

India Monitor

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Trump post showing Obamas as apes sparks widespread outrage

US President Donald Trump shared a video on his social media platform depicting former president Barack Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama as apes, imagery widely condemned as racist and offensive. The clip, posted Thursday night alongside false claims about the 2020 election, briefly showed their faces superimposed on animal bodies. Critics said the post invoked a longstanding racist trope targeting Black people. A White House spokesperson dismissed the backlash as "fake outrage", while California Governor Gavin Newsom's office called the act "disgusting".



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RBI holds rates as trade deals brighten outlook

Meera Subhashini

MUMBAI, FEB 6

The Reserve Bank of India on Friday left its key policy rate unchanged, citing manageable inflation and resilient growth prospects, while pointing to improving economic momentum following trade agreements with the United States and the European Union.

The six-member Monetary Policy Committee unanimously decided to keep the benchmark repo rate at 5.25 per cent and retained its neutral stance, signalling that borrowing costs are likely to remain low in the near term. The decision follows a cumulative reduction of 125 basis points in rates since February 2025, including a 25-basis point cut at the previous policy review in December.

Announcing the outcome, RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said the domestic economy remained on a stable footing despite heightened global uncertainty. Inflation was below the central bank's tolerance band and underlying price pressures were subdued, allowing policymakers to focus on supporting growth.

He said the recent tariff reduction announced by the United States and progress on a trade agreement with the European Union were likely to



sustain growth momentum. While the precise economic impact could not yet be quantified due to limited details, he noted that the central bank had added around 20 basis points to its growth projections factoring in multiple supportive developments, including the US agreement.

Consumer price inflation for the current financial year is projected at 2.1 per cent, marginally above earlier estimates but still well below the RBI's 4 per cent target. Inflation in the final quarter of FY26 is expected to stay above 3 per cent, while price pressures may edge above 4 per cent

in the first half of FY27.

Reflecting stronger activity, the central bank revised its GDP growth estimate for FY26 upward to 7.4 per cent from 7.3 per cent. Growth in the first half of FY27 is now projected at 6.95 per cent, up from the earlier 6.75 per cent forecast, though the RBI withheld a full year projection pending revisions to the GDP base series.

Malhotra said transmission of past rate cuts to deposit rates had improved gradually and was expected to strengthen further. He added that the real rate of interest remained low, suggesting a supportive policy environment, while future rate decisions would depend on evolving inflation and growth dynamics.

Alongside the policy decision, the RBI announced several regulatory and consumer protection measures. Draft guidelines will be issued to address mis-selling, loan recovery practices and the use of recovery agents, as well as limiting customer liability in unauthorised digital transactions. The central bank proposed compensating customers up to Rs 25,000 for losses arising from small value fraudulent transactions and said it would release a discussion paper on strengthening digital payment safety.

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Lok Sabha adjourned amid protests, Budget debate stalled

Sanjay Menon

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

LOK SABHA proceedings were adjourned for the day on Friday as persistent protests by opposition members prevented the House from transacting business, extending the stalemate that has disrupted the ongoing Budget session and stalled discussion on the Union Budget presented on February 1.

When the House reassembled at noon after an earlier adjournment, opposition MPs again trooped

into the Well, raising slogans and displaying placards over a range of issues. Presiding officer Krishna Prasad Tenneti urged members to return to their seats and maintain order, but adjourned the House till Monday as protests continued.

Earlier, Speaker Om Birla expressed concern over repeated disruptions, saying more than 19 hours of House time had been lost during the session. He said members were disrespecting parliamentary proceedings and stressed that elected representatives were ex-

pected to raise issues through debate rather than slogan shouting. The House was adjourned within minutes of convening in the morning as protests intensified.

The Lower House has witnessed turmoil since Monday afternoon after Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi was disallowed from quoting from an article citing excerpts of former Army chief MM Naravane's unpublished memoir related to the 2020 India China conflict.

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AAP leader shot dead in Jalandhar; Oppn targets Govt

Monitor News Service

CHANDIGARH, FEB 6

AN Aam Aadmi Party leader was shot dead by unidentified assailants outside a gurdwara in Punjab's Jalandhar on Friday morning, police said, triggering sharp political reactions with opposition parties alleging deterioration in law and order in the state.

The victim, Satwinderpal Singh alias Lucky Oberoi, 43, who was in charge of a ward in Jalandhar Cantonment, was attacked around 7.30 am in the Model Town area when he was leaving the gurdwara in his sport utility vehicle.

Police said CCTV footage showed an assailant wearing a black hoodie approaching Oberoi on foot and opening fire shortly after he sat inside his vehicle. The gunman fled the spot with an accomplice waiting nearby on a scooter. Several shots were fired, shattering the windows

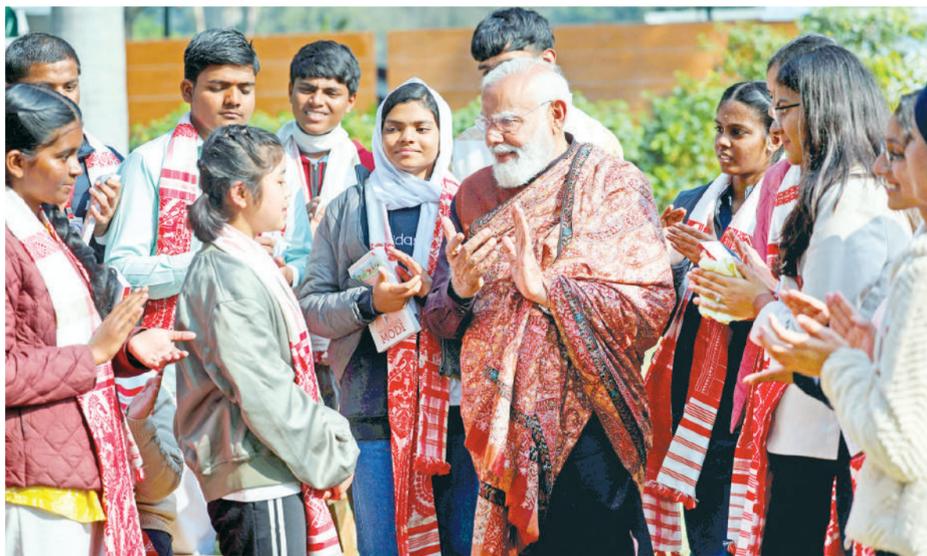
of Oberoi's vehicle and damaging another parked nearby.

Oberoi was rushed to a private hospital in an unconscious condition but succumbed to multiple gunshot injuries, Assistant Commissioner of Police Parminder Singh said. A doctor who treated him said he was brought in with unrecordable blood pressure and severe injuries, including a bullet wound through the chest. Despite efforts to revive him, he could not be saved.

Police said a case has been registered and investigations are under way. CCTV footage from the area is being examined and multiple angles, including possible personal enmity, are being probed. Sources indicated the attackers may have conducted prior reconnaissance of Oberoi's routine.

Party functionaries described Oberoi as an active local leader.

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PM Modi interacts with students during the ninth edition of 'Pariksha Pe Charcha 2026 with PM' at his residence, in New Delhi. PTI

India-Bangladesh ties independent of third country: Government

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

INDIA's relationship with Bangladesh stands on its own footing and is not shaped by Dhaka's engagement with other countries, the government told the Lok Sabha on Friday, stressing that New Delhi continues to closely monitor regional developments and safeguard its national interests.

In a written reply to questions, Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh said India attaches high priority to relations with

neighbouring countries, describing them as multifaceted partnerships guided by mutual interests and evolving regional circumstances.

Responding to concerns about whether bilateral ties were in a sensitive phase and whether external actors might attempt to exploit the situation, the minister said India and Bangladesh shared deep historical, geographical, cultural and social linkages. He said cooperation remained focused on people centric development and that exchanges under institutional bilateral mechanisms were continuing.

India's engagement with Bangladesh, he added, remained independent of its relations with third countries. The government was keeping a close watch on developments that might affect national security or economic interests and taking necessary measures when required.

The minister also reiterated India's support for a democratic, stable and inclusive Bangladesh, stating that this position had been conveyed to the country's interim government during relevant diplomatic engagements.

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Biker dies after falling into pit dug for DJB work in Janakpuri

Amit Kumar

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

THE death of a 25-year-old motorcyclist who fell into a deep trench dug for sewage work in west Delhi's Janakpuri has triggered allegations of safety lapses, with residents pointing to poor lighting, missing barricades and restricted access along the stretch.

Police said the victim, identified as Kamal Bhayani, a Kailashpuri resident employed at a private bank call centre, died after his motorcycle plunged into a pit around 15 feet deep late Thursday night. The trench had been excavated as part of work undertaken by the Delhi Jal Board.

An FIR has been registered against a contractor and officials of the civic agency under provisions relating to culpable homicide, and an investigation is under way. Authorities said legal action would follow based on findings. The Delhi government has also ordered a probe into the incident.

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Govt plans revamp of 18,000 flats, civic facilities in JJ clusters

Nadeem Ansari

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

Residents of jhuggi jhopri clusters in the national capital may see improvements in housing and basic amenities as the Delhi government, in collaboration with the National Buildings Construction Corporation Limited, plans to refurbish around 18,000 flats and upgrade civic infrastructure across several settlements.

An official said the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, along with NBCC, will undertake repair and upgradation of dilapidated

housing units where poor maintenance, structural damage and inadequate facilities have long been reported.

"The focus will be on revamping existing flats and improving basic infrastructure in the cluster areas. Around 18,000 flats have been identified for repairs," the official told PTL.

The proposed works include widening of internal lanes, construction of cemented pavements and improvement of drainage networks to address recurring waterlogging during the monsoon. Authorities also plan to install public amenities such as separate toilet facilities for women.



NBCC is currently preparing a detailed project report and execution will begin after the necessary administrative approvals are secured, the official said.

Several JJ clusters in the city have faced persistent challenges over the years, including deteriorating housing structures, clogged drains, sanitation gaps and narrow lanes that hamper access for emergency services. Residents in areas such as Wazirpur, Seelampur and parts of west Delhi have reported unsafe buildings and sewage overflow, particularly during the rainy season.

Families relocated to govern-

ment-built flats under rehabilitation schemes have also raised concerns about cracks in walls, leaking roofs and inadequate civic infrastructure, pointing to issues of upkeep and maintenance after construction.

The planned refurbishment comes amid renewed attention on living conditions in informal settlements. On Republic Day, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta hosted slum residents at her official residence, Jan Sewa Sadan, and inaugurated development projects worth Rs 327 crore targeted at JJ clusters.

During the event, she reiterated the government's commitment to

improving welfare measures for residents and announced an allocation of Rs 144 crore for various initiatives.

According to a statement from the Chief Minister's Office, administrative approval amounting to Rs 225 crore has been granted for 476 works related to public convenience complexes. Work orders worth Rs 81 crore have already been issued for 214 of these projects.

Officials said the broader infrastructure push aims to address long-standing gaps in civic services and enhance overall living conditions for thousands of families residing in these settlements.

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RBI holds rates as trade deals brighten outlook

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Additional steps included a proposal to raise the limit for collateral free loans to micro, small and medium enterprises to Rs 20 lakh, and allowing banks to lend to real estate investment trusts to support financing in the sector. Certain non-banking financial companies with smaller asset bases and limited public interface may be exempted from registration

requirements, and restrictions on branch expansion for some entities are to be eased.

The RBI also proposed removing the Rs 2.5 lakh crore investment cap under the voluntary retention route for foreign portfolio investors, subject to overall category ceilings, as part of efforts to deepen financial markets.

Market economists said the decision was broadly in line with expectations. Some analysts indicated

that the earlier rate reductions justified a pause, while others flagged commodity prices and currency movements as potential risks to the inflation outlook.

The central bank said it would continue balancing growth support with financial stability as the economy navigates global uncertainty, adding that benign inflation conditions provided space to maintain a growth supportive stance for now.

AAP leader shot dead in Jalandhar

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He is survived by his wife, who contested civic elections last year, two daughters and a son, AAP's Doaba in charge Tarandeep Singh Sunny said.

The killing drew strong reactions from opposition leaders who criticised the Bhagwant Mann government over the state's security situation. Leader of Opposition Partap Singh Bajwa said the daylight attack highlighted concerns about public safety, questioning governance and

accountability. Shiromani Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal and senior leader Bikram Singh Majithia also alleged a rise in violent incidents and called the episode indicative of weakening law and order.

Punjab Congress chief Amrinder Singh Raja Warring echoed the criticism, claiming the state had seen a decline in public safety. BJP national general secretary Tarun Chugh similarly targeted the government, saying the incident reflected broader challenges related

to crime and governance.

The state government has not issued a detailed response on the allegations, while police maintained that efforts to identify and apprehend the attackers were ongoing.

The killing of a political functionary in a public place has renewed focus on security concerns in Punjab, with investigators working to establish the motive and track down those involved. Authorities said further details would emerge as the probe progresses.

Lok Sabha adjourned amid protests, debate stalled

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Tensions escalated further following the suspension of eight opposition MPs and disagreements over other issues.

In an unusual development amid the deadlock, the Lok Sabha on Thursday passed the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address without the prime minister's customary reply, which had been scheduled earlier.

Following Friday's adjourn-

ment, Congress MPs and members of some other opposition parties staged a protest within the Parliament House complex. Gathering near the Makar Dwar, they raised slogans and displayed banners criticising the government over the India US trade agreement, the memoir controversy and the suspensions.

Among those present were Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, suspended MPs and several other party leaders. Protest-

ers carried a banner referring to the trade pact as a "trap deal".

Speaking to reporters while leaving the complex, Rahul Gandhi made brief remarks on the political standoff. Congress whip Manickam Tagore said the party would continue to press its objections, alleging shortcomings in the government's handling of several issues and criticising the prime minister's absence from the House.

The House is scheduled to reconvene on Monday.

Biker dies after falling into pit dug for DJB work

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Residents and eyewitnesses alleged that the recently dug trench lacked basic safeguards. According to locals, safety nets, barricades and adequate lighting were missing in the immediate vicinity, making movement hazardous after dark. Several said access had been difficult for weeks due to phased road closures linked to the ongoing project.

Sandeep, who manages a café nearby, said nearly a 100 metre stretch from a traffic signal towards the accident site remained poorly lit, with only one functioning streetlight near a residential lane. While barricades were visible near the intersection, he claimed none had been placed around the newly dug trench.

Other residents echoed concerns over visibility and accessibility. Uma, who lives in the neighbourhood, said repeated closures on different sides of the road had created confusion and forced commuters to squeeze through narrow gaps or take detours. She added that non-functioning streetlights left the area in darkness at night, posing risks for pedestrians and two wheelers navigating pot-holes and uneven surfaces.

Another resident, Ritu Saluja, said the trench had been dug only a day before the accident and access to the block had been severely affected as the route served as the sole entry and exit point. She said the lack of proper passage disrupted daily routines, including school commutes.

Locals also said children faced

difficulty crossing the road due to increased traffic and construction activity. Yogendra Saluja noted that barricading appeared adequate during earlier phases of the project but had not been implemented with the same rigour after work shifted to the current stretch.

Political representatives have also raised concerns over the condition of the Janakpuri-Uttam Nagar road, citing risks to schoolchildren and commuters because of uneven surfaces and lighting failures.

The incident has intensified scrutiny of safety practices at urban infrastructure sites, with residents calling for stronger oversight and enforcement as investigations proceed into the circumstances surrounding the fatal fall.

India-Bangladesh ties independent of third country ties

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He noted that the government consistently monitored developments in the neighbourhood and responded to issues affecting India's interests.

Addressing queries about reported attacks on minority communities in Bangladesh, Singh said New Delhi had raised concerns regarding the safety and security of minorities with Bangladeshi authorities at multiple levels, including by the prime minister and the external affairs minister during high level interactions last year. He emphasised that safeguarding citizens, including religious and

ethnic minorities, was the responsibility of the Bangladeshi government, while India would continue to track developments.

In response to another question regarding a perceived alignment among Pakistan, China and Bangladesh and its potential implications, the minister said the government continuously assessed developments with possible economic or security impact. He reiterated that India remained engaged with regional partners to ensure its interests were respected and advanced.

