

India Monitor

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'Homebound' makes it to Oscar shortlist for best international feature
Neeraj Ghaywan's 'Homebound' is among the 15 films shortlisted in the best international feature category at the Oscars, moving a step close to the final five nominations. The movie, inspired by a true story that became the basis of a news article during the pandemic, has been creating a global buzz since its debut at the Cannes Film Festival this May. Produced by Karan Johar and Adar Poonawalla, and starring Ishaan Khatter, Vishal Jethwa and Janhvi Kapoor, 'Homebound' is Ghaywan's second movie after 'Masaan'.

LS nod to bill to open up N-sector for pvt players

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

IN a significant move aimed at boosting private participation in India's nuclear energy sector, the Lok Sabha on Wednesday passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill by a voice vote, amid a walkout by opposition members. Union Minister Jitendra Singh described the legislation as a "milestone" that seeks to modernize the country's nuclear framework while maintaining stringent safety and regulatory safeguards.

Replying to a debate in the Lok

Sabha, Singh, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office overseeing the Department of Atomic Energy, said the new law was prompted by "silent phobia" among industry players due to stringent liability provisions under previous legislation. "Everybody was hesitant to come forward. This became an unending chain resulting in a silent phobia among suppliers, and we lost out on collaboration for the last 10 years," he said.

The SHANTI Bill amends and consolidates provisions of the Atomic Energy Act of 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act of 2010. It introduces a multi-layered

mechanism to ensure full compensation to affected persons in the event of a nuclear accident, including operator liability, a proposed government-backed Nuclear Liability Fund, and access to international compensation under India's participation in the Convention on Supplementary Compensation.

Addressing concerns about supplier liability, Singh clarified, "The government will deal only with the operator; it is upon the operator to deal with the supplier." The bill rationalizes operator liability through graded caps linked to reactor size to encourage deployment of newer technologies, such as small

modular reactors.

Singh emphasized that the legislation would modernize India's nuclear sector in line with contemporary technological, economic, and energy realities while retaining strong safety, security, and regulatory oversight. "India's role in geopolitics is increasing. If we have to be a global player, we have to follow global benchmarks and global strategies. The world is moving towards clean energy. We too have set a target of 100 GW of nuclear energy capacity by 2047," he said.

The minister said the bill is critical for meeting India's growing energy needs and increasing the share of

nuclear power to 10 per cent of the country's overall energy mix. The legislation also grants statutory status to the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, which was previously set up under an executive order, and proposes the establishment of an Atomic Energy Redressal Council to settle disputes outside the courts.

Opposition members, led by Congress MP Manish Tewari, expressed concerns about certain provisions of the bill, particularly the removal of supplier liability in case of nuclear incidents, and urged the government to refer it to a parliamentary committee for detailed scrutiny.

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Delhi cracks down on pollution: 'No PUCC, No fuel' ban begins

Ban on the entry of all private non-Delhi vehicles below BS VI standards

Anil Joseph

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

FROM Thursday, Delhi's roads will see strict enforcement as the government rolls out its "no PUCC, no fuel" rule and bars entry for private vehicles below BS VI standards. Authorities have set up 126 checkpoints, with over 537 police personnel deployed at petrol pumps to ensure compliance.

The BJP-led government also announced a second round of anti-pollution measures, including a PUCC system overhaul and a car-pooling app to reduce traffic congestion.

Delhi Traffic Police and transport department teams will be deployed at key city border points to enforce the rules, as thousands of non-compliant vehicles are expected to be denied entry.

Senior officials confirmed that 13 major checkpoints will receive focused monitoring, while enforcement teams of the transport department, supported by police personnel, will manage fuel stations across the city.

A senior transport officer said around 80 teams will be positioned at

border points including Kundi, Rajokri, Tikri, Aya Nagar, Kalindi Kunj, Auchandi, Mandoli, Kapashera, and Bajghera tolls/Dwarka Expressway.

Vehicles without valid pollution certificates will be denied fuel, with automatic number plate recognition and manual checks verifying compliance. Public announcements and special camps in neighbouring states aim to educate vehicle owners.

The Delhi Metro has increased train frequency under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) and will adjust services based on commuter demand.

Meanwhile, Delhi's Air Quality Index (AQI) improved slightly to 334 from 354 the previous day.

Addressing the press, Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa highlighted initiatives to reduce traffic congestion, including an integrated traffic management system and collaboration with Google Maps to identify pollution hotspots.

The government will allocate Rs 2,700 crore over 10 years to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) for mechanical road sweepers, litter pickers, and water sprinklers.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a visit to the Adwa Victory Memorial and Museum, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Prime Minister later left for Oman, the last stop in his three-nation tour. PTI

Luthras sent to police custody for 5 days

PANAJI, DEC 17 / PTI

A court in North Goa on Wednesday remanded Gaurav and Saurabh Luthra, co-owners of the 'Birch by Romeo Lane' nightclub, in police custody for five days.

The brothers, who were brought to Goa from Delhi earlier in the day after being deported from Thailand in connection with the December 6 fire incident that killed 25 persons, were produced in the court after undergoing health check-ups twice at the District Hospital in North Goa.

Judicial Magistrate First Class

Mapusa Puja Sardesai remanded the two brothers in police custody for five days.

A team of the Goa Police, along with the Luthra brothers, arrived at the Manohar International Airport, Mopa, in North Goa at 10.45 am.

The duo was initially taken to a Primary Health Centre at Siolim for medical examination. They were later taken to the District Hospital at Mapusa.

After their health assessment, the two were produced in the court.

The court directed that the accused be sent for fresh medical ex-

amination. Accordingly, the two were again taken to the District Hospital. Later, they were produced before Judge Sardesai, who ordered the five-day police custody of the accused.

After the fire tragedy at Arpora village, the Anjuna police had registered a case against the Luthra brothers on various charges, including culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

The brothers were arrested in Delhi on Tuesday after being deported from Thailand. A court there allowed the Goa Police their two-day transit remand.

Parliament passes bill to allow 100 pc FDI in insurance sector

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 16

PARLIAMENT on Wednesday passed the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, 2025, raising foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance sector from 74 per cent to 100 per cent. The Rajya Sabha cleared the bill by a voice vote, a day after the Lok Sabha approved it, while rejecting opposition amendments, including a proposal to refer the legislation to a parliamentary committee for further scrutiny.

Replying to the debate, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the amendments will allow foreign companies to infuse more capital into India's insurance sector, boosting penetration, reducing premiums, and generating employment. "Since 2014, our government has introduced significant reforms in the insurance sector, recognising that true national development requires broader coverage for our people, businesses, and agriculture," she said.

The minister highlighted that the higher FDI limit will enable foreign companies to enter the market without the need for joint venture partners, which in many cases had been a barrier. She added that increased competition from new entrants is likely to lower insurance premiums for policyholders.

Addressing concerns about employment, Sitharaman said the number of employees, agents, and micro-agents has grown nearly threefold from 30.14 lakh in 2014-15 to 88.17 lakh in 2024-25. She said the amendments are expected to further strengthen job creation, skill development, and formal employment in the sector.

The minister also dispelled concerns about profit repatriation by foreign insurers, noting that the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) mandates a minimum solvency ratio of 1.5, ensuring that companies maintain assets at least 1.5 times their liabilities, with provisions for all incurred but not reported claims.

Continued on page 2...

Trump orders blockade of oil tankers into Venezuela

Michelle L Price

WASHINGTON, DEC 17

US President Donald Trump said Tuesday he is ordering a blockade of all "sanctioned oil tankers" into Venezuela, ramping up pressure on the country's authoritarian leader Nicolas Maduro.

The moves comes after US forces last week seized an oil tanker off Venezuela's coast, an unusual move that followed a buildup of military forces in the region. In a post on social media Tuesday night announcing the blockade, Trump alleged Venezuela was using oil to fund drug trafficking and other crimes and vowed to escalate the military buildup.

"Venezuela is completely surrounded by the largest Armada ever assembled in the History of South America," Trump said in a post on his social media platform. "It will only get bigger, and the shock to them will be like nothing they have ever seen before — Until such time as they return to the United States of America all of the Oil, Land, and other Assets that they previously stole from us."

The buildup has been accompanied by a series of military strikes on boats in international waters in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. The campaign, which has drawn bipartisan scrutiny among US lawmakers, has killed at least 95 people in 25

known strikes on vessels.

The Trump administration has defended it as a success, saying it has prevented drugs from reaching American shores, and they pushed back on concerns that it is stretching the bounds of lawful warfare.

The Trump administration has said the campaign is about stopping drugs headed to the US, but Trump's chief of staff Susie Wiles appeared to confirm in a Vanity Fair interview published Tuesday that the campaign is part of a push to oust Maduro.

Wiles said Trump "wants to keep on blowing boats up until Maduro cries uncle."

Venezuela's government released

a statement Tuesday accusing Trump of "violating international law, free trade, and the principle of free navigation" with "a reckless and grave threat" against the South American country.

"On his social media, he assumes that Venezuela's oil, land, and mineral wealth are his property," the statement said of Trump's post. "Consequently, he demands that Venezuela immediately hand over all its riches. The President of the United States intends to impose, in an utterly irrational manner, a supposed naval blockade on Venezuela with the aim of stealing the wealth that belongs to our nation."

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Chouhan moves VB-G Ram G Bill in Lok Sabha; voting to be held today

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

THE Lok Sabha on Wednesday began a discussion on Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G Ram G) Bill, aimed at replacing the two-decade-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and guaranteeing rural households 125 days of wage employment each year.

Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said the measure will provide employment and fulfilling Mahatma Gandhi's

vision of self-reliant villages.

Moving the bill, Chouhan asserted that it will promote all-round development of villages, make them poverty-free, and accelerate their growth journey. "The Bill will ensure that rural households have consistent employment and contribute to the socio-economic upliftment of villages," he said.

At the start of the proceedings, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla noted that while the debate would continue on Wednesday, the minister would respond on Thursday before the Bill comes up for passage.

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Record over 2.28 lakh students appear for Delhi University's winter semester exams in dual sessions

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 16 / PTI

THE University of Delhi (DU) recorded a massive turnout during its ongoing winter examination session on Wednesday, with a record 2,28,781 students appearing for examinations conducted under the National Education Policy (NEP) and the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS). The examinations were largely focused on undergraduate programmes and spanned multiple sessions across centres in the national capital.

According to an official status report released by the university's examination branch, as many as 904

unique question papers were administered over the course of the day, reflecting the scale and complexity of the examination exercise. A significant share of candidates came from the School of Open Learning (SOL), the university's distance education wing.

SOL students accounted for 65,413 undergraduate appearances and 2,002 postgraduate appearances. Along with 1,61,366 regular undergraduate students who appeared for examinations on Wednesday, the SOL cohort made up nearly 30 per cent of the total candidates, the report said. No regular postgraduate or Non-Collegiate Women's Education

Board (NCWEB) postgraduate examinations were scheduled for the day.

The morning session saw the highest activity, with 795 papers conducted. Of these, 775 were for regular and NCWEB undergraduate courses, while 20 papers were held for SOL undergraduate programmes. The afternoon session was comparatively smaller, with 109 papers, all at the undergraduate level.

The data highlighted a clear preference for morning examinations. The 9.30 am session witnessed 1,52,476 students appearing for exams, more than double the 76,305 candidates who took exams in the 2.30 pm afternoon session.

FROM PAGE 1

Delhi cracks down on pollution

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Delhi will also partner with IIT Madras to develop and test "smog-eating" surfaces in selected areas.

Sirsa announced efforts to promote car-pooling, expand electric bus fleets, and engage third-party agencies to monitor potholes and improve road safety. Coordination with neighboring states is ongoing to tackle pollution regionally. On Thursday, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta will flag off 100 new electric buses to encourage public transport use.

The government emphasized a multi-pronged approach targeting vehicular, industrial, dust, and solid waste sources to combat the worsening air crisis in the national capital.



LS nod to nuclear energy bill



...Continued from page 1

They also opposed the repeal of the Atomic Energy Act of 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act of 2010. Singh responded that most provisions already existed under the previous laws and reiterated that safety norms, security controls over fissile material, spent fuel, and heavy water, as well as periodic inspections, will remain firmly under government oversight, regardless of private participation.

The passage of the SHANTI Bill is being hailed as a pivotal step toward opening India's civil nuclear sector to private industry, ensuring international collaboration, and aligning the country's nuclear energy strategy with global clean energy goals.

Parliament passes bill to allow 100 pc FDI in insurance sector

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Sitharaman emphasised that private insurers are actively participating in government schemes such as PM Fasal Bima Yojana, PMJJBY, and PMSBY, cumulatively covering over 20 crore individuals. She reassured that the statutory recognition and role of the public sector LIC remain unaffected, noting that LIC's assets under

management rose 6.45 per cent to Rs 54.52 lakh crore in 2024-25, with its solvency margin improving to 2.11.

The bill amends the Insurance Act, 1938, the LIC Act, 1956, and the IRDAI Act, 1999, while facilitating mergers between insurance and non-insurance companies. It also proposes the establishment of a Policyholders' Education and Protection

Fund, enhances regulatory oversight, and sets the tenure of IRDAI chairperson and whole-time members to five years or until the age of 65, whichever is earlier.

Experts say the move is expected to accelerate growth in India's insurance sector, improve policyholder protection, and enhance ease of doing business for insurers.

Trump orders blockade of oil tankers into Venezuela

...Continued from page 1

Maduro's government, according to the statement, plans to denounce the situation before the United Nations. The US buildup has been accompanied by a series of military strikes on boats in international waters in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. The campaign, which has

drawn bipartisan scrutiny among US lawmakers, has killed at least 95 people in 25 known strikes on vessels.

Trump has for weeks said that the US will move its campaign beyond the water and start strikes on land.

The Trump administration has defended the strikes as a success, saying they have prevented drugs from reaching American shores, and

pushed back on concerns that they are stretching the bounds of lawful warfare. The Trump administration has said the campaign is about stopping drugs headed to the US, but Trump's chief of staff Susie Wiles appeared to confirm in a Vanity Fair interview published Tuesday that the campaign is part of a push to oust Maduro. (AP)

Bill in the Lower House on Tuesday, countered that the government continues to believe in and follow the principles of Mahatma Gandhi.

He said the legislation seeks to provide a statutory guarantee of 125 days of wage employment to every rural household with adult members willing to undertake unskilled manual work.

the proposed law.

Prakash described the legislation as "anti-poor" and "anti-Dalit," alleging it favoured the wealthy and could marginalise grassroots-level bodies.

"The Bill appears to be drafted in a manner that reduces local control while creating fresh financial obligations for states," he said.

Chouhan, who introduced the

SC asks NHAI, MCD to consider shifting or closing 9 toll plazas

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

Taking a serious note of the severe air pollution levels in Delhi-NCR, the Supreme Court on Wednesday issued a slew of directions and asked the NHAI and the MCD to consider either temporary closing or relocating the nine toll plazas at borders of the national capital to ease usual massive traffic congestion.

The top court described the pollution crisis as an "annual feature" and called for pragmatic and practical solutions to tackle the menace.

It, however, refused to interfere with the Delhi government's decision to close schools for students from nursery to Class 5, holding that no further tinkering was required as the winter break was already approaching.

