

THE INDIAN MAIL

ENGLISH DAILY

FRIDAY, 20 December 2024

VOLUME : 15 ISSUE : 113 PAGES : 12 ₹ 4

PUBLISHED FROM HYDERABAD, VIJAYAWADA



India's energy storage capacity poised for 12-fold leap by 2032 : SBI report

India's energy storage capacity is expected to shoot up 12-fold to around 60 GW by 2031-32 which would play a key role...

02



South Africa have set sights on seeing itself in WTC Final: Bavuma

South Africa captain Temba Bavuma stated that his team has firmly set their sights on entering their first-ever World Test Championship Final, to be held at Lord's in June next year...

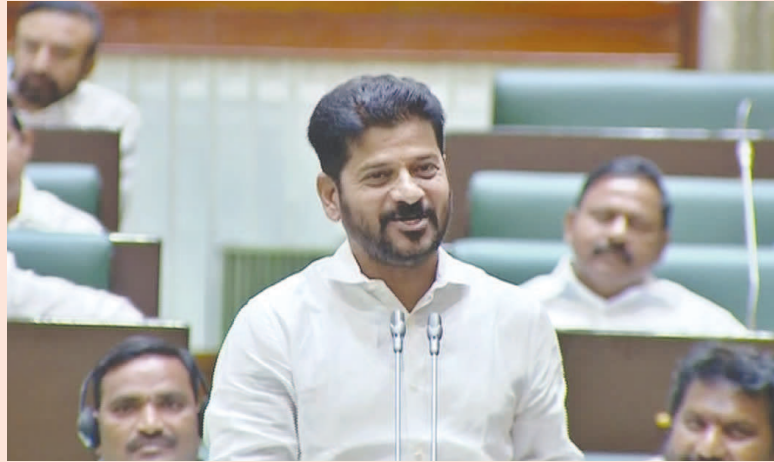
12



Small-time vendors in Chandigarh anguished over GST hike move on tobacco products

The Footpath Cycle and Rehri Fadi Workers Union of Chandigarh has expressed resentment over the proposal to introduce 35 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST)...

07



CM Revanth orders SIT probe into ORR toll contract

Hyderabad, Dec.19 (NSS): Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Thursday announced that the State government would constitute a Special Investigative Team (SIT) to probe into the Outer Ring Road (ORR) toll contract.

He said the modalities would be discussed in the Cabinet and based on the procedures, investigation would be conducted into the episode.

Continued on pg 02



ACB registers case against KTR in Formula E-car race

Hyderabad, Dec.19 (NSS): The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) has registered a case against BRS working president and former minister KT Rama Rao in the Formula E-car race case. KTR's name has been included as A1 in the case. A senior IAS officer Arvind Kumar as A2 and HMDA Chief Engineer BLN Reddy as A3 has been named in the case. The case has been registered against KTR for alleged misuse of

government funds under Sections 13(1)(A) and 13(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act, along with Sections 409 and 120(B) of the BNS. It is alleged that Rs.45 crore was paid by HMDA to the foreign company FEO in violation of RBI guidelines. The payments were reportedly made without obtaining approvals from the Cabinet or the Finance Department.

Harish Rao's remarks leads to pandemonium in House

Hyderabad, Dec.19 (NSS): The controversial remarks made by former minister Harish Rao today created furore during question hour in the State assembly. Rao called a ruling party MLA as a useless fellow while claiming that the MLA termed him as thief.

The Congress members expressed their displeasure over the remarks. Defending his comments, Harish Rao said he used the term useless fellow in response to the comment that he was a thief. This further increased the pandemonium in the House. State Legislative affairs minister D. Sridhar Babu spoke on the issue.



Congress gov't prioritises cost-effective irrigation projects targeting ayacut expansion : Uttam

Hyderabad, Dec.19 (NSS): Irrigation and Civil Supplies Minister Uttam Kumar Reddy announced a major push for cost-effective irrigation projects, aiming to expand the ayacut by 30 lakh acres over the next five years. Speaking during the Question Hour in the Assembly on Thursday, he highlighted the Congress government's focus on efficiency, employment generation, and addressing long-standing challenges in the irrigation sector. Criticising the previous BRS gov-

ernment for spending Rs 1.81 lakh crore with limited results, Uttam Kumar Reddy outlined a comprehensive strategy to maximise coverage with minimal expenditure, prioritising timely execution, modernisation, and operational sustainability of irrigation projects.

Hydra officials demolish shop shutters in Manikonda

Hyderabad, Dec.19 (NSS): Hydra officials in Greater Hyderabad have once again stepped up its activities. On Thursday, demolitions were carried out in Alkapuri Township near Manikonda. The shutters of some shops were removed from Raaga Apartment in the morning by the officials. The Hydra officials took action based

on complaints from local residents that shops were being operated with shutters installed against the rules.



Jupally inaugurates Telangana Tourist Information Center at RGI Airport

Hyderabad, Dec 19 (NSS): Minister for Tourism Jupally Krishna Rao inaugurated the Telangana Tourism Information Center at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Shamshabad on Thursday. Speaking on the occasion, the Minister said that as part of the reforms being undertaken by the Tourism department, they were moving forward with the aim of providing better ser-

vices to tourists. He said the Tourism Information Center has been set up to provide information on tourist destinations, including green hotels, tour packages, reservations and route maps in Telangana for domestic and foreign visitors, who come to visit the State's famous heritage sites, rich cultural diversity, and stunning natural scenery. The information centre will be open to visitors from 6 AM to 10 PM. The Tourism Corporation is already operating information and reservation centers at Basheerbagh, Begumpet Tourism Plaza, Kukatpally.

Gain command over AI, Quantum Computing tech to spur India in innovation : Rajnath Singh

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Indian scientists and engineers must specialise in high-end technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Quantum Computing to strengthen the country's position in cutting-edge innovation in the global arena, said Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday.

He said this while addressing the inaugural session of the Indian National Academy of Engineering's Annual Convention at IIT Delhi. Singh emphasised that these niche technologies are going to impact almost every sector in a big way in the coming times.



BRS gov't deceived people by hiding debts incurred in its ten-year regime: Bhatti



Hyderabad, Dec 19 : Deputy Chief Minister Bhatti Vikramarka has asserted that the prior BRS administration misled the people by concealing the debts amassed during its decade-long tenure. During a brief discussion on debts and their repayment in the Assembly on Thursday, Bhatti Vikramarka noted that when the Congress government assumed office in Telangana.



Congress legislators stage sit-in at Ambedkar statue in Telangana Assembly

Hyderabad, Dec 19 (IANS): Leaders of Telangana's ruling Congress on Thursday staged a sit-in at the Ambedkar statue at the Legislature premises, demanding the sacking of Union Home Minister Amit Shah for his shameful remarks on Babasaheb Ambedkar. Carrying portraits of Ambedkar in their hands and raising slogans, the Congress leaders, including ministers, staged the protest at the statue on the premises of the Assembly building. The protest was led by the party's Telangana President Mahesh Kumar Goud.

CDSCO approves Cipla to distribute, market inhaled insulin in India

Mumbai, Dec 19 (IANS) : Indian regulator Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) has approved Cipla to exclusively distribute and market inhaled insulin in the country, the drugmaker said on Thursday. The insulin called Afrezza is created and manufactured by MannKind Corporation, and is used to improve glycemic control in adults with diabetes mellitus. "Afrezza is a rapid-acting in-

haled insulin delivered through an inhaler as compared to current insulins which are given as injections. Taken at the beginning of a meal, Afrezza dissolves rapidly upon oral inhalation into the lungs and delivers insulin quickly to the bloodstream," the company said. Cipla aims to make the drug accessible to all and empower millions to take control of their health with greater ease. The company noted that Afrezza will start working in as early as



12 minutes and help in reducing the rapid increase seen in sugar levels with meals. The effect of Afrezza lasts for about 2-3 hours and it closely resembles the body's own response to insulin. This is the first and only non-injectable insulin to be developed for patients of both type 1 and type 2 diabetes mellitus, the company said.

3-judge Special Bench of SC to hear today pleas against Places of Worship Act

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : A three-judge Special Bench of the Supreme Court is slated to hear on Thursday a clutch of petitions challenging the validity of certain provisions of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. The Act prohibits the filing of a lawsuit to reclaim a place of worship or seek a change in its character from what prevailed on August 15, 1947. As per the causelist published on the website of the apex court, a Special Bench headed by CJI Sanjiv Khanna and comprising Justices Sanjay Kumar and K.V. Viswanathan will hear the matter on December 12. In March 2021, a Bench headed by then CJI S.A. Bobde sought the Centre's response to the plea filed by advocate Ashwini Upadhyay challenging the validity of certain provisions of the law. The plea said.



Gave 3,000 pages of proof on voters' deletions, EC assured due diligence: Kejriwal

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : A delegation of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) led by its National Convener Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday met the Election Commission and presented a 3,000-page document as evidence on the alleged deletion of voters' names from the electoral rolls ahead of the forthcoming Assembly elections in the national Capital. He raised concerns over a "conspiracy" to forcibly delete voters' names in Delhi Assembly constituencies and was assured of due diligence by the poll panel. "We have presented documents of 3,000 pages before the Election Commission and raised our concerns on voters' name deletion from the electoral rolls. These voters are mostly poor people, Dalits and slum dwellers whose names are being deleted. We have presented the complete data before the Election Commission," Kejriwal said. He also wrote to Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Rajiv

Kumar, alleging large-scale irregularities in applications for voter deletion. Citing an example from the Shahdara Assembly constituency, Kejriwal stated, "It has come to our knowledge that in the past six weeks, the BJP submitted applications to delete 11,018 voters on the grounds of relocation or death. However, these lists are being modified without being uploaded on the Election Commission's website." According to Kejriwal, as of December 5, only 487 deletion applications from Shahdara were displayed on the Commission's website. This discrepancy raises questions about the remaining applications and the transparency of the process. Kejriwal further alleged that the AAP conducted its own verification by visiting 500 randomly-selected addresses from the BJP's list. The investigation revealed that 372 of these voters were still residing at their registered addresses.



Rahul Gandhi to meet Hathras rape victim's family; UP Dy CM says LoP 'provoking people'

Lucknow, Dec 19 (IANS) : Congress MP and Leader of Opposition (LoP) in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, on Thursday headed to Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, to meet the family of the victim in the 2020 rape case. This visit follows a day after the LoP, along with his sister and Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi, visited the families of those who lost their lives in the November 24 Sambhal violence. Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak reacted sharply to Rahul Gandhi's visit, accusing him of "inciting riots" and "provoking people," which he claimed was an attempt to "push Uttar Pradesh into chaos." "Rahul Gandhi Ji, you are misguided and filled with despair. The CBI has already

completed its investigation in the Hathras case, and the matter is being heard in court as per legal procedures," Pathak said. "While you talk about progress, your actions -- be it visiting Hathras, Sambhal, or Aligarh -- seem directionless and derailed," he added. Pathak emphasised the state's developmental progress, stating, "Uttar Pradesh is advancing rapidly in terms of infrastructure and law and order, which is recognised nationwide. Yet, it seems you want to disrupt this progress by provoking unrest. Please refrain from such actions. The country is tired of these unnecessary provocations." Meanwhile, in Hathras' Boolgarhi village.