Singh said New Delhi's broader regional engagement was guided by its

Neighbourhood First approach and Vision MAHASAGAR, involving diplomatic dialogue, development partnerships, connectivity initiatives and people to people exchanges. These efforts, he added, were aimed at promoting stability and prosperity in the region while protecting India's security across all domains.

The government maintained that constant monitoring and sustained engagement with neighbouring countries would remain central to its approach as geopolitical dynamics evolve, underlining its commitment to balancing cooperation with vigilance in managing regional relations.



Workers prepare a cruise ship, ahead of the launch of cruise service on Yamuna river, in New Delhi on Friday. PTL

NCRTC holds stakeholder talks on intelligent transit system

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

THE National Capital Region Transport Corporation organised a stakeholder consultation meeting on Friday to discuss the proposed Intelligent Transit Management System under the PM e-Bus Sewa scheme, officials said.

The meeting, held at the corporation's corporate office here, brought together industry participants to deliberate on the project scope, system design and execution framework. Officials described the discussions as constructive and collaborative.

Addressing the gathering, NCRTC Managing Director Shalabh Goel outlined the vision and implementation strategy of the initiative, emphasising the role of technology in making urban public

transport more efficient, transparent and commuter friendly, according to an official statement.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has nominated NCRTC as the implementing agency for the ITMS project, which is intended to function as a unified digital backbone for electric bus operations across the country.

The initiative envisages development of an integrated ITMS platform, establishment of a central visualisation centre, and a phased rollout in more than 100 cities covering about 10,000 buses. NCRTC will also be responsible for operations and maintenance of the system over a ten year period, the statement said.

Goel said the corporation's experience in deploying technology driven solutions on the Namoo Bharat corridor between Delhi,

Ghaziabad and Meerut had helped build technical capacity relevant to the initiative. He added that the project aligned with the organisation's broader goal of promoting sustainable and integrated transport networks through improved multimodal connectivity.

Key components of the system include modules for contract management, automatic vehicle location, fare collection, passenger information services, incident management, commuter mobile applications, crew management tools and a dedicated project website.

Officials said stakeholder feedback from the consultation would help refine planning and support implementation of the national level system aimed at improving operational efficiency and commuter experience.

Delhi records max temperature of 24.8° C, air quality remains 'poor'

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 / PTL

DELHI recorded a maximum temperature of 24.8 degrees Celsius on Friday, while the city's air quality remained in the 'poor' category with a 24-hour average Air Quality Index (AQI) of 220.

The India Meteorological Department said that the minimum temperature remained at 9.1 degrees Celsius, which was 0.3 degrees Celsius below normal.

On the weather front, Safdarjung recorded a maximum temperature of 24.8 degrees Celsius, which was 1.5 degrees Celsius above normal. Palam logged a maximum temperature of 22.6 degrees Celsius, 0.7 degrees Celsius below normal.

Lodhi Road recorded a maximum temperature of 24.4 degrees Celsius, which was 2.4 degrees Celsius above normal, while the Ridge logged 25.1 degrees Celsius, 0.7 degrees Celsius above normal. Ayanagar recorded a maximum temperature of 24.9 degrees Celsius, which was 1.0 degrees Celsius above normal.

The minimum temperature at Safdarjung stood at 9.1 degrees Celsius, which was 0.3 degrees Celsius below normal. Palam recorded

a minimum temperature of 9.0 degrees Celsius, 0.8 degrees Celsius below normal.

At Lodhi Road, the minimum temperature stood at 8.2 degrees Celsius, marginally 0.2 degrees Celsius above normal. The Ridge station reported a minimum temperature of 10.3 degrees Celsius, which was 1.8 degrees Celsius below normal.

Ayanagar recorded a minimum temperature of 8.6 degrees Celsius, which was 1.9 degrees Celsius below normal, with a 24-hour fall of 0.6 degrees Celsius.

The air quality, on the other hand, remained in the poor category at 220. According to the Central Pollution Control Board's SA-MEER app, 26 monitoring stations in the capital recorded air quality in the 'poor' category, while 13 stations were in the 'moderate' category during the evening hours.

According to the CPCB classification, an AQI between 0 and 50 is considered 'good', 51 to 100 'satisfactory', 101 to 200 'moderate', 201 to 300 'poor', 301 to 400 'very poor' and 401 to 500 'severe'.

The air quality is likely to be in the 'moderate' category from Saturday to February 8, the air quality early warning system said.

Major fire at NDMC godown in Safdarjung

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 / PTL

A MAJOR blaze erupted at an NDMC godown near Safdarjung flyover on Friday evening, and 20 fire tenders have been rushed to the spot, officials said.

Police said that they received information around 6 pm from a local regarding the fire at the godown near Prachin Shiv Mandir.

"Immediately upon receiving the information, police rushed to the spot, where heavy flames were observed in the NDMC godown. The police staff promptly and safely evacuated all persons from the fire-affected area. Due to the timely information provided by the public person, any major incident was averted," a senior police officer said. He added that no loss of life has been reported yet.

A Delhi Fire Services official informed that 20 fire tenders have been pressed into service and the incident was reported at 6.02 pm.

"Our teams are working at the spot. If required, more fire tenders will be rushed to the spot," the DFS officer said.

Budget allocates Rs 12,846 crore for Delhi Police: Ashish Sood

Anil Joseph

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

DELHI Home Minister Ashish Sood on Friday welcomed allocations for education, infrastructure and law enforcement in the Union Budget 2026-27, describing it as a symbolic and structural departure from colonial-era practices and highlighting provisions for the national capital, including Rs 12,846 crore for the Delhi Police. Addressing a press conference here, Sood said the budget had been prepared for the first time at Kartavya Bhavan following the finance ministry's relocation from the British-era North Block, calling the shift emblematic of broader institutional change. He noted that budgets were earlier presented in the evening to suit British time zones, a practice discontinued in subsequent reforms, along with advancing the presentation date to February 1.

Terming the budget aligned with the vision of building a "Viksit Bharat" by 2047, he said it reflected a renewed administrative approach.

Sood said the allocation for Delhi Police included Rs 986 crore ear-



marked for capital expenditure. The funds would be used to strengthen policing through artificial intelligence based smart traffic management, deployment of facial recognition technology, expansion of CCTV coverage and upgrades to communication infrastructure.

Highlighting education initiatives, he said five university townships would be developed along industrial and logistics corridors, complementing the Delhi government's Narela Education City project spread across

160 acres. The proposed townships would help create a large scale academic ecosystem aimed at boosting higher education and skill development, he said. Referring to remarks by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Rajya Sabha, Sood said India had progressed from being counted among the "fragile five" economies in 2014 to a position of resilience despite global disruptions, trade tensions and conflicts.

He also welcomed the allocation of Rs 5.01 lakh crore for women led de-

velopment programmes, accounting for 9.37 per cent of the total outlay, and described it as a step towards inclusive growth.

On infrastructure and urban development, Sood said capital expenditure had been increased to Rs 12.20 lakh crore to enhance employment, connectivity and civic amenities, with metropolitan areas including Delhi expected to benefit from investments. He noted that Delhi had been granted permission for public borrowing for the first time, which he said would accelerate infrastructure expansion. The minister also cited enhanced support for Delhi Metro Phase IV and initiatives to tackle pollution, saying these measures would improve mobility and advance sustainability efforts in the capital.

Describing the budget as growth oriented and inclusive, Sood said increased spending across sectors would strengthen economic confidence while targeting welfare measures for vulnerable groups.

"This Budget reflects the vision of Antyodaya to Sarvodaya, focusing on the weakest while building a stronger future for the nation," he said.

Three DJB engineers suspended after biker's death in West Delhi

Amit Kumar

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

THREE engineers of the Delhi Jal Board were suspended on Friday after a motorcyclist allegedly fell into a construction pit linked to a sewer project and died in west Delhi's Janakpuri area, officials said.

Water Minister Parvesh Verma ordered the suspension after inspecting the site, where work was underway to rehabilitate a sewer pipeline. The officers suspended include an executive engineer, an assistant engineer and a junior engineer responsible for overseeing the project. "We are suspending three officers. It was their duty to monitor the progress of the work ongoing here," Verma told reporters. The minister also directed a comprehensive safety audit of all ongoing sewer, road and flood control works across the city following the incident reported on Friday morning.

Initial observations suggested that while parts of the road were barricaded, safety arrangements around the excavation were not fully compliant with prescribed norms. Movement of two-wheelers continued in the vicinity, raising concerns about the adequacy of preventive measures, Verma said.

"The tragedy has caused deep pain to the affected family, and the government stands firmly with them in this difficult time. Public safety is paramount. Any failure in adhering to established safety standards will be dealt with strictly, both administratively and contractually," he added. Contractors executing the work have been placed under investigation, and action including blacklisting may follow if violations are established, the minister said. He also announced ex gratia compensation for the victim's family.

According to Verma, preliminary inspection showed that the excavation pit measured about six metres in length, four metres in width and roughly 4.25 metres in depth. The site forms part of an ongoing sewer rehabilitation project that has been in progress for the past three months, although the pit itself was dug on Thursday.

Officials of the Delhi Jal Board said safety advisories had already been issued on January 24 following a similar incident in Noida. These instructions directed all executing agencies to ensure proper barricading, warning signage and adequate public protection at work sites.

AAP slams Government over biker's death; calls it 'murder'

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 / PTI

AAM Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener Arvind Kejriwal slammed the BJP-led Delhi government over a motorcyclist's death after falling in a pit dug up by the Delhi Jal Board in Janakpuri area, alleging it was not an accident but a "murder".

In a post on X, the former Delhi chief minister alleged that the BJP learnt nothing from the incident in Noida where a young software engi-

neer died after drowning in a water-logged plot last month.

"The BJP has learned nothing even from the Noida incident. Extreme negligence and an utterly irresponsible attitude have now become the hallmark of BJP governments, and it is the common people who are paying the price for it," Kejriwal charged.

He expressed his condolences to the bereaved family, saying their child was lost due to "negligence" of the Delhi government.

Parents' anniversary plans turn tragic with death

Kaifullah Khan

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

Call centre employee Kamal Dhyani's parents were waiting for him to come home from work so that they could begin celebrations for their wedding anniversary. At 12.50 am on Friday, he called his brother to inform him that he would arrive in 15 minutes. Kamal, however, stopped answering calls after some time, and the night turned into a nightmare for the family and hours later, police informed them in the morning that he had died after allegedly falling into

a 15-foot-deep pit dug by the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) while riding his motorcycle in west Delhi. They spent the entire night making frantic runs to his office and police stations looking for him.

"Our parents were supposed to celebrate their marriage anniversary and we had planned to cut a cake at midnight. Instead, we were out on the streets all night searching for Kamal," his twin brother Karan told PTI. Karan was the last person to speak to Kamal, who told him that he would reach home within 15 minutes. "He asked our mother to prepare chapatis, saying he

was reaching home soon. When he did not arrive even after half an hour and stopped answering calls, we got worried," Karan said. The family first went to Kamal's office, a call centre linked to a private bank in Rohini Sector-10, where his manager said he had already left and should have reached home by then, he added. "After that, the manager came with us, and we started searching for him and approached several police stations for help," Karan said.

Their search ended in the morning when police informed them that Kamal's body and his motorcycle had been found

inside a pit dug up for a sewer pipeline rehabilitation project in Delhi's Janakpuri area. Kamal had gifted the bike he was riding as a birthday gift. Kamal has two priests in the family, his father and his elder brother. Karan, his twin, was preparing for the Chartered Accountant examinations, while his mother was a homemaker. "We never imagined that a day meant for celebration would become the darkest day of our lives. We told our mother about his death much later. Our father, who had been searching for him all night, had to see his body wrapped in a bag," Karan said.

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Final UP voter list on April 10; EC extends claims period

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI/LUCKNOW, FEB 6

THE Election Commission has rescheduled the publication of the final electoral rolls in Uttar Pradesh to April 10, extending the timeline for claims and objections as part of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision. In a communication to the state chief electoral officer, the poll panel said it had considered a request submitted on February 2 along with other relevant factors before revising the schedule. The final voter list was earlier slated for publication on March 6.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Electoral Officer Navdeep Rinwa told reporters in Lucknow that the last date for filing claims and objections has been extended by a month, from February 6 to March 6. The revision exercise began on October 27 last year, and the draft electoral roll was published on January 6 after completion of the enumeration phase.

According to Rinwa, the extension followed a meeting with recognised national and state political



parties on January 27, when several of them sought more time. A proposal was subsequently sent to the Election Commission, which approved the change.

The extended window allows voters additional time to submit Form 6 applications for inclusion of names, Form 7 for deletion, and requests for corrections or objections. The deadline for disposing of notices related to mapping discrepancies has also been pushed back from February

27 to March 27, with final resolution of such cases continuing until that date. Rinwa said the exercise has received substantial public response. Between October 27 and January 6, authorities received about 16.18 lakh Form 6 applications and 49,399 Form 7 applications. From January 6 to February 4, more than 37.8 lakh applications for inclusion were submitted, while 82,684 deletion requests were filed between January 6 and February 5. On February 5

alone, a record 3,51,745 Form 6 applications were received.

In addition, 1,073 applications were submitted by overseas electors through Form 6A.

The officer also outlined progress on addressing discrepancies in mapping entries with the 2003 electoral roll. Around 1.04 crore voters could not be mapped, while 2.22 crore cases showed logical discrepancies such as mismatches in parentage details or significant age variations. Notices are to be issued in 3.26 crore cases overall. Of these, 2.37 crore notices have been generated, 86.27 lakh served, and hearings completed in about 30.3 lakh cases.

Rinwa said adequate time has been provided and urged voters not to be concerned. Booth-level officers will remain available with the draft rolls at polling stations from 10 am to 12 noon on all working days to assist citizens in verifying their status.

The draft rolls are also accessible on the Election Commission and CEO Uttar Pradesh websites, and copies have been supplied to recognised political parties and their booth-level agents.

Polling in Maharashtra Panchayat elections to be held on Saturday

Monitor News Service

MUMBAI, FEB 6

ELECTIONS to 12 Zilla Parishads and 125 Panchayat Samitis across Maharashtra will be held on Saturday, with the State Election Commission saying arrangements including security deployment have been completed to ensure smooth and peaceful polling.

The long pending local body elections cover districts of Raigad, Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Solapur, Kolhapur, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, Parbhani, Dharashiv and Latur. Voting had originally been scheduled for February 5 but was deferred following the death of Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar in an air crash on January 28 and the declaration of three days of state mourning.

Polling will begin at 7.30 am and conclude at 5.30 pm on Saturday, while counting of votes is set to commence at 10 am on February 9. The model code of conduct will be lifted after counting is completed.

According to the Commission, a total of 7,438 candidates are contesting for 731 Zilla Parishad seats and 1,462 Panchayat Samiti seats. Of the Zilla Parishad seats, 369 are reserved

for women, while 83 are reserved for Scheduled Castes, 25 for Scheduled Tribes and 191 for Other Backward Classes. Altogether, 2,624 candidates are contesting in reserved categories.

Among Panchayat Samiti constituencies, 731 seats are reserved for women, with additional reservations including 166 for Scheduled Castes, 38 for Scheduled Tribes and 342 for Other Backward Classes. A total of 4,814 candidates are contesting these elections. The electorate comprises 1,06,33,269 male voters, 1,01,86,965 female voters and 468 voters registered under other categories. Polling will be conducted at 25,471 stations set up across the state.

To manage the process, about 1.28 lakh personnel have been deployed, including 125 returning officers and an equal number of assistant returning officers. The Commission said adequate electronic voting machines have been arranged, including 51,537 control units and 1,10,329 ballot units, and polling staff have undergone training.

Each voter will cast two votes, one for a Zilla Parishad constituency and another for a Panchayat Samiti division. The Zilla Parishad ballot will appear on a white ballot unit, while the Panchayat Samiti ballot will be displayed on a pink unit.

Shutdown disrupts normal life in Manipur's Churachandpur district

Monitor News Service

CHURACHANDPUR/IMPHAL, FEB 6

NORMAL life was disrupted across Manipur's Churachandpur district on Friday after tribal organisations enforced a shutdown to protest the participation of Kuki-Zo MLAs in the formation of the state government, officials said.

Supporters of the shutdown were seen stopping vehicles in parts of the district headquarters town in the morning, some carrying sticks. Markets remained closed and traffic stayed off the roads, while educational institutions and government offices reported thin attendance, they said.

