argument that his first term should not count as a full term since he had completed the remainder of the term left by his late predecessor Michael Sata, Xinhua news agency reported.



Shigeru Ishiba mentions martial law aftermath in South Korea

Tokyo, Dec 18 (IANS) : Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba said on Wednesday that no one could have ever imagined South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived martial law imposition last week, while US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin took note of Ishiba's 'steady hand'. Ishiba met with Austin at his residence in Tokyo as Seoul is reeling from the aftermath of the reversed martial law declaration. "The world changes very quickly on a weekly basis. No one could have ever imagined what has happened in South Korea. Also, people couldn't predict what happened to ... the Assad regime," Ishiba said. "I think ... a century from now, we will have what's happening in 2024 as something historic.

So, we need to be accountable for today's world as well as the world of tomorrow's generations," he added as reported by Yonhap news agency. Taking stock of progress in efforts by the US and Japan to improve security capabilities, Austin expressed his appreciation for Ishiba's leadership. "As you pointed out, these are very dynamic times, and we certainly appreciate having your steady hand," Austin said. "May our alliance remain a cornerstone of peace and stability in this region for the foreseeable future." Austin arrived in Japan on Sunday night in his 13th and last trip to the Indo-Pacific as the Pentagon Chief. An expected Korean portion of the trip was excluded in the wake of political turmoil from Yoon's botched martial law attempt.



Japan to raise taxes for defence budget expansion: Media

Tokyo, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Japanese government is finalising plans to increase corporate and income tax rates to fund its plan to nearly double defence spending to 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), local media cited sources as saying on Wednesday. The government is targeting April 2026 for a 4 per cent hike in corporate tax rates, while the income tax rate is expected to rise by 1 per cent starting January 2027, reports Xinhua news agency, quoting Kyodo News.

South Korea: Assembly Speaker announces parliamentary probe into martial law declaration by Prez

Seoul, Dec 18 (IANS) : South Korean National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik said Wednesday he has invoked the authority to conduct a parliamentary probe into President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived imposition of martial law last week. Woo also called for the prompt formation of a special committee to handle the parliamentary investigation, Yonhap news agency reported. Woo told reporters that a parliamentary probe is needed to secure a "public testimony" from Yoon over the De-



cember 3 imposition of martial law. A parliamentary official said the Assembly plans to conduct the probe as swiftly as possible given the severity of the situation.



Bangladesh urges public to stay indoors to avoid health risks from air pollution

Dhaka, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Bangladeshi interim government has urged people with personal health risks to stay indoors due to worsening air pollution in capital Dhaka and elsewhere in the country, while advising people to wear masks when outdoors. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change issued the advisory in a release here Wednesday, saying that the air quality in Dhaka and its surrounding areas has deteriorated to an unhealthy and sometimes hazardous level (AQI above 250). "In this situation, the public is advised to wear masks when outdoors, while sensitive individuals are requested to avoid going outside unless absolutely necessary," said the advisory, Xinhua news agency re-



UN experts urge US to end 'double standards' on Israel-Palestine conflict

Geneva, Dec 18 (IANS) : United Nations (UN) human rights experts condemned the US for its "double standards" in addressing violations of international law in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, urging an end to impunity for both Israel and its supporters. At a press conference in Geneva, four experts, who serve as Special Rapporteurs to the UN Human Rights Council, urged the international community to hold Israel accountable for alleged violations of international law, including disproportionate violence, humanitarian blockades.

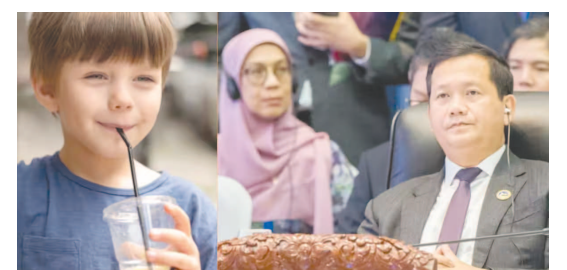
Ecuadorian President receives national plan to combat corruption

Quito, Dec 18 (IANS) : Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa reaffirmed his commitment to fight corruption as he received the 2024-2028 national plan for public integrity and the fight against corruption. The plan, presented at Quito's Simon Bolivar Andean University, was developed over a year with input from civil society and academia, alongside technical support from Germany. "This plan is not an empty promise but a genuine commitment to decisively tackle corruption," said Noboa, adding that corruption has undermined institutions, drained resources, and eroded public trust, Xinhua news agency reported. Ecuador's Comptroller General Mauricio Torres said the fight against corruption should be a state priority, calling corruption a complex economic, social, and political challenge.



