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INSIDE

Russian missile and drone blitz kills 21 in Kyiv

KYIV
Russia hammered Kyiv in an 11-hour drone and missile attack overnight into Thursday morning, killing at least 21 civilians in the city and injuring more than 90 others in what Moscow said was retaliation for Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil facilities. » PAGE 14

Kuki village in Manipur torched by armed group

GUWAHATI
Manipur's trail of violence widened after an armed group attacked and torched a Kuki village in Noney district around 5 a.m. on Thursday. The Kuki Inpi alleged that suspected members of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim carried out the "unprovoked" attack on Leikot. » PAGE 4

PF Rules notified; 'no word yet on hike in pension'

NEW DELHI
The Centre published the Rules for the Employees Provident Fund Scheme, the Employees' Pension Scheme, and the Employees' Deposit Linked Insurance Scheme, replacing the old Rules of 1952. Trade unions said the notification does not reflect demands of subscribers such as increase in minimum pension and clarity in providing higher pension for applicants » PAGE 6

Free Indo-Pacific priority for India, Japan: PM

- Both countries are 'perfectly aligned', Japanese PM says and stresses on 'strategic cooperation'
- Countries seal at least 129 MoUs on technology, investment and AI; Japan may invest $1 trillion
- Modi praises deal over defence tech for maritime security; Takaichi expresses concern over Gulf

Saurabh Trivedi
Kallol Bhattacherjee
NEW DELHI

A "free and rules-based Indo-Pacific" is a common priority for India and Japan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday while welcoming his Japanese counterpart, Sanae Takaichi. Mr. Modi said India and Japan would jointly develop technologies that would help in maintaining maritime security and "regional peace".

"India and Japan are among the biggest economies of the world. A free, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific is our shared priority. We will jointly pave the way for peace, stability and progress for the entire region," Mr. Modi said.

"In the field of defence, India and Japan have done the first agreement for co-development of projects. This agreement on naval radio antenna will open a new chapter of defence technology partnership. Now, we will jointly develop such technologies that will help in maintaining regional peace, maritime security, and strengthen rules-based order," Mr. Modi added.

Maritime security

Ms. Takaichi, who arrived in New Delhi on July 1 for her first visit to India as Prime Minister, renewed her call for an updated free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and emphasised the need for "strategic cooperation". She said that the two countries were "perfectly aligned".

Boosting ties: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Japanese counterpart Sanae Takaichi in New Delhi. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Mr. Modi and Ms. Takaichi attended an economic session in which Indian and Japanese companies sealed 129 memoranda of understanding on technology, investment, and artificial intelligence.

According to a document shared by the External Affairs Ministry, Japan is on track to invest $1 trillion across States, including Haryana, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and those in the northeastern region.

Ms. Takaichi highlighted the importance of maritime security as the key to maintaining regional stability in the Indo-Pacific.

"Expansion of maritime security is especially important for regional peace and stability," Ms. Takaichi said, highlighting the harmony between Japan's call for FOIP and the Government of India's emphasis on ocean as a "shared space" that can sustain economic growth and safeguard sovereignty.

"In the midst of international affairs in disarray, the establishment of such an inter-complementary cooperative relationship has become ever more important," she stated.

She expressed concern about the situation in the Gulf region, where at least 31 Japanese vessels remain stranded near the Strait of Hormuz.

Defence cooperation

The two sides also announced deepening of bilateral defence cooperation through joint military exercises, particularly naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and expanding Maritime Domain Awareness.

Interacting with the media on Thursday evening, Japanese officials said that bilateral cooperation in defence equipment and technology was progressing through industry agreements. They emphasised that the defence technologies being exported were intended for "defence purposes and not for warfare".

The two sides highlighted the need to collaborate in addressing energy security needs against the backdrop of the disruption in the Persian Gulf region and supported the idea of "strategic stockpiling of crude oil" to serve bilateral requirements. Japan is diversifying energy suppliers in the backdrop of the crisis in West Asia, said Japanese officials.

Modi, Takaichi unveil Maruti Suzuki plant

NEW DELHI
At the India-Japan Joint Economic Forum on Thursday, Narendra Modi and Sanae Takaichi inaugurated Maruti Suzuki's fourth vehicle manufacturing facility at Kharkhoda in Haryana. This plant will be one of the largest, Suzuki Motors head Toshihiro Suzuki said. » PAGE 12

Dry horizon

Hot as ever: Visitors take shelter under an umbrella on a sunny day at Veli beach in Thiruvananthapuram on Thursday, as the forecast predicts a monsoon deficit for the month of July. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

SC quashes NCLT order for using AI-generated case law

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

Observing that the use of non-existent or AI-generated hallucinated judicial precedents is "catastrophic" to the judicial process, the Supreme Court on Thursday set aside an order of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) after finding that it had relied on fictitious AI-generated case laws.

A Bench comprising Justices P.S. Narasimha and Alok Aradhe underscored that courts must adopt a "zero-tolerance" approach towards the reliance on AI-generated precedents without independent verification as it "contaminates" the very "lifeblood of judicial determination".

"Even if an iota of fake or hallucinated material enters the decision-making process, it would violate the sanctity of adjudication. It is absolutely necessary to maintain integrity in decision-making, and we reiterate and declare zero tolerance for the Bar as well as the Bench to cite, refer to, or rely on such material," the Bench said.

Cautioning against AI-generated hallucinations quietly permeating legal practice, it warned that reliance on fictitious precedents "subverts the rule of law".

> Even if an iota of fake or hallucinated material enters the decision-making process, it would violate the sanctity of adjudication. It is absolutely necessary to maintain integrity in decision-making, and we reiterate and declare zero tolerance for the Bar as well as the Bench to cite, refer to, or rely on such material
> SUPREME COURT BENCH

'Frame norms'

While acknowledging that "increased workloads of modern life" have compelled lawyers and judges to adapt to AI to improve efficiency, it underlined that meaningful human oversight must remain integral to every stage of the adjudicatory process.

"For us, i.e., for those in the province of adjudication and determination of disputes, this by-product of AI, i.e., the production of fake, non-existent, and hallucinated material and its utilisation as precedents in law, is like the release of methyl isocyanate in the province of law and justice: invisible, insidious, and catastrophic by the time anyone notices," the Bench said.

The top court called for a "deeper collaboration" between the Bar and the Bench on AI and urged the Bar Council of India to frame norms to address the issue of AI-generated precedents.

It noted that the process had already begun with the court publishing the Draft Regulations for Use of Artificial Intelligence in Courts, 2026, for public consultation.

The draft regulations provide that AI systems may function only in an assistive capacity and cannot supplant the role of judges. They also require disclosure of AI-assisted filings and prohibit the use of AI in judicial decision-making.

To address the growing instances of AI-generated hallucinated precedents being cited before courts, the Bench directed the (BCI), the apex statutory body regulating the legal profession, to constitute a committee to examine the issue and formulate appropriate norms.

The top court was hearing an appeal filed by Pooja Ramesh Singh, a suspended director of Essel Infraprojects Ltd., challenging the NCLT decision to admit the company into the corporate insolvency resolution process on an application filed by Jammu and Kashmir Bank under Section 7 of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code. The insolvency proceedings arose out of an alleged default in relation to a ₹200-crore credit facility extended by Jammu and Kashmir Bank to Pan India Utilities Distribution Company Ltd.

The Mumbai Bench of the NCLT admitted the insolvency application in August after recording a claimed default of ₹87.43 crore.

The order was subsequently affirmed by the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT).

Integrity of process

The apex court expressed surprise that the NCLAT had failed to notice that the NCLT's order relied on fictitious judicial precedents. It also cautioned that courts and tribunals should not "implicitly trust lawyers" with regard to authorities cited before them without independently verifying them.

The apex court held that the source of the lapse did not diminish its adverse impact on the integrity of the judicial process.

The court set aside the orders of both the NCLT and the NCLAT and remitted the matter to the tribunal for fresh consideration in accordance with law.

Falling boulder kills 7 at quarry near Bengaluru

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Seven workers, six of them migrants, were killed and five injured after a massive boulder collapsed on them at a stone quarry in Hulukenahalli village in Tavarekere Hobli on the outskirts of Bengaluru, Karnataka, on Thursday morning.

Several workers were engaged in stone-cutting and quarrying activities as a huge mass detached from the rock face in an adjacent quarry and came crashing down on them from a height of about 40 feet.

The boulder collapsed on some vehicles, including a tractor trolley which was loading crushed stones, and left several workers trapped. The accident occurred at around 7:30 a.m.

Seven labourers – five from Madhya Pradesh, and one each from Karnataka and Chhattisgarh – were killed on the spot.

Battered remains: The aftermath of the boulder collapse at the stone quarry site, near Bengaluru on Thursday. K. MURALI KUMAR

Case registered

The five injured were rushed to a hospital for treatment as the Tavarekere police and fire and emergency services carried out rescue operations.

The police registered a case against five people, including the quarry owners and supervisors, for culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

Gopi, a quarry worker from Tamil Nadu who escaped in the nick of time, claimed that several people employed at the Basaveshwara quarry were working at the top of the boulder trying to pry out the rock mass, which then broke free and rolled down on to the workers at the neighbouring S.R. Udayashankar quarry.

The accused have been identified as D. Anandaswamy, Udayashankar, Pandu, Tirupathi, and others responsible for quarry operations at the Basaveshwara and S.R. Udayashankar stone quarries. According to the FIR, the quarries, which lie adjacent to each other, had been operating in Survey No. 29 for nearly five years.

The FIR said that the accused knowingly allowed quarrying work to continue in an unsafe environment without taking adequate precautionary measures, resulting in the deaths and injuries.

Police said the quarry management had allegedly continued operations despite being aware of the risk of a rockfall and failed to implement mandatory safety measures to protect workers.

Based on the complaint, the police detained four people for questioning, including two quarry managers, a driver, and a site in-charge.

During preliminary investigation, police found no evidence of any blasting at the time of the accident. Investigators suspect the collapse was caused by the instability of a massive rock, which slid from 40 feet above, though the exact cause of the slide is yet to be established.

The probe is continuing, and the police have sought a detailed report from the Department of Mines and Geology to determine whether the quarry operators had complied with statutory safety norms and mining regulations.

INBRIEF

Punjab Cabinet gives nod to amend land pooling policy

The Punjab Cabinet on Wednesday evening gave its approval to amend the State's land pooling policy whereby it would offer more benefits to landowners. Addressing mediapersons in Chandigarh on Thursday, Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema said it has been decided that landowners will now get a commercial plot of 210 square yards as against 200 square yards for every one acre of land given under the pooling policy. If a landowner does not want to take the commercial plot, he will be entitled to a 1,630 square yard residential plot, as against the earlier provision of a 1,600 square yard plot, he said. PTI

J&K BJP demands stringent punishment in Sarla Bhat case

The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the BJP on Thursday demanded that all accused in the kidnapping and killing of young Kashmiri Pandit nurse Sarla Bhat in April 1990 should be put on trial and given stringent punishment to ensure complete justice. Addressing a press conference here, J&K BJP's chief spokesperson Sunil Sethi said Bhat was Kashmir's daughter and she represented its composite culture. "She, her family, the community and the whole of Kashmir had to wait for 36 years for justice. The justice is not complete; it is incomplete. Her killer is in Pakistan. The justice will be complete when he is brought here and put on trial," he said. PTI

Maharashtra govt. stays new RTI rules ahead of Anna's hunger strike

Veteran social activist had planned to start an indefinite hunger strike on Saturday at Ralegan Siddhi demanding a rollback; State govt. will restore the position as of June 11, says official

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
MUMBAI

The Maharashtra government on Thursday stayed the recent amendments to the Right to Information rules, two days before social activist Anna Hazare was to start an indefinite hunger strike at Ralegan Siddhi demanding a rollback. "We will restore the position as of June 11, 2026," a senior IAS officer told *The Hindu*. The government said the amendments had been stayed in view of the objections and concerns raised by Mr. Hazare.

The Fadnavis government said the amendments had been stayed in view of the objections raised by Anna Hazare. FILE PHOTO

'Moment of happiness'

The villagers of Ralegan Siddhi had called for an agitation on Friday, where they were to burn the draft of the Maharashtra Right to Information (Amendment) Rules, 2026. They expressed joy on news of the government's decision. "It is a moment of happiness for us. It would have been difficult to see Anna sit for a hunger strike at the age of 90. The village stands by him," said a close associate of the activist.

A letter sent by the General Administration Department on Thursday to the Chief Information Commissioner of Maharashtra stated: "The Chief Minister has directed that the rules before the issuance of a gazette notification on June 12, 2026, should be brought into force. Accordingly, the action has been taken immediately." Soon thereafter, the Maharashtra State Information Commission issued orders staying the Maharashtra Right to Information (Amendment) Rules, 2026.

Several activists had raised objections to the provisions of the amended rules, which included a threefold increase in application fee, the introduction of a new fee for appeals, and a cap on free information for those living below the poverty line. The rules also required that each RTI application pertain to a single subject and be limited to 150 words. Other provisions included mandatory disclosure of an applicant's identity, removing anonymity protections for whistleblowers, barring legal representation during hearings, permitting dismissal of cases if applicants fail to appear, and closing cases upon an applicant's death.

Reacting to the development on Thursday, RTI activist Vijay Kumbhar welcomed the decision to stay the amendments but also called for their scrapping. "They are in contravention to the provisions of the RTI Act. The government should appoint a new committee to look into this issue. It should include all stakeholders and be done transparently," he said.

Maharashtra's Chief Information Commissioner Rahul Pande said a team had visited Mr. Hazare on June 24 where the activist conveyed his objections. "Accordingly the CM has directed to stay the implementation of the rules."

Bengal approves panel to examine draft UCC Bill

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

The West Bengal Cabinet on Thursday approved the constitution of a committee headed by retired Supreme Court judge Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai to examine the draft Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill.

Minister Agnimitra Paul said the panel would have four weeks to scrutinise the draft legislation and submit its recommendations.

"The Cabinet has approved the formation of a committee to examine the West Bengal Uniform Civil Code, 2026, draft Bill. The committee will have four weeks to examine it, after which it will be placed in the Assembly," Ms. Paul told reporters after the Cabinet meeting.

Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari on June 29 informed the Assembly that UCC would be implemented in the State soon and had referred to the setting up of the committee to examine the draft UCC Bill.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in its election manifesto, had promised implementation of the UCC within six months of coming to power.

According to sources, UCC is likely to ban polygamy, enforce gender parity in ancestral property rights, and curb child marriage. The proposed law is likely to bring in live-in relationships under its ambit and suggest registrations. The Bill is likely to be brought in the Assembly in August. The State government will take inputs from similar legislation in Assam, Uttarakhand and Gujarat. The government has also said Adivasi communities will be kept outside the ambit of the UCC.

TMC opposes UCC

Both the factions of the Trinamool Congress have opposed the implementation of the UCC in the State.

Trinamool Congress chairperson and former Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has asked party leaders to oppose the Bill both inside and outside the Assembly. Leader of the Opposition Ritabrata Banerjee, who leads the TMC's rebel faction, has also questioned the government's haste, arguing that a proposal touching family laws and personal rights should undergo extensive public discussion before being enacted.

Congress says Datia bypoll announced in 'a rush'; was EC's decision claims BJP

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

The Congress on Thursday criticised the announcement of a byelection in Madhya Pradesh's Datia Assembly constituency, which had fallen vacant after the disqualification of Congress's Rajendra Bharti in April following his conviction in a fraud case.

The Election Commission of India (EC) has announced that bypoll in Datia will be held on July 30, along with one Assembly seat each in Bihar and Gujarat. While the last date to file nominations is July 13, the votes will be counted on August 3.