BJP slams Azam Khan, calls for end to politics of appeasement

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : As jailed Samajwadi Party (SP) leader, Azam Khan, called on the INDIA bloc to clarify its stance on the alleged atrocities against Muslims in Rampur, BJP leader Rohan Gupta on Thursday said that the politics of appeasement was history and the future was the politics of every Indian. In a statement released from his jail cell, Azam Khan, one of the most prominent Muslim faces of the SP, urged his party to raise the issue of alleged atrocities against Muslims in Rampur as forcefully as it had raised the issue of the Sambhal violence. Khan accused the INDIA bloc of remaining silent as the Muslim leadership in Rampur was being "destroyed" and called for a clear stand on the issue. Talking to IANS, BJP National Spokesperson Rohan Gupta took a strong stand, emphasising the importance of moving away from the divisive politics of appeasement.

Delhi Police busts gang involved in cable theft on Delhi Metro Blue Line

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Days after thieves stole approximately 140 metres of cable from the Delhi Metro Blue Line between Kirti Nagar and Moti Nagar, causing significant disruptions, the Delhi Police successfully apprehended three individuals involved in the crime. Some parts of the stolen cable have been recovered, police said here on Thursday. Joint Commissioner of Delhi Police, Vijay Singh, at a press conference, revealed that around 60 CCTV cameras near the crime scene were scanned and analysed. "The footage showed a Tata

Ace vehicle and an auto-rickshaw in the vicinity. Following this lead, the police traced the vehicles to Mustafabad. By examining an additional 500 CCTV cameras along the route from Kirti Nagar to Mustafabad and questioning the Tata Ace driver, the police identified the first accused, Shahrukh, and arrested him," he said. Subsequent interrogation of Shahrukh led to the arrest of a second suspect, Ramzan. Further questioning revealed the involvement of the mastermind, Rashid, who conducted reconnaissance of potential theft sites and planned the operations, the police said. "The investigation also implicated another suspect, Junaid, who was



later arrested. However, two other individuals, Masoom and Faizal, remain at large. Raids are being conducted to nab them," Vijay Singh said. According to the police, the gang operated systematically, with members assigned specific roles. While some conducted reconnaissance, others specialised in cutting the cables using tools. The stolen cables were weighed en route to confirm their value, with a receipt of the weighing recovered during the investigation.

Legislators and MPs of MVA in contact with BJP, claims party's Maha unit chief

Mumbai, Dec 19 (IANS) : Maharashtra BJP Chief Chandrashekhar Bawankule on Thursday claimed that some of the legislators and MPs of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), who are upset over the current state of affairs in the opposition alliance in the state, are in touch with his party. However, he did not divulge

further details about what will be BJP's strategy to deal with them. "Some MLAs and MPs from Maha Vikas Aghadi are upset and they are expressing their uneasiness to us and many are in touch with BJP. Those who are in touch with us are complaining that they are being ignored in their respective parties and they are not getting support from their parties.

Their parties are not convening meetings to discuss the present ground-level situation post-elections in their constituencies," Bawankule said. Bawankule's statement is crucial as cracks surfaced among MVA allies over boycotting the swearing-in ceremony of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and later skipping the election of Rahul

Narwekar as the Assembly Speaker for the second time during the three-day special session that concluded on December 9 in Mumbai. Besides, some MPs are not happy with the lack of a cohesive approach to the functioning of MVA or the INDIA bloc. Regarding 'Operation Lotus' alleged by the Opposition to split



their parties, Bawankule said that the investigation agencies are doing their work. "We have nothing to do with them.



Foreign Secy briefs MPs after Dhaka visit, says Yunus gov has assured action on perpetrators behind attacks on Hindus

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on Thursday briefed the parliamentary standing committee on the current state of India-Bangladesh ties after his visit to the neighbouring country on Monday, during which he had called on Chief Advisor of the Interim Government of Bangladesh Muhammad Yunus, met with the country's Foreign Affairs Advisor Touhid Hossain and also held Foreign Office Consultations with his counterpart Jashim Uddin. According to sources, Misri told the gathering of about 21-22 MPs, who attended the detailed briefing, that the interim government in Dhaka.

Haryana: Women of self-help groups become self-reliant, share how their incomes increased

Karnal, Dec 19 (IANS) : The women from self-help groups who had set up their stalls in the exhibition organised at ICAR-IIWBR in Karnal, Haryana, shared how they have become self-reliant and how their earnings have increased. Union Agriculture and Farm-

ers Welfare Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Thursday laid the foundation stone of the Natural Agriculture Laboratory at the Indian Institute of Wheat and Barley Research (IIWBR) under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), in Karnal, Haryana. Women from various districts of



Haryana who came to participate in the exhibition are doing their own work with the support of the government and getting increased in-

come. These women have now become 'Lakhpati Didi' as their annual incomes have exceeded Rs 1 lakh. By doing different jobs, they gained

confidence and now they manage their living on their own. Along with this, they also take care of their family. These women run different groups in their villages. Some women are making bags, some are doing sewing work. Some women are making pickles, jams, and chutney without chemicals and are earning money by selling them through different mediums.

OPINIONmail



Failure of China's 'Zero-Covid' policy critical lesson for future governance and public health reforms globally

The global community experienced extensive lockdowns nearly five years ago to combat the lethal coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, commonly referred to as Covid-19, which was initially identified in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. This pandemic resulted in approximately 6.6 million fatalities worldwide and prompted China to implement a stringent 'Zero-Covid' policy aimed at controlling the virus' spread. During the first wave, this approach led to over 60,000 deaths within China. Although the policy initially appeared effective, its prolonged enforcement has had detrimental effects on the nation's socio-economic landscape and public health, consequences that China has yet to fully address. The execution of this 'Zero Covid' strategy by the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) ultimately catalysed the White Paper protests in late 2022, which expressed widespread discontent with the oppressive conditions citizens faced.

Therefore, it is crucial to examine the implications and shortcomings of China's 'Zero-Covid' policy comprehensively. In August 2020, China implemented its 'Zero-Covid' policy to manage local Covid-19 transmissions while aiming to minimise disruptions to the nation's socio-economic stability. This strategy involved early detection through regular PCR testing and stringent regulations requiring individuals to maintain a 'normal' Covid profile, which included presenting negative test results to access public facilities. Those identified as potential cases were subjected to extended quarantines in government-supervised facilities. Additionally, movement and communication faced rigorous restrictions, with the government monitoring citizens' mobile phones.

The policy's aggressive nature was evident in the complete lockdowns of buildings, communities, and even entire cities upon identifying a single potential case. While many countries began easing lockdown measures, China maintained its strict adherence to the 'Zero-Covid' approach. Initially, this swift response garnered praise for safeguarding vulnerable populations and preventing the introduction of new Covid variants from abroad, allowing citizens time to prepare for the pandemic. The 'Zero-Covid' policy was largely portrayed as a testament to Xi Jinping's effective leadership compared to Western responses, fostering public compliance and contributing to its initial success. However, the subsequent socio-economic crisis revealed that the policy presented more challenges than benefits. Extended lockdowns and frequent mass testing significantly disrupted daily life and increased the financial burden on the government. Reports of shortages of essential supplies, including food and medical resources, emerged as individuals endured forced quarantines, exemplified by the notorious midnight quarantine in Xi'an.

Furthermore, the overextension of this policy resulted in severe economic repercussions such as sluggish GDP growth, a housing crisis, business closures, and a concerning rise in youth unemployment. The socio-economic distress stemming from movement restrictions and inadequate supplies due to Beijing's stringent measures also led to significant psychological distress among the population.

Chinese citizens, increasingly disenchanted with the two-year-long 'Zero-Covid' policy, have started to publicly voice their dissatisfaction, exemplified by the Sitong Bridge protest in October 2022.

A tragic fire in an apartment building in Urumqi the following month ignited widespread protests against the Chinese government and Xi Jinping's highly touted 'Zero-Covid' strategy. The building that burned had its fire escape doors locked due to over 100 days of government-imposed quarantine, despite the regional capital not experiencing any significant virus outbreaks. Social media highlighted the government's inaction during this incident, showcasing fire trucks unable to approach the flames. Consequently, residents of Urumqi took to the streets in protest, which soon evolved into a nationwide movement led by youth known as the White Paper protests.

EDITORIAL
the indian mail

No development work took place in last 5 years, claim Mehrauli constituency residents

Amid the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) public outreach programme ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections in Delhi, the people of Mehrauli Assembly constituency claim that no developmental works have been undertaken since the last five years in the national capital under the current government's tenure led by Chief Minister Atishi.

Sharpening its attack on the Delhi government over its failure to undertake any development in the constituency area, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has launched a scathing attack on the AAP government as Naresh Yadav is currently the MLA from Mehrauli Assembly constituency. Several residents of Mehrauli constituency told IANS about the lack of basic civic amenities such as electricity, water, roads, sewage, etc. A local resident Suraj said, "No work has been done here. The

promise of providing Ganga water has also not been fulfilled yet. No development has taken place for the last 10 years, even the water lines have not been laid. The old water line which was laid down during the previous Congress government is still being used. There is no water and sewer facility, with sewage water overflowing in the streets. But no one tried to get it fixed. The promises made by Aam Aadmi Party have not been fulfilled till now. In mohallas and settlements, senior citizens were not even paid monthly pensions on time. As the elections are coming near, pension applications are being distributed and many more announcements are being made now only for electoral gains."