China announces visa restrictions on US personnel over interference in Hong Kong affairs

Beijing, Dec 18 (IANS) : China has decided to impose visa restrictions on US personnel over interference in Hong Kong affairs, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said on Wednesday. Spokesperson Mao Ning made the announcement at a regular press briefing in response to the recent US announcement to impose visa restrictions on officials of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government. "We have already expressed our firm stance over US moves," said Mao, adding that by abusing visa restrictions on Chinese officials under the pretext of Hong Kong-related issues, the United States has grossly interfered in China's internal affairs and seriously violated the principles of international law and basic norms governing international relations. In accordance with the relevant provisions of the Law on Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China and the Law of the People's Republic of China on Countering Foreign Sanctions, China has decided to impose visa restrictions on US personnel who act maliciously in regard to Hong Kong-related issues, Mao said, Xinhua news agency reported. The spokesperson emphasised that Hong Kong is part of China and Hong Kong affairs are purely China's internal affairs.



Cambodia bans energy drinks at schools

Phnom Penh, Dec 18 (IANS) : Cambodia on Wednesday banned energy drinks at schools as the Southeast Asian country has seen a significant rise in diabetes among young people. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Youth and Sport Hang Chuon Naron said the move was aimed at preventing the risk of non-communicable diseases, especially diabetes, which was caused by the consumption of sugary and energy drinks. "The consumption, distribution, sale, and advertisement of all kinds of energy drinks in and around schools' campuses are strictly prohibited."

Your legacy will inspire one and all, says Tendulkar on Ashwin's retirement

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Legendary India batter Sachin Tendulkar said the legacy of retired off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin will continue to inspire one and all while expressing his admiration for how the Chennai-based cricketer approached the game with mind and heart in perfect sync. Ashwin, 38, an-

nounced his decision to retire from international cricket with immediate effect after India's third Test against Australia, a game he was not selected for, ended in a draw at the Gabba, Brisbane. "Ashwin, I've always admired how you approached the game with your mind and heart in perfect sync. From perfecting the carrom ball to contributing crucial

runs, you always found a way to win." "Watching you grow from a promising talent to one of India's finest match-winners has been wonderful. Your journey shows that true greatness lies in never being afraid to experiment and evolve. Your legacy will inspire one and all. Wishing you all the very best for your 2nd innings," wrote

Tendulkar in his post on 'X'. Ashwin ends his 14-year international career with 537 wickets at an average of 24 in 106 Tests and becoming India's second leading wicket-taker after legendary leg-spinner Anil Kumble, including an incredible 37 five-wicket hauls in Tests, the second-most in the history of the game, along with eight ten-wicket hauls.



PKL: Beating Haryana Steelers is a massive boost to our confidence, says UP Yoddhas' Upendra Malik

Pune, Dec 18 (IANS) : UP Yoddhas did a world of good to their chances of qualifying for the playoffs in Season 11 of the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) by Haryana Steelers, and the team's assistant coach Upendra Malik said the win gave their morale a massive boost. In the post-match press conference, Malik offered deep insights into the team's remarkable performance and playoff aspirations. The 31-24 victory against Haryana Steelers was UP Yoddhas' seventh consecutive win

and propelled them to third on the points table. After the match, Malik was candid about the team's current form and approach. "From the last 10-11 matches, our team has been doing very well," Malik emphasized. "Beating a team like Haryana Steelers gives us even more confidence." Malik specifically praised Bhavani Rajput, who was instrumental in the victory with 11 crucial points. "Bhavani played an excellent game. He scored a lot of crucial points, and today he was very good for us, which helped us

win." The assistant coach revealed the team's philosophy. "Every day is a different player's day. If Bhawani is performing today, we will support him. If Gagan is performing, we will support him," Malik explained. With just three points separating them from securing a top-six position, Malik and the team remain focused and optimistic. "We will absolutely try to win the next two matches. If we win these matches, we will definitely move forward," he stated confidently.



