

‘Education Jihad’ remarks by Rejaul Sarkar, a threat to social harmony

Himanta Biswa Sarma

Guwahati, Jan 18 : Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma accused the Congress party of undermining Assamese identity and dignity by keeping quiet about what he described as “extremely dangerous and objectionable” comments made by Rejaul Karim Sarkar, a former member of the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU) who quit the Congress party 60 hours after joining. CM Sarma addressed the continuing debate that has dominated public discourse over the last week, stating that it is a personal political decision and that the government has no objections to anyone joining or supporting the Congress. But he claimed that the problem worsened when Rejaul Karim, the day he joined the party, gave a speech in which he attempted to make frightening parallels between Dhubri and Assam’s historically significant districts. The Chief Minister claimed that Rejaul Karim’s claim that Jorhat, Tinsukia, and Sivasagar will become Dhubri and Dhubri would become Sivasagar was extremely inflammatory and based on a “distorted understanding of Assam’s demographic and cultural realities.” While Dhubri’s development is encouraging, Sarma stated that comparing it to Sivasagar is unrealistic and unacceptable. He alleged that nearly 80 per cent of Dhubri’s population consists of people who migrated from Bangladesh at various points, some of whom later acquired

Indian citizenship, leading to what he described as a steady erosion of Assamese identity and culture in the district. In contrast, Sarma highlighted Sivasagar’s unparalleled cultural, historical and spiritual importance, calling it the cradle of Assamese civilisation. He cited the launch of the Arunoday welfare scheme from Sivasagar, the origins of the Assamese language renaissance, the legacy of Srimanta Sankardev, the foundation of the Ahom kingdom by Swargadeo Chaolung Sukapha, and the global recognition of Charaideo Maidams as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. “How can Sivasagar ever be turned into Dhubri?” Sarma asked, calling such claims both absurd and inflammatory. The Chief Minister further expressed alarm over Rejaul Karim’s alleged remarks on “education jihad” and claims that future Deputy Commissioners of Sivasagar, Jorhat and Guwahati would be from Bangladesh, warning that such statements pose a serious threat to social harmony and national security. Sarma questioned why Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, who was present on the same stage during the speech, failed to immediately object or disassociate the party from the remarks. He said the Congress leadership should have acted decisively and expelled Rejaul Karim, instead of allowing him to resign voluntarily and later emerge as a “hero” within minority circles. “By remaining silent, Gaurav Gogoi gave him an op-



portunity to become a hero at the cost of Assamese culture, pride, dignity and self-respect,” Sarma alleged. Drawing parallels, the Chief Minister recalled a previous controversy in which a Congress leader allegedly suggested reserving 47 Assembly seats for minority or Miya Muslim communities. Sarma reiterated that reservation on religious lines is unconstitutional, noting that independent India does not permit such practices. He questioned the Congress over the status of the promised show-

cause notice, pointing out that no action has been made public even after a month. “By remaining silent, the Congress has bowed before one particular community,” CM Sarma claimed. Sarma also reiterated his earlier allegations regarding the alleged links between a sitting Assam MP and Pakistan, stating that he would place documentary evidence before the public before the end of the month. He warned that appeasement politics, combined with what he called “secret foreign links,” presents a

dangerous trajectory for Assam’s political future. Emphasising unity and resilience, the Chief Minister said Assam’s indigenous communities have endured significant challenges and worked hard to rebuild and strengthen themselves. He expressed confidence that the people of Assam would stand by those safeguarding the state’s identity and sovereignty. “I am confident that the people of Assam are with us, and once again, we will emerge victorious,” Sarma said, concluding his address.

In Brief

60-bed hostel at Pali Vidyapith

Itanagar: Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein inaugurated a new 60-bed hostel at Arunachal Pali Vidyapith Residential School in Chongkham, enhancing educational infrastructure to meet the rising demand for quality boarding facilities. Accompanied by local dignitaries, Mein emphasized the government’s commitment to empowering students and preserving the state’s cultural heritage. The hostel aims to support students as parents seek better educational opportunities. Mein congratulated the project execution teams and reaffirmed plans for future expansions to accommodate increasing enrollments.

Project Suvidha 2.0

Itanagar: Inspector General of Police (Operations) Apurba Bitin inaugurated Project Suvidha 2.0 on January 15 at the 1st IRBN Battalion Headquarters, aimed at enhancing personnel welfare and fostering a self-sustaining, eco-friendly environment. The initiative, supported by the DGP and PHQ officials, seeks to create a people-centric ecosystem that promotes physical fitness, social harmony, and operational resilience, ultimately enhancing the Ease of Living for personnel and their families.

ULFA (I) cadre surrenders

Guwahati: An active member of the banned United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent) has surrendered to security forces in Mon, Nagaland. The individual, Amarjit Moran, alias Dhananjay, is from Tinsukia district, Assam. Authorities are initiating legal and rehabilitation processes as part of government policy. This surrender is seen as indicative of increasing pressure on insurgent groups and a growing willingness among militants to reintegrate into society.

Body recovered

Itanagar: The body of the second tourist who drowned in Sela Lake, Arunachal Pradesh, was recovered on January 17. The incident, which occurred on January 16, involved a seven-member tourist group from Kerala who ventured near the frozen lake. One group member slipped into the water, and Dinu (26) and Mahadev (24) went in to rescue him. While one person escaped, Dinu and Mahadev drowned. A joint search operation involving multiple agencies, including the Army and SDRF, faced challenges due to poor underwater visibility but eventually recovered both bodies.

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma on the state of border security



Shillong, Jan 18 : Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma attempted to comfort the people on Thursday, January 15, as worries over border security in the Northeast continue to surface. He said that although international borders are naturally permeable, there is no urgent reason for concern along

Meghalaya’s frontier. The Chief Minister further emphasized that ongoing readiness and increased awareness are still crucial. Sangma stated that all security agencies are collaborating closely to guarantee border security while speaking in Shillong. “Borders are always porous, and the state should not be

the only one to remark on how secure they are. Central agencies and the Indian government are heavily involved. The Chief Minister emphasized that the Border Security Force (BSF), Intelligence Bureau (IB), and other agencies have frequent coordination meetings. He also mentioned that a high-level

review meeting was held on December 24, during which border security concerns were thoroughly reviewed. “We are keeping a close eye on the situation. There is currently nothing significant to be worried about. However, we need to stay very vigilant and ready in every manner,” Sangma stated. Speaking about the state of border fencing, Sangma stated that Meghalaya shares a 440-kilometer international boundary, of which 30 to 40 kilometers are still unguarded because of difficulties unique to the area. The Chief Minister emphasized that the Border Security Force (BSF), Intelligence Bureau (IB), and other

agencies have frequent coordination meetings. He also mentioned that a high-level review meeting was held on December 24, during which border security concerns were thoroughly reviewed. “We are keeping a close eye on the situation. There is currently nothing significant to be worried about. However, we need to stay very vigilant and ready in every manner,” Sangma stated. Speaking about the state of border fencing, Sangma stated that Meghalaya shares a 440-kilometer international boundary, of which 30 to 40 kilometers are still unguarded because of difficulties unique to the area.

Mizoram aims to play a significant role in the manufacturing of rubber



Aizawl, Jan 18: Mizoram, under Chief Minister Lalduhoma’s leadership, is striving to become a leading rubber-producing state through the Chief Minister’s Rubber Mission initiated in 2024. This initiative, inspired by successful models like Tripura Rubber Mission, promotes scientific cultivation and pest management. The mission aims to establish rubber as a key crop for Mizoram’s agricultural identity, alongside other crops like ginger and passion fruit. With

about 50,000 hectares of suitable land, the state has already planted 4.5 lakh rubber saplings and plans to expand to over 11.58 lakh saplings across 2,575 hectares. Infrastructure improvements, including roads and tools for rubber cultivation, are also underway, supported by training programs for farmers. Overall, the mission reflects Mizoram’s commitment to sustainable agricultural development and economic growth.

Tripura MP claims that the Left and TMC ruined Bengal’s future

Agartala, Jan 18: Former Tripura Chief Minister and BJP MP Biplab Kumar Deb criticized West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) during a press conference in Agartala. He accused the TMC and previous Left Front governments of misrule, specifically targeting their impact on West Bengal’s economy, which he claimed has driven industries out and resulted in significant youth migration in search of better job opportunities. Deb emphasized the need for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to restore dignity and good governance in the state, arguing that approximately 1.5 crore youths have left West Bengal due to the TMC’s policies. He pointed out the closure or relocation of around 7,000 industries, blaming an unfavorable busi-



ness environment created by the ruling parties. Deb dismissed the TMC’s slogan “Ma, Mati, Manush” as ineffective and highlighted the state’s declining economic contribution, which used to account for 25–30 percent of the Centre’s revenue. He also raised concerns about West Bengal’s escalating debt crisis, stating that newborns are metaphorically born into debt, and underscored the issues

of rising unemployment and industrial decline. Deb criticized the TMC’s governance of law and order, claiming it resulted in a breakdown of the justice system with low conviction rates, attributed to inadequate police investigations and political interference. He concluded by expressing the BJP’s commitment to support citizens in their fight for rights and expand its political influence in West Bengal.

NSF welcomes Nagaland Police recruitment drive



Kohima, Jan 18: The Naga Students’ Federation (NSF) welcomed the police recruitment drive in Nagaland, praising efforts to fill vacancies and create jobs for Naga youth. They emphasized the need for transparency, fairness, and meritocracy in the recruitment process to maintain public trust. The NSF also called for timely completion of the recruitment to avoid erosion of confidence among candidates and committed to monitoring the process for adherence to justice and transparency. The Federation expressed hope that this initiative would enhance integrity and efficiency in public appointments and strengthen the state’s policing framework.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma

Assam and Tripura are responding to infiltration, which poses a serious threat to the northeast; Bengal must follow suit

Guwahati, Jan 18 : Himanta Biswa Sarma, the chief minister of Assam, stated on Thursday that infiltration is still a significant problem for the Northeast and emphasized that robust measures along the Indo-Bangladesh border are necessary to protect the area. Assam (262 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Tripura (856 km), and Mizoram (318 km) are among the North Eastern states that have international borders with Bangladesh. Speaking to the media following a puja at the Mata Tripura Sundari Temple in Udaiapur, Tripura’s Gomati district, Sarma stated that infiltration is a major issue for the entire Northeast, not just Assam. Following the Census, it is anticipated that 40% of Assamese people will be minorities. This is a complicated circumstance. Assam is the most severely impacted and is directly under attack, but the North East’s general situation is bad. As a result, we have to strive to preserve



Assam and the Northeast,” Sarma stated. He went on to say that infiltration from Bangladesh is still a serious risk. West Bengal is not taking action, but Tripura and Assam are by apprehending infiltrators. The entire country will suffer if Bengal does not address the national issue, he continued. Sarma underlined that ongoing efforts along the Indo-Bangladesh border are necessary to protect

the Northeast. “In order to maintain security in the Northeast, it is crucial for He also clarified that the situation in Bangladesh would not impact the upcoming Assam elections but noted growing public sentiment. “The Bangladesh issue will not affect the Assam elections, but people here are angry over the atrocities being committed against Hindus in Bangladesh,” Sarma said.

NE/EAST

India is “hyping” the Shaksgam Valley issue, while China reacts to the Army Chief’s comments



New Delhi, Jan 18: The state-run In response to recent comments made by Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi regarding India-China relations, Global Times warned against what it called “hype” by Indian officials regarding the Shaksgam Valley, an area connected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The newspaper stated in a report released on Wednesday that although bilateral relations appear to be improving and there is a common goal to maintain peace along the Line of

Actual Control (LAC), the emphasis should continue to be on managing the border situation and fostering mutual trust between the two militaries. According to the article, which cited Chinese specialists, some Indian officials’ “erroneous view” on the boundary issue and CPEC is reflected in the country’s heightened attention to the Shaksgam Valley. It contended that at a time when both nations’ senior officials have been interacting diplomatically in recent months, such remarks run the risk of damaging at-

tempts to stabilize relations. The article also stated that Gen. Dwivedi had stated that both sides had engaged in “troop readjustment” to keep the situation stable and that the leadership of China and India were eager to maintain peace along the border and address confidence gaps. Additionally, he emphasized that while conditions along the northern frontier remained steady, ongoing attention to detail was necessary. The Army commander did, however, restate India’s long-standing stance on the Shaksgam Valley, declaring that New Delhi does not support any action in the area and views the 1963 boundary agreement between China and Pakistan as “illegal.” Even while military and political engagement with China continues to avert escalation along the LAC, India has continuously maintained that CPEC traverses through area under Pakistan’s illegitimate occupation and that questions

of sovereignty are non-negotiable. Responding to recent comments by Indian officials and media reports, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said earlier this week that the territory in question belongs to China and that Beijing is justified in undertaking infrastructure construction on its own territory.Mao said China and Pakistan, as sovereign countries, had signed a boundary agreement in the 1960s and that CPEC is an economic cooperation initiative aimed at promoting development and improving livelihoods. She added that neither the China-Pakistan boundary agreement nor CPEC affects China’s stat-ed position on the Kashmir issue.Launched in 2013, CPEC is a flagship project under China’s Belt and Road Initiative, linking Pakistan’s Gwadar port with Kashgar in Xinjiang, and spans sectors including energy, transport, industry and agriculture.

A high-level panel is established by the Assam government to settle disputes in 37 villages

Guwahati, Jan 18: The Assam government has formed a high-level commission to address the disputed inclusion and exclusion of 37 villages in Karbi Anglong and Nagaon districts. This commission, led by Dr. Ballepu Kalyan Chakravarthi, the Additional Chief Secretary of Assam, is tasked with evaluating claims and objections related to these villages, particularly concerning boundary demarcation, jurisdictional authority, and protections under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The establishment of the commission responds to requests from Karbi Anglong residents for these villages to be officially included in their district, thereby granting

them Sixth Schedule constitutional safeguards. The commission’s mandate includes thorough examination of historical records, existing administrative frameworks, and the current situation on the ground to formulate informed recommendations.Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has highlighted the commission’s intention to conduct public consultations to collect opinions from the affected populations, district officials, and elected representatives from Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, and nearby regions. This approach aims to ensure transparency, fairness, and consensus in resolving the matter. The commission will comprise District Commissioners from various districts including



Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Hojai, Morigaon, and Dima Hasao, to incorporate diverse administrative perspectives. The Assam government emphasizes that resolving such territorial and autonomy disputes is

crucial for fostering social harmony, administrative clarity, and development in autonomous council areas. Additional details regarding the timeline for public hearings and the submission of recommendations are anticipated shortly.

Mizoram will start purchasing broomsticks and ginger on February 2nd Bana Kaih scheme



Aizawl, Jan 18: According to Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma, the state government’s major handholding effort, the Bana Kaih scheme, will start purchasing ginger and dry broomsticks directly from farmers on February 2. He made the declaration while opening a ginger processing facility at Sairang, which is around 21 kilometers away from Aizawl. Lalduhoma emphasized the change in the state’s agricultural landscape, pointing out that although Mizoram is mostly an agrarian state, no crop has previously earned it unique national prominence. “Our farmers’ hard work has earned Mizoram the title of India’s ginger capital today,” he stated. Mizoram has been dubbed the “ginger capital of India” by the NITI Aayog. The

government would purchase dry broomsticks and ginger at support prices under the Bana Kaih program, guaranteeing producers a steady income. According to Lalduhoma, growing ginger has greatly enhanced farming households’ standard of living by raising their income and purchasing power. Since the Bana Kaih program began in September 2024, the Zoram People’s Movement administration has been purchasing crops from farmers, including ginger, turmeric, chilli, broomsticks, and unhusked rice, in accordance with its election promises. According to officials, the state government paid a support price of almost Rs 137.72 crore for the purchase of ginger alone last year. During the same period, the government also procured 48,602.29 quintals of dried broomsticks worth nearly Rs 2 crore and 1,473 quintals of unhusked rice valued at Rs 44.18 lakh from farmers, officials added. The chief minister also pointed out that Mizoram has strong potential for sapthei fruit and said efforts would be intensified to promote its cultivation on a larger scale, with the aim of further diversifying farm income and strengthening the rural economy.

Two trainees found hanging at Sports Authority

Kollam, Jan 18: At the Sports Authority of India (SAI) hostel in Kollam, Kerala, two trainees were discovered deceased on Thursday. Sandra, 17, of Kozhikode, and Vyshnavi, 15, of Thiruvananthapuram, have been identified as the victims.When the girls failed to show up for training, hostel officials checked their room at around five in the morning.

Both were hanging from ceiling fans when the crew pushed open the door after several attempts to reach them were unsuccessful. The two girls were spotted together late last night by other trainees, according to the police. An investigation into the fatalities has been started by the police. The cause of the deaths is still unknown, and no suicide note was discovered at

the scene. Sandra was undergoing athletics training while studying in Class 12, and Vyshnavi, a kabaddi player, was a Class 10 student. Police said that Vyshnavi, who normally stayed in a different room, had chosen to spend Wednesday night in Sandra’s room. Post-mortem procedures are underway, and the bodies will be returned to the families after completion.