Another local resident Ram Prakash said, "I am not happy with the work of the present AAP government and the local MLA. The condition of roads in our area are in pathetic condition, drinking



water woes also persist. The AAP MLA in our area is Naresh Yadav. He has been a legislator from here for the last 10 years, but he has not done any development. He only comes asking for votes at the time of elections. There are potholes on the roads, dirty water is emanating from the water taps, due to which people are falling ill." He further added: "Accidents often happen on the roads and people get injured. The promise made to build roads like those in foreign countries was also not fulfilled. The condition of Mohalla clinics is so bad that they have become garbage heaps and some Aam Aadmi Party people sit there, drink alcohol and have fun. If you want, I can take you to Lado Sarai or Mukhiya Colony and show that no developmental work has been done there. The AAP only spends

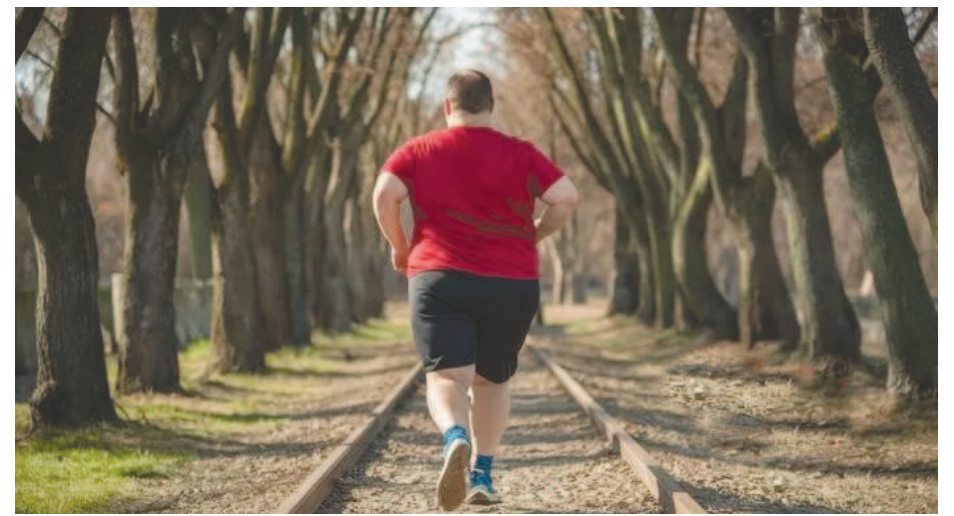
money on promotions through advertisements with their party posters being printed, but the reality is that no substantial work has been done here. We and the entire people of Mehrauli are not happy with them." Another local resident Mahendra said, "The promises made by the Aam Aadmi Party in our area, like building beautiful roads and providing facilities like in foreign countries have not been fulfilled till now. There was talks of ending water shortage but that, too, has not been resolved yet. There was no improvement in terms of roads, water and other basic facilities. The MLA has not done any special work, and I am not at all satisfied with him. Nothing concrete has been done here, only promises were made which have not been fulfilled till now."

FOR PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD TRUMP, 'TARIFF' IS A BEAUTIFUL WORD FOR AMERICAN TRADE

Just as the first Christmas tree of the season is going to be lit up in New York's iconic Rockefeller Plaza, a popular American TV channel was holding an interview with maker of native Christmas trees for decorating American homes. Lo and behold, what the interview about. It was on imposing import tariffs on Christmas trees.

America is in the midst of a tariff hysteria. America is talking of imposing tariffs on Christmas trees imported from abroad, according to a news organisation. This is the level of current hysteria in America over imports from China and other countries, including their neighbours Canada and Mexico.

Why not? In course of his campaign, Trump had said before the Chicago Economics Club that the most beautiful word in the dictionary is "tariff". So Trump and America is all set to beautify trade with tariff. But as a matter fact, United States imports Christmas trees worth close to \$3 billion a year from China.



Being overweight surpasses smoking as Australia's leading health risk

Being overweight has become the leading risk factor contributing to disease in Australia for the first time, according to government data.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) on Thursday published its annual Australian Burden of Disease Study for 2024. It is estimated that Australians lost a combined 5.8 million years of healthy life due to living with disease and dying prematurely in 2024, reports Xinhua news agency.

It found that 36 per cent of the loss of healthy life, called the burden of disease, could have been avoided or reduced due to modifiable risk

factors. Being overweight, including obesity, was identified by the AIHW as the leading modifiable risk factor.

Tobacco use was previously the leading risk factor, but the AIHW said its burden of disease has declined 41 per cent since 2003.

"This fall is likely due to declines in smoking prevalence," AIHW spokesperson Michelle Gourley said in a statement.

PAKISTAN LAUNCHES MAJOR OFFENSIVE TO EXPAND TRADE, INVESTMENT TIES WITH BANGLADESH

Indian foreign secretary held crucial talks in Dhaka with his Bangladesh counterpart as also the head of interim government Dr. Muhammad Yunus to find some ways for improving the bilateral relations in the wake of reports of attacks on Hindus by the communal elements of the country. The discussions were the first at the high level between the two countries in the Bangladesh capital with no breakthrough in sight though both expressed their desire to continue the dialogue. No sooner after the departure of the Indian foreign secretary for New Delhi from Dhaka, Pakistan Government's trade ministry swung into action to identify the areas of trade and investment in Bangladesh so that in a short term, the Yunus gov-

ernment can get some assistance from Islamabad in meeting its economic challenges posed by its present relations with India. Already, in the last two months, Islamabad and Dhaka had talks about the trade possibilities but now, Islamabad wants a full-fledged meeting of the Pakistan Bangladesh Joint Economic Commission proposed to be held in end December/January to start a new era in bilateral economic relations. Bangladesh is also making preparations and its ministries have been asked to earmark the areas where Pakistan can replace the supplies from Indian sources. Islamabad has mostly identified but Bangladesh is yet to make its list final as the administration is not sure to what extent, Dhaka can be benefitted by diverting to Pakistan supplies from India. The holding of a JEC meeting in a big way is the brainwave of the Pakistan foreign ministry

and the Islamabad strategy is to give some concessions to Bangladesh taking into the additional costs due to distance compared to India. Bangladesh has already requested granting duty free access to ten product categories covering 104 items.. Further Pakistan is assuring Bangladesh of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). More than trade Pakistani businessmen are interested in investments in Bangladesh having a huge market. A large number of non-resident Pakistani businessmen who are called NRPs like our NRIs, are in touch with both Islamabad and Dhaka for setting up facilities in Bangladesh. Many of them are interested in technical cooperation in textiles, the premier industry of Bangladesh.

WHAT NEXT IN SYRIA'S GEOPOLITICAL GAME OF CHICKEN?

The late summer and autumn of 2024 may well go down in history as the Berlin Wall moment for the Middle East as the collapse of the Assad dynastic dictatorship will have a seismic geopolitical fall out across the region. Iran has lost its land bridge/weapon supply conduit to its proxy militia Hezbollah, itself decapitated and militarily degraded by the IDF in Lebanon.

Baathist Syria was Iran's oldest ally in the Arab world, a relationship forged by Hafez al-Assad with Ayatollah Khomeini in a bid to end his diplomatic isolation after Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David Accords with Israel and his ideological archrival Saddam Hussein launched a bloody war of attrition in a failed attempt to crush the Iranian revolution in 1980. Syria, with its 70% Sunni majority has reverted to its Ottoman historical DNA as a de facto Turkish province.

Russia says Ukraine attacked its airbase with US missiles

Moscow, Dec 19 (IANS) : Ukrainian forces launched a missile strike with Western high-precision weapons on the Taganrog military airfield in Russia's Rostov region, the Russian Defence Ministry said Thursday. Six US-made ATACMS ballistic missiles were used, the ministry noted, adding that two of them were shot down and the rest were deflected by Russian electronic warfare systems, Xinhua news agency reported. Falling missile fragments caused casualties among the personnel, the ministry said. "This attack by Western long-range weapons will not go unanswered, and appropriate measures will be taken," it added.



Mexico to defend sovereignty, equal status no matter who US picks as ambassador: President

Mexico, Dec 19 (IANS) : Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said her administration will defend the country's sovereignty regardless of who the United States picks as ambassador to Mexico, following the latest appointment by US President-elect Donald Trump. "With this ambassador or any other, we will defend our sovereignty and equal status," the President said during her usual press conference at the National Palace on Thursday. Sheinbaum added she was "convinced there is going to be agreement, and they should know that we are always going to defend Mexico and make it proud without subordinating ourselves to the needs of the United States alone." She reiterated the importance of



making progress in the bilateral agenda, including combating arms trafficking from the United States into Mexico, reports Xinhua news agency. Trump announced on Tuesday evening through his Truth Social network that his ambassador to Mexico will be retired colonel Ronald Johnson.



Canada's indigenous peoples continue to be overrepresented as homicide victims

Ottawa, Dec 19 (IANS) : Canada's Indigenous peoples continued to be overrepresented as homicide victims, Statistics Canada said. Just over one in four homicide victims were Indigenous in 2023, despite representing 5 per cent of the overall population, Xinhua news agency reported quoting the national statistical agency. Similarly, in 2022, 27 per cent of homicide victims were Indigenous and this heightened risk is deeply rooted in the ongoing effects of colonisation, including systemic discrimination, poverty and a legacy of trauma, the agency said. In 2023, police services reported 778 homicides across the country, 104 fewer victims than the previous year. As a result, the national homicide rate decreased by 14 per cent, from 2.27 to 1.94 homicides per 100,000 population, according to the agency. This overrepresentation translates to a homicide rate of 9.31 per 100,000 Indigenous people, a figure more than six times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous Canadians, said Statistics Canada.



Great day for America: Trump welcomes FBI chief's resignation announcement

Washington, Dec 19 (IANS) : US President-elect Donald Trump has called the resignation announcement of FBI Director Christopher Wray "a great day for America." Wray, on Thursday, informed FBI employees of his intention to resign at the end of President Joe Biden's tenure, paving the way for a smooth transition to Kashyap "Kash" Patel, should he be confirmed as Trump's nominee to head the agency. Reacting on his social media platform Truth Social, Trump wrote, "The resignation of Christopher Wray is a great day for America as it will end the Weaponisation of what has become known as the United States Department of Injustice." He added, "We will now restore the Rule of Law for all Americans."

Trump accused Wray of abusing his authority during his tenure, stating, "Under the leadership of Christopher Wray, the FBI illegally raided my home, without cause, worked diligently on illegally impeaching and indicting me, and has done everything else to interfere with the success and future of America." The president-elect further alleged that Wray had used his powers to "threaten and destroy many innocent Americans" and praised his nominee Kash Patel as "the most qualified nominee to lead the FBI in the agency's history." Trump expressed confidence that Patel's leadership would help restore "law, order, and justice" and said, "We want our FBI back, and that will now happen."

Blinken to visit Turkey for talks on Syria's situation: Turkish foreign ministry

Istanbul, Dec 19 (IANS) : US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to visit Turkey on Thursday for high-level talks on Syria's ongoing political upheaval following the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said. Blinken is expected to meet Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Ankara to discuss Syria's transition and broader regional issues, including developments in Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon, Xinhua news agency reported quoting a statement from the ministry.



Iran, Turkey aim to raise bilateral trade to 30 bln USD

Tehran, Dec 19 (IANS) : Iran and Turkey have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to increase bilateral trade to \$30 billion within five years. The agreement, focused on enhancing economic ties, was signed in Tehran by Iranian Roads and Urban Develop-

ment Minister Farzaneh Sadegh and Turkish Trade Minister Omer Bolat, Xinhua news agency reported quoting Iran's state news agency IRNA. The signing marked the conclusion of the 29th session of the joint economic cooperation commission, a three-day meeting aimed at fostering trade, banking, and investment collabo-

ration. Currently, annual trade between the two neighbors stands at \$11.7 billion according to IRNA. The MoU outlines plans for expanded trade and economic cooperation in the coming year, laying the groundwork for further discussions at the 30th meeting of the joint commission.



Turkey's Erdogan hosts leaders of Somalia, Ethiopia to defuse tensions

Ankara, Dec 19 (IANS) : Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to address escalating tensions be-

tween the two Horn of Africa nations. The high-level talks, attended by top Turkish officials including Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Defense Minister Yasar Guler, focused on diplomatic efforts to de-

escalate the crisis sparked by Ethiopia's signing of an agreement with Somaliland, a self-declared independent region of Somalia, in January, Xinhua news agency reported.



