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**PIONEER IN SHORT**

**PAKISTAN PM DESCRIBES CHINA AS A 'TRUSTED FRIEND'**  
 Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday described China as a "trusted friend" and said that Beijing has supported Islamabad in an "unwavering fashion unmatched in the annals of history". He made the comments at a special ceremony held in Islamabad to mark the 75th anniversary of Pakistan-China diplomatic relations. The prime minister said that Pakistan and China have always supported each other on key issues. "Beijing has supported us in unwavering fashion unmatched in the annals of history," he said. Shehbaz, who will visit China from May 23 to 26 to hold talks with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, reaffirmed that Pakistan has always supported the One-China policy, without fear or favour. He said Pakistan was the "first Muslim country to recognise China and one of the first countries in the world to do so."

**FIRST 'CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR FLOWERS' TO BE MADE**  
 The Uttar Pradesh government is set to launch an ambitious project to give a boost to floriculture in Ayodhya, with the state's first 'Centre of Excellence for Flowers' to be established on three hectares of land at a cost of Rs 2 crore. The centre will not only serve as a hub for technical assistance to flower growers but will also ensure a steady supply of high-quality flowers to the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple, according to an official statement. Deputy Director of Horticulture Anoop Kumar Chaturvedi said, "The centre will play a key role in promoting modern floriculture practices. Farmers will be provided training in advanced flower varieties, scientific cultivation methods, pest management, irrigation systems, and marketing strategies."

**NGT GIVES NOD TO AYODHYA NAGAR BYPASS PROJECT**  
 Paving the way for the Ayodhya Nagar Bypass Project in Madhya Pradesh's Bhopal, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has said there is no illegality in felling 7,871 trees for the proposed work as it has been duly approved by a centrally-empowered committee. The green body was hearing a petition challenging the National Highways Authority of India's (NHAI) proposal to fell the trees for the proposed Ashram Tiraha-to-Ratnagiri Tiraha Ayodhya Bypass Project in Bhopal. The plea had sought the cancellation of the project by considering an alternative route to avoid unnecessary felling of trees. The 16.5-km road-development project entails the six-laning of both sides of the service road of the Ayodhya Bypass near the Ashram Tiraha on NH-46 till the Ratnagiri Tiraha on NH-146.

## High turnout marks peaceful Falta repoll

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
 ■ Kolkata

Electors of West Bengal's Falta voted peacefully on Thursday with over 86.11 per cent polling till 5 pm in a re-election held under the shadow of TMC candidate Jahangir Khan's dramatic withdrawal from the contest two days earlier, a move widely seen as handing over the ruling BJP a virtual walkover in the politically sensitive constituency.

With central forces heavily deployed and long queues visible outside booths through the day, the repoll passed off without major incident, though the political shadow over the constituency came less from the voting itself and more from the abrupt exit of Khan.

The repoll stemmed from controversy surrounding the April 29 election, when complaints surfaced from several booths, alleging perfume-like substances and adhesive tapes had been applied to EVMS.

The Election Commission subsequently ordered a repoll in Falta even as results for the remaining 293 assemblies



bly constituencies had already been declared on May 4, with the BJP scripting a historic victory and coming to power in West Bengal for the first time. Election officials said 86.11 per cent of the 2.36 lakh electorate had cast their votes till 5 pm, marginally lower than the 86.71 per cent recorded till the same hour in the original polling on April 29.

Reacting to the high turnout, Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari thanked the people of Falta and said visuals from the constituency resembled a festival.

"From the visuals, it appears people are taking part in a festival. Such a turnout in a repoll is really unprecedented," he said.

Around 35 companies of central forces guarded the 285 polling booths, while 30 Quick Response Teams remained on standby after the Election Commission significantly strengthened security arrangements for the repoll.

"Polling has remained peaceful in Falta. We have not received a single report of any problem from anywhere in the constituency," a poll panel official told PTI.

Large numbers of voters queued outside polling stations from early morning in a constituency where the campaign had undergone a dramatic transformation over the last fortnight.

Among those waiting outside polling booths, some said the atmosphere felt markedly different this time.

"For the first time in nearly 15 years, I feel I could vote peacefully. Earlier, many people felt they could not vote freely. This time, the atmosphere is different," a voter said, alleging that Jahangir Khan and his associates had exercised overwhelming influence in the area during previous elections.

## Parliamentary panel members grill top NTA officials over NEET paper 'leak'

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
 ■ New Delhi

Several members of Parliament grilled top NTA officials on Thursday, with the agency's director general telling them that the NEET-UG paper was not leaked through their system and the CBI is probing the matter, sources said. During a meeting of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, several MPs questioned the National Testing Agency (NTA) officials on the steps taken by them to strengthen the exam system in order to prevent paper leaks in the future. The panel had summoned top officials of the education ministry, including Education Secretary Vineet Joshi. The NTA officials, including Chairperson Pradeep Kumar Joshi and Director General Abhishek Singh, gave a detailed presentation on the recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Report on reforms in the agency. The sources said on queries from the MPs on how the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (Undergraduate) paper was leaked, Singh said it was not leaked through their system.

At this, several MPs asked him then how did the paper get leaked and what was the need to cancel

the exam and hold a retest. According to the sources, the NTA DG said the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is looking into the matter. Some opposition MPs demanded that the probe report be presented before the panel, but some of their counterparts from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) objected to this, saying the CBI is an independent body and it should be allowed to do its work.

The sources said Singh gave a detailed presentation on the implementation of the steps recommended by the Radhakrishnan Report on NTA reforms and informed that around 70 per cent of the short-term measures suggested have already been implemented. The NTA officials told the members of the panel that steps are being taken to evolve a foolproof examination system and a comprehensive review is being conducted. They also said credible people should be involved in the paper setting and distribution system. The NTA officials said holding the NEET through a computer-based testing (CBT) platform is being considered and future exams could be conducted through this mode.

The MPs are learnt to have raised the issue of a shortage of staff and filling vacancies in the NTA to

ensure that the agency functions efficiently and leakages are prevented. The sources said the NTA informed the members of the committee that there is a staff shortage of around 25 per cent in the agency currently and steps are being taken systematically to fill up all such vacancies to plug any loophole. After the meeting, the chairperson of the parliamentary panel, Congress MP Digvijaya Singh, said, "Whatever discussions happen in the parliamentary committee, we are under oath and we cannot discuss it."

He later said, "The meeting went off very well. We got inputs from all the members. The members expressed their concerns over the NEET paper leak."

Earlier, listing out the steps taken by the NTA and the government to prevent breaches and malpractices, the officials of the agency said detailed standard operating procedures (SOPs) and checklists for breach management in both PPT and CBT modes have been sent to stakeholders and the collaboration established with the state or district administrations for conducting high-stake examinations and reporting malpractices are being actively monitored on social-media platforms.

## Govt assures adequate fuel supply, says Indian seafarers safe

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
 ■ New Delhi

The Government on Thursday assured citizens that adequate stocks of petrol, diesel and LPG are available across the country amid the evolving geopolitical situation in West Asia, while confirming that all Indian seafarers in the Gulf region remain safe.

During an inter-ministerial media briefing at the National Media Centre here, officials from the Ministries of Petroleum and Natural Gas and Ports, Shipping and Waterways outlined measures being undertaken to ensure uninterrupted fuel supplies, stable maritime operations and public confidence.

The Government urged citizens to avoid panic buying of petrol, diesel and LPG and advised people to rely only on official information while remaining cautious of rumours and misinformation on social media.

Officials said all retail fuel outlets across the country

were functioning normally and there was no shortage of petroleum products. Refineries are operating at high capacity with sufficient crude inventories, while domestic LPG production has also been increased to support household consumption.

To shield consumers from rising global crude prices triggered by the Middle East crisis, the Government has reduced excise duty on petrol and diesel by Rs 10 per litre. Export levies on diesel and aviation turbine fuel (ATF) have also been lowered.

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas stated that 100 per cent supply is being maintained for domestic LPG, domestic PNG and transport CNG consumers despite the geopolitical situation. Supply to hospitals, educational institutions, pharmaceutical companies, agriculture and other priority sectors has also been ensured. Officials said LPG supply to households remains the top priority and

no dry-outs have been reported at LPG distributorships across the country.

As part of measures to prevent diversion and black marketing, Delivery Authentication Code (DAC)-based LPG cylinder deliveries have risen to nearly 96 per cent. DAC codes are sent to consumers on their registered mobile numbers before delivery.

Online LPG bookings have also increased significantly, reaching nearly 99 per cent yesterday.

During the past three days, around 1.34 crore LPG cylinders were delivered against bookings of approximately 1.32 crore cylinders. On Wednesday alone, about 47.51 lakh cylinders were delivered against bookings of 45.36 lakh cylinders.

The Government also highlighted increasing adoption of piped natural gas (PNG) as part of efforts to reduce dependence on LPG. More than 58,500 PNG consumers have surrendered their LPG connections through the MYPNGD.

## Heat wave likely in isolated pockets of C'garh: IMD

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
 ■ Raipur

Heat wave conditions are likely to develop in isolated pockets over central Chhattisgarh over the next five days, while maximum temperatures may rise by 1-3 degrees Celsius during the next four days, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Thursday. According to the IMD, no significant change in maximum temperature was recorded across the region in the past 24 hours. Light rainfall was reported at isolated places in Chhattisgarh during the same period, while no significant rainfall was recorded. The highest maximum temperature of 45.0 degrees Celsius was recorded in Mana, while the lowest minimum temperature of 25.6 degrees Celsius was recorded in Ambikapur, the IMD said.

The weather office said an upper air cyclonic circulation over east Uttar Pradesh and neighbourhood persists at 0.9 km above mean sea level. It added that a trough extending from east Uttar Pradesh to south coastal Odisha across Jharkhand and north Chhattisgarh and inter-



rior Odisha also persists at the same level. For the next 24 hours, dry weather is likely to prevail across the region, with heat wave conditions expected in isolated pockets. The outlook for the next two days also indicates dry weather with a possi-

bility of heat wave conditions at isolated locations. For Raipur city, the forecast for May 22 suggests mainly clear skies, with maximum and minimum temperatures likely to remain around 45°C and 30°C respectively.

## Sushasan Tihar aims to resolve public grievances at doorstep: C'garh CM

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
 ■ Surajpur

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Thursday said that Sushasan Tihar 2026 is not merely an administrative exercise but a focused campaign to take governance directly to the doorsteps of citizens and resolve their grievances in a time-bound manner.

Addressing a Samadhan Shivir in Ramanujnagar-Patna under Surajpur district, the Chief Minister said the government and administration are proactively reaching out to people to ensure prompt redressal of complaints and local demands.

He said the state government's priority is to ensure that the benefits of welfare schemes reach the last person in society and that citizens have better access to public services.

Sai said it is the responsibility of any government to go among the people,



understand ground realities and ensure that schemes are reaching intended beneficiaries on time.

He informed that Surajpur was his 11th district visit under Sushasan Tihar and said the government has set a target of covering all 33 districts of the state by June 10. The Chief Minister

said district-level reviews are being conducted with officials to assess implementation of government schemes, disposal of revenue cases and resolution of pending matters, while efforts are being made to resolve issues at the gram panchayat level.

He said no compromise would be made on the quality of development works and public amenities, adding that systems are being continuously monitored through surprise inspections.

Referring to tendu leaf collectors, Sai said earlier villagers had to walk barefoot into forests, but under the Charan Paduka Yojana they are now receiving support and protection.

He said the government is committed to improving the lives of farmers, women and rural communities, adding that Rs 3,716 crore bonus has been distributed to farmers and paddy procurement is being carried out at ₹3,100 per quintal. He further

said 18 lakh houses have been sanctioned under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana since the formation of the government.

Interacting with women beneficiaries, the Chief Minister said nearly 70 lakh women are benefiting from the Mahtari Vandan Yojana.

He also highlighted initiatives such as Ram Lalla Darshan Yojana, Mukhyamantri Tirth Yatra Yojana and Atal Digital Seva Kendras, saying they are improving citizen access to services. Sai said through the e-District system, services such as income, caste and residence certificates will increasingly be made available at home. He announced that a Chief Minister helpline will soon be launched for grievance registration and monitoring of redressal mechanisms. The Chief Minister also said electricity bill relief camps under the Mukhyamantri Bijli Bill Samadhan Yojana will continue till June 31 and urged citizens to avail the benefit.

## Rajnandgaon inclusion in State Capital Region a historic step: Raman Singh

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
 ■ Rajnandgaon

Chhattisgarh Assembly Speaker Raman Singh on Thursday said the inclusion of Rajnandgaon district in the State Capital Region marks a "historic milestone" for integrated and planned development of the region, adding that it will boost trade and regional growth.

He was addressing the district-level Traders' Grand Convention organised by the Chhattisgarh Chamber of Commerce and Industries at a private hotel in Rajnandgaon. State Finance Minister O. P. Choudhary attended the event as special guest. Speaking at the programme, Raman Singh said the move would give a new



direction to regional development and economic activity.

He also praised the Finance Minister's administrative approach, saying the state's economic activities have been steered in a new direction under his leadership.

Choudhary said economy and entrepreneurship play a key role in driving development and noted that India has emerged as the world's

fourth-largest economy under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Highlighting reforms, he said the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the "One Nation, One Tax" system have simplified and made business processes more transparent.

The Finance Minister urged entrepreneurs to take advantage of the state's industrial policy and focus on emerging sectors such as hydrogen energy, biofuels and artificial intelligence.

He also said the government has allocated an additional Rs 468 crore to facilitate payment of pending industrial subsidies of about Rs 200 crore, and added that "job parks" have been set up to promote employment generation.

## Delhi started issuing new ration cards from May 15: CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Thursday announced that the large-scale issuance of new ration cards has resumed from May 15, ending a 13-year gap.

The Chief Minister said that the Delhi Government has cancelled more than seven lakh ration cards so far and is considering a hike in the income limit from ₹1.20 lakh to ₹2.5 lakh per annum for ration card eligibility in the national capital.

Addressing a press conference, the Chief Minister said the hike is aimed at benefiting the maximum number of needy people. The hike decision will be approved in the next cabinet meeting, she added. At present, the income criterion to become eligible for a ration card in Delhi is capped at ₹1.20 lakh per annum.

The chief minister urged all eligible families to apply. Online applications for new ration cards and adding family members will be avail-

able on the e-District portal from May 15, 2026. Previously submitted applications have been returned to applicants through their login profiles. Applicants can update and resubmit these with a valid income certificate and required documents.

After taking office, the government audited the public distribution system and found significant irregularities. A total of 7,71,384 ineligible beneficiaries were identified. Of these, 6,46,123 were above the income limit, 95,682 had not collected ration for over a year, 6,185 were deceased but still listed, and 23,394 were receiving benefits from multiple locations. Removing these ineligible names has created nearly 7.72 lakh vacancies for new beneficiaries. So far, 3,72,367 people have applied for new ration cards, and 99,501 have applied to add family members. Since eligibility details may have changed, all applicants will be asked to reapply under the updated norms.

The Delhi Government has



implemented the Delhi Food Security Rules, 2026, to enforce the National Food Security Act, 2013.

Ration distribution has been modernised through the use of electronic weighing machines and mandatory biometric authentication at fair-price shops. Ration will only be distributed after biometric verification to prevent under-weighing and reduce leakages.

Ration card services, including new applications and family member updates, are now online. Citizens can

members. This change aims to ensure accurate verification and prevent misuse.

To curb corruption and irregularities, the government has implemented a robust digital and administrative verification mechanism. In the first stage, to address corruption and irregularities, the government has set up a digital and administrative verification process. Food and supply officers first review applications and documents and conduct field checks if needed. The assistant commissioner then examines verified applications.

A district-level committee led by the district magistrate and two local MLAs makes the final decision. Approved ration cards are generated digitally and can be downloaded from the portal. These are sent to government offices. "This is not merely an administrative reform. It is our commitment to ensuring food security and a life of dignity for every needy family in Delhi," she said.

The chief minister said the

annual family income eligibility limit for ration cards has already been increased. The annual family income eligibility limit for ration cards has been raised from ₹1 lakh to ₹1.20 lakh under the Delhi Food Security Rules, 2026, to include more poor and middle-class families. The Government is considering increasing the limit further to ₹2.50 lakh, with Cabinet discussions ongoing and a decision expected soon.

"For 13 years, the rights of Delhi's poor remained effectively locked away. Previous governments turned the ration system into a vehicle for politics and corruption. The process of issuing new ration cards had virtually come to a standstill—this deprived lakhs of deserving families of their rightful benefits.

Our government is committed to replacing that system with a transparent and people-centric mechanism. Every eligible person should now receive their entitlement with dignity," the chief minister said.

## States Focus



### BANKS MUST ENSURE CREDIT REACHES FARMERS: FADNAVIS

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Thursday directed banks, especially the nationalised lenders, to handle agricultural loan disbursal with greater seriousness and ensure that credit reaches farmers, MSMEs and the rural economy. Speaking at the 171st meeting of the State Level Bankers' Committee (SLBC) at the Sahyadri Guest House here, Fadnavis said banks should not function solely with a profit motive and must adopt a broader approach towards strengthening agriculture and rural development. "Credit is increasing, but the number of accounts is declining," Fadnavis said.



### BIHAR CM REVIEWS FLOOD, DROUGHT PREPAREDNESS

Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary on Thursday directed officials to remain alert in view of the possibility of both floods and drought-like conditions in the State. Chairing a review meeting at the Chief Minister's Secretariat, Choudhary asked officials to ensure timely preparedness and swift response to any disaster situation. "Do not allow a disaster to turn into a calamity. Extend full support to people during any disaster situation. The Government stands with the people. The first right over the state treasury belongs to disaster victims," he said, according to a statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office (CMO).

## Union Minister to launch JEEVAN app, SHATAYU dashboard today



Union Minister Virendra Kumar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Union Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Virendra Kumar will on Friday launch the JEEVAN mobile application for senior citizens and the SHATAYU dashboard for geriatric caregivers in a programme in which the ministry will host a virtual programme on "Creating a Well-Functioning Care Economy".

The virtual programme will focus on strengthening the country's care ecosystem through technology, community participation and policy interventions.

Department of Social Justice and Empowerment Secretary Sudhansh Pant will address the event, the ministry said in a statement. Union Ministers of State for Social Justice and Empowerment BL Verma and Ramdas Athawale will also address participants.

The ministry said the care economy includes childcare, eldercare, disability support, health-related home care and domestic services, covering both unpaid household care work and paid care services delivered through formal and informal sectors.

## PM making reels in Italy, while our youth tormented by paper leaks: Rahul

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the NEET-UG paper leak and said he has neither taken responsibility nor sacked Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

In a post on X in Hindi, he said the Congress will not stop till Pradhan resigns and a robust system to prevent paper leaks is put in place. Taking a swipe at Modi,

he said while the prime minister was making reels in Italy, the youth of India were taking to the streets seeking justice over the paper leak.

"When Modi ji was making reels while handing out candies in Italy — youth in India, tormented by paper leaks, were taking to the streets demanding justice," he said in his post.

"Because the NEET Paper Leak has ruined the futures of lakhs of students. Many children have even lost their lives. And Modi ji neither



took responsibility, nor removed Dharmendra Pradhan, nor uttered a single word," he said.

With students, NSUI and INC workers seeking justice, BJP's state Governments are 'raining lathis' down on

them, the leader of opposition in Lok Sabha said.

"A Government that answers students' questions with batons doesn't run on accountability — it runs on fear. But we will not be scared. We won't stop until Dharmendra Pradhan resigns and a strong, secure system is put in place to stop paper leaks in the country," Gandhi said.

This fight, the former Congress chief said, is for every such student whose future this "failed" Government has stolen.