In an effort to ease vehicular congestion at Delhi's borders, a bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant asked the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to consider shifting or temporarily closing nine toll plazas located at entry points to the capital.

The MCD was specifically directed to take a decision within one week on whether these toll plazas could be shut temporarily to facilitate smoother traffic flow and reduce vehicular emissions.

The bench underscored the need for effective implementation of existing measures rather than merely framing protocols that remain not complied with.

"Let us think of pragmatic and practical solutions of the menace,"



the Chief Justice remarked, noting that while preventive mechanisms exist, their enforcement has been consistently weak.

Taking note of the impact of pollution-related restrictions on livelihood, the bench directed the Delhi government to urgently verify construction workers rendered idle due to curbs and ensure that financial assistance is directly transferred to their bank accounts.

Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati, appearing for the Delhi government, informed the bench that around 7,000 workers have so far been verified out of nearly 2.5 lakh registered construction workers, and assured that money would be transferred to their accounts directly.

However, the bench cautioned against any leakages in the process, observing that "it should not be that money transferred to workers' accounts disappears or travels to an-

other account".

It also asked the Delhi government to consider providing alternative work to construction workers who are unable to earn due to restrictions imposed to curb pollution.

Observing that air pollution has become a recurring phenomenon every winter, the bench directed the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) to revisit and strengthen its long-term strategies.

It also asked CAQM and NCR governments to examine critical issues such as urban mobility, traffic management, and incentivising farmers to prevent stubble burning, stressing that piecemeal approaches would not resolve the crisis.

The bench has now listed the PIL filed by environmentalist M C Mehta for further direction on January 6 and reiterated that this plea has to be heard at least twice in a month around the year.

Over 10 pc posts vacant in Delhi Police: Govt

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

OVER 10 per cent of the sanctioned strength in Delhi Police is currently vacant, with the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) rank recording the highest proportion of vacancies at over 36 per cent, according to official data tabled by the government in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai, in a written reply to an question, said, as on November 30, 2025, the Delhi Police has 9,248 vacant posts against a total sanctioned strength of 92,044 -- translating into an overall vacancy rate of about 10 per cent.

Among gazetted ranks, the ACP cadre shows the maximum vacancies, with 125 posts lying vacant out of a sanctioned strength of 346 -- around 36 per cent. This is followed by the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police DCP at Junior Administrative Grade, which has 15 vacancies against 54 sanctioned posts, or nearly 28 per cent, and the

DCP/Addl DCP rank with about 22 per cent vacancies (13 out of 60).

At the cutting edge of policing, the largest number of vacancies in absolute terms is at the Constable level. There are 4,591 vacant constable posts out of a sanctioned strength of 50,946, a shortfall of about 9 per cent. Head constables account for 3,057 vacancies out of 23,724 posts, or close to 13 per cent.

The Sub-Inspector rank has 1,039 vacancies against 8,087 sanctioned posts (nearly 13 per cent), while inspectors show a comparatively lower vacancy rate of about 7 per cent, with 108 posts vacant out of 1,453.

Senior-most positions, including Commissioner of Police, Special Commissioner, Joint Commissioner and Additional Commissioner, have no vacancies at present.

The minister said that the vacancies are a "dynamic process" arising from retirements, promotions and resignations, and are being filled on a continuous basis through recruitment examinations, physical tests and medical checks.

Court acquits 5 of charges of arson, rioting in 2020 riots case

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

A court here has acquitted five men who were accused of arson, rioting and vandalism in a case linked to the 2020 Delhi riots.

Additional Sessions Judge Parveen Singh was hearing the case against Abdul Sattar, Muhammad Khalid, Hunain, Tanvir and Arif, who were charged with rioting, unlawful assembly and vandalism in the Chand Bagh area.

In an order dated December 11, the judge said, "I find that the prosecution has failed to prove its case beyond all reasonable doubts and all the accused are entitled to the benefit of the doubt. The accused are accordingly acquitted of all the charges framed against them."

The court noted that the investigating officer had claimed that the photos of the accused were shown to witness Ramdass Gupta, an

employee of a Bhajanpura petrol pump near which the incident of rioting and arson took place, but the origin of the photos was unclear.

"The assertion on behalf of the accused that after their arrest, they had been falsely implicated in this case in order to solve this case cannot be completely brushed aside," the judge observed.

The court noted that the complainant had claimed that he was attacked at the petrol pump and that he regained consciousness only at a hospital, but contrary to this claim, his father had found him injured at the Bhajanpura chowk.

"According to the injured, after being hit on his head at the petrol pump, he regained consciousness at the St Stephens hospital. Therefore, there is no possibility of this witness moving out of the petrol pump by himself," the judge pointed out.

5 arrested in killing of former Bishnoi aide in Parry murder case

Amit Kumar

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

THE Delhi Police on Wednesday arrested five alleged shooters linked to the Aarzo-Anmol Bishnoi-Harry Boxer syndicate for their suspected role in the murder of former Lawrence Bishnoi aide Inderpreet Singh alias Parry in Chandigarh earlier this month, officials said.

The arrested men have been identified as Piyush Piplani (28), Ankush Solanki (23), Kunwarbir (30), Lovepreet Singh (26) and Santokh alias Kapil Khatri (29). Police said the accused are allegedly involved in a series of serious crimes, including the killing of Parry, who was shot dead on December 1.

The arrests were made in two separate operations carried out by teams of the Delhi Police Special Cell, Additional Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) Pramod Kushwah said.

Acting on specific intelligence, officers first intercepted three of the accused near Ring Road in the Shanti Van area. The remaining two were later apprehended near the Sarai Kale Khan bus terminal. During subsequent searches, police recovered four firearms and a substantial quantity of ammunition.

Parry was killed in Sector 26, Chandigarh, shortly after stepping out of a club. According to police, he was seated inside his SUV when assailants opened fire at close range before fleeing the scene.

He was rushed to a hospital but succumbed to his injuries.

Investigators said Piyush Piplani was the lead shooter in Parry's murder and had earlier been involved in the killing of national-level kabaddi player Sonu Nolta in Panchkula earlier this year.

Ankush Solanki was also a shooter in both cases, and a non-bailable warrant had previously been issued against him. Kunwarbir allegedly drove the tail and getaway vehicle used in the Chandigarh attack.

Yamuna Expressway crash death toll likely to rise

MATHURA, DEC 17 / PTI

THE death toll in the multi-vehicle pile-up that has killed 13 people on the Yamuna Expressway in Mathura may rise further as several severely burnt human remains are yet to be identified, officials said on Wednesday.

The identities of five victims of the accident, which took place on Tuesday morning, have been established so far. Many bodies were charred beyond recognition, making identification virtually impossible at this stage, officials said, adding that they were relying on DNA tests for the purpose. According to a panel of doctors conducting post-mortem, police have brought 18 body bags to the mortuary. These contained the heads of 10 victims, torsos of two others, and one largely intact body, while the remaining bags held only small, badly burnt fragments of human remains.

Post-mortem examination of all the remains are being carried out and reports are being prepared, officials said. Deputy Chief Medical



Injured passengers receive treatment at a hospital after a fog-hit pile-up involving buses and cars sparked fires on the Yamuna Expressway, in Mathura. PTI

Officer Dr Gopal Garg said samples of all human remains have been collected and sent to the Forensic Science Laboratory in Agra for DNA profiling and to establish their identities by matching them with samples provided by claimants.

The district hospital has officially confirmed the death of 13 passengers in the accident.

However, officials said that given the fragmented condition of the remains, the actual number of victims could increase once they receive the

DNA test reports. “Only after DNA testing of all the remains will it be possible to ascertain how many individuals they belong to. Identification will be confirmed after matching with the samples provided by family members,” Dr Garg said.

Assistant Regional Transport Officer Madan Sharma said Sunil Kumar (45), who was driving the Azamgarh-bound bus involved in the crash, was missing. The second driver and the conductor were admitted to the hospital with injuries, but they have no recollection of the incident.

“They told us they fainted immediately after the collision and regained consciousness only after being hospitalised. They are unable to say what happened to Sunil Kumar, whether he was injured or died in the crash. His fate may become clear after examination of the burnt remains,” Sharma said.

A passenger, Parvati (42) from Rath tehsil in Hamirpur district, also remained untraceable. Her brother-in-law Gulzari Lal searched for her till late on Wednesday evening across hospitals and mortuaries, but no information could be found, officials said.

In another case, Kanpur resident Pooja has lost her brother-in-law AnujSrivastava, who was travelling with her on the bus.

UP steps up fog safety measures after deadly crashes

Monitor News Service

LUCKNOW, DEC 17

HIGHWAY authorities in Uttar Pradesh have intensified safety measures across expressways and national highways to prevent accidents amid dense winter fog, officials said on Wednesday, a day after a series of fog-related crashes left at least 25 people dead across the state.

The Uttar Pradesh Expressways Industrial Development Authority (UPEIDA), which manages major access-controlled corridors including the Agra-Lucknow (Taj) Expressway, Purvanchal Expressway, Bundelkhand Expressway and Gorakhpur Link Expressway, said enhanced precautions were being rolled out following Tuesday’s deadly accidents.

At least 25 people were killed and 59 injured in multiple incidents attributed largely to poor visibility. The worst crash occurred on the Yamuna Expressway in Mathura, where a multi-vehicle pile-up claimed 13 lives. Four fatalities were reported each from Basti and Unnao, while two people died each in Meerut and Barabanki.

UPEIDA nodal officer (route safety and security) Rajesh Pandey said fog-related accidents this season began on Tuesday, with most crashes, including those on the Purvanchal and Taj expressways, involving rear-end collisions due to reduced visibility. He said a proposal would soon be sent to the state government to temporarily reduce the maximum speed limit on expressways from 120 kmph to 80 kmph during the fog season, which typically lasts until February 15.

PIL seeking more compensation to Indigo passengers rejected

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

THE Delhi High Court on Wednesday refused to entertain a PIL seeking direction to the Centre and IndiGo airline to pay a compensation of four times the full ticket price to all passengers whose tickets were cancelled in November and December after the roll out of the new Flight Duty Time Limitation.

A bench of Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Justice Tushar Rao Gedela said it has already taken cognisance of the issue while hearing another PIL and granted liberty to the petitioner

to seek intervention in the pending petition.

“We decline to entertain this petition with liberty to the petitioner to seek intervention in the pending petition. The writ petition stands disposed of,” the bench said.

According to the petition filed by the Centre for Accountability and Systemic Change (CASC) through its president Prof Vikram Singh, the IndiGo fiasco has triggered widespread concern across the aviation sector, and due to sudden disruption and last-minute cancellation of thousands of flights, stranded passengers faced severe inconvenience.

TMC promises action against guilty in Messi event chaos

KOLKATA, DEC 17 / PTI

SENIOR TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee on Wednesday said that the West Bengal government acted promptly after the chaos that erupted during an event involving Argentine football star Lionel Messi, asserting that action has already been initiated and further steps will follow against anyone found guilty.

Banerjee, the party’s national general secretary and the Diamond Harbour MP, made the assertion while speaking to reporters after returning to Kolkata from Delhi, where had gone to attend the Winter Session of Parliament and a parliamentary party meeting.

“Action will be taken against

whoever is found guilty. The government has been prompt in taking action. There may have been some lapses on the part of the administration, but the government has acted and has taken steps to rectify the situation,” Banerjee said.

Referring to the disorder at the Salt Lake stadium, he said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee apologised to the public within an hour of the incident, taking moral responsibility for the lapse. The chief minister did not shy away from responsibility, the TMC leader, who is also the nephew of Mamata Banerjee, said.

He also pointed out that action has already been taken against police officers and ministers in connection with the incident, underlining that

the government has not hesitated to initiate accountability measures.

Banerjee said other state governments had failed to own responsibility in the aftermath of tragedies such as the Kumbh stampede and the New Delhi railway station stampede.

“Here, the chief minister apologised immediately and corrective steps were initiated. Even then, questions are being raised,” he said.

The chaos during the high-profile event had triggered widespread criticism, following which the state government accepted the resignation of Sports Minister Aroop Biswas, issued show-cause notices to senior police officers and ordered an inquiry into the alleged mismanagement.

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India, Ethiopia ‘natural partners’ in regional peace, security: PM

ADDIS ABABA, DEC 17 / PTI

INDIA and Ethiopia are “natural partners” in regional peace, security and connectivity, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told the Ethiopian Parliament on Wednesday, asserting that the two countries work for a world that is “more just, more equal, and more peaceful”.

Modi, who arrived here on Tuesday on his maiden bilateral visit, said it was wonderful to be in Ethiopia, the land of lions, as he greeted lawmakers in the local language, ‘Tena yistilign, Salaam’.

“I feel very much at home because my home state, Gujarat, is also home to Lions,” Modi said in his address to the Joint session of Parliament of Ethiopia. It was the 18th parliament in the world that PM Modi has addressed. “Ethiopia sits at a crossroads of Africa. India stands at the heart of the Indian Ocean. We are natural partners in regional peace, security, and connectivity,” Modi told the lawmakers, who clapped more than 50 times during the prime minister’s speech. “Our commitment to mutual security became stronger with the signing of the Defence Co-operation Agreement earlier this year. This agreement focuses on closer military cooperation. It includes collaboration in cybersecurity, in defence industries, in joint research, and in capacity building,” he said.

India and Ethiopia stand together as members of one family and work for a world that is “more just, more equal, and more peaceful,” the prime minister said. He thanked Ethiopia for its solidarity after the Pahalgam terror attack and for affirming the commitment to zero tolerance to-



PM Narendra Modi being greeted by Ethiopian leaders during a joint session of the Parliament, in Addis Ababa. PTI

wards terrorism.

Modi said he was honoured to be in this temple of democracy, in the heart of a nation with ancient wisdom and modern aspirations. “On behalf of the 1.4 billion people of India, I bring greetings of friendship, goodwill, and brotherhood,” he said.

Speaking about the Global South, Modi said the region is writing its own destiny, and India and Ethiopia share a vision for it. “Our vision is of a world where the Global South rises not against anyone, but for everyone. A world where development is fair, where technology is accessible, and where sovereignty is respected. A world where prosperity is shared, and peace is defended,” he said, adding

that the world cannot move forward if its systems remain locked in the past.

That is why, India has emphasised a Global Development Compact. It will prioritise technology sharing, affordable finance, capacity building, and trade for sustainable growth, he said. “We will walk together as equals. We will build together as partners. And, we will succeed together as friends,” Modi told the lawmakers, amid applause.

Modi said he was honoured to receive the Grand Honour, Nishan of Ethiopia. “I accept this award with folded hands, with humility, on behalf of the people of India,” he added. Modi is the first global head of state to receive Ethiopia’s highest

award. Describing Ethiopia as one of the oldest civilisations, Modi said, “This blend of old and new... This balance between ancient wisdom and modern ambition... This is the true strength of Ethiopia.”

“We too are an ancient civilisation, walking confidently into the future,” he said. “India’s national song ‘Vande Mataram’, and the Ethiopian national anthem, both refer to our land as the mother. They inspire us to take pride in the heritage, culture, natural beauty and protect the motherland,” he added. Modi said that science has traced some of the earliest footprints of species in Ethiopia, and when the world speaks about them, they are not speaking only of a fossil.