Large wildfire in Southern California scorches nearly 4,000 acres

Los Angeles, Dec 19 (IANS) : The large wildfire in Malibu in Southern California continues to burn and it has reached nearly 4,000 acres, according to the city authorities of Malibu. The fire, codenamed Franklin Fire, started Thursday night near the Malibu Creek State Park in Los Angeles County, Xinhua news agency reported. The fire grew an additional 600 acres Wednesday morning. There are over 1,500 firefighters as-

signed to the incident, said city officials. There were approximately 18,000 people and 8,100 homes and businesses under evacuation orders or warnings, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna told reporters Tuesday. There are several shelters for displaced residents. A Red Flag Warning remains in effect until Thursday afternoon, according to the city of Malibu. Currently the fire is 7 per cent contained.

Paramilitary shelling kills 15 in Sudan's North Darfur: Official

Khartoum, Dec 19 (IANS) : At least 15 people were killed and 64 others wounded in an artillery attack by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on a displacement camp and a market south of El Fasher, the capital city of Sudan's North Darfur State, a local health official said. "So far, 15 people were killed and 64 others injured, while the RSF militia's shelling on Zamzam camp and the livestock market is still continuing," Ibrahim Khatir, director-general of North Darfur State's health ministry, told Xinhua. He added that most of the casualties were children and women. The Coordination of Resistance Committees in El Fasher, a local non-governmental group, confirmed in a statement that the RSF attack on the market.



Indian Americans urge UN to recognise plight of Hindus in Bangladesh as 'ongoing genocide'

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Urging governments, global organisations, private companies and individuals to stand with the Hindus of Bangladesh, a diverse coalition of American NGOs, scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates, and civil rights leaders have jointly called for an immediate intervention to stop the "ongoing genocide" of religious minorities in the country under the "military-Islamist" interim government led by Muhammad Yunus. Citing a

factual ground report prepared by a multidisciplinary research team on the unabated violence and atrocities committed against religious minorities since the regime change in Dhaka after the fall of government led by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August, the Indian Americans - including members of Global Hindu Temple Network-America, Global Hindu Heritage Foundation and Hindu Action - assert that the United Nations and global human rights organisations must formally recognise the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh as an "ongoing geno-

cide". Making an urgent plea for justice, they have also written to several other organisations - including the UN Peace Operations, UN Human Rights Organisation, UN Women, UNICEF, US State Department, USAID, USCIRF, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank and over a dozen private international firms that buy goods from Bangladesh - highlighting the ongoing systematic persecution and violence against minorities in Bangladesh, especially Hindus. The report, titled 'Bangladesh Hindus, Christians, Buddhists,

and Religious Minorities - Killed, Converted, Forced to Flee', is authored by former UN officer Mohinder Gulati and renowned scholars like Prof. Ramesh Rao of Columbus State University and Prof. Prakasha Rao Velagapudi, a retired Professor of Sociology from the Jackson State University in Mississippi. "This report is not just a record of history but an urgent plea for justice. Hindus in Bangladesh, who have contributed to its culture and heritage for centuries, now face extinction in their own homeland. How much longer can the world remain silent? Each



day of inaction pushes this ancient community closer to disappearance," the report mentions. It details that the regime change in Bangladesh this August - "when a democratically elected government led by Sheikh Hasina was unseated through street violence, student agitations, political opposition, Islamist organisations such

as Jamaat-e-Islami, and the Bangladesh military" - unleashed targeted violence against Hindus, their places of worship, their properties and also against other minorities, fitting into the undesired pattern of most agitations and protests in volatile Bangladesh.



Men also have right, dignity, says Kerala HC as it grants anticipatory bail to Balachandra Menon

Kochi, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Kerala High Court on Thursday granted anticipatory bail to national award-winning Malayalam actor Balachandra Menon in a sexual assault case, observing that men also have the right to dignity, not just women. A single-judge bench of Justice P V Kunhikrishnan observed that the case was filed 17 years after the incident occurred. "It is an admitted fact that the alleged incident happened in 2007. It is also admitted that the petitioner is a known cine artist, he is also known as a film actor, director, and scriptwriter. He directed about 40 films and obtained two national awards. The nation awarded him by giving him a Padma Shri. Based on a statement of a lady, that too after 17 years, this case has been registered.

'Darbar Move' will be restored to preserve Jammu's uniqueness: Omar Abdullah

Jammu, Dec 19 (IANS) : J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday assured civil society members in Jammu that the annual 'Darbar Move' will be restored to preserve the uniqueness of Jammu. Speaking to a cross-section of civil society including businessmen, industrialists, lawyers and people connected with other professions, Omar Abdullah said, "Jammu's uniqueness will not be allowed to diminish. The government will restore Darbar move." The six-monthly sojourn of all the top offices of the J&K government between Srinagar and Jammu, a practice started by the Dogra Maharajas of the erstwhile state, was called the 'Darbar Move'. In order to save on the huge costs involved in shifting the offices lock, stock and barrel between the twin capitals of Srinagar and Jammu, the Lt Governor-led administration had dispensed with the practice in 2021. "Darbar Move is an is-

ssue that I fail to understand as to why it was not projected during campaigning for Assembly polls. The issue gained momentum only after the election result, although we mentioned it in our manifesto and meetings," the CM said. "We assure you that the Darbar Move will be restored. Jammu has its own importance and we will not allow its uniqueness to diminish," Omar told reporters after chairing over three-hour long meeting with representatives of civil society at his official residence. Omar, alluding to the decision to cancel the Darbar Move, said the government takes its own decision which does impact the public. "After a decision, whether its impact is right or wrong, there is a need to get feedback. Sometimes it becomes difficult to get the right feedback within the government system because you are mostly surrounded by people who only praise you.



On completing two years, CM Sukhu launches six beneficiary schemes

Bilaspur, Dec 19 (IANS) : Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhinder Singh Sukhu on Thursday launched six schemes, mainly to strengthen the rural economy, and distributed financial assistance at a public meeting here to mark the completion of two years of the Congress government. To promote natural farming, the Chief Minister introduced 'Him Bhog Atta' prepared from maize grown using natural farming practices. The government procured 398 metric tonnes of maize from 1,506 farmers in 10 districts and transferred Rs 1.20 crore directly to their bank accounts. With the state offering the highest support price for wheat at Rs 40 per kg and maize at Rs 30 per kg, over 1.98 lakh farmers across

35,000 hectares have been engaged in natural farming. CM Sukhu launched a scheme to purchase organic compost and vermin compost at Rs 300 per quintal to benefit small farmers and livestock owners. Payments of Rs 1 lakh were distributed among 100 farmers via direct benefit transfer (DBT). This initiative aims to boost farmers' incomes, strengthening the rural economy. The Chief Minister also handed over keys to 16 electric taxi owners under the Rajiv Gandhi Self-Employment Start-up Scheme -- 2023. Beneficiaries received a 50 per cent subsidy for purchasing e-taxis with the vehicles leased to government offices for five years. This scheme ensures a stable monthly income for taxi owners. The government aims to provide

around 150 permits to e-taxi owners in the first phase, an official statement said. CM Sukhu also launched the Indira Gandhi Sukh Shiksha Yojana by disbursing Rs 1.38 crore to the eligible 5,145 beneficiaries and providing them with eligibility certificates. The scheme aims to cover 23,000 children's education and wellbeing of widows, destitute women, divorced women and disabled parents, offering them financial assistance for their higher education and wellbeing. Eligible beneficiaries receive Rs 1,000 monthly for children under the age of 18 years and financial aid for higher education expenses. With an annual budget of Rs 53.21 crore, the scheme aims to prevent child exploitation and provide a supportive environment for vulnerable families.

Attacks on Hindus in B'desh: Why are Nobel laureates from Bengal not saying a word, asks Anirban Ganguly

Bengaluru, Dec 19 (IANS) : Anirban Ganguly, Chairman of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, New Delhi, has questioned why Nobel laureates from West Bengal aren't speaking a word about attacks on Hindus and minorities in Bangladesh.



Addressing 'A Talk and Discussion on Hindus in Bangladesh, Current Status, Challenges, Way Ahead' on Thursday in Bengaluru, organised by Mantahana Karnataka Organisation, he said, "Now, I want to ask if you can hear any voices? I can't. There are no voices. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who writes a letter to the New York Times about the depreciation of democracy in India and says the Constitution is in danger etc; but, in

the last hundred days, I have not heard him say a word." "Neither Amartya Sen, Amitav Ghosh, Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee and others have spoken out against what is happening in Bangladesh. No. I have tried to listen to them. No Nobel laureate, none of the illustrious Bengalis, one of them Bharat Ratna also tried to advise the advisor, who is also a Nobel laureate," he stated referring to Mohammad Yunus, Chief Advisor of the interim government of Bangladesh. "No one has raised a voice against what is happening in Bangladesh. But ordinary Bengalis, the Bengali diaspora and Indian diaspora have raised a banner of revolt. Major capitals across Europe, US and India in the last 72 hours the banner of revolt is raised," he stated.

Two-year Congress rule in Himachal 'black chapter' in state's history : BJP

Shimla, Dec 19 (IANS) : A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) delegation led by former Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur on Thursday submitted a memorandum to Governor Shiv Pratap Shukla and exposed the "misdeeds" of the Congress-led state government on completing two years in the state. "The two-year term of the Congress government will be known as a black chapter in the state's history as the government is neck deep in corruption, brought the state to the brink of bankruptcy by unethically benefitting its friends, promoting wasteful expenditure.



4 national-level, 15 regional advanced research labs established : Centre

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science and Technology, Jitendra Singh, said on Thursday that four national-level Sophisticated Analytical and Technical Help Institute (SATHI) centres and 15 regional Sophisticated Analytical Instrument Facilities (SAIF) centres for advance research have been established in the country. In a written reply in the Lok Sabha, Singh said that these centres are

equipped with major analytical instruments to boost research in the country. "The four SATHI centres are at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi (Delhi), Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (West Bengal), Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), and Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad (Telangana), while over the years 15 SAIF centres were also established in various states," the Minister said.

Cold wave grips Bihar

Patna, Dec 19 (IANS) : Cold wave gripped Bihar with several districts of the state registering a considerable drop in minimum temperature. The Meteorological Department has forecast that the cold conditions will intensify further and dense fog will envelop Bihar's 17 districts over the next two days. In response, the Disaster Management Department of Bihar has taken measures to assist residents during this period. For any emergency assistance related to the cold wave, residents are advised to contact the State Emergency Operation Centre on the helpline.



Post Office Passport Seva Kendras in Bengal under security agencies' scanner

Kolkata, Dec 19 (IANS) : Some employees of Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs) in bordering districts of West Bengal were under the scanner of security and intelligence agencies in connection with arranging fake Indian documents, including passports, for Bangladeshi infiltrators.