## Over 23,000 candidates opt for three new exam centres: UPSC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) on Thursday said over 23,000 civil services aspirants have opted for three newly introduced examination centres as part of efforts to decongest venues for examination.

With the addition of centres at Bhubaneswar, Kanpur, and Meerut, the total number of examination centres for the civil services (preliminary) examination has increased from 80 to 83, the Commission said.

"Nearly 23,000 candidates have applied to these new centres, easing the rush at the adjoining centres for the Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination-2026," the UPSC said in a statement.

The civil services exam is conducted annually in three stages — preliminary, mains, and interview — for recruitment to services including Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Foreign Service (IFS), and Indian



Police Service (IPS). This year's civil services preliminary examination is scheduled to be held on Sunday.

The Commission said it has received a total of 8,19,372 applications for the preliminary examination.

UPSC Chairman Ajay Kumar said the initiative aims to make the examination process more candidate-friendly, accessible, and efficient. "The addition of three new centres is aimed at easing congestion and providing greater convenience to aspirants," Kumar said.

He said that the Commission has also

ensured that Person with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBD) candidates are allotted their preferred examination centres, even beyond existing capacity, by creating additional seats where required. As a result, nearly 805 PwBD candidates got their centre of choice in the Delhi area alone, the Commission said.

The newly introduced Bhubaneswar centre received 10,656 applications and helped reduce the burden of the Cuttack centre, while Kanpur centre attracted 6,938 applications, easing pressure on Lucknow.

## SMC 2026 guidelines not for private unaided schools: Education Ministry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Education Ministry on Thursday clarified that the School Management Committee (SMC) Guidelines 2026 do not apply to private unaided schools that do not receive Government aid or grants. The clarification came amid concerns raised by certain sections of society regarding the implementation of the guidelines.

However, the ministry said such schools are still encouraged to constitute School Management Committees to promote greater transparency, accountability and participatory governance.

"With reference to concerns raised by certain sections of society regarding the School Management Committee Guidelines (SMCs) 2026, the Ministry of Education clarifies that the Guidelines are not applicable to private unaided schools covered under Section 2(n)(iv) of the RTE Act, provided such institu-



### THE MINISTRY SAID SUCH SCHOOLS ARE STILL ENCOURAGED TO CONSTITUTE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES TO PROMOTE GREATER TRANSPARENCY

tions do not receive any aid or grants from the appropriate Government or local authority towards meeting their expenses," the ministry said in a post on social media.

The ministry also stressed that education is a shared responsibility of the Government, schools, parents and the community. "Strengthening collabora-

tion among parents, schools and other stakeholders is essential to improving the overall functioning of schools and ensuring better learning outcomes for children," it added.

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on May 6 launched the guidelines, underscoring the need for stronger community participation,

improved school infrastructure and updated pedagogy in line with the National Education Policy 2020.

Pradhan had underlined that SMCs are not a new concept but have evolved over time and remain central to improving learning outcomes and governance in schools.

The guidelines introduced several key reforms, including a single SMC for all classes from 'Balvatika' to Class 12, aimed at strengthening school-level governance and continuity in decision-making.

The guidelines clearly define the roles and responsibilities of SMCs and member secretaries, with a focus on improved accountability, transparency and financial oversight in school management.

They also emphasise proactive monitoring of student attendance and teacher engagement to enhance learning outcomes.

## From Assam to Ladakh: PM Modi showcases Indian crafts as diplomatic gifts

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

A Muga silk stole for Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a Madhubani painting with fish motif for Dutch Prime Minister Rob Jetten and a Ladakhi pure wool stole for Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson were some of the gifts presented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his just-concluded five-nation tour.

During his trip, Modi also gifted Kesar mangoes and Meghalaya pineapples to UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a replica of the ice axe used by Sherpa Tenzing Norgay to Iceland's Prime Minister Kristrún Freydisson among others, officials said. Modi visited the United Arab Emirates, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway and Italy.

The Muga silk stole gifted to Meloni is a rare and prestigious textile from the Brahmaputra Valley. Muga silk is known as the "golden

silk" of Assam and is celebrated for its natural golden hue and understated elegance.

Italy's celebrated tradition of luxury textiles and timeless design finds a natural resonance in the elegance of Assam's "golden silk," the officials said.

The prime minister of Italy was also gifted a Shirui Lily silk stole, which draws its inspiration from the misty heights of Shirui Kashong peak in Manipur.

It is inspired by the rare Shirui Lily, a delicate bell-shaped flower with pale pinkish-white petals that blooms nowhere else in the world.

For the Tangkhul Naga community of Manipur, the Shirui Lily symbolises purity, identity and cultural pride. The lily also holds deep cultural resonance in Italy, where it has long symbolised purity, grace and artistic refinement, frequently appearing in Renaissance art.

President of Italy Sergio Mattarella was gifted a marble inlay work box with CDs of legendary Hindustani classical vocalist Pandit

Bhimsen Joshi and Carnatic singer MS Subbulakshmi. The box is a refined example of India's handcrafted artistry, closely associated with the master craftsmen of Agra.

Created using the intricate art of Pacchikari, or Pietra Dura, this decorative tradition is believed to have originated in Florence, Italy, before flourishing in India under royal patronage, making it a remarkable artistic bridge between the two nations.

Together, the marble inlay box and the timeless musical works celebrate the shared appreciation of India and Italy for art, heritage and cultural excellence.

King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands was gifted blue pottery from Jaipur. It is a GI-tagged art form with deep Indian roots, iconic for its vibrant cobalt blue, white, and yellow designs.

It stands as a celebrated symbol of Indian craftsmanship, blending traditional artistry with contemporary design. With the Netherlands' world-famous heritage of producing masterful Delft Blue pottery, these pieces



are an ode to a shared commitment to artistic excellence, the officials said.

Queen of the Netherlands Maxima was gifted Meenakari and Kundan earrings. These earrings embody the finest traditions of Indian jewellery craftsmanship, originating from the royal ateliers of Rajasthan.

Prime Minister of the Netherlands Rob Jetten was gifted a Madhubani painting with a fish motif. Madhubani painting is a GI-tagged folk art tradition from the Mithila

region known for its intricate geometric patterns and vibrant colours.

Queen Sonja of Norway was gifted a palm leaf Pattachitra, locally known as Tala Pattachitra, one of Odisha's most ancient and intricate art forms.

Apart from the Ladakhi pure wool stole, the Swedish PM was also gifted the Loktak tea, an artisanal, small-batch tea from the lush hills surrounding the largest freshwater lake in the northeast, and a handcrafted Santiniketan messenger bag.

Iceland's prime minister was gifted a replica of the ice axe used by Norgay as a tribute to the legendary tool carried by the Sherpa guide of Sir Edmund Hillary on the first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953.

The prime minister of Denmark was gifted a Bidri silver work vase, which reflects the refined artistry of the Deccan, celebrated for its intricate silver inlay, elegant form, and meticulous craftsmanship. Finland's Prime

Minister Petteri Orpo was given a Kamal Talai Pichwai painting, which reflects the serene beauty and devotional artistry of the Nathdwara tradition of Rajasthan.

The UAE president was gifted a Rogan painting with the tree of life. The Rogan painting is a rare and exquisite textile art form from the Kutch region of Gujarat.

He was also given Kesar mangoes, a GI-tagged fruit also known as Gujarat's "Queen of Mangoes", and Meghalaya's pineapples, which are celebrated as some of the finest in the world, thriving in the hilly terrain of Meghalaya.

The UAE crown prince was gifted a dagger with Koftgari work. A ceremonial dagger, adorned with intricate Koftgari work, is a rare expression of India's martial and artistic heritage, and Mithila makhana, a premium agricultural product from the Mithila region of Bihar.

The UAE Queen Mother was gifted Maheshwari silk fabric, one of India's most elegant handloom traditions, originating in the historic

town of Maheshwar on the banks of the Narmada river in Madhya Pradesh, and Chak Hao rice, famously known as Manipur's "black rice", a prized aromatic rice variety from the fertile valleys of the northeast.

Qu Dongyu, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, was gifted red rice, an indigenous grain from the black soils of Palakkad, Kerala; Gobindobhog rice, a premium, aromatic short-grain rice from West Bengal; Basmati rice a premium long-grain variety originating from the Indo-Gangetic plains; Joha rice, a premium, indigenous aromatic variety exclusive to the fertile Brahmaputra Valley of Assam; and Kalanamak rice, often called the "Buddha Rice", which originated in the Terai region of Uttar Pradesh.

He was also given healthy millet bars. Millets are an integral part of Maharashtra's agricultural heritage, widely cultivated in regions such as Solapur, Ahmednagar, and the Marathwada belt.

### CM Sai holds chaupal with tendu leaf pluckers under mahua tree

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Surajpur

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Thursday visited the tendu leaf collection centre at Patna under the Ramanujnagar Primary Minor Forest Produce Cooperative Society during his Surajpur district tour and interacted with tendu leaf pluckers. Sitting under a mahua tree, he held a chaupal with tendu leaf pluckers and enquired about their livelihoods, working conditions and access to basic facilities, an official statement said. The tendu leaf pluckers welcomed the Chief Minister with a special garland made of tendu leaves and fruits. Praising the contribution of tendu leaf pluckers, Sai said communities linked to forest-based livelihoods form a strong pillar of the rural economy and their prosperity remains a priority for the government. During the interaction, the Chief



Minister said the state government is reaching villages directly to understand people's concerns firsthand. He also reviewed the status of ration distribution, drinking water supply, progress under the Jal Jeevan Mission, revenue-related matters, education facilities and disbursement of benefits under the Mahtari Vandan Yojana. Interacting with women beneficiaries, he discussed how the Mahtari Vandan Yojana is helping strengthen household finances and support children's needs. He further sought details about the income and working conditions of tendu leaf collectors and

instructed officials to continue efforts for protecting the interests of people dependent on forest-based livelihoods. During the visit, he also distributed charan padukas among tendu leaf pluckers to encourage them. Meanwhile, the tendu leaf collection rate for 2026 has been fixed at Rs 5,500 per standard bag. Against the target of 50 standard bags at the Patna collection centre, 66,640 standard bags had already been collected till May 21, 2026. A total of 108 tendu leaf collectors are associated with the work, contributing significantly to the forest-based economy of the region. Women and Child Development Minister Laxmi Rajwade, MLA Bhulan Singh Moravi and Forest Development Corporation Chairman Ramsevak Paikra were also honoured by the tendu leaf pluckers at the programme. A large number of tendu leaf pluckers were present on the occasion.

### No laxity in construction quality, timelines: PWD Secy

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Raipur

Chhattisgarh Public Works Department (PWD) Secretary Mukesh Kumar Bansal on Thursday reviewed the functioning of the department and directed officials to ensure quality, transparency and timely completion of all construction projects in the state. Chairing a high-level meeting, Bansal emphasized that public interest and technical efficiency must remain central to all departmental activities. He instructed officials to maintain both speed and quality in execution of works and said no laxity would be tolerated in this regard. The Secretary also stressed the need for greater use of modern technical equipment, digitisation and software-based systems to improve efficiency and accelerate project execution. During the



meeting, Bansal directed officials to complete all tender-related processes with complete transparency and strictly within prescribed timelines. He instructed authorities to carry out continuous monitoring of ongoing projects while ensuring adherence to technical standards and public utility requirements. Senior departmental officials informed the Secretary that modern geo-informatics technology is being used for effective monitoring, mapping and project management of construction works. They also briefed him on the tender allocation process, billing procedures and payment systems related to construction projects. Detailed discussions were held on ongoing construction works across the state, progress of tender procedures and preparations for upcoming projects. The Secretary reviewed the performance of officials and contractors and sought information regarding technical procedures, quality control mechanisms and timely payment systems. Bansal also reviewed the progress of the Kachna Railway Overbridge project in Raipur and sought updates regarding its execution and monitoring arrangements.

### CM flags off 'Kamayabi Van' to promote digital learning in rural



**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Koriya

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Thursday flagged off the 'Kamayabi Van' in Koriya district as part of efforts to strengthen digital education infrastructure in remote and rural areas of the state. The initiative was launched during a chaupal organised at Kushha village in Sonhat development block under Sushasan Tihar, an official statement said. The project, implemented under the NITI Aayog-funded

'Mission Kamayabi', aims to provide technology-enabled learning opportunities to students in remote regions through modern digital tools. Speaking on the occasion, the Chief Minister said the state government is committed to ensuring equal access to quality education and modern technology for children in villages and remote areas. In today's era of knowledge and innovation, it is essential to connect rural students with digital resources and modern learning methods to prepare them

for future challenges," Sai said. Officials said the 'Kamayabi Van' is equipped with Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies to deliver interactive and experiential learning in subjects such as science, mathematics and technical education. The initiative is expected to enhance students' understanding of complex concepts, improve learning outcomes and boost performance in board examinations, they said. The Chief Minister said the programme would help bridge the gap between rural and urban education by making modern learning tools accessible in interior regions. Among those present on the occasion were MLA Bhaiya Lal Rajwade, Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister Subodh Singh, Special Secretary Rajat Bansal, Collector Roktima Yadav, and Superintendent of Police Ravi Kumar Kurre, along with local public representatives and a large number of villagers.

### Jal Jeevan Mission Director stresses water conservation

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Kondagaon

Additional Secretary to the Government of India and Director of the National Jal Jeevan Mission Kamal Kishore Soan on Thursday stressed the need for water conservation and groundwater recharge to ensure sustainability of rural drinking water sources during a visit to Chhattisgarh's Kondagaon district. Accompanied by Area Officer Umesh Bhardwaj, Soan inspected a single-village drinking water scheme being implemented under the Jal Jeevan Mission at Juganikalar village in Farasgaon block, an official statement said. During the inspection, he reviewed the functioning of the water distribution system, operational management and water quality testing procedures, officials said. Soan directed officials to conduct



extensive water testing before and after the monsoon season and ensure that water tanks are cleaned twice annually to maintain safe drinking water supply. He also instructed officials to train at least one person in

every village for active participation in Jal Jeevan Mission activities and stressed regular maintenance of water infrastructure. Interacting with villagers, the official gathered information regarding the use of toilets

constructed under the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) and advised local authorities on proper disposal and management of household wastewater. Juganikalar Gram Panchayat Sarpanch Sangita Netam informed the visiting team that villagers no longer depend on hand pumps as clean drinking water is now being supplied directly to households under the scheme. Executive Engineer Virendra Pandey said a project worth more than Rs 2.15 crore has been sanctioned for the village under the Jal Jeevan Mission. He said drinking water is currently being supplied to 409 households through a 65-kilolitre RCC water tank and a solar-powered tank system. Chief Engineer, Bastar Zone, G. L. Lakhera, along with Superintending Engineers Kailash Madharia and R. K. Shukla, and local villagers were present during the inspection.

### 'Ayurveda perspective on menopause highlights lifestyle balance'

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Raipur

Menopause and hormonal imbalance in women can be effectively managed through proper lifestyle regulation, balanced diet and mental wellbeing practices, Ayurveda specialist Swati Vikesh Jain said on Thursday. Speaking on women's health during the menopausal transition, Dr. Jain said the condition is associated in Ayurveda with an increase in Vata dosha, which can lead to physical and emotional instability. "This phase requires nourishment, stability and calmness in the body. A disciplined routine, proper sleep, balanced diet and stress management play a key role in maintaining overall health," Dr. Jain said. She said women should adopt early rising habits, preferably around sunrise, and begin the day with warm water and breathing exercises to improve overall wellbeing. "Ayurveda recommends yoga, pranayama, Anulom-Vilom, Bhramari, walking and gentle Surya



Namaskar to reduce stress, irritability, weight fluctuations and sleep disturbances," she said. Dr. Jain added that proper sleep hygiene, including early bedtime and reduced screen exposure at night, is essential, and traditional practices such as warm milk or turmeric milk before sleep may support relaxation. On emotional health, she said meditation, chanting, hobbies and spending time with family help in maintaining mental balance during this phase. "Menopause is a natural biological transition and not a disease. With the right care, women can maintain emotional and physical stability,"

Dr. Jain said. She recommended inclusion of calcium and protein-rich foods such as milk, curd, paneer, legumes, sesame seeds, fox nuts and nuts like almonds and walnuts in daily diet. Green vegetables, seasonal fruits and healthy fats like ghee and flaxseeds should also be consumed in moderation, she added. Dr. Jain further advised herbal support such as amla, shatavari, ashoka and lodhra, along with cumin-coriander-fennel water, stating that such remedies should be taken under proper guidance based on individual body constitution. She cautioned against excessive tea and coffee, junk food, refined sugar, and very spicy or fried foods, saying these may aggravate hormonal imbalance. "Symptoms like hot flashes, weight gain, hair fall, sleep disturbances and mood swings are common during this natural transition, but they can be managed with lifestyle correction and supportive Ayurvedic therapies where required," she said.

### Seven held for duping man of Rs 30L



**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Kondagaon

Police in Chhattisgarh's Kondagaon district have busted an alleged international cyber fraud racket and arrested seven accused for duping a man of around Rs 30 lakh by impersonating officials of an insurance regulatory body, police said on Thursday. Farasgaon police said the gang, operating from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, allegedly cheated the victim by promising release of a large insurance payout after payment of "processing charges". The victim, identified as Sangam Rana of Kobra Bazarpara, transferred around Rs 29.69 lakh into multiple bank accounts provided by the accused after receiving repeated calls from fraudsters posing as officials of the Insurance Ombudsman Council. After a complaint was lodged, police launched an investigation and carried out technical analysis of mobile data, bank transactions and location tracking, which led to key

inputs about the accused, officials said. A special police team conducted coordinated raids in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh for nearly 10 days, following which seven accused were arrested, Farasgaon Sub-Divisional Police Officer Abhinav Upadhyay said. Police said the gang used fake SIM cards, forged bank accounts and manipulated identity documents to carry out the fraud. "Once the money was deposited, it was quickly withdrawn through multiple ATMs to avoid detection," SDOP Upadhyay said. Investigators said the alleged kingpin of the racket had earlier been involved in cybercrime cases and had also been jailed previously. Police added that further investigation is underway to trace the wider interstate network and identify additional bank accounts linked to the fraud. The operation was conducted under the supervision of Farasgaon SDOP Abhinav Upadhyay, with assistance from local police and cybercrime team personnel.

### Healthcare services reach remote Bijapur region after years of isolation

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Bijapur

A team of Health Department conducted a universal health screening drive in remote and Naxal-affected villages of Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh, providing medical services to 642 villagers after travelling through difficult terrain, officials said on Thursday. The camps were organised in Nugur, Hingmeta and Hurrugwali villages under the guidance of Collector Vishwadeep and the leadership of the district Chief Medical and Health Officer, an official statement said. Officials said the health team crossed challenging routes, including the nearly two-kilometre-wide Indravati River, to reach Nugur village, located around 90 kilometres from the Bhaigramgarh block headquarters. The region had remained largely inaccessible for years due to Naxal influence and geographical difficulties, they said. During the camps, villagers underwent health check-ups and were provided medicines free of cost. Patients suffering from serious ailments were referred to higher health centres for further treatment. According to health officials, awareness regarding healthcare and immunisation has improved significantly in the area in recent years. "Earlier, villagers often hesitated to undergo health check-ups and child immunisation. Now people are voluntarily participating in screenings and



ensuring regular vaccination of children," an official said. In Nugur village, health check-ups were conducted for 207 people, including 75 non-communicable disease (NCD) screenings, three fever cases, five cases of skin irritation and examination of one pregnant woman. In Hingmeta village, 125 villagers underwent medical examinations, including 42 NCD screenings and two cases related to skin ailments. At Hurrugwali village, health screenings were conducted for 310 residents, including 115 NCD screenings, five fever cases and three skin disease cases. Officials said the initiative was aimed not only at providing healthcare services but also at strengthening trust in the administration and increasing health awareness in remote regions. They added that regular outreach programmes are helping villagers in inaccessible areas avail the benefits of government welfare schemes directly.