Bill is a dangerous leap into privatised nuclear era: Tharoor

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

CONGRESS MP Shashi Tharoor on Wednesday launched a sharp attack on the government’s proposed nuclear energy legislation, describing it as a “dangerous leap into privatised nuclear expansion” that lacks adequate safeguards and could compromise public safety, environmental protection and justice for victims. Participating in the Lok Sabha debate on the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, Tharoor said the proposed law was riddled with exceptions, excessive discretionary powers and showed little regard for public welfare. “I am not sure whether it is a nuclear bill or an unclear bill,” the former Union minister remarked.

Tharoor warned that the pursuit of private capital must not override non-negotiable concerns related to safety and accountability. Referring to the title of the legislation, he said the word “SHANTI”, which implies peace and sustainability, should not become “a cruel irony in the aftermath of a preventable disaster”. “The promise of transforming India ought not to conflate the risk of scarring India,” he added.

Taking a swipe at the BJP-led Centre, Tharoor said that while the government speaks eloquently about harnessing nuclear energy, it has failed to draft a coherent and rigorous law. He contrasted the bill with earlier milestones in India’s nuclear journey, recalling that Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundations of the



programme and Manmohan Singh steered the 2008 Indo-US nuclear deal that ended India’s global isolation. “This bill represents a disappointing reversal, deepening uncertainty about where India’s nuclear framework is headed,” he said.

The Congress leader argued that the bill suffers from fundamental structural flaws and requires comprehensive reworking rather than minor amendments. Ideally, he said, it should have been referred to a joint parliamentary committee for wider scrutiny. He also criticised the bill’s preamble for describing nuclear energy as “clean and abundant”, calling the language misleading as it ignored risks from radioactive leaks, long-lived nuclear waste and catastrophic accidents.

Tharoor cautioned that India’s uranium reserves are limited and that thorium-based reactors, despite India’s reserves, remain decades away from large-scale deployment. He objected to provisions that allow “any other company or person” permitted by the Centre to apply for licences across the nuclear fuel cycle, calling it a blanket opening up of the sector to private actors with unclear qualifications.

Send VB-G Ram G to Standing Committee: Parl panel chief

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

CHAIRPERSON of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka, on Wednesday wrote to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, urging him to refer the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, 2025, to the relevant standing committee for detailed scrutiny. In his letter to the Speaker, Ulaka, a Congress MP from Koraput in Odisha, said the proposed legislation seeks to introduce far-reaching changes to the framework governing rural employment and livelihood support.

Given its scale, scope and potential impact, particularly on rural, tribal and economically vulnerable populations, he said the bill warrants a thorough examination by a parliamentary standing committee. Expressing “deep concern and institutional discomfort”, Ulaka said it would be inappropriate for a bill of such magnitude to be processed without the benefit of committee-level scrutiny. He underlined that standing committees are not mere procedural formalities but are integral to Parliament’s legislative role, especially when proposed laws affect statutory guarantees, decentralised governance and the rights of rural workers.

Ulaka argued that the bill fundamentally alters the nature of statutory guarantees by replacing rights-based entitlements with contingent provisions that are identified and controlled administratively by the government. He said the legislation introduces structural changes whose implications are neither limited nor self-evident and which could have serious long-term consequences for rural employment and livelihood security. The Congress leader also raised concerns about constitutional propriety, the dilution of justiciable rights and the erosion of accountability.



Police use water cannons to disperse Congress workers during a protest against centre over alleged false charges in the National Herald case, in Bhopal. PTI

Opposition seeks wider examination of N-bill by JPC

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

OPPOSITION parties on Wednesday pressed for the government’s proposed nuclear energy legislation to be referred to a parliamentary panel for wider consultations, while members of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) strongly backed the move, arguing it would help India achieve long-term energy security. The debate took place in the Lok Sabha on the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, which seeks to open India’s tightly regulated civil nuclear sector to private participation. The government has pitched the bill as a major reform to boost clean energy generation, investment and employment. Initiating the discussion, Congress MP Manish Tewari opposed the legislation, warning that it could have serious implications for public safety. He argued that provisions related to supplier liability had been diluted, which could prove harmful

in the event of a nuclear accident. Tewari also objected to the proposed repeal of the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010.

Recalling India’s nuclear journey, Tewari cited the establishment of the Department of Atomic Energy under Jawaharlal Nehru, the 1974 nuclear test ordered by Indira Gandhi, the 1998 tests under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and the subsequent end of “nuclear apartheid” during Manmohan Singh’s tenure. He contended that the bill ignored critical issues such as radioactive waste management and prioritised uranium-based reactors over thorium and molten salt reactors, which are central to India’s three-stage nuclear programme. He demanded the bill be sent to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) for detailed scrutiny.

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor described the bill as a “dangerous leap into privatised nuclear expansion” without adequate safeguards. He said the legislation was heavy on discretion and exceptions, and failed to adequately protect public wel-



fare. “The pursuit of capital cannot override the non-negotiable requirements of public safety, environmental protection and victim justice,” Tharoor asserted.

Echoing similar concerns, Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Arvind Sawant questioned how the government would ensure that private companies maintain safety standards comparable to those in the public sector. Samajwadi Party MP Aditya Yadav opposed the

bill, alleging it would favour foreign companies at the cost of national interests and undermine the government’s “Make in India” programme. Trinamool Congress MP Saugata Roy termed nuclear energy a “risky proposition” and criticised the proposed liability cap, calling for it to be raised. DMK MP Arun Nehru described the bill’s title, SHANTI, as an “oxymoron” and urged extreme caution, citing past nuclear accidents abroad.

FDI insurance bill needs more scrutiny: Opposition in RS

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, DEC 17

SEVERAL Opposition members in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday opposed the government’s proposal to raise foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance sector to 100 per cent and demanded that the legislation be referred to a parliamentary panel for detailed scrutiny. The objections were raised during the debate on the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, 2025, which was moved for consideration and passage by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. The Bill, which was passed by the Lok Sabha on Tuesday, seeks to amend key insurance-related laws to allow full foreign ownership in the sector.

Members from opposition parties also objected to the title of the Bill, which is written in a mix of English and Hindi. Congress MP Shaktisinh Gohil said the mixing of languages in legislative business was not permissible. He expressed serious concerns over the sharing of personal data, such as Aadhaar and PAN details, with foreign insurers once 100 per cent FDI is allowed, especially in light of rising incidents of digital financial fraud. Opposing the move to raise FDI, Gohil cited the privatisation of the aviation sector, alleging that it led to monopolistic practices and a loss of government control. He accused the government of “destroying” Air India through privatisation and questioned how the Centre could now direct private airlines to operate on unprofitable routes. He urged the government not to act in haste and to refer the Bill to a Select Committee. Responding to the criticism, BJP MP Arun Singh attacked the Congress, blaming its past policies for bankruptcies in the telecom and banking sectors. He said opposition parties were trying to create confusion over the FDI provision and argued that regulatory control would continue to rest with domestic authorities.

SIR draft rolls highlight risk of silent voter exclusion

The publication of draft electoral rolls following the Special Intensive Revision in three states and two Union territories has brought an uncomfortable truth into focus. More than one crore electors are missing from the draft lists compared with the rolls in force barely seven weeks earlier. While the Election Commission insists these names have not yet been deleted, the scale of exclusion demands closer scrutiny, transparency and corrective urgency. According to official data, 12.32 crore electors appear in the draft rolls against 13.36 crore on October 27. West Bengal alone accounts for a shortfall of 58 lakh voters, Rajasthan for 44 lakh, with significant numbers also flagged in Goa, Puducherry and Lakshadweep. The Commission has attributed most of these omissions to the ASD category, voters who were absent, shifted, dead or suspected duplicates, primarily because enumeration forms were not returned on time. Procedurally, the Commission is on firm ground. Names marked as ASD are not automatically struck off and election registration officers retain the authority to verify and reinstate genuine voters before the final rolls are published in February. Yet electoral integrity is not sustained by procedure alone, it rests equally on public confidence. When such a large number of electors find themselves pushed into a provisional category, the burden shifts to the system to demonstrate fairness, accessibility and sensitivity to ground realities.

Special intensive revisions are designed to improve accuracy, but they also expose structural weaknesses. Enumeration depends heavily on door to door verification and timely form submission. Migrant workers, urban renters, the elderly and marginalised communities are disproportionately vulnerable to being marked absent or shifted. In states like West Bengal and Rajasthan, where internal migration and seasonal movement are common, rigid timelines can easily translate into unintended exclusion. The staggered extension of SIR schedules across other states reflects that even election administrators recognise these challenges. However, extending deadlines alone is not sufficient. Communication with voters, clarity on the consequences of non-submission and proactive follow up by booth level officers are essential to prevent legitimate electors from slipping through the cracks. The Election Commission has long enjoyed institutional credibility, built on a reputation for independence and administrative rigour. Preserving that credibility now requires going beyond assurances. Clear public disclosure of constituency level ASD data, simplified objection mechanisms and visible efforts to reach flagged voters can help restore confidence before final publication. Elections derive legitimacy not merely from clean polling day management, but from inclusive and accurate rolls that reflect the full electorate.

MP’s blood safety failure exposes children to HIV

The revelation that six children suffering from thalassemia have tested positive for HIV in Madhya Pradesh is a stark indictment of systemic failures in public healthcare. These children were not seeking elective treatment. They were dependent on regular blood transfusions to survive. What should have been a life sustaining intervention has instead exposed them to a lifelong infection. The suspected source, contaminated blood transfusions across government hospitals in Satna and Jabalpur and a private facility, points to deep lapses in screening, monitoring and accountability. Blood transfusion is among the most regulated medical procedures precisely because the risks are well known. That multiple children, over several months, could contract HIV without detection raises troubling questions about compliance with protocols and oversight of blood banks. The government has ordered probes and promised strict action if negligence is found. Such assurances are routine after public health crises. What matters now is whether investigations move beyond internal committees and lead to transparent findings, fixed responsibility and criminal accountability where warranted. A state level inquiry is necessary, but it must not become a shield behind which culpability is diffused across systems and institutions.

This episode also exposes the vulnerability of children with chronic illnesses, particularly those from modest backgrounds who rely almost entirely on public hospitals. Thalassemia patients often require dozens of transfusions over their lifetime. Their safety depends not on one decision, but on the consistent integrity of the healthcare system. When that system fails, the harm is cumulative and irreversible. The political backlash, including demands for ministerial resignation, reflects public anger but should not distract from the structural issues at hand. Madhya Pradesh has witnessed a series of healthcare related scandals in recent months, from unsafe medicines to poor hospital hygiene. Viewed together, they suggest a governance problem rather than isolated lapses. Rebuilding trust will require more than disciplinary action after the fact. The state must urgently audit all blood banks, strengthen independent testing mechanisms and ensure that accreditation and periodic inspections are enforced without exception. Digital tracking of blood donations and transfusions, along with external quality audits, should no longer be optional. Above all, the affected families deserve clarity, care and long term support. Children who were already fighting one serious condition now face another because of institutional failure. A healthcare system is judged not by its intentions, but by the protection it offers its most vulnerable patients. On that measure, this incident marks a serious moral and administrative failure that demands sustained reform, not momentary outrage.

Standards are shaping development

From trade and technology to climate and health, standards quietly determine who competes, who complies and who is left behind. The World Development Report 2025 argues that development outcomes are increasingly shaped not by tariffs or capital flows, but by rules that govern quality, safety and interoperability. Treated strategically, standards can accelerate growth and inclusion. Ignored or copied blindly, they can deepen inequality and lock countries into low productivity futures.

Ambreesh Mishra

For decades, development debates have revolved around trade, finance, technology and governance. Tariffs were cut, capital was liberalised and institutions reformed. Yet beneath these visible levers sits a quieter force that increasingly shapes who grows, who competes and who falls behind. Standards, from how goods are measured and certified to how data flows and pollution is monitored, now form the invisible architecture of modern economies.

The World Development Report 2025 places standards at the centre of development strategy, and its core argument deserves serious attention. Standards are not neutral technical tools. They are economic policy instruments with real distributional effects. Used well, they can raise productivity, protect citizens and manage risk. Used badly, they can exclude small firms, fragment markets and lock countries into low quality, low growth paths.

This matters because the nature of global competition has changed. Estimates suggest that close to 90 per cent of global goods trade is now affected by non-tariff measures, most of them linked to standards. This reflects legitimate concerns about safety, sustainability and consumer protection. But it also means that market access increasingly depends not on tariff preferences but on the ability to measure emissions, certify processes, document compliance and demonstrate quality. For many low and middle income countries, that capability remains limited.

The report rejects the false choice between high standards and development. Instead, it argues that ambition must be matched with capacity. In recent years, many governments have adopted the most stringent standards from advanced economies, hoping to signal seriousness, attract investment or align with global norms. Often, the result has been counterproductive. Where enforcement capacity is thin, compliance becomes selective, corruption flourishes and markets consolidate around large firms that can afford certification. Smaller firms retreat into informality or exit altogether, undermining jobs and competition.

The alternative proposed is a sequenced approach. At early stages of development, countries should adapt international standards to local conditions, especially for domestic markets and non-tradable services. As firms upgrade and institutions strengthen, standards should progressively align with global norms. Over time, countries should aim to author standards in areas where they have developed expertise, shaping the rules rather than simply importing them.

This is not an abstract theory. The report documents how countries



For much of the post liberalisation era, development policy has been framed around visible levers. Tariffs were reduced, markets opened, capital mobilised and institutions restructured. Success or failure was measured in export growth, investment inflows and headline reforms. Yet as globalisation has matured, the centre of gravity has quietly shifted. Today, it is no longer enough to trade freely or attract capital. Countries must prove compliance, certify quality, measure emissions, secure data and demonstrate safety. In this new landscape, standards have become the gatekeepers of opportunity.

such as South Korea embedded standards into industrial policy, procurement and export promotion, turning quality into a source of competitive advantage. It also highlights how gradual, tiered regulatory approaches, including vehicle emissions standards in China and India, allowed firms time to invest while steadily raising environmental ambition. In both cases, sequencing mattered as much as the end goal.

A recurring theme is quality infrastructure, the ecosystem of metrology, testing, certification and accreditation that makes standards real. Without it, standards remain paper rules. Building this infrastructure is expensive and politically unglamorous, but the payoffs are substantial. Firms gain credibility, regulators gain leverage and consumers gain trust. Where such systems function well, markets operate with less friction and lower costs.

The report is also clear eyed about institutional weaknesses. In many developing countries, national standards bodies combine roles that should be kept separate, setting standards while also earning revenue from certification. This creates conflicts of interest and undermines confidence. Reform here is less about copying institutional models from high income countries and more about sequencing, transparency and regional cooperation. Not every country needs every laboratory. Shared facilities and mu-

tual recognition can deliver scale without wasteful duplication.

Standards matter far beyond trade and industry. In health and education, simple process standards have delivered meaningful improvements. Childbirth checklists have been shown to reduce preventable complications. Clear learning benchmarks have helped improve literacy outcomes. These examples underline an important point. Standards do not need to be complex to be effective. They need to be enforceable, credible and adapted to context.

The report’s discussion of risk is particularly timely. Financial crises, environmental degradation and emerging technologies share a common feature. Without agreed rules, private incentives can generate systemic harm. Standards are often the first line of defence. Yet the global system is unbalanced. There is an abundance of detailed standards for relatively low risk products, and glaring gaps in areas such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology, where stakes are high and coordination is hardest. Geopolitical rivalry has slowed cooperation precisely where it is most needed.