Datia holds significance as Bharti won the seat in the 2023 election after defeating BJP heavyweight and then Home Minister of Madhya Pradesh Narottam Mishra in a fiercely fought contest.

Umang Singhar. FILE PHOTO

Bharti's legislative membership was, however, cancelled on April 2, a day after he was sentenced to three years in prison for cheating a co-operative bank by a special MP/MLA court in Delhi. He has challenged the verdict in the Delhi High Court and sought a stay, which is scheduled for hearing on July 8.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Bharti said the byelection has been announced "in a rush" while accusing the EC of "double standards".

Bharti said the Commission had deferred byelection in Uttar Pradesh's Milkipur seat in November 2024 due to a pending election petition by the BJP candidate who had lost during the 2022 Assembly poll.

'EC's double standards'

While the Milkipur Assembly seat had fallen vacant after the Samajwadi Party MLA Awadhesh Prasad won the Lok Sabha poll, the bypoll was only held in February 2025 after the petition in the Allahabad High Court was withdrawn by the BJP leader.

"This clearly shows the EC's double standards. They should have waited for the High Court's decision as they did in Milkipur. Has the EC assumed that the courts will rule against me," Bharti asked.

Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Umang Singhar highlighted the case of Bina MLA Nirmala Sapre who had won on a Congress ticket and is currently facing disqualification proceedings before the M.P. High Court after she unofficially switched over to the BJP in 2024. Mr. Singhar had moved to the HC seeking her disqualification from the Assembly. He said there has been no decision on Ms. Sapre's case for nearly two years. "Datia is an important place. Rajendra Bharti defeated a big BJP leader in 2023. Now, the BJP wants to capture this seat by hastily conducting a byelection," he said.

Cabinet Minister and senior BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya said it was the EC's responsibility to hold the bypoll on the seat.

"Any Assembly or Lok Sabha seat could not have been left vacant without a representative for a long time," he said addressing reporters in Bhopal, adding that a decision on the candidate was yet to be taken.

AIADMK ex-Minister C. Vijayabaskar, other functionaries join TVK in T.N.

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The exodus of influential regional leaders from the AIADMK continued on Thursday, with former Ministers C. Vijayabaskar and M.R. Vijayabhaskar, several other senior functionaries, and thousands of cadres joining Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay-led Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), dealing a fresh blow to the Dravidian major.

AIADMK leaders joining the TVK in the presence of Ministers N. Anand and Aadhav Arjuna on Thursday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

In the presence of TVK general secretary and Minister for Rural Development and Water Resources N. Anand, general secretary (election campaign management) and Minister for Public Works and Sports Development Aadhav Arjuna, and other Ministers, they joined the ruling party at a private resort in Mamallapuram, nearly 60 km south of Chennai.

Dr. Vijayabaskar, who had been associated with the AIADMK since his college days and served as the Health Minister between 2013 and 2021 in the Cabinets headed by former Chief Ministers Jayalalithaa, O. Panneerselvam, and Edappadi K. Palaniswami, resigned his Assembly membership on June 16.

He was elected to the Tamil Nadu Assembly from Pudukkottai in 2001 and from Viralimalai in 2011, 2016, 2021, and 2026. Dr. Vijayabaskar was a strongman of the AIADMK in Pudukkottai district.

Part of rebel group

His namesake (M.R. Vijayabhaskar), who hails from Karur, served as Transport Minister from 2016 to 2021. He won the Karur Assembly seat in 2016 and 2026, both by narrow margins. He resigned as MLA on June 29.

Both of them were part of the group of 25 rebel AIADMK MLAs who voted in favour of the Vijay-led government during the vote of confidence in the Assembly on May 13, defying the party whip.

Former AIADMK Ministers M.S.M. Anandan and S. Valarmathi also joined the TVK. Mr. Anandan won the 2011 election from the Tiruppur North Assembly segment and served as Forest Minister. He won the Palladam seat in 2021 and lost to TVK's V. Sathyabama, who earlier served as the Tiruppur MP (2014-19) on an AIADMK ticket, in the 2026 election from Tiruppur North.

Ms. Valarmathi was elected to the Assembly from the Srirangam in the 2015 byelection, necessitated following the conviction (later acquitted) of former CM Jayalalithaa in a disproportionate assets case. Ms. Valarmathi also won the same seat in 2016 and served as Backward Classes Welfare Minister.

Gujarat HC questions govt. on 'illegal demolition' in Surat

Press Trust of India
AHMEDABAD

The Gujarat High Court on Thursday sought the State government's stand on the "completely illegal" demolition carried out in Narisnagar locality of Surat on May 30 resulting in around 100 houses being razed without any prior notice.

The HC asked the government whether it was not responsible for its citizens and said an inquiry should have been carried out at the level of some one much senior to the Municipal Commissioner.

Hearing a plea filed by some affected persons whose houses were razed by the Surat Municipal Corporation, Justice Nikhil Kariel asked the government as to what was its stand on this "completely illegal" demolition.

The HC also posed an oral question to the Police Commissioner on absence of complaint and investigation in the matter, despite a DCP-level officer being present at the site.

'Probe conducted'

In his affidavit, the Municipal Commissioner informed the court that a preliminary inquiry carried out by the civic body's Deputy Municipal Commissioner opined that further inquiry was required as officers concerned were not coming out with the truth. It added that five officers who were present at the site when demolition was being carried out have been suspended.

"This cannot be a one-off incident. If your officer has the audacity to do something like this – a 100 houses, god knows how much you have done which has not yet come out," it said.

The court also wanted to know as to how the Municipal Commissioner plans to rehabilitate the people who were rendered homeless.

The Municipal Commissioner, in his affidavit, said the plot belonged to private individuals who had sought to develop it through third parties, and on March 12 this year a plot validation certificate was sought, which was rejected.

When the developer requested for a physical demarcation of the street line, some SMC officers had intimated the police authorities on May 30.

Madras HC refuses to quash case against Ponmudy over derogatory speech in 2025

Mohamed Imranullah S.
CHENNAI

The Madras High Court on Thursday refused to set aside a private complaint lodged by Uma Anandan, a BJP councillor in the Greater Chennai Corporation, against former DMK Minister K. Ponmudy over the derogatory comments he made last year against Saivites, Vaishnavites, and women.

Justice G.K. Ilanthiraiyan dismissed a criminal revision petition filed by the former Minister against the private complaint, lodged for alleged offences under various provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which the III Metropolitan Magistrate's Court at George Town in Chennai had taken cognisance of earlier this year.

K. Ponmudy

On February 23, the Magistrate had ordered the issuance of summons to the former Minister and hence, he had approached the High Court with the present revision petition in March, claiming that what he had said during a closed-door meeting was only a recall of certain statements made by another person several years ago, and was not from his own imagination.

In her complaint, Ms. Anandan had stated that she had come across a YouTube video of the Minister's speech at an event in Chennai in April 2025. She found it to be highly distasteful, and intended at promoting enmity between different groups of people, besides being prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony. She said that Mr. Ponmudy had, in the speech delivered during his stint as Forest Minister, recalled an incident of a person having likened the *pattai* (a horizontal symbol displayed by Saivites on their forehead) and *tiruman* (a vertical symbol sported by Vaishnavites on their forehead) to sexual postures by a sex worker.

As the speech amounted to wounding the religious feelings of the two sects professing Hinduism, besides falling under the definition of hate speech, the complainant said she had initially approached the police. But the police closed her complaint, and therefore, she had chosen to approach the Magistrate by way of a private complaint.

Opposing her plea before the Magistrate, the counsel for the former Minister had contended that the complainant had not made out the commission of any offence under Sections 196(i)(a) (promoting enmity between different groups), 299 (deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings), or 302 (uttering words with intent to wound religious feelings) of the BNS, 2023, and hence, the complaint was not maintainable.

Ex-Trinamool Cong. MLA's husband held in graft case

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

A team of the Special Task Force of West Bengal Police has arrested Debraj Chakraborty, the husband of former Trinamool Congress MLA Aditi Munshi, in a case relating to alleged disproportionate assets, officials said on Thursday.

The development came days after the Calcutta High Court granted anticipatory bail to Ms. Munshi in the same case on June 24, holding that she has a four-month-old child. The court denied the same for her husband while also directing his wife, a singer-turned-politician, to surrender her passport before a lower court and cooperate with the investigation.

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Five booked for 'child abuse' at creche in Bengaluru IT firm

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The alleged abuse took place at Little Buds Day Care centre at the IT firm Capgemini.

The HAL police have issued notice to five staff of the creche operating inside IT firm Capgemini in Bengaluru, summoning them for questioning about allegations of physical abuse and cruelty towards the children of the employees of the company.

The police registered an FIR against workers at the creche, Little Buds Day Care, on June 29.

The police have gathered video clips reportedly showing the alleged abuse and sent them to the Forensic Science Laboratory for further verification.

The questioning would ascertain the exact role of the staff based on which necessary legal action would be taken, a senior police officer said.

The FIR names caregivers Manjula, Vijayalakshmi, Bhavani, Sindhu and Bindu. They have been booked under Section 351 (2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, and Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, based on a complaint filed by Tilakesh Kumar.

Allegations against staff

According to the complaint, the alleged incidents took place on June 25 at the facility. The complainant alleged that the crèche staff, including the in-charge and caregivers, subjected the children to physical and mental abuse.

It noted that the children who cried or created a disturbance were allegedly confined inside a washroom, doused with water, and subjected to physical assault.

The complainant stated that videos showing children crying were circulated on WhatsApp, bringing the alleged abuse to light.

Temporarily closed

On July 1, Capgemini issued a statement announcing full co-operation with the investigators and temporary closure of the on-campus day care facility.

Police Commissioner Seemant Kumar Singh said that a special team, led by an officer of the rank of Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), was formed for the probe. "The FIR was registered based on a call to the child helpline...," he said.

Mr. Singh announced that the police would collect details of all day care centres run by companies in Bengaluru, and ensure that all the rules are followed at these centres. "Any violation will be dealt with strictly," he said.

20 passengers held with fake visas at Hyderabad airport

The women passengers from A.P. were stopped from boarding an Oman Air flight after officials detected forged Kuwait visa documents; case filed against 39 accused, including 19 travel agents

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

The role of the airline is being probed after boarding passes were issued despite the forged documents. FILE PHOTO

Twenty women from East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh were stopped from boarding an Oman Air flight at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad after immigration officials detected forged Kuwait visa documents that had been altered to bypass emigration requirements for overseas workers.

The police have registered a case against 39 accused – the 20 passengers and 19 travel agents – involved in arranging the forged documents.

According to the first information report (FIR), the women, all holders of Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports, were scheduled to travel to Kuwait via Oman, on Oman Air flight WY-236 during the intervening night of June 30 and July 1. During immigration clearance, officials noticed discrepancies in some of the visa documents and subjected them to further verification.

Officials verified the visas through the official Kuwait visa application and found that the passengers had originally been issued domestic worker visas. However, police said the visa documents had been altered to falsely reflect the category as "Join Family" and carried the endorsement "Not permitted to work". Investigators believe that the forged endorsements were intended to help the passengers evade mandatory clearances.

The women were detained at the airport and handed over to the RGIA Airport Police Outpost for further legal action. During questioning, the women said that they had been promised jobs in Kuwait by travel agents and were unaware that the visa documents had been forged.

The officials said that the role of the airline is being probed after boarding passes were issued despite the forged visa documents.

Heavy rain lashes Himachal; five killed

Press Trust of India
SHIMLA

Heavy rainfall lashed several parts of Himachal Pradesh, with five rain-related deaths reported across the State in the 24 hours till Thursday evening, official sources said.

Three persons were killed in separate accidents in Shimla and Chamba districts, while one death was reported in Mandi district, officials said. A bus conductor named Gyan Chand, a resident of Mandi district, was killed in Lahaul and Spiti district after falling stones from a hillside hit him.

Around 30 pilgrims were stranded near a temple in Bharmour of Chamba district as flash floods washed away a temporary wooden bridge, cutting off access to the temple.

A joint search and rescue operation involving the National Disaster Response Force, local administration, a mountaineering institute and the Public Works Department, was launched after information was received about the incident.

"The temporary wooden bridge to the temple has collapsed. The rescue team has reached the site and essential supplies have been sent to the stranded pilgrims," Bharmour Sub-Divisional Magistrate Vikas Sharma told mediapersons.

Incessant rainfall has caused the Cherang Khad – a stream at Rispa in Kinnaur district – to surge, washing away the only road to Rispa village, cutting it off completely.

A total of 49 roads were closed to vehicular traffic across the state, officials said on Thursday. The Chamba-Bharmaur road was also closed due to landslide. According to the SEOC, 30 roads were closed in Kullu, eight in Sirmaur, seven in Chamba, and two each in Lahaul-Spiti and Una districts.

INBRIEF

A.P. CM to launch work on Rayalaseema steel plant today

In a major step towards industrialisation of the Rayalaseema region in Andhra Pradesh, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu will launch the construction works of the JSW Rayalaseema Integrated Steel Plant in Kadapa district on Friday. The commencement of construction transforms a long-pending aspiration into reality and reaffirms the State's commitment to make Rayalaseema a manufacturing and green industrial hub, says an official release.

Bengaluru ISRO headquarters evacuated after bomb threat

A hoax bomb threat was emailed to the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) headquarters in Bengaluru, claiming explosives were planted at the high-security establishment. After a thorough security check by the police and bomb disposal squads, the email was declared a hoax. The email was received by the ISRO staff post-lunch. They alerted the police who rushed to the spot, and evacuated the campus. Police have launched a probe to trace the email sender.

Telangana DSP booked in disproportionate assets case

The Telangana Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) has registered a disproportionate assets case against Sankireddy Bheem Reddy, Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) posted at Police Computer Services (PCS), Hyderabad, alleging that he amassed assets disproportionate to his known sources of income through corrupt practices. The arrest came after ACB officials carried out simultaneous searches at the officer's residence and 15 other premises linked to him.

Kerala begins examination of Vizhinjam port deal

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Kerala government has initiated the process of examining the proposal by the Adani Group to divest its 49% stake in Adani Vizhinjam Port Private Limited (AVPPL), the concessionaire and operating company of the Vizhinjam International Seaport.

The announcement by Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Limited (APSEZ) that the Switzerland-based Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) Group will acquire a 49% stake in AVPPL has sparked a controversy in Kerala.

On Thursday, the government expressed dismay over being kept in the dark on the issue. Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan conveyed the State's displeasure to the management of the Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd., a communication from the Chief Minister's Office said.

Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan said that such a deal without the prior permission of the government was "illegal."

Following the controversy, the company hurriedly submitted a proposal to this effect on Wednesday night to the Ports Department Secretary and the Managing Director of Vizhinjam International Seaport Limited (VISL).

The proposal has now been forwarded to the Law department for vetting.

After legal scrutiny, it will be examined by a high-power committee headed by the Chief Secretary. Based on the committee's recommendations, the State Cabinet will decide whether to approve the stake sale.

Word of caution

Sealed off: A notice has been placed declaring the area restricted following the compound wall collapse at the government-run Bowring and Lady Curzon Hospital in Shivajinagar, Bengaluru, on April 29, 2026. J. ALLEN EGENUSE

No urgent hearing in case related to judges' PAs: SC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday declined to grant an urgent hearing on a plea challenging a Madras High Court order setting aside the appointment of 17 Personal Assistants (PAs) to High Court judges after finding several "illegalities and irregularities" in the recruitment process.