Small-time vendors in Chandigarh anguished over GST hike move on tobacco products

Chandigarh, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Footpath Cycle and Rehri Fadi Workers Union of Chandigarh has expressed resentment over the proposal to introduce 35 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) on "sin goods" like aerated beverages and tobacco products, saying the hike would badly impact their incomes and lead to smuggling and revenue loss for the country too. "With consumers already avoiding buying legal cigarettes owing to high prices on account of high taxes, the new increase will push many of them permanently towards illegal products being sold at much lower prices," union president Ram Millan Gaud told IANS on Thursday.

The union, comprising over 1,200 small-time members who sell tobacco products on small roadside kiosks, said the "government would lose revenues that it collects from legal sales and at the same time, law-abiding retailers would lose their income and livelihood".

"It seems the government is bent on benefiting illegal operators and smugglers at the expense of tax-paying legal industry and law-abiding retailers," Gaud added. On December 2,



the Group of Ministers on GST rate rationalisation decided to hike tax on "sin goods". The 55th GST Council meeting, scheduled on December 21 in Rajasthan's Jaisalmer, may discuss key issues, including the current GST structure on life and health insurance, rate rationalisation measures and GST tax slabs. The Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM), the economic arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has already opposed the proposal to introduce a 35 per cent GST on "sin goods". The proposal, if accepted by the GST Council, would "defeat" the very efficiency principle of taxation, the SJM said.



TN police intensify vigil at Kerala border checkposts following medical waste dumping in Tirunelveli

Chennai, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Tamil Nadu police have ramped up security measures at border check posts with Kerala after reports of medical waste being dumped in a public area at Palavoor, Kadangallur, in Tirunelveli district surfaced. Patrolling has been intensified across various check posts in districts including Kanyakumari, Coimbatore,

Gudalur, and Theni. Tirunelveli district police have warned of strict action against those involved in the illegal disposal. Environmental activists allege that large quantities of medical waste are being transported illegally from Kerala and dumped in Tamil Nadu, urging authorities to enforce stringent measures to prevent such hazardous practices. The Palavoor police have registered a case under Sections 271

and 272 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Environment Protection Act. Efforts are underway to trace the culprits using CCTV footage from strategic locations. Officials from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) and the Department of Rural Development have inspected the site to evaluate the extent of the issue.

TN reservoirs almost full; weather office forecast more rain

Chennai, Dec 19 (IANS) : Even as heavy rain since the onset of the Northeast Monsoon from October 1 onwards filled Tamil Nadu's reservoirs close to full capacity, more rain is forecast in Chennai and adjoining districts on Thursday.

The Meteorological Department has forecast continued

heavy rain in coastal districts, from Chennai to Nagapattinam, over the next few days, which may push water levels even higher. On Thursday, water storage levels in the state's reservoirs were just 12 per cent short of their total capacity of 224,297 thousand million cubic feet (TMC).

The Tamil Nadu Water Resources Department (WRD) reported that

12 reservoirs - three in the Coimbatore region, seven in the Madurai region, and two in the Chennai region - have reached full capacity. Additionally, storage in 18 reservoirs has exceeded 90 per cent of their total capacity, while 23 reservoirs have water levels between 70 per cent and 80 per cent.



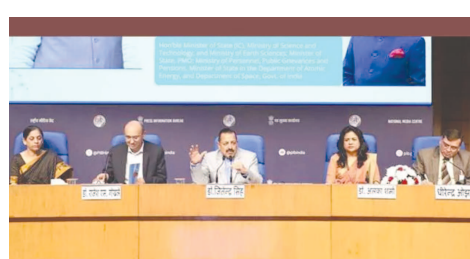
Major announcements expected on jobs, welfare in Nitish cabinet today

Patna, Dec 19 (IANS) : Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar will chair a cabinet meeting on Thursday at 5 p.m., ahead of his scheduled Pragati Yatra starting from December 23. This meeting, taking place after two weeks, has raised expectations of some important decisions, particularly regarding jobs, employment, or new welfare schemes. The timing is crucial, especially in the wake of the opposition's 'Mai-Behan Maan Yojana' promise by Tejashwi Yadav to provide Rs 2500 per month, which has set the tone for potential counter-announcements. Nitish Kumar may announce something big to counter Tejashwi Yadav's promise.

The cabinet meeting was slated for December 20, but has been advanced for December 19. The meeting will be held in the Cabinet Hall of the Chief Secretariat. The people are anticipating that the meeting will revolve around new announcements related to jobs and employment.

SP MP Zia-ur-Rehman seeks legal relief over Sambhal violence case

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Samajwadi Party MP, Zia-ur-Rehman Barq, has filed a petition in the Allahabad High Court, seeking a stay on his arrest and the quashing of an FIR related to the violence that erupted in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal during a court-mandated survey of the Shahi Jama Masjid. Barq has argued that his arrest would lead to "irreparable loss" and labelled the allegations against him as politically-motivated. Denying his involvement in the incident, which claimed five lives and injured several others including 22 policemen, the Sambhal MP accused the ruling BJP in Uttar Pradesh of using the case as a means to target him for harassment.



Jitendra Singh launches anti-pesticide suit to safeguard farmers' health

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Earth Sciences Dr. Jitendra Singh has launched Kisan Kavach, the first-of-its-kind anti-pesticide bodysuit, to protect farmers from the harmful effects of pesticide exposure.

The indigenous innovation marks a transformative step in ensuring farmer safety. The bodysuit developed by BRIC-inStem, Bengaluru, in collaboration with Sepio Health, offers protection against pesticide-induced toxicity, which often leads to severe health complications. Regular exposure to pesticides can lead to breathing disorders, vision loss, and, in extreme cases, death. "Kisan Kavach is not just a product but a promise to our farmers to safeguard their health as they continue to feed the nation," Singh said. The bodysuit is washable and reusable and can last up to a year.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar to give keynote address at UN on World Meditation Day on Dec 21

Bengaluru, Dec 19 (IANS) : Global spiritual leader and humanitarian, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, will guide a live World Meditation on Saturday, following the unanimous adoption of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution declaring 21 December as the World Meditation Day.

This historic event establishes an annual global celebration of meditation, recognising its transformative benefits for mental and physical health, as well as its power to foster peace and unity, an official release by the Art of Living

stated on Thursday. The Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations in New York is marking the first-ever World Meditation Day at the UN headquarters on December 20. The commemorative event at the UN will feature a keynote address by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

This momentous occasion, themed 'Meditation for Global Peace and Harmony,' would mark the First World Meditation Day.

"The recognition of meditation by the United Nations is a profound step forward," said Gurudev.



Jaipur, Jaisalmer poised to serve as centres of world economy, says Dharmendra Pradhan

Jaipur, Dec 19 (IANS) : Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said on Thursday that India is poised to become the world's most powerful economy by 2047, with Rajasthan leading the way as a prominent state under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. Union Minister Pradhan said, "Just as the Gulf countries serve as hubs of the global economy, Jaipur and Jaisalmer are destined to serve as economic centres of the world economy in the future, with this summit playing a pivotal role in shaping that vision." Highlighting the entrepreneurial spirit of Rajasthan, he noted that entrepreneurs from the state have established themselves globally, with every Rajasthani achieving new milestones in economic and social domains.

The Union Minister announced that the Central government would support the establishment of advanced technology labs in Rajasthan's premiere educational institutions, such as IIT Jodhpur and the Central University. He lauded the state's impressive 11 per cent growth rate, achieved despite its challenging geographical conditions, crediting the hard work and resilience of its people. Addressing the concluding session of the Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit on Wednesday, Minister Pradhan commended the state government for organising the summit in its first year under the leadership of Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma. He expressed confidence that Rajasthan is setting new benchmarks for development under CM Sharma's leadership. The Union Minister emphasised that Rajasthan is not just a centre for capital creation but also a knowledge-based economy, boast-



ing world-class institutions such as IIT, IIM, and AIIMS. He underscored the need for the country to prioritise job creators over job seekers, adding that the entrepreneurial spirit is ingrained in the people of Rajasthan. Minister Pradhan highlighted that the majority of MoUs signed at the summit pertained to the energy sector, calling it a significant step forward. He noted that after the US and China, India ranks as one of the top energy consumers globally. Rajasthan, he said, is leading in green and renewable energy initiatives, with investments in the sector set to provide resources, generate income, and improve infrastructure across the state. He remarked that Rajasthan, once considered a "BIMARU" state, has transformed into a rising powerhouse, symbolised by its progress and development initiatives.

Maha ex-DGP records statement with Thane Police in extortion case

Thane (Maharashtra), Dec 19 (IANS) : Maharashtra's ex-Director General of Police and former Commissioner of Police Sanjay Pandey appeared before the Thane Police to record his statement in connection with an extortion case lodged against him and others in August, here on Thursday. Based on a complaint by a Mumbai businessman Sanjay Punamiya, the Thane Nagar Police Station had registered the case which is being investigated by the Crime Branch Unit 5, based in Wagle Estate.



After recording his statement for around three hours, Pandey – who had been granted protection against arrest till January 3, 2025.



Congress to fight alone in Delhi, Alok Sharma labels AAP a 'distraction'

Chandigarh, Dec 19 (IANS) : In a scathing attack on the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Congress spokesperson Alok Sharma on Thursday accused AAP of functioning as the "B team" of the BJP and reiterated that the Congress would contest the Delhi Assembly elections independently. Sharma questioned AAP's electoral performances in recent elections. "In Haryana, AAP garnered fewer votes than NOTA. Clearly, they should contest elections alone instead of meddling with the Congress' prospects. AAP is behaving as the BJP's B team. They are a big distraction. After such a dismal showing, they need to introspect on their strategy and purpose," Sharma told IANS. Sharma also expressed confidence in the Congress' chances in Delhi. "We are fully prepared to fight the Delhi Assembly elections on our own."



Will set up university and medical college in each district: Assam CM

Guwahati, Dec 19 (IANS) : Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday announced that there will be one university and one medical college in every district of Assam. Addressing the media, Sarma argued that Assam has been developing at a very fast pace. He said, "It is a tremendous accomplishment that at least 80 lakh people have been lifted out of poverty in recent years. The state administration has prioritised health and education. Many colleges were promoted to universities under the present administration." According to the Chief Minister, the government is currently building 23 medical colleges, and work on three more will start in a year.

New narcotics stations set up in Mizoram to combat drug menace

Aizawl, Dec 19 (IANS) : In a bid to combat drug abuse and reduce the supply of narcotics in Mizoram, Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Thursday inaugurated two new excise and narcotics stations at Saitual and Khawzawl, the newly-established district headquarters in the eastern part of the state, officials said.



A senior official said that setting up of two new excise and narcotics stations reflects the government's unwavering commitment to tackling the drug menace and providing effective remedies for drug-addicted youth. He added that a majority of the drugs trafficked into Mizoram flow from neighboring Myanmar, posing a grave challenge to the state's efforts to address this crisis.