### State ranks sixth in inland fish production: Minister

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Raipur

Chhattisgarh has emerged as one of the leading states in inland fish production and achieved self-reliance in fish seed production due to its strong water infrastructure, favourable climate and pro-fishermen policies, Minister of Department of Fisheries Ramvihar Netam said on Thursday. Addressing a programme in Raipur organised jointly by the Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA), the



Department of Fisheries, Government of India, and the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB), the minister said the state currently ranks sixth

He said out of the total available water area of 2.081 lakh hectares in Chhattisgarh, nearly 96.25 per cent has already been developed for fish farming

activities. The minister said the state government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai, is committed to economically empowering people through welfare-oriented fisheries policies. By granting fish farming the status of an agricultural activity, fish farmers in the state are receiving benefits such as concessional electricity tariffs, interest-free loans and relief in water charges, he said. Netam further said the department is promoting modern scientific techniques, including Cage Culture,

Recirculating Aquaculture Systems (RAS) and Biofloc technology, to enhance production and increase farmers' income. He said special clusters are being developed in Raipur and Kanker districts for GIFT Tilapia production, with a target of producing 30,000 metric tonnes by 2028. According to the minister, the initiative is expected to generate annual export revenue of Rs 90 crore to Rs 100 crore for the state. Director of Fisheries Narayan Singh Nag said the state has developed a strong infrastructure for production of

quality fish seed. He said Chhattisgarh currently operates 123 circular hatcheries, 102 fish seed farms, 3,698 rearing ponds, one Pangasius hatchery in Dhamtari, seven Magur hatcheries across multiple districts and two Monosex Tilapia hatcheries in Raipur and Balodabazar. Nag said the state is producing more than 606 crore units of fish seed annually and is supplying quality fish seed to states including West Bengal, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala and Goa.

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## Congress pay tribute to Rajiv Gandhi on death anniversary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, besides several other Congress leaders on Thursday paid tributes to former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on his death anniversary. He was born on August 20, 1944, in Mumbai and was assassinated in Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991.

"Tributes to former Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi ji on his death anniversary," Modi said in a post on social media. Rajiv Gandhi served as India's prime minister from October 31, 1984, to December 2, 1989. Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge paid tributes to the former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on his 35th death anniversary, and recalled the various initiatives undertaken by him for the country's progress.

Besides members of the Gandhi family, many former chief ministers and union ministers paid their tributes to Rajiv Gandhi at his memorial Veer Bhumi here.

Paying tribute, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi said his father's teachings and values will always remain with him.



Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi and Congress leader Sonia Gandhi paying tribute to former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on his death anniversary at Veer Bhumi in New Delhi on Thursday

"Papa, I will fully shoulder the responsibility of realising the dream of a skilled, prosperous, and strong India that you envisioned," Rahul Gandhi said in a post on social media. "Your teachings, your values, and your memories will always remain with me," he said.

After paying floral tributes to the former prime minister, Congress chief Kharge recalled Rajiv Gandhi's words: "India is an old country but a young nation. I dream of India — strong, independent, self-reliant and in the front rank of the nations of the world, in the service of mankind". In a post on social media, Kharge said, "On his martyrdom day, we

pay our deepest respects to Former Prime Minister and Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi, a remarkable son of India who inspired hope and aspiration in millions across the nation."

With vision, courage, and a deep belief in India's future, he laid the foundations for the country's journey into the twenty first century, Kharge recalled.

"His transformative initiatives included lowering the voting age to eighteen, empowering local self-governance through Panchayati Raj, ushering in the telecom and information technology revolution, advancing computerisation, securing important peace accords, launching

the Universal Immunisation Programme, and introducing a forward looking education policy centred on inclusive learning. "His legacy continues to shape modern India and remains a source of inspiration for generations," the Congress chief said in a post on social media.

Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and K C Venugopal, former chief ministers Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Ashok Gehlot, besides several former union ministers were present at his memorial Veer Bhumi.

Several Congress leaders also remembered Rajiv Gandhi as the architect of modern India.

## Gurugram homebuyers fraud: ED seeks witness protection from police in 3 States

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

The Enforcement Directorate has written to the police forces of three States asking them to ensure protection for homebuyers and witnesses who alleged receiving threats on behalf of Swaraj Singh Yadav, the arrested promoter of Gurugram-based realty firm Ocean Seven Buildtech Pvt Ltd.

In November 2025, the central agency arrested Yadav in a money laundering case linked to the alleged duping of buyers of affordable housing projects through arbitrary cancellations and re-allotments.

During the hearing of a plea filed by Yadav seeking regular bail on May 18, some victims informed the designated court in Delhi about the "threats", "intimidation" and "coercive tactics" being used against them for depositing before the ED as part of this investigation.

The victims informed Additional Sessions Judge (Patiala House Courts) Shefali Barnala Tandon that a man began recording their video while they waited outside the court on the said date.

Some other victims, including an Army officer and a senior citizen, told the court that they were being



threatened "at the instance" of Yadav. The court was also informed that "false" FIRs were being filed against some of them in Rajasthan as they claimed Yadav and his associates were operating as a "mafia".

ED's investigating officer told the court that "he has received 10 complaints from the victims/homebuyers of the present matter of threatening at the instance of accused Swaraj Singh."

"It has also been stated by the IO that even the prosecution witnesses are receiving calls on behalf of accused Swaraj Singh for resiling from their statements given to the ED and depositing in their favour," the court said in its order of May 18.

Observing that multiple victims have "consistently projected a palpable and bonafide apprehension to their life and liberty", the court ordered the deputy commissioner of police (DCP) of New Delhi to ensure

"protective" arrangements for the victims until the ED undertakes appropriate witness protection measures.

According to officials, the ED followed the court's directions and wrote to the DCP of Delhi Police, providing the names of the victims and prosecution witnesses so that the police can extend protection to them.

The agency also wrote to the Gurugram (Haryana) police commissioner and its EOW (the predicate agency in the case against Yadav and his company), informing them about the said court order and the threats the victims reported receiving.

The ED also wrote to the inspector general of police (Jaipur range) in Rajasthan, informing the authority about the "false" FIRs being filed under its jurisdiction against the victims by certain persons allegedly linked to Yadav, the officials said.

## New helipad inaugurated to cater growing rush at Vaishno Devi: LG Sinha

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Jammu

To cater to the growing rush of pilgrims opting for helicopter services to visit the Cave Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, a newly constructed helipad was inaugurated in the Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor (LG) Manoj Sinha on Thursday in Katra.

The facility will be used to streamline helicopter services for pilgrims visiting the Mata Vaishno Devi and Shiv Khori shrines. Built at a cost of around ₹27 crore, the helipad is expected to improve connectivity and provide major relief to devotees travelling to the twin shrines, officials said, adding that helicopter services from Katra to Shiv Khori will commence soon.

Addressing reporters after inaugurating the helipad at Katra, Sinha said the Mata Vaishno Devi Board and the Shiv Khori Board — both civil authorities — have jointly developed the facility.

"It is a very modern heliport, designed keeping in view passenger facilities and with full emphasis on safety," he said. The LG said the heliport has been constructed in accordance with the Directorate General of Civil Aviation's (DGCA) norms.

## 75,000 CAPF to remain in West Bengal till June 20 for post-election duties



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Kolkata

The Union Home Ministry has decided to continue deploying 500 companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) in West Bengal till June 20 for post-poll law and order management based on a request from the West Bengal Government, an official said Thursday.

In an official communication, the home ministry said the West Bengal Government had sought continuation of the Central forces' deployment till the end of October for post-election duties.

"The request of the Government of West Bengal has been considered in this ministry," it said. The communication addressed to the West Bengal chief secretary, home secretary and director general of police stated that 500 companies of CAPFs, comprising 200 of the CRPF, 150 of the BSF, and 50 each of the CISF, ITBP and SSB, would continue to remain deployed in the state till June 20.

A senior state Government official said the forces are being retained primarily to assist police in maintaining law and order in sensitive areas following the Assembly election.

"The deployment is aimed at ensuring peace and preventing any untoward incidents in vulnerable areas. Coordination between the state police and CAPFs is continuing," the official said.

The Union Home Ministry has also asked the West Bengal Government to ensure necessary logistics, accommodation and other operational arrangements for the central forces stationed across the state.

On May 16, Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari, during an administrative review meeting held at Diamond Harbour, requested the chief secretary and home secretary to seek an extension of the stay of CAPF personnel beyond the scheduled two-month period.

Incidentally, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, during one of his rallies for the just-concluded assembly polls in Bengal, had said that a total of 500 companies of CAPF would extend their stay in the state for 60 days after the election, primarily to keep a check on the post-poll violence.

The two-phase polling in Bengal got over on April 29, and the counting was held on May 4.

## Ranjeet Kumar Dass elected as Speaker of Assam Assembly

TONY DAS ■ Guwahati

Four-time BJP MLA Ranjeet Kumar Dass was on Thursday unanimously elected as the Speaker of the 16th Assam Legislative Assembly, becoming the only legislator in the state to assume the chair for the second time.

Pro tem Speaker Chandra Mohan Patowary announced that there were three nominations in favour of Dass, and no one contested him.

"As there is no other nomination, I declare Ranjeet Kumar Dass as the Speaker of the 16th Assam Legislative Assembly," he added.

This is the second term for Dass as the Speaker of the Assembly. He was in the chair in 2016 when the BJP formed its first Government in the northeastern state.

Dass, the MLA from Bhowanipur-Sorbhog seat, was a cabinet minister during Himanta Biswa Sarma's first term as CM from 2021 to 2026. He also served the party as



Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday extended his greetings and felicitations to the newly elected Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly, Ranjeet Kumar Dass

its Assam unit chief. Dass has been elected to the Assam Assembly for four consecutive terms since 2011.

After his election, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma congratulated Dass.

"Today, you have made history. You are the only person who is assuming the

Speaker's chair for the second time," Sarma said.

Legislators from the ruling coalition and the opposition parties also congratulated Dass and offered their full support for his tenure.

"We expect you to be fully neutral in the House. We, the opposition, have very few

seats this time. So, we will be allotted less time. However, we expect you to show some leniency and give more time to present the issues affecting the people," Congress MLA Jakir Hussain Sikdar said.

Dass, while acknowledging the support of the MLAs, said he would be neutral inside the House. "However, I am a member of a political party following a particular ideology. It is not easy to leave it instantly," he added.

Dass also objected to the word 'Speaker', saying it originated from British rule.

"I hope there will be some discussions in this House on the usage of the word — Speaker. Sabhapati or Adhyaksh words sound fine. In future, I will try to work as per Indian culture and tradition. I will not follow the British tradition," he added.

The Speaker also appealed to all members to make the Assam Legislative Assembly a model House in the country.

## Minister dedicates UMMID programme to nation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Union minister Jitendra Singh on Thursday said the UMMID programme for rare genetic disorders and diseases has already benefited nearly three lakh individuals through screening and diagnostic services.

Launched in 2019, the Unique Methods of Management of Inherited Disorders (UMMID) initiative is supported by the Department of Biotechnology.

The programme has also helped establish nearly 30 National Inherited Diseases Administration (NIDAN) kendras for advanced diagnostics and counselling, ensuring that advanced genomic healthcare reaches beyond metropolitan centres.

Singh, the Minister of State (Independent Charge)



of the Ministry of Science and Technology, said, "The UMMID programme has successfully established a national framework integrating genetic diagnostics, prenatal and newborn screening, genetic counselling, clinician capacity-building and community outreach under a unified public health model."

The minister made these comments during an event for the dedication of the UMMID initiative to the nation.

## BRO successfully launches 170 feet Bailey bridge in Bihar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Bihar

Vikramshila Setu, a vital 4.88 km-long bridge over the River Ganga connecting NH-33 (Old NH-80) and NH-31, serves as a lifeline for Bhagalpur and adjoining regions. Following the collapse of the 34-meter navigational span of the bridge, traffic movement was completely disrupted, severely affecting public mobility and the movement of essential services.

Realising the urgency of the situation, the Government of Bihar requested immediate assistance from the Ministry of Defence for the deployment of emer-

gency bridging solutions to facilitate the movement of light vehicles and essential services. The Ministry of Defence entrusted the restoration works to Border Roads Organisation (BRO).

Consequently, BRO has undertaken the challenging task of launching these Bailey Bridges to restore connectivity and provide immediate relief to the affected population of North & South Bihar on a war footing. The Construction Team of Project Swastik has launched 170 Feet Bailey bridge in a short time. In addition to the two Bailey bridges that have been launched so far, as requisitioned by the State Government, two more



Bailey bridges will also be launched over distressed spans of the Vikramshila Setu shortly.

Shri Jitendra Prasad, VSM, Additional Director General Border Roads (East), visited the bridge site on 20 May

the remaining two bridges.

Before visiting the bridge site, the ADG also had an interaction with Pankaj Kumar Pal, Secretary, RCD at Patna. Jitendra Kumar, MD, BRPNNL and Bipin Kumar Chand, Superintending Engineer, BRO, attended the meeting.

The State Administration has also expressed profound gratitude to the Border Roads Organisation for its timely intervention and fast-paced construction efforts.

Restoration of connectivity is expected to greatly ease transportation hardships, ensure continuity of essential services and provide much-needed succor to the local populace.

Tourists at the snow-covered Baralacha Pass on the Manali-Leh Highway in Lahaul and Spiti district, Himachal Pradesh on Thursday

## Congress joins TVK Govt, Vijay expands Cabinet by inducting 23 more ministers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Chennai

Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay on Thursday expanded his Cabinet by inducting 23 more legislators as ministers, including two from the Congress, which marked the return of the grand old party to governance in Tamil Nadu after almost 60 years.

The swearing-in ceremony was held at the Lok Bhavan and Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar administered the oath of office and secrecy to the minister-designates. TVK MLAs, including Srinath, S Kamali, C Vijayalakshmi and RV Ranjithkumar were initially sworn-in as ministers.

Congress party's S Rajesh Kumar, representing Killiyoor, and P Viswanathan, who won from Melur segment, took oath as ministers.

AICC incharge for Tamil Nadu, Girish Chodankar, said the inclusion of his party MLAs in the Cabinet heralded a "turning point" in the political history of Tamil Nadu.

"Congress cadres have been striving for power for the last 59 years and have been working for it with loyalty and dedication. Now, they have got it," Chodankar told PTI Videos. Congress Lok Sabha (Karur) MP Jothamani said in a statement: "After 59 years, two members of the Congress party have taken up positions in the Tamil Nadu Cabinet. This is a highly joyful moment for the Congress party. Heartfelt congratula-



Tamil Nadu Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar and CM C Joseph Vijay felicitate TVK MLA N Marie Wilson, who took oath of office as Minister for Finance, Planning and Development at the Lok Bhavan in Chennai

tions to elder brother Viswanathan and younger brother Rajeshkumar! May this responsibility turn out to be a great opportunity to render exemplary service to the people of Tamil Nadu."

Also, Congress supporters hailed in social media the inclusion of party MLAs in the Cabinet on May 21, the death anniversary of iconic leader Rajiv Gandhi.

A total of 23 MLAs were sworn in as ministers and it includes three women. Vijay's friend Srinath, elected from Thoothukudi Assembly segment, was the first to take oath. Mohamed Farwas J, and N Marie Wilson were from the minority communities.

Governor Arlekar corrected Congress leader Rajesh Kumar during his oath-taking and asked him to confine to the written oath given to him. While reading out the oath from a paper, he sudden-

ly hailed Congress leaders Kamaraj, Rajiv Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, spontaneously prompting the Governor to say, "that is not part of your oath." The Cabinet expansion marks the Congress' return to Government in Tamil Nadu after nearly six decades as the Dravidian majors—DMK and AIADMK, have never accommodated allies, including the national party that has aligned with both parties at different points of time. The last Congress chief minister was M Bhakthavatsalam and he helmed Tamil Nadu, then known as Madras state, from 1963 to 1967.

The first non-Congress Government in post-independent India was ushered in by Dravidian stalwart and DMK founder CN Annadurai in 1967 when he led the party to a stupendous win against the then ruling Congress.



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### Order Order

#### HC reserves order on exemption to slaughter rules for Eid

The Calcutta High Court on Thursday reserved judgment on a bunch of petitions challenging a recent West Bengal government notification on animal slaughter during next week's Eid al-Adha. The petitioners sought an exemption under Section 12 of the Animal Slaughter Control Act, 1950, for performing the religious rituals during the festival. Senior lawyer Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya, appearing for one petitioner, submitted before the court that the Act was framed in 1950, when agriculture was dependent on domestic animals, but at present, farming is technology-driven. He stated that section 12 of the Act provides for relaxation for religious purposes. (PTI)

### Have asked all HCs to conduct online hearings: CJI

Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant on Thursday said he has asked all high courts across the country to conduct hearings online and most of them have already implemented it. The observation came when a lawyer mentioned a plea before a bench headed by the CJI seeking an urgent hearing of her plea that all Delhi courts should go online. "I have already requested the Chief Justices. Most have already implemented. It has to be a voluntary exercise by both the Bar and the Bench," CJI Kant said. The lawyer told the apex court that in her plea, she has sought directions to all district courts to conduct hearings online for three months in the interest of the nation. The CJI then said, "District courts are the domain of High Courts. District courts are in the administrative domain of HCs. Let them take call... I have requested them for district courts also." (PTI)

### Thin line between defamation, political criticism: Delhi HC

The Delhi High Court on Thursday said there was a thin line between political criticism and defamation, as it asked MP Raghav Chadha if he can be "sensitive" to social media posts seemingly criticizing his "political decision". Chadha, who recently exited the Aam Aadmi Party to join the BJP, filed a lawsuit in the high court against the publication of alleged malicious and fabricated social media posts that, he said, are gravely prejudicial to his reputation and personality rights. Senior advocate Rajiv Nayar, appearing for Chadha, contended there were posts with profane content, including where the politician is shown as having "sold himself away for money". Reserving verdict on the aspect of interim relief to take down such alleged offending content, Justice Subramonium Prasad acknowledged that while an individual has the right to live with dignity, the right to free speech under the Constitution also cannot be taken away. "It is a comment by an individual criticizing a political decision... As a political leader, can you be sensitive," asked Justice Prasad during the hearing. "Right from Independence, we have grown up seeing RK Laxman's cartoons... In various ways criticism has been made on decisions taken politically, economically... Now social media has gone to greater extent. But still at the end of the day, it's still within the realm of a person," stated the judge. Chadha's senior counsel asserted that posts implying he "traded for money" cannot be termed as "fair criticism". Even as Chadha's senior counsel argued that the offending posts "can't stay even for a day", Justice Prasad responded that prima facie they only appeared to be criticism. "According to me, prima facie, these are all only criticism of a political decision," the judge orally said. "The line between defamation and criticism is quite thin, right? It's very easy to slip to the other side, which affects your right to live with dignity and you cannot infringe on this side at the same time. Your Article 19 (1) (a) right also cannot be taken away," the court added. Considering that the alleged offending posts were by unknown individuals, the judge suggested appointing an amicus curiae to assist the court in the matter.

## Exclusion of heirs not enough to invalidate will: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Noting that the very purpose of a will is to alter the normal line of succession, the Supreme Court on Thursday said that merely excluding natural heirs from inheritance cannot by itself be treated as a suspicious circumstance to invalidate a will.

A bench of Justices Ujjal Bhuyan and Vijay Bishnoi dismissed an appeal filed by the wife and children of late B Sheena Nairi challenging the validity of a will through which the deceased had bequeathed his properties in Karnataka to his sister Laxmi Nairithy.