The matter was mentioned for urgent listing before a partial working days Bench comprising Justices M.M. Sundresh and Sheel Nagu by senior advocate S. Nagamuthu. The Bench, however, declined the request.

Finance Bill passed in violation of Assembly conventions: Pinarayi

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala's Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan on Thursday accused the United Democratic Front (UDF) government of disregarding Assembly conventions to pass the Finance Bill "so as to benefit private liquor companies."

He accused Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan of showing "unnecessary haste and stubbornness to provide tax cuts" to liquor companies.

"The Finance Bill was not part of the schedule for the Revised Budget session. The government had said at that point of time that no new tax proposals were under consideration. This was reiterated in the Business Advisory Committee as well. But, after the Budget presentation, the Finance Bill was surreptitiously inserted into the agenda...," he said.

"Finance Bills with such tax proposals are usually passed only after vetting by the Subject Committee. However, this convention was also violated. The Chief Minister tried to justify this by claiming that the LDF government also passed a Finance Bill during its final Budget session, but that Bill did not have any new tax proposals," he said.

Vikram-1, India's first-ever privately developed orbital rocket, gears up for launch

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Vikram-1 sits on a launch pad at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota.

India's first privately developed orbital-class rocket is all set for its maiden launch.

On Thursday, private space launch company Skyroot Aerospace, based in Hyderabad, announced that the launch window for Vikram-1's first test flight, named Mission Aagaman, is between July 12 and August 4.

It said that Test Flight-1 is targeted for no earlier than July 12, subject to the completion of assembly and testing operations at the launch site at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, as well as weather, safety and range clearance. The launch window extends till August 4.

The company said that Mission Aagaman, meaning 'the arrival', marks its second mission following the successful suborbital flight of Vikram-S, the first private rocket to reach space from Indian soil, on November 18, 2022.

It said that this would be a partially commercial flight, with the company planning to commence full commercial flights after one or two successful demonstrations to orbit.

All stages of the Skyroot's Vikram-1 have been successfully integrated and stacked at the launch pad. The mission will gather critical data across propulsion, stage separation, guidance, navigation, control and overall vehicle performance.

NIMHANS opens 'database' to aid research on sleep disorders among stroke patients

Afshan Yasmeen
BENGALURU

The database comprises 100 overnight polysomnography (PSG) recordings collected at the NIMHANS. SUDHAKARA JAIN

A team of researchers from NIMHANS, Bengaluru, and the International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), Hyderabad, has developed the first open-access Asian database of overnight sleep studies in patients with ischemic stroke.

The database, which has been made publicly available, is expected to support research on sleep disorders in stroke survivors and help improve post-stroke care.

The dataset, named iSLEEPS (Polysomnography Dataset for Sleep Analysis in Ischemic Stroke Patients), has been published in the Nature Portfolio journal *Scientific Data*. It comprises 100 overnight polysomnography (PSG) recordings collected at the NIMHANS between September 2018 and December 2021.

Each recording includes manually scored sleep stages, respiratory events, oxygen desaturation episodes, periodic limb movements and clinical information, all annotated, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine's 2017 guidelines.

Srijithesh P.R., professor of neurology at NIMHANS and one of the corresponding authors of the study, told *The Hindu* that the project was conceived to address a major gap in sleep medicine research. "Sleep-disordered breathing is extremely common after ischemic stroke, but researchers have had very limited access to large, well-annotated datasets from stroke patients... We wanted to create a high-quality resource that researchers across the world can use," he said.

"Sleep... plays an important role in brain repair, memory consolidation and functional recovery after stroke. If sleep disorders... are not recognised and treated, they can adversely affect rehabilitation and even increase the risk of recurrent stroke," he said.

Navy foils piracy attempt in Gulf of Aden; three vessels still in captivity, IMO warns

INS Trikand intercepts and secures Thoothukudi-bound bulk carrier *Golden Arsenal*; International Maritime Organization says 3 other ships are held by pirates, with a critical situation aboard one of them, which has an Indian crew member; five Indians among crews of two of the three ships

Saurabh Trivedi
M. Kalyanaraman
NEW DELHI/CHENNAI

The Indian Navy successfully responded to a piracy attempt on the merchant vessel *MV Golden Arsenal* in the Gulf of Aden, with stealth frigate *INS Trikand* swiftly intercepting and securing the ship after the attack.

The operation comes even as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) issued an urgent appeal for the release of the crews of three other vessels still held by Somali pirates, warning that the humanitarian situation aboard one of them, which has one Indian crew member, had turned critical. Five Indian nationals are among the crews of two of those three vessels.

The Navy on Thursday informed that the *Golden Arsenal*, a St. Vincent and the Grenadines-flagged bulk carrier, reported an attempted pirate attack on July 1 while transiting from Aden, Yemen, approximately 300 nautical miles east-northeast of Djibouti. The vessel, en route to Thoothukudi, was carrying 21 crew members – 20 Syrian nationals and one Indian.

The incident was reported through the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), following which *INS Trikand*, then about 80 nautical miles away, altered course to close in on the vessel. As it approached, the frigate launched a helicopter to sanitise the area.

Fortified refuge

On establishing communication with the vessel, naval personnel ascertained that the crew had taken shelter in the ship's citadel – a fortified refuge built to withstand forced entry, equipped with independent power, ventilation, satellite communication and supplies – and remained safe throughout the incident, with pirates suspected to be still onboard. *Golden Arsenal* had been stopped roughly 110 nautical miles northeast of Somalia's Boosaaso, with *INS Trikand* maintaining a close watch within 1.5 nautical miles of the vessel through the night.

Indian Navy personnel with seafarers on board Thoothukudi-bound *MV Golden Arsenal* after an anti-piracy operation. PTI

On Thursday, a team from *INS Trikand* boarded *Golden Arsenal* to sanitise the vessel and assess the situation. After a comprehensive search, no suspicious personnel were found onboard. The crew then safely emerged from the citadel and, along with Indian Navy personnel, began assessing the damage to the vessel. To strengthen the operation, the Indian Navy also deployed a P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft for aerial surveillance.

The merchant ship had sustained damage to its bridge superstructure and adjoining compartments during the pirate attack.

With the vessel declared secure and the immediate threat neutralised, *INS Trikand* concluded its anti-piracy operation. The *Golden Arsenal* has since resumed its onward voyage. The Navy said it remains committed to safeguarding merchant shipping, countering piracy and ensuring the safety of all seafarers in the Indian Ocean Region, irrespective of nationality.

Ships held hostage

Meanwhile, the IMO has expressed particular concern over the Palau-flagged tanker *MT Honour 25*, whose 17 crew members – including one Indian national – have now been held for more than two months since the vessel was hijacked on April 24. Citing the latest communication from the ship's Master, the IMO statement said five crew members, including the Master, were now unwell, with food supplies reportedly down to rice alone and the available drinking water unfit to drink.

It also said armed pirates guarding the vessel had recently exchanged fire with a rival pirate group that tried to approach the ship, leaving the crew caught between competing armed factions.

The Master was quoted appealing to the international community to help secure the crew's release.

The IMO said the crews of two other vessels – *Sward* and *MV Eureka* – also continue to be held under similarly difficult conditions. *MV Eureka*'s 12-member crew includes four Indian nationals, while there are no Indians among those held aboard *Sward*, according to officials.

The IMO called for urgent, coordinated international intervention to secure the immediate and unconditional release of all three crews, urging Somalia's federal government, flag states, shipowners, insurers and regional partners to intensify diplomatic and operational efforts.

The *Golden Arsenal* operation is the latest in a series of anti-piracy patrols the Indian Navy has sustained in the Gulf of Aden and the wider Western Indian Ocean amid what the IMO has described as a resurgence of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the region.

Username feature: Telegram, Signal get notices from govt.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology on Thursday sent notices to Telegram and Signal, seeking information on their username feature.

The notice comes after a similar missive was sent to WhatsApp on Wednesday. The Meta-owned messaging platform is yet to implement the feature anywhere in the world, but is taking reservations for usernames.

Spokespersons for Telegram and Signal did not have an immediate comment to share on the notices (Telegram was contacted outside normal business hours in the United Arab Emirates). The username feature appeared to remain available on both platforms well into Thursday evening.

The Centre's move against the three messaging platforms comes on the heels of a week-long ban of Telegram.

The Internet Freedom Foundation, a Delhi-based digital rights advocacy group, called the pressure on the messaging platforms an "unconstitutional dragnet over privacy features" (accounts with a username on all platforms are designed to conceal phone numbers). "The executive is restraining lawful features, and with them the private communication those features protect," the IFF said in a statement.

The Centre's move comes on the heels of a week-long ban on Telegram.

The notice to Signal in particular was worrying, the IFF added. "Signal ... keeps almost [no data on user accounts and activity], has refused to build the searchable directory an identification order would need, and is the tool journalists, activists and many at risk people and their contacts rely on, so a notice aimed at it strikes straight at protected speech," the IFF said.

Kuki village torched in Manipur's Noney district in pre-dawn attack

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Manipur's trail of violence widened after an armed group attacked and torched a Kuki village in Noney district around 5 a.m. on Thursday.

The Kuki Inpi (apex body) of Jiribam, Tamenglong, and Noney districts alleged that suspected members of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) carried out an "unprovoked" pre-dawn attack on Leikot Kuki village, reducing it to ashes.

The NSCN is also known as the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, one of the oldest extremist groups in the northeastern region.

Desolate look: The Leikot Kuki village in Manipur lies in shambles after the attack. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Kuki Inpi said the village volunteers, armed with licensed single-barrel firearms and limited resources, tried to defend the village but were overwhelmed by the attackers who used automatic rifles and mortar shells.

The incident happened more than 200 km west of the India-Myanmar border, where armed Naga groups allegedly torched Phaimol Kuki village and Kuki extremists reportedly destroyed Huimin Thana and Kherongram villages in a retaliation. The villages along the international border are in Kamjong district.

Thursday's attack indicated an expansion of the Kuki-Naga conflict zone, which began with Ukhrul district and spread to the adjoining Kamjong and Kangpokpi districts.

Condemning the attack on Leilot Kuki village, the Kuki Inpi questioned the inadequate security arrangements in vulnerable areas of Noney district and demanded immediate government intervention.

Part of newly built Delhi-Dehradun Expressway caves in after rainfall

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A section of the newly built Delhi-Dehradun Expressway caved in on Wednesday morning following overnight rainfall, triggering concerns over the quality of its construction. Videos of the damaged stretch quickly went viral on social media, with users questioning safety for motorists, and how a flagship infrastructure project could develop such damage within months of becoming operational.

The affected stretch has since been repaired and traffic movement restored, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) said. The cave-in was caused by localised waterlogging following heavy rainfall, and the inability to operationalise a permanent cross-drainage system due to resistance by local residents, the NHAI said in a press statement.

The affected stretch has since been repaired and traffic movement restored. FILE PHOTO

The damaged stretch was identified during routine patrols and repaired immediately, allowing traffic to continue uninterrupted, according to the NHAI. A balancing culvert meant to drain rainwater could not be commissioned due to resistance from local residents, who have been using the culvert opening as a vehicle crossing, it said. Permanent slope protection and drainage works remain stalled because of a land-related arbitration dispute with landowners, the NHAI said.

As an interim measure, the NHAI has constructed a 1.5-km parallel drain, and is redesigning the drainage system to safely channel rainwater until the permanent drainage infrastructure can be completed.

The 210-km Expressway was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in April 2026.

Default bail only if charge sheet is not filed on time: SC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has clarified in a judgment that accused persons cannot claim default bail for non-filing of additional copies of the charge sheet.

Default bail, an indefeasible right flowing from Article 21 of the Constitution, could be claimed only if the charge sheet itself was not filed within the statutory 60 or 90 days of investigation. The judgment, authored by Justice Sanjay Karol, came in a case involving digital arrests and cyber extortion.

"The relief of default bail is limited to the non-filing of the charge sheet itself and once the charge sheet is filed in its proper form, the question of default bail does not arise," the judgment, dated July 1, said. The court said the law on default bail had not changed when the Code on Criminal Procedure was replaced with the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS).

"Once the charge sheet is filed, in compliance with the form prescribed under Section 193(3) BNSS, within the aforesaid [60/90-day period], the right to default bail ceases," Justice Karol observed.

The judgment was based on an appeal filed by Shaurya Sunil Kumar Singh after the Bombay High Court dismissed his plea for default bail. Mr. Singh said the CBI did not supply him with charge sheet copies and related records of the case.

Justice Karol observed that the CBI had filed the charge sheet within the prescribed statutory time before the Magistrate. The court said Mr. Singh's right to default bail stood extinguished and he ought to have applied for regular bail. Moreover, the court said, it had already taken cognisance of the charge sheet filed by the investigating agency.

The case relates to a CBI probe into a cyber criminal network which used sophisticated digital means to extort money from individuals.

As M.P. judge faces online fury, case to protect judicial officers languishes in Supreme Court

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

Madhya Pradesh Additional District and Sessions Judge Tabassum Khan has faced online abuse and threats ever since June 12, when she sentenced a group of cow vigilantes to life imprisonment for lynching truck driver Sheikh Lala Nazir Ahmed in August 2022. This comes even as a *suo motu* case to protect judges like her from "pressure, intimidation, threats and actual violence" languishes in the Supreme Court.

The *suo motu* case was initiated after another Additional District and Sessions Judge Uttam Anand, this time from Dhanbad in Jharkhand, was mowed down by a vehicle while he was out for a morning jog in 2021. He had reportedly rejected bail petitions for some gangsters shortly before his death. The case had sent shockwaves across the nation, compelling the Supreme Court to sit up and take notice.

The then Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, had summoned senior advocate K.K. Venugopal, the then Attorney-General of India, to express the court's concern about the rising instances of violence and maligning campaigns against the judiciary.

'Alarming situation'

"There is no freedom for judges to work," a visibly upset Justice Ramana had said in the open courtroom on August 6, 2021, pointing out that threats, abusive messages, and "peeping" into online accounts take not only a physical but also mental toll on judges.

A few days later, the top court transferred the investigation of Judge Anand's death to the Central Bureau of Investigation. Its August 9, 2021 order highlighted the need to "resolve the alarming situation in the country where judicial officers and lawyers are being pressured and intimidated by threats of, and/or actual violence. There is, therefore, an institutional need to create an environment where judicial officers feel safe and secure."

The same August 9 order tagged the *suo motu* case, *In re: Safeguarding Courts and Protecting Judges*, with an earlier writ petition filed by advocate Karunakar Mahalik, who had said there was a "crying need" for a "special security system to protect court premises and persons related to justice delivery system".

The Supreme Court Advocates on Record Association (SCAORA) has issued a statement "unequivocally condemning" the threats and "targeted social media campaign" against Judge Khan.

Bombay HC upholds helmet exemption for Sikh community

Chinmay Gaikwad
MUMBAI

The Bombay High Court has held that the exemption granted to Sikh community from wearing helmets constitutes a "reasonable classification" under Article 14 of the Constitution and does not violate fundamental rights.

A Division Bench of Justices Urmila Joshi-Phalke and Nivedita Mehta dismissed the petition filed by law student Kirtesh Vikas Chaudhari, who appeared in-person, challenging the exemption under Section 129 of the Motor Vehicles Act. The petitioner had argued that the government was engaging in "class legislation" by denying equal protection of laws and making certain people offenders. He contended that the exemption provided special privilege to a particular class.

The Bench, however, found the contentions to be "misconceived". The judges pointed out that Article 14 prohibits class legislation but permits reasonable classification for legislative purposes. The court noted that the exemption is not based on caste, creed, or religion but on a valid and logical basis with a public purpose.