The Churachandpur unit of the Kuki Students Organisation called a 24-hour shutdown beginning at



midnight on Thursday, and the Joint Forum of Seven imposed a separate shutdown across Kuki-Zo areas from 6 am to 6 pm. The impact of the protest was most visible in the Tuibong area, where activity came to a near standstill. Officials described the situation as tense and said additional security personnel were deployed at key locations in the district headquarters to prevent any escalation.

The Kuki Women Organisation for Human Rights announced plans

to hold a mass public rally on Friday afternoon to oppose the involvement of Kuki-Zo MLAs in the government formation process. The organisation said the rally was intended to convey opposition to any arrangement that includes participation of legislators from the community under the current circumstances. It said the gathering would reflect the collective stand of Kuki women on recent political developments.

Tensions had already risen on Thursday evening when clashes broke out near the Tuibong forest gate between a mob and security personnel. Authorities used batons and fired tear gas shells to disperse protesters who allegedly resorted to stone-pelting. The confrontation continued until early Friday, leaving two demonstrators injured, officials said.

Centre signs tripartite pact to create Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 5

THE Centre on Thursday signed a tripartite agreement with the Nagaland government and the Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation for the creation of the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority, a new administrative body aimed at addressing long standing governance and development demands in the eastern districts of the state. The agreement was signed in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio. Officials said the arrangement would pave the way for the formation of the authority covering six districts, Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak and Shamator, along with devolution of powers across 46 subjects.

According to an official statement, the framework provides for the establishment of a mini secretariat headed by an additional chief secretary or principal secretary and outlines the sharing of development outlays for eastern Nagaland proportional to population and area. It clarified that the arrangement does not affect the



provisions of Article 371A of the Constitution relating to Nagaland.

The authority is expected to function with financial autonomy and enhanced decision-making powers aimed at accelerating infrastructure development, economic activity and resource utilisation in the region. The Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation, which represents eight tribes across the six districts, had sought a separate state since 2010 citing perceived neglect. It later agreed to a proposal for greater autonomy through an administrative arrangement.

Addressing the event, Shah said the Centre would extend assistance

and fulfil its responsibilities towards development in eastern Nagaland. He recalled that the organisation had earlier decided to boycott elections, adding that engagement through democratic processes had led to negotiations that culminated in the agreement. He said most issues had been resolved and that the Union government would support initial establishment expenditure and determine annual financial allocations. The home minister also referred to a series of agreements signed in the northeast in recent years, saying efforts were aimed at resolving disputes and strengthening stability in the region.



Corporators flash victory sign during a special general body meeting of the newly elected corporators of Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC), in Nagpur, Maharashtra. PTI

25 still left: PM Modi to leader who greeted him on 75th birthday

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 / PTI

"TWENTY five are still left," Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a leader who had called to greet him on his 75th birthday.

Sharing an anecdote during his interaction with students at the Pariksha Pe Charcha programme, which was telecast on Friday, Modi said a leader had called him on his 75th birthday last year.

"Just recently, a leader called me on my birthday, September 17. He said, 'You have turned 75,' the

prime minister said.

"I replied, 'No, 25 are still left,'" Modi told a student from Manipur.

The student, Imota K Shyam from the Sainik School in Imphal, had told Modi that he has been a great inspiration to him since childhood and he also shares his birthday with the prime minister.

"I do not count what has passed. I count what remains. That is why I say to you: do not waste time counting what is gone. Think about how to live what is left. Now, tell me," the prime minister said.

'Pariksha Pe Charcha': Focus beyond marks, PM tells students

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi on Friday urged school students to approach examinations with confidence and balance, telling them that tests should be seen as occasions to celebrate learning rather than sources of anxiety, and advising them to focus on improving their lives instead of merely chasing marks.

Interacting with students during the ninth edition of 'Pariksha Pe Charcha 2026', Modi shared suggestions aimed at reducing exam stress ahead of the board season. He said students should listen to advice from parents and teachers but adopt lifestyle changes only

when they find them meaningful.

Describing examinations as comparable to festivals, he said they should be embraced with enthusiasm. Education, he added, must not feel burdensome but should involve wholehearted participation, as fragmented effort rarely leads to success. He cautioned against excessive emphasis on marks, noting that academic scores are often remembered only briefly. He asked students whether they could recall the highest scorers from previous board examinations and used their response to underline his view that life achievements extend beyond examination results.

The interaction included questions from students across the country. Responding to a student who described confusion arising from conflicting

advice by teachers, parents and peers on study routines, Modi said diverse opinions are part of life at every stage. He noted that individuals develop their own patterns and should rely on experience to determine what works best, while remaining open to constructive suggestions.

Drawing analogies from daily life, he said different people follow different rhythms and learning habits, some preferring late night study and others early mornings. Students, he said, should trust their own approach while making improvements based on experience rather than pressure.

He encouraged participants to focus on the future rather than dwelling on past setbacks, adding that education should contribute to overall develop-

ment and not be limited to examinations alone. Teachers, he said, should emphasise holistic learning instead of focusing exclusively on topics that yield marks. Responding to a question about pursuing gaming despite social pressure to prioritise studies, the prime minister said gaming could develop alertness and speed when approached constructively. He advised students to focus on quality gaming as a skill while balancing it with academics, and cautioned against gambling elements, noting that regulations have been introduced to curb such practices.

He emphasised the need to balance study, rest, hobbies and skill development, describing this as essential for growth. Life skills and professional skills, he said, complement each other

and begin with knowledge gained through education. Setting goals that are attainable but challenging was also important, he added, as balance in different aspects of life helps maintain progress. At the start of the programme, Modi welcomed participating students at his residence with a traditional Assamese gamosa. The event was also screened at the Bal Yogi Auditorium within the Parliament complex.

Launched in 2018 as a town hall style interaction, Pariksha Pe Charcha has expanded into a nationwide student engagement initiative. Participation has risen steadily over the years, with registrations increasing from about 38.8 lakh in 2023 to 2.26 crore in 2024 and 3.53 crore in 2025, the latter earning a Guinness World Record.

ED seizes ₹2.2-cr in highway compensation scam

NEW DELHI/ITANAGAR, FEB 6 / PTI

THE Enforcement Directorate on Friday conducted searches at multiple locations in Arunachal Pradesh and seized about Rs 2.2 crore in cash as part of a money laundering probe linked to an alleged Trans-Arunachal Highway compensation scam, officials said.

Six premises in Itanagar and one each at Likabali (Lower Siang district) and Aalo (West Siang district) were raided under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). These include the locations of Deputy Commissioner, DLRSO (District Land Revenue and Settlement), assessment officials apart from private beneficiaries and conduits, the officials said.

The Trans-Arunachal highway compensation scam case pertains to "large-scale" irregularities in assessment, certification and disbursement of land acquisition compensation involving public servants and private beneficiaries.

The project covered a stretch of 157.70 km spread across Yachuli, Ziro and Raga sectors. Probe found that the Deputy Commissioner, Ziro initially prepared a compensation estimate of Rs 289.40 crore for the Potin-Bopi stretch.

RBI policy seen reinforcing Budget push, boosting confidence: Experts

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

The Reserve Bank of India's latest monetary policy has been viewed by economists and industry leaders as a steady follow-up to the Union Budget's growth-oriented measures, reinforcing market confidence and supporting credit flows to businesses and consumers.

The central bank on Friday left its benchmark interest rate unchanged, with the six-member Monetary Policy Committee voting unanimously to retain the repo rate at 5.25 per cent. The RBI also maintained a neutral policy stance, signalling no immediate shift in direction as inflation remains within its tolerance band and growth outlook stabilises.

The decision had been widely anticipated by markets, which remained largely unaffected, according to analysts. Observers said the policy reflected improving macroeconomic conditions, aided by increased government spending outlined in the Budget and easing tariff pressures following a recent trade understanding with the United States.



Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra, centre, with Deputy Governors Shirish Chandra Murmu, left, Swaminathan Janakiraman, second left, T Rabi Sankar, second right, and Poonam Gupta before a press conference following the announcement of the sixth and final bi-monthly monetary policy for the current fiscal year, in Mumbai, Maharashtra on Friday. PTI

Industry body ASSOCHAM said the neutral stance provided policy certainty for businesses and investors. Its president, Nirmal Kumar Minda, noted that stable inflation and sustained growth momentum would help reinforce market confidence, strengthen manufacturing and trade activity,

and enhance India's competitiveness globally.

Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at Bank of Baroda, pointed to a direct link between fiscal and monetary signals. He said the decision to raise the collateral-free loan limit for micro, small and medium enterprises to Rs

20 lakh aligned with the Budget's push for MSME support and demonstrated coordinated follow-up action. Markets, he added, reacted calmly as the status quo had been expected.

Real estate developers also welcomed the rate pause. Pradeep Agarwal, founder and chairman of Signature Global India, said stability in borrowing costs would benefit interest-rate-sensitive sectors. He attributed resilient residential demand partly to improved affordability stemming from earlier rate cuts.

Financial sector executives highlighted regulatory measures accompanying the policy. Capri Global managing director Rajesh Sharma said proposals aimed at strengthening customer protection, enhancing digital payments security and easing operational norms could improve efficiency without compromising stability. Vinod Francis, chief financial officer at South Indian Bank, said the unchanged rate and neutral stance reflected confidence in benign inflation and economic resilience, adding that a higher growth projection for FY26 reinforced confidence in the banking system.

Railways posting surplus after costs: Vaishnaw

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

UNION Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Friday told the Rajya Sabha that the financial condition of the national transporter has strengthened over the past decade, with the system now generating a modest surplus after meeting its overall expenditure.

Replying to supplementary questions during Question Hour, the minister said sustained efforts to boost freight movement, enhance passenger revenue and contain costs have contributed to improved finances. He added that employment generation and network electrification were among other outcomes of policy measures taken in recent years.

According to Vaishnaw, the overall expenditure of the railways currently stands at around Rs 2.74 lakh crore. This includes staff costs of about Rs 1.18 lakh crore for roughly 12 lakh employees and pension outgo of Rs 65,000 crore for 18 lakh pensioners. Energy expenditure accounts for around Rs 32,000 crore, finance costs Rs 23,000 crore and maintenance costs Rs 8,000 crore.

He said that after meeting these



expenses, the railways is earning a small revenue surplus. In a written reply, the minister stated that in the 2024-25 financial year the operating ratio stood at 98.22 per cent, gross traffic receipts were Rs 2,65,114 crore and surplus was recorded at Rs 2,660 crore.

The minister attributed part of the improvement to the electrification of the railway network, which he said has lowered energy expenditure while providing environmental benefits. Energy costs, including diesel and electricity, have declined to about Rs 32,400 crore from Rs 37,841 crore four years earlier despite an increase in freight volumes.

Two held after Meghalaya illegal mine blast

CM warns of strict action

Monitor News Service

SHILLONG, FEB 6

MEGHALAYA Police have arrested two persons in connection with a blast at an illegal coal mine that left 18 people dead, even as Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma warned of stringent action against those responsible for the incident.

Director General of Police I Non-grang said a third suspect had been identified and efforts were under way to trace the individual. The explosion occurred on Thursday in the remote Thangsku area of East Jaintia Hills district, killing at least 18 miners and injuring eight others.

Police said seven of the injured have been identified, four from Nepal, two from Assam and one local resident, and are receiving treatment at hospitals in Shillong. The process of identifying the deceased is continuing.

Sangma directed two cabinet ministers to visit the site to review rescue, relief and law and order arrangements. Senior police officials, including the range Inspector General, and mining department personnel are already present at the location.

The chief minister said law enforcement agencies had been instructed to take strict action against those involved and asserted that illegal mining would not be tolerated.

He noted that scientific mining had begun in the state and miners now had the option to apply for legal licences. The government announced an ex gratia of Rs 3 lakh each for the next of kin of those killed.

Search and rescue operations resumed on Friday morning, involving multiple agencies amid concerns that more people might be trapped. Two teams of the State Disaster Response Force, one Special Rescue Team and three National Disaster Response Force teams have been deployed. Additional medical personnel have been mobilised from Jowai and Shillong, with seven ambulances stationed in the area.

The Border Security Force has sent personnel, ambulances and medical staff to assist, while the Army and Air Force remain on standby. Authorities said rescue efforts were being coordinated by the State Disaster Management Authority, with district officials monitoring the situation.

President Droupadi Murmu expressed grief over the loss of lives, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced financial assistance of Rs 2 lakh for the families of the deceased and Rs 50,000 for the injured from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund. Union Home Minister Amit Shah spoke to Sangma and assured central support for ongoing operations.



SC allows termination of minor's 30-week pregnancy

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

THE Supreme Court on Friday permitted the medical termination of a 30-week pregnancy of a 17-year-old girl, observing that courts cannot compel a woman, particularly a minor, to continue with a pregnancy against her wishes.

A bench of Justices B V Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan directed Mumbai's JJ Hospital to carry out the procedure while ensuring all required medical safeguards are followed. The minor had approached the court seeking permission to terminate the pregnancy after conceiving in a relationship with a neighbourhood boy.

The bench said the central consideration was the minor's reproductive autonomy and her unwillingness to continue the pregnancy, rather than the nature of the relationship that led to conception. It observed that the issue before the court was not whether the relationship was consensual or involved sexual assault, but the rights and interests of the minor seeking termination.

Taking note of the medical board's report, the court said there was no immediate threat to the life of either the minor or the foetus if the pregnancy continued to term. However, it held that the absence of medical risk did not override the minor's right to decide whether to carry the pregnancy forward.

The judges noted the ethical and legal complexities involved, observing that while childbirth ultimately results in a new life, the decisive factor in the present case was the clear and consistent unwillingness of the minor to proceed with the pregnancy. They added that judicial reluctance to permit termination in such situations could push individuals towards unsafe and unauthorised medical practices.



Union Home Minister Amit Shah pays tribute at martyr memorial 'Ajeya Prahari' at the 'Bobiya' Border Out Post (BOP) in Jammu and Kashmir. PTI

SC gives Telangana Speaker 3 weeks to decide on BRS MLA disqualification pleas

T Raghu

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

THE Supreme Court on Friday granted what it termed a final opportunity to the Telangana Assembly Speaker to decide pending disqualification petitions arising from the defection of 10 Bharat Rashtra Samithi legislators to the ruling Congress, warning that contempt proceedings would follow if no decision is taken within three weeks.

A bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and A G Masih issued the direction while hearing a contempt plea filed in connection with the delay in adjudicating the petitions. The court said it expected the Speaker to take a decision within the specified period, failing which it would proceed to initiate contempt action.

During the hearing, Justice Karol cautioned against trivialising the proceedings, remarking to senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for the Speaker, that such matters should not be turned into social media content. Singhvi informed the bench that a decision had been taken in one case and that the Speaker was close to concluding two others. Referring to scheduling constraints, including municipal elections in the state, he sought three weeks to dispose of all remaining pleas.

Counsel representing the BRS legislators argued that extensions had previously been sought and little progress made, noting that only one meeting had been held on the matter so far. The bench observed that although three weeks had earlier been requested, it had granted two weeks

to assess developments.

On January 16, the apex court had directed the Speaker to submit a status report within two weeks detailing steps taken to adjudicate the disqualification petitions. The court had earlier, on November 17, 2025, issued contempt notices for non-compliance with its directions to decide the matter concerning the 10 legislators.

The proceedings stem from a July 31 judgment in which the Supreme Court ordered the Speaker to conclude the adjudication within three months on writ petitions filed by BRS leaders K T Rama Rao, Padi Kaushik Reddy and K O Vivekanand. Observing that the delay amounted to serious disregard of its directives, the court had described the non-compliance as the "grossest kind of contempt".

Four hospitalised after gas leak at factory in Gujarat's Vapi

VAPI (GUJARAT), FEB 6 / PTI

AT least four persons were hospitalised following a gas leak at a factory near Vapi in Gujarat's Valsad district on Friday morning, officials said.

The incident was reported from Sarigam town, an Industrial Notified Area, they said.

The authorities cordoned off the area around the factory and controlled the gas leak using sand and sodium bicarbonate, officials added.

The exact nature of the gas released during the manufacturing process is yet to be identified, the official said, adding that the local police have launched a probe.