The top court upheld concurrent findings of the trial



court, the appellate court and the Karnataka High Court, which had accepted the will as genuine.

"The exclusion of the natural heirs cannot be sufficient to vitiate the will in

question, particularly when the will clearly specifies that the testator has not done any injustice to his wife, children, or other relatives, and that he has given enough to his wife and children who are residing

at Bombay," the court said.

The dispute arose after B Sheena Nairi, a chartered accountant, executed a will in May 1983 in favour of his younger sister and died later that year. His wife and chil-

dren challenged the document, alleging it was fabricated and contending that they had been unfairly deprived of inheritance.

"Mere exclusion of the natural heirs from the property of the testator, by itself, cannot be construed as a suspicious circumstance so as to invalidate a will outright," the court said.

The bench noted that the will itself recorded that the testator had already given "enough and more" to his wife and children residing in Bombay. The court also reiterated the legal principles governing proof of wills and held that the document stood duly proved through the testimony of an attesting

witness, who confirmed that the testator had executed and signed the will in his presence.

"A testator is legally entitled to dispose of his property according to his own wishes, and unless the exclusion is accompanied by suspicious circumstances affecting the genuineness or due execution of a will, such exclusion alone does not render a will invalid," the court said.

The bench further held that mutation entries in revenue records do not confer title and are merely for fiscal purposes. Dismissing the appeal, the bench held that the findings of all courts upholding the validity of the will did not warrant interference.

## Court convicts three for rioting, unlawful assembly

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

A Delhi court has convicted three men in a case related to the 2020 northeast Delhi riots, saying that the prosecution successfully proved they were part of an unlawful assembly that pelted stones at police and obstructed officials on duty during the violence at Khajuri Khas.

Additional Sessions Judge Parveen Singh was hearing a case against Ikram, Sarfaraz and Mustaqeem accused of rioting, unlawful assembly and assault on public servants, and said that evidence established their guilt in the case.



In an order dated May 18, the court said, "The evidence on record clearly establishes that throughout the relevant period, the unlawful

assembly was continuously indulging in stone pelting upon the police force, thereby obstructing public servants in discharge of

their duties and causing injuries to several police personnel."

According to prosecution, the three persons were accused of being part of violence that erupted on February 24, 2020, near Bhajanpura police booth and Karawal Nagar Road in northeast Delhi during the riots, where an unruly mob allegedly set ablaze shops, carts and a police booth and pelted stones at police personnel.

It was alleged that the police officials patrolling the area repeatedly asked people to disperse and announced prohibitory orders before the crowd turned violent. Several policemen were injured in the clashes.

## CJI urged to retract observations against environment activists

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

A group of 72 lawyers, law students, law faculty, law researchers, and activists trained in law have written an open letter to Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant, demanding a retraction of the Supreme Court's recent observations on the practice of filing pleas to stall developmental projects.

A Bench comprising the

CJI and Justice on May 11 had said, "Show us even a single project in this country where these alleged environmental activists have said that we welcome this project."

The letter, released on Tuesday, states that the observations cast unjust aspersions on concerned citizens, communities and collectives defending the ecology, within the framework of law, statutory institutions, and jurisprudence



evolved by the apex court over decades.

The signatories of the letter are members of the National Alliance for Justice, Accountability and

Rights (NAJAR), a platform of law professionals.

"We are writing because the observations made extend beyond the outcome in one case. It relates to a broader jurisprudential shift: from viewing environmental litigation as an integral part of constitutional governance towards treating it as a suspect form of obstruction," said the letter.

It added that the obser-

ventions also pertain to a shift from recognising citizens as enforcers of statutory duties, towards dismissing them as "so-called environmental activists."

Also, from subjecting environmental decision-making to rule-of-law scrutiny towards deference to project clearances and administrative expertise, even where the record reveals inconsistencies, omissions and unresolved public concerns.



## HC GRANTS BAIL TO SALIM MALIK IN UAPA CASE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Delhi High Court on Thursday granted bail to Salim Malik in a case under anti-terror law UAPA concerning the "larger conspiracy" behind the February 2020 riots in the city's northeastern parts. The relief was granted by a bench of Justices Prathiba M Singh and Madhu Jain on Malik's appeal challenging a trial court order of January 29 that denied him bail in the case. His counsel argued that he was entitled to bail in view of the Supreme Court granting the relief to identically-placed co-accused Saleem Khan and Shadab Ahmed.

## BCI moves SC to finalise 10% co-option formula for women in State bar councils

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Bar Council of India (BCI) has moved the Supreme Court seeking approval for a merit-based "co-option" mechanism to ensure 30 per cent women's representation in state bar councils.

The BCI, the apex bar body, has proposed to fill a 10-per cent co-option quota by selecting women candidates who have secured the highest number of votes among those not elected, rather than through subjective appointments. The proposal aims to complement the 20 per cent seats reserved for women through direct election, bringing the total representation to the 30-per cent mandate previously set by the apex court. BCI chairperson and senior advocate Manan Kumar Mishra, in a statement, said the bar body



has considered the submissions made by stakeholders before the apex court-appointed High Powered Election Supervisory Committee on the co-option of women members in state bar councils.

"This issue concerns not merely filling seats, but the larger institutional objective, which is ensuring that women advocates, who constitute an indispensable and distinguished part of the legal fraternity, are given their rightful place in the representative structure of the Bar.

has considered the submissions made by stakeholders before the apex court-appointed High Powered Election Supervisory Committee on the co-option of women members in state bar councils.

## SC refuses to lift stay on counting of Delhi Bar Council polls

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Thursday refused to modify its earlier order staying the counting of votes for the Bar Council of Delhi (BCD) elections following tampering allegations and asked the Delhi High Court to hear the pleas on May 25. A bench comprising Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi was urged by senior advocate Vikas Singh that the May 18 order of the apex court staying the counting of votes be modified. "The counting is underway. Let it be completed. It will not be released subject to the orders of the high



court," Singh said, adding that votes are lying scattered and it raises the issue of tampering of votes. "We will not modify our order... there are serious issues (with regard to BCD elections)," the CJI said, referring to allegations that tampered ballot papers were being counted.

"On mentioning the MA (miscellaneous application) taken on board, since the matter is urgent, we request the Delhi High Court Chief Justice to list the matter immediately on Monday before a Division Bench. Parties shall be at liberty to present all arguments," the bench ordered. On May 18, the bench stayed the counting of votes for the BCD elections.

**यूनियन बैंक Union Bank of India**

Regional Office - Raipur, Plot No 71, Sector 24, Atal Nagar, Naya Raipur, Raipur, Chhattisgarh-492018

Appendix-IV A [See the proviso to rule 6(B)]  
Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Properties

### E-Auction Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 6 (6) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rule, 2002

Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower(s) and Guarantor (s) that the below described immovable property mortgaged/charged to the Secured Creditor, the constructive/physical possession of which has been taken by the Authorized Officer of Union Bank of India (secured creditor), will be sold on "As is where is", "As is what is" and "Whatever there is" on 26/06/2026 between 11.00 am to 5.00 pm for recovery of dues as mentioned hereunder to Union Bank of India from the below mentioned Borrower (s) & Guarantor (s). The Reserve Price and the Earnest Money Deposit are also mentioned hereunder:

S. No.	Name of the Borrower / Guarantor and Branch	Short description of the properties	Total Dues (in Rs.)	Reserve Price (in Lacs)
01	Mr. Anand Shrivastava Branch- Priyadarshini Nagar	Flat no.106, 1st Floor, Super built up area 430 sq ft, Usha Kiran Parisar, Bhatagaon, Ward no 63, Shyamla Prasad Mukherjee ward, Raipur.	₹ 7,40,347.96 + Interest + Legal & other charges	₹ 14.00 Lacs ₹ 1.40 Lacs ₹ 0.15 Lacs
02	Gagan Deep Singh & Mrs Kamaljeet Kaur Badesha Branch- Priyadarshini Nagar	Flat No. 102, B Block, Area- 1469 Sq.ft. Situated at Ph no. 110/40/63 Part of Khasra No. 1102, 1281, 1280, 198, 1130/2, 1104/2, 1105/2, 1100, 1097, 1098, 1099, 207/9, Khamardih Shankar Nagar Raipur Chhattisgarh.	₹ 23,91,882.42 + int. since 31.01.2026 + Legal & other charges	₹ 48.00 Lacs ₹ 4.80 Lacs ₹ 0.50 Lacs
03	Hiraman Divedi S/o. Ram Sipahi Divedi, Geeta Divedi Branch-Chandnidhi	Residential House Constructed On Kh. No. 113/3 P. Ph. No. 108 Thakurdev Ward No 18, Near Siddhi Vinayak Hospital, Utkura, Village- Khillora Raipur C.G. Owned By Smt. Geeta Divedi W/O Heeraman Divedi Area 1066 Sq Ft.	₹ 16,02,748.16 + int. since 31.01.2026 + Legal & other charges	₹ 27.00 Lacs ₹ 2.70 Lacs ₹ 0.30 Lacs
04	Late Mrs. Kiran Chaturvedi (through known legal heirs) Shri Pushpendra Kumar Chaturvedi, Shri Ashish Kumar Chaturvedi, Shri Mahendra Kumar Chaturvedi Branch-Charoda	House No. 191, Mouza No. 544, Ward No. 36, Near Sangam Chowk, New Khursipar, Bhilai, District-Durg, Chhattisgarh 490011.	₹ 3,57,905.56 + int. since 31.01.2026 + Legal & other charges	₹ 27.00 Lacs ₹ 2.70 Lacs ₹ 0.30 Lacs

**Detail of encumbrance over the above properties, as known to the bank - Not known**  
**Date & Time of E-Auction: 24/06/2026, at 11.00 AM to 5.00 PM**

For Registration and Login and Bidding Rules visit The Online E-Auction will be held through web portal/website <https://baanetnet.com> for further detailed any enquiry please contact: For No. 01: Mr. Gaurav Mishra/ Mob. 7800002186. 02: Mr. Pradeep Barik/ Mob. 7077103753, For No. 4: Mr. Arnab Ghosh/ Mob. 9769306558 & No. 04: Mr. Sunil Maurya/ Mob. 9919175656.

This may also be treated as STATUTORY 15 DAYS SALE NOTICE UNDER RULE 6(6) & Rule 9(1) OF SECURITY INTEREST (ENFORCEMENT) RULES 2002, to the borrower/s and guarantor/s).

Date: 21.05.2026, Authorised Officer, Union Bank of India

**SVATANTRA MICRO HOUSING FINANCE CORPORATION LTD.**

Office no. 5 & 6, 11th Floor, E Wing, Times Square, Anand-Kurda Road, Marol, Andheri (E), Mumbai - 400059. TEL: 18001234427 / +91 22 69609000/100 E-mail: collections@smhfcindia.com

**APPENDIX IV [See Rule 8 (I)] POSSESSION NOTICE**

Whereas the undersigned being the Authorized Officer of the Svatantra Micro Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (SMHFC) under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of Powers conferred under Section 13 read with the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, issued a demand notice as mentioned below dated calling upon the Borrowers mentioned in tables to repay the amount mentioned in the notice with interest and expenses thereon within 60 days from the date of notice/ date of receipt of the said notice.

The borrowers having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower/ guarantor/mortgagor and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him/her under Section 13(4) of the said Act read with Rule 8 of the said Rules. The borrower/ guarantor/mortgagor in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of the Svatantra Micro Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (SMHFC) for an amount as mentioned below with further interest & expenses thereon until full payment.

Name of the Borrower(s)/ Guarantor (s)	Demand Notice Date/ Date of Possession	Amount Outstanding	Description of the property
Mr. Yashwant Nishad Mr. Dinesh Kumar Nishad Mrs. Mehtrini Nishad	07-11-2025 20-05-2026	Rs.1,03,264/- (Rupees One Lakh Three Thousand Two Hundred Sixty Four only)	Part of Khasra No. 447/1, Plot No. 462, P.H.N.14, At- Ghargoda, Nagar Panchayat, Ward No 12, Tehsil-Ghargoda, Raigarh, Chhattisgarh 496111
Mr. Jageshwar Patel Mrs. Santoshi Patel	07-11-2025 19-05-2026	Rs.5,49,729/- (Rs Five Lakh Forty Nine Thousand Seven Hundred Twenty Nine only)	Khasra No. 280/3, P.H. No. 03, At - Padariya, Tehsil- Akaltara, Janjgir Champa, Chhattisgarh, 495560
Mrs. Gyanmati Patel Mrs. Meena Patel Mr. Santosh Patel	09-12-2025 20-05-2026	Rs.11,31,109/- (Rupees Eleven Lakh Thirty One Thousand One Hundred Nine only)	Khasra No. 352/11, P.H. No. 12, At - Darogamuda, RIC and Tehsil - Raigarh, Raigarh, Chhattisgarh - 496001
Mr. Fagu Ram Pardihi Mr. Prakash Pardihi	07-01-2026 19-05-2026	Rs.3,20,740/- (Rupees Three Lakh Twenty Thousand Seven Hundred Forty only)	Part of Khasra No.1827 Plot No. 45, P.H. No. 32, At - Maro, RIC - Maro, Tehsil - Nawagarh, Bemetra, Chhattisgarh, 491340
Mr. Shubham Dewangan Mrs. Padmavati Dewangan	07-02-2026 19-05-2026	Rs.3,99,235/- (Rupees Three Lakh Ninety Nine Thousand Two Hundred Thirty Five only)	Land bearing Plot No.10, Part of Khasra No.1023/2 Renumbered as Khasra No.1023/9, At -Kherdha, P. H. No. 47, R.I.C - Ahiwara-2, Tahsil - Dhamdha, Durg, Chhattisgarh, 490024
Mr. Aabid Yunus Khan Mrs. Mumtaj Aabid Khan	07-02-2026 20-05-2026	Rs.7,13,453/- (Rupees Seven Lakh Thirteen Thousand Four Hundred Fifty Three only)	House constructed on Plot No. 170, Khasra No. 305, Tehsil - Mahasamund, at Basna, Mahasamund, Chhattisgarh, 493554

Date : 22/05/2026  
Place : Chhattisgarh

(Sharik Saudagar)- Authorised Officer  
For SVATANTRA MICRO HOUSING FINANCE CORPORATION LIMITED

**AU SMALL FINANCE BANK LIMITED**

INFORMATION NOTICE

The below mentioned Borrowers & Co-Borrowers are informed to remove their movable assets from the mortgaged property (mentioned in the below table) which is going to be sold by AU Small Finance Bank Ltd. (A Scheduled Commercial Bank) through auction proceeding under SARFAESI Act, 2002, otherwise the movable assets would be transferred to any rented location at their own cost and they will also be liable for any damage caused during the shifting, if it is not removed within 15 days. For other queries contact: Dhiraj Pandey - 7389923795 or at nearest branch.

Loan A/c No./Name of Borrower/ Co-Borrower/Mortgagor/Guarantor	Detail of Mortgaged Property
(Loan A/c No.) L9001070527305456 & L9001070627293134, Manish Kumar Yadav (Borrower), Smt. Bharti Bai Yadav (Co-Borrower)	Property Situated At- Khasra No.-649/2 & New Khasra No- 649/3, P H No.-8/9, Mouja: Bhatgaon, Th & Dist- Durg, Chhattisgarh (Co-Borrower)

Date : 21/05/2026  
Place : Chhattisgarh

Authorised Officer  
AU Small Finance Bank Limited

## Editor's TAKE

### India expands its European footprint

By strengthening ties with Italy, India is securing economic opportunities, strategic connectivity and diplomatic leverage to shape its global standing

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's five-nation tour finally took him to Italy, which marks far more than another diplomatic engagement. The visit is a concerted effort to deepen economic, technological, and geopolitical partnerships with Western Europe, of which Italy is a key constituent. PM Modi's talks with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni would immensely benefit India in terms of trade, connectivity, defence cooperation, and India's strategic positioning.

The decision to elevate India-Italy relations into a "special strategic partnership" is not only a big step towards cementing relations but also an effort to move beyond the realm of given groupings and alliances. Both countries are seeking long-term cooperation in critical sectors such as defence manufacturing, clean energy, critical minerals, technology, maritime security and infrastructure. One of the major strategic discussions during the visit revolved around the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the Indian answer to the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. This project aims to link India with Europe through ports, rail networks and digital infrastructure across the Middle East. Italy's support is especially valuable because of its geographic location as a gateway to Europe and the Mediterranean region. Economically, the visit opens fresh opportunities for Indian businesses and exporters. Bilateral trade between India and Italy has already crossed €14 billion, and both countries are aiming for €20 billion by 2029. Modi's tour also involves business leaders from both sides. The talks on investment flows in manufacturing, green technologies, automobiles, defence production and innovation sectors could be a game-changer for India and Indian companies get an edge by collaborating with their Italian counterparts to upgrade technology and get access to a larger European market. This could generate employment and support India's ambition of becoming a global manufacturing hub. Europe is increasingly looking toward India as a reliable democratic partner amid geopolitical tensions, disruptions in supply chains and concerns over excessive dependence on China. For India, closer ties with Italy can help broaden its influence within the European Union and accelerate cooperation in areas such as artificial intelligence, climate action and food security. But this visit was not just about strategic and economic outreach, as it had cultural undertones to it. Modi's references to the civilisational connection between Rome and Varanasi highlighted the cultural depth shared by both nations. Such symbolism builds emotional and historical bridges alongside strategic interests.

Critics may dismiss the optics and personal chemistry between Modi and Meloni as political theatre. However, modern diplomacy is all about personal rapport to ease difficult negotiations and fast-track partnerships. Behind the headlines and social media moments lies a serious strategic recalibration—it is India's transition from a regional power to an increasingly influential global actor.

## Flex-fuel: The future of India's ethanol push

At a time when even the EV transition remains heavily dependent on imported components, flex-fuel may well represent India's most realistic route towards true energy self-reliance.



KUSHAN MITRA

India has already proved it can move quickly on ethanol. The question now is whether it can move smartly.

The answer is not to linger over halfway stops like E22, E25 or E27. The next logical step is flex-fuel. If India wants lower oil dependence, a stronger domestic fuel base and a transport system that can actually scale, flex-fuel is the cleaner and more durable path.

The logic is simple. Flex-fuel vehicles allow consumers to use whatever blend is available locally, whether E20, E85 or E100. That flexibility matters in a country as large and uneven as India, where fuel availability, logistics and regional supply conditions vary widely. It also saves automakers from repeatedly spending on separate development and testing programmes for every new blend level. One vehicle platform, many fuel options: that is the real efficiency gain.

This debate matters even more now because the global oil environment has become increasingly unstable. The West Asia crisis is another reminder that India's transport fuel system is still too exposed to imported crude and the geopolitical shocks that come with it. The Prime Minister's call to conserve fuel and reduce import dependence is therefore not just political messaging. It is a strategic warning.

On that measure, ethanol-blended flex-fuel vehicles make a strong case for themselves. They are, in effect, Atmanirbhar. The fuel can be produced domestically. The feedstock can be sourced domestically. The value chain stays largely within India. In a period when energy security is being tested from every direction, that is not a small advantage.

The case for flex-fuel becomes even stronger when compared with the current EV transition narrative. Electric vehicles will certainly be part of India's long-term future, but the present reality is more complicated. A large share of the EV ecosystem still depends on imported cells, batteries, motors and magnets. Out of 49 EV passenger vehicle models currently available in India, only six meet the 40 percent local value-add threshold of Performance Linked Incentive schemes.

So the danger is obvious: a rapid move to EVs today may not eliminate import dependence at all. It may simply shift it from the Middle East to China and the restriction of Chinese rare-earth magnets last year was no less impactful to EVs as the Straits of Hormuz closure has been to internal combustion engine vehicles.