It noted that the exemption is not based on religion but on a valid and logical basis

"In the interest of society, Section 129 of the Motor Vehicles Act has made compulsory use of protective headgear/helmet by rider and pillion rider of two-wheeler motorcycles," the judges observed.

The court explained that permissible classification depends on two conditions: first, that the classification must be founded on an intelligible differentia distinguishing persons grouped together from those left out; and second, that the differentia must have a rational relation to the object to be achieved by the statute.

Byelections in 3 Assembly constituencies on July 30

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Byelections in three Assembly constituencies in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat will be held on July 30, the Election Commission announced on Thursday.

The byelections will be held in Bankipur in Bihar, Datia in Madhya Pradesh, and Manjalpur in Gujarat.

In Bihar, the vacancy arose following the resignation of BJP president Nitin Nabin as an MLA; in Madhya Pradesh, following the disqualification of Congress legislator Rajendra Bharti after his conviction in a fraud case; and in Gujarat, following the death of BJP MLA Yogeshbhai Narandas Patel.

According to the schedule announced by the Election Commission, the Gazette notification for the byelections will be issued on July 6. July 13 is the last date for filing nominations, and the last date for withdrawal of candidature is July 16. Counting of votes will be held on August 3.

Wangchuk's health worsens on fifth day of hunger strike

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Activist Sonam Wangchuk's health deteriorated on the fifth day of his hunger strike at Jantar Mantar on Thursday, with his blood sugar level dropping to 60 and his blood pressure remaining low. The Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) alleged that police assaulted students attempting to set up a library at the protest site, and the agitation received fresh backing from CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya and RTI activist Nikhil Dey.

In a post on X, CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke said Mr. Wangchuk's condition was "continuously deteriorating" and warned that the government would be responsible if anything happened to him, reiterating the demand for Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation.

Mr. Dipke also held an interaction with protesters titled "*Chai Pe Charcha* with Cockroaches", saying it was aimed at gathering feedback to make the movement bigger.

Six students part of All India Students' Association (AISA) continued their indefinite hunger strike. According to AISA, some of them were at risk of losing consciousness.

Govt. rolls out VB-G RAM G scheme from A.P. village

Union Agriculture Minister takes part in launch event at Mukkavaripalli village in Tirupati district; Chief Minister says spending funds on the scheme is 'not a burden but a responsibility' of States

A.D. Rangarajan
TIRUPATI

A.P. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan launch the VB-G RAM G scheme on Thursday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The little-known Mukkavaripalli village in Tirupati district of Andhra Pradesh shot to fame on Thursday with the nationwide launch of the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar Ajeevika Mission Grameen (VB-G RAM G) scheme.

Union Minister for Agriculture Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, and Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan launched the scheme by laying the foundation stone for a farm pond, to signal that the new rural employment guarantee scheme gives top priority to farmers' welfare, besides rural development.

Later, Mr. Naidu and Mr. Chouhan launched the VB-G RAM G portal. The scheme replaces the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Chouhan said Prime Minister Narendra Modi aimed to build 74,212 houses in Andhra Pradesh under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, and had sanctioned funds for linking villages through 146 rural roads. "With ₹422 crore earmarked for Andhra Pradesh, the Indian government is keen to develop roads and *pucca* houses in the State," he said.

A.P. CM says ₹7,700 cr. will be given by Centre and ₹4,000 cr. will be borne by State for the scheme

Mr. Naidu said works would be taken up with an outlay of ₹7,700 crore from the Centre and another ₹4,000 crore coming from the State. He asserted that roping in States to spend funds on this scheme was "not a burden but responsibility".

Complete transparency

"With 125 work days, any work required for rural development will have scope under VB-G RAM G. We will utilise this scheme to create assets such as roads, drainages, canals and others," Mr. Naidu said.

The Chief Minister added that the scheme would be implemented with complete transparency by deploying technologies such as geo-tagging and biometrics.

The delegates later planted saplings of 10 varieties, such as teak, neem, and eucalyptus, at the venue. Mr. Pawan Kalyan, who holds the Panchayat Raj portfolio in the State, designed the project to plant tree varieties that yield wood, to earn revenue for the panchayats in future. He also explained the idea of a Wood Bank to Mr. Chouhan.

(With PTI inputs)

EC seeks responses from both Trinamool factions on organisational elections

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

The Ritabrata Banerjee-led faction of Trinamool Congress addresses media after meeting EC in New Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

The Election Commission has sought responses from the rival factions of the Trinamool Congress regarding "claims and counter claims" made by them with respect to organisational elections and authorised signatories.

The two sides, one led by former West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the other by rebel leader Ritabrata Banerjee, have been asked to submit their responses by 5.30 p.m. on Monday, sources in the EC said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, a full Bench of the poll body met leaders of the rebel faction led by Mr. Ritabrata. However, leaders loyal to Ms. Mamata questioned the EC's decision to grant an audience to the rebel faction, alleging that the meeting violated the poll body's own procedures of granting appointments to only authorised signatories of a recognised political party. "The EC had informed all parties about their rule where only authorised representatives of parties can request a meeting with a full Bench of the EC. We have not asked for any meeting. On what grounds is the EC meeting the breakaway MLAs of the party? We decide who represents our party. Gyanesh Kumar [Chief Election Commissioner] has no role or power to decide for us," Trinamool MP Saugata Roy said.

After the meeting with the EC, Mr. Ritabrata said the 10-member delegation led by him had formally placed its case before the poll panel, after informing it of the faction's special organisational session held in Kolkata on June 22.

The commission gave them a "patient hearing" on their claim over the party, he said, expressing hope that the poll body would respond shortly.

Even as he declined to disclose the documents submitted to the EC, Mr. Ritabrata said the rebel faction had "abided by all rules" while conducting the June 22 organisational session.

"The All India Trinamool Congress had a special session in Kolkata on June 22. Immediately after the session, we formally informed the EC about it in writing. We also met the Election Commission in Kolkata and sought an appointment with the Election Commission of India," he said, adding that this was part of the prescribed procedure, and that the faction had already completed the process.

Mr. Ritabrata reiterated the faction's claim that it represented the "real" Trinamool Congress.

Rabri gives up official bungalow, moves to own house in Patna

The Hindu Bureau
PATNA

Former Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi finally vacated her official residence on 10 Circular Road in Patna on Thursday. She had been living there along with her family members, including former Bihar Chief Minister and Rashtriya Janata Dal supremo Lalu Prasad, for about 20 years. The family shifted to their own house in the State capital.

Earlier, the BJP-led NDA government had issued several notices to Ms. Devi to vacate the bungalow as it had been allotted to the Dairy, Fisheries and Animal Resources Minister Nand Kishor Ram.

Ms. Devi has been given a bungalow on 39 Hardinge Road, where renovation work is on.

On Thursday afternoon, the family informed the State Building Construction Department that it was vacating the Circular Road property.

Bungalow row

Ms. Devi being asked to vacate the bungalow had become a political rallying point for her party.

When the State government had issued the last notice asking the leader to vacate by June 29, Ms. Devi had dared the government to "evict her from the bungalow using force". Later, Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary said that those occupying the official bungalow have to vacate "at any cost". On Wednesday, Mr. Tejashwi said that "politics should not happen" on the issue but added that "even those who do not deserve, have been provided government residences".

Ram temple row: Venugopal writes to PM seeking SC-monitored probe

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

K.C. Venugopal

Stepping up the Congress's attack over the alleged embezzlement of donations at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, party general secretary K.C. Venugopal on Thursday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking an immediate Supreme Court-monitored probe into what he described as the "*Chanda Chori* mega scandal".

In his letter, Mr. Venugopal alleged that the fraud involved "hundreds of crores" and amounted to a "monumental betrayal" of the Hindu faith, religion, and way of life.

He also questioned the credibility of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted by the Uttar Pradesh government, saying it appeared to be little more than an "eyewash".

He further alleged that there was a growing apprehension that the probe was being used to erase the remaining evidence while shielding the "big fish" behind the alleged multi-crore embezzlement.

Alleging that the preliminary investigation had exposed a highly organised racket operating "right under the nose" of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, Mr. Venugopal said the "systemic lapses at every level" suggested that the alleged loot had been enabled by institutional support.

"On one hand, the counting staff bypassed regular surveillance to siphon off bundles of cash and valuable jewellery on a daily basis; on the other, 7 to 8 months of crucial CCTV footage was deliberately destroyed... This clearly indicates that... this is a scam orchestrated with the complicity of the higher-ups instead," he alleged.

Complaints suppressed

Mr. Venugopal also claimed that complaints of embezzlement and theft were either ignored or actively suppressed. "The Trust's former Chief Accounts Officer, who flagged these systematic irregularities as early as 2020-21 and warned that unaccounted gold and silver ornaments were being spirited away, was unceremoniously removed from his duties instead of being heard," he said.

Mr. Venugopal said "this scandal" warrants the highest level of accountability because the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust is a public trust constituted by the Government of India in 2020.

"A State-appointed SIT is neither equipped nor institutionally independent to investigate individuals wielding immense political and institutional influence," he said.

"Therefore, I strongly demand your immediate intervention in this matter to order a free and fair investigation by a high-level independent agency under the strict supervision of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India," he said.

Congress slams BJP's silence over alleged land deals of M.P. CM

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Thursday questioned the "silence" of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav and the BJP's top leadership over allegations that Mr. Yadav's family and associates were involved in large-scale land purchases in areas in Ujjain where development projects were planned. The party demanded that Mr. Yadav either explain the transactions publicly or resign pending an inquiry.

Addressing a press conference, former MLA Praveen Pathak said Mr. Yadav had remained silent for 10 days after the allegations surfaced. He said the issue was not merely about land purchases but about whether access to power and prior knowledge of government decisions and development projects had been used for private gain. "If that is not the case, why has the Chief Minister remained silent for over 10 days," he asked.

Mr. Pathak alleged a possible link between the purchases and infrastructure projects announced or advanced in the region during Mr. Yadav's tenure as a Minister and later as Chief Minister.

Mr. Pathank demanded a judicial inquiry into the matter under the supervision of a retired Supreme Court judge. The matter should also be probed by the ED, the Income Tax Department, and the Lokayukta, he said.

He said the issue had been repeatedly raised by the party's State unit, but the BJP government had not responded.

Wish there was an antidote to insecurities, Manish Tewari says after Punjab Cong. revamp

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Manish Tewari

Congress leader Manish Tewari on Thursday posted a cryptic message on social media after being left out of the party's organisational reshuffle in Punjab, saying he wished he had "an antidote for the insecurities of individuals and institutions".

Mr. Tewari, the Chandigarh MP and former Union Minister, shared on X *The Hindu*'s report on the Congress's Punjab revamp, which said he had been "left in the cold" as the party announced new working presidents and election panels ahead of the 2027 Assembly election.

"*Hai bada koi avgun usme jise koi hunar aave* (loosely translated as 'if a person is talented, society usually finds fault with him)," Mr. Tewari wrote on social media platform X.

Without elaborating on the remark, he added that the Congress had given him "enough over the past 45 years" and that he had devoted his entire adult life to the service of the party.

The Congress had on Wednesday announced its election-related committees for Punjab ahead of the 2027 Assembly election, while retaining Amarinder Singh Raja Warring as president of the Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee and Partap Singh Bajwa as leader of the Congress Legislature Party, ending speculation over a possible leadership change in the State unit.

Former Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi was appointed chairman of the campaign committee, while former Deputy Chief Minister Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa was named chairperson of the core committee.

2 J&K clerics denied nod to travel to Iran for Khamenei funeral

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

Two Kashmir Shia clerics were denied permission to travel to Iran, a day after the Iranian International Relations Department invited them to attend the final rites of assassinated leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

J&K Anjuman-e-Sharie Shian president Aga Syed Hassan Al-Mosavi Al-Safavi was stopped by the Bureau of Immigration on Thursday.

"Officials seized his passport, and prevented him from boarding the flight despite all requisite travel documents, including a valid passport, visa, and confirmed travel arrangements," said a spokesman of the organisation. "No explanation or written order was furnished to justify the action," he said.

The Shia organisation called upon the authorities concerned "to immediately clarify the circumstances under which this action was taken".

Another Shia cleric Masroor Abbas Ansari was also "denied a passport".

Five Shia clerics and former Chief Minister and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) president Mehbooba Mufti are among those invited by Iran to attend the burial ceremonies of assassinated Iranian supreme leader in an Israeli strike on February 28 this year.

Ms. Mufti is likely to visit Iran "to pay her respects".

J&K CM Omar Abdullah backs efforts to resume dialogue between India and Pakistan

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

Omar Abdullah

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday backed initiatives seeking resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan, saying "his party wants relations between neighbours to improve".

Referring to the joint open letter signed by over 100 individuals from India and Pakistan, Mr. Abdullah said, "A request is being made to the Prime Minister via a letter to find a way to improve relations between the two countries. Recently, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat stated that India and Pakistan should talk to each other and establish friendly ties. No one objects when the RSS says it."

'No objection'

Recalling the statement made by former Prime Minister, the late BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Mr. Abdullah said, "Mr. Vajpayee would say 'one can change friends but not neighbours'. We also want relations between neighbours to improve."

He said cross-border tensions between India and Pakistan had persisted for decades and worsened after the Pahalgam terror attack last year.

"The recent appeal reflects a sentiment that has long been expressed across the political spectrum. If calls for peace and engagement are welcomed from some quarters, they should not become controversial when voiced from Jammu and Kashmir," he said.

Mr. Abdullah added there should be no objection to advocating dialogue and normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan.

INBRIEF

Police move SC against Sonam Raghuvanshi's bail

The Meghalaya Police on Thursday moved the Supreme Court seeking an immediate stay on the bail granted to Sonam Raghuvanshi, the prime accused in the alleged murder of her husband, Raja Raghuvanshi, during their honeymoon in Meghalaya in May 2025. Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the State, mentioned the matter before a vacation Bench comprising Justices M. M. Sundresh and Sheel Nagu and sought an urgent hearing. The law officer pointed out that the Meghalaya High Court on June 29, had upheld an order of a Shillong trial court granting bail to Ms. Sonam. He argued that there was a plausible risk of the accused absconding.

Centre amends drug rules to ensure uniform regulations

Aimed at strengthening regulatory oversight of advanced and emerging medical technologies, the Central government has amended the Drugs Rules, 1945 to bring stem cell derived products, gene therapeutic products, and xenografts under the ambit of the Centrally License Approving Authority (CLAA) framework. These include vaccines, large volume parenterals and r-DNA based medicines. This set is being expanded with this amendment to cover additional emerging technologies, said Ministry on Thursday.

Amarnath pilgrims reach base camp ahead of yatra

The first batch of more than 4,800 pilgrims has set off from Jammu in a convoy of 259 vehicles, officials say; security on the twin routes has been stepped up using AI technology and drones

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

A year after the Pahalgam attack saw a dip in pilgrim footfall, Jammu & Kashmir Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha on Thursday flagged off the first batch of devotees for the pilgrimage to the Amarnath holy cave from the Bhagwati Nagar Base Camp in Jammu.

Pilgrims started reaching the twin base camps – Nunwan at Pahalgam in south Kashmir and at Baltal in Sonamarg – a day ahead of the formal trek to the ice (stalagmite) *lingam* at an altitude of 3,880 metres. "I wish all devotees a safe, comfortable, blissful and spiritually fulfilling journey. May this holy pilgrimage bring immense joy and divine peace to all," Mr. Sinha said, wishing the pilgrims.

Every year, the J&K administration, Shri Amarnath Shrine Board, J&K Police, Indian Army, security forces, local community, and all stakeholders join hands to make the pilgrimage a success.