For advanced economies, the report carries an implicit warning. Well intentioned standards embedded in regulation, from carbon border measures to digital compliance regimes, can function as de facto trade barriers if they ignore capacity constraints elsewhere. This risks

deepening global divides and undermining cooperation on shared challenges such as climate change. Supporting participation by developing countries in standard setting is not charity. It is self-interest. Standards that are co-created are more likely to be implemented, trusted and harmonised.

The governance implications are equally important. Standards within government, covering budgeting, procurement and recruitment, are central to state capacity. Where hiring criteria are opaque and procedures inconsistent, policy delivery suffers. Here again, ambition must be calibrated. Over engineered reforms can overwhelm administrations. Iterative, evidence based approaches tend to work better than sweeping redesigns imported wholesale.

Perhaps the most provocative reflection comes when the report turns the lens inward. Development economics itself operates through implicit standards that often exclude scholars based in developing countries. The comparison with science and engineering is telling. High standards need not be exclusionary, but ambiguity and discretion can be. Precision, transparency and participation matter in knowledge production as much as they do in manufacturing or finance.

The larger lesson is that standards are already shaping development trajectories, whether governments acknowledge it or not.

IPL auctions are quietly reshaping cricket’s market logic

Raghav Iyer

IPL auction has always been sold as theatre. Cameras linger on raised paddles, owners exchange glances, and sudden bidding wars become instant folklore. Yet beneath the spectacle lies a more consequential transformation. Over nearly two decades, the IPL auction has evolved from a star driven extravaganza into a disciplined labour market, one that reflects how Indian cricket now values skill, scarcity and risk.

In the league’s early years, particularly between 2008 and 2012, auctions were dominated by reputation. International stars with global profiles often attracted bids that far exceeded their tactical utility. Players such as Andrew Flintoff or Kevin Pietersen commanded extraordinary prices less for role fit and more for brand value, reflecting a league still establishing its commercial identity.

That logic has steadily weakened.

As franchises professionalised and analytics became embedded in recruitment, spending shifted from names to functions. Modern auctions are no longer about stardom but about problem solving. A death over specialist, a middle order finisher or a wicketkeeper batter who allows balance elsewhere in the XI often attracts sharper bidding than a marquee top order batter.

At first glance, rising auction prices suggest runaway inflation. In reality, escalation has broadly tracked the IPL’s expanding revenues and team purse sizes. What has changed is not the scale of spending but its distribution.

Mega auctions tend to reset the market, compressing the middle tier while pushing up prices for scarce skill sets. Mini auctions expose urgency more starkly. The 2023 mini auction, for instance, saw Sam Curran become the most expensive player in IPL auction history at that time. The bid

Behind the drama and record breaking bids of the IPL auction lies a quieter transformation. Over time, the league’s player market has shifted from star driven spectacle to a disciplined, data informed system that rewards scarcity, role clarity and long term value. Tracing this evolution, the article shows how franchise strategy, the growing premium on Indian talent and a forward looking approach to recruitment have reshaped how cricket’s most lucrative league values its labour.

was not purely about performance, but about scarcity, a left arm seamer who could bat, bowl at the death and fit leadership needs.

Subsequent auctions have since produced even higher headline numbers, underlining that record prices are contextual, not absolute.

One of the most enduring trends is the growing premium for Indian players. Early IPL seasons leaned heavily on overseas talent. Today, elite Indian fast bowlers, wicketkeeper batters

and all-rounders frequently command bids comparable to or higher than international names in similar roles.

Players such as Ishan Kishan exemplify this shift. While not holding current auction records, he has consistently attracted high valuations, reflecting the premium franchises place on Indian core players. The logic is structural rather than sentimental. Indian players offer availability, workload flexibility and continuity

in a crowded calendar, making them easier long term assets around which squads can be built.

The rise of multi crore bids for uncapped Indian players reinforces this point. These valuations reward scouting depth and early identification rather than international reputation, signalling confidence in domestic pipelines.

Age has also become a silent determinant. Teams increasingly prefer acquiring players early in their careers, betting on growth rather than paying peak premiums later. Younger players offer multiple seasons of value within a salary cap, making them financially efficient.

This has altered bargaining power. Established players with strong past records but declining physical returns now face a harsher market, sometimes going unsold despite recent success. The auction has become forward looking, privileging projected output over historical achievement.

Not all teams behave alike. Some franchises consistently pay premiums for certainty, securing specific roles early in the auction. Others exploit inefficiencies, building squads later with undervalued specialists.

Over time, success has begun to correlate less with headline spending and more with auction discipline. The most consistently competitive teams are rarely those dominating opening bidding wars. Instead, they are the ones that understand when to wait and when to strike.

The IPL auction is no longer chaotic capitalism. It is a regulated, data informed labour market with its own hierarchies and exclusions. Players with rare, clearly defined skills benefit most. Versatility without specialisation is often undervalued. Brand still matters, but far less than it once did.

The writer is a policy commentator focusing on governance and economic reform, besides being a keen follower of cricket.

Susie Wiles' *Vanity Fair* interview stirs storm in US

Darlene Superville and Bill Barrow

WASHINGTON, DEC 17

SUSIE Wiles, President Donald Trump’s understated but influential chief of staff, criticised Attorney General Pam Bondi’s handling of the Jeffrey Epstein case and broadly defended the president’s aggressive second administration in a series of interviews published Tuesday in *Vanity Fair*.

Wiles told the magazine in a wide-ranging, revealing series of conversations that she underestimated the scandal involving Epstein, the disgraced financier, but sharply criticised how Bondi managed the case and the public’s expectations. She also said Trump wants to keep bombing alleged drug boats in the waters off the coast of Venezuela until that country’s leader, Nicolas Maduro, “cries uncle.”

And Wiles at one point said she and Trump had a “loose agreement” that his retribution campaign would end before the first 90 days of his second term — but it continues well beyond the three-month mark. Trump tapped Wiles after she managed his winning

2024 campaign. She is the first woman to ever serve as White House chief of staff and is known for shunning the spotlight. It is rare for her to speak as extensively and openly as she did about the president to the magazine, which published its lengthy interview with her — and other members of the White House staff and the Cabinet. Wiles has been speaking to *Vanity Fair* since just before Trump took office last January.

Asked about Epstein, Wiles said hadn’t really paid attention to “whether all these rich, important men went to that nasty island and did unforgivable things to young girls.” She said she has read the Epstein file and that Trump is “not in the file doing anything awful.” He and Epstein were friends before they had a falling out. The Justice Department is facing a Friday deadline to release everything it has on Epstein after Trump, after objecting to the release, signed legislation requiring that the papers be made public. Wiles criticised Bondi’s handling of the case, going back to earlier in the year when she distributed binders to a group of social media influencers that included no new information about Epstein. That led to even more calls from Trump’s base



for the files to be released. “I think she completely whiffed on appreciating that that was the very targeted group that cared about this,” Wiles said of Bondi. “First she gave them binders full of nothingness. And then she said that the witness list, or the client list, was on her desk. There is no client list, and it sure as hell wasn’t on her desk.”

Wiles, over the series of interviews, described the president behind the scenes very much as he presents himself in public: an intense figure who thinks in broad strokes yet is often not concerned with the details of process and policy. She added, though, that he has not been as angry or temperamental as is often suggested, even as she affirmed his ruthlessness and determination to achieve retribution against those he considers his political enemies. Trump, she said, has “an alcoholic’s personality,” even though the president does not drink. But the personality trait is something she recognizes from her father, the famous sports broadcaster Pat Summerall.

“High-functioning alcoholics or alcoholics in general, their personalities are exaggerated when they drink. And so I’m a little bit of an expert in big personalities,” she said, adding that Trump has “a view that

there’s nothing he can’t do. Nothing, zero, nothing.” On Venezuela, Wiles said Trump wants to keep the pressure on Maduro.

“He wants to keep on blowing boats up until Maduro cries uncle. And people way smarter than me on that say that he will.” Her comment, though, seemed to contradict the administration’s position that the strikes are about stopping drugs and saving American lives, not regime change. She said the administration is “very sure we know who we’re blowing up.” The continued strikes and mounting death toll have drawn scrutiny from Congress, which has pushed back and opened investigations. Wiles described much of her job as channeling Trump’s energy, whims and desired policy outcomes — including managing his desire for vengeance against his political opponents, anyone he blames for his 2020 electoral defeat and those who pursued criminal cases against him after his first term.

“We have a loose agreement that the score settling will end before the first 90 days are over,” Wiles said early in his administration, telling *Vanity Fair* that she does try to tamp down Trump’s penchant for retribution. *AP*

India summons Bangladesh envoy; demands full security to its mission



NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

INDIA on Wednesday summoned Bangladesh envoy Riaz Hamidullah and lodged its protest over plans by certain extremist elements to create a security situation around the Indian mission in Dhaka.

New Delhi also expressed its serious concerns over the deteriorating security situation in Bangladesh and reiterated its call for holding free, fair and credible parliamentary elections. The polls are scheduled for February 12. Hamidullah was summoned to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and was served a demarche or a formal diplomatic note, people familiar with the matter said.

India’s action followed after certain extremist elements announced plans to hold protests around the Indian high commission in Dhaka, they said. In a statement, the MEA

said that India “completely rejects the false narrative” sought to be created by extremist elements regarding certain recent events in Bangladesh.

“It is unfortunate that the interim government has neither conducted a thorough investigation nor shared meaningful evidence with India regarding the incidents,” it said shortly after summoning Hamidullah.

The MEA said Hamidullah was summoned and apprised of India’s strong concerns at the deteriorating security environment in Bangladesh.

“His attention was drawn, in particular, to the activities of some extremist elements who have announced plans to create a security situation around the Indian Mission in Dhaka,” it said.

The MEA said India expects the interim government in Bangladesh to ensure the safety of its missions and posts in that country in keeping with

its diplomatic obligations. It also noted that New Delhi is in favour of peace and stability in Bangladesh.

“India has close and friendly relations with the people of Bangladesh rooted in the liberation struggle, and strengthened through various developmental and people-to-people initiatives,” it said.

“We are in favour of peace and stability in Bangladesh and have consistently called for free, fair, inclusive and credible elections, conducted in a peaceful atmosphere,” it added.

Three days back, Bangladesh foreign ministry summoned Indian envoy to Dhaka, Pranay Verma and conveyed its concern over former prime minister Sheikh Hasina’s “incendiary” statements from Indian soil. In its reaction, New Delhi asserted that it has never allowed its territory to be used for activities inimical to the interests of Bangladesh. Last month, Hasina, 78, was sentenced to death by a special tribunal in Dhaka for “crimes against humanity” over her government’s brutal crackdown on the student-led protests last year.

The Awami League leader has been living in India since she fled Bangladesh on August 5 last year in the face of the protests.

The relations between India and Bangladesh came under strain after the interim government headed by Muhammad Yunus came to power.

India has been expressing concerns over attacks on minorities, especially Hindus, in that country. *PTI*

India closes visa application centre in Dhaka due to security situation

DHAKA, DEC 17 / PTI

THE Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) in Bangladesh’s capital Dhaka on Wednesday closed its office in view of the current security situation. The IVAC at Jamuna Future Park in Dhaka is the main, integrated centre for all Indian visa services in the capital.

“In view of the ongoing security situation, we wish to bring to your kind notice that IVAC JFP Dhaka will be closed at 2 pm today,” the IVAC said in a statement. The IVAC said all applicants with appointment slots scheduled for submission on Wednesday would be rescheduled for a later date.

Earlier in New Delhi, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned Bangladesh envoy Riaz Hamidullah and conveyed its strong concern over certain extremist elements announcing plans to create a security situation around the Indian mission in Dhaka. “We expect the interim government to ensure the safety of Missions and Posts in Bangladesh in keeping with its diplomatic obligations,” it said. It said the envoy was apprised of India’s strong concerns about the deteriorating security environment in Bangladesh.

Plans for attack in New Orleans thwarted; suspect arrested

BATON ROUGE, DEC 17 / AP

PLANS to “carry out an attack” in New Orleans were thwarted after an ex-Marine was arrested while on the way to the Louisiana city with guns and body armour in the car, according to court documents obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press.

Micah James Legnon, 28, was charged with threats in interstate commerce. Federal authorities said they had been surveilling Legnon due to ties to an extremist anti-capitalist and anti-government group.

Four members of the group were arrested Friday in the Mojave Desert, east of Los Angeles, as they were rehearsing a foiled plot to set off bombs in Southern California on New Year’s Eve, authorities said.

Plans of an attack in New Orleans began to intensify after several hundred immigration agents were deployed to southeast Louisiana, authorities said. The enforcement operation, dubbed “Catahoula Crunch,” has a goal of 5,000 arrests. The crackdown is the latest in a series of enforcement operations that have also unfolded in Los Angeles, Chicago and Charlotte, North Carolina. Legnon believed it was time to “recreate” Waco with an attack in New Orleans, authorities said in court documents. They pointed to a December 4 chat message by Legnon

written under the alias “Kateri The Witch” the day after Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrived in New Orleans.

Legnon’s alias had “she/her” written beside it, but jail records referred to Legnon as male. Investigators believe Legnon’s chat message referred to the 1993 siege at a Waco, Texas, compound that ended after 51 days and the deaths of four federal agents, a religious leader and 76 of his followers. Eight days after the post in the group chat, Legnon appeared to place a weapon into a car, an FBI agent surveilling Legnon said in the court document.

“On my way” to New Orleans, Legnon said in a group chat. Legnon then shared a video of a gun and bullet proof vest and wrote “just in case.” After Legnon’s December 12 arrest, agents found an assault rifle, a pistol, a gas canister and body armor inside the car. Inside Legnon’s apartment in New Iberia, Louisiana, agents found sniper training manuals, SWAT training manuals, assault rifles, and rounds of ammunition.

Court documents did not list an attorney who could speak on Legnon’s behalf. The Office of the State Public Defender and the United States Attorney’s Office for the Western District of Louisiana did not immediately respond to requests for information on Legnon’s attorney

Louvre workers vote to extend strike at world’s most visited museum

Thomas Adamson

PARIS, DEC 17

EMPLOYEES at the Louvre Museum voted on Wednesday to extend a strike that has disrupted operations at the world’s most visited museum.

Union workers were protesting chronic understaffing, building deterioration and recent management decisions — pressures intensified by a brazen crown jewels heist in October. The decision came during a morning general assembly, after workers had adopted the walkout unanimously earlier this week. The museum was already closed on Tuesday for its regular weekly shutdown. It remained unclear whether the strike would force a full closure on Wednesday. Visitors holding tickets queued outside the museum in the morning as management assessed staffing levels and whether enough employees were available to safely open galleries.

Tensions have been further sharp-

ened by fallout from the theft of crown jewels during a daylight robbery that exposed serious security lapses at the museum.

Culture Ministry officials held crisis talks with unions on Monday and proposed to cancel a planned USD 6.7 million cut in 2026 funding, open new recruitment for gallery guards and visitor services and increase staff compensation. Union officials said the measures fell short.