That is why India needs a broader fuel strat-



THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD THEREFORE STOP TREATING FLEX-FUEL AS A SIDE BRANCH OF THE ETHANOL STORY. IT SHOULD BE THE MAIN ROAD AHEAD.

The writer is Director and the Printer & Publisher of The Pioneer

dailyopinioner @kushanmitra The Pioneer

egy, not a narrow one. Ethanol and flex-fuel deserve more serious support because they are rooted in Indian agriculture, Indian biomass and Indian industrial capability. They convert surplus grain, molasses, maize and agricultural residue into transport energy. They keep more value inside the country. They reduce pressure on crude imports. And they offer a path that is both practical and sovereign.

The Automotive Industry is right to ask for policy support to make this shift possible. If flex-fuel is to become a mass-market technology, it will need lower GST or some other form of fiscal encouragement. It will also need fuel economics that make sense. E85 or E100 must be meaningfully cheaper than petrol, ideally by at least 30%, if consumers are to see a real reason to switch. Nobody buys into a new fuel system because it sounds patriotic. People switch when the economics, convenience and availability all line up.

That is why the government's policy direction matters so much. NITI Aayog's recent report is important because it includes biofuel-based vehicles in the definition of Zero Emission Vehicles for the first time. That is a significant shift in thinking. It shows that the policy establishment is beginning to understand that India's mobility transition will not be a straight line from petrol to battery.

The report's sequencing is also sensible. It recommends first phasing out the most polluting diesel vehicles and moving toward lower-emission options such as CNG, hybrids and EVs. The next phase should expand bio-

fuels through flex-fuel vehicles, high bio-CNG blends and hybrid FFV models, while EV adoption continues. The final phase should move toward full deployment of Zero Emission Vehicles, including EVs, hydrogen vehicles, FFVs and CBG-based models, with segment-specific targets and compliance timelines.

That is a realistic roadmap, not a slogan.

And realism is the point. India's transition cannot be powered by one technology alone. It needs a portfolio. EVs will matter. Hybrids will matter. CNG and biogas will matter. But flex-fuel deserves a central place in that mix because it can turn India's biomass advantage into transport energy now, not at some distant future date.

That is the larger strategic gain. India has the agricultural base, biomass potential and industrial depth to produce fuel domestically at scale. Ethanol gives that potential an outlet. It uses surplus and residue more productively. It supports rural incomes. It keeps more of the energy value chain within India. And it reduces dependence on imported crude at a time when that dependence is increasingly risky.

The government should therefore stop treating flex-fuel as a side branch of the ethanol story. It should be the main road ahead. That means fiscal support for FFVs, clear pricing for E85 and E100, and a serious market-building strategy that gives both consumers and manufacturers confidence. India does not need more halfway solutions. It needs a policy that can carry the weight of its ambitions. Flex-fuel is that policy.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

## PICTALK



A purple sunbird perches on a branch of Samanea Saman tree, commonly known as monkey pod tree, in New Delhi. PHOTO: PTI

## Why quality teachers are hard to find?



SAKSHI SETHI

### 2ND OPINION

Education is often described as the backbone of a nation's development, and teachers are the pillars that support this foundation. Yet, despite the importance of their role, schools across the country are facing a growing challenge - attracting and retaining qualified teachers. Beneath impressive academic results, school rankings, and rising expectations lies a troubling reality: teaching, once considered one of the most respected professions, is steadily losing its appeal among talented young professionals.

The problem extends far beyond unfilled vacancies. It reflects the widening gap between what society expects from teachers and the conditions under which they are expected to work. Over the years, the role of educators has expanded dramatically. A modern teacher is no longer limited to classroom instruction. Teachers today are

expected to be mentors, counsellors, administrators, event managers, technology experts, and emotional support systems for both students and parents.

At the same time, their workload has increased significantly. While professional development is necessary for improving education standards, the constant demands often leave little time for creativity, personal well-being, or meaningful engagement with students.

One of the most pressing concerns remains the issue of compensation. Teachers shoulder immense responsibility in shaping young minds, yet salaries in many institutions fail to reflect the effort, expertise, and emotional investment required by the profession. In comparison, the corporate sector generally offers better salaries, performance incentives, flexible work environments, and clearer opportunities for career growth. Employees in corporate jobs often receive recognition for their achievements and enjoy more defined professional boundaries.

Teachers, however, frequently work beyond official hours without adequate compensation. Correcting notebooks late at night, preparing lessons on weekends, organising school events, and managing administrative work have become accepted parts of the profession. Such an imbalance naturally discourages many capable graduates from choosing teaching as a

career. Young professionals with strong communication skills, leadership qualities, and subject expertise increasingly prefer corporate careers that promise financial stability, recognition, and work-life balance. Another major challenge is the pressure to constantly deliver measurable results. Teachers are judged not only by their teaching abilities but also by student performance, parent expectations, school reputation, and institutional targets. The rapid integration of technology has added further responsibilities. Teachers are expected to continuously adapt to digital platforms, smart classrooms, and online assessments, often without sufficient support or time. Alongside this, they quietly carry the emotional burden of supporting anxious students and managing behavioural issues. Despite these difficulties, countless teachers continue to serve with dedication and sincerity.

However, commitment alone cannot sustain a profession indefinitely. If society truly values education, it must value educators through better salaries, healthier working conditions, mental wellness support, and professional respect. After all, no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers, and neglecting them ultimately means risking the future of an entire generation.

The writer is an educator and a councillor

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## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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## REFORMING SIVAKASI FIREWORKS INDUSTRY

Sivakasi's fireworks industry, which powers India's festive celebrations and provides livelihoods to thousands, continues to witness tragic accidents with alarming regularity.

Despite repeated judicial interventions over the past decade - including restrictions on hazardous chemicals and the push for green crackers - fatal explosions remain a grim reality. The recurring deaths and injuries reveal deep-rooted systemic failures that can no longer be ignored.

The very nature of fireworks manufacturing involves handling volatile chemicals under dangerous conditions, especially during peak summer months when high temperatures increase the risk of combustion. However, climate alone cannot explain the

scale of devastation. Reports submitted before the National Green Tribunal indicate that more than 130 people have lost their lives and nearly 90 have been injured since 2022. Such statistics point towards inadequate safety standards, poor monitoring and insufficient worker protection. The industry urgently requires comprehensive reforms. Strict enforcement of safety regulations, modern manufacturing practices, regular inspections and proper training for workers are essential.

At the same time, businesses must adopt sustainable and responsible production methods. Protecting workers' lives should be treated as a priority, not an afterthought, if the industry is to survive with credibility and public trust.

JAYANTHY SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

Please send your letter to the info@dailyopinioner.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Biodiversity protection is essential for survival

Human beings cannot remain passive spectators when it comes to environmental protection because nature is deeply connected to the survival of all living beings. Clean air, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration and sustainable use of resources are all essential for maintaining a healthy environment. A balanced ecosystem, made up of plants, animals, fungi and microorganisms, strengthens productivity and ensures long-term sustainability. The devastating coronavirus pandemic has also highlighted the consequences of disturbing ecological balance. Deforestation, destruction of wildlife habitats, climate change and uncontrolled urban expansion have increased interactions between humans and wild animals, creating pathways for dangerous viral transmissions. The chain is clear: habitat destruction leads to increased human-animal contact, which eventually raises the risk of infectious diseases spreading to humans. Over the last fifty years, the world has lost nearly half of its natural resources due to reckless exploitation and environmental neglect. Sustainable development requires maintaining a careful balance between consumption and conservation. Protecting biodiversity is no longer merely an environmental issue; it is essential for human health, economic stability and the future of the planet itself.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

### Building a smarter power network

India's rapidly growing electricity demand underlines the urgent need to modernise and strengthen the country's power infrastructure. Merely increasing energy production is not enough to guarantee uninterrupted supply unless transmission and distribution networks are efficient, reliable and technologically advanced.

Frequent power outages, overloaded transformers and transmission losses continue to inconvenience households and disrupt industries, particularly during periods of extreme weather. The focus must now shift towards creating intelligent and adaptable power systems capable of responding quickly to fluctuations in demand and supply. Greater use of automation, smart grids, data analytics and energy storage technologies can significantly improve efficiency while reducing wastage.

Encouraging rooftop solar adoption and enabling households or local communities to feed surplus electricity back into the grid can also reduce pressure on conventional systems. A modern electricity network is necessary for sustaining industrial growth and economic development. As India moves towards cleaner and more sustainable sources of power, strengthening the backbone of the electricity sector must become a national priority for long-term progress and resilience

VANDANA | CHANDIGARH

### Political Optics and Public Priorities

The recent exchange between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni over Melody chocolates has once again triggered political debate and social media frenzy. The "Melodi" phrase, coined from the surnames of the two leaders during the COP28 summit in Dubai, resurfaced after a video shared by Meloni showed PM Modi gifting her a packet of Melody candies. While the moment was widely circulated online, it also invited criticism from the Opposition.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi questioned the timing and optics of such gestures, arguing that the country is facing serious economic concerns. Referring to rising inflation, unemployment and the struggles of farmers, workers and small traders, Gandhi alleged that symbolic public relations exercises cannot distract from pressing economic challenges. He also linked the issue to the Prime Minister's recent appeal urging citizens to adopt austerity measures. Political leaders often use public diplomacy and personal gestures to build international goodwill. However, critics argue that governance must remain focused on addressing domestic hardships and economic anxieties. The controversy reflects how even seemingly light-hearted moments can become politically charged in a deeply polarised environment.

BHAGWAN THADANI | PUNE

## Reclaiming the sacred: Ancient Indian wisdom for today's environmental challenges

From the Vedas to the Bhagavad Gita, Indian civilisation has long viewed the Earth, rivers, forests and animals as sacred and interconnected with human existence. In an era of ecological crisis, these timeless values may hold important lessons for building a more sustainable and harmonious future.



VINAYAK RAJAT BHAT

The world today is facing serious environmental challenges. Pollution, climate change, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity are no longer distant concerns—they are realities we experience every day. Rivers are becoming polluted, forests are shrinking, and many species are disappearing at an alarming rate. Governments and global institutions have introduced laws and policies, such as environmental protection acts and carbon credit systems, to address these issues. While these measures are necessary, they often fall short of creating lasting change.

The main reason is that these solutions depend largely on social enforcement rather than inner motivation. People may follow rules when they are monitored, but real and lasting change happens only when individuals feel a sense of responsibility from within. What is needed is a cultural and ethical foundation that inspires people to care for nature willingly. This is where ancient Indian wisdom becomes highly relevant.

Indian tradition offers a powerful perspective. It teaches us to see nature not as a resource to be exploited, but as something sacred and deeply connected to our lives. This shift—from control to reverence—can transform how we approach environmental protection.

### A Worldview Rooted in Unity

In ancient Indian thought, especially in the Vedas, nature is not separate from human life. It is an integral part of existence. The basic elements of nature—Ether, fire, air, water, and earth—were respected and even worshipped because they sustain life.

Akasa (Ether), Agni (fire), Vayu (air), and Apah (water) were treated as divine forces. This was not blind ritualism but a way of reminding people of their importance and encouraging respect.

The Earth itself was seen as a nurturing mother. The Atharvaveda describes Earth as "Vasudha," the one who supports all living beings. A powerful verse says: "O earth! The beings who are born on you travel over you. For the four-legged animals and two-legged humans you nurture, the sun spreads the nectar light throughout its rays throughout its rays." - (Atharvaveda 12.1.15)

This idea is deeply meaningful. It tells us that humans are not the sole owners of the planet. Animals, birds, and all creatures have equal rights over it. This perspective is especially important today, when human activity is destroying habitats and threatening biodiversity.

This vision is further expressed in the phrase "vasudevah kutumbh"—the world is one family. If we truly accept this idea, then harming nature would feel like harming our own family members.

### Lessons in Leadership from Indian Traditions

Indian scriptures and stories provide practical examples of how these values can be applied. The life of Sri Krishna offers important lessons in environmental responsibility.

In the story of Kaliya-Mardana, the serpent Kaliya had poisoned the Yamuna river. Krishna did not ignore the problem. He took responsibility, confronted the source of pollution, and restored the river.

In today's context, Kaliya can represent industries or activities that pollute our environment. The lesson is clear: leadership is tested in moments that demand timely action. Another important episode is the worshipping of the Govardhana mountain. Krishna encouraged people to honour the mountain that directly supported their lives, rather than focusing only on distant forces. This story is very relevant today. Modern development often damages mountains and ecosystems, leading to floods and landslides. The Govardhana episode reminds us that nature sustains us, and we must protect it.

The Bhagavad Gita expresses this idea of mutual care:



"By supporting one another, you shall attain the highest good." - (Bhagavad Gita 3.11)

This highlights that human well-being and environmental well-being are mutually dependent.



### Respect for Nature in Daily Life

Indian culture brings environmental awareness into everyday life through symbols and practices. Rivers like the Ganga are worshipped as goddesses, and mountains like the Himalayas are considered sacred. These beliefs create a sense of respect and responsibility. When people see nature as sacred, they are more likely to protect it. This mantra Rigveda of presents the same:

Imam me gange yamune Sarasvati sutudri sacata parusnya |

Asiknya marudvdhe vitarjayarjikiye sruhya susomaya || (Rigveda: 10.75.5)

O Ganga yamuna saraswati shatadru and parushni, receive my prayers. O maruda, joined by the asikni with asta and arjikiya by the sushma hear my prayers. Rituals like the Ganga Arati and gatherings such as the Kumbhmelā reinforce this connection and remind people of the importance of keeping natural resources clean.

Animals are also given respect. Many deities are associated with animal vehicles—Siva with the bull, Vishnu with the eagle, and Skanda with the peacock. These symbols show that animals are part of the sacred order of life. Even natural enemies are shown coexisting peacefully in divine imagery, representing harmony in nature. The early incarnations of Lord Vishnu—as a fish, tortoise, boar, and half-lion—also convey that divinity exists in all forms of life. This encourages respect for biodiversity.

### Environmental Responsibility as a Daily Practice

Ancient Indian tradition emphasises daily responsibility through the concept of the Panca Maha-yajnas, or five duties. Among them is Bhuta Yajna, which focuses on caring for other living beings. This can be practised through simple acts—feeding animals, planting trees, or avoiding harm to nature. This idea holds great significance in today's context. Environmental protection is often seen as a large issue, but Bhuta Yajna shows that small daily actions also matter. When practised collectively, they can create meaningful change.

### A Way Forward

Modern science and policies are essential for solving environmental problems, but they need to be supported by a strong ethical foundation. Ancient Indian wisdom provides this foundation. It encourages respect, balance, and responsibility by teaching us to see the Earth as a mother and all beings as part of one family.

The goal is not to replace modern solutions but to complement them. By combining traditional values with contemporary approaches, we can create a more sustainable future. Education and public awareness can play an important role in bringing these ideas into practice. In the end, solving environmental challenges is not just about laws and technology—it is about changing our mindset.

When we begin to see nature as sacred, protecting it becomes a natural part of life. Ancient Indian wisdom offers a timeless guide for this transformation. By rediscovering these values, we can move towards a future that is not only sustainable but also deeply meaningful.

The writer is SSME - IKS, Vyoma Linguistics Labs Lead Guide, Bharat Ki Soch

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## Delhi's water future depends on what we do today!



UMANG BAJAJ

Every year, Delhi faces the same issues in summer — rising temperatures, increasing demand for water, and stress on the water resources of the city. What is new about the issue today is the seriousness of the efforts to solve the problems effectively.

To understand the challenge better, it is essential to focus on the basic problem that Delhi faces every year in relation to water. While the demand increases in summer, the water supply in the city remains the same. This makes it important to look at ways to better manage the city's supply requirements.

A considerable amount of the city's water requirement is fulfilled by north Indian rivers. Over the years, these rivers have come under increasing strain. Pollution, untreated waste, encroachment, and shrinking river flows have all reduced both the quantity and quality of water available.

It has also become critical to see the bigger picture here with reference to our environment. Low snowfall in the Himalayas due to climate change impacts our sources of water directly and highlights the need to look at measures on a large scale. We need to be ready for both the present and the future.

In such a situation, it is worth noting that a new approach to resolving the water problem is emerging. Though Delhi has received abundant rains in the monsoon period for many years, the runoff from this monsoon water was not being used and was allowed to drain away.

At the same time, there were problems related to floods and a shortage of water in the summer months. It had become important to address this issue, which is the focus of current policymaking. It is for this reason that rainwater harvesting has gained significance as an important area of policy implementation.

The concept of rainwater harvesting is very clear and easy to understand. The objective behind it is to conserve rainwater in its place and recharge it into the groundwater, thus addressing the problem of floods and ensuring water security by minimising dependency on external water.

This is a positive trend, as it is no longer merely a suggestion but something that is enforced. The government has established deadlines for achieving compliance with installing the rainwater harvesting systems before the onset of the monsoon season for government properties, parks, residential areas, and campuses. Accountability appears to be at the heart of this initiative.



It is worth noting here that the Delhi Jal Board has played an instrumental role in enforcing rainwater harvesting by providing financial incentives to encourage compliance. Incentives such as rebates for installation of the system have been proposed along with stricter compliance procedures. Self-certification has also been proposed as another mechanism of compliance and long-term accountability of property owners.

That said a rapid depletion of groundwater resources remains an issue of concern not just in areas around Delhi, but in many other states also. India is among the biggest consumers of groundwater resources in the world. According to estimates, groundwater provides irrigation for about 62% of India's cultivated land, accounts for 85% of rural water needs, and satisfies almost half of urban water demands.

It is due to over-construction, less space available for rainwater to infiltrate, and increased water consumption that depletion of groundwater resources has increased. Thus, it has become critical to conserve groundwater resources. Instead of letting rainwater runoff into storm sewers, it has to be allowed to seep into the ground. For this we are focused on proper planning, monitoring the exploitation of groundwater resources, and safeguarding water bodies.

Meanwhile, as the summer season progresses, the government has implemented its action plan, which includes efficient distribution of water, increased responsiveness to water shortage areas, and better monitoring.

This has enabled the authorities to ensure that people suffer no inconvenience even in peak demand.

Nevertheless, even the most effective initiatives can only work when people equally participate in them. The need for conservation of water should involve everyone. Be it individual homes adopting rainwater harvesting methods or the RWAs and the entire community making sure of its efficient use, each step is significant. Ultimately, the goal should be to make water conservation a mass movement in Delhi. In this process, the communities and the RWAs can be a very valuable partner of the government and work collectively to make it a success.

Rainwater harvesting and other water conservation methods are the way to go. In addition, we need strict policies to enforce them and citizen participation to ensure water security.

While the problem may be difficult, solutions still exist. It is through proper planning and teamwork only that we can ensure the city does not face any future water shortages.

Author is member of the Delhi Legislative Assembly & M.Tech in mechanical engineering and Masters in international business from University of Southampton, UK

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## Urja Atmanirbharta: Why India must accelerate the CBG revolution



AKANSHA JAIN

The sitting PM is asking ordinary citizens to alter personal decisions because the national balance sheet is under strain is deeply concerning. And when a leader of Modi's stature makes that kind of appeal, the underlying economics must be genuinely alarming.