All set: Pilgrims waiting for registration at the Baltal Base Camp in Sonamarg on Thursday, where they will spend the night before proceeding to the Amarnath shrine. IMRAN NISSAR

However, the Pahalgam terror attack, which left 26 civilians dead in April 2025, also impacted the pilgrimage later in the year.

The first batch of more than 4,800 pilgrims has set off on the holy yatra in a convoy of 259 light and heavy vehicles, officials said.

The Baltal route is a steep, 14-km one-way trek. The Pahalgam route is a 34-km trek, with the Mahagunas Top at 4,276 m.

Upgraded security

Security on the pilgrimage routes has been stepped up this year. Artificial Intelligence technologies and drones have been deployed to maintain a vigil.

J&K Apni Party president Altaf Bukhari conveyed his wishes to the devotees. "This annual pilgrimage has always been a shining symbol of Jammu and Kashmir's rich composite and inclusive culture. It reflects our cherished values of faith, harmony, mutual respect, and hospitality," he said.

The people of Jammu and Kashmir, especially the Muslim community, have always played a vital role in ensuring the safe, smooth, and hassle-free conduct of the pilgrimage, the leader said.

House panel pulls up Education Secretary over CBSE remarks

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A heated argument erupted in Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on Thursday, after Education Secretary Vineet Joshi sought to prevent questions being posed to the Central Board of Secondary Education, saying the Board fell outside the panel's agenda for the day.

The CBSE has come under fire in recent months for serious discrepancies in the on-screen marking system for its Class 12 examination and the award of the digital evaluation contract to a questionable firm.

The PAC, chaired by senior Congress leader K. C. Venugopal, was meeting to review the implementation of welfare schemes of the Union Education Ministry. Mr. Joshi later withdrew his remarks after pushback from Mr. Venugopal and several others, including some BJP MPs.

'No questions allowed'

The Education Secretary started by delivering a presentation on various schemes, including Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, PM SHRI, and PM POSHAN. Mr. Joshi then said, according to sources, that no questions could be directed to CBSE Chairperson Lokhande Prashant Sitaram, who was also present at the meeting, as the Union government does not provide grants or funding to the CBSE.

According to sources, Mr. Venugopal said that the CBSE could submit written responses later. In response, Mr. Joshi, speaking on behalf of Mr. Sitaram, said that the CBSE would need to consult the Law Ministry before answering the panel's questions.

Outrage from MPs

The remark led to an uproar. According to sources, Mr. Venugopal said that dismissing the panel's questions amounted to an insult to Parliament. BJP MPs K. Laxman and Aparajita Sarangi also supported the Chairperson, saying the PAC could take up any issue of public importance. When members insisted that the exchange be placed on record, Mr. Joshi withdrew his comments, sources said.

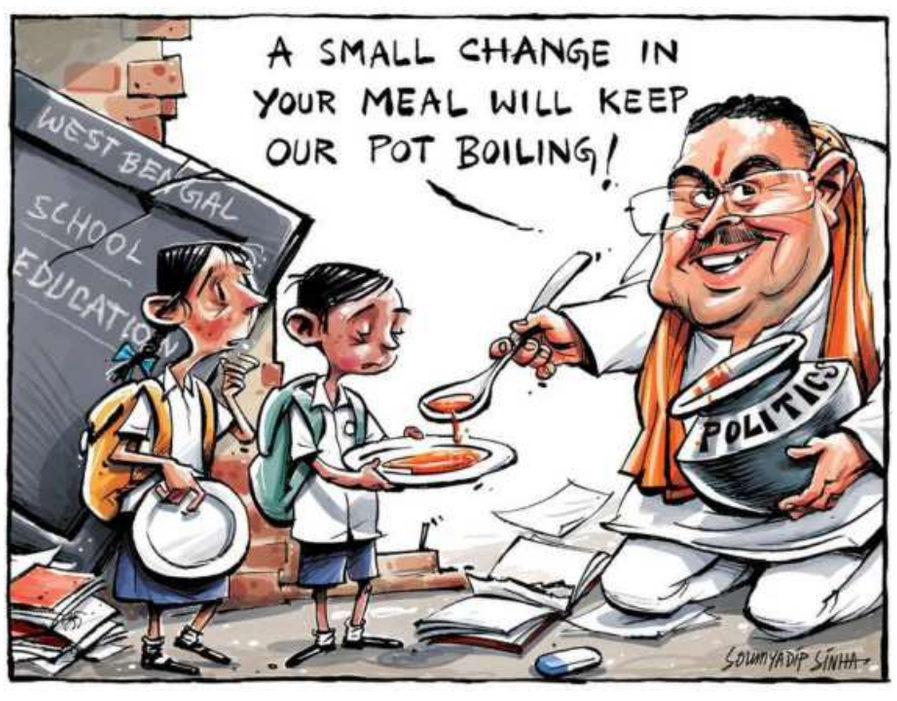
15 papers fail to help Assam man prove his citizenship

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Days after the External Affairs Ministry clarified that a passport was not proof of citizenship, a 38-year-old resident of Assam could not convince the Gauhati High Court that 15 other documents he possessed were sufficient to establish him as an Indian, not a foreigner.

On June 30, a Bench of Justice Kalyan Rai Surana and Justice Shamima Jahan upheld an order of a Foreigners' Tribunal declaring Aminul Hoque, a daily-wage labourer, a non-citizen, citing inconsistencies in the documents he produced to claim his citizenship. These included a copy of the 1951 National Register of Citizens featuring his father and grandparents, voter identity cards, a permanent account number, a school certificate, and an original land purchase deed of 1973.

On the draw



Railways sees 4% growth in freight

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Railways registered steady growth in both freight transportation and passenger services during June 2026, as compared with the corresponding month last year, the Railway Ministry said in a statement.

The Railways loaded 142.21 million tonnes of freight during June 2026, compared with 136.71 million tonnes in the corresponding month last year, registering a growth of 4%.

"Freight earnings also recorded healthy growth, generating an additional revenue of about ₹430 crore, an increase of 3 per cent over June 2025," the Ministry added in the statement.

PF Rules notified; no word on hike in minimum pension, allege unions

A. M. Jigeesh
NEW DELH

The Union Labour Ministry published on June 29 and 30 the Rules for the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) Scheme, 2026, the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS), 2026, and the Employees' Deposit Linked Insurance (EDLI) Scheme, 2026, replacing the old Rules of 1952.

The new Rules were required after the implementation of the Code on Social Security in November 2025. The Central Board of Trustees (CBT) had approved the draft Rules in its 239th meeting on March 2.

The Ministry had told the CBT that the notification of the new schemes will provide a legally sound framework under the Code and will enable incorporation of previously approved reforms.

The government said it will facilitate alignment of scheme provisions with the Code and remove ambiguity during the transition phase along with ensuring continuity and stability in administration of social security benefits.

The Ministry had said that the notification of the new schemes would provide a legally sound framework.

Trade unions, however, said the notification does not reflect the demands of subscribers such as increase in minimum pension and clarity in providing higher pension for the applicants.

To align the application of the EPF Scheme with the Code, the Rule was amended so that it will be applicable to every establishment, to which the Chapter III of the Code applies, and to every establishment belonging to or under the control of the Central or a State government.

In the EPS Rules, the current provision was that where the pay of the member exceeded ₹15,000 per month, the current wage ceiling limit for pension, the contribution for pension payable by the employer and the Central government will be limited to the amount payable on the employee's pay of ₹15,000 only.

In the new Rule, it has been amended as: "Provided that where the wage of the member exceeds the wage ceiling notified by the Central Government, the contribution payable by the employer and the Central Government shall be limited to the amount payable on wages up to such wage ceiling," giving an indication that the government may revise the wage ceiling for pension, a demand of the trade unions.

There is a minor amendment in the case of disbursing agencies of pension, which was earlier limited to agencies such as post offices, nationalised banks, treasuries or scheduled commercial banks including regional rural banks or co-operative banks.

In the EDLI Scheme Rules, the Centre has added definition of 'insurance service provider', 'insurance policy', 'commissioner', 'member' and 'nominee'.

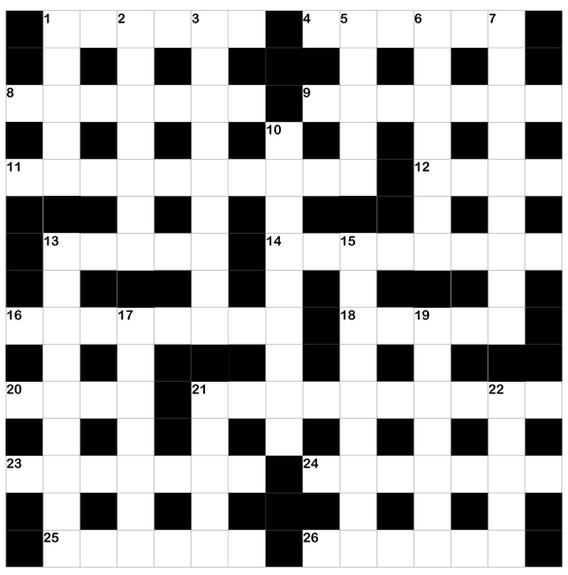
Centre of Indian Trade Unions leader and worker's representative in the CBT R. Karumalaiyan told *The Hindu* that the amendments are cosmetic and the long-pending demands of increasing the minimum pension and addressing the problems in distributing higher pension were ignored by the government. "Also, the ceiling for pension, which was fixed in 2014, should have been changed," he said.

TH CROSSWORD + 14836

(set by Crossant)

Solve this puzzle online and access more puzzles at *https://thehindu.com/crosswords*

SCAN TO PLAY



ACROSS

1. Weak Queen refused to fast after start of summer (6)
4. Warning boy to leave nasty, immoral habit (6)
8. Mounting covert police operation to nab foreigner (7)
9. Delighted when entering sanctuary in outskirts of Palakkad (7)
11. Nicely go around flashing a new Tesla (10)
12. Bird starting late gets worm? (4)
13. Further education lags in that respect (5)
14. U.S. never bothered about India and the world (8)
16. Maybe Vasco da Gama from Portugal learning routes in the beginning (8)
18. Military vehicles and tense, faceless rows of soldiers (5)
20. Follow hooligan cycling around entrance of estate (4)
21. In fact, session at home is fixed (10)
23. Boy working hard without accomplishment ultimately gets extremely angry (7)
24. What bowlers do when de Villiers bats - won't have slip mostly (7)
25. Makes pens out of unhealthy styrene primarily (6)
26. About to exit central building, understood? (6)

DOWN

1. Is finally all right? Great. (5)
2. Bit of cream soup (no piece of potato) and cheese maybe (7)
3. Listen, leaders of national eminence lost and are angry (4,2,3)
5. Lloyd botched an easy catch (5)
6. Judge one with a drink in Middle East (7)
7. Implements tariffs restricting export revenues in the beginning (9)
10. Say most regressive, senseless last words perhaps (2,2,5)
13. Revolutionary took best, essentially Marxist reading material (9)
15. Check and re-enter if wrong (9)
17. King and Queen maybe switching sides and allegiance (7)
19. More curious about India becoming rowdier (7)
21. Slow person needs backing from time to time (5)
22. Equalise at the end of tight game (5)

SUDOKU

								9
				2	6	4	5	
		6	3		5			
8		7					9	
2	4			8			3	5
	3					1		2
			2		3	9		
	6	3	8	9				
4								

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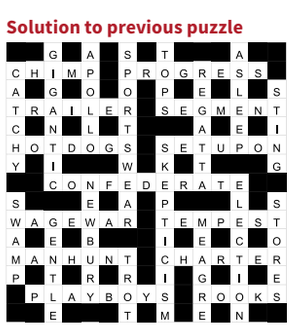
DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to previous puzzle



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

4	8	1	5	7	6	3	9	2
6	2	5	8	9	3	7	4	1
7	3	9	1	4	2	8	5	6
8	5	3	6	1	4	2	7	9
9	4	6	2	5	7	1	8	3
1	7	2	3	8	9	5	6	4
5	6	8	9	2	1	4	3	7
3	1	4	7	6	8	9	2	5
2	9	7	4	3	5	6	1	8

FAITH

'Bhagavan', the apt title

When we say 'Bhagavan', it refers to Sriman Narayana, said Sri Desika Srinivasa Thathachariar in a discourse. How did Sriman Narayana get the title Bhagavan? What meaning do the scriptures give to this word? The word Bhagavan consists of two components, "*bhaga*" and "*vat*". The suffix *vat* indicates possession, similar to possessing a quality. One who possesses *bhagam* is called Bhagavan. So what is the meaning of *bhaga*? Sastras define six auspicious attributes for the word *bhaga*. From the manifestation of these six primary attributes, all other auspicious qualities – such as Vatsalyam (compassion), Karunyam (mercy), Mardavam (gentleness), Hardam (affection), Sthairyam (stability), Dhairyam (courage) and Parakramam (valour) – originate.

The Lord possesses countless divine attributes. Among them, the most important are the six Kalyana Gunas. They are jnanam (knowledge), balam (strength), aishwaryam (lordship and sovereignty), veeryam (valour), shakthi (power), and Tejas (self-sufficiency). The above six attributes are known as the Lord's "*Paraavara Guna Shatkam*", the six foremost, primary, and essential qualities. Jnanam means he perceives all things at all times, simultaneously, directly, and by his own inherent nature. Balam refers to the immense power to sustain and bear everything without undergoing fatigue or strain. Aishwaryam is the capability to command, rule, and regulate everyone and everything. Veeryam emphasises that he remains completely unchanged in his inherent nature. Shakthi means the capability to make the impossible possible. Tejas explains that he is completely self-sufficient.

Can space oncology revolutionise cancer treatment?

Even as the burden of cancer is rising in India, space oncology is a rapidly emerging field, investigating how microgravity and cosmic radiation impact cancer progression and treatment

K. Ganapathy

Latest advances: Cancer is biologically diverse. Understanding divergent mechanobiological responses helps identify signalling pathways fundamental to metastasis, tissue invasion and treatment resistance. ISTOCKPHOTO

> When it comes to drugs, researchers have found that microgravity changes the cytoskeleton and spheroid formation of cells, which can help hasten drug discovery and also lead to reduced animal testing for drugs. As microgravity also allows for more uniform protein crystals and lower-viscosity biologics, this could help develop more stable formulations.

Cancer is a group of diseases where abnormal cells grow uncontrollably, invading nearby tissues and sometimes spreading to distant organs of the body. In India, an estimated 1.87 million new cases are likely to be diagnosed in 2026, which means 1 in 9 Indians reading this article are at a lifetime risk of developing cancer.

Damage wreaked on the body apart, cancer is one of the most economically disruptive illnesses for families. Every year, ₹3,400 crores is spent on direct and indirect medical costs for cancer: this, however, excludes income loss, debt, asset depletion and caregiver burden.

It is no wonder then, that with the burden of cancer rising in India and globally, that it is one of the most widely-studied diseases in the world. And it is this research that has led to the emergence of what could perhaps become a new frontier in cancer treatment: space oncology.

What is space oncology?

Space oncology is a rapidly emerging field, investigating how microgravity and cosmic radiation impact cancer progression and treatment. Space is a natural laboratory for studying cancer biology. Space-based environments are studied to accelerate tumour modelling and drug discovery.

Space oncology has already produced useful, conceptual and technological spin-offs, ranging from 3D cell-culture systems to protein-crystal studies for cancer drug development. This is in addition to refined thinking about radiation risk, tissue response and biomarker discovery.

Why this is useful?

Cancer is biologically diverse. Understanding divergent mechanobiological responses helps identify signalling pathways fundamental to metastasis, tissue invasion and treatment resistance.