Sri Lanka prepare for New Zealand challenge with unchanged T20I squad

Colombo, Dec 18 (IANS) : Sri Lanka have named a strong 16-member squad led by Charith Asalanka for a six-match white-ball series involving three T20Is followed by three ODIs, against New Zealand. The T20I squad sees no changes from the group that recently played against New Zealand in a home series in November. With the team looking confident under Asalanka's leadership, they are set to carry forward the momentum they've built on their home turf.

Pakistan will play in Kho Kho World Cup next year, assure organisers

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Kho Kho Federation of India (KKFI) on Wednesday expressed confidence over the participation of Pakistan in next year's inaugural Kho Kho World Cup and said the Indian team will take on arch-rivals on January 13, 2025. "We are sure there will be no visa issues and Pakistan will come and play the first match of the Kho Kho World Cup against India on January 13," the organisers said. Earlier on Wednesday, the

KKFI announced the onboarding of Indian superstar Salman Khan as the brand ambassador to promote the inaugural edition of the tournament, set to take place in New Delhi between January 13 to 19. Salman, expressed his excitement for the first-ever Kho Kho World Cup, recalling his history with the sport. The megastar praised the initiative to host the World Cup in the nation's capital and said he is thrilled to see the sport spreading across the world.



Mitchell Santner appointed as New Zealand's new white-ball captain

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : Left-arm spin all-rounder Mitchell Santner has been appointed as New Zealand's new white-ball captain. Santner will be taking over the leadership role from Kane Williamson, who stepped down following New Zealand's group-stage exit from Men's T20 World Cup in June. Santner previously led New Zealand in 24 T20Is and four ODIs, and will begin his full-time captaincy tenure through the upcoming T20I and ODI series at home against Sri Lanka, starting with the series opener in the shortest format happening at Bay Oval on December 28.

BFI, CPBL launch six-team Pro International Basketball League to be held in January 2025

New Delhi, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Basketball Federation of India (BFI) has finally fulfilled its long-cherished wish to launch a professional league in the country to speed up the development of talented hoopsters. The BFI has now joined hands with Captains Professional Basketball Pvt Ltd (CPBL) to launch the Pro International Basketball League (InBL PRO U-25). The launch of the initiative to transform Indian basketball by creating superior opportunities was announced at a press conference here on Wednesday. The league is set to commence on January 15, 2025, with six

teams fighting for the championship. Post commencement, one game will be played each day, culminating with the final four games in Abu Dhabi at the beginning of March 2025. The player will go in for auction on January 9, 2025, which will also feature international talent from countries like the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and others. The key stakeholders present at the launch included Aadhav Arjuna, President, BFI, Kulvinder Singh Gill, Secretary General, BFI, Chengalraya Naidu, Treasurer, BFI, Rupinder Brar, Founder and Chairman.



National Shooting Championship: Kiran Ankush Jadhav tops Olympians to clinch men's 3P crown

Bhopal, Dec 18 (IANS) : The Navy's Kiran Ankush Jadhav, overcame the challenge emanating from two Olympians, among them Paris Olympic bronze medalist Swapnil Kusale representing the Railways, to clinch the men's 50m rifle 3 positions (3P) title in the National Shooting Championships here at the M.P. State Academy Shooting range here on Wednesday. The navy man shot 465.8 in the final to leave double-Olympian Aishwary Pratap

Singh Tomar of the home state in second place on a score of 463.1. Kusale, after leading the 45-shot final till the 40th shot, bowed out in third ahead of the final gold-deciding shot, with a tally of 451.8. Earlier, the railwayman had topped the qualification with a world-class score of 593, leaving Aishwary a point behind in second in that match. Kiran had qualified fourth with a solid 590. However, both the gold and silver medalists pulled out the big shots when it mattered most, to finish ahead of Kusale, who af-

ter leading at every stage of the final could not seem to hit the 10-ring after his 40th. His last four shots in the final Standing position read 9.2, 9.4, 8.9, and 9.5, putting paid to title hopes. Jadhav, meanwhile, remained in third place in the final till the same 40-shot stage, before finishing with a series of 10.6, 10.4, 10.6, 10.0, and 10.8 to strike gold. Home favourite Tomar's 41st shot for a 9.9 meant he could not take advantage of Swapnil's slip, holding on to the second spot.