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2 more Naxalites killed in ongoing Gadchiroli operation

GADCHIROLI, FEB 6 / PTI

TWO more Naxalites have been killed in an ongoing operation in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, while a jawan from a special force of state police succumbed to injuries suffered during the encounter, police said on Friday.

So far, three Naxalites have been neutralised in the operation, which was launched three days ago, they said.

The operation involving 14 C-60 units under the SDPO (Sub-Divisional Police Officer) Bhamragd began on Tuesday near Phodewada village on the Gadchiroli-Narayan-

pur (Chhattisgarh) border, following inputs about the presence of cadres of company number 10 of the Maoists, police said.

The C-60 is a specialised combat unit of the Maharashtra police engaged in tackling Naxalism in the Gadchiroli and Gondia districts.

While police busted two Naxalite camps on Wednesday, they deployed four more C-60 units and one unit of QAT (Quick Action Team) of the Central Reserve Police Force on Thursday morning for reinforcement.

The body of a Naxalite, along with an AK-47 rifle and a self-loading rifle (SLR), was recovered Thursday, according to police.

Two more bodies of Naxalites, including that of a woman, were recovered subsequently, taking the total number of cadres killed in the ongoing operation to three, they said.

All three Naxalites are yet to be identified.

Meanwhile, C-60 jawan Deepak Chhinna Madavi (38), who was earlier airlifted to Bhamragad after sustaining injuries in the anti-Naxal operation, died during treatment, police said. Another injured jawan, Joga Madavi, was also airlifted to Bhamragad. He is out of danger and will be taken to Gadchiroli shortly, said police, adding that the operation is still underway.

RBI's pause signals calculated stability

The Reserve Bank of India's decision to hold its benchmark interest rate reflects less a moment of caution than one of calibration. After an aggressive easing cycle over the past year, the Monetary Policy Committee's unanimous choice to keep the repo rate unchanged suggests that monetary policy has reached a point where stability, rather than stimulus, serves the economy best. Inflation remains manageable, growth signals are resilient, and external pressures have softened, allowing the central bank to pause without appearing defensive. The broader macroeconomic context matters. Government spending announced in the Union Budget and reduced tariff pressures following a trade understanding with the United States have strengthened the outlook for domestic demand and exports. These developments ease immediate concerns over growth momentum, reducing the need for further monetary accommodation. A neutral stance, therefore, reflects confidence that previous rate cuts are still working through the system while preserving flexibility should conditions shift. Inflation dynamics reinforce this approach. Price pressures remain below target, providing room for supportive policy, yet the outlook is not devoid of risks. Commodity price volatility, currency movements, and global geopolitical uncertainties continue to shape cost trajectories. The central bank's restraint indicates recognition that excessive easing at this stage could compromise medium-term stability. By maintaining rates, policymakers signal a willingness to safeguard credibility while monitoring evolving risks rather than reacting prematurely.

Beyond the rate decision, accompanying regulatory initiatives point to a broader interpretation of monetary stewardship. Measures addressing mis-selling, recovery practices, and fraud compensation underline a growing emphasis on consumer protection within financial governance. Proposals to expand collateral-free lending to smaller enterprises and ease regulatory thresholds for financial institutions seek to sustain credit flows where they matter most for employment and investment. These steps suggest an attempt to balance prudence with targeted facilitation. Nevertheless, the pause should not be mistaken for complacency. Growth projections remain contingent on external developments and domestic structural factors. Financial conditions globally are fluid, and domestic inflation expectations could adjust as new data emerges. The central bank's decision to defer full-year projections pending updated statistical series reflects awareness of uncertainty rather than hesitancy. The policy message, ultimately, is one of equilibrium. Monetary authorities appear determined to avoid both over-tightening that might restrain expansion and over-loosening that could undermine stability. Such balance is especially relevant as India navigates evolving trade alignments and investment dynamics. A steady policy anchor contributes to market confidence, signalling continuity in an environment marked by shifting external variables.

Autonomy pact tests cooperative federalism

The tripartite agreement to create the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority marks a notable attempt to address long-standing regional grievances through administrative innovation rather than territorial redrawing. By offering devolved authority across multiple governance subjects to eastern districts of Nagaland, the arrangement signals a preference for accommodation within the existing constitutional framework. The initiative reflects both the possibilities and limits of negotiated federal responses to localised discontent. The significance of the pact lies in its context. Demands from eastern Nagaland have persisted for over a decade, rooted in perceptions of developmental neglect and uneven resource distribution. Movements calling for separate statehood highlighted structural tensions between identity, representation, and governance outcomes. The new authority appears designed to respond to these concerns without altering state boundaries, offering financial autonomy, localised decision-making, and institutional presence through a dedicated administrative structure. Such measures aim to translate political recognition into practical developmental leverage. This approach underscores the value of dialogue-driven resolution. Negotiated outcomes carry legitimacy that imposed solutions often lack, particularly in regions shaped by historical sensitivities and strategic complexities. The willingness of stakeholders to converge around a framework short of statehood suggests recognition that incremental institutional empowerment may achieve stability more effectively than maximalist demands. It also reinforces the broader principle that decentralisation can operate as a conflict-mitigation tool within India's federal architecture.

Yet the agreement's success will hinge on implementation rather than design. Devolution of subjects and financial outlays must be accompanied by clear administrative capacity, transparent resource allocation, and measurable development outcomes. Without demonstrable improvements in infrastructure, livelihoods, and service delivery, institutional restructuring risks being perceived as symbolic. Expectations in the region are likely to be high, and delays or ambiguity in execution could revive dissatisfaction rather than resolve it. Equally important is maintaining coherence within the state's governance ecosystem. The arrangement explicitly safeguards existing constitutional provisions, underscoring the need to balance autonomy with unity. Effective coordination between the new authority, state administration, and central agencies will determine whether decentralisation strengthens governance or fragments responsibility. Institutional overlap and jurisdictional confusion remain risks that require careful management. There is also a broader lesson for federal policymaking. India's regional aspirations cannot always be addressed through uniform templates. Tailored arrangements that recognise local realities while preserving constitutional integrity may offer more sustainable pathways. However, such models should remain anchored in accountability and clarity of mandate to avoid setting precedents that complicate governance elsewhere.

Insolvency reform must address India's homebuyer vulnerability

Kavita Nagpal

India's insolvency framework was designed to address corporate distress, preserve asset value, and ensure time-bound resolution for creditors. Yet cases involving stalled real estate projects repeatedly expose a tension at the heart of this system: what happens when the claimants are not banks or financial institutions, but households waiting for homes they paid for years earlier? The intersection of insolvency law and homebuyer rights has become one of the most complex tests of India's economic governance.

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code was built on the logic of creditor primacy. Financial creditors assess risk, price it, and absorb losses through structured resolution. Homebuyers, however, occupy a fundamentally different position. Their investment is rarely diversified,

their exposure is often life savings, and their objective is not financial recovery but possession of a home. Treating them strictly as creditors within insolvency proceedings risks overlooking the social and economic consequences of project collapse.

Policy has attempted to bridge this gap by recognising homebuyers as financial creditors under the insolvency framework. This step improved their legal standing, granting representation in decision-making processes. Yet practical outcomes continue to reveal limitations. Resolution plans often prioritise maximising recoveries over completing projects. Liquidation scenarios, while commercially rational, rarely restore housing security. The result is a recurring dilemma: legal equality does not necessarily translate into substantive protection.

Judicial interventions have increasingly stepped into this space. Courts

have used broad constitutional powers to prioritise project completion, restrict resolution processes, or direct alternative execution mechanisms when conventional insolvency pathways proved inadequate. Such interventions reflect institutional recognition that housing disputes carry consequences beyond contractual default. They affect urban stability, consumer confidence, and trust in regulatory systems.

However, reliance on judicial activism also exposes systemic weaknesses. Courts are not designed to function as long-term coordinators of construction, financing, or project management. When resolution depends on extraordinary judicial direction, it signals gaps in regulatory oversight, enforcement, and market discipline. Sustainable solutions require institutional design rather than episodic intervention.

The deeper issue lies in structural

regulation of the real estate sector. Delays and insolvencies often arise from aggressive expansion, leverage, and weak project governance. Preventing distress, rather than managing its aftermath, must remain the policy priority. Strengthening disclosure standards, escrow discipline, land-use transparency, and enforcement of completion commitments would reduce systemic vulnerability. Consumer protection frameworks and sectoral regulators must operate in tandem with insolvency mechanisms, not as afterthoughts.

Another unresolved question concerns the role of state entities in rescuing distressed housing projects. Public sector participation can restore confidence and accelerate completion where private resolution fails. Yet routine reliance on such interventions risks creating moral hazard. Developers and lenders may underestimate consequences if expectations of pub-

lic rescue take hold. Balancing stability and market discipline is therefore essential. State involvement should remain structured, transparent, and exceptional, rather than evolving into default practice.

Financial system implications also merit attention. Banks and institutional creditors require clarity regarding recovery hierarchies to maintain credit flows to housing development. Excessive prioritisation of one stakeholder group may alter risk perceptions and financing costs. Policy must therefore navigate between consumer protection and credit stability. The objective should be alignment, not substitution, of interests through mechanisms that preserve project viability and fair recovery.

Looking ahead, reform must aim at integration rather than incremental adjustment. Insolvency resolution for real estate should incorporate

sector-specific protocols focused on project completion where feasible. Pre-distress monitoring, escrow-based safeguards, and dedicated resolution frameworks could mitigate conflict between asset recovery and social outcomes. Clearer coordination between sector regulators, financial authorities, and insolvency institutions would enhance predictability for all stakeholders.

The broader lesson is institutional. Economic law cannot remain detached from lived realities when households are primary stakeholders. At the same time, emotional responses must not erode systemic coherence. The task is to design frameworks where consumer protection and financial discipline reinforce rather than undermine each other.

The writer is a legal affairs commentator and columnist. She writes on law, governance, and institutional reform.

From compliance to competitiveness

India's ease of doing business reforms have moved beyond headline rankings to deeper institutional restructuring. The Union Budget 2026-27 reinforces this shift through tax certainty, digital trade facilitation, and compliance rationalisation, but the real challenge lies in translating procedural simplification into productivity, competitiveness, and sustained enterprise growth.

Raman Singh

India's ease of doing business agenda has travelled a considerable distance from the period when it was judged primarily by global rankings. The Union Budget 2026-27 suggests that the policy objective has matured into something deeper and more structural: reshaping the regulatory state to reduce friction in investment, trade, taxation, and compliance. Digitisation, tax certainty, litigation reduction, and trust-based customs oversight are not isolated announcements. Taken together, they reflect a continuing effort to make regulation predictable rather than permissive, and facilitative rather than discretionary.

The central question now is whether procedural simplification can translate into productivity gains and sustained competitiveness. Administrative reform can lower barriers to entry, but growth depends on whether firms can operate efficiently once established. The budget's measures provide evidence of progress, but also illustrate the distance yet to be covered.

Trade facilitation offers one of the clearest examples of regulatory recalibration. Proposals for a single digital clearance window and a comprehensive customs integration system aim to collapse fragmented approval chains into an interoperable framework. Risk-based verification, advanced scanning, and recognition of trusted importers point to a shift from physical oversight to data-driven supervision. This transition matters beyond administrative efficiency. For exporters and manufacturers, time certainty at ports affects working capital cycles, supply chain commitments, and cost competitiveness. In a global environment shaped by supply chain diversification, logistics reliability has become an economic signal as important as taxation levels.

Tax reform in the budget follows a similar logic of predictability over dramatic rate reductions. Rationalisation of minimum alternate tax provisions and their treatment as a final levy seek to reduce interpretive disputes. Integrated penalty proceedings and lower pre-payment thresholds for appeals attempt to contain litigation drag, which has long imposed hidden costs on firms. Decriminalisation of minor procedural offences further aligns enforcement with proportionality. Businesses are more likely to engage constructively with regulators when compliance failures attract monetary consequences rather than criminal exposure. The underlying objective is behavioural: replacing adversarial compliance cultures with rules-based engagement.

Trust-based governance, however, is not self-sustaining. It depends on institutional discipline, transparent audit mechanisms, and credible enforcement when violations occur. Without these, the shift from oversight to trust risks inconsistency across jurisdictions. Investors value systems where outcomes are fore-



The latest budget signals continuity in India's regulatory transformation, emphasising predictability, digitisation, and trust-based governance. Yet administrative ease alone will not secure competitiveness. The next phase must align regulatory clarity with infrastructure, judicial efficiency, and workforce capability to ensure businesses can scale and innovate without friction.

seeable even when obligations are demanding. Predictability, not leniency, ultimately determines regulatory credibility. The success of this reform approach will therefore hinge on implementation integrity rather than legislative intent alone.

Digital single-window governance illustrates both ambition and limitation. Platforms integrating approvals across departments attempt to address India's long-standing administrative fragmentation. Simplified application pathways reduce entry barriers and lower procedural uncertainty. Yet digitisation is only transformative when backend decision chains are synchronised. If departments retain siloed workflows behind unified interfaces, procedural delays persist beneath the surface. The emphasis must therefore remain on interoperability, time-bound processing, and performance monitoring. Digital architecture without administrative coordination risks becoming cosmetic modernisation.

The investment climate, moreover, is shaped decisively below the national level. Land use permissions, construction approvals, labour compliance, and environmental clearances operate through state and district authorities. Evidence of compliance reduction initiatives and procedural liberalisation across states suggests that competitive federalism is fostering experimentation. District-level reform frameworks recognise that ease of doing business is experienced locally. A delayed municipal approval can negate national policy intent. Institutionalising benchmarking, public disclosure of performance metrics, and incentives for subnational reform may therefore produce deeper systemic change than centrally driven mandates.

Financial and labour sector reforms complement regulatory re-

structuring. Digital credit assessment models for smaller enterprises attempt to address the structural financing constraints that hinder business expansion. Access to capital remains a larger obstacle for many firms than licensing complexity. Simplified labour compliance structures and reduced approval timelines offer operational flexibility while preserving regulatory oversight. Such measures signal recognition that enterprise development requires clarity throughout the business lifecycle, not merely at the entry stage.

Administrative efficiency, however, should not be conflated with competitiveness. Ease of doing business reforms are necessary conditions for growth, not sufficient ones. Firms evaluate infrastructure reliability, judicial timelines, energy stability, and workforce capability alongside procedural requirements. Gains from compliance reduction will plateau if not matched by improvements in contract enforcement, logistics capacity, and human capital development. The next phase of reform must integrate regulatory transformation with institutional strengthening across these domains.

There is also a geopolitical dimension to regulatory credibility. In an era marked by supply chain realignment and capital diversification, governance predictability functions as economic signalling. Expanding investor access and rationalising sectoral participation frameworks indicate openness to global capital while maintaining oversight safeguards. Predictable rulemaking enhances positioning in investment allocation decisions that increasingly weigh governance quality alongside market scale. Regulatory transparency thus becomes an instrument of strategic economic diplomacy.

The philosophical shift under-

lying these reforms is significant. Governance is moving from clearance-centric control towards compliance-centric monitoring. This reflects confidence in digital capabilities and administrative maturity. However, inclusivity must remain central to implementation. Smaller enterprises and regional businesses should not face technological or procedural barriers in adapting to digital regulatory ecosystems. Capacity-building support and accessible design will be essential to ensure that modernisation does not inadvertently widen structural inequalities within the enterprise landscape.

The Union Budget 2026-27 represents continuity rather than rupture in regulatory policy. Digitisation, simplification, and decriminalisation form part of a cumulative process reshaping economic governance. Indicators such as investment flows, enterprise formation, and expanding formalisation suggest that reform momentum is producing measurable effects. Yet incremental gains must evolve into structural advantage if India seeks durable competitiveness.

The next stage demands a broader vision of ease of doing business. The objective should not be limited to enabling firms to enter markets smoothly, but to enabling them to scale, innovate, and integrate globally with minimal friction. Aligning regulatory clarity with infrastructure readiness, judicial efficiency, and skill development would convert administrative progress into economic capability.

India's regulatory transformation remains a work in progress. The budget underscores commitment to that trajectory. Its ultimate success will be judged not by procedural streamlining alone, but by whether the ecosystem it creates allows enterprise to expand with confidence, speed, and resilience. When ease of doing business becomes ease of sustained growth, reform will have fulfilled its purpose.