Some cell changes that have been identified as a result of microgravity are cytoskeletal reorganisation, altered focal-adhesion signalling, changes in extracellular-matrix interactions and spontaneous formation of multicellular spheroids. Each is relevant to tumour spread and therapeutic response.

When it comes to drugs, researchers have found that microgravity changes the cytoskeleton and spheroid formation of cells, which can help hasten drug discovery and also lead to reduced animal testing for drugs.

As microgravity also allows for more uniform protein crystals and lower-viscosity biologics, this could help develop more stable formulations.

Microgravity also changes the tumour-cell biology that drugs act on, and improves performance of delivery systems such as nanoparticles and 3D formulations. The effects of microgravity on cancer cells, cancer stem cells, and drug response therefore, could help future therapeutic strategies.

International Space Station (ISS) studies have covered real-space and simulated-microgravity experiments across breast, lung, thyroid, prostate, melanoma, glioblastoma and hematologic cancer models. Cancer cells studied in microgravity and exposed to unique radiation environment of space behave differently than in conventional laboratory systems. These differences reveal mechanisms that are otherwise difficult to understand.

Reviews of real-space and simulated microgravity experiments show effects on cell adhesion, migration, proliferation, gene expression and formation of multicellular spheroids.

On microgravity

Microgravity also changes how tiny drug packages (nanoparticles) form. These particles carry chemotherapy directly into the tumours and release it slowly. Microgravity reorganises cancer-cell shapes, membrane behaviour and gene expression. This alters how cells take up drugs. Remove or reduce gravity, and cells experience major changes in fluid behaviour, mechanical loading and cell-to-cell interaction.

For cancer cells, these changes are not trivial. In microgravity, protein crystals and complex biologics form more slowly and uniformly without gravitational sedimentation. Microgravity, therefore, helps produce drug crystals and biologic formulations that are harder to make on Earth.

Breast & GI cancer in outer space

Breast cancer cells show changes in gene expression, morphology, signal transduction and invasive behaviour under microgravity. In a microgravity environment of space, breast cancer cells generally shift toward a less malignant and less aggressive phenotype. Under normal gravity, breast cancer cells attach strongly to their surrounding matrix using focal adhesions. In space, these adhesion points fail to mature, reducing the cells' ability to crawl, migrate, and metastasize. Key proteins that regulate cell cycle checkpoints, specifically cyclin D1 and cyclin B1, are heavily downregulated, pausing the division process and stopping the rapid colony-forming ability of the tumour. Breast cancer spheroids grown in space are more susceptible to specialised therapies.

Gastrointestinal and colorectal cancer, however, react to microgravity by accelerating their disease trajectory and become more aggressive. Reduced expression of drug-resistance genes, increased DNA/RNA damage markers, and reorganisation of the protein, F-actin, make gastric cancer cells more sensitive to the chemotherapy drug, doxorubicin.

Regulations and investments

In 2025, the United States' Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a subcutaneous form of an immunotherapy drug, pembrolizumab.

The U.S. space agency, NASA, had developed this through protein crystal growth research performed on the ISS, targeting the ADAR1 gene. These crystals were more uniform and better suited to supporting formulation work for this route of delivery.

Similarly, rebecsinib, became the first space-tested cancer drug to enter clinical trials. Following successful ISS-linked testing it received the FDA 'Investigational New Drug' status. Microgravity-grown tumour organoids helped demonstrate antitumor activity strong enough to support further regulatory progression.

These cases show that space-based research is now a legitimate pathway for drug development, not just a novelty.

This year, United Kingdom regulators and the U.K. Space Agency publicly backed the development of a regulatory pathway in outer space.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), and the Regulatory Innovation Office have streamlined inter-agency bureaucracy. The specific 'dual-regulation' hurdles that previously made space-based pharmacology legally risky for heavy corporate investment were addressed.

This has enabled startups to engineer highly stable, concentrated cancer therapies that patients can self-inject at home instead of hours-long IV infusions. For companies, the costs of setting up a factory are removed; instead they may be able to deploy compact units that operate independently in orbit.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), in spite of a modest $13 billion space economy, is the third- largest space-tech power globally and fifth among major government space agencies. Falling launch costs and new commercial platforms are making space oncology and space pharmaceutical manufacturing more realistic. With successful space startups in India the prices may fall further.

Space manufacturing is no longer about research. The picture is clear: the industry is moving from proof-of-concept to commercial production.

The microgravity pharmaceutical manufacturing market valued at $1.5 billion in 2025 is projected to reach $9.8 billion by 2034. Commercial space stations and nano/microsatellites (CubeSats) are now essential platforms for experiments. Small, frequent launches are becoming viable for pharmaceutical payloads.

What the future holds

Over 700 peer reviewed papers, 40 chapters and 12 monographs have already been published in the area of space oncology. At present, space oncology can be encapsulated by the well known saying: 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.' There is no doubt that humans will exploit outer space in the perpetual quest to solve the cancer conundrum on planet Earth.

(Dr. K. Ganapathy is past president of the Neurological Society of India and the Telemedicine Society of India. A former distinguished visiting professor at IIT, Kanpur he is currently a honorary distinguished professor at IIM, Jammu. drkganapathy@gmail.com)

THE GIST

- Space oncology is a rapidly emerging field, investigating how microgravity and cosmic radiation impact cancer progression and treatment. Space is a natural laboratory for studying cancer biology. Space-based environments are studied to accelerate tumour modelling and drug discovery
- Microgravity changes how tiny drug packages (nanoparticles) form. For cancer cells, these changes are not trivial. In microgravity, protein crystals and complex biologics form more slowly and uniformly without gravitational sedimentation. Microgravity, therefore, helps produce drug crystals and biologic formulations that are harder to make on Earth
- The microgravity pharmaceutical manufacturing market valued at $1.5 billion in 2025 is projected to reach $9.8 billion by 2034. Commercial space stations and nano/microsatellites (CubeSats) are now essential platforms for experiments. Small, frequent launches are becoming viable for pharmaceutical payloads

THE HEALTH QUIZ

Please send in your answers to health@thehindu.co.in

July 11 marks World Population Day, a day to revisit the importance of reproductive and maternal health. Here is a quiz to find out how much you know about the topic

Zubeda Hamid

QUESTION 1
This number has been doing the rounds in media reports of late: the replacement level of the total fertility rate.
What is this number?

QUESTION 2
Is the following statement true or false? A woman's eggs increase until she reaches puberty.

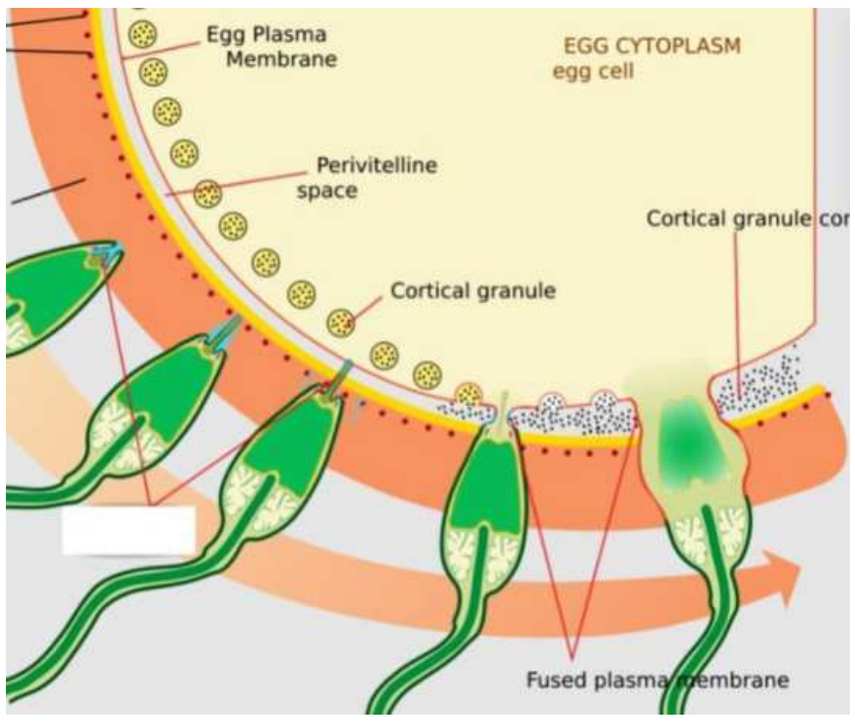
QUESTION 3
The two hormones necessary for the production of sperm are _____ and _____.

QUESTION 4
Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a common, but treatable cause of infertility. This condition recently underwent a name change. What is it called now?

QUESTION 5
What is one of the few temporary organs of the human body that forms part of the reproductive health system?

QUESTION 6
The reproductive system contains the largest and smallest human cells. Name them.

Answers to previous edition's quiz:
1. What is the most common type of headache condition? **Ans: Tension-type headache** 2. What is a type of brief, severe, frequently recurring headache, focused on one side of the head or around one eye? **Ans: Cluster headache** 3. Which type of headache ranks third in accounting for overall neurological disease burden as measured by age-standardized disability-adjusted life years? **Ans: Migraine** 4. True or False: Migraines are hereditary **Ans: True** 5. Rebound headache is a commonly-used term for overuse of what? **Ans: Medication** 6. What food is believed to trigger migraine in some people? **Ans: Chocolate** 7. Mucus building up in your _____ can cause a headache **Ans: Sinuses**
Visual: Name the English author.
Ans: Lewis Carrol
Winners: Viswanathan Neelakantan | Tamil Biswas | B. Sanjeevi



Visual question: What is the name of the vital reaction that a sperm must undergo to successfully fertilise an egg? WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Unwelcome surge

The buoyancy in GST collections is spurred by imported inflation

India's June GST collections rose 13.9% year-on-year to ₹1.95 lakh crore, driven largely by import IGST, which surged 34.6% compared with June 2025, up from 17.2% growth in May. Domestic GST collections grew by a more modest 6.5%, suggesting that the sharp increase in overall collections owes less to a broad-based improvement in domestic value addition. Some economists have argued that this reflects stronger imports of capital goods and industrial inputs. However, May petroleum products' trade data and Q1 FY27 data on the performance of the eight core industries, point to a rather different explanation. June GST collections reflect economic activity during May. While crude and petroleum products constituted a 54% rise this May (YoY) in merchandise imports by value, the other chunk was gold, which constituted another 34% rise. The surge in gold price, by nearly 60% between last May and this May, suggests hedging during difficult times, rather than broad-based economic activity. To stem gold imports, the government hiked its import duty from 6% to 15% on May 13, which likely added to the May import GST kitty. This period also coincided with the rupee depreciating by almost 6% against the U.S. dollar since late February. This coupled with a spike in freight charges, and a 14.5% rise on non-oil imports in May at elevated global prices mechanically raised the June tax base. This suggests that much of the import GST rise is driven by imported inflation and currency depreciation rather than domestic production growth, indicating an unwelcome increase due to higher prices.

Read alongside the performance of India's eight core industries, which expanded by only about 2.8% in Q1 FY27 compared with around 6% in the corresponding period last year, the domestic economy appears more subdued. Growth has been expectedly weak in crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilizers and electricity. The latest HSBC Manufacturing PMI reading of 54.2 likewise points to steady but moderating factory activity, marking the second-lowest expansion in 13 months. These figures come as India marks nine years of GST as a unified destination-based indirect tax. The government can point to the expansion of the tax base from about 66 lakh taxpayers in 2017 to over 1.65 crore today, reflecting better compliance, greater formalisation, and faster refunds, though input tax credit, litigation and federal balance in revenue sharing issues remain unresolved. GST has strengthened India's indirect tax architecture. Yet, the June numbers are a reminder that a growing share of the recent buoyancy appears to have been underwritten by imported inflation and a depreciating rupee rather than stronger domestic value addition.

A hold on AI

AI holds scientific promise, but it should not unfold unchecked

The UN's Preliminary Report of the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI drives at a few fault lines in the rapid investment into and proliferation of AI technologies: the Global South-Global North divide, with the latter poised to take the lion's share of the benefits of the diffusion of advanced AI models in different industries; and the challenge poorer countries face in regulating models far more advanced than what their own AI ecosystems can develop. These divides force emerging countries to choose between capital-intensive undertakings to get a seat at the table, or to accept the hand dealt to them by the half-dozen companies whose decisions shape AI access and use. These divisions are all the more urgent when seen in the light of what makes a country a voice that matters in AI: abundant electricity, highly capitalised firms that employ scarce talent with high salaries, and a drive to plow through policy resistance with a competitive zeal to outdo last month's capabilities. While the report highlights AI technologies' transformative potential in scientific research, its development is far more rapid than that of social media – an industry that had time to act responsibly yet deformed public discourse and affected democracies, even as people were more or less able to tell what was going on in real time. It is unclear whether individual countries, even China or the U.S., have enough power to meaningfully arrest how AI develops.

AI firms acting irresponsibly have already caused harms that would not be tolerated in any other industry. AI models have ensnared teenagers and adults in parasocial fantasies that have sometimes turned fatal; they have flattened the world wide web, grievously injuring the news media's ability to deploy resources in their respective missions to inform the public; they have unleashed an epidemic of deepfakes, undermining trust in the written word and images alike; and they have deeply intertwined their promises of Artificial General Intelligence with global financial systems, with possible catastrophic economic consequences. The most important task for governments is how to hold these firms to account when needed, as taking a backseat on this conversation – even if industry leaders ignore the Global South's concerns – carries far greater costs. India has already experienced the cost of not asserting itself in the technology development of the decade: even as Anthropic's Mythos and Fable held out the tantalising promise of securing vast cyber systems, the U.S. pulled access, leaving the firms that had these models to ponder the risk of a different model succeeding at attacking their infrastructure. There is a limit to visions of AI as a geostrategic asset; much needs to be done to address its potential for broad damage.

The right to a fair trial at the crossroads

Gautam Bhatia

Delhi-based lawyer

When, earlier this year, the Supreme Court of India denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in the 2020 Delhi Riots cases (while granting bail to five other individuals in the same case), one key question that arose was this: "how long is too long" for people to be kept in jail without being found guilty of an offence? At the time of the Court's judgment, Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam had spent more than five years in jail without trial; at the time of writing, that period is approaching six years.

Bail, delay, and rights

In its own prior judgments, the Court had noted that an extended delay in trial would trigger an accused's right to personal liberty under Article 21. Thus, even though the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) has strict requirements for delay, these statutory restrictions could not override the constitutional (and indeed, human) right to personal liberty.

However, in denying bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, another Bench of the Court noted that a delay in the trial could not create an iron-clad right to bail, but would have to be weighed against other factors such as the gravity of the offence and which of the parties was "responsible" for the delay. With respect, these observations appear to miss the point. Issues such as the gravity of an offence are factors used to determine, in the first instance, whether or not a case for bail is made out. To then invoke the gravity of the offence–which, at the stage of bail, is only an allegation made by the state – to override the question of delay essentially creates a sliding scale under which certain individuals can be kept in jail for decades simply because they have been "accused" of grave offences.

Indeed, this has happened: people accused under the UAPA have been kept in jail for more than two decades before eventually being acquitted, with the best years of their lives robbed from them. Indeed, the very fact that this has happened on more than one occasion ought to have given the Court pause.

Nor does the argument that the accused themselves might be responsible for delaying the trial hold any water. Whatever applications an accused (or, for that matter, the state) may make, ultimately it is the judge who controls the courtroom and the pace of the trial, and it is the judge upon whom the ultimate responsibility rests to ensure that trials are completed within a reasonable timeframe.