Louvre President Laurence des Cars was scheduled to appear before the Senate’s culture committee later Wednesday as lawmakers continue probing security failures at the museum. Des Cars has acknowledged an “institutional failure” following the heist, but has come under renewed scrutiny after admitting she only learned of a critical 2019 security audit after the robbery. France’s Court of Auditors and a separate administrative inquiry have since criticised delays in implementing a long-promised security overhaul. *AP*

Record warming to rusting rivers, 2025 Arctic Report shows faster deterioration

Matthew L. Druckenmiller and Twila A. Moon, Univer

BOULDER (US), DEC 17

THE Arctic is transforming faster and with more far-reaching consequences than scientists expected just 20 years ago, when the first Arctic Report Card assessed the state of Earth’s far northern environment. The snow season is dramatically shorter today, sea ice is thinning and melting earlier, and wildfire seasons are getting worse. Increasing ocean heat is reshaping ecosystems as non-Arctic marine species move northward.

Thawing permafrost is releasing iron and other minerals into rivers, which degrades drinking water. And extreme storms fueled by warming seas are putting communities at risk.

The past water year, October 2024 through September 2025, brought the highest Arctic air temperatures since records began 125 years ago, including the warmest autumn ever measured and a winter and a summer that were among the warmest on record. Overall, the Arctic is warm-

ing more than twice as fast as the Earth as a whole. For the 20th Arctic Report Card, we worked with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an international team of scientists and Indigenous partners from across the Arctic to track environmental changes in the North — from air and ocean temperatures to sea ice, snow, glaciers and ecosystems — and the impacts on communities.

Together, these vital signs reveal a striking and interconnected transformation underway that’s amplifying risks for people who live there. Arctic warming is intensifying the region’s water cycle. A warmer atmosphere increases evaporation, precipitation and melt-water from snow and ice, adding and moving more water through the climate system. That leads to more extreme rainstorms and snowstorms, changing river flows and altering ecosystems.

The Arctic region saw record-high precipitation for the entire 2025 water year and for spring, with the other seasons each among the top-five wettest since at least 1950. Extreme

weather — particularly atmospheric rivers, which are long, narrow “rivers in the sky” that transport large amounts of water vapour — played an outsized role. These wetter conditions are reshaping snow cover across the region. Snow blankets the Arctic throughout much of the year, but that snow cover isn’t lasting as long. In 2025, snowpack was above average in the cold winter months, yet rapid spring melting left the area covered by snow far smaller than normal by June, continuing a six-decade decline.

June snow cover in recent years has been half of what it was in the 1960s.

Losing late spring snow cover means losing a bright, reflective surface that helps keep the Arctic cool, allowing the land instead to be directly warmed by the sun, which raises the temperature. Sea ice tells a similar story. The year’s maximum sea ice coverage, reached in March, was the lowest in the 47-year satellite record. The minimum sea ice coverage in September was the 10th lowest. Since the 1980s, the summer sea ice extent has shrunk by about 50 per cent, while

the area covered by the oldest, thickest sea ice — ice that has existed for longer than four years — has declined by more than 95 per cent.

The thinner sea ice cover is more influenced by winds and currents, and less resilient against warming waters. This means greater variability in sea ice conditions, causing new risks for people living and working in the Arctic. The Greenland Ice Sheet continued to lose mass in 2025, as it has every year since the late 1990s. As the ice sheet melts and calves more icebergs into the surrounding seas, it adds to global sea-level rise.

Mountain glaciers are also losing ice at an extraordinary rate — the annual rate of glacier ice loss across the Arctic has tripled since the 1990s.

This poses immediate local hazards. Glacial lake outburst floods — when water that is dammed up by a glacier is suddenly released — are becoming more frequent. In Juneau, Alaska, recent outburst floods from Mendenhall Glacier have inundated homes and displaced residents with record-setting levels of floodwater.

The Conversation

Rob Reiner's son Nick to be charged with two counts of murder

Andrew Dalton and Christopher Weber
LOS ANGELES, DEC 17

ROB Reiner's son Nick Reiner will be charged with two counts of first-degree murder in the killing of his parents, Los Angeles County prosecutors said Tuesday. Nick Reiner, 32, will be charged in the death of the 78-year-old actor and director Rob Reiner and his wife Michele Singer Reiner, District Attorney Nathan Hochman announced at a news conference with LA Police Chief Jim McDonnell.

Prosecutors plan to file the charges, two counts of first degree murder special circumstances of multiple murders, later Tuesday. They will also include a special allegation that he used a dangerous weapon, a knife. The announcement of the charges came two days after the couple was found dead from apparent stab wounds in their home in the upscale Brentwood neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Nick Reiner was arrested on suspicion of the killing and jailed hours later.

Nick Reiner had been expected to make an initial court appearance earlier Tuesday, but his attorney Alan Jackson said he was not brought from the jail to the courthouse for medical reasons and the appearance would not come before Wednesday. Jackson did not comment further on the case, and Nick Reiner has not yet entered a plea. Rob Reiner was the Emmy-winning star of the sitcom "All in the Family" who went on to direct films including "When Har-



ry Met Sally..." and "The Princess Bride." He was an outspoken liberal activist for decades. Michele Singer Reiner was a photographer, movie producer and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. They had been married for 36 years. Representatives for the Reiner family did not respond to requests for comment.

Nick Reiner's attorney Alan Jackson said his client will not be in court Tuesday for medical reasons. Jackson told reporters outside the courthouse that he did not know what the medical issue was, but he said Reiner will not appear before Wednesday. Prosecutors are set to

decide whether and how to charge the 32-year-old, who is being held in jail without bail. He was arrested several hours after his parents were found dead in their home in the upscale Brentwood neighborhood of Los Angeles on Sunday, police said. Police haven't said anything about a motive for the killings. Nick Reiner's attorney didn't comment further about the case on Tuesday. Jackson is a high-profile lawyer who represented Harvey Weinstein at his Los Angeles trial and Karen Read at her trial in Massachusetts. He was a central figure in the HBO documentary on the Read case.

Investigators believe Rob and Michele Singer Reiner died from stab wounds, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press. The official, who was briefed on the investigation, could not publicly discuss the details and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity. The killings were especially shocking given the warm comic legacy of the family. Rob Reiner was the son of comedy legend Carl Reiner, who died in 2020 at age 98. Three months ago, Nick Reiner was photographed with his parents and siblings at the premiere of his father's film "Spinal Tap 2: The End Continues." *AP*

States sue Trump admin for billions in withheld EV charging funds

Alexa St John
DETROIT, DEC 17

SIXTEEN states and the District of Columbia are suing President Donald Trump's administration for what they say is the unlawful withholding of over USD 2 billion dollars in funding for two electric vehicle charging programmes, according to a federal lawsuit announced Tuesday. The lawsuit filed Tuesday in the US District Court for the Western District of Washington is the latest legal battle that several states are pursuing over funding for EV charging infrastructure that they say was obligated to them by Congress under former President Joe Biden, but that the Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration are "impounding."

"The Trump Administration's illegal attempt to stop funding for electric vehicle infrastructure must come to an end," California Attorney General Rob Bonta said in a release. "This is just another reckless attempt that will stall the fight against air pollution and climate change, slow innovation, thwart green job creation, and leave communities without access to clean, affordable transportation."

The Department of Transportation did not immediately respond to request for comment.

The Trump administration in February ordered states to halt spending money for EV charging that was allocated in the bipartisan infrastructure law passed under the previous administration.

Several states filed a lawsuit in May against the administration for withholding the funding from the USD 5 billion National Electric Ve-

hicle Infrastructure programme for a nationwide charging buildout. A federal judge later ordered the administration to release much of the funding for chargers in more than a dozen states.

Tuesday's separate lawsuit addresses the withholding of funding obligations for two other programmes: USD 1.8 billion for the Charging and Fuelling Infrastructure Grant programme, as well as about USD 350 million in Electric Vehicle Charger Reliability and Accessibility Accelerator money.

Tuesday's lawsuit is led by attorneys general from California and Colorado, joined by the attorneys general of Arizona, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin and the District of Columbia, and the governor of Pennsylvania.

The Trump administration has been hostile to EVs and has dismantled several policies friendly to cleaner cars and trucks that were put in place under Biden, in favour of policies that instead align with Trump's oil and gas industry agenda. Once in office a second time, President Trump immediately ordered an end to what he has called Biden's "EV mandate." While Biden targeted for half of new vehicle sales in the US to be electric by 2030, policies did not force American consumers to buy or automakers to sell electric vehicles. Biden did set stringent tailpipe emissions and fuel economy rules in an effort to encourage more widespread EV uptake, as the auto industry would have had to meet both sets of requirements with a greater number of EVs in their sales mix. *AP*

Bondi Beach gunman wakes from coma, charged with 15 counts of murder

SYDNEY, DEC 17 / AP

THE suspected gunman in Sydney's Bondi Beach massacre was charged with 59 offences, including 15 charges of murder, on Wednesday, as hundreds of mourners gathered in Sydney to begin funerals for the victims.

Two shooters slaughtered 15 people on Sunday in an antisemitic mass shooting targeting Jews celebrating Hanukkah at Bondi Beach, and more than 20 other people are still being treated in hospitals. All of those killed by the gunmen who have been identified so far were Jewish.

Police said that Naveed Akram, the 24-year-old suspected shooter, was charged on Wednesday after waking from a coma in a Sydney hospital, where he has been since police shot him and his gunman father at Bondi. His 50-year-old father, Sajid Akram, died at the scene. The charges include one count of murder for each fatality and one count of committing a terrorist act. Akram was also charged with 40 counts of causing harm with intent to murder in relation to the wounded and with placing an explosive near a building with intent to cause harm.

Police said the Akrams' car, which was found at the crime scene, contained improvised explosive devices.

Funerals began as a country reeling from its deadliest hate-fueled massa-



cre of modern times turned to searching questions, growing in volume since the attack, about how it was able to happen. As investigations unfold, Australia faces a social and political reckoning about antisemitism, gun control and whether police protections for Jews at events such as Sunday's were sufficient for the threats they faced. First, however, was a day of anguish for families from Sydney's close-knit Jewish community who gathered, one after another, to begin to bury their dead. The victims of the attack ranged in age from a 10-year-old girl to an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor.

Authorities believe that the shooting was "a terrorist attack inspired by Islamic State," Australia's federal police commissioner Krissy Barrett

said Wednesday. The authorities have said that Naveed Akram came to the attention of the security services in 2019, but have supplied little detail of their previous investigations. Now, authorities will probe what was known about the men. That includes examining a trip the suspects made to the Philippines in November. The Philippines Bureau of Immigration confirmed Tuesday that the two suspected shooters travelled to the country from Nov. 1 to Nov. 28, giving the city of Davao as their final destination. Groups of Muslim separatist militants, including Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines, once expressed support for IS and have hosted small numbers of foreign militants from Asia, the Middle East and Europe in the past. *AP*

US adds 20 more countries to travel ban, restrictions list

Yoshita Singh
NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, DEC 17

THE Trump administration has expanded its travel ban and restrictions to 20 additional nations as well as the Palestinian Authority as part of its efforts to "protect US national security and public safety interests". US President Donald Trump signed a proclamation on Tuesday expanding and strengthening entry restrictions on nationals from countries with "demonstrated, persistent, and severe deficiencies" in screening, vetting, and information-sharing to protect America from national security and public safety threats.

The proclamation said these measures are necessary to prevent the entry of foreign nationals about whom the US "lacks sufficient information to assess the risks they pose, garner co-operation from foreign governments, enforce our immigration laws, and advance other important foreign policy, national security, and counterterrorism objectives."

It imposed partial restrictions and entry limitations on 15 additional countries - Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Dominica, Gabon, The Gambia, Malawi, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tonga, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Full restrictions and entry limitations were also imposed for nationals of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, South Sudan, and Syria. Full restrictions and entry limitations have also been placed on individuals holding Palestinian Authority-issued travel documents, as several "US-designated terrorist groups operate actively in the West Bank or Gaza Strip and have murdered American citizens," it said, adding that the recent war in these areas likely resulted in compromised vetting and screening abilities.

"...Considering the weak or non-existent control exercised over these areas by the PA (Palestinian Authority), individuals attempting to travel on PA-issued or endorsed travel documents cannot currently be properly vetted and approved for entry into the United States." The proclamation also imposed full restrictions and entry limitations on Laos and Sierra Leone that were previously subject to partial restrictions, and continued partial restrictions on nationals from Burundi, Cuba, Togo, and Venezuela. The entry of nationals from additional countries must be restricted or limited to protect US national security and public safety interests, the proclamation said.

It continues full restrictions and entry limitations of nationals from the original "12 high-risk countries named by the Trump administration. *PTI*

Pakistan extends airspace ban for Indian aircraft by another month



ISLAMABAD/LAHORE, DEC 17 / PTI

PAKISTAN on Wednesday extended its airspace ban for Indian aircraft by another month till January 23.

Pakistan closed its airspace to India's airlines in April after the Pahalgam attack. India too has imposed a similar ban on Pakistan.

The previous extension was set to expire on December 24 but the Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA) extended the restrictions on Wednesday till January 23.

"Pakistan airspace will remain closed to Indian-registered aircraft, including all aircraft owned, operated, or leased by Indian airlines, as well as Indian military flights," the PAA said.

According to the NOTAM (Notice to Airmen), the restriction, which has already been in force, "will continue until January 23, 2026, as per the specified timings."

Pakistan's airspace is divided into two flight information regions (FIRs) — Karachi and Lahore, according to a Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA) document from 2022.

The NOTAM applies to both Karachi (OPKR) and Lahore (OPLR) FIRs.

A terror attack in April in Jammu and Kashmir's Pahalgam that killed 26 people led to a four-day conflict in May between India and Pakistan, Islamabad has several times extended its ban on Indian airlines flying over its airspace. India too has imposed a similar ban on Pakistan.

South African immigration raids US refugee centre

Michelle Gumedede and Gerald Imray
JOHANNESBURG, DEC 17

A centre in South Africa processing applications for the United States refugee programme was raided by immigration and law enforcement officers and seven Kenyan nationals were arrested for working there illegally, South Africa's Home Affairs Ministry said Wednesday.

The centre in Johannesburg was processing applications by white South Africans under the Trump administration's new programme, giving them priority for refugee status in the US The Kenyans were working at the centre alongside US officials despite entering South Africa on tourist visas, which did not allow them to work, the Home Affairs Ministry said

in a statement. It said no US officials were arrested in the raid on Tuesday, and it was not a diplomatic site.

The raid is bound to increase tensions between the US and South Africa. US President Donald Trump has been especially critical of the South African government since he returned to office, claiming the country is violently persecuting its white Afrikaner minority and also pursuing an anti-American foreign policy.

Trump's widely rejected claims over the treatment of Afrikaners in South Africa led to his administration setting up the programme offering them refugee status in the US

South Africa's government has said that white South Africans do not meet the criteria for refugee status because there is no persecution, but says it won't stop them from applying for relocation under the US programme.



The South African Home Affairs Ministry didn't immediately say who the Kenyans worked for, but the US government contracted a Kenya-based company, RSC Africa, to process the refugee applications by

white South Africans, according to the US Embassy in South Africa. RSC is operated by Church World Service, a US-based nongovernmental organisation offering humanitarian aid and refugee assistance across the world.