The writer is a policy analyst focusing on employment, demographics, and economic development. He writes on the intersections of workforce trends, technology, and industrial policy

US, Russia agree to military dialogue after Ukraine talks



Kamila Hrabchuk

KYIV, FEB 5

THE US and Russia agreed on Thursday to reestablish high level military-to-military dialogue following a meeting between senior Russian and American military officials in Abu Dhabi, the United States European Command said in a statement. The agreement was reached following meetings between Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, the Commander of US European Command -- who is also NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe -- and senior Russian and Ukrainian military officials, the statement said.

The channel "will provide a consistent military-to-military contact as the parties continue to work towards a lasting peace," the statement said. High level military communication was suspended in 2021, just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Grynkeiwich was in the capital of the United Arab Emirates where talks between American, Russian and Ukrainian officials on ending the war in Ukraine entered a second day and

as Moscow escalated its attacks on Ukraine's power grid.

Russia continues to target Ukraine's electricity network, aiming to deny civilians power and weaken their appetite for the fight, while fighting continues along the roughly 1,000-kilometre (600-mile) front line snaking along eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy revealed that 55,000 Ukrainian troops have died since Russia's invasion almost four years ago. "And there is a large number of people whom Ukraine considers missing," he added in an interview broadcast by French TV channel France 2 late Wednesday.

The channel "will provide a consistent military-to-military contact as the parties continue to work towards a lasting peace," the statement said. High level military communication was suspended in 2021, just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Grynkeiwich was in the capital of the United Arab Emirates where talks between American, Russian and Ukrainian officials on ending the war in Ukraine entered a second day and

month's talks in the same place as the Trump administration tries to steer the two countries toward a settlement. At the time, Zelenskyy described the issue of who would control the Donbas industrial heartland of eastern Ukraine as "key." Officials have provided no information about any progress in the discussions.

Zelenskyy has repeatedly said his country needs security guarantees from the US and Europe to deter any postwar Russian attacks. Ukrainians must feel that there is genuine progress toward peace and "not toward a scenario in which the Russians exploit everything to their advantage and continue their strikes," Zelenskyy said on social media late Wednesday. Last year saw a 31 per cent increase in Ukrainian civilian casualties compared with 2024, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch said in a report published Wednesday.

Almost 15,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed and just over 40,000 injured since the start of the war through last December, according to the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. (AP)

Trump makes India-Pak war-stopping claims again

Yoshita Singh

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON, FEB 6

UN President Donald Trump repeated twice in a single day the claim that he stopped the war between India and Pakistan last year. "In one year, I've ended eight raging wars, such as (the war between) Cambodia and Thailand, Kosovo and Serbia, Pakistan and India, Israel and Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan," Trump said at the National Prayer Breakfast on Thursday.

Later, in a post on Truth Social, Trump reiterated the claim that he stopped a nuclear war from breaking out between India and Pakistan.

"The United States is the most powerful Country in the World. I completely rebuilt its Military in my First Term, including new and many refurbished nuclear weapons. I also added Space Force and now, continue to rebuild our Military at levels never seen before. We are even adding Battleships, which are 100 times more powerful than the ones that roamed the Seas during World War II -- The Iowa, Missouri, Alabama, and others. I have stopped Nuclear Wars from breaking out across the World between Pakistan and India, Iran and Israel, and Russia and Ukraine," Trump posted.

The US President has claimed over 90 times that he stopped the conflict between India and Pakistan. He has been making the assertion repeatedly, on various platforms in the US and around the world, since May 10 last year when he announced on social media that India and Pakistan agreed to a "full and immediate" ceasefire after a "long night" of talks mediated by Washington.

India has consistently denied any third-party intervention. (PTI)

US cuts ties with Polish speaker over 'insults' against Trump

Claudia Ciobanu

WARSAW, FEB 6

THE US ambassador to Poland announced on Thursday that the US will have "no further dealings, contacts, or communications" with Wlodzimierz Czarzasty, the speaker of the lower house of the Polish parliament, over what Rose called "outrageous and unprovoked insults directed against President Trump." Amb Tom Rose did not specify what those alleged insults were, but Czarzasty had issued a public statement on Monday in which he said he would not support an initiative of his Israeli and American counterparts to nominate US President Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Czarzasty is one of the leaders of a left-wing party in the liberal government led by Donald Tusk.

Ever since Trump came to power, Poland has had to walk a fine line between defending its European allies while not upsetting its most powerful ally, the United States, on which peace in neighbouring Ukraine depends. Warsaw has so far managed to do this by having Tusk handle European Union matters and letting President Karol Nawrocki, who came to power supported by the national-conservative opposition party Law and Justice, connect with Trump.

Nawrocki enjoys good relationships with Trump, who endorsed him during the electoral campaign for presidency last year, and invited him to the White House soon after the Pole took office. As the two presidents sat side by side in September in the White House, Trump declared he does not intend to pull US troops out of Poland, a sign of support for the new president and his aims. "We'll put more there if they want," Trump even said. Yet this week's dispute highlights the difficulty of Poland's position in the current international context.

Czarzasty did not mince his words on Monday when he said Trump "does not deserve the Nobel Peace Prize." He said Trump "represents

power politics and, by the use of force, pursues transactional politics." This often means "breaking international law," the Polish politician added.

He criticised Trump for not recognising enough the role Polish soldiers played in US military missions and for "the instrumental treatment of other territories," such as Greenland.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk was quick to respond to Rose's announcement. "Mr Ambassador Rose, allies should respect, not lecture, each other," Tusk wrote on X Thursday afternoon. Rose, however, was undeterred. He replied to Tusk that, despite the Polish prime minister himself being "a model ally and great friend of the United States,"



Czarzasty's comments "were so potentially damaging to your government."

Insulting Trump, "the greatest friend Poland has ever had in the White House," was "the last thing" a Polish leader should do, Rose warned. Earlier this week, Nawrocki called a meeting of a national security body to discuss, among others, whether Poland should join Trump's Board of Peace as well as to clarify alleged "eastern business and social contacts" of Czarzasty. The parliament speaker denies any nefarious relationships in Russia or Belarus.

Law and Justice, the main opposition party in Poland who supported Nawrocki's presidential bid, is hoping to regain power in parliamentary elections next year. Weakening Tusk's coalition partners is part of its strategy. (AP)

EU to Tik-Tok: Change 'addictive design'

Kelvin Chanap

LONDON, FEB 6

THE European Union on Friday accused TikTok of breaching the bloc's digital rules with "addictive design" features including autoplay and infinite scroll, in preliminary charges that strike at the heart of the popular video sharing app's operating model. EU regulators said their investigation found that TikTok hasn't done enough to assess how its features could harm the physical and mental health of users, including children and "vulnerable adults."

The European Commission said it believes TikTok should change the "basic design" of its service. The commission is the EU's executive arm and enforcer of the 27-nation bloc's Digital Services Act, a sweeping rulebook that requires social media companies to clean up their platforms and protect users, under threat of hefty fines.

"The Commission's preliminary findings present a categorically false and entirely meritless depiction of our platform, and we will take what-

ever steps are necessary to challenge these findings through every means available to us," the company said in a statement.

TikTok now has a chance to reply to the commission's findings, which could lead to a so-called non-compliance decision and possible fine worth up to 6 per cent of the company's total annual revenue.

"Social media addiction can have detrimental effects on the developing minds of children and teens," Henna Virkkunen, the commission's executive vice-president for tech sovereignty, security and democracy, said in a press statement. "The Digital Services Act makes platforms responsible for the effects they can have on their users. In Europe, we enforce our legislation to protect our children and our citizens online."

The preliminary findings from Brussels are the latest example of pressure that TikTok and other social media platforms are facing over youth addiction.

Australia has banned social media for under-16s while governments in Spain, France, and Denmark want to introduce similar measures. (AP)



In this image made from video provided by Russian Defense Ministry Press Service late, Russian servicemen sit in a bus after returning from captivity during a POW exchange of a group of servicemen between Russia and Ukraine at an airport outside Moscow. AP/PTI

Shutdown of Kenya's Koko biofuel firm wipes out clean cooking options

Allan Olingo

NAIROBI, FEB 6

THOUSANDS of fuel dispensers across Kenya have fallen silent after the sudden shutdown of a bioethanol distribution network that once provided a low-cost alternative to charcoal and cooking gas for more than a million households, raising concerns about access to clean energy options.

The closure of Koko Networks' fuel supply points has disrupted daily routines for families who relied on the system to refill canisters cheaply and conveniently. Designed to func-

tion like prepaid mobile airtime, the model allowed users to purchase small quantities of fuel through local outlets, reducing dependence on traditional stoves that produce smoke and indoor pollution. For more than a decade, the network was credited with helping households transition away from charcoal toward cleaner-burning bioethanol. But operations halted after the company failed to secure key government approvals linked to carbon-credit sales, which had underpinned financing that kept fuel prices low. In Nairobi's informal settlements, the shutdown has been swift and visible. Dispensers at neighbourhood



shops stand unused, and some retailers have removed them altogether. Vendors who previously served dozens of customers each day now face lost income and uncertainty about whether operations will resume.

Consumers were largely informed

through brief text messages announcing the suspension, leaving many without immediate alternatives. Households that adopted ethanol stoves must now decide whether to revert to charcoal or absorb the higher costs associated with liquefied petroleum gas. The company's difficulties followed earlier regulatory setbacks. Restrictions on bioethanol imports in recent years forced reliance on more expensive local supplies. Negotiations with authorities over authorisation to trade carbon credits -- a key revenue stream -- ultimately failed, and the firm announced it would cease operations, citing financial unsustainability.

Government officials have not publicly detailed their position, though economic advisers have pointed to broader concerns surrounding carbon credit frameworks and regulatory transparency. Analysts say the episode illustrates the fragile economics of clean cooking initiatives that depend heavily on climate-linked financing rather than domestic affordability alone. Energy experts warn the closure could reverse environmental and public health gains achieved through reduced charcoal use. Smoke from traditional fuels contributes to respiratory illness and deforestation, issues that bioethanol adoption had partially

mitigated. The sudden loss of access underscores wider challenges facing clean energy transitions in developing markets.

Critics also argue that models tied to carbon markets expose vulnerable households to risks when funding or policy support shifts. When projects falter, consumers -- rather than investors or regulators -- bear the consequences, often reverting to polluting fuels. Some analysts suggest long-term solutions should prioritise electrification supported by renewable energy infrastructure, which could provide more stable cooking alternatives. (AP)

Oman mediates indirect US-Iran contacts on nuclear programme

Jon Gambrell

MUSCAT, FEB 6

OMAN hosted indirect contacts on Friday between the United States and Iran over Tehran's nuclear programme, with delegations arriving separately for discussions with the sultanate's top diplomat in a renewed attempt to stabilise diplomacy after months of heightened regional tension.

Convoys carrying representatives from both countries were seen travelling to a palace on the outskirts of Muscat, where Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi held separate meetings with each side. Journalists observed Iranian officials arriving first, followed later by a US convoy bearing diplomatic insignia. Neither Tehran nor Washington immediately commented on the substance or outcome of the talks.

Oman's foreign ministry confirmed al-Busaidi met Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and later held consultations with US Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff and adviser Jared Kushner. According to an official statement, the discussions focused on creating conditions for resuming diplomatic and technical negotiations and emphasised the importance of ensuring their success in achieving regional security and stability.

The talks mark the latest mediation effort by Oman, which has frequently served as an intermediary between the two adversaries. Earlier rounds of engagement held at the same venue in 2025 faltered after a



brief but intense conflict involving Israel, Iran and US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities disrupted diplomacy and heightened tensions across the region.

Since then, geopolitical pressure has continued to shape the diplomatic environment. US officials have argued that Iran's leadership faces mounting internal and external challenges, including protests and economic strain, while maintaining military deployments in

the region. Gulf Arab states have expressed concern that escalation could trigger broader conflict affecting vital shipping routes and regional stability.

Details of the Muscat contacts remained limited, with the scope of discussions and duration of the meetings unclear. Iranian state media reported that Araghchi arrived with a diplomatic team, and he later posted on social media that Iran entered diplomacy with "open eyes"

and expected commitments to be honoured on the basis of equality and mutual respect. Senior officials in Tehran signalled support for his role in the negotiations, describing him as a trusted representative of national interests.

On the US side, Witkoff led engagement efforts while travelling through the region alongside Kushner as part of a broader diplomatic itinerary that included stops in Gulf capitals. Officials in Washington have indicated that future negotiations should address not only nuclear issues but also Iran's missile capabilities and regional activities, though Tehran has emphasised that its nuclear programme remains the primary subject under discussion.

Regional actors have also explored potential proposals aimed at reducing tensions, including reported suggestions for temporary limits on uranium enrichment and measures to restrict missile deployment. Iranian officials have publicly rejected some of these ideas, particularly those involving halting enrichment or transferring nuclear material abroad. Despite uncertainties surrounding substance and progress, the Muscat meetings reflect continuing attempts to reopen dialogue between two countries whose relations have remained adversarial for decades. Oman's mediation underscores the role of regional intermediaries in maintaining communication channels even amid strained political conditions. Whether the contacts lead to formal negotiations or remain exploratory exchanges remains to be seen. (AP)



31 dead, 169 hurt in suicide attack in Pakistan capital

Sajjad Hussain

ISLAMABAD, FEB 6

A suicide bomber blew himself up at a Shia mosque during Friday prayers in Pakistan's capital, killing at least 31 people and injuring nearly 170 others, officials said. The powerful explosion took place at Khadijatul Kubra mosque-cum-imambargah in the Tariq area of Islamabad, the police said in a statement. The suicide bomber was stopped at the gate of the imambargah, but he detonated himself, police and eyewitnesses said.

At least 31 people were killed and 169 others injured in the explosion, a district administration spokesperson said in a post on X. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the blast. However, police sources said that the attacker was a foreign national and had links with Fitna al-Khawarij, a term used for Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In a post on X, Islamabad Deputy Commissioner Irfan Nawaz Memon earlier said that more than 80 people were injured in the blast, while 15 bodies were shifted to different hospitals.

Police and Rescue 1122 personnel reached the site of the incident and initiated rescue operations. The army troops and Rangers have cordoned off the area, and security operations are underway in and around the site of the blast. An emergency was declared in the hospitals of the capital to deal with the situation, as the injured were being shifted to hospitals.

The attack came less than three months after a suicide bomber killed 12 people in a blast outside a district and sessions court building in Islamabad. Today's attack came when Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was visiting Pakistan. He arrived on a two-day state visit on Thursday. President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Senate Opposition Leader Allama Raja Nasir Abbas condemned the attack.

"Targeting innocent civilians is a crime against humanity," Zardari said. Strongly condemning the attack, Abbas said that targeting places of worship is a direct attack on humanity, religion and social values, which cannot be tolerated under any circumstances. (PTI)

3 African nations to take back migrants after UK threat

Aditi Khanna

LONDON, FEB 6

THREE African countries have agreed to take back their nationals who entered the UK illegally or were convicted of other offences following a threat to shut down their visas, the UK Home Office said on Friday. Officials said that Namibia and Angola have agreed to cooperate on migrant returns a month after Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood threatened visa penalties. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) fell in line weeks after the minister had stripped VIPs and decision-makers from the country of preferential visa treatment, as well as revoking fast-track visa processing services for all DRC nationals.

"My message is clear, if foreign governments refuse to accept the return of their citizens, then they will face consequences," said Mahmood.

"Illegal migrants and dangerous criminals will now be removed and deported back to Angola, Namibia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I will do what it takes to restore order and control to our borders," she said. Some UK media reports reference sources as saying that India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Somalia and Gabon are among other countries "resistant" to striking similar returns agreement and may be in line for future visa sanctions.

The Home Office did not confirm this speculation but admitted further



visa penalty threats are expected. It stated: "While Angola, Namibia and DRC are now cooperating on returns, other countries are still frustrating the returns process and not taking back their nationals who have no right to remain in the UK." "The home secretary has been clear that those who refuse to work with the UK on returns cannot expect a normal visa relationship, with further threats expected where countries are not cooperating," it added. Around 58,500 people have been removed or deported since July 2024 when the Labour government took charge, with officials claiming that removals of illegal migrants with no right to be in the UK are at an "all-time high". The latest agreements with the African nations means over 3,000 nationals could be eligible for deportation. It follows a hard line on immigration set out by Mahmood last year, when the South Asian heritage minister warned that countries that "do not play ball" could face visa cuts and penalties. (PTI)

Pak forces kill 24 terrorists in KP province

PESHAWAR, FEB 6 / PTI

Pakistani security forces have killed 24 terrorists in two separate intelligence-based operations in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the military's media wing said on Friday. "On 4-5 February, 24 khawarij belonging to Fitna-al-Khawarij were killed in two separate engagements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province," the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said in a statement.