India imports nearly 88% of its crude oil and 60% of its LPG, and the overwhelming bulk of it flows through the 33-kilometre-wide Strait of Hormuz. Since early March 2026, that strait has been effectively blocked following the escalation of the US-Israel conflict with Iran. The consequences for India have been swift and severe: LPG supplies fell to more than 40% of normal capacity, the Essential Commodities Act was invoked, commercial kitchens in Mumbai shuttered, hotels in Bengaluru received barely 10% of their gas allocations, and the rupee came under sustained depreciation pressure. The economics of this crisis have been brutal so far, with every \$10 rise in crude oil prices adding \$13-14 billion to India's annual oil import

bill. As the Brent crude prices touched \$130 per barrel at the peak of the crisis, India has been hemorrhaging foreign exchange at a rate that no amount of RBI intervention can fully neutralise. Thus, PM's appeal to reduce gold imports (a massive dollar drain), comes under this scenario. The messaging is clear: the import bill is now structurally unsustainable, and the government is urgently searching for room to breathe.

As T.S Eliot famously quoted, "Home is where one starts", and so in this case, the search must begin closer to home as well. India has, largely untapped, one of the largest natural biogas reserves in the world. Agricultural residues from paddy, wheat, and sugarcane up to 500 million tonnes annually; cattle dung from 300 million bovines, municipal solid waste from a rapidly urbanising population of 1.4 billion and tonnes of food processing waste from one of the world's largest agro-economies, a huge scale of waste, but when fed into anaerobic digesters, they produce biogas. This biogas, when purified and compressed, becomes Compressed Biogas (CBG), chemically identical to CNG, compatible with existing gas pipelines, buses, industrial boilers, and domestic PNG connections.

India's technical potential for CBG production is estimated at up to 90 billion cubic metre equivalents annually. To put that in perspective: India's total LNG import dependence of 27-29 million tonnes per annum could be substantially offset if even a fraction of this potential were realised. CBG carries zero geopolitical risk, as its feedstock grows in Indian fields, not in the Gulf. Yet as of



late 2025, India had barely 130 operational CBG plants, against a SATAT programme target of 5,000. Despite the resource availability, policy execution is a problem, and now the Hormuz crisis has made the cost of that underperformance visible in hard-dollar terms.

What makes CBG scale-up so compelling is that it is a convergence of several of India's most pressing developmental needs. Firstly, every tonne of CBG that displaces imported LNG or LPG is a dollar that stays inside India's reserves. At current import prices and crisis-level crude, that is a significant macro relief. A CBG sector at even 30% of its potential could take measurable pressure off the current account deficit.

Second, is the farmer's dividend. CBG's primary

feedstocks, such as paddy straw, cattle dung, and press mud from sugar mills, are either wasted or actively destructive today. Stubble burning across Punjab and Haryana each October chokes Delhi with smog. Converting that residue into CBG feedstock creates a new income stream for farmers, a new industrial anchor for rural districts, and an end to one of India's most politically intractable environmental crises in a single stroke.

Third, the slurry produced as a byproduct of CBG digestion is a rich, slow-release bio-fertiliser, a direct substitute for imported urea. The Hormuz crisis has already pushed global urea prices up by 50% since the Gulf states account for nearly a third of world production. A mature CBG sector would produce fermented organic manure at scale, closing a loop that currently runs from Indian agriculture to Gulf fertiliser plants and back again at enormous dollar cost, ensuring food security.

While there is policy in place, the gap between the policy and the plant needs to be urgently bridged. Amidst the blending mandate and actually getting the molecule to the pipeline, India has already lost a decade, and of course, a lot of dollars. What India needs now is to set out existing programmes to work at the pace the crisis demands. This means mapping the available feedstocks to categorise which ones are suitable for CBG production; investing in making feedstock aggregation, supply chain and storage; clear instructions on mandates, clearances, subsidies, implementation mechanisms, which are lacking currently due to multiple ministries; and lastly treating CBG not just as a peripheral green

initiative but as a core supply-chain imperative. It also means state governments, enacting their own CBG policies with real Viability Gap Funding. And it means the blending mandate is being enforced with the same rigour as the ethanol blending targets have been pursued.

With no major Assembly elections due until early 2027, the Centre has a rare five-to-six-month runway to take decisions that are economically necessary but short-term painful. Fuel price adjustments, investment in supply-side infrastructure, and acceleration of CBG commissioning are easier when the electoral calendar provides breathing room.

The Hormuz crisis, for all its enormous costs, has done one useful thing: it has made the price of India's energy dependency impossible to ignore. The PM has acknowledged the problem publicly, in the plainest possible language. The next step must move from restraint, asking citizens to do less, to acceleration, asking the state to build faster. Every methane molecule that rises from India's fields and reaches the atmosphere is a failure of both policy and imagination. Every one that reaches a gas pipeline is a dollar saved, a farmer paid, and a degree of sovereignty reclaimed, in true sense Urja Atmanirbharta (energy self-reliance) attained!

Dr Akansha Jain is a research consultant at the Centre for Climate Change and Energy Transition (CCET) at Chintan Research Foundation (CRF).

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# Form JVs with US companies to leverage tech: Gadkari

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari on Thursday made a case for Indian companies forming joint ventures with US companies to leverage their new technologies.

Addressing AMCHAM's Annual Leadership Summit, Gadkari further said Ministry of Road Transport and Highways is exploring possibilities of taking help of US consultancy companies in preparation of detailed project report (DPR) for road projects.

"India is the fastest growing major economy... the US companies develop lots of new technologies, so

it is very important for Indian companies to have joint venture with US companies," he said.

Noting that supply chain is the most important part in logistics, Gadkari said logistics cost in India has come down to single digit helped by rapid expansion of expressways and economic corridors.

Gadkari further said six months ago, a report prepared by IIT Chennai, IIT Kanpur and IIM Bangalore revealed that India's construction of expressways and economic corridors has helped reduce the country's logistics cost to 10 per cent from 16 per cent earlier.

"India's logistics cost has



now come down to single digit," he said.

Logistics cost is 12 per cent in the US, 12 per cent in European countries and 8-10 per cent in China.

Talking about India's automobile sector, the minister

said, "Within five years, our target is to make India's automobile industry the number 1 in the world."

"When I took charge as transport minister, the size of the Indian automobile industry was ₹14 lakh crore. It is now ₹22 lakh crore," Gadkari added.

He said the automobile sector provides jobs to 4 lakh youths and the highest GST to the Centre and states. Presently, the size of the US automobile industry is ₹78 lakh crore, followed by China (₹47 lakh crore) and India (₹22 lakh crore).

Gadkari noted that India's dependence on fossil fuels is an economic burden, as ₹22 lakh crore is spent annually

on fuel imports and is an environmental hazard, making the adoption of clean energy crucial for the country's progress.

The minister also said that the government has identified 10 highway stretches in different parts of country for plying green hydrogen-powered trucks with an aim to reduce vehicular pollution.

The identified highway stretches include Greater Noida-Delhi-Agra, Bhubaneswar-Puri-Konark, Ahmedabad-Vadodara-Surat, Sahibabad-Faridabad-Delhi, Jamshepur-Kalinganagar, Thiruvananthapuram-Kochi, and Jamnagar-Ahmedabad, among others.

## Stock markets end marginally lower in volatile trade



Equity benchmark indices ended lower in a volatile day of trade on Thursday, surrendering their early gains, amid profit-taking in blue-chip stocks.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 135.03 points, or 0.18 per cent, to settle at 75,183.36. During the day, it hit a high of 75,945.79 and a low of 74,996.78, gyrating 949.01 points.

The 50-share NSE Nifty skidded 4.30 points, or 0.02 per cent, to end at 23,654.70.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Bajaj Finance, Tech Mahindra, Hindustan Unilever, Infosys, Bajaj Finserv and Bharti Airtel were among the major laggards.

InterGlobe Aviation, Trent, Bharat Electronics and Adani Ports were among the winners.

"Indian equity markets witnessed another volatile session today, with benchmark indices surrendering their strong opening gains as positive global cues collided with persistent macroeconomic concerns and strong resistance at higher levels," Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and Founder, Livelong Wealth, said.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, declined 0.71 per cent to USD 104.3 per barrel level.

In Asian markets, South Korea's benchmark Kospi and Japan's Nikkei 225 index ended higher. The Kospi surged over 8 per cent.

Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index ended lower.

Markets in Europe were trading in positive territory. US markets ended significantly higher on Wednesday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹1,597.35 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

On Wednesday, the 30-share BSE benchmark climbed 117.54 points, or 0.16 per cent, to settle at 75,318.39. The Nifty edged higher by 41 points, or 0.17 per cent, to end at 23,659. (PTI)

## GST: Businesses can digitally record 'goods delivered'



GST registered businesses can now digitally record delivery of goods for which a way bill was generated on the portal, GST Network said.

In an advisory to taxpayers, GSTN, which manages the tech backbone of goods and services tax (GST) said, "A new e-way bill closure facility has been introduced in the e-way bill system on voluntary basis to enable closure of the e-way bill once delivery of goods is completed."

Until now, the e-way bill framework primarily tracked initiation and transit of goods movement, but lacked a formal mechanism to digitally record completion of delivery. This closure feature would create a clearer end-to-end transaction trail and strengthens logistical accountability. Under GST, a person carrying goods valued over ₹50,000 has to carry an e-way bill. The document is required to be generated from the GST Portal by a GST-registered person or transporter before transporting the goods.

The GSTN said e-way bill may be closed by either supplier, or recipient, or transporter involved in the transaction, or driver or any authorised person whose mobile number has been provided for closure.

It further said the changes are being implemented in the e-way bill system with a view to strengthening data integrity, improving traceability of goods movement, and enabling system-driven closure of transactions.

It also asked taxpayers, transporters, ERP/API integrators, and other stakeholders to initiate necessary system readiness measures.

AMRG Global Managing Partner Rajat Mohan said the introduction of the e-way bill closure facility marks an important evolution in GST's digital compliance architecture and businesses with large supply chains should begin evaluating operational readiness early.

While currently introduced as a voluntary mechanism, there is a strong possibility that GSTN may gradually move towards making such closure a mandatory compliance step. If that happens, it could materially strengthen invoice-to-delivery reconciliation and help address concerns around circular trading, round-tripping. (PTI)

# BALCO launches 'Black Maize' fine dining outlet powered by women entrepreneurs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
Raipur

Bharat Aluminium Company Limited (BALCO) inaugurated 'Black Maize', a fine dining café in Balconagar, as part of its women empowerment initiative Project Unnatti, highlighting the growing role of self-help groups in livelihood generation and entrepreneurship, it was announced on Thursday.

The outlet was inaugurated by BALCO Chief Executive Officer Rajesh Kumar Singh on Wednesday, the BALCO statement said. Officials said the initiative is powered by women associated with Project Unnatti, under which



thousands of women from Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been engaged in skill development and income-generating activities. Speaking at the inauguration, Singh said BALCO aims to create sustainable livelihood opportunities, particularly for women, to enhance dignity and long-term economic independence. He said more than 6,000 women from surrounding areas are currently benefiting from the initiative and are moving towards financial self-reliance through structured support and training.

According to company officials, Black Maize has evolved from an earlier community food centre into a full-fledged café with seating capacity for over 50 guests, including a dedicated private dining space for gatherings and events. Women associated with the project said the initiative has helped them gain confidence and economic independence.

A Self Help Group member Nirmala Deshmukh said the programme had brought a visible transformation in her life since joining in 2022, adding that she now feels more confident and skilled in managing hospitality-related work.

## GOLD EXTENDS GAINS FOR THIRD DAY TO ₹1.65 LAKH/10G

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi

Gold prices rose by ₹600 to ₹1.65 lakh per 10 grams in the national Capital on Thursday, and silver advanced to ₹2.71 lakh per kilogram as traders stayed cautiously optimistic towards precious metals amid geopolitical tensions.

Extending gains for the third straight session, the yellow metal of 99.9 per cent rose ₹600 to ₹1,65,500 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes) from Wednesday's closing level of ₹1,64,900, according to local marketmen.

The precious metal has gained ₹2,700 in the past three sessions.

Traders said continued geopolitical tensions in West Asia and concerns over inflation globally supported buying in the metal despite firm US Treasury bond yields.

Silver prices also staged a recovery, jumping ₹5,000 to ₹2,71,000 per kilogram, aided by bargain buying and recovery in industrial demand sentiment, market players said.

Analysts said concerns over the US-Iran conflict and disruptions linked to the Strait of Hormuz continued to underpin demand for the precious metals, and a weaker rupee also supported local prices.



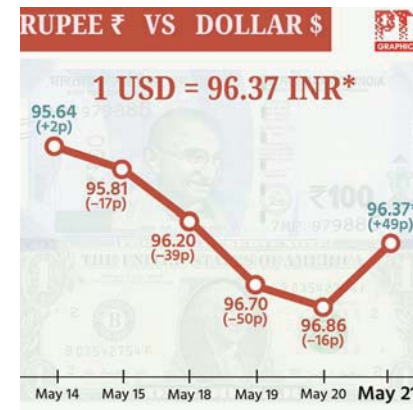
## Rupee settles at 96.37 against US dollar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi

The rupee rebounded 49 paise from its all-time closing low to settle at 96.37 against the US dollar on Thursday after crude oil prices retreated from elevated levels amid signs of easing geopolitical friction, alongside likely central bank intervention. Forex traders said the rupee had gained after the recent geopolitical developments, but investors are still gauging the geopolitical risk and oil price sensitivity in the background.

The one-year forward market rate for the rupee touched the crucial 100/USD mark on Wednesday, indicating that currency markets are pricing in a weakening bias for the USD/INR pair over the next 12 months, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 96.25



against the dollar, then touched an early high of 96.05 and a low of 96.60 in intraday trade. At the end of Thursday's trading session, the rupee was at 96.37, up 49 paise from its previous closing.

# Pensioners' body submits memorandum to Labour Ministry over higher pension issue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
Raipur

The National Confederation of Pensioners' Associations (NCPA) has submitted a memorandum to the Union Labour and Employment Ministry, seeking intervention over issues related to higher pension under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995 (EPS-95), officials said on Thursday.

The representation was submitted to Union Labour and Employment Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, Minister of State Shobha Karandlaje and Labour Secretary Vandana Gurnani, NCPA statement said.

The pensioners' body, which represents over one million EPS-95 pensioners and higher pension aspirants, has raised concerns



over the implementation of Supreme Court judgments related to pension on higher wages, including the R C Gupta case

(2016) and a Constitution Bench verdict in 2022. According to the memorandum, pensioners have alleged that the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has introduced additional verification criteria through an internal circular dated January 18, 2025, which, they claim, has led to rejection of several applications for higher pension benefits. The association has also objected to what it described as differential treatment of employees from exempted and non-exempted establishments, stating that Supreme Court directions have held both categories as a single class for pension purposes. The NCPA further stated that internal trust rules of exempted establishments should not override statutory provisions under the

EPF Act and the pension scheme. It also alleged that several regional offices of EPFO are issuing rejection orders without granting personal hearings, which the association termed a violation of principles of natural justice.

The pensioners' body has disputed concerns over financial constraints, stating that the EPFO manages a substantial pension corpus and that higher pension contributions are self-funded by employees and employers.

The memorandum also urged the ministry to withdraw the January 18, 2025 circular and ensure expeditious implementation of higher pension benefits in line with court directions. Officials said the ministry is expected to examine the representations and respond as per due process.

# Acharya Balkrishna honoured with Champion Health Award

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
Haridwar

Renowned Ayurveda expert Acharya Balkrishna, received the "I AM PEACEKEEPER - Champion Health Award 2026" at the Billionaires for Peace Conclave 2026 in Mumbai. This award recognises his significant contributions to global wellness, humanitarian service, peacebuilding, and the advancement of holistic healthcare through Ayurveda.

This recognition marks a milestone as Ayurveda and India's holistic healthcare traditions gain global traction. Through his visionary leadership, scientific outlook, and tireless efforts, Acharya Balkrishna has helped transform Ayurveda from being viewed merely as a traditional healing practice into a globally notable medical system supported

by modern scientific validation and integrative health research. After receiving the award, Acharya Balkrishna stated that healthy individuals are the foundation of peaceful societies and strong nations. He emphasised that Ayurveda is a comprehensive science of life that guides people toward balance, positivity, and health. He also highlighted India's philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", the world is one family, and global community's growing interest in India's sustainable solutions for peace and holistic wellbeing.

He further remarked that the modern world is facing an alarming rise in stress, lifestyle disorders, and health-related challenges, and that nature-centric living combined with India's ancient wisdom can offer meaningful solutions. According to



him, Yoga and Ayurveda not only help create a disease-free world, but also contribute towards building a stress-free and conflict-free society. Acharya Balkrishna described the award as a collective recognition, attributing it to India's cultural

heritage, the enduring science of Ayurveda, and all who have embraced natural living to build a healthier, more compassionate society. Over the years, Acharya Balkrishna has played a transformative role in spreading awareness

about preventive healthcare, natural therapies, and holistic wellness at a global level. His efforts have significantly elevated the stature of Ayurveda on the world stage and inspired millions to adopt healthier and more conscious lifestyles. The award ceremony was part of the global "I AM PEACEKEEPER" initiative, which promotes peace, justice, harmony, and humanitarian values. The conclave gathered Nobel Peace Prize laureates, policymakers, industry leaders, spiritual leaders, and global thinkers to discuss peace, human welfare, and sustainable progress.

This honour for Acharya Balkrishna marks a pivotal moment for the Patanjali family, underscoring Ayurveda's growing global influence and the value of holistic wellness for the future of healthcare.



## States Focus

GOVT TO LAUNCH CAMPAIGN AGAINST STRAY DOGS: MANN



Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Thursday said his government will launch a campaign starting Friday against stray and killer dogs which endanger the lives of people.

On May 19, the Supreme Court in a significant verdict allowed euthanasia of rabid, incurably ill, dangerous and aggressive dogs to curb threat to human lives, saying the right to live with dignity encompasses the right to move freely without the threat of harm from canines.

"Following the Honourable Supreme Court's decision, the Punjab government will launch a massive campaign starting tomorrow to eliminate stray and killer dogs that pose a threat to the lives of children and passersby...Thanks to the Supreme Court," Mann said in a post on X in Punjabi.

In a first-of-its-kind order, the top court ruled that when the safety and lives of human beings are weighed against the interests and welfare of sentient beings, the constitutional balance must necessarily and unequivocally tilt in favour of the preservation and protection of human life.

A bench of Justices Vikram Nath, Sandeep Mehta and N V Anjaria, which dismissed all the petitions and applications for recall, modification of the November 7, 2025 order including the directive on relocation and sterilisation of dogs from institutional areas, said the right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution stands at the "highest pedestal of constitutional protection".

## \$40 bn investment push after PM's 5-nation trip

RAJESH KUMAR  
New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent five-nation visit has helped India secure an investment pipeline worth nearly \$40 billion, with several multinational firms committing fresh investments and expansion plans across key sectors.

PM Modi held meetings with chief executives and senior representatives of over 50 global companies during the tour, covering sectors such as semiconductors, logistics, infrastructure, defence, energy and technology. The combined market valuation of these companies is estimated between \$2.7 trillion and \$3 trillion.



Addressing a press conference, Union minister Piyush Goyal on Thursday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's five-nation tour has yielded "concrete outcomes" for the benefit of everyone in the country and slammed Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for calling the prime minister a "traitor". Goyal listed the outcomes of the prime minister's just-concluded visit to the UAE, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and Italy, and said Modi has returned with "something or the other" for every section in India. During his five-day foreign tour, the

prime minister was also conferred three international awards, he added. "On the one hand, the entire world looks upon Prime Minister Modi with immense confidence, on the other, Rahul Gandhi, who has a negative mindset, repeatedly reveals his true nature and character through his words and language," he added.

Goyal said Rahul Gandhi stooping to hurling abuses at the prime minister in an "extremely petty language" is "truly deplorable". "Tell me, is the ending of Naxalism an act of 'gaddari' (betrayal) or was allowing Naxalism to fester for years under the Congress rule the true act of 'gaddari'? Would we label the act of enhancing the

global prestige of the tricolour as 'gaddari'? "Or, would we consider it 'gaddari' when one travels abroad only to disparage India's tricolour?" the senior BJP leader asked.