A key suspect in Punjab’s murder In an Amritsar police encounter, an AAP sarpanch was slain



Amritsar, Jan 18: While being transported to Amritsar on Thursday to recover evidence, one of the main suspects in the murder of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) sarpanch Jarmal Singh was slain, according to police. After the sarpanch was shot and killed at a resort in Amritsar, the culprit, named as Sukhraj Singh, was one of two suspects detained from Raipur. According to the police, Sukhraj was brought to the Valla area at the time of the encounter in order to retrieve a pistol that was reportedly used in the crime. The Amritsar Sukhraj was the primary shooter, according to Police Commissioner Gurpreet Bhullar, who stated that seven people had been detained in relation to the murder thus far. Sukhraj revealed that he had hidden the pistol used in the murder during questioning.

Two unidentified attackers on motorcycles opened fire on the police car as the team transported him for treat-

ment, according to Bhullar. A shootout broke out after police officers replied. According to the commissioner, one police officer was hurt during the gunfight. According to Bhullar, Sukhraj allegedly attempted to overpower the police squad and fire a weapon during the turmoil, but he was shot and subsequently died from his wounds. “The police car was struck by several rounds. The commissioner stated that efforts are being made to locate and identify the unnamed assailants who opened fire on the police unit. Jarmal Singh, the sarpanch of Valtoha village and a member of the ruling AAP in Punjab, was shot dead by assailants at a wedding venue in Amritsar on January 4. Police have said the murder was the result of a planned conspiracy linked to old enmity. According to Punjab Police, foreign-based gangster Prabhdeep Singh alias Prabh Dasuwal is the alleged mastermind behind the killing and is still at large.

Assam CM inaugurates 70 MW solar plant during Bilasipara visit Empowers women

Guwahati, Jan 18: During a busy official visit to Bilasipara on January 15, Assam Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma oversaw a number of significant programs that included women’s economic development, the spread of renewable energy, and important legislative messaging. Under the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan, the Chief Minister started the day by giving entrepreneurship checks to 18,375 women from the Bilasipara Assembly constituency at the INA Ground. Speaking to a sizable group of recipients known as “Lakhpatri Baideus,” Dr. Sarma described the progressive support structure of the program. Beneficiaries receive ₹10,000 in seed funds in the first phase, and ₹25,000 in the second phase after the initial sum is well utilized. A third phase would help women expand their businesses by offering grants or bank-linked loans totaling up to ₹50,000. A 70 MW solar power plant at Khudigaon was later launched by the chief minister. It was built over around 1,000 bighas of land at a cost of ₹350 crore. Dr. Sarma described the project as a turning point for Assam’s



proposed state legislation, a second marriage could invite imprisonment of up to 14 years, while a third marriage could lead to a jail term of up to 21 years. On the political front, Dr. Sarma criticised the opposition, alleging that Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi had elevated Rezaul Karim as a “hero” for political convenience. He also expressed strong concern over reported atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh, calling for greater attention to the safety and rights of minorities across the border. Concluding his visit, the Chief Minister reiterated his government’s commitment to strengthening rural women’s livelihoods while simultaneously accelerating Assam’s industrial and energy-sector transformation.

clean energy aspirations, stating that it will bolster the state’s drive for renewable energy and establish Assam as a developing center for green energy. The Chief Minister also introduced a toll-free helpline, 114, to combat polygamy while addressing the media in Bilasipara. He warned that under the

Supreme Court: Maintenance from in-law property is due to a widowed daughter-in-law

New Delhi, Jan 18: According to the Supreme Court, a widowed Hindu daughter-in-law is entitled to support from her father-in-law’s property under the Hindu Adoptions and support Act regardless of whether her spouse passed away during or after her father-in-law’s lifetime. A Hindu widowed daughter-in-law has such a right under the Constitution, the ancient Manusmriti, and the statute Act, according to a bench of Justices Pankaj Mithal and S.V.N. Bhatti.”A son or the legal heirs are obligated to provide for all dependent individuals from the inherited estate, that is, all individuals who the deceased was morally and legally required to provide for. As a result, when a son passes away, the father-in-law has a religious duty to provide for his widowed daughter-in-law if she is unable to support herself on her own or with the assets the deceased son



left behind. Justice Mithal observed, “The Act does not envision to rule out the above obligation of the father-in-law to maintain his widowed daughter-in-law, regardless of whether she became a widow prior to or after his death.” In making its decision, the Supreme Court rejected pe-

titions from Dr. Mahendra Prasad’s relatives, Kanchana Rai and Uma Devi, who contested the high court’s order to review his widowed daughter-in-law . Geeta Sharma’s maintenance claim from his estate. The Supreme Court ruled that it was inappropriate to categorize bereaved daugh-

ters-in-law based only on whether their father-in-law passed away before or after their spouse. Such a classification has no logical connection to the Act’s goal, which is to provide maintenance to dependents who are unable to support themselves . Due to their widowhood, lack of spousal support, and similar financial fragility, the women in both circumstances are in a similar position with regard to the Act’s goal. The top court declared.”It is blatantly arbitrary and a violation of the guarantee of equality before the law under Article 14 of the Constitution to deny maintenance to one category based on a fortuitous circumstance beyond their control.” “Any interpretation contrary to one opined above would also infringe upon Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life with dignity,” the bench added.

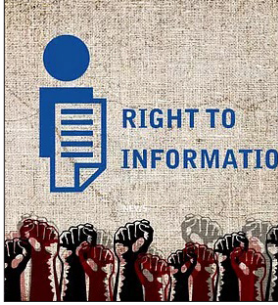
Supreme Court: Maintenance from in-law property is due to a widowed daughter-in-law

New Delhi, Jan 18: According to the Supreme Court, a widowed Hindu daughter-in-law is entitled to support from her father-in-law’s property under the Hindu Adoptions and support Act regardless of whether her spouse passed away during or after her father-in-law’s lifetime. A Hindu widowed daughter-in-law has such a right under the Constitution, the ancient Manusmriti, and the statute Act, according to a bench of Justices Pankaj Mithal and S.V.N. Bhatti.”A son or the legal heirs are obligated to provide for all dependent individuals from the inherited estate, that is, all individuals who the deceased was morally and legally required to provide for. As a result, when a son passes away, the father-in-law has a religious duty to provide for his widowed daughter-in-law if she is unable to support herself on her own or with the assets the deceased son left be-

hind. Justice Mithal observed, “The Act does not envision to rule out the above obligation of the father-in-law to maintain his widowed daughter-in-law, regardless of whether she became a widow prior to or after his death.” In making its decision, the Supreme Court rejected petitions from Dr. Mahendra Prasad’s relatives, Kanchana Rai and Uma Devi, who contested the high court’s order to review his widowed daughter-in-law Geeta Sharma’s maintenance claim from his estate. The Supreme Court ruled that it was inappropriate to categorize bereaved daughters-in-law based only on whether their father-in-law passed away before or after their spouse. Such a classification has no logical connection to the Act’s goal, which is to provide maintenance to dependents who are unable to support themselves. Due to their widowhood, lack of spousal support, and similar

financial fragility, the women in both circumstances are in a similar position with regard to the Act’s goal. The top court declared, “It is blatantly arbitrary and a violation of the guarantee of equality before the law under Article 14 of the Constitution to deny maintenance to one category based on a fortuitous circumstance beyond their control.” “Any interpretation contrary to one opined above would also infringe upon Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life with dignity,” the bench added.

Central Government Health Scheme RTI applicants are left without replies by an abandoned government portal



New Delhi, Jan 18: A significant number of RTI applications intended for the Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) are mistakenly submitted

to an abandoned portal, resulting in no responses for applicants. The Central Information Commission (CIC) has demanded urgent corrective actions after being informed by CGHS that they did not receive these applications on their active online portal. The CIC issued an advisory under the RTI Act, instructing the CGHS to work with the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) to close the abandoned portal and transfer

the pending applications to the active system. This issue was highlighted during CIC hearings, where it was noted that relevant information was only provided by CGHS after receiving hearing notices. In specific cases related to health center proposals and reimbursement queries, the CGHS clarified that applications submitted on the abandoned portal were not processed appropriately, leading to further complications for applicants.

A Garoland body calls for a ban on non-tribals in employment, business, and elections

Shillong, Jan 18: During a meeting of its Central Executive Committee in Tura on January 10, the Garoland State Movement Committee (GSMC) adopted a number of controversial and extensive resolutions advocating for broad restrictions on non-tribals in the Garo Hills region, including restrictions on employment, business activities, voting rights, and access to identity documents. Acting Chairman Balkarin Ch. Marak presided over the meeting, which covered topics pertaining to constitutional protections under the Sixth Schedule and tribal rights. Ryan Ch. Marak spoke about Tura’s evolving character, while co-chairman Jakrak A. Sangma gave the welcome speech. General Secretary Tony Tojrang B. Marak gave the vote of gratitude. All resolutions were thoroughly reviewed and unanimously approved, according to a press release released by the GSMC after the meeting. A resolution condemning non-tribals conducting business in Tura and a request to limit non-tribals’ access to the Garo Hills region were among the major rulings.

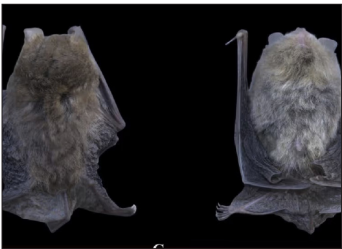


Resolutions suggesting age-based limitations on the issuing of Aadhaar and Election Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) were also approved by the Committee. It was decided that EPIC cards should only be obtained by residents of A•chik A•song and Sixth Schedule areas who are between the ages of 18 and 20, while non-tribals would only be eligible for two years. In another resolution, it proposed that

non-tribals may obtain Aadhaar cards for children only between the ages of three and eight. Taking a strong stance on governance issues, the GSMC reiterated its demand for the abolition of municipalities in Garo Hills, citing Article 243(ZC) of the Constitution, which exempts Sixth Schedule areas from municipal governance. It also expressed serious concern over the collection of a one-percent charge

by the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) on house construction and demanded that such charges be withdrawn immediately for tribal Garos. The resolutions are expected to generate significant political and legal debate, particularly on their constitutional validity and implications for inter-community relations in the Sixth Schedule areas of Meghalaya.

Rare woolly bat discovered in Meghalaya



Shillong, Jan 18: In a groundbreaking discovery, researchers have confirmed the presence of Titania’s woolly bat (*Kerivoula titania*) in Meghalaya, India, significantly extending its known range by nearly 500 kilometers and increasing India’s bat diversity to 137 species. This finding, documented in the journal *Animal Taxonomy and Ecology*, emerged from a field survey in December 2024. A lone male bat was captured using specialized traps and lures, leading to its identification through various examinations, including DNA sequencing and morphological studies. The research team, including notable biologists, emphasized the need for continued biodiversity surveys in Northeast India, especially in community-managed forests that are essential for uncovering new species.

Assam CM cautions merchants not to take advantage of farmers

Guwahati, Jan 18: On January 14, Assam Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma issued a strong warning against the exploitation of farmers during the current paddy procurement season, threatening to take severe legal action against anyone who buys paddy for less than the government-set minimum support price. Speaking to the media in Diphu, the Chief Minister stated that the government has set the price for paddy purchase at ₹2,670 per quintal and that this amount cannot be negotiated. He warned that paying farmers less than the announced price would not be accepted in any situation and advised private traders and other buyers not to do so. According to Dr. Sarma, the government keeps a careful eye on procurement operations to guarantee that farmers are paid fairly for their produce. The Chief Minister harshly denounced the role of intermediaries and dishonest traders, claiming that they frequently use farmers’ lack of access to markets



and urgent cash demands in order to compel distress sales. According to him, the state is dedicated to shielding farmers from these kinds of unfair acts and making sure that they directly benefit from government initiatives. Dr. Sarma reiterated the government’s pro-farmer position, stating that the Assam government continues to prioritize protecting cultivators’ interests. He continued by saying that

enforcement measures have been implemented and that any breach of the procurement standards would result in legal repercussions. In a significant announcement aimed at strengthening local procurement infrastructure, the Chief Minister said the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) is considering setting up rice mills in each Legislative Autonomous Council (LAC) under its jurisdic-

tion. He said such an initiative would help reduce farmers’ dependence on private traders, improve local value addition and ensure smoother procurement at fair prices. Dr. Sarma said the proposed move would not only empower farmers economically but also contribute to long-term agricultural sustainability in the hill districts by creating local processing capacity and employment opportunities.

Govt. run helicopter services conducts flight tests in five districts of Nagaland



Kohima, Jan 18: Pawan Hans Limited (PHL), the biggest government-owned helicopter service provider in India under the Ministry of Civil Aviation, carried out test landings of its aircraft in five districts of Nagaland as part of the Government of India’s Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS)–UDAN. The purpose of the trial landings was to evaluate the helicopter connectivity between Dimapur and Mokokchung, Kohima, Phek, Tuensang, and Zunheboto. After receiving the necessary authorization from the relevant district administrations, the activities were carried out using a Pawan Hans Dauphin twin-engine helicopter (registration VT-ELG). To guarantee the safe and efficient execution

of the trial operations, sufficient safety measures were implemented at every helipad, including police security, fire tender services, and ambulance facilities. The Pawan Hans crew was received at the Lerie Helipad in Kohima by Commissioner and Secretary of the Transport Department Robert Longchari, Officer on Special Duty (Transport) M. Ababe Ezung, and representatives from the Nagaland State Transport (NST). According to officials, Pawan Hans Limited, the Government of Nagaland’s Transport Department, the relevant Deputy Commissioners, and district administrative teams worked together to make the successful trial landings possible. A safe and effective operation was made possi-

ble in large part by the collaboration and careful planning at the district helipads. The presence of the Commissioner and Secretary at the Kohima helipad underscored the Nagaland government’s keen interest and strong support for the initiative, which marks an important milestone toward the launch of regular helicopter services in the state. Once operational, the helicopter services under the UDAN scheme will directly connect Kohima, Phek, Mokokchung, Tuensang and Zunheboto through Dimapur Airport. The initiative is expected to significantly improve regional connectivity, enhance access to remote districts, and boost economic growth and social integration across Nagaland.

Parimal Suklabaidya, the MP for Silchar, begins a month-long road safety bike rally

Silchar, Jan 18: Marking National Road Safety Month 2026 and Indian Army Day, Silchar Lok Sabha MP Parimal Suklabaidya launched a month-long awareness bike rally named “Pather Barta Pothe Jatra” at the Masimpur Military Station. This initiative addresses the concerning rise in road accident fatalities in India, where over 1.72 lakh deaths occur annually, particularly among individuals aged 18 to 45. The economic impact of these accidents is significant, costing nearly three percent of the nation’s GDP. The rally is set to traverse all 162 gram panchayats, three municipal boards, and one municipal corporation within the Silchar Lok Sabha constituency. Throughout the month, the team will hold road safety awareness programs in schools, colleges, and government offices. The initiative aims not only to raise public awareness but also to provide training for police personnel and citizens in life-saving techniques, alongside educating them



about the Good Samaritan Act. MP Parimal Suklabaidya emphasized the rally’s goal to disseminate safer road practices to grassroots levels, thereby reducing accidents and saving lives. He stated, “Through this road journey, we want to spread awareness and work towards minimising road accidents.” The campaign has garnered support from various stakeholders, including the Indian Army, civil administration, and local organizations, showcasing a collaborative commitment to enhancing road safety in the region.

CM Rio calls attention to a political crisis in Naga and calls for an end to “blame culture”

Chungtia, Jan 18: Dr. Neiphiu Rio, the chief minister of Nagaland, was a special guest at the 70th Ao Kaketshir Mungdang (AKM) Conference on Tuesday in Chungtia Village. There, he discussed important socio-political issues facing the state and honored the pioneering legacy of the Ao people. Dr. Rio thanked the AKM, Chungtia Village, and the Ao community for organizing the historic event under the conference subject of “Strengthening Horizons.” He recounted how the Ao pioneers shaped Naga civilization, pointing out that their goal went beyond tribal lines and was based on the advancement of all Nagas. The Chief Minister referred to the AKM motto, “For the Nation,” as a visionary dedication to selfless service. He reiterated the state government’s designation of the Ao tribe as the “Land of Pioneers” and highlighted the tribe’s historical contributions to Nagaland’s development. The unresolved Naga political issue, growing social fragmentation, and governance issues pertaining to the Inner

Line Permit (ILP), Article 371A protection, and the use of the state’s mineral resources were just a few of the urgent issues that Dr. Rio openly discussed during his speech. He emphasized that overcoming these obstacles required cooperation, respect for one another, and unity among all Naga tribes. The Chief Minister outlined the state government’s actions, highlighting projects like the Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) and the September 12, 2024, consultative forum that brought together important players to discuss the Naga political issue. Dr. Rio called for a shift away from a “blame culture” and advocated for true communication and conversation to resolve conflicts. Speaking to the young people, he stated that the heritage of the ancestors should be carried forward as a duty rather than just as history to be recalled. In order to ensure that the founding founders’ principles continue to direct Nagaland’s future, he finished by urging the next generation to preserve their goals and vision.