Mamata announces inauguration date of Jagannath Temple at Digha, BJP questions state funding behind it

Kolkata, Dec 19 (IANS) : West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, on Thursday, announced that the inauguration of the Jagannath Temple at Digha, on the lines of the iconic Puri Jagannath Temple, will be done in April next year on Akshaya Tritiya (April 30).



Suspected hooch claims two lives in Bihar's Begusarai district

Patna, Dec 19 (IANS) : Two people died after consuming suspected hooch in Bihar's Begusarai district. The deceased were identified as Chunchun Prasad Singh, a rural medical practitioner, a resident of Ward-8, Maida Shahpur in Cheria Bariyarpur police station area and a 50-year-old compounder Hareram Tanti. Both reportedly consumed li-

quor on Thursday night, which their families said caused their deaths. The incident has triggered a panic in the district. While Singh's autopsy was yet to be done, the district administration conducted the post-mortem of Tanti under the supervision of a special team of the District Health Department. Begusarai Civil Surgeon Pramod Kumar Singh claimed: "Earlier

too, Tanti had undergone treatment at Sadar Hospital and partially lost his eyesight. But this time, Tanti died." "The family members confirmed Tanti had a habit of alcohol consumption. It seems that he died due to consuming liquor. However, his post-mortem report has not come yet," the civil surgeon said. Begusarai SP Manish stated that both individuals fell ill under suspicious circumstances.

"We are questioning the family members to gather more information. The case remains under active investigation to determine the exact cause of the deaths," Manish said. The district administration has heightened vigilance to address potential issues related to illicit liquor, particularly in the affected areas of Cheriya Bariyarpur block.



2 held for robbing MoS Suresh Gopi's ancestral home

Kollam, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Kerala Police on Thursday arrested two young men, both of whom are history sheeters, for robbing actor-turned-politician and Union Minister of State Suresh Gopi's ancestral home located within the Eravipuram police station limits. The arrested people identified as Shiminas and Arun, who are in the age group of 18-20, have previous cases of robberies registered against them, an official from the Kerala Police said on Wednesday. The two criminals fell into the Kerala Police net after a relative of Minister of State Suresh Gopi arrived at the house to check on it and found the doors of the outhouse left wide open. Upon checking, the relative found that someone had stolen certain old materials kept in the outhouse of the minister's home.

Amid Bangladeshi parties' 'long march' security tightened along Tripura borders

Agartala, Dec 19 (IANS) : Amid Bangladeshi parties' reported march towards Indian borders along Agartala, security along the frontiers with Tripura has been further tightened, officials said. West Tripura district Superintendent of Police, Kiran Kumar, said that due to various reasons, the security along the India-Bangladesh border has been further beefed up.



Jordan, Iraq vow to intensify coordination to face regional challenges

Amman, Dec 19 (IANS) : King Abdullah II of Jordan and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani emphasised here on Thursday the importance of strengthening coordination between the two countries to address the challenges posed by the regional situation. During a meeting in Amman,

the two sides also underlined the need to exert maximum efforts to prevent a slide into chaos and the expansion of conflict in the region, according to a statement by the Royal Hashemite Court. During the meeting, the Jordanian king reiterated his country's support for the Syrian people and respect for their will, stressing the need to protect Syria's security and its citi-

zens, Xinhua news agency reported. He also underscored the importance of intensifying international efforts to achieve an immediate cessation of the Israeli war on Gaza and to double humanitarian and medical aid. The king warned of the dangers posed by continued extremist settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank and violations against Islamic and Christian holy



sites in Jerusalem. Regarding Lebanon, the king called for efforts to ensure the success of the ceasefire. The two leaders also stressed the deep ties between the two countries and their peoples, as well as the commitment to enhancing cooperation across various fields.



COP29 Global Energy Storage and Grids Pledge gains support of 58 nations

Brussels, Dec 19 (IANS) : The COP29 Global Energy Storage and Grids Pledge has gained the support of 58 countries, including major players from all continents like Brazil, Kenya, the US, Ukraine, numerous European countries, and dozens of organisations. These signatories are taking the lead in implementing the ambitious target of tripling renewables agreed at COP28, with action-oriented goals for grids and storage set by the COP29 Presidency: deploying 1,500 GW of energy storage, doubling global grid investments, and developing 25 million kilometres of grid infrastructure by 2030. This marks the first time that energy storage and grids have been officially acknowledged as vital components for a successful energy transition.

Two Polish tourists killed in road accident in coastal Kenya



Mombasa, Dec 19 (IANS) : Two Polish tourists were killed and four others, including two Poles, were injured in a road accident in Kenya's coastal city of Mombasa on Thursday, police said. Resila Onyango, spokesperson for the National Police Service, confirmed the 7:00 a.m. (0400 GMT) incident at the Mariakani area along the

Nairobi-Mombasa Highway, saying their driver and a guide were also injured. Onyango said the accident involved a truck and the van carrying the two couples who were heading to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Both men died on the spot and two women were seriously injured, with one in critical condition. He said the couples were leaving the tourist resort of Diani

for Nairobi when the accident occurred. An investigation has been launched into the crash, Xinhua news agency reported. The accident came amid a surge in the number of road accidents across Kenya since January 2024 as compared to the same period last year. Statistics from the National Transport and Safety Authority and police show that 4,282 people were killed in accidents between January and November, up from 3,901 reported in the same period in 2023. The leading causes of fatal crashes include hit-and-runs, tire blowouts, loss of control of cars and motorcycles, and improper overtaking and failure to stay in the proper lane resulting in head-on collisions.



Russia, Ukraine trade blame over attack on IAEA vehicle

Moscow, Dec 19 (IANS) : Russia on Thursday said Ukraine launched drone attacks on an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) vehicle, while Ukraine earlier pinned the blame on Russian forces. One of the vehicles of an IAEA team heading to Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant for a planned staff rotation was severely damaged in the attacks on Thursday, with staff members unharmed, according to the United Nations (UN) nuclear watchdog. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi condemned the attack as "absolutely unacceptable." The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Thursday Moscow strongly condemns "the provocative and reckless actions of the Kyiv regime," which pose threats to nuclear facilities and human lives.



Spanish, Lebanese PMs discuss peace, reconstruction

Madrid, Dec 19 (IANS) : Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez hosted his Lebanese counterpart Najib Mikati on Thursday in Madrid to address pressing issues in Lebanon and the Middle East. The Spanish prime minister's office said that the meeting focused on Lebanon's challenging situation, just two weeks after the ceasefire agreement with Israel took effect and five days following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.



Qatar says to reopen embassy in Syria

Doha, Dec 19 (IANS) : Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on Thursday its decision to reopen the country's embassy in Syria soon. "This step aims to strengthen the close historical fraternal relations between the two countries and their peoples," a statement by the ministry quoted spokesperson Majed bin Mohammed Al-Ansari as saying. Al-Ansari stressed that the decision reflects Qatar's unwavering support for the Syrian people in

building a state founded on justice, peace, stability and prosperity. He further highlighted that reopening the embassy "will enhance coordination with relevant authorities to facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid provided by Qatar via the air bridge to the Syrian people", Xinhua news agency reported. In July 2011, after the outbreak of the anti-government protests in Syria, Qatar recalled its ambassador to Syria and closed its embassy.

Syria forms transitional govt, international community condemns Israeli military actions

Damascus, Dec 19 (IANS) : Syria is undergoing a major transition after the military forces, that recently overthrew President Bashar al-Assad, formed a new transitional government. The announcement came following a cabinet meeting in Damascus, where leaders of the military forces and former Assad officials gathered to establish a caretaker administration. Mohammed al-Bashir, a relatively unknown figure who previously led a small region in Syria, was appointed as the head of the transitional government, which is expected to oversee Syria until March 2025. The transitional government's ministers met with members of the ousted al-Assad government to ensure a smooth transfer of state institutions. Al-Bashir, the newly appointed prime min-



ister, emphasised the need to maintain security, restore essential services, and prevent state fragmentation during this interim phase. He called for cooperation from outgoing ministers to ensure the continuity of public services, stressing the importance of a seamless transition. Al-Bashir, born in 1983, was an electrical engineer and head of the 'Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)' in Idlib formed in 2017 by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other Syrian militant groups during the Syrian civil war. The SSG wielded administrative and service-related authority in areas under the HTS control in Syria. The formation of a transitional government may offer a glimmer of hope for peace, but the prospects for lasting stability are uncertain.

South Korea: Police chiefs met Yoon hours before martial law declaration

Seoul, Dec 19 (IANS) : The South Korea national police commissioner and the Seoul police chief met with President Yoon Suk Yeol three hours before the martial law declaration, according to a police investigation on Thursday.

Cho Ji-ho, commissioner general of the Korean National Police Agency, and Kim Bong-sik, head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency, visited a presidential safe house in central Seoul at around 7 p.m. on the day of the declaration, according to the investigation.

During the meeting, they were handed a document listing key locations, including the National Assembly, that would require control following the imposition of martial law. Former Defence Minister Kim Yong-hyun was also present at the meeting, the inves-



tigation revealed. These findings contradict the information previously submitted by the police to an opposition party lawmaker, Yonhap news agency reported.



Turkey fines Meta over child privacy breach

Ankara, Dec 19 (IANS) : Turkey's data protection authority, the Personal Data Protection Authority (KVKK), has fined Meta, the parent company of Instagram, 11.5 million Turkish liras (around 330,000 US dollars) for violations related to the privacy of minors. The breach stemmed from Instagram allowing private accounts of users under the age of 18 to be switched into business accounts, effectively making them public and exposing personal data, said the protection authority in a statement on Thursday. KVKK explained that this feature exposed minors to online risks by revealing sensitive information such as email addresses and phone numbers through the platform's HTML source code, leaving them vulnerable to potential data harvesting. The regulator determined that Meta failed to implement adequate technical safeguards to ensure the security of minors' data, thereby increasing their susceptibility to online risks, Xinhua news agency reported. This triggered an ex officio investigation by the Turkish authority, and ultimately resulted in the fine.

Humanitarian situation in Syria remains volatile: UN

United Nations, Dec 19 (IANS) : UN humanitarian situation in Syria remains volatile, with continuing hostilities and looting reported in the capital Damascus area but relative calm in the country's northwest. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported challenges for aid delivery in parts of the northeast, Xinhua news agency reported. "Airstrikes and other hostilities continue to be reported in

Damascus, rural Damascus, Daraa, and As-Sweida," OCHA said. "Some looting of aid warehouses, including those of UN agencies and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent has been reported." UN agencies and their partners said they are trying to identify the extent of the reported looting. A curfew is in place in Damascus and its countryside, Latakia, and Tartous from 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. local time. "While vital public services are gradually resuming, movement restrictions, including curfews, are hindering the flow of goods and services,"



OCHA said. The humanitarians have received reports from areas with relative calm of displaced people who fled hostilities in the past two weeks returning home. "All 11 reception centers that had been opened in Idlib to host newly displaced families were empty as of yesterday (Monday)," the office

said, adding that its partners in the northeast report people continuing to arrive in displaced sites. The United Nations and partners continue aid activities as the security situation permits. OCHA said the cross-border operation from Turkey is continuing without any impediment. "Our humanitarian colleagues tell

us that 25 trucks carrying UN aid crossed to northwest Syria," the office said. "Nine trucks carrying more than 200 tons of food crossed through Bab Al-Salam, while 16 trucks crossed through Bab Al-Hawa." UN partners also deployed 16 mobile medical teams to support the response in underserved areas and displacement camps. The UN Population Fund and the World Health Organization reported distributing health, surgical and trauma kits to support hospitals. The World Food Programme (WFP) reported that food prices in markets across the country are increasing sharply.