Rupee recovers 55 paise from all-time low to close at 90.38

MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

THE rupee recovered 55 paise from its all-time low level to close at 90.38 (provisional) against the US dollar after a volatile trade on Wednesday, amid suspected aggressive central bank intervention. Analysts said the rupee’s recent fall against the US dollar was primarily driven by external factors, not domestic economic weakness, and the high volatility in the forex market is expected to persist amid shifting economic and geopolitical cues. The lack of progress in the US–India trade negotiations and extended selling by foreign portfolio investors have weighed on the sentiment, while Brent crude oil prices hovering near USD 60 per barrel supported the domestic unit at lower levels.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 91.05 against the US dollar, then recovered some lost ground to touch an intra-day high of 89.96, registering a 97 paise gain from its previous close. At the end of trade on Wednesday, the rupee was quoted at 90.38 (provisional), up 55 paise over its last close. On Tuesday, the rupee tanked below 91 per dollar, hitting a low of 91.14. It finally settled at an all-time low of 90.93 against the American currency.



“The Indian rupee appreciated after a five-day losing streak, bolstered by suspected aggressive intervention from the central bank,” Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said. Parmar further added that high volatility is expected to persist in the forex market amid shifting economic and geopolitical headlines. “Technically, USD/INR has immediate resistance at 90.60 and support at 89.70,” he said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback’s strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.42 per cent higher at 98.56. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 2.09 per cent higher at USD 60.16 per barrel in futures trade. “The rupee’s record low against the US dollar was primarily driven by external factors, not domestic

economic weakness. Key reasons, apart from the imposition of steep US tariffs (50 per cent) on Indian exports, include persistent capital outflows and dollar demand linked to non-deliverable forward maturities.

“These factors have led to a roughly 6 per cent year-to-date depreciation, making the rupee Asia’s most negatively impacted currency in 2025,” said Deepak Agrawal, Chief Investment Officer – Debt and Product Head, Kotak Mutual Fund. Agrawal said despite India’s strong GDP growth, robust forex reserves, and a manageable current account deficit, the lack of progress in the US–India trade negotiations and extended selling by foreign portfolio investors have weighed on the sentiment.

“The RBI remains focused on curbing volatility rather than defending a specific level, supporting a market-driven approach. Looking ahead to 2026, the rupee is expected to relatively appreciate if the India-US trade deal is finalised and capital flows improve,” Agrawal said.

On the domestic equity market front, Sensex declined 120.21 points to settle at 84,559.65, while the Nifty dropped 41.55 points to 25,818.55. Foreign Institutional Investors sold equities worth Rs 2,381.92 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

Silver price crosses record Rs 2 lakh per kg level in Delhi markets

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

SILVER prices on Wednesday breached the record Rs 2 lakh-per-kilogram mark in the national capital for the first time, driven by strong demand in domestic and global markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The white metal jumped by Rs 7,300 to hit an all-time high of Rs 2,05,800 per kg on Wednesday, against the previous closing level of Rs 1,98,500 per kilogram.

“Silver continued its ascent with prices touching record high levels in the domestic markets as the white metal surged to hit a new peak in the international markets,” Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said.

So far in this year, silver prices have added Rs 1,15,300, or 127.40 per cent, since the level of Rs 90,500 per kilogram recorded on January 1, 2025.

In the local bullion market, gold prices climbed by Rs 600 to Rs 1,36,500 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes), compared to the previous close of Rs 1,35,900 per 10 grams, as per the association.

Renisha Chainani, Head - Research at Augmont, said the US dollar index has reached a two-month low, making greenback-priced bullion more affordable for international purchasers.

In the international markets, spot gold went up by USD 18.59, or 0.43 per cent, to USD 4,321.06 per ounce.

“Spot gold is trading with a gain of around 0.4 per cent at USD 4,320 per ounce as traders await the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) data to be released on Thursday,” explained Praveen Singh, Research Analyst at the Mirae Asset ShareKhan.

Echoing similar sentiments, Dilip Parmar of HDFC Securities said gold in the global markets is hovering near the record highs as investors are monitoring the escalating geopolitical tensions in Venezuela.

He added that metal traders are closely monitoring for signals of further monetary easing following the US Federal Reserve’s third consecutive rate cut last week, a significant tailwind for non-interest-bearing assets.

Parmar further stated that investment demand from both retail and institutional sectors is expected to remain robust, which could push prices higher.

In addition, spot silver crossed the USD 66-per-ounce mark for the first time in the overseas trade. The white metal climbed by USD 2.77, or 4.35 per cent, to hit a fresh record of USD 66.52 per ounce.

Stock markets fall for 3rd day; Sensex drops 120 pts

MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

STOCK markets declined for the third consecutive day on Wednesday, with benchmark Sensex closing lower by 120 points at a week’s low due to relentless foreign fund outflows.

The 30-share BSE Sensex edged lower by 120.21 points or 0.14 per cent to settle at 84,559.65. During the day, it dropped 263.88 points or 0.31 per cent to 84,415.98.

The 50-share NSE Nifty declined by 41.55 points or 0.16 per cent to a week’s low of 25,818.55.

Among Sensex firms, Trent fell the most by 1.61 per cent. HDFC Bank dropped by nearly 1 per cent, emerging as a major drag on the index. ICICI Bank, Adani Ports, Bajaj Finserv,

Bharat Electronics, Titan and Asian Paints were also among the laggards.

However, State Bank of India rose the most by 1.51 per cent, helping Sensex restrict losses. Infosys, Axis Bank and Maruti were among the gainers.

“Foreign investors are pulling out funds, and emerging markets are struggling, while developed economies remain strong, showing that investors are becoming more cautious about emerging markets,” Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

Selling in heavyweight stocks across sectors led to broad-based weakness, while muted cues from global markets further dampened investor sentiment, Ajit Mishra – SVP,

Research, Religare Broking, said.

Analysts said a rebound in the rupee from record low levels offers temporary relief, as global uncertainty and sustained foreign selling keep upside potential limited.

The rupee rebounded sharply by over 1 per cent in the early session to trade at 89 level against the US dollar briefly on heavy dollar selling by banks.

The rupee later pared gains to close at 90.38, up by 55 points over the last record closing low of 90.93.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) off-loaded equities worth Rs 2,381.92 crore on Tuesday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth Rs 1,077.48 crore, according to exchange data.

World shares gain, oil jumps with Venezuela blockade

BANGKOK, DEC 17 / AP

SHARES advanced on Wednesday in Europe and Asia as strong buying of technology shares helped lift some benchmarks, while the price of US crude briefly surged more than 2 per cent after President Donald Trump ordered a blockade of all “sanctioned oil tankers” into Venezuela.

Trump’s move followed the seizure by US forces last week of an oil tanker off Venezuela’s coast, an unusual move that followed a buildup of military forces in the region as his administration ramps up pressure on the country’s authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro.

The future for the S&P 500 edged 0.1 per cent higher and that for the Dow Jones In-

dustrial Average was virtually unchanged.

In Germany, the DAX added 0.3 per cent to 24,138.73, while the CAC 40 in Paris was up 0.1 per cent to 8,115.18. Britain’s FTSE 100 surged 1.4 per cent to 9,817.65.

Tokyo’s Nikkei 225 gained 0.3 per cent to 49,512.28 as traders awaited a decision on an interest rate hike by the Bank of Japan later in the week.

Adding to expectations for a rate hike, Japan reported its exports rose 6 per cent in November from a year earlier, as shipments to the US rose for the first time since March. A trade deal with the Trump administration that set tariffs on imports from Japan at a baseline rate of 15 per cent, down from the initial plan for a 25 per cent helped boost exports of cars and chemicals, among other key

manufactured goods.

Hong Kong’s Hang Seng climbed 0.9 per cent to 25,468.78, while the Shanghai Composite index jumped 1.2 per cent to 3,870.28.

In South Korea, the Kospi advanced 1.4 per cent to 4,056.41, lifted by computer chip maker SK Hynix, which gained 4 per cent, and a 5 per cent jump for Samsung Electronics.

Australia’s S&P/ASX 200 gave up 0.2 per cent to 8,585.20.

On Tuesday, US stocks drifted through a mixed day of trading after reports on the US economy did little to clear up uncertainty about where interest rates may be heading.

One report said the US unemployment rate was at its worst level since 2021 in November, but employers also added more jobs last month than economists expected.

NTPC’s commercial operational capacity crosses 85.5 GW

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

POWER giant NTPC on Wednesday announced commercial capacity addition of 359.58 MW through various solar projects of its subsidiaries in Gujarat and Rajasthan, taking the overall commercial capacity over 85.5 GW at the Group level.

NTPC declared the commercial operation date (COD) of part capacity of 243.66 MW out of 1,255 MW Khavda-I Solar PV project of NTPC Renewable Energy, a step-down subsidiary of NTPC, through its subsidiary NGEL. Further, the company declared COD of 78 MW out of 245 MW capacity of NTPC’s Nokh Sokar PV project (3x245 MW) in Rajasthan.

The company has also declared COD of

part of the capacity of 37.925 MW out of 300 MW at Khavda Solar Energy Project under the 450 MW Hybrid Tranche V project of NTPC REL. With this, the total installed and commercial capacity of the NTPC group has reached 85,541 MW.

The company has another 30.90 GW under construction, including 13.3 GW of renewable energy capacity. NTPC, under the Ministry of Power, is India’s largest power generation player, catering to the country’s one-fourth electricity demand alone through conventional and renewable sources.

The company has ventured into various new business areas, including e-mobility, battery storage, pumped hydro storage, waste-to-energy, nuclear power, and green hydrogen solutions.



NSE NIFTY TOP GAINERS December 17, 2025

%	POINTS
+2.07	Shriram Finance 866.00
+1.58	SBIN 976.35
+1.30	Hindalco 848.00
+1.15	Eicher Motors 7,143.00
+0.86	Tata Consum 1,180.00
+0.76	Wipro 261.20
+0.73	Coal India 384.40
+0.57	Infosys 1,602.00
+0.52	Axis Bank 1,226.00
+0.46	Sun Pharma 1,789.50

NSE NIFTY TOP LOSERS December 17, 2025

%	POINTS
-3.71	Max Healthcare 1,033.20
-1.98	Apollo Hospitals 6,912.00
-1.66	Trent 4,040.30
-1.55	Bajaj Auto 8,868.00
-1.49	HDFC Life 752.95
-1.13	SBI Life 2,012.90
-0.92	ICICI Bank 1,353.50
-0.92	HDFC Bank 985.20
-0.79	Adani Ports 1,487.10
-0.76	Jio Financial 293.00

BSE SENSEX TOP GAINERS December 17, 2025

%	POINTS
+1.51	SBIN 975.90
+0.69	Sun Pharma 1795.10
+0.61	Infosys 1602.10
+0.41	TCS 3217.60
+0.41	Axis Bank 1224.65
+0.33	Bharti Airtel 2108.65
+0.29	Tata Steel 170.30
+0.27	Maruti 16393.40
+0.21	Power Grid 261.00
+0.20	TMPV 346.20

BSE SENSEX TOP LOSERS December 17, 2025

%	POINTS
-1.61	Trent 4043.50
-0.99	HDFC Bank 984.30
-0.96	ICICI Bank 1352.95
-0.89	Adani Ports 1485.90
-0.69	Bajaj Finserv 2021.20
-0.64	BEL 385.45
-0.53	Titan 3906.65
-0.44	ITC 399.95
-0.40	Kotak Bank 2173.50
-0.27	M&M 3613.05

India GDP estimated to grow at 7.5 per cent in FY26: Report

MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

INDIA'S real gross domestic product (GDP) is likely to grow at 7.5 per cent in FY26 and moderate to 7 per cent in the subsequent fiscal year, a domestic rating agency said on Wednesday. The rupee, which is hitting lifetime lows lately and has breached the 91-mark, will appreciate and is expected to be at the 89-90 level in FY27, according to Careedge Ratings.

"India's macroeconomic outlook remains constructive heading into FY27. Even with external uncertainties lingering, the Indian economy is expected to record healthy growth of 7 per cent in FY27," its chief economist Rajani Sinha said.

The growth momentum will be supported by factors like comfortable inflation, lower interest rates and lower tax burden, Sinha said, adding that a likely US-India trade deal would provide further impetus.

The agency feels the capital expenditure cycle is showing "early signs of revival" as reflected by strong growth in the order book of capital goods companies. The jump in gross FDI (foreign direct investment) inflows suggests that the country's growth is being taken note of by overseas investors, it said, adding that



market reforms like the new labour code will give further confidence to domestic and global investors. After the impressive show in the first half of FY26, the GDP rise is likely to moderate to 7 per cent in H2, but will maintain a growth of 7.5 per cent for the full fiscal, it said, attributing the moderation to the impact of fading export front-loading and normalisa-

tion of consumption after festivities.

The agency said India's goods exports are set to contract by around 1 per cent in FY26 compared to a growth of 0.1 per cent in FY25 and pointed to a decline in merchandise exports to the US across categories.

Noting that exports of US tariff-impacted gems and jewellery and textiles have risen to Hong Kong

and the UAE, the agency said shifts in export market dynamics remain a key monitorable going ahead. The current account deficit will remain at a manageable 1 per cent of GDP in FY26 and FY27, it said. The Centre will meet its fiscal deficit commitment of 4.4 per cent for FY26 and curtail the gap further by up to 0.2 per cent in FY27, it added.

India Inc to see 9 pc salary growth in 2026: Report

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

AVERAGE employee salaries in India are set to increase by 9 per cent in 2026, with a renewed focus on short-term incentives and skills-based systems, a report said on Wednesday.

According to Mercer's Total Remuneration Survey 2026, organisations in India are shifting toward broader, more holistic value propositions and the top factors influencing salary increases include individual performance, inflation and the organisation's competitiveness in the job market, among others.

The survey, which covered remuneration trends across more than 8,000 roles and in more than 1,500 companies, revealed that organisations are continuing to refine their rewards packages, with a focus on short-term incentives, moving toward more transparent, skills acquisition and deployment-based systems. "Our survey shows most organisations in India will continue to plan pay increases in line with balancing cost pressures and talent retention. Alongside this, there is a growing emphasis on skills-based organisation architecture, talent assessments to better align workforce capabilities with evolving business needs and pay programs to drive desired outcomes," said Malathi KS, Mercer's Rewards Consulting Leader India.

As companies respond to shifting workforce dynamics -- ranging from digital transformation and sourcing scarce, in-demand skills to the rising importance of benefits and well-being -- they are redesigning rewards strategies to build a more resilient, future-ready talent.

"These shifts present Indian organisations with significant opportunities to strengthen workforce engagement and shape a more agile and inclusive workplace," Malathi KS said. Short-term incentives like bonuses have led to a stronger emphasis on near-term performance alignment, cost efficiency, and the development of transparent, skills-based pay frameworks to support evolving workforce needs in the face of AI and productivity priorities. Adding to this, the implementation of newly-approved labour codes will tighten the social security net and preventive health care, the report by the global consulting firm noted. Sectorwise, High Tech (product and consulting) and the Automotive Industry are set to have the highest salary increases in 2026 at 9.3 per cent and 9.5 per cent respectively, while the IT, ITES, and Global Capability Centers (GCC) sector in India continued to lead the way in offering innovative and progressive employee benefits reflecting the sector's commitment to enhancing employee well-being and engagement.

Centre has set clear goals in fiscal management transparency, states should follow suit: Sitharaman

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

FINANCE Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday said the Centre has set clear goals for transparency in fiscal management and brought down its debt levels, and called upon states to implement the same.