Arunachal Para Powerlifting team has been revealed for the 2026 National Championship



Imphal, Jan 18: The para powerlifting team representing Arunachal Pradesh at the Senior and Junior National Para Powerlifting Championship 2026, which will take place at COER University in Uttarakhand from January 16 to 18, has been revealed by the Paralympic Association of Arunachal (PAA). Under the auspices of the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI), the India Para

Powerlifting Organization is organizing the national championship. Based on their performance and accomplishment of the Minimum Qualifying Standard (MQS) in the Arunachal Pradesh State Para Powerlifting Championship 2025, four para-athletes have been chosen to represent the state, according to the PAA. Tarh Rade (72 kg), Bale Labung

(49 kg), Taj Richo (55 kg), and Amak Wangsa (55 kg) are the chosen athletes. Nich Tell, the team manager, and Tana Bunu, the escort staff, are among the state representatives traveling with the group. The chosen athletes are proud Divyangjan athletes from Arunachal Pradesh, according to PAA authorities, who also expressed confidence in their ability to represent the state at the national level with commitment, discipline, and athletic prowess. On January 15, the contingent is expected to leave for Dehradun. The Paralympic Association of Arunachal expressed its best wishes to the squad and expressed hope that the athletes will uphold the spirit of sportsmanship and win awards for the state. The association also appealed to the people of Arunachal Pradesh to extend their support and encouragement to the athletes as they compete on the national stage.

Amit Shah to visit Dibrugarh on January 30



Dibrugarh, Jan 18: Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Friday that Union Home Minister Amit Shah will travel to Dibrugarh on January 30 to complete the first phase of the Khanikar Stadium reconstruction and lay the foundation stone for Assam’s second Legislative Assembly complex. The planned Assembly facility in Dibrugarh is a major step towards making the city Assam’s second capital, according to the Chief Minister, who made the news during a Facebook Live conversation. He stated that the Assam Legislative Assembly will have two sessions in Dibrugarh each year after the complex is operational, with the remaining two sessions still taking place in Guwahati. According to Dr. Sarma, the action demonstrates the government’s dedication to decentralizing government and bolstering Upper Assam’s position within the state’s governance structure. The first phase of the Khanikar Stadium renovation project will be officially completed during the visit of the Union Home Minister. The goal of the refurbishment is to turn the current building into a state-of-the-art space that can accommodate big public events and athletic activities. The January 30 visit is being seen as a major milestone for Dibrugarh, underscoring the state government’s focus on balanced regional development and long-term infrastructure expansion.

Arunachal Deputy Chief Minister: The VB-G RAM G Act is revolutionary for rural India

Itanagar, Jan 18: The VB-G RAM G Act, according to Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein on January 17, is a “decisive and visionary reform” that strengthens India’s dedication to inclusive growth and rural empowerment. Speaking to media in the Namsai district, Mein stated that the Act, which was conceived under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s direction, strengthens livelihood chances and village-level infrastructure while offering a legal guarantee of 125 days of work in rural areas. The deputy chief minister described the Act as a historic piece of legislation that increases job security and concentrates on building long-lasting assets that would benefit rural communities for many years. He pointed out that the Act gives priority to the development of sustainable assets in important areas including disaster preparedness, rural connectivity, agricultural sup-

port, and water management. According to Mein, the focus on creating long-term assets would boost resilience and production in rural India in addition to creating jobs. He emphasized the significance of decentralized government, stating that the framework ensures that development projects reflect local needs and aspirations by placing gram sabhas and panchayats at the center of planning and execution. He continued by saying that the foundation of successful implementation will be public involvement. Referring to transparency and accountability, Mein said the Act incorporates digital monitoring systems, enhanced financial transparency, and provisions that align employment with agricultural cycles, thereby improving efficiency and farmer welfare. According to the deputy chief minister, these measures would help reduce leakages and ensure that benefits reach the intended households in a timely manner.



North East Chronicle

JANUARY 19 2026 VOL 01 NO. 319



India Skills Future

The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship successfully concluded the week-long Kaushal Manthan with a high-level session chaired by the Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Jayant Chaudhary, bringing together senior officials, institutional heads, industry representatives, and other key stakeholders from across the country to deliberate comprehensively on strengthening India’s skilling ecosystem, where the discussions over the course of the event, held from the 23rd to the 31st of last month, focused on identifying priority reforms, strategies, and frameworks aligned with national objectives and aimed at creating a responsive, outcome-oriented, and future-ready skilling infrastructure capable of meeting the evolving demands of the labor market, technological advancements, and emerging industry trends; the consultations culminated in the finalisation of the Skill Resolutions 2026, a set of actionable policy directives and programmatic guidelines intended to serve as the blueprint for the government and its partner agencies in implementing skilling initiatives throughout the upcoming year, emphasizing measurable outcomes, improved convergence with State Governments, closer engagement with industry, and enhanced monitoring mechanisms for training quality, assessment standards, certification processes, and placement outcomes, thereby ensuring that India’s skilling ecosystem is not only expanded but also continuously improved to meet both domestic and global labor market requirements; the Ministry highlighted that the deliberations addressed multiple dimensions of institutional strengthening, administrative simplification, and accountability enhancement, with detailed proposals including the introduction of outcome-based grading for Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), decentralisation of administrative powers to facilitate quicker decisionmaking, and a reorganisation of Sector Skill Councils to incorporate clearly defined performance indicators that would guide their operational effectiveness and contribution to national skilling goals, alongside continuous curriculum upgradation, industry co-creation of training programs, and flexible delivery models designed to make training more relevant and adaptable to a rapidly evolving technological landscape and emerging skill requirements across sectors; a major theme of the consultations was the creation of seamless learning pathways that allow individuals to progress from entry-level skill training to advanced certifications, support school-to-work transitions, enable lifelong learning opportunities, and facilitate mobility through the adoption of robust credit frameworks and standardized recognition of prior learning, ensuring that skill development is inclusive, flexible, and aligned with career aspirations as well as sectoral demands; in addition, the Ministry reiterated its commitment to operationalising a National Federated Skill and Workforce Registry to maintain a comprehensive database of trained individuals, track employment outcomes, and inform policy interventions, alongside the establishment of a National Trainer Framework to improve the quality and availability of certified trainers, strengthening of apprenticeship programs to ensure real-world experience and employability, and integration of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) into national skilling efforts, recognising their critical role in job creation, economic growth, and workforce development across the country; the Kaushal Manthan also addressed critical policy-level discussions on enhancing institutional coordination among central ministries, state governments, industry partners, and training providers, focusing on reducing fragmentation, improving datadriven decision-making, promoting transparency in program implementation, and leveraging technologyenabled monitoring and evaluation systems that track learning outcomes, trainee satisfaction, and employment rates, all of which are key to creating a robust and accountable skilling ecosystem that meets the ambitions of India’s workforce and employers alike; officials noted that the recommendations from the week-long deliberations also emphasized continuous adaptation to future industry needs, including emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, digital services, and green skills, ensuring that curricula, training modules, and assessment frameworks remain relevant, adaptive, and forward-looking, while integrating mechanisms for rapid reskilling and upskilling to mitigate disruptions caused by automation, technological change, or economic shifts; the consultations further highlighted the need for building strong partnerships between industry and training providers to co-design courses, implement work-integrated learning, and facilitate apprenticeships and on-the-job training that directly translate into employable skills, thereby reducing the skills gap, improving productivity, and enhancing the competitiveness of India’s workforce both nationally and globally; in addition to sector-specific interventions, discussions also focused on inclusive skilling, prioritizing access for women, persons with disabilities, economically disadvantaged youth, and marginalized communities, with strategies to promote equitable participation, create flexible training schedules, provide financial support, and offer mentorship programs, thereby ensuring that the benefits of India’s skilling initiatives are broadly shared and contribute to inclusive economic growth; technology integration emerged as another key area of focus, with proposals for digital learning platforms, e-assessment tools, virtual classrooms, AI-driven analytics for learner tracking, and cloudbased certification management systems, all aimed at enabling a scalable, transparent, and highly efficient skill development ecosystem that can respond in real time to both learner needs and employer demands while reducing administrative burdens and ensuring accountability.

Why Trump’s 100 per cent tariff strike on China could benefit India

Hours after he was denied the Nobel Peace prize, US President Donald Trump dropped a trade bomb on Beijing. For months, Trump had avoided “punishing” China with steep tariffs for buying Russian oil. China was slapped with 30 per cent tariffs, India with 50 per cent. That changed on October 10. The 100 per cent tariff imposed on all Chinese exports to the US from November 1 comes on top of the 30 per cent tariff already in place.

This, in effect, puts an embargo on Chinese exports to the world’s largest economy. What triggered Trump’s sudden action? The immediate provocation was a hardening of China’s ban on the export of critical rare earth minerals to the US. The festering wound is China’s refusal to buy soyabeans from US farmers. This has driven American farmers, who depend on China buying over 50 per cent of their crop, to near bankruptcy. Along with 100 per cent tariffs on Chinese exports, an enraged Trump has banned the export of critical software to China. A meeting between President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping was expected on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit on October 26 in Malaysia. That is unlikely to happen unless Trump backs off on his 100 per cent tariff threat. For its part, China has raised the ante in recent days. Apart from expanding the list of rare earth mineral exports that need elaborate enduse certification, Beijing says it will levy new port fees to all ships associated with the US. That, in economic terms, is a declaration of war. What is worrying the powerful US defence establishment is that this is the first time China has targeted the US military.



The new Chinese rules target US defence manufacturers, a red flag for Trump and the Pentagon. Since neither the new Chinese measures nor the retaliatory 100 per cent US tariffs go into effect till November, they could be part of hardball bargaining tactics between Washington and Beijing. Trump has said, notwithstanding the intensifying US-China trade war, he will attend the ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur on October 26. Xi has not yet decided his schedule and may not attend, ruling out a possible Trump-Xi meeting. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, is scheduled to attend. A Modi-Trump meeting on the sidelines of the summit is likely. Sergio Gor, the US ambassador-designate to India, called on Modi with a special message from Trump. refined exports by up to 20 per cent.

Dealing with Taliban: India walks a fine, pragmatic line

The October 2025 visit by Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to India, which is the greatest degree of direct engagement since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, signifies a dramatic change in both countries’ diplomatic approaches. Rather than endorsing the Taliban government, India views the action as a practical recalibration meant to protect its strategic interests and adjust to changing ground realities in Afghanistan. Muttaqi is prohibited from traveling by the UN, just like other prominent Taliban leaders. The 1988 sanctions committee of the UN Security Council granted India a remission. The agreement was essential to making the visit possible. The relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is deteriorating. Given the extremely tense relations between Pakistan and the Taliban, Muttaqi’s visit presents India with a strategic opportunity. New Delhi’s involvement is a direct reaction to the worsening ties between Pakistan and the Taliban, enabling India to acquire clout in Kabul and retaliate against its longstanding adversary. Notably, explosives shook Kabul during Muttaqi’s arrival, and the Taliban has accused Pakistan of being responsible. Pakistan’s alleged invasion of Kabul’s “sovereign territory” has been called a “unprecedented, violent, and provocative

act” by the Afghan administration. The incident is the latest event amidst escalating violence and deep mistrust between the two nations, which includes border clashes and accusations of harbouring militant groups. Pakistan has long accused the Afghan Taliban of permitting the Pakistan Taliban, also known as the TTP, to operate from their territory. The Taliban government has always denied this. The Taliban Defence Ministry warned in its statement that, should the situation become worse, “the consequences will be attributable to the Pakistani army”. While Afghanistan’s relations with Pakistan are deteriorating, India is strategically strengthening its ties with the Taliban. During Muttaqi’s visit, India announced that it would upgrade its technical mission in Kabul to a full embassy, effectively elevating diplomatic relations with the Taliban administration. This elevates diplomatic engagement to its highest level since the Taliban’s takeover. India’s deepening of ties with the Taliban is seen as a strategic move to counter Pakistan, which earlier had close links to the Taliban. India’s Concerns Thus, the geopolitical dynamics of the region are changing. The core shift is the deterioration of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan on one hand and a pragmatic pivot by India toward the Taliban

on the other. Reopening the embassy allows India to regain a diplomatic foothold and better monitor developments in Afghanistan after its initial withdrawal in 2021. The move enables direct engagement with the Taliban on security concerns like terrorism and extremist groups. A core element of India’s strategic interest is preventing Afghan soil from being used by terrorist groups for anti-India activities, a major concern since the 1999 IC-814 hijacking. During the discussions, the Indian side emphasised the need for both nations to coordinate efforts against cross-border terrorism. Muttaqi assured India that Afghanistan would not allow its territory to be used against New Delhi’s interests. This is important in the context of the fact that the Taliban has historically maintained links with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), both of which have carried out numerous terror attacks against India. Muttaqi’s Visit to Deoband The LeT and JeM are both considered ideological allies of the Taliban due to their shared adherence to the extremist Deobandi school of Sunni Islam. This common foundation has historically fostered strong connections between them. During the Taliban’s previous rule in the 1990s, the groups operated from Afghan territory.

A legal action to promote high-quality higher education

The Supreme Court’s order directing all Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to fill all vacant faculty positions within a period of four months is a timely judicial intervention to end the chronic shortages of faculty that have been gripping universities and colleges in India for long. In the last five years, universities have increased by 22%, colleges have increased by 17%, and the Gross Enrollment Ratio has also gone up to nearly 30% of the eligible students in the age group 18-23 years. The SC fixing a narrow window period of four months for filling the vacancy lays bare the crisis of a disproportionate faculty-student ratio, raising questions over the quality of education imparted in HEIs. The apex court’s directive follows an interim report submitted by a National Task Force constituted by it to address the mental health concerns of students and prevent the commission of suicides in HEIs. The SC observed that extremely rigid attendance policies, overburdening and unplanned phasing/scheduling of the academic curriculum, exam assessment methodologies, faculty shortages, vacant teaching posts, excessive reliance on inexperienced guest faculty, non-transparent or non-existent placement processes, etc. were all pointed out as stressors by the responses received by the NTF from students. While observing that vacancies of teaching as well as non-teaching officials in almost all the Higher Educational Institutions/Central Universities are very high vis-a-vis the sanctioned strength, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports also insisted that the existence of vacancies in HEIs, including technical institutions, impacts the faculty-student ratio and dilutes the quality of teaching in such institutions. The SC also directed that the appointment and filling of vacancies of the post of vice chancellor, registrars, and other key institutional/adminis-



trative positions must also be made within a period of four months.

The parliamentary panel’s emphasis, in this regard, on the importance of a regular, full-time VC in running a university, particularly given their critical role in appointing faculty and non-faculty members and overseeing the implementation of development plans, also needs to be noted by HEI for the smooth conduct of faculty recruitment. The Committee pointed out that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promises that leadership positions in HEIs will not be kept vacant for long periods and that outgoing and incoming Vice-Chancellors will overlap for some time. Ground realities, however, present a gloomy picture of unfulfilled promises. The SC further directed that since the date of retirement is known much ahead in time, recruitment processes must begin well in advance to en-

sure that such posts do not remain vacant for more than a month, and all HEIs must report on an annual basis to the Central and relevant State Governments as to how many reserved posts are vacant, how many are filled, reasons for non-filling, time taken, etc., so that periodic accountability is ensured. Implementation of this directive will be crucial in abolishing adhocism in faculty recruitment in HEIs and their over dependence on guest faculty and contractual appointments.

“Maintaining a robust and efficient workforce is crucial for the effective functioning of higher educational institutions. Timely and strategic filling of vacancies in both teaching and non-teaching positions based on the principles and procedures for a transparent, merit-based, and efficient recruitment process is essential to ensure continuity of academic delivery, administrative efficiency, and over-

all institutional excellence,” observed the parliamentary committee. The Committee’s recommendation that the Ministry of Education should direct the concerned stakeholders to conduct regular workforce analysis to identify current and future staffing requirements, considering factors like student enrollment, program expansion, faculty retirement, and evolving administrative requirements and academic vision, has got a judicial stamp of approval with SC making annual reporting of faculty strength, vacancy, and recruitment mandatory.

As NEP 2020 envisions that all HEIs by 2040 shall aim to become multidisciplinary, autonomous, and self-governing with larger student enrollments; establish at least one large multidisciplinary HEI in or near every district by 2030; achieve a 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by 2035; and phase out the affiliation system in the next 15 years, recruitment of qualified and permanent faculty in the required ratio will be critical to improve the standard of the teaching-learning ecosystem. HEI plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for research and grooming researchers to contribute to the country’s growth in all spheres through quality research work. Apart from fast tracking faculty recruitment, the Committee’s recommendation for providing seed grant facility to the newly recruited faculty at central university and institutions funded by the University Grants Commission to enable top performance by them needs to be prioritised. The central government and state governments earmarking adequate budgetary allocations for higher education will be critical to execute the SC order without any financial hurdles. The Union Budget for 2026-27 can be expected to include policy announcements enabling the HEIs to evolve a dynamic recruitment policy based on the apex court’s order.