Israeli Defence Minister sees opportunity for hostage release in ceasefire talks

Jerusalem, Dec 19 (IANS) : Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said that he sees an opportunity to secure the release of all hostages still held in Gaza through a ceasefire deal. "There is currently a chance for a new deal, hopefully for the release of all hostages, including those with American citizenship," said Katz in a phone call with US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, Xinhua news agency reported.

According to Katz's office, the two discussed several issues, including the renewed negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza. The talks for a ceasefire in Gaza have resumed following a truce agreement that ended the fighting between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah. No breakthrough has been announced yet in the brokered talks between Israel and Hamas. About 100 hostages are still held by Hamas in Gaza.



Theme park in Kurukshetra renamed as Keshav Park

Kurukshetra, Dec 19 (IANS) : Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini said on Thursday that the theme park located on the sacred land of 'Dharmakshetra' -- Kurukshetra, will be known as Keshav Park. This initiative aims to further preserve and promote the cultural and spiritual heritage of Kurukshetra -- a place of immense religious and historical significance in India. The Chief Minister declared a special holiday on Thursday for school students who participated in the Global Gita Path here. He urged the students to utilise this holiday to prepare diligently for their upcoming examinations. Chief

Minister Saini participated in the Global Gita Paath -- Ashtadashi Shloka programme, which saw the participation of 18,000 children, during the International Gita Mahotsav here. Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan, Haryana Agriculture Minister Shyam Singh Rana, Tanzania Tourism Minister Pindi Chana, Gita Manishi Swami Gyananand Maharaj were among those present. Extending greetings on Margashirsha Shukla Ekadashi and Gita Jayanti, the Chief Minister prayed that God may illuminate the lives of residents with the light of knowledge. He highlighted that 5,162 years ago on this day, Lord Krishna proclaimed the Shrimad Bhagavad

Gita. "Today the sky has resonated with the Ashtadashi verses by 18,000 students. It is a matter of great pride that the Gita is being recited in numerous countries around the world." Chief Minister Saini said this recitation "holds not only religious significance but also a scientific one. The 18 verses recited today embody prayer, song, and a call for peace". He added that every shloka of the Bhagavad Gita offers a fresh perspective and new inspiration for living life. "Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is not merely a dialogue between Arjun and Lord Krishna but provides answers to all of our questions.



Rising Rajasthan Summit to return in 2026, says CM Sharma

Jaipur, Dec 19 (IANS) : Announcing that the Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit will be organised again in 2026, Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma said that the state government will work with full force to implement the MoUs signed in the Rising Summit at the ground level. On December 11 next year, the proceedings of the implementation of all these MoUs will be reviewed and brought before the people. Chief Minister Sharma said that Rising Rajasthan will be organised again in 2026. "Our state is full of immense possibilities and has the potential to touch the peak of entrepreneurship and development. Rajasthan is emerging as a new centre of innovation and investment hub," the Chief Minister said. He added that MoUs worth more

than Rs 35 lakh crore have been signed through this summit. The Chief Minister said that the state government has taken several significant decisions to promote industries in the state. Funds worth more than Rs 1,200 crore have been sanctioned for setting up 11 industrial areas in the state, allotment of land to five new industrial areas, and eight industrial areas have been planned by Rajasthan State Industrial Development and Investment Corporation Ltd. Chief Minister Sharma said: "We (state government) are aiming at bringing the rich cultural heritage of Rajasthan to the global stage and hence are committed to double the number of GI tags in the next three years. Products with GI tags will move from village to the world, which will realise the 'Vikas Bhi Virasat Bhi' vision of successful Prime Minister Narendra Modi."



Kerala HC issues contempt notice to official over elephant regulation violations

Kochi, Dec 19 (IANS): The Kerala High Court on Thursday issued a contempt notice to an officer of the Cochin Devaswom Board under the Contempt of Courts Act for allegedly breaching its guidelines on the use of elephants during temple festivals. The action comes amidst growing concerns over the treatment of elephants at such events.

Shehla Rashid calls PM Modi a 'fair administrator,' shares her journey from critic to admirer

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Shehla Rashid, a former Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student and Kashmir-based activist on Thursday shared why Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership is

different from other leaders and what made her an admirer of the PM from a one-time critic. She also called the PM a 'fair administrator.' Rashid spoke about how the Modi administration stands apart from previous ones, espe-

cially regarding schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, and others that have benefitted a wide cross-section of society. Talking to IANS, Rashid said, "PM Modi is a fair administrator. When

he brings out a scheme, it's for everyone — whether it's the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana or Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, or any other initiative. Everyone gets its benefits, irrespective of their background. Unlike previous schemes, like the



Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, today everything is digital. There's no officer sitting in the office; it's a completely transparent system where people can access these benefits without discrimination or bribery." She further highlighted how the digitalisation of government services has reduced bureaucratic interference and opened doors for people across the country.

Intelligence agencies on high alert in Bengal over 'outsiders' hiring rooms near Bangladesh border

Kolkata, Dec 19 (IANS) : Intelligence agencies, both central and state, are on high alert in West Bengal following inputs about the sudden increase in the number of outsiders hiring rooms in different villages close to the international borders with Bangladesh. Sources said that most of the new faces, who suddenly surfaced in the bordering villages, were aged between



their mid-twenties and early thirties. As per inputs received by the security agencies from the natives of these villages, the new

faces rarely interact with the local people. Now this development, sources said, has kept the security and intelligence agencies on high alert mainly for two reasons, the first being inputs about attempts by activists of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HUT) to open sleeper cells at different points in the bordering districts of West Bengal with Bangladesh.

Rail blockade in Bengal's Cooch Behar withdrawn; train services affected

Kolkata, Dec 19 (IANS) : The rail blockade protest organised by the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association at West Bengal's Jorai railway station on Thursday, demanding a separate Cooch Behar State, was finally withdrawn. The blockade which started in the morning, threw train ser-

vices totally out of gear in almost the entire north Bengal and parts of northeastern India. The protesters deliberately chose Jorai station near the Assam-West Bengal border as the principal blockade point so that railway services are affected not only in north Bengal but also in parts of northeastern India. Initially, the protesters said that they would be con-



tinuing the rail blockade protest indefinitely as done eight years back in 2016, when the same Jorai station was the main blockade point. In 2016, the rail blockade protests continued for 80 hours, following which the police intervened.

NASA performs investigation on grounded Ingenuity Helicopter on Mars

Los Angeles, Dec 19 (IANS) : NASA engineers have completed investigations on the agency's Ingenuity Mars Helicopter which was permanently grounded on the Red Planet since its last flight in January this year. Ingenuity was the first aircraft to fly on another world, designed as a technology demonstration to perform up to five experimental test flights over 30 days. It had operated for almost three years, performed 72 flights, and flew more than 30 times farther than planned while accumulating over two hours of flight time, NASA said on Thursday, Xinhua news agency reported. During its final flight on January 18, 2024, Ingenuity climbed to 12 metres, hovering, and capturing images. It initiated its descent and was back on the surface and had halted communications. The following day, the mission reestablished communications,

and images that came down six days after the flight revealed Ingenuity had sustained severe damage to its rotor blades, according to NASA. The investigation concludes that the inability of Ingenuity's navigation system to provide accurate data during the flight likely caused a chain of events that ended the mission. The helicopter arrived at Mars' Jezero Crater on February 18, 2021, attached to the belly of NASA's Perseverance rover. Although Flight 72 permanently grounded Ingenuity, the helicopter



still beams weather and avionics test data to the Perseverance rover about once a week. The weather information could benefit future explorers of the Red Planet, said NASA. The findings are expected to benefit future Mars helicopters, as well as other aircraft destined to operate on other worlds, said NASA. The chopper weighing 1.8 kilogram was tasked with demonstrating that powered flight is indeed possible on Mars despite the planet's thin atmosphere.



Kabul welcomes Moscow's decision toward removing Taliban from terror list

Kabul, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Afghan caretaker government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has welcomed the decision of the Russian State Duma (lower house of the parliament) toward removing the Taliban from the list of terrorist groups. The Russian State Duma on Thursday approved a bill in the first of three required readings to remove the Taliban, the current ruler of Afghanistan, from the list of prohibited groups, Xinhua

news agency reported quoting Russia's Interfax news agency. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan welcomes the decision of the Russian Federation's parliament to approve a proposal aimed at removing the 'Taliban Movement', previously referred to as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, from the list of prohibited organisations in Russia," spokesman for the ministry Abdul Qahar Balkhi said in a statement posted

on his X account on Wednesday evening. "This step represents a great development and is meant to remove the obstacles in enhancing bilateral relations between Afghanistan and the Russian Federation," the statement added. Similarly, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesman of the Afghan caretaker government, told local media that the decision was a significant step in promoting bilateral ties between Afghanistan and Russia.



UN chief calls for reform of global financial institutions

Johannesburg, Dec 19 (IANS) : United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for the reform of global financial institutions and urged action to address the debt crises affecting some countries. Guterres made these remarks in Johannesburg while addressing the first G20 Sherpas-Finance and Central Bank Deputies Joint Meeting. "G20 must lead on delivering financial justice," he noted, Xinhua news agency reported. Financing plays a fundamental role in fostering inclusive economies, supporting industrialisation, addressing food insecurity, and reducing inequalities, he said. "These institutions must represent

today's economy. Developing economies must be represented fairly in their governance. These institutions must also protect economies, especially the vulnerable ones from global shocks," said Guterres. The UN chief is scheduled to meet South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. Guterres expressed his commitment to working with South Africa during its G20 presidency to tackle key issues such as climate change, development challenges, and the global debt crisis. South Africa assumed the G20 presidency on December 1, becoming the first African country to lead this influential group of the world's major economies.

FBI director Wray says he will leave office at end of Biden's term

Washington, Dec 19 (IANS) : FBI director Christopher Wray on Thursday told agency employees that he intends to resign at the end of President Joe Biden's tenure. This would clear the way for a smooth transition to Kashyap "Kash" Patel, should he be confirmed as President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to head the investigating agency. "I've decided the right thing

for the bureau is for me to serve until the end of the current administration in January and then step down," Wray said at a town hall with employees of the FBI, adding, "This is the best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray while reinforcing the values and principles that are so important to how we do our work." Three years remain of Wray's 10-year tenure, but his position at the agency became untenable after

Trump signalled his desire for him to leave by naming Patel his nominee. The president-elect has not asked Wray to resign and did not say if he will fire him after taking the oath of office on January 20. He had made it amply clear, though, that he was not happy with Wray. "The resignation of Christopher Wray is a great day for America as it will end the Weaponization of what has become known as the



United States Department of Justice," Trump wrote on Truth Social, his social media platform. "I just don't know what happened to him.