India and the UAE signed seven agreements during PM Modi's stopover, including a strategic defence partnership framework, energy cooperation deals and a proposed maritime infrastructure project at Vadinar in Gujarat. The UAE also committed investments worth \$5 billion across Indian infrastructure and financial sectors. India and the Netherlands elevated bilateral ties to a strategic partnership and unveiled a roadmap covering trade, semiconduc-

tors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, green hydrogen and maritime security.

The visit also produced 17 agreements, including cooperation in critical minerals, renewable energy and defence manufacturing. India and Sweden upgraded relations to a strategic partnership, with both countries endorsing a joint action plan for 2026-2030 focused on green transition, emerging technologies, trade, defence and climate action.

Goyal said Modi has kept the country secure which reflects his "true patriotism". "The way the Congress party and the Gandhi family provide patronage to infiltrators, that is 'gaddari'," he added.

## Omar faces internal dissent over demolition drive

MOHIT KANDHARI  
Jammu

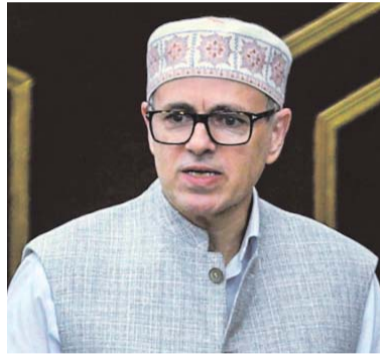
Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah is once again facing opposition from within the party ranks over the manner in which a demolition drive was carried out by officials of the Forest Department, headed by the National Conference Cabinet Minister Javed Ahmed Rana in Jammu.

Approximately 3 hectares (60 kanals) of encroached forest land were reclaimed during the drive, where 32 illegal structures were demolished early Tuesday morning.

On Thursday, a National Conference Member of Parliament, Syed Aga Ruhullah Mehdi, fired a fresh salvo targeting Omar Abdullah.

After paying condolences at the residence of Engineer Rashid in Handwara, Ruhullah reacted strongly over the manner in which the demolition drive was conducted to evict the encroachers in Jammu.

"Demolishing homes of Gujjar-Bakarwal families in Sidhra, many on electoral rolls since 1952, without notice or due process, is indefensible. The land



is reportedly revenue, not forest. Affected families must be rehabilitated, and those responsible held accountable". He said the Government has consistently disappointed the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

Feeling the heat over the matter, Deputy Chief Minister Surinder Kumar Choudhary, in the absence of the Chief Minister, who is yet to make any statement, said the elected Government in Jammu and Kashmir is functioning with limited powers and alleged that major decisions are being taken by the

bureaucracy instead of the representatives chosen by the people.

Choudhary said the recent demolition drive in Jammu would not have happened if Jammu and Kashmir had retained full statehood.

Questioning the demolition of houses, he said the structures had existed for years and were not built overnight.

"If these constructions were illegal, where were the concerned departments all these years?" he asked, calling the demolitions unfortunate.

People's Democratic Party leader, Iltija Mufti, also visited the members of the affected families in Jammu on Thursday. After meeting several affected members, Iltija told reporters, "A common thing which all families told me is that BJP MLA Vikram Randhawa came here about 10 days ago and said that all of this is illegal and they will demolish this. There is no coincidence that the BJP gives direction to the NC that a drive has to be carried out here. Who does the Forest Department come under? This started in April in RS Pura, then in Kathua and now here."

## Raj Thackeray acquitted in 2008 railway exam assault case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
Thane

A court in Thane on Thursday acquitted all the accused, including Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) chief Raj Thackeray, in a 2008 case related to the alleged assault on Railway Recruitment Board examinees at Kalyan railway station by MNS activists.

Eight persons, including Thackeray, were named as accused in the case. Two of them died during the pendency of the trial.

Defence lawyer Suresh Sadekar told the media that the magistrate pronounced the 'not guilty' verdict in the court and a detailed order was not yet available.

During the trial, the defence contended that

neither the charge sheet nor oral evidence established Thackeray's presence at the spot.

The prosecution failed to produce any evidence of provocative speeches allegedly made by the MNS chief, and its witnesses could not identify the accused, the defence submitted. It further argued that although the prosecution claimed nearly 150 students had appeared for the railway examination, no admit cards, identity proofs or related records were produced.

Reacting to the court order, MNS Mumbai president Sandeep Deshpande said, "We are glad that Raj Thackeray has been acquitted. He was falsely implicated as he was not even present when the incident occurred."

## Race for Next IB chief heats up, hunt on for successor

RAJESH KUMAR/PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH  
New Delhi

With IB Director Tapan Kumar Deka's second extension ending June 30, 2026, the contest to head India's internal intelligence agency has entered its final phase. Senior IPS officers with intelligence experience are under consideration, though no formal shortlist has been released.

One name emerging strongly from multiple corridors of power is Sunil Acharya, a 1991-batch Nagaland-cadre IPS officer currently serving as Special Secretary in the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). Acharya is noted for his rare cross-agency expertise and a reputation for operational effectiveness. During his years in the IB, Acharya played a key role as staff officer to former Director Rajiv Jain, a period marked by the agency's success in solving several



high-profile terror and espionage cases. His experience solidified his proficiency in developing human intelligence networks and conducting sensitive operations. Acharya's tradecraft, reflecting Jain philosophy's prioritisation of human intelligence over excessive reliance on technology, is considered one of his core strengths.

In 2019, he moved to R&AW, where his steady rise has included overseas postings and gained him broad insti-

tutional insight. Acharya's effectiveness stems from an understated operational style, a comprehensive intelligence background, and a proven track record in handling both internal and external intelligence matters.

His ability to adapt, foster inter-agency coherence, and manage sensitive security operations positions him as a strong candidate for the IB Director role, especially given India's present challenges in counter-terrorism, radicalisation, hybrid threats, and border stability.

Deka, who received extensions citing persistent security challenges, has focused his tenure on strengthening human intelligence networks, improving inter-agency coordination, and proactively addressing evolving threats.

There is another contender, Rithwik Rudra, IPS, 1993 batch, Himachal Cadre, who is seen as the

incumbent Deka's preferred choice. He has extensive hands-on IB experience, having served at the Additional Director and Joint Director levels and a family legacy in the IPS; his father, Kalyan Rudra, was Haryana DGP.

The next IB Director will inherit an expanded mandate that spans counter-terror operations, cyber intelligence, monitoring of internal stability, and coordination in an increasingly politically charged environment. The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) is expected to take a final call in the coming weeks.

While no official announcement has been made, the decision will be among the most closely watched appointments in India's security establishment this year. The appointment will reveal the Government's internal security priorities as discussions continue ahead of the June 30 deadline.



Devotees gather near the Madmaheshwar temple after the doors of the second Kedarnath temple were opened for devotees amid chanting of Vedic mantras in Rudrapur district, Uttarakhand on Thursday

## 1,000 pilgrims selected for Kailash Manasarovar Yatra



ASHOKE RAJ  
New Delhi

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar conducted the computerised draw for the selection of pilgrims for the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra 2026 on Wednesday.

The Ministry of External Affairs announced that the 2026 edition of the pilgrimage will commence in June and conclude in August.

A total of 1,000 Yatris have been selected through a fair, computer-generated, random, and gender-balanced process.

According to the ministry, the selected pilgrims will travel in 20 batches, with each batch comprising 50 Yatris. The pilgrimage will be conducted through the Lipulekh Pass and Nathu La Pass routes, both of which are now fully motorable, significantly reducing the need for trekking.

The Yatra was resumed last year after a gap of nearly

five years as part of efforts to normalise the relation between India and China.

It was suspended initially in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequently because of the military standoff between the two sides on the Line of Actual (LAC) in eastern Ladakh.

Officials stated that detailed information regarding routes and batch allocations is available on the official Yatra portal.

Notifications regarding selection have been sent to shortlisted applicants via SMS and email. Applicants can also check their selection status by visiting Kailash Manasarovar Yatra Portal.

The Kailash Manasarovar Yatra is considered one of the most significant spiritual pilgrimages for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and followers of Bon tradition, attracting devotees from across India every year.

## Amit Shah gifts rare sandalwood at Pashupatinath Temple

SHIRISH B PRADHAN  
Kathmandu

The sandalwood gifted by India was handed over to Ganesh Bhatta, the main priest of the Pashupatinath temple, in coordination with Sandeep Rana, a member of Nepal's House of Representatives. Shah sent over 40 kilograms of sandalwood for the purpose of using it for the worship of the Shree Yantra of Pashupatinath Temple, according to officials at the Pashupati Area Development Trust that manages the affairs of the temple.



The sandalwood received by main priest Bhatta was handed over to Chief of the Guthi Sansthan Pashupati Goswara Office, Sushila Sharma, for storage on Thursday itself, the officials said.

Nepal receives such a special type of sandalwood from India every year in line with close religious and cultural ties between the two countries. People from both Nepal and India visit the Pashupatinath temple, one of the most sacred Hindu temples situated on the banks of the Bagmati river. (PTI)

## Send Bangladeshi infiltrators to BSF, not courts: Suwendu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
Kolkata

West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari on Thursday said Bangladeshi infiltrators detained in the state would be handed over to the BSF, instead of being produced before courts, in line with a new rule that came into effect a day ago.

Speaking to reporters after an administrative review meeting at the Howrah district magistrate's office, Adhikari said instructions had already been issued to the police commissioner and the Railway Protection Force (RPF) in this regard.

"Since yesterday, the new rule has come into effect

under which infiltrators will not be sent to courts but handed over to the BSF at the Bangladesh border," he said.

Adhikari on Wednesday announced the implementation of a mechanism under which infiltrators detained by state police would be handed over directly to the BSF for deportation, unveiling what he described as part of a broader "detect, delete and deport" framework.

The chief minister did not name the Act under whose purview the newly elected BJP Government in Bengal made the policy shift for prosecution of infiltrators.

However, it seemed Adhikari was referring to the Immigration and Foreigners



Act, 2025, passed by Parliament in April last year, which aims to provide a modern, tech-driven system for immigration, registration, surveillance, detention, and deportation in India. "The police commissioner

and the RPF have been clearly instructed that if any migrant from Bangladesh, who is not entitled to apply for citizenship under the CAA, is detained at Howrah station, he or she should not be sent to a court. The person con-

cerned should be properly fed and then taken directly to the BSF personnel at the Petrapole border in Bongaon or the border outpost in Basirhat in North 24 Parganas district," he said.

Adhikari also said that a weekly report on the number of such detainees would have to be submitted to the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) through the DGP.

The chief minister was accorded a guard of honour at the Howrah district magistrate's office before he chaired a meeting with senior administrative officials.

During the meeting, the chief minister reviewed civic infrastructure and develop-

ment-related issues concerning Howrah city on the other bank of the Hooghly river.

Adhikari said a coordination committee had been constituted under the district magistrate to ensure clean drinking water supplies, proper drainage systems and other civic amenities in the Howrah Municipal Corporation area.

The committee would be monitored by Municipal Affairs Secretary Khalil Ahmed, he added.

Adhikari also said the state Government and the railways would jointly identify and list their respective responsibilities for improving civic infrastructure in the city.

## BRIEFLY

### Ashmita moves to quarterfinals of Malaysia Masters



Ashmita Chaliha moved to the women's singles quarterfinals, emerging as the country's lone surviving contender after the rest of the Indian challenge came to an end at the Malaysia Masters Super 500 tournament here on Thursday.

Ashmita registered a comfortable 21-13, 21-16 victory over Malaysia's Goh Jin Wei in the pre-quarterfinals, wrapping up the contest in under 30 minutes with a composed all-round display.

Kjaersfeldt advanced after defeating India's Malvika Bansod, who squandered a one-game advantage to go down 21-16, 8-21, 15-21 in a 59-minute battle.

In another women's singles clash, reigning Thailand Masters champion Devika Sihag was outclassed by top seed Chen Yufei of China, who sealed a 21-16, 21-13 win in 36 minutes. (PTI)

### Southampton lose appeal against play-off expulsion



Southampton's appeal against its expulsion from the Championship playoff final because of spying offenses was dismissed. An arbitration panel on Wednesday upheld the English Football League's decision to remove Southampton from Saturday's final, meaning Middlesbrough will take its place and play Hull at Wembley Stadium for the chance to win promotion to the Premier League. The decision is final.

Southampton was expelled on Tuesday after admitting to repeatedly spying on opponents.

It was charged earlier this month for the unauthorised filming of Middlesbrough's practice sessions ahead of their semifinal. It went on to win the two-legged tie to go within one game of promotion to the top flight.

The southcoast club subsequently admitted further breaches this season concerning games against Oxford United and Ipswich. It was also deducted four points for next season.

In its appeal, it described its punishment as "manifestly disproportionate" to any previous sanction in English soccer history. (AP)

## Commonwealth Games Day celebrations in India on May 24

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Shooter Anjum Modgil and badminton player Trupti Murgunde will be among the sporting stars in attendance when the country celebrates the Commonwealth Games Day on May 24 across 8,000 locations with the main event in Ahmedabad.

The 75th edition of Fit India Sundays on Cycle will be organised in Ahmedabad on May 24 "in the spirit of the Commonwealth Games movement, celebrating sportsmanship, unity, fitness and national pride", the sports ministry stated on Thursday.

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, along with Gujarat Deputy Chief Minister Harsh Sanghavi, will lead the event in Ahmedabad.

"The theme for this edition, 'A New Icon for a Fitter India — Pedalling to 2030', reflects the vision of preparing India for CWG 2030 through fitness, unity and sporting spirit."

A special CWG-themed exhibition will also be inaugurated during the event, showcasing India's sporting achievements over the last 12 years, alongside flagship schemes such as the Khelo India Mission and Sports Goods Manufacturing initiatives.

Actor Ayushmann Khurrana, along with former Commonwealth medal-



lists, including Rajani Etimarpu (Hockey), Gurjit Kaur (Hockey), Sonika Tandi (Hockey), Ankur Mittal (Shooting), Murgunde and Modgil (Shooting), as well as thousands of cyclists, will participate in the event.

"Union Ministers, State Ministers, MPs and public representatives will participate in their respective regions, further strengthening Sports Jan Bhagidari across the country," the min-

istry said. In the run-up to the CWG Day celebration, a nationwide quiz competition, reel-making contest and torch design competition were organised on the MY Bharat platform, which saw participation from more than one lakh youngsters.

Fit India Sundays on Cycle has so far reached 3.07 lakh locations across 74 editions, with participation by over 50 lakh cyclists.

## Aston Villa celebrates Europa League triumph

JAMES ROBSONAP ■ Istanbul

In front of the future king of England, Unai Emery reaffirmed his status as the king of the Europa League. Aston Villa beat Freiburg 3-0 in Istanbul on Wednesday to secure Emery a record-extending fifth title in this competition.

Celebrating wildly inside the Tupras Stadium was lifelong Villa fan Prince William, who traveled to watch his beloved team end a 30-year wait for a major trophy. "Amazing night!! Huge congratulations to all the players, team, staff and everyone connected to the club!" the Prince posted on X.

He had his phone out taking photos as captain John McGinn lifted the cup in the center of the field and in front of an explosion of confetti. "He's a classy guy. He was in the dressing room before the game and he's a



massive Villa fan so he was never going to miss it," McGinn told TNT Sports.

It was Villa's first major piece of silverware since winning the English League Cup in 1996 and its first continental title since lifting the European Cup and then the Super Cup in 1982.

Was the outcome ever in doubt with the ultimate Europa League specialist

Emery on the sideline? The Spanish coach has enjoyed remarkable success in Europe's second-tier competition, winning it three years running with Sevilla from 2014-16 and again with Villarreal in 2021.

Now he has led a third team with Villa' in its name to the title. "I am always very grateful for Europe, for every competition, Conference

League, Champions League, Europa League, but especially Europa League," Emery said. "We fought strongly in this competition and tried to give it our best. We played in a very serious way this year." 2 brilliant first-half strikes from Youri Tielemans and Emiliano Buendia put Villa into a 2-0 lead at the break. Morgan Rogers added a third in the second half. (AP)

## Fed Cup: Athletes to vie for CWG berths from Friday



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Ranchi

A host of the country's top track and field stars will seek to impress national selectors for 2026 Commonwealth Games berth during the four-day Senior Federation Competition beginning on Friday. The meet is also significant as it is the first time the Athletics Federation of India (AFI) will conduct SRY Gene Test at the national level in a bid to ensure that only biological females compete in women's category. It's a mandatory once-in-a-lifetime test will be conducted via a cheek swab or blood test.

The AFI will also start DNA testing of the Indian athletes to collect and preserve their data which could be used later for research and development, prevention of injuries, among other reasons. The results and records of both the SRY tests and DNA tests will be kept confidential.

Besides being the final selection event for the 2026 CWG in Glasgow (July 23 to August 2), the May 22-24 Federation Competition will also serve as the trials for the inaugural Asian U23 Championships, to be held in China from July 9 to 12. The meet will, however, not see in action the likes of star javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra and 3000m steeplechaser Avinash Sable.

Two-time Olympic medalist Chopra has participated in a national event only once in the last five years as he trains and competes in major international events like the Diamond League and World Championships. Chopra last competed in a national event

at the Federation Cup in Bhubaneswar in 2024. Before that, he took part in the 2021 edition of the Federation Cup. Recuperating from a back injury, Chopra will head to Switzerland from May 25 for a 47-day off-season training camp in Bienne.

Sable, meanwhile, had undergone anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) surgery in July 2025 after suffering the injury during the Monaco Diamond League. Women's 3000m steeplechase national record holder Parul Chaudhary has also not entered her name for the Ranchi meet. She recorded her second career-best time to finish seventh in the season-opening Diamond League meeting in Shanghai on May 16.

Long distance runner Gulveer Singh, a national record holder in 5000m and 10000m, will also skip the meet. The government recently cleared his proposal for foreign training and competition exposure, along with his coach, in the United States from May 15 to June 17.

Sprinter Hima Das, who had begun her season during the Indian Athletics Series 3 in New Delhi in April, has not entered her name. Among the top athletes who will compete in Ranchi are javelin thrower Sachin Yadav, long jumper Murali Sreeshanker, sprinter Animesh Kujur, quarter-miler Vishal TK, high hurdler Tejas Shirshe, decathlete Tejaswin Shankar.

National record holder long jumper Jeswin Aldrin has also entered his name for the meet though he has not competed in any event this year. He last competed in an event in April last year.

## Praggnanandhaa held by Deac Bogdan-Daniel

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bucharest (Romania)

Indian Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa was held to a draw by Romanian Deac Bogdan-Daniel while France's Alireza Firouzja decided to finally call it quits in the sixth round of the Super Chess Classic, part of the Grand Chess Tour.

Alireza, who played two games despite an ankle injury, decided it was not possible for him to continue and withdrew on the rest day of the ten-players nine-rounds tournament. Germany's Vincent Keymer was the one to benefit from Firouzja's withdrawal as he



stretched his lead to a full point after getting a walk over in this round.

While all the other games ended in draws, Keymer remained as the sole leader on 4.5 points, a full point clear of Holland's Jordan Van

Foreest and Anish Giri, top seeded American Fabiano Caruana and Praggnanandhaa who all have 3.5 point each.

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France and Wesley share the sixth spot on three points

apiece while World Championship challenger Javokhir Sindarov of Uzbekistan is close behind on 2.5 points. Romanian Deac Bogdan-Daniel is in ninth spot with two points and Firouzja ended his campaign on one point from five games.

Deac Bogdan-Daniel might be the lowest ranked but the Romanian has time and again proved why he is the local pick for the main event as a wild card.