Digital Fertilizer

Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan presented the Viksit Bharat-G Ram G Act, 2025 during a special Gram Sabha in Loni Budruk, Maharashtra, emphasizing its role as a transformative legislative measure aimed at bolstering rural employment, livelihood security, and local governance. The Act, which was broadcasted nationwide to over six million viewers, establishes a legally guaranteed provision of 125 days of employment for rural workers alongside prompt wage payments within a week of work completion, imposing additional compensation for delayed payments. This addresses persistent issues surrounding wage disbursement while fortifying the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). A key aspect of the Act is the decentralization of decision-making, empowering Gram Sabhas to prioritize projects that align with local needs, thereby enhancing participatory governance. The legislation encompasses various activities such as water conservation, rural infrastructure development, disaster mitigation, and livelihood initiatives aimed at improving productivity and fostering sustainable economic growth, with a pronounced focus on social inclusion and gender equity. Notably, it mandates that at least 33% of project work opportunities be reserved for women, promoting their active involvement in governance and economic activities. Moreover, the Act increases administrative funding from 6% to 9%, ensuring effective implementation and timely payments. This advancement aims to bolster capacity-building, monitor execution, and integrate technological solutions, including digital payments. Chouhan articulated that the Act transcends mere legal stipulations; it serves as a comprehensive developmental tool capable of modernizing rural employment frameworks, curbing distress migration, and fostering equitable growth. Notably, it encourages women’s active participation in governance and economic activities by requiring that at least 33% of project job opportunities be set aside for them. Additionally, the Act boosts administrative funds from 6% to 9%, guaranteeing timely payments and efficient execution. By fostering local innovation and accountability through decentralized governance, the Act aligns with the government’s vision of inclusive and sustainable rural transformation. It facilitates the development of vital infrastructure like irrigation and rural roads, and promotes environmental sustainability through activities like soil conservation and afforestation. The integration of livelihood activities with employment guarantees aims to provide steady income sources and enhance agricultural productivity. Chouhan underscored the importance of protecting the rights of workers, marginalized communities, and women, thereby affirming this legislation’s commitment to participatory democracy and community empowerment.

BUSINESS

Coca-Cola reshuffle puts India head under new global CEO

New Delhi: Coca-Cola announced a number of leadership changes on Wednesday, including the promotion of Sanket Ray, president of the company’s Southwest Asia and India operating unit, who will now be in charge of Greater China and Mongolia as well as Japan and South Korea as of March 31. Henrique Braun, the company’s new CEO, will oversee the creation of two new market segments. According to a statement from the US company, the groups “are designed to enhance focus on markets in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.” Claudia Lorenzo, who will also be president of the EME operational unit, will now be in charge of the markets in Africa, Asean and South Pacific, and Eurasia and the Middle East. She was previously president of the Asean and South Pacific operational unit and is currently chief of staff to chairman and CEO James Quincey. Quincey will remain the board chairman.

This new role will be filled by Sedef Salangan Sahin, who is presently president of the company’s Eurasia and Middle East operating unit and will answer to BraunThe company has also created the new role of Chief Digital Officer. “We believe our on-



going growth depends on understanding consumers even more deeply,” said Braun in the release.“We are evolving our operating organisation structure and elevating digital leadership so we can move faster and work smarter across all markets,” he added. Coca Cola Company is expected to announce its December quarter and full year results on February 10.

Indian Overseas Bank Q3 net profit up 63%



Chennai: Indian Overseas Bank (IOB) in Chennai reported a 63% net profit increase to Rs 1,427 crore for the quarter ending December 2025, up from Rs 875 crore the previous year. Operating income rose 15% to Rs 8,172 crore. The bank improved its asset quality, with gross non-performing assets declining to 1.54% from 2.55% year-on-year, and net NPAs dropping to 0.24% from 0.42%. Total business grew by Rs 1.01 trillion to Rs 6.44 trillion, an 18.7% year-on-year increase. CASA deposits rose by 7.8% to Rs 1.43 trillion, while total deposits increased by 14.5% to Rs 3.49 trillion. Advances in retail, agriculture, and MSME sectors grew significantly, contributing to a 24.1% overall increase in total advances to Rs 2.95 trillion.

In February, the Vivo V70 series might debut alongside the X200T

New Delhi: Vivo might launch the Vivo V70 series in India soon. According to a report by GSMArena, Vivo is likely to launch the Vivo V70 and V70 Elite smartphones in February. This lineup is expected to succeed the existing Vivo V60 and V60 Lite, which were launched in August and September 2025, respectively. It might be accompanied by the Vivo X200T as well. Vivo is also reportedly planning to launch the Vivo V70 FE (Fashion Edition) in India, but at a later date. The Vivo V70 range is anticipated to feature Sony camera sensors in conjunction with Zeiss lenses and be powered by Qualcomm Snapdragon CPUs, according to a GSMArena report. OriginOS 6, which is based on Android 16, is anticipated to be pre-installed on the smartphones along with a number of AI-powered features. The Vivo S50, which had its debut in China in December 2025, is anticipated to be relaunched as the Vivo V70. If this is accurate, the phone may have a 6.59-inch AMOLED screen, two 50MP back cameras (one primary sensor



and one periscope telephoto lens), an 8MP ultra-wide camera, and a 50MP front camera. Additionally, it can have a 6,500mAh battery, a Snapdragon 8s Gen 3 chipset, up to 16GB of RAM, and 512GB of internal storage. However, a Qualcomm Snapdragon 7 Gen 4 CPU might power the smartphone instead, according to a GizChina leak. The Vivo X200T is expected to position itself between the X200 and X200 FE, combining elements of both to deliver a near-flagship experience at a more affordable price. Vivo has already previewed the phone on Flipkart, revealing a dark purple finish and a circular rear camera module similar to its premium X-series models.

RBI authorizes Japan’s SMBC to establish a fully owned subsidiary in India

Mumbai: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has granted Japan’s Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) in-principle approval to establish a wholly owned subsidiary (WOS) in India, months after SMBC acquired a 24.21 percent stake in private sector lender Yes Bank. The regulatory approval to establish WoS was also granted in May of last year to Emirates NBD Bank PJSC, which will pay \$3 billion to acquire a controlling interest (up to 60%) in another private sector lender, RBL Bank. RBL will be an NBD subsidiary.

The fourth foreign lender to establish a WoS in India will be SMBC. With its four branches in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Bengaluru, SMBC presently conducts branch-based banking operations in India. The bank has received in-principle approval to convert its current Indian branches into a WoS. A WoS of the Sumitomo Mitsui Financial Group (SMFG) is SMBC. One of the biggest diversified non-banking financial businesses (NBFCs) in India is SMFG’s WoS, SMFG India Credit.



“If the RBI is satisfied that SMBC has complied with the necessary conditions set forth by the central bank as part of “in-principle” approval, it would consider granting a licence for the commencement of banking business in WoS mode under Section 22(1) of the Banking Regulation Act, 1949” the RBI press release said. After the transaction with Yes, SMBC became the largest shareholder while State Bank of India’s (SBI’s) stake fell to 10.78 per cent.

SBI and other banks had invested in Yes Bank as part of the latter’s reconstruction scheme. In March 2020, several banks led by SBI took 79 per cent stake in Yes Bank and helped the lender to stay afloat. Initially, SBI and

seven other private banks, which had invested in Yes during its reconstruction phase in March 2020, collectively sold their 20 per cent stake to SMBC for ₹13,482 crore.

Current regulations allow foreign banks to operate as a branch or a WoS of the parent entity. Currently, DBS Bank India and SBM Bank India work as wholly owned subsidiaries. A local presence gives these banks more flexibility than operating as a foreign branch. Earlier, Moody’s Ratings had said the deal with Yes will enhance SMFG’s presence in India, which it considers has both medium- and long-term strong growth potential. At end-March 2025, the number of foreign banks operating in branch/WoS mode in India declined to 44, following the exit of one bank during the year. “The change in the number of branches of foreign banks reflects their continuous realignment of global business,” the RBI said in its recent Trends & Progress report. As on March 31, 2025, there were 775 branches of foreign banks in India and 31 representative offices.

Infosys Q3 net profit down 2.2% at Rs. 6,654 crore on new Labour Codes

Mumbai: The second-largest IT services company in India, Infosys, has increased its revenue growth forecast for 2025–2026 due to a robust transaction pipeline and rigorous execution. In FY26, the business now anticipates sales growth in the range of 3-3.5% in constant currency, up from 2-3% in October. Due to the effects of the new Labor Codes, the company recorded a 2.2% decrease in net profit to roughly ₹6,654

crore for the third quarter (October–December) of FY26. This occurred as its industrial and financial services industries continued to be robust. Financial services and manufacturing were the main drivers of the 8.9% year-over-year increase in revenue to approximately ₹45,479 crore. Infosys exceeded revenue projections but fell short of profit targets. Bloomberg projected a net profit of approximately ₹7,393 crore and revenue

of approximately ₹45,172 crore. During the quarter, the Labour Codes’ implementation had an impact of ₹1,289 crore.

Similar effects were also felt by peers TCS and HCLTech. The company grew 1.7% on a constant currency basis, which eliminates the effect of currency changes. This was significantly better than the larger competition TCS, but it fell short of HCLTech, who reported the greatest growth

of the three, at 4.8%. Parekh clarified that the revised guidance does not include the impact of the acquisition of Versent, an Australian technology and consulting firm in which Infosys acquired a majority stake in August. It, however, does factor in the billion-pound deal signed with the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) to modernise its workforce management solution across England and Wales.

Mahindra’s XEV 9S, XUV 7XO clock nearly 94,000 bookings

New Delhi: Mahindra has recorded strong initial demand for its newly launched SUVs, the XEV 9S and XUV 7XO, garnering a consolidated 93,689 bookings by 2 pm on Tuesday. The bookings translate into a cumulative value of over Rs 20,500 crore, calculated at ex-showroom prices, the company said. Mahindra opened bookings for the two models earlier in the day, marking the latest additions to its SUV portfolio. The XEV 9S is offered as an electric SUV, while the XUV 7XO is available with petrol and diesel powertrain options, catering to different customer segments.

“With the XEV 9S and XUV 7XO, Mahindra is strengthening its leadership in the authentic SUV segment by offering customers compelling choices across electric, diesel and petrol powertrains, aligned to distinct usage needs and evolving preferences,” the company said in a statement. Deliveries of the two models will be rolled out in a phased manner across dealerships. While deliveries of the XUV 7XO commenced on Tuesday, the XEV 9S is scheduled to begin reaching customers from the week starting January 26, 2026.Earlier this year, Mahindra rose to the number two position in India’s passenger vehicle market, overtaking Hyundai Motor India and Tata Motors. This was largely driven by strong SUV demand. The company sold 600,000 vehicles in



2025, growing by around 20 per cent year-on-year.

Ajmera Realty up 10% on Rs. 1,431-cr sales

New Delhi: Activity is at a peak at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in SrAjmera Realty and Infra India shares jumped nearly 10 per cent in Wednesday’s session after reporting record ₹1,431-crore sales for the first nine months of the current financial year (9MFY26). The scrip gained 9.88 per cent to ₹200, the highest level since January 5 on the National Stock Exchange (NSE).

So far today, 1.5 million shares of Ajmera Realty and Infra India have changed hands on the National Stock Exchange. The stock was trading 2.50 per cent higher at ₹186.20 as of 3:07 PM, as compared to 0.26 per cent decline in the Nifty 50 index. Ajmera Realty and Infra India Limited share price rose on Wednesday as the company reported record sales for nine months of the current financial year (9MFY26). The real estate company recorded the highest ever sales worth ₹1,431 crore during this period. Ajmera Realty and Infra India said in their operational performance report that



they are poised to outperform annual guidance of ₹1,600 crore.In the third quarter of the current financial year (Q3FY26), the company recorded sales value of ₹603 crore. Collections doubled on year to ₹333 crore, which gave a clear boost to the company’s cash flow visibility. The real estate company delivered a strong performance in the December quarter (Q3FY26) as it launched Ajmera Solis at Vikhroli. The first phase of the project saw an impressive response from customers. Post launch, 84 per cent of its inventory

got absorbed, which helped to drive total sales growth of 123 per cent Y-o-Y during the quarter.

Sales area grew 59 per cent on year to 2,62,975 square feet, the company said. Ajmera Realty is compressing into a well-defined 58-week triangle, with clear outer boundaries placed near ₹175 on the downside and ₹220 on the upside. This prolonged contraction signals balance rather than trend exhaustion, but control is yet to decisively shift, said Anshul Jain, head, research at Laksh- mishree

Dredging Corporation Surges 26% in a Week, Hits 52-Week High



New Delhi: Nick Kyrgios has withdrawn from the Australian Open singles, saying he’s not physically ready for five-set matches. The Aussie tennis star, expected to get a wildcard, will focus on doubles instead. “I’m fit and back on court, but five-setters are a different beast,” Kyrgios said, citing his injury struggles . At 12:31 PM; DCIL has rallied 32 per cent higher at ₹1,136.80, as against 0.09 per cent gain in the BSE Sensex. Since December 8, 2025, the market price of DCIL has rallied 32 per cent after Invesco Mutual Fund A/c Invesco Infrastructure acquired a stake in the company. The said mutual fund purchased 250,694 equity shares of the company

at ₹942.83 per share via open market on the NSE, the bulk deal data shows. As on December 31, 2025, Invesco India PSU Equity Fund held 3.64 per cent stake in DCIL, the shareholding pattern data shows. The mutual fund had NIL holding in the company at the end of September 2025 quarter. Meanwhile, Quant Mutual Fund A/C Quant Infrastructure Fund holding in DCIL declined to NIL or below 1 per cent in December quarter, from 1.26 per cent at the end of September 2025 quarter.

Life Insurance Corporation of India also reduced its stake in the company to 3.92 per cent from 4.03 per cent, data shows. DCIL is promoted by

a consortium comprising four ports namely Visakhapatnam Port Trust, Paradip Port Trust, Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT), and Deendayal Port Trust. The 73.47 per cent equity stake in DCIL, previously held by Government of India (GoI), has been transferred to this consortium along with change in management control. All four ports are under the direct administrative control of the Ministry of Shipping (MoS). With the change in promoters, DCIL has been deriving benefits by virtue of receipt of orders on a nomination basis.DCIL specialises in providing comprehensive dredging services to ports, the Indian Navy and other organisations in India.

While the company primarily operates within the Indian dredging industry, it has also executed international projects in countries, including Sri Lanka, Taiwan and the UAE.DCIL on November 1, 2025, informed the stock exchanges that the company entered into 22 Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) with 16 organisations worth ₹17,645 crore during the India Maritime Week 2025 event held in Mumbai from October 27 - 31, 2025. The initiative forms a vital part of the government’s long-term vision to achieve the goals of Maritime India Vision 2030 and Atmanirbhar Bharat

2047, reaffirming India’s leadership in the maritime and blue economy sectors, DCIL said. DCIL’s strong parentage with shareholding held by major ports of the country, and a growing order book is providing medium-term revenue visibility. The profitability of DCIL has been adversely impacted during FY25 with levy of liquidated damages of ₹118 crore for shortfall in performance obligations. Besides, forex loss on unhedged foreign currency borrowing with sharp depreciation in INR/EURO exchange rate has also moderated the profit level. CARE Ratings Ltd (CareEdge Ratings) had envisaged an improved profitability along with growth in revenue and order book. However, delays in commissioning the new dredger and lower than anticipated order inflow have constrained scale and overall financial performance.Reliance on promoter ports has increased to 43 per cent of the order book (from 20 per cent on August 14, 2024). Commissioning of India’s largest dredger - DCI Dredge Godavari, scheduled for October 2026, is expected to enhance capacity and support both maintenance and capital dredging orders, thereby improving scale and revenue profile in the medium term, CareEdge Ratings said in its rating rationale.

Tesla showcase at ACKO Drive in Bengaluru



Bengaluru: ACKO Drive, an integrated automotive platform that helps users buy new cars sell used cars, and get car servicing, on Wednesday said it will host what it described as an “exclusive Tesla experience” here, marking the electric vehicle maker’s “first such showcase” in the city.

The showcase will be held at the ACKO Drive Service Centre and it will be open to the public from January 15 to 31, according to a press release. “Starting Thursday, the

ACKO Drive Service Centre at Kudlu Gate will serve as the exclusive destination in Bengaluru to experience Tesla,” it said. Announcing the initiative, Ashish Mishra, Executive Vice President, ACKO, said Bengaluru was a natural choice for the display, citing the city’s technology-driven consumer base. He said the initiative was aimed at bringing global mobility innovations closer to Indian consumers and was not limited to a static display.