Lebanon deploys troops to southern border as Israel withdraws

Beirut, Dec 19 (IANS) : Lebanese army units, accompanied by the United Nations peacekeepers, deployed Thursday afternoon to five positions around Khiam, a town in the eastern sector of Lebanon's southern border area, the Lebanese army command said. "Army units were stationed in five locations around Khiam town in coordination with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)," the command said in a statement. The deployment, it added, marked the first phase of operations in the area, coinciding with the Israeli withdrawal following discussions by the five-member monitoring group, Xinhua news agency reported. A second phase will follow, with specialist units conducting an engineering survey of the town to clear unexploded ordnance. The army urged civilians to stay away from the area and follow military instructions until the deployment is complete. The Lebanese army has mobilised some 6,000 troops and hundreds of armored vehicles in barracks south of the Litani River.

Zimbabwe clamps down on smuggling, counterfeit products to safeguard public safety

Harare, Dec 19 (IANS): Authorities in Zimbabwe are intensifying efforts to combat the smuggling of consumer goods into the country and the proliferation of counterfeit and substandard products in the market to safeguard public safety and protect the local industry. Authorities said that the rise in smuggled goods is partly driven by public demand for affordable products in informal markets that operate outside regulatory frameworks, Xinhua news agency reported. To address the trade in illicit goods, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce is leading a multi-agency task force, including the police and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, aimed at curbing smuggling. "Stringent anti-smuggling measures have been put

in place to protect our domestic industries from unfair competition posed by illegal imports," said Zimbabwe's Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce Rajesh Kumar Modi during a dissemination workshop for the Zimbabwe Industrial Reconstruction and Growth Plan (ZIRGP) in the capital of Harare on Thursday. "The development of value chains also remains a priority, as the government has put in place measures to promote the procurement of domestically produced goods," he added. Launched on November 1, the ZIRGP is a short-term transitional manufacturing policy running through December 2025, focused on enforcing consumer protection and preventing the spread of smuggled.



Slovenia keeps processing Syrian asylum requests, seeks EU-wide approach

Ljubljana, Dec 19 (IANS) : Slovenia is continuing to process asylum requests of Syrian citizens regardless of the fall of the Assad regime, the Interior Ministry said in a statement. Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon told the parliamentary Foreign Policy Committee earlier on Thursday that the key goal regarding Syrian asylum requests is "to protect civilians," Xinhua news agency reported. She added that "the last thing we want is secondary migration of Syrian applicants because of tougher rhetoric in individual (EU) member states" and called for a uniform approach of the European Union (EU) member states regarding Syrian refugees. The Interior Ministry said interior ministers of Slovenia and of its neighbours, Croatia and Italy, discussed the changes in Syria over the phone on Tuesday and agreed to continue their discussion on the sidelines of the Brussels meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council on Thursday.

Cooperation urged to resolve logistics disruptions at South Africa-Mozambique border crossing

Cape Town, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Parliament of South Africa urged cooperation among stakeholders to address the ongoing logistics disruptions at the country's main border crossing with Mozambique. This came after South Africa's Border Management Authority (BMA) temporarily suspended operations at the Lebombo Port of Entry again Thursday due to election-related protests near the border with Mozambique, Xinhua news agency reported. The crossing has faced multiple closures since the election results were announced in the southeastern African country



on October 24. "Transporters are urged not to dispatch new vehicles to the port until further notice," the BMA said in a statement Thursday. South Africa's Road Freight Association (RFA) said Tuesday that the temporary suspension of operations at the Lebombo Port of Entry is costing the economy about \$562,400 per day.



Keshav Maharaj to miss remainder of ODIs vs Pakistan

Cape Town, Dec 19 (IANS) : South Africa spinner Keshav Maharaj has been ruled out of the remainder of the ODI series against Pakistan due to a left adductor strain. Maharaj suffered the injury during warm-ups ahead of the first ODI in Paarl on Tuesday. He was replaced by pace-bowling all-rounder Andile Phehlukwayo in South Africa's XI. Maharaj will return home to Durban for rehabilitation while Bjorn Fortuin has been named as his replacement.



South Africa have set sights on seeing itself in WTC Final: Bavuma

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : South Africa captain Temba Bavuma stated that his team has firmly set their sights on entering their first-ever World Test Championship Final, to be held at Lord's in June next year. South Africa are currently sitting on top of the standings for the ongoing cycle with 63.33 PCT, ahead of their two-match Test series against Pakistan, starting with the Boxing Day game on December 26 at SuperSport Park in Centurion. It will be followed by the New Year's game at Newlands in Cape Town, starting on January 3. After beating Sri Lanka 2-0, South Africa now needs to win one of their two Tests against Pakistan to confirm their slot for the WTC Final. "The World Test Championship; it's a World Cup for the red-ball players. We've obviously set our sights on seeing ourselves in that final."

Formula 1: Liam Lawson to race for Red Bull in 2025

Milton Keynes (UK), Dec 19 (IANS) : Red Bull have announced Liam Lawson as Sergio Perez's replacement to race alongside four-time world champion Max Verstappen in the 2025 Formula 1 season. New Zealand native Lawson joined the Red Bull Junior Programme in 2019 and after multiple junior formula successes made his Formula One debut with Scuderia AlphaTauri at the 2023 Dutch Grand Prix, in place of the injured Daniel Ricciardo.



Jack Draper to miss United Cup due to hip injury, remains 'positive' for Australian Open

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Britain's No. 1 male tennis player Jack Draper said that he will miss the United Cup, the 2025 ATP season-opener, due to a hip injury but remains 'positive' to play the Australian Open in Melbourne, starting on January 12. Draper was expected to play for Great Britain in the United Cup which starts on December 27. With a hip injury ruling him out of the competition.



Hockey rankings : Indian men's team ends year placed fifth, women in top 10

Lausanne, Dec 19 (IANS) : The Indian men's hockey team will end the riveting year in fifth place in the FIH world rankings, while the women's team is placed ninth in the latest update released by the International Hockey Federation (FIH) on Thursday. The Indian men's hockey team made history at the 2024 Paris Olympics by winning back-to-back medals at the Games for the first time since the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Olympic champions the Netherlands (3267 points) stand at the top of the rankings. The Netherlands started the year in the top spot following a great run in the FIH Hockey Men's World Cup, and gold medals at the FIH Hockey Pro League and the EuroHockey Championship in 2023.

Kohli loses cool at journalist on his arrival at Melbourne airport: Reports

Melbourne, Dec 19 (IANS) : Veteran Indian batter Virat Kohli has reportedly lashed out at the mediaperson on his arrival at Melbourne airport ahead of the Boxing Day Test. After the third Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy ended in a stalemate at the Gabba.



One of the sharpest cricketing brains, says Ponting on Ashwin

New Delhi, Dec 19 (IANS) : Former Australia captain Ricky Ponting has lauded recently retired Ravichandran Ashwin's impact on the game, saying the veteran off-spinner always stood out for his remarkably sharp cricketing brain. Ashwin, 38, announced

his sudden retirement 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 ended his 14-year international career with 537 wickets at average of 24 in 106 Tests and

becoming India's second leading wicket-taker after legendary leg-spinner Anil Kumble. He also picked an incredible 37 five-wicket hauls in Tests, the second-most in the history of the game, along with eight ten-wicket hauls. "Well I must admit I'm really surprised to hear that Ravi Ashwin

has retired. I mean he's been such a fantastic stalwart of Indian cricket. His record at home is outstanding. His record away from home is equally as good." "He's going to go down as one of the all-time great spin bowlers, one of the all-time great Indian cricketers.



ISL 2024-25: Both teams hope to build on current form as Mohun Bagan SG meet FC Goa

Fatorda (Goa), Dec 19 (IANS) : FC Goa take on defending champions Mohun Bagan Super Giant in an Indian Super League (ISL) 2024-25 match at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium here on Friday with both teams hoping to build their current form and maintain the momentum. FC Goa will aim to improve their record against the Mariners, having lost five of their eight meetings (W2 D1) in the ISL, including a narrow 0-1 defeat in their most recent encounter on February 14, 2024. Mohun Bagan Super Giant's unbeaten run has seen them win seven and draw one of their last eight ISL games, and a win in this fixture would equal their record for the longest winning streak (5) in the competition's history.

Yuva Kabaddi Series : Himalayan Tahrs remain on top; Ranchi Rangers get first win of Division 3

Coimbatore, Dec 19 (IANS): The Yuva Kabaddi Series Division 3 delivered a mix of nail-biting finishes and dominant performances on Day 5 at the Karpagam Academy of Higher Education. Table-toppers Himalayan Tahrs made a strong comeback to seal a narrow 27-26 victory over the Dehradun Dynamos to continue their domination on top of the standings. The Dynamos led for most of the game, but a clutch tackle by Lovepreet Saini in the final minute turned the tide in favour of the Tahrs. Lal Singh led the raiding effort for the Tahrs with nine raid points, while Deepak Lohan scored nine raid points for the Dynamos but lacked support. Ranchi Rangers registered their first win of the season with a dominant 58-44 triumph over Chambal Challengers. Prince Kumar Roy was unstoppable, racking up a staggering 21 raid points.



ISL 2024-25: Recovering from virus, Chennaiyin FC bullish about away clash with Mumbai City

Chennai, Dec 19 (IANS) : Chennaiyin FC will be looking to record back-to-back wins in the Indian Super League (ISL) 2024-25 when they take on champion side Mumbai City FC at the Mumbai Football Arena in Mumbai on Saturday. Deputising for the unwell Owen Coyle, Wilson also provided updates on the availability of several players in light of the virus that has hit the camp. The assistant coach stated that Ryan Edwards, Lukas Brambilla, and Ankit Mukherjee were back in training, with the suspended Connor Shields and the recovering Elsinho Dias the only confirmed absentees for the Mumbai outing. The previous match witnessed Elsinho stretchered off under medical care. Wilson also provided an update on his situation: "These things happen in a football match. Head coach Owen Coyle is very experienced, he knows how to take care of it, and he has been speaking with the players this week on how to move ahead. We are looking forward to Elsinho recovering and rejoining the team." Joining Wilson for the press conference was summer signing Kiyan Nassiri, who detailed his experience so far and laid down his personal goals for the season. "I am just trying



my best in training. Obviously, it's not in my hands who makes it in the first eleven; I can train and do very well and keep my head up, keep training every day, keep giving my 100 per cent. If the coach decides I am fit to play, I'll be there," Kiyan said. "My plan is to get better every season. My mentality is always to win something with the club and I hope we get that this season." Chennaiyin's earlier meeting against Mumbai City in the reverse fixture produced an entertaining 1-1 draw at the Marina Arena.