Speaking at the Times Network India Economic Conclave, Sitharaman said from next financial year debt levels will be the core focus area, along with fiscal deficit, and nudged states to lower their debt levels so that the country can achieve its goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047.

"The central government has set clear goals for transparency in budget-making, ensuring that fiscal management is visible to all and meets the highest standards of accountability. As a result, we have been able to bring down the debt-to-GDP ratio since the post-COVID period, when it had crossed 60 per cent. It is now on a declining path," she said.

India's debt-to-GDP shot up to 61.4 per cent post Covid, but policies adopted by the central government helped bring it down to 57.1 per cent



by 2023-24. The government expects it to reduce to 56.1 per cent this year. Sitharaman also called upon states to take up accountability and transparency in fiscal management as a priority just like the central government, which has every year reduced the debt levels.

"Unless the debt-to-GSDP is managed better and kept within the FRBM limits and the stock of debt which is being accumulating over the years with high rate of interest which many states are unable to service, unless even those are brought down, you will be borrowing to service the loans, you will not be borrowing for developmental expenditure. That's a poor play in the fiscal terrain," Sitharaman said.

IndiGo promoters fly into top-10 list of self-made bizmen with ₹ 2.2 lakh crore valuation

MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

RAHUL Bhatia and Rakesh Gangwal, the promoters of IndiGo have debuted in a list of top-10 self-made entrepreneurs by piloting the low-cost carrier to a valuation of Rs 2.2 lakh crore in 2025, a report said on Wednesday. Eternal's Deepinder Goyal leads the list as the business built by him is valued at Rs 3.2 lakh crore, which is up 27 per cent from last year. He pips Radhakishan Damani of Avenue Supermarts, who's business valuation dropped by 13 per cent over the last year to Rs 3 lakh crore.

The IndiGo founders are third on the 'IDFC First Private and Hurun India's Top 200 Self-made Entrepreneurs of the Millennia 2025' list, which has been computed as on September 25 this year. The stock of Inter-globe Aviation, IndiGo's parent, took a hit lately because of severe issues around flight cancellations as the carrier failed at implementing a new set of aviation rules earlier this month. Hurun said the IndiGo founders have debuted into the top list because of their dominance of India's aviation market with a 65 per cent market share in the domestic sector.

"The airline has expanded aggres-



sively internationally and introduced sustainable aviation initiatives, including testing biofuels and deploying fuel-efficient aircraft," the report said. Goyal is leading the list for the first time, as per a report, which commended the food delivery entity for operating in 800 cities. Competing brand Swiggy's co-founders Sriharsha Majety and Nandan Reddy come fifth on the list on the back of a 5 per cent increase in the enterprise's

valuation to Rs 1.06 lakh crore.

Paytm founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma witnessed one of the biggest jumps at 67 per cent and occupied the eighth position in the list with his business valued at Rs 72,900 crore.

The recently listed Lenskart also saw a 60 per cent jump in valuation to Rs 67,000 crore, leading co-founders Peyush Bansal, Amit Chaudhary, Neha Bansal, and Sumeet Kapahi to occupy 10th position in the list. The cumula-

tive value of all companies on the list stands at Rs 42 lakh crore in 2025, up 15 per cent from Rs 36 lakh crore last year.

The number of billion-dollar companies founded by self-made entrepreneurs stands at 128, up from 121 last year, and the valuation threshold to be on the list has moved up to Rs 4,300 crore. Bengaluru continued to top as the base of the companies on the list by being home to 52 entities, down by 14 entities.

Growing ChatGPT, Perplexity use makes India largest LLM market in the world: Report

MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

THE growing use of platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity has made India the world's largest market for large language model (LLM) adoption, a foreign brokerage said on Wednesday. This makes India the "ideal test bed" for agentic AI apps built on top of LLMs that can reason, plan and execute tasks independently, the report by Bofa Securities said. However, on the flip side, this can lead to some impact on the domestic startup ecosystem, Bofa Securities said.

The number of ChatGPT downloads peaked at over 24 million in July before falling a bit and plateauing at 24 million once OpenAI zero-cost subscriptions, while Airtel's bundled pack helped Perplexity peak at over 20 million downloads in October, the report said. ChatGPT is the number one platform in India among the LLMs with around 145 million monthly active users and Gemini comes second at 105 million, it said.

On a daily basis, 65 million Indians

use the OpenAI-led ChatGPT, while Gemini comes second at 15 million daily average users. Over 16 per cent of ChatGPT's global base is from India, making the country as the largest market for the platform, the Bofa Securities report said. Interestingly, India is also the largest for peers, including Google Gemini which gets 30 per cent of its monthly average users from here and Perplexity which derives 38 per cent of monthly average users, it said. Complimentary subscriptions to LLM apps by domestic telcos were pointed out as among the reasons leading to the feat by the brokerage Bofa Securities.

Other factors, including over 700 million mobile users, access to affordable data plans allowing a user to consume over 20 GB of data by paying just USD 2 a month, and a young and English-speaking population, also helped, it said. The adoption at scale is a win-win for all, including the consumers who get to improve their productivity and learning and transcend language barriers, as many of the apps are available in regional

languages as well, and also the global LLMs, the report said.

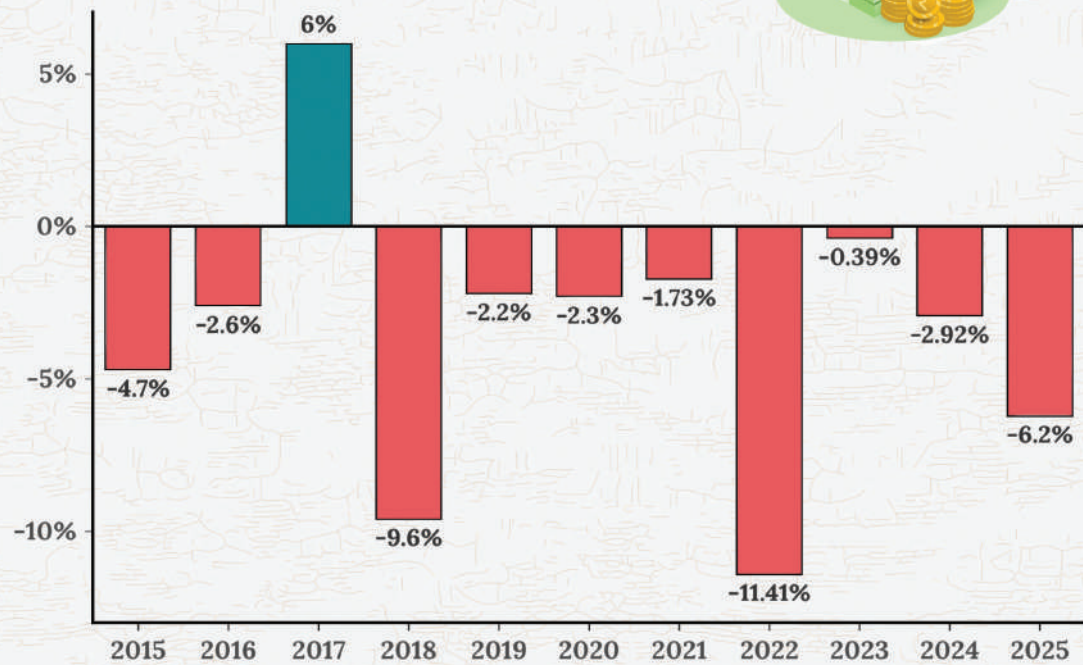
The global LLMs get access to vast and rich data which can be used to train and refine the models, and also improve handling of multi-lingual and culturally nuanced queries, it said.

It is also a positive for telcos, the report said, pointing out that entities in the highly competitive sector can expand their average revenue per user, create upselling room through targeted offerings in the future and also create collaboration opportunities in datacenter space with global entities.

Elaborating on the impact on the domestic startups, it said global LLMs may dominate before local LLMs mature or scale, and pointed to Meta and Google's dominance of the market through offerings like Facebook, Youtube etc.

Also, the network effect of global LLMs would make them better placed to meet local consumer demand via agentic AI wrappers better than what Indian startups could do, it said.

Yearly fall in Rupee (against US Dollar) since 2015



Source: RBI

The rupee fell 23 paise against the greenback to settle at a new all-time low of 91.01 (provisional) on Tuesday, as the government in the Rajya Sabha attributed the sliding value of domestic currency to the widening trade deficit and the ongoing developments related to the India-US trade agreement. A look at the yearly fall in the rupee against the USD since 2015. PTI GRAPHICS

4th T20I called off due to dense smog

LUCKNOW, DEC 17 / PTI

The fourth T20I between India and South Africa was called off on Wednesday owing to poor visibility after a dense layer of smog engulfed the Ekana Stadium raising serious questions about BCCI’s scheduling of matches in northern part of India during peak winter month.

The venues allotted for the full series against the Proteas included New Chandigarh, Dharamsala, Lucknow, Ranchi, Raipur, Visakhapatnam, Cuttack, Ahmedabad, Guwahati and Kolkata during November and December.

It is also a period when pollution levels in the host cities like Lucknow, New Chandigarh and Dharamsala are usually at its worst.

The fourth T20I was officially abandoned without a ball being bowled due to “excessive fog”, the reality was that a thick blanket of smog enveloped the Ekana Stadium, severely hampering visibility.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) remained in the hazardous range, above 400 in Lucknow on Wednesday, raising serious questions about the BCCI’s commitment to players’ welfare.

Star all-rounder Hardik Pandya was seen wearing a surgical mask to counter the pollution while the Indian team warmed up ahead of the game.

The match, scheduled to start at 7 pm, was eventually called off at 9:30 pm after the sixth inspection



although it was more of a formality with everyone present well aware that visibility was only going to get worse as the night progressed.

The players had abandoned their warm-up session by 7:30 pm and returned to the confines of their dressing rooms. By 9 pm, the sizeable crowd that had braved the cold conditions had also begun to thin out.

BCCI vice-president and lifelong Uttar Pradesh Cricket Association’s spiritual boss Rajeev Shukla walked out to the middle during one of the inspections but his body language after speaking to match officials in-

icated disappointment.

With no reserve day in place, both teams will now fly to Ahmedabad for the final T20I on Friday, with India leading the series 2-1.

While the BCCI follows a rotational policy when allotting venues, the board could have considered swapping venues with the white-ball series against New Zealand, scheduled to begin January 11.

The ‘Men in Blue’ are set to face New Zealand for a white-ball series at venues across western and southern India -- Vadodara, Rajkot, Indore, Nagpur, Raipur, Visakhapa-

tnam and Thiruvananthapuram with just one match scheduled in the northeastern city of Guwahati.

Matches held at most north zone venues have historically been affected by weather conditions during the winter months.

Last week, the third T20I was played in sub-10-degree temperatures in Dharamsala, set in the lap of the snow-clad Dhauladhar range.

Post the game, India’s mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy, who hails from Tamil Nadu, admitted that the conditions were particularly challenging for him.

FIFA slashes price of some World Cup tickets to USD 60 after global fan backlash

GENEVA, DEC 17 / AP

FIFA slashed the price of some World Cup tickets for teams’ most loyal fans following a global backlash and some will get \$60 seats for the final instead of being asked to pay \$4,185.

It was a rare climbdown by the soccer body and its president Gianni Infantino after soaking up waves of criticism for World Cup strategies, including top-dollar prices and closer political alignment with U.S. President Donald Trump.

FIFA said Tuesday that \$60 tickets will be made available for every game at the tournament in North America, going to the national federations whose teams are playing. Those federations decide how to distribute them to loyal fans who have attended previous games at home and on the road.

The number of \$60 tickets for each game is likely to be from 400 to 750 per team, in what FIFA is now calling a “Supporter Entry Tier” price category. FIFA is using 16 host cities, including 11 NFL stadiums in the United States, plus two in Canada and three in Mexico.

FIFA did not specify exactly why it so dramatically changed strategy, but said the lower prices are “de-

signed to further support traveling fans following their national teams across the tournament.”

However, the Football Supporters Europe group, which represents grassroots fan groups, said the limited price cut was “an appeasement tactic due to the global negative backlash.”

“This shows that FIFA’s ticketing policy is not set in stone, was decided in a rush, and without proper consultation,” the group said in a statement.

The World Cup in North America will be the first edition that features 48 teams — up from 32 — and is expected to earn FIFA at least \$10 billion in revenue while being the most expensive ever for fans.

Despite the outcry over prices, FIFA says it has already received more than 20 million ticket requests in its latest sales phase.

The FSE group said that even with Tuesday’s announcement, “the vast majority would still have to pay extortionate prices, way higher than at any tournament before.” Initial pledge for cheap ticketsFans worldwide reacted with shock and anger last week on seeing FIFA’s ticketing plans that gave participating teams no tickets in the lowest-priced category.



Carey’s century helps Australia reach 326-8 on Day 1 of 3rd Ashes test

ADELAIDE, DEC 17 / AP

ALEX Carey posted a hometown hundred and Usman Khawaja scored 82 after a dramatic, last-minute recall to help Australia reach 326 for eight at stumps on a hot opening day of the third Ashes test.

Paceman Joffra Archer (3-29) took three big wickets, including two in three balls immediately after lunch, and spinner Will Jacks (2-105) dismissed Australia’s two leading scorers to give England a slight edge Wednesday in conditions that were ideal for batting.

Carey shared partnerships of 91 with Khawaja, who replaced Steve Smith at late notice, 59 with Josh Inglis, 26 with Pat Cummins and 50 with Mitchell Starc to keep Australia’s innings moving at around four runs an over. He was out just before stumps for 106, mistiming a slower ball from Jacks.

Mitchell Starc, voted player of the match in the first and second tests, continued his impressive form against England and was unbeaten on 33 at stumps.

The temperature topped 35 Celsius (95 Fahrenheit) on Wednesday and is forecast to get close to 40C (104F) on Day 2, which could make conditions tough on the bowling team.

The crowd of 56,298, a record for a test match at the Adelaide Oval, helped Carey thrive.

“A decent day’s cricket. The crowd — 56,000 in Adelaide — it’s pretty special,” Carey said. “To make a hundred here in front of home fans and family, it was a great moment.”

Carey played a key role in one of the most contentious moments in recent Ashes history when he stumped England’s Jonny Bairstow in the acrimonious 2023 series. Carey threw down the stumps when Bairstow wandered out of his crease without checking if the ball was dead, a dismissal that ignited a storm across the cricketing world with Australian players verbally abused in the members’ Long Room at Lord’s and political leaders weighing in.

After scoring his first Ashes century, Carey said in a TV interview he’d probably rather discuss the 2023 episode than dwell on the emotions of his big innings.

I couldn’t stop crying even when bidding ended : Kartik Sharma

MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

OVERWHELMED with emotion, 19-year-old Kartik Sharma was left in tears after five-time champions Chennai Super Kings secured him for a record Rs 14.20 crore at the IPL 2026 mini auction, making him the joint-highest paid uncapped player in the league’s history.

Coming into the auction at a base price of Rs 30 lakh, Kartik and Uttar Pradesh’s Prashant Veer set the record when CSK splurged Rs 14.20 crore on each of them, in the auction at Abu Dhabi on Tuesday.