Fitna-al-Khawarij is a term used by the state for terrorists belonging to the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Two intelligence-based operations were conducted in the province's Orakzai and Khyber districts. During the operation conducted in Orakzai district, troops engaged the terrorists and killed 14 terrorists. While in Khyber, during the conduct of another IBO, security forces killed 10 terrorists. Following the engagements, security forces conducted sanitisation operations in the areas "to eliminate any other sponsored khawarij found in the area". Earlier in January, 11 terrorists were killed in two separate IBOs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The military's media wing added that the counter-terrorism operations, conducted under the vision of 'Azme Istehkam' by security forces and law enforcement agencies, will continue at full pace to wipe out the menace of foreign sponsored and supported terrorism from the country.



Students dance on traditional drum beat during a gathering to celebrate three-day kite flying festival 'Basant' at their university campus, in Lahore, Pakistan. AP/PTI

Death toll rises to 13 in bus mishap in western Nepal

KATHMANDU, FEB 6 / PTI

THE death toll in the Nepal crash when a bus carrying a wedding party met with an accident rose to 13, with five more people succumbing to their injuries. The accident took place in Nepal's Sudoorpashchim province on Thursday. Eight persons died on the spot and five more succumbed to their injuries during treatment at Dadelhura Hospital, police were quoted as saying by the Kathmandu Post.

The accident occurred on Thursday when the bus, carrying the wedding party from the Purchaudi Municipality area of Baitadi district, fell 200 metres down the hilly road at 8 pm, according to the police. A woman was among the 13 killed, and 40 others were injured in the accident that occurred at Badgau of Purchaudi -7 area of western Nepal, reported the Kathmandu Post. The injured passengers have been admitted to a local hospital, said the police.

Indian-origin man jailed in Singapore

Gurdip Singh

SINGAPORE, FEB 6

AN Indian-origin man has been sentenced to 23 months' jail for cheating a woman he met on Singapore's online marketplace of over SGD268,000. Thevendran Elan Goven, 31, was handed the sentence on Thursday, after he earlier pleaded guilty to one count of cheating. The Straits Times reported. Two other similar charges were taken into consideration. Deputy Public Prosecutor Suriya Prakash told the court previously that Thevendran did not stop cheating the victim even after all her money was gone.

The court heard that the victim was 25 years old at the time of the offences, according to the Singapore daily report. On or before July 24, 2021, Thevendran posted a listing on Carousell for a PlayStation 4 (PS4), and the victim responded. He told her the game console would be delivered within seven days if she paid a deposit of SGD150, and said she had to pay a balance of another SGD150 after it was delivered. The woman transferred SGD150 to Thevendran on July 24, 2021. The pair continued messaging on Carousell about unrelated matters before continuing their conversation on WhatsApp. Three days later, he asked her to pay the remaining SGD150 for the console, which he had not delivered, and an additional SGD49 for some PS4 games. (PTI)

Lebanon weighs value of gold reserves as prices surge

Kareem Chehayeb and Malak Harb

BOURJ HAMMOUD (LEBANON), FEB 6

LEBANON, struggling with a prolonged economic crisis and weakened financial institutions, is reassessing the role of its sizable gold reserves as global prices surge and citizens increasingly turn to precious metals to safeguard savings eroded by years of instability.

The country holds roughly 286 tonnes of gold, among the largest reserves in the Middle East, accumulated largely in the 1960s and maintained by its central bank. With inflation persisting and reforms stalled, debate has intensified over whether this stockpile could help restore confidence in the banking sector or offset losses suffered

by depositors after the financial collapse that began in 2019.

That crisis wiped out savings for many Lebanese and pushed large segments of the population into poverty. The financial system recorded tens of billions of dollars in losses, further strained by recent conflict-related costs and continuing economic decline. Against this backdrop, the rise in global gold prices has renewed attention on an asset long treated as untouchable.

At its peak, the reserves were valued at tens of billions of dollars, exceeding the country's economic output. Some banking officials have floated the idea of using part of the holdings to support deposit repayments or stabilise the sector. However, such proposals face legal and political barriers. A law enacted during the civil war in the 1980s



prohibits selling gold, and parliament would have to approve any change to that framework.

Political appetite for such a move appears limited. Lawmakers have previously dismissed discussion of tapping the reserves, and broader fiscal reform legislation remains stalled amid disagreements over how losses should be distributed among banks, the state and

depositors. Many citizens, distrustful of institutions that have yet to deliver structural reforms, argue that the gold should remain preserved as a national safeguard. Economists have suggested alternative approaches, including deploying a small portion alongside policy changes to revive public services such as electricity, healthcare or education. Yet any plan would require political con-

sensus that has so far proved elusive.

While authorities debate, ordinary Lebanese are responding to economic uncertainty in their own way. Demand for gold and silver among households has surged as people seek tangible stores of value outside the banking system. Dealers report rising queues for coins, bars and jewellery, with some buyers paying in advance due to limited supply.

Precious metals have long played a cultural and financial role in Lebanon and the wider region, often serving as personal reserves during periods of upheaval. Economists say this tradition, combined with repeated episodes of inflation and currency instability, has reinforced public perception of gold as a reliable hedge against economic shocks.



NSE NIFTY TOP GAINERS
February 6, 2026

%	POINTS
+5.21	ITC 326.35
+3.33	Kotak Bank 422.35
+2.83	Hindustan Unilever 2,421.00
+1.79	Bajaj Finance 982.00
+1.54	Bharti Airtel 2,023.00
+1.19	Power Grid 292.80
+1.05	Titan 4,140.80
+1.03	Bajaj Finserv 2,020.80
+0.91	Shriram Finance 1,001.00
+0.85	Axis Bank 1,341.90

Stock markets end higher as RBI keeps policy rates unchanged

Amit Jain

MUMBAI, FEB 6

Domestic equity markets ended higher on Friday after the Reserve Bank of India kept its benchmark interest rate unchanged and proposed measures to expand financing for the real estate sector, helping lift sentiment toward the close of a volatile session.

The 30-share BSE Sensex rose 266.47 points, or 0.32 per cent, to settle at 83,580.40 after recovering sharply from intraday lows. The benchmark had fallen to 82,925.35 earlier in the day before staging a late rally that saw it gain more than 650 points from the session's bottom. The NSE Nifty also edged higher, adding 50.90 points, or 0.20 per cent, to finish at 25,693.70.

Investors reacted to the central bank's policy announcement, which maintained the status quo on interest rates while signalling regulatory support for deeper funding channels in the real estate market. The RBI's six-member Monetary Policy Committee unanimously

voted to retain the repo rate at 5.25 per cent and continued with a neutral stance, suggesting no immediate shift in policy direction.

Alongside the rate decision, the central bank proposed allowing banks to lend to Real Estate Investment Trusts under specified prudential safeguards, a move aimed at broadening access to credit and strengthening the funding ecosystem for property assets. Market participants said the regulatory clarity improved sentiment in related sectors.

Gains were led by select large-cap stocks. ITC emerged as the top performer among Sensex constituents, climbing over 5 per cent. Other notable advances were recorded in Kotak Mahindra Bank, Hindustan Unilever, Bharti Airtel, Bajaj Finance, Power Grid and Bajaj Finserv. On the downside, technology stocks lagged, with Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, HCL Tech and others ending lower alongside declines in Adani Ports and Asian Paints.

Sectoral indices reflected mixed performance. Fast-moving consumer goods led advances, followed by telecommuni-

cations, power, realty, energy and capital goods. The information technology segment declined, mirroring weakness seen in broader technology counters, while services, public sector banking and auto shares also slipped.

Analysts said the market remained subdued for much of the day before selective buying emerged late in the session. They attributed the recovery to defensive sectors and private banking stocks, noting continued underperformance in technology shares. The monetary policy outcome broadly matched expectations, reinforcing stability while maintaining a constructive outlook on growth.

Weekly gains underscored stronger momentum, with the Sensex rising more than 2,800 points and the Nifty climbing nearly 3.5 per cent over the period.

Global cues remained mixed. Major Asian indices in South Korea, China and Hong Kong closed lower, while Japan's benchmark ended higher. European markets traded mostly positive, contrasting with declines on Wall Street overnight where major US indices posted losses.

Rupee falls 36 paise amid oil surge, global uncertainty

Amit Jain

MUMBAI, FEB 6

THE rupee weakened by 36 paise to close at 90.70 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, reversing early gains as rising crude oil prices, geopolitical tensions and continued foreign fund outflows weighed on sentiment in the currency market.

The domestic unit initially strengthened after the Reserve Bank of India maintained its benchmark lending rate, a move widely anticipated by markets. However, forex dealers said the positive impact faded as investors turned cautious amid uncertainty surrounding developments in US-Iran diplomacy and a climb in global energy prices, both of which typically increase pressure on oil-importing economies.



At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 90.28 per dollar and traded within a range of 90.18 to 90.83 during the session before settling weaker than the previous close. The currency had ended Thursday at 90.34 against the greenback.

Market participants noted that the central bank's policy decision initially boosted confidence, but broader external factors overshadowed domestic cues. Analysts said heightened geopolitical risk often leads to risk-averse capital flows that favour stronger currencies, dampening emerging market units.

The US dollar index, which measures the American currency against a basket of major global peers, was marginally lower during the day, suggesting limited external support for the rupee. Meanwhile, Brent crude futures rose more than 1 per cent to trade above USD 68 per barrel, reinforcing concerns about import costs and inflationary pressures.

On the domestic equities front, benchmark indices ended higher, with the Sensex rising more than 260 points and the Nifty gaining over 50 points, reflecting selective investor buying. However, foreign institutional investors remained net sellers in the previous session, offloading equities worth over Rs 2,150 crore, exchange data showed, contributing to pressure on the local currency.

Analysts indicated that while global uncertainties may keep the rupee volatile, supportive factors such as optimism around trade engagement with the United States and potential capital inflows could provide stability near lower levels. Forecasts suggest the currency may continue to trade within a defined range in the near term as investors monitor external developments.

NSE NIFTY TOP LOSERS
February 6, 2026

%	POINTS
-2.40	HDFC Life 703.40
-1.83	Tech Mahindra 1,616.00
-1.71	TCS 2,940.30
-1.54	SBI Life 1,986.80
-1.40	TMPV 368.90
-1.34	Bajaj Auto 9,517.50
-1.32	Adani Ports 1,549.50
-1.28	Wipro 230.40
-1.15	Eternal 283.55
-1.11	Asian Paints 2,405.00

Bitcoin falls 9 pc, Asian shares slip after Wall Street losses

Chan Ho-Himap

HONG KONG, FEB 6

US FUTURES and Asian shares traded mostly lower on Friday, tracking Wall Street's losses as technology stocks again dragged on markets.

Bitcoin sank to roughly half its record price, giving back all it gained since US President Donald Trump won the White House for his second term.

Tokyo's Nikkei 225 was up 0.5 per cent to 54,073.52, recovering from losses earlier this week, with technology-related stocks leading gains. SoftBank Group rose 1.9 per cent, and chipmaker Tokyo Electron rose 3 per cent. Japan will also be holding its general election on Sunday, in which Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi expects to win a stronger public mandate for her policies.

South Korea's Kospi lost 1.7 per cent to 5,076.69, weighed down by tech shares. Samsung Electronics, the country's biggest listed company, fell 0.9 per cent. Chipmaker SK Hynix was down 0.6 per cent. Hong Kong's Hang Seng fell 1.2 per cent to 26,569.14. The Shanghai Composite index was flat at 4,075.37.

In Australia, the S&P/ASX 200 shed 1.6 per cent to 8,745.60. Taiwan's Taiex fell 0.2 per cent. Against the backdrop of the technology sell-off this week, Bitcoin, the world's largest cryptocurrency, saw dimming enthusiasm and was trading about 9 per cent lower at just under USD 65,000 early Friday.

Silver extends losses for second day amid firm dollar

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

SILVER prices fell for a second consecutive session in futures trade on Friday as investors booked profits against the backdrop of a stronger US dollar and easing geopolitical tensions, factors that reduced demand for safe-haven assets.



On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), silver futures for March delivery declined by Rs 8,198 per kilogram in a turnover of 6,160 lots. During intraday trading, the contract dropped as much as Rs 14,628, or about 6 per cent, to hit a low of Rs 2,29,187 per kg. The fall followed a sharp decline in the previous session, when prices slid Rs 25,035, or 9.3 per cent, to settle at Rs 2,43,815 per kg.

Market analysts attributed the downturn to heightened volatility and position unwinding after a rapid price rally in recent months. According to commodity researchers, the metal's recent gains had attracted optimistic positioning, making it vulnerable to corrections when global signals shifted.

Silver's slide came after a brief rebound earlier in the week failed to hold. Analysts said deleveraging across precious

metals gathered pace as expectations of sustained buying weakened and investors reassessed risk exposure. A firmer dollar also weighed on bullion, as it makes dollar-denominated commodities more expensive for holders of other currencies.

Further easing in geopolitical risk sentiment contributed to the decline. Signs of diplomatic engagement between the United States and Iran reduced immediate safe-haven demand, prompting some investors to rotate away from metals. Analysts noted that developments in global negotiations would remain a key factor influencing sentiment in the near term.

In contrast to silver's drop, gold futures opened lower but later recovered, trading higher by Rs 976, or 0.64 per cent, at Rs 1,53,047 per 10 grams on the MCX. The yellow metal had fallen by a similar margin in the previous session, settling at Rs 1,52,071 per 10 grams.

International markets mirrored the mixed domestic trend. On the Comex exchange, silver futures for March delivery declined by USD 4.78, or 6.23 per cent, to USD 71.93 per ounce. In intraday trading, prices fell sharply to touch USD 63.90 per ounce before partially stabilising. Gold for April delivery slipped modestly by USD 18.34, or 0.38 per cent, to USD 4,871.16 per ounce.

Analysts said bullion prices softened despite weaker labour market data in the United States that reinforced expectations of potential interest rate cuts by the Federal Reserve later this year. Market participants continue to watch for signals on the timing of policy easing, with some anticipating initial action around mid-year.

Amazon shares fall after surge in capital spending

NEW YORK, FEB 6 / AP

AMAZON sales surged 14 per cent during the fourth quarter, helped by strong holiday spending and a better-than-expected growth in its prominent cloud computing unit.

But shares fell 11 per cent in after-hours trading on Thursday as investors appeared to be spooked by the Seattle-based tech company's plans to increase capital spending by nearly 60 per cent to USD 200 billion from last year's USD 128 billion as it sees opportunities in artificial intelligence, robots, semiconductors and satellites. The company's fourth-quarter profits also were slightly below analysts' projections.

Wall Street analysts were expecting capital spending to rise to around USD 147 billion this year, according to FactSet.

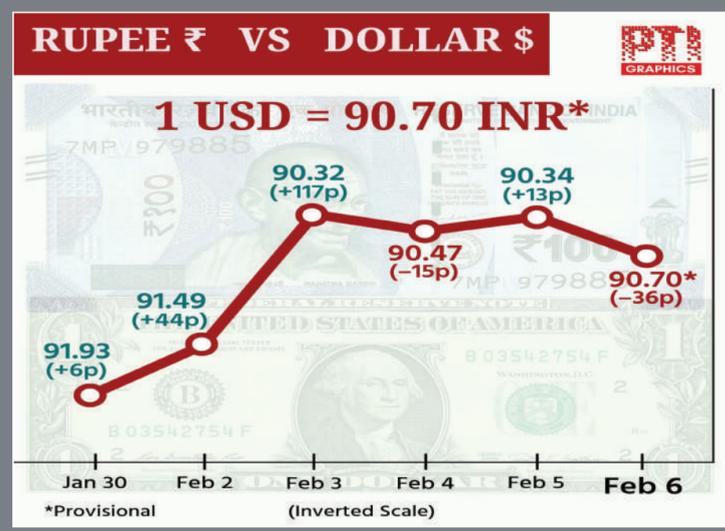
Amazon's CEO Andy Jassy told investors on the call following the earnings release that it anticipates strong long-term return on

the invested capital.