Praggnanandhaa went for complications right from the opening by going for the Stonewall Dutch but Deac did not flinch and matched the Indian move-for-move.

## Diksha Dagar aims to go one better in Morocco

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dar es Salam (Morocco)

A year after losing in play-off, India's Diksha Dagar is back to challenge for the Lalla Meryem Cup in Morocco, hoping to go one better after a runner-up finish in the last edition. The two-time LET winner, Diksha is being accompanied by Pranavi Urs, Avani Prashanth and Hitaashee Bakshi this week.

A year ago, Cara Gainer of England shot a final round of 4-under 69 to get into a play-off where she claimed a clutch victory defeating Diksha in a sudden-death playoff to secure her maiden win on the LET at Royal Golf Dar Es Salam.



Interestingly both Gainer and Diksha will have their fathers as their caddies this week. Gainer was helped by fiancée, Seb, last year as he caddied for her en route to victory. This year it will be her father as she defends the Lalla

Meryem Cup. Also having her Dad on the bag will be Diksha, whose father, Col. Narender, is regular as caddie for her.

Diksha will be playing with Lina Belmati of Morocco and Emma Spitz of Austria, while Pranavi plays with

Patricia Isabel Schmidt of Germany and Luca Thompson of Wales. Avani goes out with Maria Hernandez of Spain and Lisa Pettersson of Sweden and Hitaashee is grouped with Hannah Screen of England and Andrea Lignell.

All four Indian girls are geared towards the second half of the season, which will include their home event, the Hero Women's Indian Open, where all of them have finished in Top-5 but never won.

Maha Haddioui is all smiles ahead of this week's Lalla Meryem Cup as the home favourite welcomes her tour mates to Morocco.

## Scheffler looks for putting rebound

SCHUYLER DIXONAP ■ McKinney (USA)

Scottie Scheffler is eager to test the difficulty of the revamped greens at the CJ Cup Byron Nelson a year after tying the PGA Tour's 72-hole scoring record while winning his hometown event by eight shots.

The world's top-ranked player doesn't exactly have momentum on his side going into Thursday's start at TPC Craig Ranch in suburban Dallas, given how putting kept him from making a run as the defending champion at the PGA Championship last week.

"Overall, I feel like I'm in a good spot," Scheffler said. "I've actually putted the best that I have in my career so far this year and just kind of get a reset, get on some new greens, work on my reads, make sure I'm checking all my fundamentals."

The Lanny Wadkins-led redesign of the par-71 layout, at a cost of nearly \$25 million, focused mostly on new bent-grass greens with more contours. Additional bunkers



helped transform the fairways as well.

Undulating greens were a big part of the PGA story at Aronimink, where Scheffler couldn't make a run to contention Sunday after missing a 4-foot birdie putt early and two par putts that were even shorter on the back nine. He

ended up tied for 14th. Scheffler said he has been reminded of last summer, when a rough time on the greens left him tied for eighth at the Scottish Open before he huddled with putting coach Phil Kenyon and won his first British Open the next week. (AP)

## CTC keen to fast-track reforms in Sri Lanka Cricket



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Colombo

The Cricket Transformation Committee (CTC), the Government-appointed interim panel tasked with running Sri Lanka Cricket, on Thursday made it clear that it intends to amend the SLC constitution governing the election of office-bearers.

The CTC addressed the media here for the first time since being appointed by the country's sports minister. "We want to do it as fast as possible," CTC chairman Erani Wickremaratna said.

Wickremaratna, a former junior minister, said the entire process, including parliamentary procedures, would take

at least six months. Asked about the visit of officials Imran Khwaja and Devajit Saikia, Wickremaratna said the world body had been "very cordial and constructive", but declined to reveal whether the ICC had specified a timeframe for the CTC's functioning.

"The ICC knows we are open and transparent with what we are doing," he said. Asked what was wrong with the existing system of electing office-bearers, Wickremaratna said: "There are lots of concerns that have come up about the current constitution. The so-called democratic voting system seems to have been abused in a big way."

## Ketan Kushwaha to captain India team in U18 Asia Cup

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bhopal

Forward Ketan Kushwaha was on Thursday appointed captain of the Indian team for the upcoming U18 Asia Cup from May 29 to June 6 in Kakamigahara, Japan.

The squad was selected after a rigorous national coaching camp at Udhav Das Mehta (Bhai ji) Central Centre at SAI Bhopal under the team's coaching staff comprising Sardar Singh and Rajnish Mishra.

The team's preparations included a high-profile four-match series against the Australia U-18 team in Bhopal as part of an exposure tour. Gearing up for the tournament, the Indian team won one match against Australia U18 and lost one. Two matches ended up as drawn affairs.

Commenting on the final squad for the tournament, coach Sardar said, "The selection process was



incredibly competitive, but we have picked an 18-member squad that gives us the perfect tactical balance.

"Our training in Bhopal and the exposure matches against a top-tier side like Australia gave these boys a great understanding of international pressure and match tempo. We have spent the last few weeks working heavily on our tactical discipline, penalty corner routines, and structure.

"The boys are in high spirits; and going into a major tournament like the Asia Cup, our objective is

clear - we want to execute our plans effectively, top our group and put ourselves in the best possible position to bring home the trophy," he added.

India has been drawn in Pool A alongside South Korea, hosts Japan, Chinese Taipei, and Kazakhstan.

The Indian team will kick off their pool-stage campaign on May 29 against Kazakhstan, before taking on hosts Japan on May 31.

They will then face South Korea on June 1 and wrap up their group matches against Chinese Taipei on June 3.

## US indicts former Cuban leader; President slams charges

JOSHUA GOODMAN/ALANNA DURKIN RICHER ■ Miami

Federal prosecutors on Wednesday announced criminal charges against former Cuban President Raul Castro in the 1996 downing of civilian planes flown by Miami-based exiles as the Trump administration escalated pressure on the island's socialist government.

The indictment accuses Castro of ordering the shoot-down of two small planes operated by the exile group Brothers to the Rescue. Castro, who turns 95 next month, was Cuba's defense minister at the time. The charges, which were secretly filed by a grand jury in April, included murder and destruction of an airplane. Five Cuban military pilots were also charged.

"For nearly 30 years, the

families of four murdered Americans have waited for justice," acting Attorney General Todd Blanche said in Miami at a ceremony coinciding with Cuban independence day to honour those killed. "They were unarmed civilians and were flying humanitarian missions for the rescue and protection of people fleeing oppression across the Florida straits."

Asked what lengths American authorities would go to bring Castro to face charges in the US, Blanche said: "There was a warrant issued for his arrest. So we expect that he will show up here, by his own will or by another way."

Asked what will happen next for Cuba, President Donald Trump said, "We're going to see." He added that the US is ready to provide



Audience members give a standing ovation as Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche (center), speaks at an event where federal prosecutors announced charges against former Cuban President Raul Castro in the 1996 downing of civilian planes operated by Miami-based exiles on Wednesday in Miami

humanitarian assistance to a "failing nation."

The charges pose a real threat, observers said, following the capture by US forces in January of former Venezuelan President

Nicolas Maduro to face drug charges in New York.

"He's going to have to keep his head pretty low from now on," said Peter Kornbluh, a specialist on the US-Cuba relationship at the National

Security Archive at George Washington University.

**Cuban president condemns indictment**  
While it remains unclear whether Castro will ever step foot in a US courtroom, the

murder and conspiracy charges carry the potential for life in prison or the death penalty upon conviction.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel condemned the indictment as a political stunt that sought only to "justify the folly of a military aggression against Cuba." In a message on social media, he accused the US of lying and manipulating events surrounding the shoot-down, including ignoring repeated warnings by Cuban officials at the time that they would defend against "dangerous violations" of their airspace "by notorious terrorists."

Among those attending Wednesday's ceremony in downtown Miami was Marlene Alejandre-Triana, whose father, Armando Alejandre Jr, was killed while she was away for her first year of college.

Over the years, she spoke to multiple federal investigators about charging Castro, referring to him as "one of the main architects of the crime." But none until now had the courage to seek justice for her family and the other victims.

"It has been long overdue," she said standing before a giant photo of her father.

Trump has threatened military action for months Trump has been threatening military action in Cuba ever since US forces captured Maduro, the Cuban Government's long-time patron.

After ousting the Venezuelan leader, the White House ordered a blockade that choked off fuel shipments to Cuba, leading to severe blackouts, food shortages and an economic collapse across the island. (AP)

## Malaysia orders TikTok to explain fake content targeting king

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia said Thursday it has ordered TikTok to explain and address what it described as the social media platform's failure to act swiftly against offensive, defamatory and fake content targeting the royal institution.

The Communications and Multimedia Commission said the move followed the circulation of "grossly offensive, false, menacing and insulting" content, including AI-generated videos and manipulated images linked to an account falsely claiming association with king Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar.

Such matters fall within the sensitive issues of race, religion and royalty "which are highly sensitive and may undermine public order, national harmony and respect for constitutional institutions," the regulator said in a statement.

Despite prior notifications and engagements, it said TikTok's moderation response especially in ensuring the prompt removal of such content and preventing further dissemination was unsatisfactory.

It said TikTok — which has not publicly commented on the case — has been issued a legal notice that requires it to explain its moderation failures and undertake immediate remedial measures, including strengthening its content moderation mechanisms and improving enforcement against content that violates Malaysian laws and community standards.

The commission said social media platforms operating in Malaysia are expected to exercise greater responsibility in preventing unlawful and harmful activities on their services. (AP)

## Nigeria's anti-drug agency shuts down large meth laboratory

OPE ADETAYO ■ Lagos (Nigeria)

Nigeria's anti-drug agency said it has busted a transnational organised drug syndicate involving Nigerians and Mexicans in the southwestern region of the country.

The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency said late Wednesday that its special operations unit shut down "an industrial-scale clandestine laboratory" in a remote forest in the Ijebu area of Ogun state, which shares a border with Lagos, the country's economic capital. The agency added that it is the biggest drug bust ever in the country.

The agency said in a statement that it arrested seven members of the "cartel," which included four Nigerians and three Mexicans, during the operation, and three more in follow-up arrests.

"This network did not just traffic drugs; they were actively manufacturing industrial-scale quantities of highly lethal illicit substances right on our soil, threatening the national security and public health of Nigeria," Brig Gen Mohamed Buba Marwa, the agency's head, said.

According to the statement, the operation resulted in the seizure of 2.4 tons of chemical materials, including methamphetamine, worth 480 billion naira (USD 363 million) and two vehicles.

In recent years, West and Central Africa have emerged as a hot spot for global trafficking and manufacturing of illicit drugs due to porous borders and corruption, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (AP)



A worker carries out confiscated drugs from a warehouse in Lagos, Nigeria

## Europe faces stray Ukrainian drones as Kyiv targets Russian oil exports

EMMA BURROWS ■ Kyiv

Over the past months, Ukrainian drones have crashed into the chimney of a power plant in Estonia, hit empty fuel tanks in Latvia and been shot down by Romanian fighter jets stationed in Lithuania.

For the first time in a NATO and European Union capital, Lithuanians were pictured sheltering in underground car parks in Vilnius on Wednesday, as authorities warned of unidentified drone activity.

No one has died or been injured recently, but the

increasing airspace incursions have prompted some Baltic ministers to chastise Ukraine for the violations. In Latvia, officials' handling of the stray drones led to a political crisis that triggered the collapse of the Government earlier this month.

Ukraine has ramped up attacks on Baltic Sea ports used for Russian energy exports in an attempt to hit Moscow's war chest as US President Donald Trump's war in Iran has driven up the price of oil, a key revenue stream for the Kremlin.

As Ukraine's drones have snaked up north, they have

skirted the borders of NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland. Some of them were not detected before they crashed and landed in some of the Baltic states.

Ukrainian officials apologised and said the drones were aimed at military targets inside Russia but were sent off course by Russian electronic interference. The string of airspace violations has prompted questions about the state of air defences on NATO's eastern flank.

**Ukraine is targeting Russian ports on Baltic Sea**  
Ukraine's intensifying

attacks against Russia have focused on arms factories, ports on the Baltic Sea and energy facilities as the war in Iran has boosted oil prices.

It has particularly targeted the ports of Ust-Luga and Primorsk, close to the borders of Estonia and Finland. Russia uses the ports to load up ships taking its oil exports through the Baltic Sea.

During one attack in May, which set part of the port of Primorsk on fire, more than 60 Ukrainian drones were shot down, Leningrad region governor Alexander Drozdenko said.

After stray Ukrainian



Ukrainian servicemen of Khartia brigade launch a drone towards Russian positions at the front line in the Kharkiv region, Ukraine

Silina to also quit days later because she was left without a majority in the coalition Government. (AP)

## Displaced Lebanese grandmother feeds thousands of compatriots who fled war

MALAK HARB/KAREEM CHEHAYEB ■ Beirut

Even months after she was displaced by war, Soubhiye Zeiter starts every morning the same way: with a large cup of coffee and a few quiet moments beside a small table decorated with flowers outside her tent in Beirut.

But once the coffee is poured, the quiet disappears quickly. By early morning, dozens of people are already lined up outside Zeiter's small bakery stand in a tented settlement in the heart of the Lebanese capital, waiting for her mana'eesh — the popular Lebanese flatbread breakfast topped with cheese, meat or za'atar — a thyme and herb seasoning. Children weave among customers, volunteers rush trays of dough in and out of ovens, and Zeiter, 63, greets



Soubhiye Zeiter (63) a displaced woman who fled her home with her family in Beirut's southern suburbs due to the war between Israel and Hezbollah, distributes mana'eesh, a popular Lebanese flatbread breakfast topped with thyme at a small bakery in a tented settlement along Beirut's waterfront in Lebanon on Thursday

nearly everyone who walks by, often calling people over to sit and have some coffee.

Known to many as Om Mohammed — an Arabic nickname

that means Mohammed's mother — the grandmother fled her home in the southern suburbs of Beirut with 15 members of her family at the start of the war between Israel

and Hezbollah. She was living just south of the capital when the Israeli military issued an evacuation warning to the sprawling neighbourhoods ahead of an intense aerial bombardment.

The ongoing war between Israel and the Hezbollah militant group displaced over one million people in the tiny country during months of cross-border fighting. Many families fled villages in southern Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs, seeking shelter in schools, public buildings and tented settlements in Beirut and across the country.

From feeding her family to feeding the community

When Zeiter first arrived at the tented settlement between the Mediterranean Sea and the capital's high-end downtown district, she went to an area nearby

where aid was being distributed. But after being told that she would have to stand in line for hours and still might not receive anything, she decided to make food to feed her family and those in need instead.

She began using her own saj — a traditional round metal griddle used across Lebanon — baking around 200 mana'eesh a day and handing them out for free. As word spread, more people began showing up every morning, some donating ingredients. Soon, the lines stretched longer than she could manage alone.

Now, her small corner of the camp looks more like a neighbourhood bakery. People who heard about what she was doing donated a larger gas-powered oven that hums from early morning until late at night. Dough is rolled through a sheeter. (AP)



The incoming 17th King of Malaysia, the Sultan of Johor, Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar, is seen during welcoming ceremony at National Palace in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## Germany urges EU to offer Ukraine 'associate membership' and boost talks with Russia

LORNE COOK/GEIR MOULSON ■ Brussels

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz wants the European Union to consider offering "associate membership" to Ukraine and breathe the new life into talks aimed at ending more than four years of war with Russia, according to a letter seen Thursday by The Associated Press.

His letter, to the EU's top officials, comes as the 27-nation bloc weighs whether to try to launch its own negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, with US mediated talks bogged down while America's attention focuses



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (centre) attends the cabinet meeting at the chancellery in Berlin, Germany on Wednesday

on the Iran war.

Under Merz's proposals, Ukraine would take part in EU meetings, but without voting rights, and would also have non-voting "associate members" of the bloc's powerful executive branch, the European Commission, and

the European Parliament.

He insisted that this "would not be a membership light," and "go far beyond" the Association Agreement that currently governs EU-Ukraine relations. Merz suggested a "snap-back mechanism" in

case Ukraine backslides on democratic standards.

European Council President Antonio Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reaffirmed last month that official membership talks with Ukraine should be opened "without delay," and Merz too called for that process to start.

**Delays and road blocks**

On Wednesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed signs of possible progress in the accession negotiations, saying in an address that it is "very important for us. Ukraine has fulfilled everything necessary for this progress." (AP)



Britain's King Charles III playing a ukulele while meeting members of the Loughries Men's Shed Ukulele Ensemble at Ards Allotments, near Strangford Lough in Newtownards, Northern Ireland on Thursday

## Walmart delivers another strong quarter but economic uncertainty clouds outlook for retail sector

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ New York

Walmart delivered another quarter of impressive sales as speedy deliveries and low prices served as a magnet for shoppers across the income spectrum.

Yet like other major retailers posting financial results this week, it was cautious about the rest of the year, given the current economic uncertainty.

On Thursday, it issued a forecast for the current quarter that was weaker than Wall Street had been expecting. Shares slipped more than 2 per cent before the opening bell on Thursday.

Walmart has resonated with many Americans who are increasingly careful about where they spend their money as inflation has taken a bigger bite out of pay-

checks, particularly since the start of the Iran war in late February. Traffic at Walmart can be a barometer of consumer spending given its vast customer base. More than 150 million customers are on its website or in its stores every week, according to Walmart.

On Thursday, Walmart touted strong sales that were fueled by online shopping.

Comparable sales at US Walmart stores rose 4.1 per cent during the three-month period ended April 30. Walmart's US online sales rose 26 per cent, the company said.

Walmart's promise of lower prices, improved merchandise and faster delivery has also attracted wealthier shoppers. The biggest gains in market share for Walmart are coming from house-



holds with annual incomes over USD 100,000. That shift is taking place as lower-income shoppers become more entrenched in what economists collectively call a K-

shaped economy.

"Our results reflect our continued focus on delivering across the enterprise - better shopping experiences, a broader assortment, and faster

delivery," CEO John Fumer said in a prepared statement Thursday.

Yet US retailers have spent months navigating an uncertain economic environment, from President Donald Trump's tariffs to the impact of soaring gasoline prices due to the war. The average price for a gallon of regular gasoline raced higher this week and did so again overnight. Gasoline prices are about 45 per cent above where they were at this time last year.

Based on quarterly financial reports this week from Walmart, as well as Target, Home Depot, Lowe's and TJX, shoppers are cautious but still spending, helped by more generous tax refunds. Yet there is a widespread belief among economists that once of those refunds dry up, shoppers

will pull back on spending. Consumer spending is the dominant economic engine for the US.

Target reported the largest jump in comparable sales in four years on Wednesday, but a cautious outlook overshadowed convincing evidence that changes under the company's new CEO are resonating with customers. Target raised its annual revenue outlook on Wednesday, but even that falls below the pace of its first quarter this year.

The nation's two largest home improvement retailers, Home Depot and Lowe's, this week reported strong sales, but both companies said that customers are putting off larger home projects.

"I think, overall, this has been the most difficult housing market that I've faced in this business

since the financial crisis," Lowe's CEO Marvin Ellison said this week.

Walmart, based in Bentonville, Arkansas, reported first-quarter earnings of USD 5.33 billion, or 67 cents, for the quarter ended April 30. Adjusted per-share results were 66 cents, matching the 66 cents that analysts expected, according to FactSet.

For the year-ago quarter, the company reported net income of USD 4.48 billion, or 56 cents per share. Sales rose 7.3 per cent to USD 177.75 billion in the fiscal first quarter, above the USD 174.84 billion that analysts predicted.

For the second quarter, Walmart expects sales to be 4 per cent to 5 per cent higher than the same period a year ago. That brings the range to between USD 182.8 billion and USD 184.59 billion.