“When the bidding started, I was scared I might miss out. But as the bid kept going up, I started crying,” Kartik was quoted as saying in a Jio-Hotstar release.

“Even after it ended, I couldn’t stop. I was overwhelmed with emotion and happiness, I honestly don’t know how to put it into words,” the teenage keeper-batter from Rajas- than added.

The bidding for Kartik was started by Mumbai Indians and Lucknow Super Giants before Kolkata Knight Riders joined in.

While MI exited the bidding, KKR and LSG took the price to Rs 2.80 crore before CSK entered the fray.

The bidding price surged to Rs 13.20 crore when KKR left the race and Sunrisers Hyderabad entered,



before CSK sealed the deal at Rs 14.20 crore.

Kartik said he was exited to play alongside MS Dhoni but remembered the contributions of his family and friends in his journey.

“A special thank you to all my family members & friends, without their support, I don’t think I would have reached this stage,” he said.

“My entire family is very happy, everyone is celebrating and dancing. I’m extremely excited to play alongside Mahendra Singh Dhoni and learn from him.”

Sarfaraz thanks CSK for giving him new life, hopes to win 2026 title for franchise

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

OUT-OF-FAVOUR India batter Sarfaraz Khan says he has got a “new life” thanks to five-time IPL champions Chennai Super Kings after the team bought him at his base price of Rs 75 lakh in the mini players’ auction in Abu Dhabi.

The 28-year-old Sarfaraz, who slammed a 22-ball 73 in a Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy match just hours before the auction on Tuesday, went unsold in the first round but was later picked up by CSK.

“Thank you so much, CSK for giving me new life. I will make sure CSK will lift the 2026 title,” the Mumbai batter wrote on his Instagram page.

The hard-hitting middle-order batter last featured in the IPL for



the Delhi Capitals in 2023 against Sunrisers Hyderabad.

He failed to find buyers in the two seasons after that. Even his international career is in disarray right now as he has not been picked in the Indian team for any format despite strong domestic performances.

He has also played for Royal Challengers Bengaluru, Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals in past IPL editions.

Sarfaraz made his IPL debut for RCB in 2015. The right-hander has been in fine form in this year’s Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, amassing 329 runs at an average of 82.25 and a strike rate of 204.34, with a century to his name.

Sarfaraz has represented India in six Test matches, scoring 371 runs at an average of 37.10 and strike rate of 74.94 with 150 being his highest score.

Jr hockey players eyeing senior team berth through HIL

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

AFTER achieving a podium finish at the World Cup, the Indian colts have now set their sights on a good show in the upcoming Hockey India League to break into the senior national team.

India registered a come-from-behind 4-2 win over Argentina to win the bronze medal in the just-conclud-

ed junior World Cup.

The men’s HIL will begin in Chennai on January 3, while the women’s league is scheduled to commence in Ranchi on December 28. The junior players are aware that India’s chief coach Craig Fulton will be closely monitoring their progress during the HIL.

“Ending the Junior World Cup campaign with a medal around our

neck surely feels fantastic, but to do well in the Hockey India League is the next big step in making the cut for the senior team,” said striker Dilraj Singh, who scored five goals in the tournament. “We are aware, we will be watched closely and doing well in the HIL where we will be on the same platform as some of the senior players from across nations.”

I hope football has bright future in India: Messi after tour

NEW DELHI, DEC 17 / PTI

LIONEL Messi hoped that football has a “bright future” in India and expressed gratitude for the “generous hospitality” that he got here during a whirlwind three-day tour, which had thousands of fans jostling to catch a glimpse of the Argentine genius in four different cities.

Messi, after extending his stay by a day to visit the Anant Ambani-founded Vantara wildlife rescue, rehabilitation and conservation centre in Jamnagar, left for his base in Miami on Wednesday.

Taking to Instagram, the 38-year-old posted a one-minute highlights clip of the tour, featuring his interactions with Indian cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar, Bollywood actor Kareena Kapoor Khan and several young footballers.

“What amazing visits to Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata.

Thank you for the warm reception, generous hospitality, and all the feelings of love with which you surrounded me throughout my tour.

“I hope that football has a bright future in India,” he wrote underneath the video. His good wishes come at a time when Indian football finds itself at its lowest ebb.

The domestic season has been brought to a halt for the want of a commercial partner and the national team’s fortunes have been in a free-fall following a string of poor results.

An ongoing court case over administrative issues has further deepened policy paralysis.

The superstar striker, who is among the most recognisable and adored sportspersons in the world, did not play any competitive football during the trip.

He was accompanied by Uruguay great and close friend Luis Suarez and Argentina teammate Rodrigo de

Paul during the tour.

Messi made stadium appearances for ticketed events in all the four cities starting with Kolkata, where things turned ugly after politicians and officials surrounded him, denying fans, who had paid thousands for a seat, a clear view of the icon.

Agitated by this, the gathered spectators indulged in vandalism at the Salt Lake Stadium, prompting Messi to be whisked away sooner than the originally planned time.

However, his visits to Hyderabad, Mumbai and Delhi passed off smoothly as he charmed fans by posing for pictures and showcasing some of his warm-up routines besides playing briefly with young players.

“...we carry all this love with us, and we will definitely return, hopefully one day to play a match or on another occasion, but we will definitely return to visit India,” he said after the final leg of the tour in Delhi.



Global wealth dynasties add \$359 bn in a year as market rally lifts fortunes

Monitor News Desk
NEW DELHI, DEC 17

The world’s richest families tightened their grip on global wealth over the past year, adding a staggering \$358.7 billion to their collective fortunes and pushing their combined net worth to nearly \$2.9 trillion, according to the latest Bloomberg ranking of the world’s 25 wealthiest families.

The sharp rise reflects a potent mix of favourable market conditions, sustained demand for essential goods, and the enduring advantages of scale, influence and experience that multi-generation business dynasties command. While stock markets rallied across major economies, family-controlled enterprises spanning retail, commodities, energy, luxury goods and consumer staples emerged as some of the biggest beneficiaries.

Ambani family, led by Reliance Industries chairman Mukesh Ambani, remains the only South Asian entrant on the list. Its diversified presence across energy, telecom, retail and digital services has helped the group navigate market volatility while capturing growth in India’s expanding consumer economy.

At the top of the list once again is the Walton family, heirs to the Walmart empire, whose wealth surged alongside rising equity valuations and resilient consumer spending. Walmart’s global footprint and pricing power have helped insulate the retailer from economic volatility, reinforcing the family’s position as the world’s wealthiest.



Energy-rich ruling families from West Asia also feature prominently. The Al Nahyan family of Abu Dhabi, along with Saudi Arabia’s Al Saud and Qatar’s Al Thani dynasties, have seen their fortunes swell on the back of steady oil revenues and diversified investments spanning infrastructure, finance, technology and global real estate. Elevated commodity prices and long-term sovereign investment strategies have provided a cushion against market swings.

Beyond energy and retail, families linked to industrial metals and everyday consumer products have recorded strong gains. Demand for metals critical to infrastructure and the global energy transition



boosted the wealth of industrial dynasties, while consumer goods conglomerates benefited from steady spending even amid inflationary pressures. The Mars family, whose private empire includes pet food and confectionery brands, saw rising demand for pet care products translate into higher valuations. Europe’s luxury sector also played a role. The Hermès family, custodians of the iconic French fashion house, gained from continued appetite for high-end goods, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, where affluent consumers remain resilient despite broader economic uncertainty.

Analysts say the dramatic wealth gains underscore how deeply entrenched family capital has become



in the global economy. Unlike publicly traded firms driven by short-term cycles, family-owned businesses often benefit from long planning horizons, control over capital allocation and the political and financial clout built over decades.

At the same time, the concentration of wealth among a small number of dynasties is reigniting debate over inequality and economic mobility. As these families grow richer, critics argue, the gap between inherited wealth and earned income continues to widen.

For now, however, market momentum, strategic positioning and generational experience have once again worked decisively in favour of the world’s richest families.

Earth has warmed more than we admit

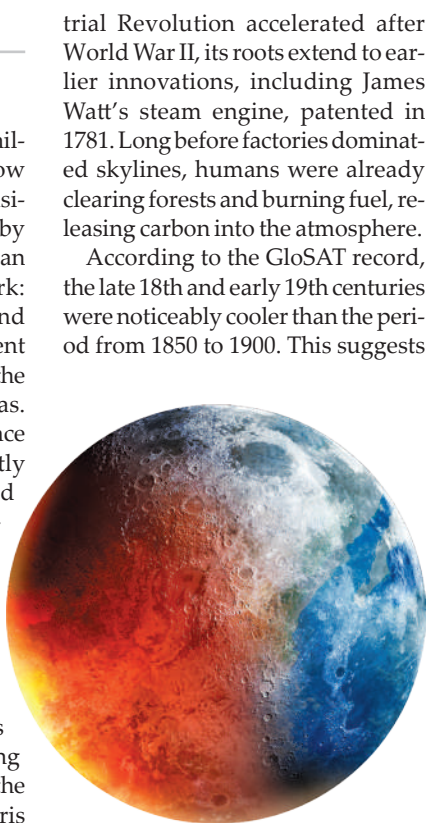
Monitor News Desk
NEW DELHI, DEC 17

In coastal villages across the Philippines, dead mangroves now stand in shallow seawater, a visible reminder of a planet reshaped by rising tides. The encroaching ocean reflects multiple forces at work: melting Antarctic ice, sinking land caused by decades of development and groundwater extraction, and the steady expansion of warmer seas. These impacts are the consequence of a warming world—but exactly how much the Earth has warmed depends on how far back scientists look.

For decades, most global temperature estimates have measured warming relative to the period between 1850 and 1900, often described as “preindustrial.” Using that baseline, scientists estimate the planet is approaching 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, the threshold highlighted in the Paris climate agreement. But a newly released temperature dataset suggests that this benchmark may already include some human-caused warming, meaning the Earth may have heated up more than previously thought.

The new dataset, known as GloSAT, was developed by a team of 16 scientists based primarily in the United Kingdom and published in Earth System Science Data. Unlike most global temperature records, which begin around 1850, GloSAT stretches back to 1781—deep into the early stages of industrialization.

That longer view matters. Greenhouse gas concentrations rose by about 2.5% between 1750 and 1850, enough to have contributed to warming that traditional datasets largely overlook. While the Indus-



trial Revolution accelerated after World War II, its roots extend to earlier innovations, including James Watt’s steam engine, patented in 1781. Long before factories dominated skylines, humans were already clearing forests and burning fuel, releasing carbon into the atmosphere.

According to the GloSAT record, the late 18th and early 19th centuries were noticeably cooler than the period from 1850 to 1900. This suggests that the commonly used “preindustrial” baseline may already reflect some warming relative to earlier conditions. Colin Morice, the study’s lead author and a scientist at the UK Met Office Hadley Centre, says the 1850 start date was chosen largely for practical reasons. “It’s not the beginning of industrialization,” he noted, “just the point where we have better data coverage.”

Not all of the warming observed between the late 1700s and late 1800s can be blamed on humans, however. The early 19th century was marked by massive volcanic eruptions, including Mount Tambora in 1815, which injected sunlight-blocking particles into the stratosphere and temporarily cooled the planet.

Jane Austen’s mysterious death: What her letters and illness still reveal

Monitor News Desk
NEW DELHI, DEC 17

MORE than two centuries after her death, the final illness of Jane Austen remains one of literary history’s most enduring puzzles. The celebrated British novelist died on July 18, 1817, at the age of just 41, after nearly a year of declining health. Despite her fame and the careful attention of physicians in both London and Winchester, no clear diagnosis was recorded — leaving scholars, doctors and devoted “Janeites” to piece together clues from her letters and fiction.

For eight weeks before her death, Austen lived with her sister Cassandra at No. 8 College Street in Winchester, where she had gone seeking medical treatment. Today, the modest brick house bears a simple plaque noting that Austen “lived her last days and died” there. For admirers, it marks the most enigmatic chapter of her life.



Much of what is known about Austen’s illness comes from her correspondence. In letters written between 1816 and early 1817, she described recurring fatigue, fevers, weight loss and, most persistently, rheumatism — pain in her back and knees. She also noted a strange facial

discoloration, writing memorably that she was “black and white and every wrong colour.” At times, her health appeared to improve, only for symptoms to return. “Sickness is a dangerous indulgence at my time of life,” she wrote in March 1817.

Over the decades, these fragments have inspired numerous medical theories. A 1964 paper proposed Addison’s disease, a rare hormonal disorder, a diagnosis that gained traction largely through repetition. Other scholars and physicians have suggested stomach cancer, tuberculosis or Hodgkin’s lymphoma — all conditions consistent with general symptoms such as fatigue, poor appetite and intermittent fevers.

Yet none of these explanations fully accounts for Austen’s experience. In 2021, the late neuro-ophthalmologist Dr. Michael D. Sanders and medical ophthalmologist Dr. Elizabeth Graham revisited every surviving letter, constructing a detailed timeline of her illness.

Comedian Russell Peters announces India tour in 2026

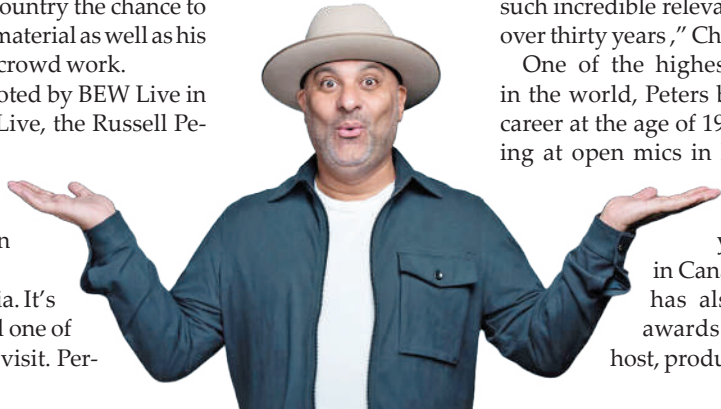
MUMBAI, DEC 17 / PTI

COMEDIAN Russell Peters is bringing his critically acclaimed Relax World Tour to India with shows slated to take place in seven prominent cities including Delhi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Kolkata in March next year.

The Emmy winning comedian, who has toured India multiple times, will also perform in Mumbai, Pune and Chennai. His 2026 Relax World Tour marks Peter’s biggest, most expansive tour of India to date, giving fans across the country the chance to experience his all-new material as well as his signature, razor-sharp crowd work.

Presented and promoted by BEW Live in association with EVA Live, the Russell Peters Relax World Tour will kick off in March 2026 and travel to all the seven cities within the span of one month.

“I love coming to India. It’s home. It’s my roots and one of my favourite places to visit. Per-



forming here is always an incredible experience – the energy, the food, hospitality and the audiences, who are smart, lively and have supported me from day one. I can’t wait to come back!”

Deepak Choudhary, Founder & Managing Director, EVA Live said Peters comedy cuts across ages, cultures and generations. “His ability to innovate while staying true to the humour people admire makes this massive comedy tour a must-attend experience. Only a few iconic comedians of our time have sustained such incredible relevance and popularity over thirty years,” Choudhary added.

One of the highest paid comedians in the world, Peters began his stand-up career at the age of 19, performing at open mics in his native Toronto and honing his craft over fifteen years across clubs in Canada and the UK. He has also earned various awards for his work as a host, producer, and actor.



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