“For the first time in the city, visitors can view and experience Tesla Model Y vehicles in a dedicated, high-tech setting. The Model Y was the world’s best-selling vehicle in 2023 and 2024 and features five-star safety ratings and fast-charging capability,” the company said. Interested customers can book test-drive slots through the Tesla India website and take the test drives from the service centre, the company added.

UK lawmakers express concern about China’s massive embassy in London

London: Senior members of the UK’s Labour Party have voiced serious concerns in Parliament regarding China’s planned “mega embassy” in central London, citing potential national security threats as Prime Minister Keir Starmer approaches a decision on the project. Labour MP Sarah Champion described China as a “hostile state” and noted widespread apprehensions among government agencies about the embassy’s implications. A group of nine Labour MPs has formally requested Communities Secretary Steve Reed to halt the project, emphasizing the proximity of the proposed embassy at Royal Mint Court to vital financial and communications infrastructure.

Opposition MP Alicia Kearns highlighted alarming aspects of suggested plans, including a concealed room adjacent to critical fiber-optic cables, warning it could facilitate economic warfare. While Housing Minister Mathew Pennycook acknowledged the threats posed by China, he maintained that national security would not be compromised, asserting the UK would maintain a pragmatic approach to engagement with China.



China’s acquisition of the Royal Mint Court site in 2018 for £225 million followed by plans for a larger embassy have faced delays due to security concerns, although MI5 and MI6 have not lodged formal objections. Starmer is poised to make the final decision on the embassy, coinciding with his upcoming visit to Beijing, which would mark the first by a British PM in eight years. The situation reflects internal party tension over the balance between economic engagement and security risks in dealing with China.

Rodriguez of Venezuela opens the oil industry and calls for diplomacy following Maduro’s removal



Caracas: In response to the Trump administration’s promise to take over Venezuelan crude sales, acting President Delcy Rodriguez of Venezuela used her first state of the union address on Thursday to promote opening the vital state-run oil industry to more outside participation. Less than two weeks after the United States arrested and overthrew former President Nicolas Maduro, Rodriguez presented a vision for Venezuela’s new political reality for the first time, one that goes against the core tenets of her government. Maduro’s former vice president announced that a “new policy is being formed in Venezuela” in response to pressure from the US to assist with its efforts to restructure Venezuela’s sanctioned oil industry. She called on parliamentarians to adopt oil sector reforms that would guarantee foreign companies access to Venezuela’s enormous reserves and asked the foreign ambassadors present to inform foreign investors about

the developments.”Venezuela can sell the products of its energy industry in free trade relations with the world,” she stated. In order to benefit the Venezuelan people, the Trump administration has stated that it intends to regulate future oil export earnings. In keeping with that, Rodriguez, dressed in a bright green pantsuit, explained how money from the oil sales went into two sovereign wealth funds: one to support health services that are in dire need and another to strengthen public infrastructure, much of which was constructed under Maduro’s predecessor, Hugo Chavez, but has since declined. These days the country’s hospitals are so poorly equipped that patients are asked to provide supplies needed for their care, from syringes to surgical screws. While Rodriguez criticized the US capture of Maduro and referred to a “stain on our relations,” she also promoted the resumption of diplomacy between the historic adversaries. Her succinct,

44-minute speech and mollifying tone marked a dramatic contrast to her predecessors’ fiery rants against US imperialism that often went on for hours. “Let us not be afraid of diplomacy,” Rodriguez. “I ask that politics not be transformed, that it not begin with hatred and intolerance.” The day before, she gave a 4-minute briefing to the media to say her government would continue releasing prisoners detained under Maduro’s harsh rule. But human rights groups have verified just a fraction of the releases that she claimed took place. Rodriguez appears to be threading a needle. A portrait of Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, was displayed next to her as she spoke. She called for the US government to “respect the dignity” of Maduro, who is being held in a Brooklyn jail after pleading not guilty to drug-trafficking charges. She portrayed herself as defending Venezuela’s sovereignty even as the country warmed up to the US with dizzying speed. “If one day, as acting president, I have to go to Washington, I will do so standing up, walking, not being dragged,” she said. “I’ll go standing tall ... never crawling.” Rodriguez delivered her speech as Venezuela’s Nobel Prize-winning opposition leader Mara Corina Machado was the one in Washington to meet President Donald Trump. Machado’s meeting with Trump received no coverage in Venezuela. The country’s state-run TV still pumps out a steady stream of pro-government images, including various statements from Iranian and Russian

officials decrying “US aggression” and wall-to-wall coverage of state-orchestrated rallies demanding Maduro’s return. Crowds of teachers on Thursday marched through the streets of Venezuela’s capital, Caracas, carrying posters condemning the US for “kidnapping” Maduro and chanting slogans in support of the government. National police wearing riot gear were everywhere. Pro-government graffiti scrawled across city walls read: “To doubt is to betray.” “They’ve kept the same anti-imperialist rhetoric going, but more moderated,” said David Smilde, a Venezuela expert at Tulane University who has studied Venezuela for 30 years. “Their idea is to give Trump everything he wants economically, but stay the course politically.”On the streets of central Caracas, most Venezuelans going about their days declined to be interviewed about their opinions, fearful of government reprisals as Maduro’s security apparatus remains intact. Others were simply at a loss of what to say about their country’s strange new reality in which the US claims to call the shots. “It’s a complete sea of uncertainty, and the only one who now has the power to make decisions is the United States government,” said Pablo Rojas, 28, a music producer. He said he was following Trump’s meeting with Machado closely “to see if she takes a leadership position, if they consider her ready to lead the country or be a candidate.” He shook his head in puzzlement. “It’s impossible to know what will happen.”

Trump threatens to use the Insurrection Act in the wake of the ICE shootings in Minneapolis

New York: In response to attempts to thwart his immigration crackdown in Minneapolis, President Donald Trump vowed on Thursday to use the Insurrection Act. Since a federal agent killed a woman in the area last week, tensions have increased. The administration has increased its use of forceful techniques, which local officials claim are intended to incite fear and reaction. On Wednesday night, there was another shooting involving a federal agent, which sparked hours of fighting between demonstrators and police. According to a federal spokesman, a man from Venezuela who was in the country illegally was shot in the leg while resisting arrest. The President stated that “if the corrupt politicians of Minnesota



don’t obey the law and stop the professional agitators and insurrections from attacking the Patriots of ICE,” he would use the 1807 Act, which permits the use

of force on US soil to put an end to an uprising or invasion.Renee Good, a 37-year-old mother and poet who was shot in her car by an Immigration and Customs En-

forcement officer last week, has been designated as a domestic terrorist by the administration. The federal version of events has been challenged by local officials, and protesters have called for the agent, Jonathan Ross, to be arrested and prosecuted, an improbable possibility under federal law. Minneapolis residents have protested repeatedly in the week since Good was fatally shot on the south side of Minneapolis. As word of the latest shooting spread, at least 200 protesters gathered near the apparent scene on Wednesday night. A group of them yelled at Minneapolis police officers who had blocked the street to traffic, telling the local officers that the federal agents should be arrested.

Yoon Suk Yeol, the former president of South Korea, was given a five-year prison sentence by a court

South Korea: Following his unsuccessful effort to establish martial law, former president Yoon Suk Yeol was found guilty of hindering attempts to arrest him and was sentenced to five years in jail by a South Korean court on Friday.According to a live broadcast of the decision, the Seoul Central District Court found Yoon guilty of preventing officials from carrying out an arrest order pertaining to his declaration of martial law in December 2024.

In addition, he was found guilty of crimes that included falsifying official documents and disregarding the legal procedures necessary for martial



law.The decision is the first in relation to Yoon’s criminal prosecution for his poorly ex-

ecuted declaration of martial law. The ruling can be appealed.

ICE grabbed a US citizen from a car in Minneapolis

Minneapolis: A US citizen named Aliya Rahman reported being forcibly removed from her car by immigration officers while en route to a medical appointment in Minneapolis. This incident, which was captured on video and went viral, has drawn attention to the increasing crackdown on immigration in the region. Rahman stated that after her arrest, she was held at a detention center, denied medical assistance, and subsequently lost consciousness. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) labeled her an agitator, alleging that she obstructed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents conducting nearby arrests. This incident unfolds amid widespread protests against what local officials have termed a “federal invasion” as federal agents intensify their operations.

Rahman was reportedly on her way to the Traumatic Brain Injury Center when she had an encounter with federal agents at an inter-

section, surrounded by protests that included whistles, car horns, and shouts. Rahman was hauled away, as seen in the video, despite her claim that she was incapacitated and could not move in response to orders.

Video footage shows a masked agent breaking her car window, while others proceeded to cut her seatbelt and forcibly extract her from her vehicle. Despite her assertion that she was disabled and unable to move in response to commands, Rahman was taken away, as depicted in the video footage. The DHS has contested Rahman’s version of events, asserting that she ignored multiple directives to relocate her vehicle before her arrest, which coincided with the apprehension of six others deemed agitators. One of those detained was charged with jumping on the back of an officer during the chaos surrounding the arrests. This narrative exemplifies the current tensions surrounding immigration enforcement in Minneapolis.

Japan, US share concern over yen slide as Tokyo signals readiness

Tokyo: As Tokyo increased its threats of intervention to stop the yen’s decline, Japan’s Finance Minister Satsuki Katayama stated both she and U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent were concerned about the recent “one-sided depreciation” of the currency. The yen’s decline, which crossed the crucial 158-yen-per-dollar threshold for the first time in over a year due to rumors that Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi would call a snap election in February, is reflected in Katayama’s remarks.

The reports caused the yen to weaken as they fueled rumors that Takaichi would be able to get a mandate for her expansionary fiscal policies if she won the election. However, the weakening yen has caused problems for policymakers because it raises import prices, burdens households, and may have an impact on Takaichi’s popularity ratings.Katayama told reporters in Washington, “I conveyed my deep concern over the one-sided depreciation of the yen, seen also on January 9, and Secretary Bessent shared this view,” implying that the United States had implicitly approved of market intervention. Speaking on the fringes of a multinational conference on vital mineral supply chains, Katayama had just concluded a bilateral discussion with Bessent. A request for comment on the bilateral meeting between Bessent and Katayama was not immediately answered by a U.S. Treasury official. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Masanao Ozaki issued a warning about possible action during a different press conference. “The government will take appropriate steps on excessive currency moves, including speculative ones,” he stated. Ozaki said that the Prime Minister has the authority to dismiss parliament, but he de-



clined to comment on the rumors of an election. According to Hiroyuki Machida, director of Japan FX and commodities sales at ANZ, “Japan’s argument is that yen-buying interventions should be justified as the yen’s recent weakness, despite the narrowing interest rate gap between the U.S. and Japan, deviates from fundamentals.” But the latest yen selling would continue until the outcome of the reported election and the direction of fiscal policy become clear, meaning the need for massive firepower to keep supporting the yen, Machida said. “So intervention is possible anytime now, but my guess is that wouldn’t happen till the yen hits 160 per dollar.” Katayama has said Tokyo has “a free hand” in dealing with excessive moves in the yen, citing a joint Japan-U.S. statement issued in September. The joint statement said Japan and the U.S. reaffirmed their commitment to “market-determined” currency rates, while agreeing that foreign exchange interventions should be reserved for combating excess volatility. Japanese policymakers have cited the statement as giving them the right to intervene when yen moves deviate from economic fundamentals and make excessively big swings.

Iran’s court warns of swift trials and executions amid tensions and rallies around the country

Tehran: Despite a warning from US President Donald Trump, Iran’s head of the judiciary hinted on Wednesday that detainees seized during widespread rallies will face swift trials and executions. Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei’s remarks coincided with activists’ warnings that detained people would soon be hanged. The US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency reports that at least 2,586 people have died as a result of the security forces’ crackdown on the protests. The rising death toll reminds people of the upheaval following Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution and is higher than any other demonstration or disturbance in decades. Human rights organizations and the protester’s family predicted that Iran will kill a demonstrator on Wednesday for the first time during the current wave of anti-government demonstrations. The demonstrator was recognized by rights organizations and family members as 26-year-old Erfan Soltani from a region west of



Tehran.Iran has vowed to launch a preemptive attack after claiming, without providing proof, that the US and Israel were behind the protests. A senior Iranian official brought up a prior Iranian attack in Qatar, prompting a US official to say that some workers at a major US military facility there have been advised to leave by Wednesday night. About 100 members of the security forces who were murdered during the protests were given a large

funeral on Wednesday. Iranian flags and pictures of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei were carried by tens of thousands of mourners. The coffins were heaped and draped with Iranian flags. They were covered with framed pictures of the deceased and red and white roses.In other places, people continued to be afraid in the streets. While anti-riot police and members of the all-volunteer Basij unit of the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard seemed

to have been returned to their barracks, plainclothes security forces continued to patrol several neighborhoods. “We are very frightened because of these sounds (of gunfire) and protests,” said a mother-of-two shopping for fruits and vegetables, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. “We have heard many are killed and many are injured. Now peace has been restored but schools are closed and I’m scared to send my children

to school again.”Ahmadreza Tavakoli, 36, told The Associated Press he witnessed one demonstration in Tehran and was shocked by the use of firearms by authorities. “People were out to express themselves and protest, but quickly it turned into a war zone,” Tavakoli said. “The people do not have guns. Only the security forces have guns.”Mohseni-Ejei’s comments about rapid trials and executions were made in a video shared by Iranian state television online.“If we want to do a job, we should do it now. If we want to do something, we have to do it quickly,” he said. “If it becomes late, two months, three months later, it doesn’t have the same effect. If we want to do something, we have to do that fast.”The comments stand as a direct challenge to Trump, who warned Iran about executions an interview with CBS aired on Tuesday.“We will take very strong action,” Trump said. “If they do such a thing, we will take very strong action.”

LIFESTYLE & HEALTH

Life-extending prostate cancer drug to be offered to thousands in England

A life-extending prostate cancer drug is to be made available to thousands of men in England in a matter of weeks, after a campaign by a patient and a charity. Abiraterone has been provided on the NHS in Scotland and Wales since 2023 but not in England and Northern Ireland, except in the most severe cases. The drug is already prescribed for patients in the UK with very advanced prostate cancer that has spread. But from now on the drug will be available on the NHS in England to high-risk patients whose cancer has not yet metastasised - potentially saving hundreds of lives. Amy Rylance, assistant director of health improvement at charity Prostate Cancer UK, said the decision was “a momentous, life-saving victory for the thousands of men whose lives will now be saved”. She praised the BBC for keeping “a spotlight on this issue” through its coverage over the past few years.

The charity estimates 7,000 men a year will now start the treatment, with some 1,470 avoiding later news that their cancer has got worse. The charity suggests some 560 lives will be saved. The drug will be available in weeks, NHS England says, with around 2,000 men diagnosed with prostate cancer in the last three months getting access to the treatment if it is of clinical benefit. Abiraterone stops cancer spreading by starving the disease of the hormones it needs to grow. Giles Turner, from Brighton, was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer in March 2023. He approached BBC News later that year after hearing that abiraterone was provided by the NHS in Scotland and Wales but not in England. “I was shocked and angered that my postcode meant I was denied free access to a treatment that could halve my risk of dying and give me the best chance of a cure,” he told the BBC. He chose to pay for treatment with the



drug, costing him £250 a month. He told us then that he felt “very fortunate” to be able to afford it, but outraged for others who could not. Mr Turner began his campaign for a change of policy. At the time, NHS England said it was reviewing the drug’s use for a wider range of men. But the following year officials told Prostate Cancer UK that there was no funding available. This was repeated by ministers in early 2025. “Today’s wonderful news is the culmination of all our determined and dogged efforts” said Mr Turn-

er. “I’m beyond happy that men like me now have fair access to the most effective treatment, that so many lives will now be saved, and that so many families will be spared heartbreak.” But he added that he was frustrated that nearly three years had passed since he raised the issue. Prostate Cancer UK’s argument that many lives could be extended by the drug was based on the findings of a trial called STAMPEDE, published in 2022. It found improved odds of survival among men given the drug alongside usual care. The Institute of Cancer Research said two years of abiraterone halved the risk of prostate cancer coming back and reduced the risk of death by 40%. Researchers had been frustrated that the health watchdog the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) had not approved the use of the drug for newly diagnosed patients. But for NICE and the medical regulator the MHRA to consider extending a drug’s usage they need detailed and time-consuming applications. In October 2022, abiraterone had gone “off patent” - which means the legal protection granted to the original brand making it (granting them exclusive rights to manufacture and sell it) had expired. Once it became a generic medicine - with other companies now having the right to buy and sell it - there was limited incentive for companies to seek approval for it to be prescribed for a wider group of patients.