"We are continuing to see as fast as we install this capacity, this AI capacity, we are monetising it," Jassy said. "So it's just a very unusual opportunity. I passionately believe that every customer experience that we know of today is going to be reinvented."

The results come as Amazon is slashing about 16,000 corporate jobs in the second round of mass layoffs for the e-commerce company in three months. Amazon said in an e-mailed statement last week that AI was "not the reason behind the vast majority of these reductions." Rather, the cuts had more to do with eliminating layers to drive speed.

Separately, Amazon said last week it would cut about 5,000 retail workers, according to notices it sent to state workforce agencies in California, Maryland and Washington, resulting from its decision to close almost all of its Amazon Go and Amazon Fresh stores.



BSE SENSEX TOP GAINERS
February 6, 2026

%	POINTS
+5.09	ITC 326.05
+3.35	Kotak Bank 422.35
+2.96	Hindustan Unilever 2423.75
+2.32	Bharti Airtel 2038.35
+1.76	Bajaj Finance 981.65
+1.26	Power Grid 292.90
+1.17	Bajaj Finserv 2023.95
+1.07	Titan 4141.80
+0.82	Axis Bank 1341.55
+0.75	ICICI Bank 1406.65

BSE SENSEX TOP LOSERS
February 6, 2026

%	POINTS
-1.69	TCS 2941.45
-1.64	Tech Mahindra 1619.10
-1.32	Adani Ports 1550.20
-1.21	Asian Paints 2402.70
-1.20	Eternal 283.45
-0.95	HCL Tech 1593.55
-0.88	HDFC Bank 941.15
-0.85	Infosys 1506.90
-0.76	BEL 429.55
-0.65	SBIN 1066.40

IndiGo plans to launch Delhi-Shanghai flight

BEIJING, FEB 6 /PTI

IndiGo plans to launch direct flights between New Delhi and Shanghai soon to become the third airline to operate flights between the two cities after India and China resumed air services last year after a gap of about five years.

If approved, it will become the third direct air link between the two economies, China's state-run Global Times reported on Friday.

The airline plans to launch the route in late March or early April pending regulatory approval, it quoted officials as saying. On February 1, Air India launched the Shanghai-Delhi direct flight, resuming its flight services between the two cities after a gap of about six years.

Chinese airline China Eastern resumed flight operations from Shanghai to Delhi in November last year. Officials say plans are afoot to launch direct Delhi-Beijing flight.

Earlier IndiGo resumed the Kolkata-Guangzhou service on October 26, 2025, becoming the first Indian airline to restart direct flights to China after a five-year hiatus.

Currently, there are two daily round-trip flights between Guangzhou and India. As of February 5, the Kolkata route has completed 102 flights, while the Delhi route has operated 87 flights, transporting ap-



proximately 54,000 passengers, officials told the daily.

The average seat occupancy rate in 2025 was approximately 85 per cent, with the passenger base mainly consisting of business travellers, they said. Guangzhou and Shanghai hosts a large expat Indian business community.

Pieter Elbers, CEO of IndiGo, in his earlier interview to Global Times expressed his confidence over the size of the air travel market between India and China as "one-third of the world's population is living in these two countries".

China is the second-largest economy in the world, and India is the fourth, so "there is room for a lot of flights and a lot of operators", he said.

He also said that the airline is eval-

uating operations from additional Indian cities to more Chinese destinations. The route expansion came amid the background of warmer ties between the two countries in recent months.

The flight services between the two countries were suspended following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. They were not restored in view of the over-four-year border face-off in eastern Ladakh, which ended in October last year.

The process of normalisation of India, China relations followed two summits between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at Kazan in Russia in 2024 followed by a second meeting on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Tianjin last year.

Forex kitty jumps by \$14.361 bn to new peak of \$723.774 bn

MUMBAI, FEB 6 /PTI

INDIA'S forex reserves jumped by another USD 14.361 billion to a new all-time high of USD 723.774 billion during the week ended January 30, the Reserve Bank said on Friday.

In the previous reporting week, the forex kitty had increased by USD 8.053 billion to USD 709.413 billion, surging past the earlier all-time high of USD 704.89 billion recorded in September 2024.

For the week ended January 30, foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, decreased by USD 493 million to USD 562.392 billion, the data released by the central bank showed.

Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effects of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units, such as the euro, pound, and yen, held in the foreign exchange reserves. Value of gold reserves soared by USD 14.595 billion to USD 137.683 billion during the week, the RBI said.

The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were up by USD 216 million to USD 18.953 billion, the apex bank said. India's reserve position with the IMF was also up by USD 44 million to USD 4.746 billion in the reporting week, according to the apex bank's data.

Toyota taps earnings expert as its chief after declining profits

YURI KAGEYAMAAP

TOKYO, FEB 6

JAPAN'S top automaker Toyota reported a 43 per cent drop in quarterly profit Friday, and announced Chief Financial Officer Kenta Kon will become its new chief executive and president.

Kon, a Toyota veteran, replaces Koji Sato in both roles in April. Shareholders' approval is expected in June.

"This expresses our determination to move toward change with all our might," Sato told reporters, calling the latest personnel changes part of a "gear shift."

Sato remains vice chairman at Toyota Motor Corp.

Kon, who has hands-on experience in various fields, including automated driving, was tapped as an expert on ways to improve company earnings, according to Toyota.

All the Japanese automakers have been struggling because of rising material costs and the impact of US President Donald Trump's tariffs.

Toyota, which makes the Camry sedan and Lexus luxury models, estimated the negative impact of tariffs erased 1.45 trillion yen (USD 9.2 billion) from its operating profit last year.

For the October-December quarter, group profit at Toyota totalled

1.25 trillion yen (USD 8 billion), down from 2.19 trillion yen the same period the previous year.

For the nine months through December, Toyota reported a 26 per cent decline in profit at 3.03 trillion yen (USD 19 billion) from 4.1 trillion yen, even as sales gained nearly 7 per cent to 38 trillion yen (USD 242 billion) from 35 trillion yen the previous year.



Global vehicle sales for the nine months grew to 7.3 million vehicles from about 7 million vehicles, as sales increased in Japan, North America and Europe.

Sato, Toyota chief for the last three years, will continue to hold a key industry role as chairman of JAMA, or Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, starting in January.

He also holds a leadership position at Keidanren, the Japan Business Federation, which oversees Japanese businesses overall.

RBI exploring ways to make UPI sustainable

Amit Jain

MUMBAI, FEB 6

RESERVE Bank of India Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Friday said the central bank would work towards ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Unified Payments Interface while improving its infrastructure, as the widely used digital payments system continues to expand rapidly.

Speaking after the February monetary policy announcement, Malhotra said authorities were examining ways to strengthen the ecosystem for all stakeholders while maintaining reliability and efficiency for users.

have argued that the absence of a merchant discount rate — a fee commonly applied to card transactions — raises questions about financial sustainability for service providers.

The government has resisted calls to introduce such charges, citing the platform's widespread adoption and consumer sensitivity to transaction costs. More than 500 million users are estimated to rely on UPI for daily payments.

In the Union Budget for 2026-27, authorities allocated Rs 2,000 crore to promote low-value peer-to-merchant transactions through UPI and RuPay debit cards. The funding supports incentive payments to acquiring banks, which share benefits with issuing banks, payment service providers and third-party application platforms involved in processing transactions.

While the allocation reflects continued support for digital payments, it represents a slight reduction compared with revised spending in the ongoing fiscal year. The incentive programme is designed to maintain momentum in digital adoption while policymakers consider longer-term structural solutions for the ecosystem.

The governor reiterated earlier remarks emphasising the need to address sustainability concerns as transaction volumes surge. Government data presented in Parliament this week showed UPI transactions reaching record levels in value terms during the current financial year, underscoring the platform's scale and importance.

As usage expands, regulators and policymakers face the challenge of balancing affordability, accessibility and commercial viability. The RBI's review is expected to feed into broader policy discussions on maintaining the resilience of digital payment infrastructure while supporting innovation and continued adoption.



He described UPI as a uniquely important part of India's payment landscape and indicated that steps would be taken not only to maintain but also to enhance its performance in the coming years. Efforts would include addressing infrastructure concerns and ensuring the system remains robust as transaction volumes grow.

UPI transactions are currently free for users, with banks compensated through government incentives funded by budgetary allocations. The arrangement has supported the rapid adoption of digital payments by reducing reliance on cash. However, industry participants

changes could boost innovation and attract long-term investment.

Under revised norms notified by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, entities with turnover up to Rs 200 crore will now qualify for startup recognition. A new category has also been created for deep tech ventures working on advanced or breakthrough technologies,



Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal witnesses the signing of the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in New Delhi. PTI

Maharashtra, auto major M&M sign MoU for Rs 15,000 crore greenfield project

NAGPUR, FEB 6 /PTI

THE Maharashtra government and auto major Mahindra & Mahindra on Friday signed an MoU under which the company will set up a greenfield project in Nagpur to manufacture cars, sports utility vehicles (SUVs) and tractors with an investment of Rs 15,000 crore.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed at the inauguration of Advantage Vidarbha, a three-day business conclave and investment summit here, in the presence of Union minister Nitin Gadkari and state Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis. Gadkari is the chief mentor of Advantage Vidarbha.

Addressing a gathering at the inauguration, Fadnavis said, "Some

very important MoUs were signed today, including the one with Mahindra & Mahindra.

It is for the first time that investment in the automotive sector is coming to Vidarbha. Mahindra & Mahindra will start a very advanced next-generation SUV and car factory, he said.

"It will be an integrated factory, which will manufacture EV cars, next-gen cars and tractors," the CM said.

The company is also investing in Nashik and Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, which will create huge opportunities, Fadnavis added.

The chief minister said the state government also signed an MoU with Super Smelters Limited, which will invest Rs 10,000 crore to set up

a steel factory in Gadchiroli district.

Speaking on the occasion, Mahindra & Mahindra's Executive Director and CEO (Auto and Farm Sector) Rajesh Jejurikar said the new greenfield project, which will be a state-of-the-art plant in Nagpur, will be set up with an investment of Rs 15,000 crore over the next ten years.

The new facility will be for all automotive products and tractors. The company plans to take up about 1,500 acres of land for this plant, he said.

The company will also set up a supplier park in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar over an area of 150 acres, Jejurikar said.

It will also carry out a major expansion on a 300-acre site at Igatpuri in Nashik district, according to him.

Dignity, security of workers central to Govt's vision: Mandaviya

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 /PTI

WELFARE, dignity and security of workers remain central to the government's vision of national development, Union Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said on Friday.

The Union Minister for Labour and Employment made these remarks at the inaugural session of the All India Triennial Conference of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) in Puri, Odisha.



In his address, the minister "reiterated that the welfare, dignity and security of workers remain central to the Government's vision of national development," the Ministry of Labour & Employment said in a statement.

Emphasising that both workers and industry are equally important for economic growth, the minister said that harmony and cooperation between the two are essential for building a strong and resilient economy. He noted that the government has brought the Labour Codes into effect to strengthen this balance, enhance welfare provisions and social security for workers, while simplifying compliance for industries.

Industry welcomes expanded startup definition and deep tech recognition

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

INDUSTRY bodies and venture capital firms on Friday welcomed the government's decision to expand criteria for recognising startups, including doubling the turnover threshold and formally recognising deep technology firms, saying the

changes could boost innovation and attract long-term investment.

Under revised norms notified by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, entities with turnover up to Rs 200 crore will now qualify for startup recognition. A new category has also been created for deep tech ventures working on advanced or breakthrough technologies,

with extended eligibility provisions reflecting longer development cycles typical of such businesses.

The age limit for deep tech startups has been expanded to 20 years from incorporation, compared with 10 years previously, while the turnover threshold for this category has been set at Rs 300 crore. Industry representatives said these changes better align

policy frameworks with the realities of research-driven innovation.

Business leaders noted that startups in technology-intensive sectors often require more time and capital before reaching commercial viability. Expanded recognition allows such firms to continue benefiting from support schemes during growth phases rather than losing eligibility prematurely.

Investors backing science-led enterprises described the move as a signal of policy intent to encourage intellectual property creation and long-term capability building. Venture capital representatives said extended time horizons could improve capital efficiency and confidence among investors committing resources to frontier technologies.

The reforms also broaden eligibility for startup recognition to certain cooperative enterprises engaged in agriculture, rural industries and community-based activities, subject to conditions. Observers said this could support grassroots innovation and widen participation in entrepreneurial initiatives beyond conventional corporate structures.

Sooryavanshi blitz powers India to U-19 WC win



HARARE, FEB 6 / PTI

TEENAGE sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi produced one of the most extraordinary innings in Under-19 World Cup history to propel India to a record-extending sixth title with a commanding 100-run victory over England in the final here on Friday. The 14-year-old opener smashed a breathtaking 175 off just 80 balls, laced with 15 sixes and 15 fours, as India piled up a massive 411 for nine after England chose to bowl first. England's chase of the daunting 412 never truly threatened to succeed, despite Caleb Falconer's spirited 115 off 67 balls, and they were bowled out for 311 in 40.2 overs.

Sooryavanshi's innings set the tone for India's dominance in the summit clash and rewrote several tournament records. His knock became the highest individual score in a U-19 World Cup

final and powered India to the biggest team total in the competition's title match. The right-hander raced to his century in just 55 balls, the second-fastest hundred in tournament history, after reaching his half-century in 32 deliveries. His second fifty came in a mere 23 balls as he dismantled the English attack with a full range of strokes.

A staggering 150 of his runs came through boundaries, and his 15 sixes established a new record for most maximums in a Youth ODI innings, surpassing his own previous mark set earlier in the competition. He also recorded the fastest 150 in U-19 cricket, reaching the milestone in 71 balls.

Sooryavanshi shared a 142-run stand with captain Ayush Mhatre, who contributed a measured 53 off 51 balls before departing soon after completing his half-century. Even after the opener's dismissal in the 26th over, India maintained momentum through

useful contributions from Abhigyan Kundu (40 off 31 balls), Vedant Trivedi (32 off 36), Vihaan Malhotra (30 off 36) and Kanishk Chouhan (37 off 20).

England's bowlers struggled to contain the onslaught, with Manny Lumsden conceding 81 runs in eight overs and seceding Morgan leaking 74 in nine. Spinners Ralphy Albert and Farhad Ahmed were also taken apart during Sooryavanshi's assault.

In reply, England displayed flashes of resistance through Falconer, whose counterattacking century reduced the margin of defeat and provided some late entertainment. However, the target proved far beyond reach against India's disciplined bowling unit, which struck regularly to keep the chase under control.

The triumph underscored India's sustained dominance at the age-group level and reflected the depth of its domestic structure and development

pathways. The side, led by Mhatre, joined a lineage of successful Indian U-19 teams, although this campaign was marked by a particularly ruthless edge showcased most vividly by Sooryavanshi's fearless batting.

India last lifted the trophy in 2022, and Friday's emphatic victory reinforced their standing as the competition's most successful side. Once the team crossed the 400 mark, the outcome appeared inevitable, and the bowlers completed the formalities with a collective performance that sealed a comprehensive win. For Sooryavanshi, who has emerged as the youngest centurion in tournament history and finished the edition with a record haul of sixes, the final served as a defining moment. His dazzling innings ensured that India's march to another global youth crown would be remembered as much for individual brilliance as for collective supremacy.

If needed, both Varun, Kuldeep will play together: Suryakumar

Devarchit Varma

MUMBAI, FEB 6

SKIPPER Suryakumar Yadav on Friday said India will not hesitate from playing Varun Chakravarthi and Kuldeep Yadav together in the T20 World Cup if required, describing the selection conundrum surrounding the two spinners as a "very good headache".

Both Kuldeep and Chakravarthi played in India's last assignment before the T20 World Cup, a five-match series against New Zealand but it was only in the second T20I at Raipur where the two featured together. "It is an added advantage that you have such good bowlers

available. But at the same time, you also have to look at the combination, whom do you play against a certain opposition," Suryakumar told the media on the eve of their T20 World Cup opener against the USA here.