> As proceedings in the 2020 Delhi Riots cases show, endless imprisonment without trial raises urgent questions about liberty and justice

Indeed, it was clear that the Court itself recognised some of these issues when, in a rare move, another two-judge Bench recently openly criticised the Delhi Riots bail rejection as being contrary to established precedent and reiterated the fundamental principle that, under a Constitution committed to the rule of law, individuals cannot be incarcerated indefinitely without a trial.

In response, and in another case, the Delhi Riots Bench "referred" this question to the Chief Justice to constitute a larger Bench to resolve. With respect, the very fact that the Supreme Court is effectively debating whether people who have spent more than half a decade in jail (the amount of time that another famous political prisoner, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, did) should or should not be released, is a cause for consternation.

Bail and legal inconsistency

In the meantime, at the level of the trial court and the High Courts, conflict and inconsistency in judicial decisions continue to persist. Recently, the High Court of Delhi (correctly) granted bail to the Kashmiri human rights activist, Khurram Parvez, who had been incarcerated for more than four years without trial. This length of time in prison without trial weighed heavily with the High Court in deciding to grant bail. What is curious, however, is that the judge who (correctly) granted Khurram Parvez bail had denied bail in the Delhi Riots cases the previous year, when the accused in that case had already spent more than four years in jail. Nor is this the only instance of the same judge speaking with different judicial voices: in the Delhi Riots cases themselves, on the same underlying facts, the same judge delivered opposing bail judgments a year apart.

It is trite to say that no case is identical to the other. On an issue as basic as pre-trial incarceration, repeated inconsistencies across cases and courts undermine the rule of law and, ultimately, damage the cause of fundamental rights and individual liberty. These questions assume particular significance because laws such as the UAPA, in particular, have an undeniably political character, and it has been demonstrated across the world that states are only too happy to interpret these laws in a way that blurs the line between political dissent and what the law defines as "terrorism". Recent attempts in the United Kingdom and the United States around dissent linked to Israel's genocide in Palestine are examples of this.

What the judiciary must ensure

In such a context, it becomes particularly important for the judiciary to ensure that such laws are not weaponised. While legal interpretation is subjective, one thing is – and should be – crystal clear: that the state cannot keep people behind bars for years without trial. It makes a mockery of having a system based on the rule of law, and one that – to use the old adage – entrenches the process as the punishment.

It is unclear whether – or when – the Court's larger Bench will opine on the issue. In the meantime, however, there remain contentious UAPA cases, where individuals continue to be imprisoned without trial, and their time spent in custody continues to increase with no resolution in sight. Indeed, one such case is that of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, the last two individuals among the accused student activists who remain in custody in the "Delhi Riots cases". After the denial of bail by the Supreme Court, the case is once again coming up before the trial court this week; in the meantime, five years in prison have turned into six, and the cost – both to the lives of the imprisoned individuals and to the rule of law – has continued to become steeper.

Ultimately, therefore, this issue is both about individual human lives and about our commitment as a society to human and democratic values. As these cases continue to arise, the courts will once again have an opportunity to reaffirm these values, whether in individual bail cases before trial courts or when it comes to laying down the law before the Court. It is to be hoped that this happens, and that the cycle of endless imprisonment without trial is broken.

A shot at life, Mandsaur's model for HPV vaccination

Aditi Garg

Collector and District Magistrate, Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh

The birth of Savita (name changed) in Mandsaur district, Madhya Pradesh, 14 years ago was a moment of celebration for her family. The Banchhada community she was born into – a denotified tribe in Madhya Pradesh traditionally associated with sex work – welcomes the birth of girls, who are often viewed as future breadwinners. Yet, when a team of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccinators recently approached Savita's family, they were apprehensive. "Will she be able to work?" they asked candidly, worried about the vaccine's future impact.

Their hesitation was neither unexpected nor isolated. Although cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among Indian women, preventive health-care initiatives often grapple with low levels of awareness and social stigma. Cervical cancer vaccination faces a distinct set of challenges – low cultural sensitivity around sexual health and gender bias, coupled with vaccine hesitancy – making it a pressing public health concern.

In light of this, the Government of India launched a nationwide cervical cancer campaign on February 28, 2026, providing free HPV vaccinations to 1.15 crore girls aged 14-15 years. India bears a quarter of the global cervical cancer burden, reporting over 1.2 lakh new cases and 80,000 deaths annually. Since nearly 95% of cases are caused by high-risk HPV strains, vaccination offers a significant preventive breakthrough.

From data to coverage

To implement the programme effectively and inclusively, the Mandsaur district administration adopted a data-driven, decentralised and adaptive strategy. For exhaustive coverage, the most vulnerable and often overlooked populations were targeted first.

Girls from difficult-to-reach communities – Banchhadas, nomadic tribes, urban slums, and school dropouts – became the starting point. These "missed populations" are at greater risk of falling off the radar of government service delivery.

At the grassroots, the challenge is often not vaccine hesitancy but data invisibility. Leveraging multiple government databases – Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK), SAMAGRA MP (a citizen-centric social security platform by the Government of Madhya Pradesh) and Ladli Laxmi Yojana hyper-localised target lists were created. Fragmented records were transformed into actionable intelligence. Door-to-door surveys and tracking through SAMAGRA IDs ensured that eligible girls did not fall through statistical gaps. School and anganwadi enrolment gaps over the years were meticulously analysed to prepare village-level Master Line Lists. Rapid identification of 'low-coverage/high-resistance' areas enabled coordinated micro-planning. Mapping vulnerable groups geographically also enabled customising communication strategies, tailored to cultural sensitivities.

> This district in Madhya Pradesh has demonstrated effective grassroots strategies for HPV vaccination delivery

Reducing barriers through 'nudges'

Behavioural insights played a pivotal role in grassroots' saturation. The district relied on the "Nudge Approach" that helped design an environment where vaccination became the default choice. This helped in effectively breaking down grassroots barriers such as reluctance, inertia, social discomfort. Health-care workers informed families that their daughters were 'due for vaccination', rather than asking them to choose to vaccinate. Families who refused vaccinations received repeated counselling visits by health-care teams. Schools and local bodies arranged transportation to eliminate logistical barriers, simplifying access.

Misinformation hoaxes and myths around vaccine-induced infertility resulted in initial resistance. To counter rumours, the administration launched targeted awareness campaigns involving Gen-Z influencers and youth icons. National-level athletes, young doctors, students, religious leaders and media personalities voluntarily joined the effort to promote vaccination and dispel misconceptions.

Social norms and peer networks served as powerful "behavioural nudges". Local events publicly felicitated vaccinated families and recognised vaccinated girls as peer champions. Gram panchayat and ward-level data sharing sparked both collaboration and competition. Recognition was given to both top performers and the most improved. "Digital nudges" and red-flag reminders for frontline workers enhanced monitoring and accountability.

At the cutting-edge implementation level, resistance often manifests as delay, doubt, and discomfort rather than outright refusal. Vaccinations were conducted exclusively under medical supervision at visible health-care facilities, normalising the practice of adolescent girls' vaccination. Experiences of women affected by cervical cancer were shared to create emotional resonance and encourage informed decision-making. Counselling sessions reduced stigma and replaced distrust with dialogue.

Strategy to impact

The HPV campaign was further integrated with on-going health-care programmes. Routine immunisation days, antenatal care clinics and the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan sessions were used to promote HPV awareness and conduct vaccination drives. When women accessed one service, they became more receptive to another, creating avenues for 'bundling' of health-care service delivery.

The results were significant. In less than 40 days, Mandsaur achieved 100% of its vaccination target – 493 vaccination sessions were conducted through 12 permanent and 27 temporary vaccination sites across the district. Girls who met the criteria, from 893 villages and 190 urban wards, were mobilised, moving from planning on paper to protecting the population.

The magnitude of India's health-care challenge must be met with the measure of its grassroots' actions. Policy design must bridge the yawning gap between intended outcomes and empirical ground realities. Behavioural and systemic "nudges" in implementation can leverage the human tendency to opt for preset choices. Dovetailing health-care data and grassroots innovations tailored to regional realities can bridge the last mile and deliver the final dose.

By moving from coverage to care, from data to impact, Mandsaur turned a formidable public health challenge into a collective mass movement. The district's inclusive vaccination campaign demonstrated how a simple shot in the arm can truly become a fair shot at life.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Horse-trading allegations

It has become hard to make sense of what is happening in Tamil Nadu politics. The election result has redrawn the political landscape with parties such as the Congress, the CPI(M), the CPI, the VCK, the IUML and MDMK providing the TVK-led government its crutches, and the AIADMK imploding. The so-called ideological like-mindedness has given way to opportunism. What these parties did was not quite ethical. Saying that it was done to prevent the imposition of President's rule was a lame excuse to rationalise their politically expedient move. It is most worrying that newly-elected AIADMK MLAs are tendering their resignations as MLAs and joining the TVK. If it is not TVK-style 'horse trading', what is it? The defections are no great advertisement to 'pure politics' that Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay professes to represent and uphold. The only plausible explanation for luring AIADMK MLAs is that the TVK does not want to rely on the support of the allies for long. The TVK's countercharges that the DMK is indulging in horse trading does not stand the test of contextualisation, given the respective strengths of the parties in the Assembly. The irony is that at the time of voting, electors were not aware of the possibility of their elected representatives resigning so soon after the election, for no good reason.

G. David Milton,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

Political morality, probity in public life and ethical propriety dictate that the sanctity of democracy needs to be upheld and preserved. Public trust is the core aspect in a democracy. Some fast-emerging events in the State drive one to infer that the very foundation of democracy is under attack.

V. Johan Dhanakumar,
Chennai

Blending experiment

The government's latest submission before the Supreme Court that ethanol blending remains an ongoing experiment raises many questions: if its full impacts are still being studied, why has ethanol-blended fuel become the default option for consumers, and why have concerns over efficiency losses and engine damages been so readily dismissed? Equally concerning is that the promised benefits of ethanol blending have yet to translate into visible savings at the petrol pump, with fuel prices remaining high and consumers left wondering where the gains are.

Himangka Kaushik,
New Delhi

Corrections & Clarifications

In the Editorial, "Yes and no" (July 2), the first sentence should have said "... based on Ministry of Panchayati Raj surveys".

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Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Has the expansion to 48 teams affected the quality of the World Cup?

PARLEY

Pradhyum Reddy
is a coach and commentator

Lallianzuala Chhangte
is an Indian National team footballer

In January 2017, when FIFA expanded the World Cup to 48 teams, starting with the 2026 edition, there were mixed feelings. Many welcomed the move, arguing that the flagship event of the planet's most popular sport should have more than just 32 outfits. But there was criticism too, for many felt that the increase would dilute the quality of football. What does evidence from the ongoing World Cup in North America say? **Pradhyum Reddy** and **Lallianzuala Chhangte** discuss this in a conversation moderated by **N. Sudarshan**. Edited excerpts:

How has the World Cup watching experience been so far?

Pradhyum Reddy: Apart from the time difference, it has been really enjoyable. Before the World Cup, there was talk about a lot of the negatives, but it is good to see the crowds. This is what makes the World Cup so interesting, like the stories about the Scottish fans in Boston and the colour that the African sides bring. Teams have caught us by surprise and that gulf with European and South American sides keeps getting smaller. Teams like Cape Verde and the Democratic Republic of Congo have made it really interesting.

Lallianzuala Chhangte: The biggest thing I have noticed is how competitive football has become. Every team is better prepared and there are very few easy games. From a player's point of view, it is really inspiring to see how much nations have progressed. It is really exciting to see more countries get the opportunity to compete on a bigger stage.

Many feared an abundance of one-sided contests. How do you rate the quality?

PR: There have not been many blowout games. It is good to see the so-called smaller countries coming through. There has been a lot of gate-keeping by European countries over the years. If it is called a World Cup, it should be representative of the world and not just five or six countries from South America and the European elite. Nine of the [10] African countries qualified for the second phase. The Asian countries started well, and then the gulf in quality became visible.

But [overall], it has been good, and this is what inspires nations. Even from an Indian perspective, you will get fans who do not normally follow Indian football suddenly getting involved. It is a good gauge of where we are, and the direction in which world football is growing in terms of player quality and styles.

Changes begin: Cape Verde, the third-smallest country to qualify, reached the knockout rounds. REUTERS

LC: The tournament has answered many doubts. Expanding the World Cup has given more nations a chance to dream bigger. I do not think the quality has suffered. In fact, it has been shown that the gap between many countries is getting smaller because football is developing everywhere.

Cape Verde, the third-smallest country to qualify, reached the knockout rounds. Only Mexico, Argentina and France won all three of their group-stage matches. Is this proof of the quality improving?

LC: Absolutely. It proves that football is not just about population or history anymore. With the right planning, right investment and belief, even smaller nations can compete with the best.

PR: One of the disadvantages of the 48-team World Cup is the way eight third-placed sides [from the group stage] go through. It leads to the situation where you are probably not going to have three wins like Argentina, Mexico and France because you can pretty much qualify after two wins.

That said, you cannot just play to get three draws because you have seen teams even with one win not go through. So there is an incentive to [get a win] and that is why you have seen some really good counter-attacking football. Players all over the world are very well prepared physically. So, if they can be defensively organised, the gulf narrows. That is the great leveler we have seen this time.

Asia doubled its slots for the 2026 World Cup, helping Uzbekistan and Jordan make the grade. They lost all their matches, but what effect can World Cup qualification have on a country?

> Expanding the World Cup has given more nations a chance to dream bigger. It has been shown that the gap between many countries is getting smaller because football is developing everywhere
>
> LALLIANZUALA CHHANGTE

PR: We should not look at the results of Uzbekistan and Jordan in a negative light. It is a massive achievement to qualify. Jordan was runner-up at the AFC Asian Cup (2023). Uzbekistan has done well at the U-17, U-20, and U-23 levels in Asia. So, if you can consistently challenge for your continental competitions, the pathway is there for success. Of course, countries that come in for the first time are not going to see success. You need one team to go far, like Morocco last time (semifinalist in 2022). That will inspire other teams to bridge the gap between themselves and the leaders in the region.

LC: When I look back at those matches we played [against Uzbekistan and others], I still feel jealous. But seeing Uzbekistan and Jordan feature in the World Cup also gives us hope. Qualification for the World Cup can transform football. It will inspire young players, attract more sponsors and big brands of the world, and it will improve infrastructure and encourage better youth development. The results did not go Uzbekistan's and Jordan's way, but experience at the highest level is invaluable.

Only two out of nine from the Asian zone made it to the round of 32. But nine of the 10 African nations progressed. What does it say about Asian football? Overall, do you think the sport is improving?

PR: A lot of the African players are playing in the top-five leagues of the world. That is the next stage of development for Asian football. African club football has not really grown as much as player development. But you look at Asia, there is a lot of focus on how the clubs have grown, whether they are successful in the AFC Champions League, etc.

Even among the elite in Asia, like Japan and South Korea, many players are playing in Europe. They have got a striker [Ayase Ueda, Japan] who was the top scorer in the Eredivisie [Netherlands]. Once the rest of Asia can catch up in producing players who go on to play at that level, the gulf will reduce.

LC: Every continent is improving. Africa's performance shows what consistent investment and player development can achieve. Most of the players from Africa are playing abroad. Asia has made progress too, but we still need greater consistency. Countries like Japan and Australia have shown what is possible with long-term planning. I think the gap with Europe and South America is getting smaller and smaller each year.

India is ranked 26th in Asia. When can we realistically expect to be at a World Cup?