Scientists turn body fat into bone to heal spinal fractures

Researchers in Osaka have found that stem cells from fat tissue can repair spinal fractures similar to those caused by osteoporosis. By turning these cells into bone-forming clusters and pairing them with a bone-rebuilding material, rats regained stronger, healthier spines. The approach could provide a safe and minimally invasive alternative for treating bone diseases in humans. Researchers at Osaka Metropolitan University have developed a promising new method for repairing spinal fractures using stem cells extracted from adipose tissue, also known as body fat. In animal studies, the treatment successfully healed spinal injuries in rats that mimic osteoporosis-related fractures seen in humans. Because these cells are easy to collect, even from older adults, and cause minimal strain on the body, the technique could provide a gentle, non-invasive alternative for treating bone diseases. Osteoporosis weakens bones, making them fragile and more likely to break. As Japan’s population continues to



age, the number of people affected is projected to surpass 15 million. Among the various types of fractures caused by osteoporosis, compression fractures of the spine, known as osteoporotic vertebral fractures, are the most common. These injuries can result in long-term disability and severely reduce quality of life, highlighting the need for safer and more effective treatments. Researchers at Osaka Metropolitan University have developed a promising new method for repairing spinal fractures using stem cells extracted from adipose tissue, also known as body fat. In animal studies, the treatment successfully healed spinal injuries in rats that mimic osteoporosis-related fractures

seen in humans. Because these cells are easy to collect, even from older adults, and cause minimal strain on the body, the technique could provide a gentle, non-invasive alternative for treating bone diseases. How Fat-Derived Stem Cells Help Rebuild Bone. Stem cells derived from adipose tissue (ADSCs) show strong potential for repairing bone damage. These multipotent cells can develop into various types of tissue, including bone. When ADSCs are cultivated into three-dimensional spherical groups called spheroids, their ability to promote tissue repair increases. Pre-differentiating these spheroids toward bone-forming cells further enhances their effective-

ness in stimulating bone regeneration. Led by Graduate School of Medicine student Yuta Sawada and Dr. Shinji Takahashi, the Osaka research team used ADSCs to create bone-differentiated spheroids and combined them with b-tricalcium phosphate, a material commonly used in bone reconstruction. The mixture was applied to rats with spinal fractures, resulting in significant improvements in bone healing and strength. The researchers also observed that genes responsible for bone formation and regeneration became more active after the treatment, suggesting that the approach stimulates the body’s natural healing processes.

Italy’s new nun-mapped pilgrim trail

Under a pale autumn sky, I set out to meet my old friend, Sister Katherine Adams; a Franciscan nun who lives in the village of Vallepiastra on the outskirts of Rome. She had invited me on the Cammino della Santissima Trinità, an ecclesiastical pilgrimage through the forested landscapes of Lazio and Abruzzo where Benedictine monasticism first emerged in the 6th Century. The network of four walking trails spans 18km and winds past pivotal, yet largely untouristed, Catholic sites of worship. Since the pilgrimage launched three years ago, more than 10,000 devotees have plodded these paths, and as I grabbed a coffee-filled thermos, a rose-scented rosary and a map, I, too, embarked on Italy’s newest pilgrimage.

A sister act of love

Though these trails have existed for centuries, the santo cammino (holy trail) itself only came to life in September 2022, when Italy’s strict pandemic restrictions were finally easing. Just as the nation prepared to brace for a new onslaught of overtourism in its cities and at many of its iconic religious monuments, Adams and her fellow nuns mapped the trails to offer young people an adventurous way to avoid the crowds while exploring some of Italy’s lesser-known spiritual sites; rediscovering prayer and community along the way. “Visitors rarely know what a sanctuary trail experience in Subiaco or Vallepiastra means,” Adams told me. “When they land in Rome, it’s all about crumbling aqueducts, grand piazzas and Renaissance abbeys. But it’s right here that a wealth of sacred relics and challenging hiking experiences converge.” Unlike other modern pilgrimages, apps can’t help you on this adventure. This network of trails is only partially signposted, forcing you to trust your instincts or locals who know the land by heart. Steep gorges require caution, reminding you to slow down. “People arrive exhausted by everyday life,” Adams told me. “But here, their gaze changes. Their approach becomes quieter. They start bonding with others while singing litanies.”

The cradle of medieval Europe

Though the official starting point of the santo cammino is the Vallepiastra Santissima Trinità – a sanctuary perched 1,373m high in the mountains – Adams suggested I begin my trek along the Cammino delle Abbazie, a moderately difficult 7km (4.3 miles) trail running from the town of Subiaco through the Monti Simbruini Regional Park to the Monte Cassino hilltop. I arrived in Subiaco at first light; mist still hanging over the valley as I passed a group of hikers singing pastoral songs, followed by the echo of blackbirds. Today, travellers come to Subiaco to raft the River Aniene and explore its medieval ruins. Yet, its role as the epicentre of Western monasticism is rarely acknowledged. This sprawling countryside of ancient stone villas and chestnut woods is where Saint Benedict of Nursia founded his first monastic communities and where



his new order of monks withdrew into a world of prayer, labour and discipline. Benedictine monasteries soon became centres of culture, crucial for preserving ancient knowledge – from Latin to theology – and nurturing the arts and architecture while pioneering the medicinal, agricultural and culinary techniques that shaped medieval Europe. Along the trail is also the majestic 6th-Century Santa Scolastica monastery, a tribute to Saint Benedict of Nursia’s sister; the founder of Benedictine monastic life for women. After immersing myself in its ancient library, I reached the end of the Cammino delle Abbazie, which segues into the 1.9km (1.1 miles) Tourist Trail ST2 leading to the 6th-Century Sacro Speco monastery. Cars arrived in these remote hills in the 20th Century, but this trail is still the most evocative way to reach the monastic community; one of Italy’s holiest sites for Benedictine spirituality. Built into a sheer limestone cliff, the

monastery takes its name from the “holy cave” where Saint Benedict of Nursia is believed to have lived in a state of penitence. I followed the trail just like shepherds, hermits and nuns once did while carrying candles and provisions. The trail climbs steadily above Lake San Benedetto, as its cobblestone steps lead past views of ravines down below. “Traces of spirituality are everywhere, from the old mule tracks anciently used to ferry supplies up and down the valley to the small apothecary room filled with handmade lavender soaps and glass bottles holding tinctures. This place is the result of a long tradition shaped by history and the Benedictine principle of ora et labora, literally ‘pray and work,’” said Friar Maurizio Osb, who guides pilgrims through the medieval labyrinthine frescoed corridors and cloister. At Sacro Speco, monks spend a part of their day gardening, as they have done for centuries. Each plant is conserved to



prepare their herbal products, now sold at the monastic apothecary filled with organic deodorants, peppermint sweets and their famous amaro benedettino, a bitter digestif made from gentian and wild fennel.

In the footsteps of ancient pilgrims

After four hours immersed in Subiaco’s spiritual world, I took the local bus from Piazza Falcone to the Simbrivio Dam. There, I crossed stretches of low juniper scrub for a kilometre and finally arrived in Vallepiastra, an 11th-Century village with 300 inhabitants. Its main square overlooks the lush Simbrivio valley, mirroring the Santissima Trinità Sanctuary carved high into the cliff on the opposite side of the stream. I stopped for a plate of fettuccine with hearty lamb ragù and a board of local cheeses at the osteria “La Brace” da Pietro and followed the Sentiero dei Pellegrini (Pilgrims’ Path) for another 5km (3.1 miles). This itinerary has long linked



Vallepiastra to the Santissima Trinità sanctuary and is now part of the newly mapped pilgrimage. In the centre of the sanctuary lies the open-air altar that has been the fulcrum of the Sentiero dei Pellegrini since the 5th Century. Admiring the hagiographic frescoes etched into the ancient stone walls, I followed Adams and Sister Mary Ricci, a nun who has lived in the convent for more than 30 years, to the neoclassical Chapel of San Giuseppe; home to ecclesiastic masterpieces depicting St Bernardino of Siena and St John of Capistrano. I was spellbound by the central fresco of the Holy Trinity, which dates back to the 12th Century, famous for its Byzantine-influenced iconography thought to reflect early Eastern monastic symbolism. “Symbolism is part of this hiking journey,” Ricci says. “Step by step, you encounter simple wooden crosses carved with messages from pilgrims or

candles lit in hope for a miracle.”

A sweet return to the simple life

On my walk back to the trail’s starting point, I passed locals selling cured meats and nutty mountain cheeses before boarding a shuttle to the village of Cappadocia; home to the fourth and final trail of the santo cammino. Cappadocia is known as “the gateway to inland Abruzzo” and its historical 12th-Century centre is filled with stone houses and terraced pastures. Its slopes explode with Apennine edelweiss and orchids; paths are lined with wild strawberries, bilberry bushes and hawthorn. Once in the village, I embarked on the Madonna dell’Oriente; a short but steady 4km (2.5 miles) path that brings visitors to the eponymous white chapel perched on a grassy ridge. It’s a modest sanctuary, yet a reminder that devotion is woven into ordinary life as personal offerings, from ribbons to family photographs.

Suniel Shetty opens up about son Ahan’s struggle



Mumbai: In Bollywood, the star kid label often comes with the assumption of an easy ride. Veteran actor Suniel Shetty recently pulled back the curtain on the emotional toll the industry can take. He opened up about the difficult phase his son, Ahan Shetty, went through after his debut. Ahan entered the industry with Tadap (2021), a high-octane remake of the Telugu hit RX 100 (2018). While the film showcased Ahan’s potential and dedication, it failed to ignite the box office. Speaking at the song launch event for his new movie Border 2, Suniel was visibly emotional while reflecting on Ahan’s journey. He addressed the misconception that lineage guarantees a smooth path. “One day, after his first film, there was a little break. You know, there’s always a turmoil in our lives,” Suniel shared. “Ev-

eryone thinks, yes, Suniel Shetty’s son would have got a lot of work. But somewhere or the other, there’s a lot that Ahan went through in life.” For Suniel, watching his son navigate the lull after his first release was a test of the entire family’s resilience. He revealed that he kept his advice simple, focusing on character rather than box-office numbers: “The only thing I said was, whatever you do, do it with your heart.”

The tide seems to be turning for Ahan, who now has a lead role in Border 2 — sequel to one of the films that defined his father’s career, Border. Suniel expressed a profound sense of gratitude toward producer Nidhi Dutta and director JP Dutta for giving Ahan this massive platform.

That’s why I have always been indebted, and I use the word ‘indebted’. I am not saying a thank you, but I use the word indebted to Nidhi. Nidhi is like my little daughter,” Suniel said. For a father who saw his son struggle through disappointment, this film feels like a blessing. He added: “For Nidhi to take Ahan in such a big film is a big thing. So, from a father’s point of view, I am indebted. I just pray that he has done justice and the film works for all of us.” Slated for release on January 23, 2026, Border 2 serves as a spiritual sequel to the 1997 classic, Border. While the original focused on the Battle of Longewala, this chapter expands the scope to include a multi-front narrative featuring the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Ahan is set to share the screen with powerhouses Sunny Deol and Varun Dhawan. As the film gears up for its release, the Shetty family is hopeful that this project will be the milestone Ahan has worked so hard for.

Hema Malini is not ready to watch Dharmendra’s final film Ikkis yet



New Delhi: Actor Hema Malini has revealed that she hasn’t yet found the courage to watch the final film of her late husband and actor Dharmendra. She

shared that she will watch Ikkis once the wounds begin to heal. Hema spoke about her late husband and cinema icon Dharmendra in an interview with Screen.

She revealed that she still hasn’t found the courage to watch his final film.

When asked whether she has watched Dharmendra’s final film Ikkis, Hema

shared, “I came to Mathura when it was released. I have to do my work here. Also, I can’t see it now, it will be too overwhelming. That’s what my daughters are also saying.

Maybe I will watch it later when the wounds start healing.” Directed by Sriram Raghavan and produced by Dinesh Vijan under Maddock Films, Ikkis is a tribute to the life of Second Lieutenant Arun Khetpal, the youngest recipient of the Param Vir Chakra. The film stars Agastya Nanda as Arun, alongside Simar Bhatia, Jaideep Ahlawat, and Dharmendra. During the interview, Hema revisited the chatter around a supposed family rift, which had surfaced after two separate prayer meets were organised in Dharmendra’s honour: one hosted by Sunny Deol and the other by Hema Malini.

Taapsee Pannu on new-age Bollywood publicity tactics slams aggressive PR culture



Mumbai: Taapsee Pannu has never been one to shy away from honest conversations, and this time, the actor has spoken candidly about the changing nature of Bollywood’s publicity culture. In a recent interview, she reflected on how PR strategies in the Hindi film industry have grown louder and more aggressive, pointing out that promotion today is no longer just about highlighting one’s own

work, but often about dragging others down - a trend she has consciously chosen to stay away from. Speaking to Taapsee explained that her relatively slower pace over the last couple of years has been intentional. Taking a step back, she said, helped her clearly observe how the industry’s publicity ecosystem now operates. “I was too busy doing my own things. But last 1.5-2 years I have slowed down things

and it has also been a conscious effort. I have realised that this PR game has gone to some other level. You are paying either to, I mean push yourself.

Which was one version of doing PR. You are also paying to push someone else down,” she said. Questioning the mindset behind this shift, Taapsee expressed concern over how success is increasingly being measured in comparison to others.

“Since when did your success depend upon someone else’s failure? People have started creating a new facade of their personalities because they need relevance,” she added, calling out the pressure to manufacture public personas for attention rather than letting work speak for itself. The actor also highlighted what she sees as a growing disconnect between the voices celebrities project publicly and the work they deliver on screen.

“I am not okay with just me being there in a hit film, I also need to have a very strong voice even if it is not yours. But you have to create a voice. And that voice that you are trying to create beyond films is not matching with the work you are doing.

So that discrepancy. You are saying beyond your films but your work is saying something else,” she said, underlining the importance of authenticity. Taapsee further shared that she prefers investing her time and mon-

ey in herself and her close circle rather than indulging in publicity tactics such as “planting articles,” making it clear that aggressive PR is not a route she intends to take. On the work front, Taapsee made her acting debut with the Telugu film Jhummandi Naadam in 2010 and entered Hindi cinema with Chashme Baddoor in 2012. Over the years, she has carved a distinct space for herself with performances in films like Baby, Naam Shabana, Manmarziyaan, Mulk, Badla, Thappad, Rashmi Rocket, Haseen Dillruba, Dobaaraa and Phir Aayi Haseen Dillruba. She was last seen in Mudassar Aziz’s Khel Khel Mein, which also featured Akshay Kumar, Vaani Kapoor, Ammy Virk, Aditya Seal, Pragya Jaiswal and Fardeen Khan. Taapsee will next be seen in Gandhari, a revenge drama directed by Devashish Makhija and backed by Kanika Dhillon’s Katha Pictures, set to premiere on Netflix.

Diljit Dosanjh’s song from Border 2 brings romance to the frontlines



New Delhi: The makers of Border 2 have dropped a fresh track titled Ishq Da Chehra, and it’s steering the spotlight away from battlefields and towards matters of the heart. Unveiled by T-Series and JP Films, the song offers a tender look at the personal worlds that keep soldiers anchored as the film builds momentum ahead of its January 23, 2026 release. Ishq Da Chehra lands as a romantic, melancholic melody exploring love, longing and the quiet strength that relationships lend during times of duty. Through

soft, emotive montages, the track captures intimate moments between the film’s central characters and their partners. Composed by Sachet-Parampara with lyrics by Kausar Munir, the song features vocals by Diljit Dosanjh, Parampara Tandon and Sachet Tandon. The music’s restrained emotion bridges two worlds – the chaos of the border and the stillness of home – underscoring how personal connections influence a soldier’s resolve. The visuals connect several on-screen couples: Sunny Deol-Mona Singh,

Varun Dhawan-Medha Rana, Diljit Dosanjh-Sonam Bajwa and Ahan Shetty-Anyaa Singh. Each pairing is shown experiencing a different shade of resilient love, subtly shaping the viewer’s understanding of what motivates soldiers beyond the call of duty. For the makers, the track acts as a reminder that soldiers are not just men of uniform but individuals with families, lovers and lives halted by service. The film team continues to frame Border 2 as a saga of courage and patriotism, with the new song highlighting the emotional stakes behind that narrative. Presented by Gulshan Kumar & T-Series in association with J.P. Dutta’s JP Films, Border 2 is produced by Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, J.P. Dutta and Nidhi Dutta, with Anurag Singh directing. With each new reveal, anticipation around the film’s theatrical arrival only grows stronger.

Khans at 60 and the tricky box office fight of 2026



Mumbai: Conversation surrounding Bollywood’s box office performance in 2026 has focused on whether it will be a breakthrough year for leading actors Ranveer Singh and Ranbir Kapoor. With Ranveer’s “Dhurandhar Part 2” and Ranbir’s “Ramayana Part 1” set to release, industry analysts believe these films could significantly influence the trajectory of the Hindi film industry. The anticipation of a power shift mirrors a memorable scene from the blockbuster “Pathaan,” where Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, veterans of the Bollywood landscape at 60, discuss their continued relevance against a backdrop of uncertainty re-

garding the new generation of actors stepping into the spotlight.