"If there is a need that we can play two spinners, (or) two wrist spinners, then we will definitely play (them). But yes, it is always good to have options like Varun Chakravarthi and Kuldeep Yadav, two (of the) best spinners in the world and it is a very good headache," he added.

The Indian team's preference to have a deep batting order has often come in the way of both Chakravarthi and Kuldeep playing together as they are not known to swing the willow if

the situation demands.

The Indian skipper said it again is a "good headache" to have more left-handed batters than right-handers, with Ishan Kishan set to open the innings with Abhishek Sharma. "Are you enjoying watching the fours and sixes being hit or not?" Suryakumar answered when asked if it was an issue for the team management. "I think it is a good headache and I feel it is an over-rated conversation. At this stage, when you have played so much cricket against the left-arm spinners or off-spinners, whatever it is, you have played enough cricket and you (also) have practiced a lot.

"On a given day, irrespective of a spinner is bowling or a fast bowler is bowling to two left-handers or two right-handers, your job is to do what you (can) do (for) the best for the team and that is what is happening," he added. Suryakumar conceded Ishan will open the innings given his current form.

"Definitely. The way he played cricket in the last five T20Is, because they were international matches it (his performance) came up (noticed) so much," Suryakumar said. "He batted similarly in the (Syed) Mushtaq Ali T20 Trophy and he has carried the same here. He got an opportunity at No. 3 and then he opened in the warm-up match (against South Africa)."



T20 World Cup: Scotland seek to justify late entry against WI

Monitor Newws Service

KOLKATA, FEB 6

SCOTLAND will begin their T20 World Cup campaign against two-time champions West Indies on Saturday determined to show that their late inclusion in the tournament was deserved rather than fortunate, as they look to turn a sudden opportunity into a statement performance.

Scotland were drafted into the competition barely two weeks before the start after Bangladesh withdrew following prolonged discussions with cricket authorities. Bangladesh had been scheduled to play multiple group matches in India but declined to travel citing security concerns, prompting organisers to invite Scotland based on ranking considerations. Despite the circumstances of their entry, Scotland insist they are not merely substitutes filling a vacancy. Senior spinner Mark Watt said the squad believed it had earned its place despite a difficult qualifying campaign, and was prepared to challenge higher-ranked opposition.

The team's confidence draws on past results, including victories over West Indies in previous international encounters. Scotland notably defeated them in a T20 World Cup match in Australia and secured a one-day win during a global qualifying tournament.

Jhared wins Chhattisgarh Open on PGTI debut

Monitor Newws Service

NAYA RAIPUR, FEB 6

AMERICAN golfer Jhared Hack made a remarkable debut on the DP World PGTI by securing a commanding five-shot victory at the season-opening Chhattisgarh Open, a Rs 1.5 crore event, at the Fairway Golf and Lake Resort on Friday. Starting the final round in third place and one stroke off the lead, Jhared delivered a stunning performance, carding a 10-under 59, the lowest single-round score recorded at the venue. His four-round tally of 63-61-63-59 gave him a

winning total of 30-under 246, setting a new tournament record and surpassing last year's mark of 27-under 249. The Las Vegas-based golfer, who had finished runner-up at the DP World PGTI Qualifying School the previous week, also bettered the previous course record of 60 at Naya Raipur, achieved by multiple players in last year's edition. India's Anshul Kabthiyal produced a career-best finish, claiming second place at 25-under 251. The 21-year-old, who began the day as joint leader, returned a flawless four-under 65 in the final round but was unable to match Jhared's surge.

Coach helps Sooryavanshi deliver record knock

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 / PTI

A brief technical message from childhood coach Manish Ojha proved timely for teenage batting prodigy Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, who delivered a historic innings in the Under-19 World Cup final after acting on advice sent just days earlier. Following India's semi-final win over Afghanistan, in which Sooryavanshi scored 68, Ojha messaged his pupil encouraging him to convert starts into a major score. The reminder came with technical suggestions addressing issues the coach had observed in the youngster's shot execution. The guidance appeared to pay off as the 14-year-old produced a stunning performance against England in Harare, smashing 175 off 80 balls with an array of boundaries. His knock included 15 fours and 15

sixes and featured a century reached in just 55 deliveries, making it one of the fastest hundreds recorded in the tournament's history. Ojha said his message was intended both to motivate and to fine-tune technique, particularly in handling short-pitched bowling. He noted that Sooryavanshi had been experiencing difficulty when



attempting pull shots to deliveries outside off stump.

According to the coach, adjustments to head position and body alignment were suggested so the batter could achieve fuller extension and better control when attacking short balls. The objective was to ensure he could maintain power while reducing the risk of mistimed strokes. The result was an innings that underlined the rapid progress of a player already attracting attention well beyond age-group cricket. Despite not yet turning 15, Sooryavanshi has already registered multiple centuries in senior-level competitions, including domestic white-ball tournaments and franchise cricket. Ojha attributed the youngster's development partly to an intense playing schedule that has limited exposure to distractions

often accompanying early fame. Over the past year, Sooryavanshi has taken part in international youth tours and domestic competitions, moving frequently between formats and venues. The coach described the batter's growing consistency as a key sign of maturity, pointing to several high scores across formats and tournaments. He said Sooryavanshi's willingness to absorb and implement technical advice set him apart from peers, adding that the teenager demonstrates an unusual capacity to grasp adjustments quickly. Beyond technical progress, Ojha emphasised the importance of emotional support as the player navigates increasing expectations. He noted that family members often travel to matches when possible, helping maintain stability and comfort amid a demanding schedule.



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Women's Premier League (WPL) 2026 final T20 cricket match against Delhi Capitals, at Baroda Cricket Association Stadium, Kotambi in Vadodra, Gujarat. PTI

Siraj replaces injured pacer Harshit Rana in T20 World Cup

Devarchit Varma

MUMBAI, FEB 6

YOUNG India speedster Harshit Rana was on Friday ruled out of the T20 World Cup because of a knee injury sustained in a warm-up game here with skipper Suryakumar Yadav admitting that he was "not looking good". Fellow pacer Mohammed Siraj has been drafted in to replace Rana in the squad, according to reliable BCCI sources.

Earlier, Suryakumar's admission was indication enough that head coach Gautam Gambhir's 24-year-old protege was unlikely to recover in time to play any of the matches, starting with the lung-opener against the USA on Saturday. "Harshit Rana has not been ruled out yet, the physios are assessing him but he does not



look good," Suryakumar said at the pre-match press conference here on Friday. The Indian captain, however, tried to make light of the setback.

"Don't worry, we have 11 players for tomorrow. But it obviously would be a big blow because you make a squad of 15 after a lot of thought and he was included after some thought process," said Suryakumar.

"But if he is not available going forward, we will then set different combinations. We have enough players and combinations against all teams that we can have for this tournament but if we miss him (for not being available), we will definitely miss him," he added.

Rana could bowl only one over in the warm-up game against South Africa in which he conceded 16 runs and then hobbled off the field with a knee injury. Although Rana is not a first eleven certainty with an economy rate of 10.60 in nine T20Is, he certainly would have been a handy inclusion in specific conditions.

He is also a useful lower-order hitter. In place of Rana, the pacers who could be in contention are Prasidh Krishna, and Mohammed Siraj among the experienced ones.

Karnataka seize advantage after bowling out Mumbai cheaply

Monitor Newws Service

MUMBAI, FEB 6

KARNATAKA seized early control of their Ranji Trophy quarterfinal against Mumbai after a strong bowling display restricted the hosts to a modest total before steady batting reduced the deficit by stumps on the opening day.

Fast bowlers Prasidh Krishna and Vidwath Kaverappa, along with leg-spinner Shreyas Gopal, shared nine wickets as Mumbai were dismissed for 120 in 48.1 overs after electing to bat first. Prasidh returned figures of 3 for 21, Kaverappa took 3 for 38 and Gopal delivered a particularly effective spell, claiming 3 for 4.

Mumbai's innings faltered from the outset as they lost three wickets inside 14 overs to slump to 39 for 3. Opener Akhil Herwadkar provided resistance with a patient 60 from 138 balls, accounting for half of his team's total. However, he found little support as the middle and lower order collapsed, with seven wickets falling for just 50 runs.

Karnataka responded confidently with the bat, led by a brisk opening stand between KL Rahul and Mayank Agarwal. The pair raced to 33 without loss in the first five overs, with Rahul adopting an aggressive approach in his 28-run knock before his dismissal. Agarwal anchored the innings thereafter, compiling an unbeaten 54 from 81 deliveries to guide Karnataka to 110 for 2 at stumps. His measured half-century ensured the visitors trailed by only 10 runs heading into the second day.

With momentum firmly on their side after dominating both with ball and bat, Karnataka will look to secure a first-innings lead when play resumes, while Mumbai face the challenge of producing early breakthroughs to re-enter the contest.

Newly discovered comet could light up April skies

Jonti Horner

MELBOURNE, FEB 6

Astronomers are closely watching a newly-discovered comet that could become a dramatic spectacle in early April, with the potential, under favourable conditions, to shine brightly enough to be seen in broad daylight. While such outcomes remain uncertain, the object's trajectory and classification have already sparked considerable excitement within the scientific community.

The comet, designated C/2026 A1 (MAPS), was detected on January 13 by four amateur astronomers using a remotely operated telescope in Chile's Atacama desert. Follow-up observations quickly identified it as part of the Kreutz family of sun-grazing comets, a group known for producing some of the brightest celestial displays in recorded history.

Sungrazers travel on highly elongated paths that carry them extremely close to the Sun. In early April, the newly found comet is expected to pass within roughly 120,000 kilometres of the solar surface. Such proximity exposes it to intense heat and gravitational forces that can either cause disintegration or trigger spectacular brightening as volatile material vaporises.

If the comet survives the encounter, observers could see it glowing prominently in the evening sky, particularly across the southern hemisphere. There is also a possibility, though far from guaranteed, that it may reach sufficient brightness to be visible during daylight hours near its closest approach.



The excitement surrounding the object is partly rooted in the dramatic legacy of its cosmic relatives. Kreutz sungrazers are thought to originate from a massive comet that fragmented more than two millennia ago after passing near the Sun. Subsequent

returns of those fragments produced several celebrated historical comets, some bright enough to rival or surpass the Moon's brilliance.

Among the most famous examples were the Great Comet of 1965 and the Great Comet of 1882. Both

dazzled observers worldwide and provided key insights into comet fragmentation. Astronomers now recognise these spectacular visitors as members of the same lineage, continuing to shed pieces that periodically revisit the inner Solar System.

Modern spacecraft observations have revealed that most surviving fragments are small and often disintegrate before reaching perihelion, the point of closest approach to the Sun. NASA's Solar and Heliospheric Observatory has catalogued thousands of such remnants over the past decades, many measuring only metres across. Larger fragments appear far less frequently, which is why each new candidate draws attention.

Initial measurements of C/2026 A1 (MAPS) suggest it may be somewhat larger than the average fragment, though experts caution against premature conclusions. The comet was detected farther from the Sun than any previously discovered member of its class, raising the possibility of a more substantial nucleus. However, advances in detection technology mean this does not necessarily imply exceptional size.

Astronomers continue to track its brightness, which has increased steadily since discovery. This pattern may indicate structural stability rather than early disintegration, offering cautious optimism about its survival prospects. Yet sungrazers remain unpredictable. Many crumble before reaching perihelion, while others fragment during or after the encounter, sometimes enhancing their visibility.

(The Conversation)

Epstein arranged WH tour for Woody Allen

Hillel Italieap

NEW YORK, FEB 6

RECENTLY-released emails from US justice records have shed new light on the relationship between filmmaker Woody Allen and financier Jeffrey Epstein, revealing that Epstein assisted in arranging a White House visit for Allen and his wife Soon-Yi Previn in 2015. The correspondence, part of a large trove of documents made public in recent days, offers a detailed look at personal and social ties that continued years after Epstein's earlier criminal conviction.

According to the emails, Epstein contacted former White House counsel Kathy Ruemmler in May 2015 to request assistance in organising a tour for Previn, suggesting Allen might avoid participation due to political sensitivities. Ruemmler replied that she could arrange access, though she questioned whether Epstein himself would be permitted entry given his legal history. White House visitor records indicate that Allen and Previn toured the premises later that year while President Barack Obama was out of Washington.

The exchange is among numerous communications illustrating the closeness between the three individuals. Allen, Previn and Epstein lived near each other in New York and met frequently for meals and social gatherings. The emails describe mutual support during periods of negative media coverage and public scrutiny, with discussions touching on allegations of sexual misconduct faced by several of those involved.

Allen's acquaintance with Epstein has long been known, but the newly disclosed material provides additional context about their in-



teractions and social circles. Dinner guests referenced in the correspondence included prominent cultural and academic figures, and the emails show Epstein attending film screenings and visiting Allen during editing sessions. Messages also indicate that Previn often acted as a liaison between the two men.

The correspondence also revisits controversies that have surrounded Allen's personal life since the early 1990s. During that period, Allen acknowledged a relationship with Previn, the adopted daughter of his then partner Mia Farrow, and faced allegations concerning Farrow's adopted daughter Dylan. Authorities investigated the claims at the time, and a prosecutor later said there was probable cause to bring charges but declined to pursue them. Allen has repeatedly denied wrongdoing.

Emails from 2016 show the trio discussing public reactions to their respective controversies and comparing them with allegations against other public figures. (AP)

How Olympic torchbearers are chosen

Monitor News Service

NEW DELHI, FEB 6

THE Olympic flame, lit in Olympia, Greece, in November, is making its journey toward the Winter Games in Milan and Cortina, carried by thousands of torchbearers selected to represent sporting achievement, community service and cultural impact. The relay, one of the most recognisable traditions associated with the Olympics, highlights the individuals chosen to transport the symbolic flame across regions before the opening ceremony.

Torchbearers are typically selected by organisers of each host Games, who determine criteria aligned with Olympic values and local themes. Candidates may include accomplished athletes, public figures or ordinary citizens recognised for contributions to their communities. Applications are also accepted from members of the public, and nominees often emerge through recommendations from schools, institutions, sponsors and civic organisations.

The selection process aims to assemble a diverse group represent-



ing different ages, backgrounds and social roles. Alongside prominent sporting personalities, volunteers, youth leaders and individuals involved in cultural, social or environmental initiatives are commonly chosen. Organisers emphasise that torchbearers are not selected solely for popularity but for their ability to embody principles such as solidarity, inclusion and civic engagement during their segment of the relay.

The flame itself is lit in Olympia

using sunlight concentrated through a parabolic mirror, echoing ancient ceremonial practices. From there, it is transported along a route spanning multiple communities and territories before reaching the host nation. Each participant carries the torch only a short distance, forming a chain intended to symbolise unity and continuity until the flame arrives at the stadium where it ignites the cauldron marking the start of the Games.

Laurence Fishburne joins Scarlett Johansson in 'The Exorcist' reboot

LOS ANGELES, FEB 6/PTI

HOLLYWOOD actor Laurence Fishburne has joined the cast of Scarlett Johansson in the upcoming reboot of horror hit "The Exorcist".

Mike Flanagan is tackling the project, which will tell an all-new story and is not a sequel to 2023's "The Exorcist: Believer", according to Variety.

Fishburne, known for movies such as "The Matrix" series, "Man of Steel" and the "John Wick" franchise, will feature alongside Johansson, Jacobi Jupe, Diane Lane and Chiwetel Ejiofor in the film.

The project will shoot in New York City and is set for a wide theatrical release in March 2027 from Universal Pictures.



It will be produced by Blumhouse-Atomic Monster and Morgan Creek Entertainment with Flanagan through his Red Room Pictures.

The horror franchise began with William Friedkin's landmark 1973

film "The Exorcist", adapted from William Peter Blatty's novel, which became one of the most popular horror movies ever made, noted for its shocking imagery, religious themes and critical acclaim.

It was followed by "Exorcist II: The Heretic" (1977), while Blatty returned to write and direct "The Exorcist III" (1990).

The series later expanded with prequels "Exorcist: The Beginning" (2004) and "Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist" (2005), two different versions of the same origin story about Father Merrin.

The franchise was revived on television with the "The Exorcist" series (2016-2018), and then returned to cinemas with a new sequel, "The Exorcist: Believer".

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