“Dhurandhar,” directed by Aditya Dhar, has revitalized interest in Hindi cinema, grossing over Rs 1239 crore globally and becoming the highest-grossing Bollywood film in India. Its success has heightened expectations for “Dhurandhar Part 2,” scheduled for March 19. On the other hand, “Ramayana Part 1,” directed by Nitesh Tiwari and featuring Ranbir Kapoor as Bhagwan Ram, aims to set a new standard in visual effects for Indian cinema, with a combined budget for both films rumored to be around Rs 4,000 crore. Despite the emergence

of these promising films, the legacy of the Khans—Shah Rukh, Salman, and Aamir—remains unparalleled, with their influence expected to linger. Each Khan is preparing to release self-produced projects in 2026, reflecting their enduring power. Shah Rukh’s upcoming film “King” continues the themes of action and romance that have characterized his previous successes, including “Jawan” and “Pathaan,” which each grossed over Rs 1000 crore globally. As the industry looks forward to 2026, the balance between established stars and emerging talent will be crucial to shaping the future of Bollywood.

Shahid Kapoor steps into a brutal, vengeance-driven tale O’Romeo teaser

Mumbai: Shahid Kapoor is set to bring love wrapped in violence with his upcoming film O’Romeo. The film is set to mark his reunion with acclaimed filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj, promising a powerful revenge romance inspired by true events.

Adding to the growing anticipation, the makers have unveiled a striking teaser of the evocative world of O’Romeo, offering audiences their first glimpse into its intense emotional landscape and eclectic ensemble. Set against the backdrop of unrequited love, O’Romeo stars Shahid and Triptii Dimri in a deeply emotional and turbulent narrative that explores passion, pain, and the irreversible consequences of love denied.

The film also boasts an extraordinary ensemble cast featuring Nana Patekar, Avinash Tiwary, Disha Patani, Farida Jalal, Aruna Irani, Vikrant Massey, and Tamannaah Bhatia in a special appearance. Each performer brings a distinct presence and intensity, enriching the narrative and adding depth to this layered and compelling story. The clip elevates expectations, hinting at a bold and emotionally charged cinematic experience. With a stellar cast and Vishal Bhardwaj’s signature storytelling at its core, the film promises a distinctive take on love, loss, and vengeance. Produced by Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, O’Romeo is set to release in Valentine’s Week on February 13.



Director Rakeysh Mehra shares Delhi-6 ending

New Delhi: Director Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra has disclosed that the original version of his 2009 film Delhi-6, starring Abhishek Bachchan and Sonam Kapoor, began with the death of the protagonist. In a recent interview, Mehra shared that this unreleased cut, which was screened at the Venice Film Festival, starkly contrasted with the version released in India. He attributed his decision to alter the ending to external feedback and personal uncertainty about the Indian audience’s readiness to accept the original narrative. While talking to Screen, plained the major narrative difference in the original version, saying, “The original film opens with the ashes immersion of Abhishek’s character in the Ganges. And over that, a voiceover comes, in Abhishek’s voice, saying, ‘These are my ashes.’ I still have it with me. That’s the one that went to the Venice Film Festival. They saw the film, they freaked out, they said ‘wow,’ and they gave it a lovely reception out there. about the decision.” Out of foolishness. Sheer foolishness. We, filmmakers, are foolish people, mad, foolish, all of that. I think there was so much dark humour in the film. There was so much going on that everybody who saw the cut said, ‘Leave it with some hope,’ and all that. And I fell for it. I shouldn’t have,” he added.

Akshay Oberoi opens up on undergoing combat training for Toxic



Mumbai: Akshay Oberoi will next be seen alongside actor Yash in Toxic: A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups, which marks his South debut and the actor will be seen in an action avatar in the film. For the same, he underwent rigorous combat training for about a month before the shoot, and continued it through the course of the shoot. He recalls it as an exhilarating experience.

“I’ve been doing action for a long time. I learnt martial arts as a kid and continued that training into my college years. I underwent rigorous physical training for about three weeks before the shoot and that continued during the whole shoot. Learning the choreography beats for specific action sequences was quite exhilarating. We had a world-class action team from across the globe, and it was tonnes of fun training and learning from them,” he says. Speaking about his preparation, Akshay Oberoi shares, “The action in Toxic is on a different scale altogether. I’ve done action in my earlier films, but what

this film expected from me was on another level. The choreography, the detailing, the physical drills, everything was designed to build not just muscle but endurance, timing, and mind-body sync. The director and action team had a very specific vision, with its own rules.” Talking about his co-star, Akshay raves, “He is the Rocking Star Yash, the main protagonist of the film. So, of course, the action was alongside him and it was very cool and slick. The teaser has just come out can get a glimpse of how larger-than-life the film is going to look. I’m quite excited about that. Ask him how action is different for him than the dramas that he has done and he says, “Action is very physical. So at the end of the day, different parts of you are drained when you do action. When you go home, you are just exhausted physically. But when you do drama, you’re exhausted emotionally. At the end of the day, if you’ve done your job correctly, you should be exhausted either way, just in different ways.”

Real Madrid’s New Era: Arbeloa Pumps Up the Team with Alonso’s Blessing

New Delhi: Alvaro Arbeloa has spoken about his conversation with Xabi Alonso after taking over as Real Madrid’s manager, saying their friendship is still strong. “He wished me well, and I would’ve done the same for him. Our friendship comes first,” Arbeloa said, emphasizing there’s no tension between them. Arbeloa replaced Alonso, who left the club after a poor run of results and squad unrest. He’s keeping their conversation private. The 42-year-old, who was promoted from his role with Real Madrid Castilla, inherits a side under pressure.

Los Blancos trail Barcelona by four points in LaLiga and are coming off a painful 3-2 defeat in the Spanish Super Cup final on Sunday. Speaking at his first press conference on Tuesday, Arbeloa admitted he was fully aware of the magnitude of the task ahead but sounded confident and energised. “Of course, I am aware of the responsibility and the task ahead of me, and I am very excited,” he said. “I’ve found a group of players who are really eager. They share my enthusiasm to fight for everything and to win.” Earlier in the day, Arbeloa took his first training session as head coach before addressing



the media. He underlined his ambition to restore Real Madrid’s winning culture and fill the club’s trophy cabinet. “My only goal is to win. This club demands the highest standards and that’s exactly what we will aim for,” he added. Having been part of Real Madrid’s coaching structure since 2020, Arbeloa now faces an immediate test, with just one training session under his belt before Wednesday’s Copa del Rey round-of-16 clash against second-division Albacete.

The former right-back, who made 238 appearances for the club between 2009 and 2016, enjoyed a glittering playing

career at the Bernabu, winning eight major trophies, including two Champions League titles. He insisted he is ready to serve the club for as long as required. “I’ve been in this house for 20 years, and I’ll stay as long as they want me to,” Arbeloa said. In the short term, his focus is on closing the gap on Barcelona in LaLiga while ensuring strong runs in the Champions League and Copa del Rey. “The important thing is that the players are happy, enjoy themselves on the pitch, and honour the badge,” he said. “Wearing this badge is the best thing that can happen to you in life.”

Supreme Court delivers split verdict on prior approval clause in anti graft law

New Delhi, Jan 12: The Supreme Court delivered a split verdict on Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act, which requires prior sanction before investigating public servants for corruption. Justice B.V. Nagarathna declared the provision unconstitutional, stating it protects corrupt officials and violates Article 14 of the Constitution. On the other hand, Justice K.V. Viswanathan upheld the provision, suggesting that sanction decisions be taken by independent bodies like the Lokpal or Lokayukta. The controversy surrounds the requirement of prior approval for investigating public servants, with critics arguing it hinders anti-corruption efforts and protects corrupt officials. The case will now be referred to a larger bench for a final decision. Section 17A was introduced through an amendment in 2018 to protect public servants from prosecution in corruption cases. The section was challenged by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL) on the ground that it was introduced to frustrate any police probe into the offences committed by a public servant. According to the NGO, the amendment was



brought in despite the apex court holding twice earlier that no prior sanction was needed for a probe against public servants. While holding the provision unconstitutional, Justice Nagarathna said: “Firstly, the question is whether prior approval within the meaning of Section 17A of the Act has to be given at all? The question is not about who, within the government or outside the government, should give such an approval. In my view, no such prior approval is required....”She said Section 17A of the Act was nothing but another attempt to resurrect on the statute book what was struck down by this court earlier....In my view, the requirement of prior approval within the mean-

ing of Section 17A of the Act is contrary to the object and purpose of the Act, inasmuch as it forestalls an enquiry and thereby in substance protects the corrupt rather than seeking to protect the honest and those with integrity, who really do not require any such protection,” she said.She said she did not concur with Justice Viswanathan’s view to substitute the expression “Government” in Section 17A and the expression “of the authority competent to remove him from his office” with “Lokpal” or “Lokayukta”, as the case may be, as such substitution was impermissible by way of interpretation.Justice Viswanathan said Section 17A was “constitutionally valid, subject to the condition that grant or

refusal of the approval by the competent authority mentioned therein will depend on the recommendation of the Lokpal/Lokayukta”.He said the Centre or states and “the authorities competent to remove set out in Section 17A will, on receipt of the information under Section 17A, immediately forward the information to the Lokpal/Lokayukta”.The Lokpal/Lokayukta may initiate an inquiry and forward the recommendation to the appropriate authority, who shall be bound to act in accordance with the recommendation insofar as the grant or refusal of permission under Section 17A is concerned, he said.“Insofar as the judiciary is concerned, already Veeraswami (supra) and UP Judicial Officers Association (supra) have provided a mechanism. Section 17A(c) could also be attracted in cases where the body/organisation/public servant is not covered within the jurisdiction of Lokpal,”he said.In such cases, the authority competent to remove the public servant in question should get the information screened by an independent investigative agency and act in accordance with its recommendation, he said.

Henry Nicholls believes that the inexperienced New Zealand team will recover in Rajkot

New Delhi: New Zealand are eyeing an opportunity to put their learnings from the first ODI into practice as they aim to make a comeback in the second fixture of the three-match series on Wednesday, January 14, at the Niranjan Shah Stadium, Khandheri, Rajkot. The Kiwis lost the series opener by four wickets despite making India toil hard during their run chase in the second innings. As New Zealand look to level the series in the second match, star batter Henry Nicholls acknowledged their inexperience on the bowling front and placed the onus on the batters to bat deep once they get their eye in. New Zealand got off to a great start in the first ODI, with the openers adding 117 runs for the first wicket, but they failed to capitalise on it during the death overs. “From a batting point of view, we did a lot of things pretty well and it’s a case of us being able to do them for a bit longer. Devon and I (had a) partnership at the top — if one of us is able to bat for an extended period of time” Nicholls said during the pre-match press conference.

“That’s always the case in one-day cricket. If you’re able to have wickets in hand and a set batter going through to the last 15 or 10 overs, then it certainly extends your death-over period,” he added. Nicholls also spoke about the challenges of bowling to stalwarts such as Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli and backed their inexperienced bowl-



ing unit to find ways to put them under pressure. “That’s the challenge when you come over here, and certainly as a young group — even as an experienced group — when you play against players who have played that much cricket. But to see it firsthand in the first game, and the way the guys adapted, particularly from a bowling point of view, bowling to those guys and finding ways to try and put them under pressure, was encouraging,” he said. “If we are able to do some of those things, even as an inexperienced side, then the na-

ture of cricket is that if you’re able to take wickets, you’re able to put teams under pressure,” Nicholls added.New Zealand have never won an ODI series in India and will have a final chance to stay alive in the rubber in Rajkot. Meanwhile, India will be looking to seal the series with another commanding victory. There has been one change in their squad, with Washington Sundar being ruled out due to a rib injury and replaced by Ayush Badoni. It remains to be seen whether he will be handed his debut in the second ODI.

Carlos Alcaraz, Jannik Sinner hint at historic doubles pairing



New Delhi: Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner, the world’s top two men’s tennis players, have revealed they are open to partnering in doubles, as they prepare for an exhibition match in South Korea one week before the Australian Open. Their mutual interest in teaming up adds a new dimension to a rivalry that defined the 2025 tennis season and comes as both players continue to dominate the singles circuit. Speaking on the eve of their match in Incheon, Sinner shared his enthusiasm for the possibility. “I think it would be fun at least one time to share the court in different ways, on the same side,” said Sinner. He added that the demands of the singles tour pose challenges: “Of course, the schedule, and we are so

focused on singles that it’s very difficult because if you go deep in singles and then you have to play doubles, you don’t have the right recovery.” Sinner suggested the partnership could become a reality at some point. “But for one tournament, I think it’s great to do it, and we’re going to talk about it maybe this year at a certain time where we feel like, or next year.” Alcaraz echoed the sentiment, admitting the idea had crossed his mind “once or twice.” The Spaniard added, “At least once would be fun,” before joking, “I think I’m playing forehand, and he’s playing backhand.” The two will face each other on Saturday in South Korea, marking their only warm-up before the Australian Open, which begins on 18 January. The exhibition comes at a critical moment for both athletes. The 22-year-old Alcaraz withdrew from the Shanghai Masters in September due to “physical issues” and has previously criticised the sport’s packed schedule.

Nick Kyrgios withdraws from Australian Open singles



New Delhi: Nick Kyrgios has pulled out of the Australian Open singles, citing he’s not ready for the physical demands of five-set matches. The Australian tennis star, who was expected to receive a wildcard, will instead focus on doubles at the tournament. “I’m fit and back on court, but five-setters are a different beast, and I’m not quite ready to go the distance yet,” Kyrgios wrote on social media. The 30-year-old, who reached the quarter-finals of his home Grand Slam in 2015, has endured a prolonged battle with injuries in recent years. He will now feature only in the doubles competition at Melbourne Park alongside compatriot Thanasi Kokkinakis, with the tournament set to begin on January 18. Announcing his decision to withdraw from the singles event, Kyrgios revealed that his body was not quite ready for the demands of five-set matches and that he wanted the wildcard to go to someone who could “make their moment count”. “After some good conversations with TA, I’ve made the call to focus on doubles for this year’s AO. I’m fit and back on court, but five-setters are a different beast and I’m not quite ready to go the distance yet. This tournament means everything to me, but I’d rather give my spot to someone who’s ready to make their moment count. It’s all building blocks, and I will be back next year and pumped to compete. See you out there,” Kyrgios wrote on his Instagram story.

India keeps an eye on events in Bangladesh as the Army chief emphasizes open lines of communication

New Delhi, Jan 12: Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi on Tuesday said India was closely watching the developments in Bangladesh and keeping military communication channels open to avoid any “miscommunication or misunderstanding”. He said Bangladesh military actions were not targeted at India. “I want to assure you that, as of today, whatever actions are being taken are not directed against India in any way,” the army chief said. “Secondly, as of today, all three services have kept their communication channels fully open. The Indian Army has multiple channels of communication open and I remain in regular touch with their chief there. In the same way, we are also in contact through our other channels as well,” Gen. Dwivedi added.He said India had already sent a team to assess the situation there. “We (army) had sent a delegation



there, which met everyone. Similarly, the chief of the naval staff and the chief of the air staff have also spoken,” he said, stressing that the intention is to avoid any “miscommunication or misunderstanding”.Responding to the increased Pakistan-Bangladesh engagement, Gen. Dwivedi described capability development as routine for all countries. “As far as capabili-

ty development is concerned, it is something that is an ongoing process. India is also doing it, and other countries are also doing it. As far as our preparation is concerned, we are closely monitoring.... We are having our training exchange programme. There is no problem in our military relationship with Bangladesh,” he said.New Delhi’s ties with Bangladesh have come under

strain since Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League regime was ousted in August last year following a violent protest. The simmering tension between the two countries has escalated with diplomatic protests and a sports boycott. Both countries have suspended visa services in several cities and accused each other of failing to ensure adequate security for their diplomatic missions.

Jaishankar unveils India’s BRICS 2026 plan



New Delhi, Jan 12: External affairs minister S. Jaishankar unveiled India’s approach to BRICS under New Delhi’s chairship, hours after several countries of the grouping, including India, woke up to the spectre of being hit by another Trump tariff if they continued to do business with member country Iran. Given how US President Donald Trump has railed against BRICS in the past, his latest missive threatening to impose 25 per cent tariff on any country which does business with Iran was the elephant in the room at the unveiling of the logo, theme and website of BRICS 2026. The logo, barring the colour palette, is similar to the one used in 2016 when India last chaired the grouping. The original BRICS members are Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, with the grouping now expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates. Jaishankar did not speak directly on the new tariff of 25 per cent “announced” by Trump but he referred to “complicated economic landscapes” in his speech. “The current global environment presents complex and interlinked challenges. Geopolitical uncertainties, complicated economic landscapes, climate-related risks, technological changes and persistent development gaps continue to affect countries across regions. In this context, BRICS remains an important forum that encourages dialogue and cooperation, and

practical responses, taking into account national priorities and different stages of development,” he said. Building resilience, facilitating innovation and promoting cooperation and sustainability, the minister said, would be the four pillars of India’s chairship. In the context of resilience, Jaishankar elaborated that under this pillar, “we will endeavour to build structural institutional strengths capable of weathering global shocks”. India intends to work with BRICS partners to build resilience in agriculture, health, disaster risk reduction, energy and supply chains, including through cooperative frameworks that enhance collective preparedness and response. “At a time when the world is also navigating multiple complex challenges — the call for a reinvigorated, inclusive and effective multilateral order has never been more urgent,” Jaishankar added, urging BRICS member countries to commit themselves to reformed multilateralism that reflects contemporary realities where institutions like the United Nations, the WTO, IMF and the World Bank are representative and inclusive. He further iterated India’s commitment to the New Development Bank that predates even the first Trump administration but is seen as an alternative to western-led financial systems.“Founded by BRICS countries, the New Development Bank has emerged as an important instrument of economic cooperation, promoting infrastructure and sustainable development of its member countries. India remains committed to supporting activities and efforts to further strengthen the bank as a credible, responsive and financially sustainable institution,” Jaishankar said. Till late in the evening, there was no official response from the government to the US President’s announcement of punitive tariffs related to Iran, with officials maintaining that no details were available.

Siddaramaiah seeks clarity from Rahul Gandhi



Bengaluru, Jan 14: Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has sought clarity from Congress MP Rahul Gandhi, saying there was “constant confusion” over a power tussle in the state, sources told. According to sources, Siddaramaiah said he was keen to expand his cabinet and sought a meeting with Rahul Gandhi over rumours of a leadership change. The development comes amid persistent speculation over leadership tensions within the Congress government in Karnataka, even as the party’s central leadership has repeatedly denied any internal crisis. Last month, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge sought to play down reports of a leadership tussle, asserting that there was no confusion at the level of the party high command. “The high command has not created any confusion,” Kharge had said, stressing that any internal issues should be resolved by the state leadership itself. Kharge also warned party leaders against taking personal credit for the Congress’ electoral success in Karnataka, emphasising that the organisation was built collectively by its workers over decades.Both Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar have consistently denied reports of discord. Siddaramaiah has maintained that he enjoys the confidence of the party leadership and will complete his full term, rejecting claims of any rotational chief minister arrangement. Shivakumar, for his part, has dismissed talk of rifts as media speculation and opposition propaganda.

Nihal Sarin dazzles Viswanathan Anand, while Arjun Erigaisi comes in second Tata Chess Blitz

New Delhi: After a series of erratic and exciting rounds, Wesley So finished the first day of the Open Blitz as the only leader, earning seven of the nine potential points. Arjun Erigaisi, who maintained his steady performance in fast time controls, finished half a point behind him. The day saw a lot of upsets, significant errors from elite players, and quick changes in the standings.

The competition started with Vidit Gujrathi taking advantage of an odd self-trap by Wesley So in his first game, while Erigaisi benefited from an early error by Volodar Murzin in Round 1. R Praggnanandhaa, who made a crucial mistake in a challenging queen endgame, was also defeated by Hans Niemann. After a series of erratic and exciting rounds, Wesley So finished the first day of the Open Blitz as the only leader, earning seven of the nine potential points.

Arjun Erigaisi, who maintained his steady performance in fast time controls, finished half a point behind him. The day saw a lot of upsets, significant errors from elite players, and quick changes in the standings.

The competition started with Vidit Gujrathi taking advantage of an odd self-trap by Wesley So in his first game, while Erigaisi benefited from an early error by Volodar Murzin in Round 1. R Praggnanandhaa, who made a crucial mistake in a challenging queen endgame, was also defeated by Hans Niemann. Nihal Sarin's victory over Anand in just 21 moves in Round 2 was a standout result, highlighting the uncom-



promising nature of the Blitz format. Erigaisi maintained his momentum with wins over Wei Yi and Aravindh Chithambaram, later edging out Nihal Sarin in a lengthy endgame to stay near the top of the standings. A key moment came in Round 4 when Erigaisi used a queen sacrifice to defeat Anand in a Ruy Lopez, showcasing deep calculation under time pressure. Wesley So recovered strongly in Round 6, exploiting loose pieces by Erigaisi to secure a much-needed win and regain his position among the leaders. Anand responded with a crucial victory over Niemann, keeping himself in contention. Round 8 proved decisive as Anand checkmated Vidit, Praggnanandhaa edged out Erigaisi, and So outplayed Niemann. These results caused further changes at the top of the leaderboard. The final round of the day saw Wesley

So hold Wei Yi to a draw, while Erigaisi overcame Vidit Gujrathi to remain just behind So in the standings. Nihal Sarin ended the day in third place with 5.5 points, keeping the competition open for the following rounds. In the Women's Blitz, Carissa Yip made an impressive start, winning her first four games before being stopped by Vantika Agrawal. Stavroula Tsolakidou later defeated Vantika with a strong display using the bishop pair, and Aleksandra Goryachkina remained a consistent contender throughout the session. A key draw between Carissa Yip and Goryachkina late in the session left Carissa in the lead with 6 points. Stavroula, Goryachkina, and R Vaishali finished the day just half a point behind, keeping the Women's Blitz closely contested heading into the next rounds.

AIFF says ISL gets AFC recognition



New Delhi: The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has formally recognized the forthcoming shortened 2025–2026 Indian Super League (ISL) season, according to the All India Football Federation (AIFF). The federation stressed, however, that champions of the Super Cup and ISL would only be eligible for indirect, rather than direct, entry into the AFC Champions League 2 this season through zonal qualifications. The decision comes after the league's delayed start, which resulted in fewer games. Clubs will therefore be unable to fulfill the AFC's basic requirement of 24 league and cup matches for direct qualification. Only 16 games, including 13 ISL games and at least three Super Cup games, are anticipated for most teams. In a letter to the AIFF dated January 15, the AFC outlined the regulatory basis for its decision. "With the exception of any additional slot(s) allocated to a Member Association in accordance with Articles 3.4 and 3.5, Member Associations that fail to fulfil the Member Association Eligibility Criteria shall, subject to Article 4.4, be eligible to be allocated only indirect slots for the relevant AFC Club Competition," the AFC stated.

Alyssa Healy, the captain of Australia, unexpectedly announced her retirement from cricket

New Delhi: Healy stated, "I have mixed feelings about the upcoming India series being my final one for Australia." "I'm still passionate about playing for Australia, but I feel like it's time to call it a day because I've kind of lost that competitive edge that has kept me driven since the start." Healy discussed the psychological and physical effects of competitive sports and how the past few seasons had been particularly taxing. "It's been a while coming. More than anything else, the past few years have been mentally taxing.

It's becoming more difficult to continue diving back into the well when it's not as full as it once was, and there have been injuries,"

she stated. Healy will finish her career having played close to 300 international matches, scoring over 7,000 runs across formats. Behind the stumps, she has been equally influential, registering 275 dismissals since making her debut as a teenager in 2010. For much of her career, Healy served as vice-captain under Meg Lanning, before taking over as full-time skipper in 2023. One of her standout moments as captain came when she led Australia to a historic 16-0 whitewash of England. Across her career, Healy has been part of eight ICC World Cup-winning campaigns and has etched her name into the record books. Her achievements include the highest individu-



al score in a World Cup final and the most dismissals by a wicketkeeper in women's T20 Internationals. She was also honoured with the Belinda Clark Award in 2019, twice named ICC Women's T20I Cricketer of the Year, and played a key role in Australia's gold medal-winning run at the 2022 Commonwealth Games. Far from anxious about the next chapter, she said she was looking forward to a fitting farewell on home soil.

A Danish badminton player criticizes the "Highly Unprofessional"

New Delhi: Currently underway at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in New Delhi, the India Open badminton tournament has encountered significant challenges, drawing negative attention from players. Notable incidents include a disruption during a match featuring India's HS Prannoy due to bird droppings on the court. Additionally, Danish player Mia Blichfeldt has publicly denounced the tour-



nament conditions, citing severe air pollution and labeling them as "unacceptable" and "highly unprofessional." Blichfeldt expressed doubts about the feasibility of hosting a World Championship under such circumstances. It is noteworthy that this Super 750 event has been previously held in the KD Jadhav Indoor Hall, suggesting a need for better management and facilities to ensure suitable playing conditions.

Aryna Sabalenka and Carlos Alcaraz are determined to win the Australian Open

New Delhi: Aryna Sabalenka is completely focused on winning a third Melbourne championship, while Carlos Alcaraz begins his campaign for a career Grand Slam on Sunday "hungry" for an elusive Australian Open triumph. There are presently two French Opens, two US Opens, and two Wimbledons in his main collection; the championship is the only piece missing. "This is my main goal for this year," stated Alcaraz, who will play local player Adam Walton in the night game at Rod Laver Arena. "I'm just hungry for the title, hungry to do a really good result here." At Queen's in



London last year, he faced the 79th-ranked Walton and prevailed 6-4, 7-6 (7/4). The 22-year-old would become the sixth person to win all four major titles, behind Andre Agassi, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, and Rod Laver, if he were to complete the career Slam. Additionally, he would overtake Nadal,

who was 24 at the time, to become the youngest. However, he has a significant obstacle in the form of Italy's Jannik Sinner, the two-time reigning champion who is in excellent physical shape. Sinner, who won Wimbledon after defeating Alexander Zverev in the previous year's final, will start against Hugo Gaston of France, whom he has faced twice but not since 2021. "We worked a lot physically," Sinner said of his pre-season. "These days, the physical aspect is crucial since the matches may be really intense and lengthy. "You have to be at the top physical level as long as you can."

Aryna Sabalenka must overcome fierce competition from Coco Gauff



New Delhi: World No.1 Aryna Sabalenka's road to a third Australian Open title in four years could include passing her rivals Coco Gauff and Iga Swiatek after the draw for the season's first major was revealed on Thursday. World No.1 Aryna Sabalenka's road to a third Australian Open title in

four years could include passing her rivals Coco Gauff and Iga Swiatek after the draw for the season's first major was revealed on Thursday.

The 27-year-old Sabalenka and third seed Gauff are on a semifinal collision course, but the Belarusian may first need to move past 2021 US Open champion and 28th seed Emma Raducanu, big-hitting Danish 14th seed Clara Tauson and seventh seed, two-time major finalist Jasmine Paolini to reach that stage. Gauff, who won her second major at Roland Garros last year, may face 18-year-old Mirra Andrejeva, the eighth seed, in the quarterfinals. In her attempt to win back-to-back Australian Open titles, defending champion Madison Keys may face Canadian 22nd seed Leylah Fernandez in the third round after splitting their two previous meetings. This could lead to a fourth-round matchup with US countryman Jessica Pegula.

Ayush Shetty hopes to live up to the anticipation ahead of his India Open debut



New Delhi: Ayush Shetty asked veteran countryman H.S. Prannoy for advice on how to handle his anxiety the day before he would play in the India Open badminton competition in New Delhi. However, the anxiety wasn't brought on by the fact that he would be competing against Indian No. 1 Lakshya Sen in his World Tour 750 debut. Instead, it was because he had found out that he would be making another debut at the press conference prior to the competition. "I'm doing this for the first time. "I went and asked Prannoy bhaiyya what I was going to be asked and what all I should say before this (the conference)," he says, The fact that Ayush was indeed called to the stage and that he shared it with double-Olympic medalist P.V. Sindhu, World medalist Prannoy and Asian Games champion and world medalist doubles pair of Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, give an idea of the kind of expectations the 20-year-old carries on his broad shoulders. Ayush is currently ranked 32, second highest for an Indian men's singles player after Lakshya (WR 13). He's racked up a number of career highlights over the past year. He won the US Open World Tour 300 last year – the first major title for an Indian in 2025 (Lakshya later won the Australian Open at the end of the year). He's also notched up a number of high profile scalps. He twice beat World No. 9 Kodai Naraoka and former World Champion Loh Kean Yew, and overcame World No. 6 Chou Tien-chen at the US Open. Last week, he beat Olympic bronze-medallist Lee Zii Jia

of Malaysia and then took one game before going down in three against World champion Shi Yuqi of China at the Malaysia Open. His coaches are optimistic about his prospects. "India has had a number of talented men's singles players but after Lakshya, Srikanth and Prannoy, most of them were stuck between World No. 35 to 40.

Ayush has started to graduate from competing at the World Tour 300 stage to the top level of world badminton. Even though he's not winning tournaments just yet, he's already regularly beating players in the top 10," says former national coach Vimal Kumar, who is also head coach at the high performance academy in Bangalore where Ayush has been training since 2020. In fact even before his break-out win in the USA last year, Vimal says Ayush had been praised by double Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen. "They had had a training camp together in Marseille just before the Olympics and there Viktor said that Ayush reminded him of a younger version of himself," Vimal tells.

A glance at Ayush is enough for you to see the resemblance. At six-foot-five, Ayush is slightly taller than Viktor – one of the tallest singles players in international badminton. That height gives Ayush immense reach and power. "He has some really good shots from the back of the court and he is very strong at the net as well," says Vimal. That height is a double-edged sword though. "One of the challenges with my height is that defense and movement

is harder for me compared to others. I also have to work really hard on my fitness," Ayush says. Indeed, Ayush has been travelling with a physio to help him recover between matches after having suffered a minor back niggle late last year. There's work to be done but Ayush believes he has it in him. He's always thought so. Growing up in Karakala, a small town of 30,000, an hour's drive north of Mangalore, professional sports wasn't on the horizon for Ayush. "I don't have any sportsperson in my family. My father works at a bank. He was interested in badminton and I started playing in the backyard of my home. I slowly started enjoying it. There was no real coach or training partner but even at that age I thought I would one day become the best in the world. I saw videos of players like Lee Chong Wei and Axelsen and I would think that one day, I'd be playing in the biggest stage as well. I know all kids say this but I really believed it," he says. Even though they had no knowledge of sport, Ayush's family supported him. At 12, he moved to Bangalore along with his mother and sister so he could get better training. After four years at a smaller academy, he was scouted by Centre for Badminton Excellence (then known as the Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy). Since his time at the Centre for Badminton Excellence, he's made his way past a number of similarly talented youngsters to be at the top of the prospect pile. "A lot of youngsters fall away and don't always do justice to their talent. What helped Ayush is that he has a calm temperament. He doesn't think that he knows everything and is always willing to learn," says Vimal. Ayush says he's watched and learned a lot from Lakshya himself, who was his senior at the academy. "I've grown up watching Lakshya. He is an amazing player with the best speed and strokes. But when I saw his career progress it was a big lesson to me because I saw how hard he worked. I saw just how hard it was to get to where he is. That's what I learned the most from him," he says. When he takes on Lakshya in the opening round of the India Open, all respect will have to be put to one side as he hopes to register his first win in three senior encounters against the senior partner. "I know the crowd will be cheering for him because he is the favourite. But I hope I make it a good match," Ayush says. Regardless of how the match goes, Ayush and his coaches have big plans for the 2026 season.

Lamine Yamal leaks another Szczesny smoking clip after Super Cup win

New Delhi: Following FC Barcelona's victory over Real Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup, Lamine Yamal unintentionally took center stage after a brief Instagram Live video appeared to show goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny smoking in the changing room amid the festivities. Yamal was capturing behind-the-scenes footage from the locker room just after Barcelona's Supercopa victory, giving viewers a peek at the celebrations that followed the game. The young winger unintentionally caught Szczesny smoking while moving the camera. Yamal abruptly turned the phone back on him-

self after seeing what was on film, and he could be heard stating, before the video ended. Although the moment was short, it quickly gained popularity on social media. The incident is not new territory for Szczesny. The Polish goalkeeper was previously captured smoking during Barcelona's Super Cup celebrations last year as well, following their 2025 final win over Real Madrid. That episode had sparked debate among supporters and pundits, though Szczesny has remained open about his habit since joining the club. Barcelona fans have largely taken the situation in stride. Supporters are

known to chant "Szczesny fumador" during matches, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the goalkeeper's candid admission that smoking is a personal choice. Szczesny has previously stated that it is part of his private life and not something he intends to change simply because he plays for Barcelona. On the pitch, the Super Cup final delivered drama worthy of the occasion. Barcelona took the lead in the 36th minute through Raphinha, before Vinicius Junior responded with a stunning solo goal. Robert Lewandowski restored Barcelona's advantage, only for Gonzalo Garcia to equalise right on half-

time, sending the teams into the break at 2-2. The decisive moment arrived after the interval when Raphinha fired in a long-range effort that took a deflection past Thibaut Courtois. Barcelona then had to weather late pressure, including a red card for Frenkie de Jong and the introduction of Kylian Mbappe, before holding on to lift the trophy. While Barcelona celebrated their first silverware of the season and continued their recent dominance over Madrid, Yamal's accidental leak ensured that the night carried a lighter, if slightly awkward, moment alongside the footballing drama.