PR: The simplest explanation is: you look at all the teams that have qualified, and they have gotten there by doing well consistently in their confederations. We have not qualified for the 2027 AFC Asian Cup. Qualification for the AFC competitions should become the norm. We have to be there at every single AFC U-23 and U-20 event. The [Indian] women just showed that they can do it. They were at the AFC U-17, U-20 and seniors. When our men's teams consistently compete at all age-group tournaments for at least 10 years, you are starting to build a group that could compete in a World Cup.

LC: We have not built an ecosystem consistently over a long period. There have been changes in directions, uncertainties with the league, challenges in youth development, infrastructure and grassroots football. These things do not improve overnight, but at the same time, it is not a reason to lose hope. We should not put a fixed timeline on qualifying because that creates unnecessary pressure. We should focus on improving year after year, and become consistently competitive in Asia first. Then, qualifying for the World Cup will become a realistic goal rather than just a dream.

As a player, how do you cope with the feeling of missing out?

LC: We were once close [to Uzbekistan], in terms of physicality and experience. One reason we are not catching up is that we don't have Indian-origin players playing here, and our players aren't taking the risk to play outside India. As coach Pradhyum mentioned, we need more players who play outside. For me, it might be too late. But the younger generation should go abroad and gain experience for at least four or five years. We need players who go out of their comfort zone, and that will put India in a better place.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Bhagyaraj, Bharathiraja and the memories they left behind

Two filmmakers reshaped Tamil cinema with distinctive storytelling, memorable characters and authentic portrayals of human relationships

B. Kolappan

I vividly remember the night I went to watch K. Bhagyaraj's *Thooral Ninnu Pochu*. I sat on the carrier of my cousin's bicycle as he pedalled against the stiff wind blowing from Putheri Lake in Kanniyakumari district. That night, we slept on the veranda of my cousin's neighbour's house and woke up to the scorching morning sun beating down on our faces, with the film still playing in my mind. Its unforgettable songs – especially *Erikkarai Poongatre* – have continued to echo in my ears even after decades.

The day Bhagyaraj died, I was in Thukkachi, a village near Kumbakonam. My Chief of Bureau, Ramya Kannan, alerted me to the news. I was stunned. Barely two weeks earlier, another of my favourite filmmakers, Bharathiraja, had passed away.

Bhagyaraj was an associate of Bharathiraja. Together, they transformed the grammar of Tamil cinema. Writing Bhagyaraj's obituary – and, before that, Bharathiraja's – came naturally to me because I had admired their work for decades. As a director, actor, scriptwriter, and dialogue writer, Bhagyaraj broke almost every convention of commercial filmmaking.

A gifted storyteller with an instinctive understanding of human relationships, he dethroned the larger-than-life hero and replaced him with the ordinary man from the street. He proved that charisma did not depend on a commanding screen presence or exaggerated heroics. Wit, intelligence, vulnerability and self-deprecating humour could be just as compelling. His films showed that an unassuming young man could win a woman's heart through ingenuity rather than machismo.

In *Indru Poi Naalai Vaa*, he and his friends are willing to do almost anything to win the affection of the heroine. Bhagyaraj's character accompanies the heroine's mother to the ration shop in the hope of getting closer to her family and even sketches a donkey because its milk is believed to cure the heroine's younger sister's ailment. Such scenes became believable because of his extraordinary sense of humour and impeccable comic timing.

Bharathiraja, by contrast, dealt with more serious themes, capturing the emotional landscape of rural Tamil Nadu with remarkable sensitivity. His films were marked by dialogues that lingered long after the curtains came down. One such line that resonates with me is Sridevi's poignant declaration to Kamal Haasan in the closing moments of *16 Vayathinile*: "*Indha Mayilu Unakkagave Eppavume Kaathiruppa* (will always be waiting for you)."

In Bhagyaraj's *Suvar Illatha Chithirangal*, the comedy scenes featuring Kallapetti Singaram and Goundamani, spoken in authentic Kongu dialect, testify to his deep understanding of society. It was from that film that I learnt the word *siluvanam*, used to describe a naïve person. Equally unforgettable is the street-side tailor's lament: "*Veppankaikku kood irandu kaaka varuthu; enakku kadankaranthan vaaran* (At least a few crows visit the neem tree for its fruits, but I am visited only by money lenders)."

I watched most of the films of Bharathiraja and Bhagyaraj in touring talkies. Those humble theatres, the crackling projector, the smell of the earth spread on the floor, and the collective excitement of the audience whenever a punch dialogue was delivered made watching a film an unforgettable experience.

During the summer temple festivals in our villages, *naiyandi melam* troupes would often play songs from Bhagyaraj's films. Even today, whenever I come across such performances, I request them to play *Mookuthi Poomele* from *Mouna Geethangal* and *Kadhal Vaibhogame* from *Suvar Illatha Chithirangal*.

I watched *Mouna Geethangal* with a young girl, her father and her brother. By then, I had begun wearing spectacles like the child character in the film and was constantly ridiculed by my classmates. Yet I cherish that film for a very different reason. The girl who watched it with me would, years later, become my wife.

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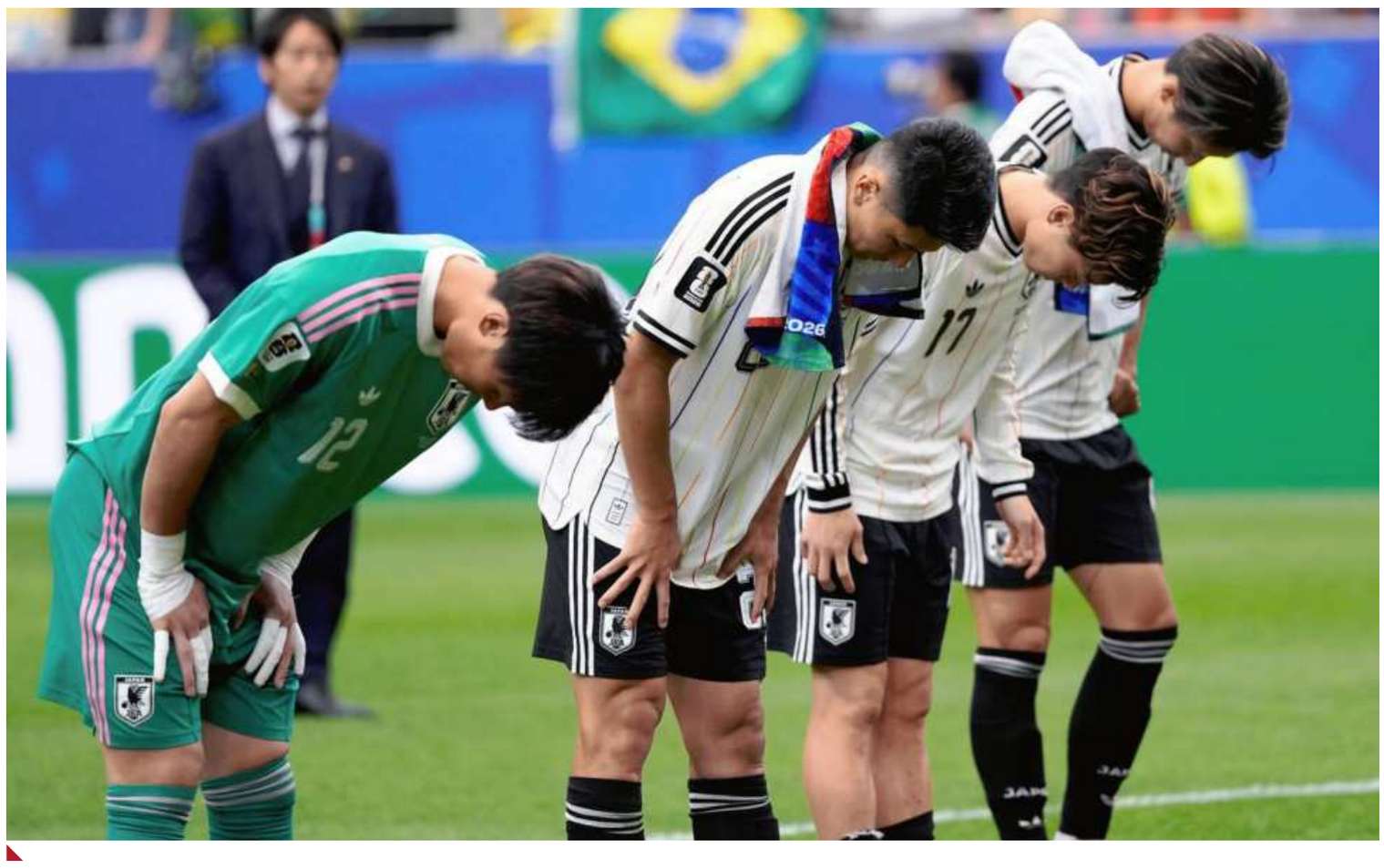
PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Bowing out



Grace in exit: Japan's players bow to their supporters after a 2-1 defeat to Brazil in the FIFA World Cup 2026 Round of 32 match in Houston on June 29. AP

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 3, 1976

Advertisements should carry conviction: Dave

Madras, July 2: Mr. P. K. Dave, Adviser to the Governor, to-day asked the advertising profession to avoid high pressure campaigns where all kinds of tall claims are made for particular brands of consumer articles.

"The public is now getting wiser and perhaps more cynical with this kind of high pressure advertising," he said. For common articles of consumption, manufactured virtually to common standards, he wondered what variations there were in real content. Delivering the presidential address at a symposium on "Credibility in Advertising" organised by the Advertising Club of Madras at Hotel Connemara, he said there was great scope for the profession. State Governments were vying with one another to promote programmes of industrialisation, sell their regions for industrialisation, to sell their industrial estates and so on. Besides, the printed word must teach the masses to tell them of their obligations as well as their duties.

Mr. Dave said advertising men should help carry the message of the 20-point programme to the masses. But he warned them against turning the campaign into "sloganeering".

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 3, 1926

Sea Scouts in Madras

This branch of scouting has not made much headway in the Presidency till now. But thanks to the efforts of Commander Digby-Beste R. I. M. of the Port Trust, serious attempts at starting a scout troop exclusively for sea scouting have become a success. The troop was organised a couple of months ago and more has been working vigorously and systematically. The idea of sea scouting was put before the Provincial Commissioner who granted permission to start a troop with the condition that precautions against accidents in boating or bathing should be taken. Commander Digby-Beste proceeded about the business properly and himself took a course of training in scout craft in the recent training camp conducted in "Rutland Gate", Nungambakam.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Amount to be given by U.S. to Tanzania under five-year health pact

1.3 in $ billion. The U.S. has signed an MoU with Tanzania to invest more than $1.3 billion in its health sector over the next five years. The agreement, signed late on Wednesday, is similar to those struck with countries including Rwanda, Kenya, and Uganda under U.S. President Donald Trump's 'America First Global Health Strategy'. REUTERS

Official death toll in Ebola virus outbreak in DR Congo

438 The official toll in an Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo now exceeds 400, according to official figures released on Thursday. The highly contagious disease has claimed 438 lives, with 1,406 people infected since the outbreak was declared in northeastern Ituri province on May 15, National Institute of Public Health said in its latest report. AFP

Toll in communal clashes in Nigeria's Niger state

48 Communal violence in Nigeria killed at least 48 people on Wednesday, as per a security report. The report, prepared for the United Nations, said "herder militia" raided farmers from Kamuku ethnic group in the town of Tegina in Niger state. The state has already been reeling from violence by jihadists, kidnapping-for-ransom and cattle rustling gangs called bandits. AFP

Amount to be spent by Belgium on NASAMS and skyranger systems

3.1 in € billion. Belgium is planning to buy 10 advanced surface-to-air missile system (NASAMS) launchers from Kongsberg and 20 Skyranger short-range air defence systems from Rheinmetall for a total price of 3.1 billion euros, a Belgian official said on Thursday. The plans could be announced at a NATO summit in Ankara next week, the official said. REUTERS

Fine imposed on *Tagor* tanker by France

1 in € million. The French authorities on Thursday fined the *Tagor* tanker, which they intercepted and impounded at the end of May over its role in shipping Russian oil and gas, €1 million ($1.1 million). The French Ministry of Justice added in a statement that the *Tagor* was now free to leave French waters following the payment of the fine. REUTERS

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Welfare promises and fiscal constraints

The West Bengal government's strategy relies on higher central transfers and a sharp rise in tax collections; if these projections fail to materialise, both its fiscal targets and political commitments could come under pressure

ECONOMIC NOTES

Subhanil Chowdhury

Riding on a historic mandate, the first BJP government of West Bengal presented its Budget on June 22. The BJP's election manifesto promised to provide ₹3000 per month to women, increase the Dearness Allowance for the State government employees to bridge the gap between the salaries at the Centre and State governments along with other commitments. The first Budget of the BJP government has tried to accommodate these pre-poll promises of the party, while simultaneously trying to reduce the fiscal deficit. The question is whether the expenditure and revenue allocations in the Budget will be able to do justice to the promises made by the government.

The government has budgeted a total expenditure of ₹4,28,557 crore in 2026-27 which is ₹82,083 crore more than the Revised Estimate (RE) of 2025-26. This huge expenditure is accompanied by a reduction in both fiscal deficit (from ₹67,774 crore in RE 2025-26 to ₹62,421 crore in Budget Estimate 2026-27) and revenue deficit (from ₹41,164 crore to ₹21,984 crore). How could the government increase its expenditure substantially, while reducing both the fiscal and revenue deficits? The answer lies in the so called "double engine sarkar".

If we look at the revenue receipts of the government, an increase of ₹75,618 crore is projected in 2026-27, as compared with RE 2025-26. This huge increase in revenue receipts is largely explained by a projected increase of ₹49,324 crore in the Centre's grant-in-aid to the State government, mainly via Centrally Sponsored Schemes. This bonanza of around ₹50,000 crore is the revenue impact of the so called 'double engine sarkar'. The government also projects an increase in the State taxes to the tune of ₹18,933 crore, non-tax revenue to increase by ₹4,508 crore and State's share of central taxes to increase by ₹2,853 crore in 2026-27 as compared with RE 2025-26. While the total increase in revenue receipts is to the tune of ₹75,618 crore, the total increase in revenue expenditure is ₹56,438 crore. This shows that the government is more concerned with closing the deficit than passing the benefit of the windfall to the people. This deficit figure is based on receipt projections which can also go awry. In that case, it may be politically difficult for the government to rein in the deficit and stick to its political promises simultaneously.

Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari, State Finance Minister Swapan Dasgupta (right) and BJP MLA Anandamay Barman hold the Budget book at the State Legislative Assembly House, in Kolkata. ANI

The expectation of the government regarding an increase in State taxes amounting to ₹18,933 crore seems difficult to attain. This is because according to the Medium Term Fiscal Policy Statement of the government, the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of West Bengal is projected to rise from ₹19,90,896 crore in 2025-26 to ₹21,48,244 crore in 2026-27. This entails a nominal growth rate of only 7.9%. In the year 2025-26, the growth rate of nominal GSDP in Bengal was 9.85%. In other words, the government is projecting a 2 percentage points drop in the nominal GSDP growth of the State but assuming an increase in tax collections of around ₹19,000 crore. Even with 9.85% nominal GSDP growth in the State in 2025-26, the increase in State's tax collection was around ₹13,744 crore as compared with 2024-25. The projected increase in tax collection appears difficult to achieve since the government has not announced any major policy to raise taxes or improve tax compliance. The government may be relying on closing the tax leakage due to corruption. Whatever may be the case, a slowdown in GSDP and a huge increase in tax collection is difficult to materialise simultaneously. Given that it has already committed to a reduction in fiscal and revenue deficits, any shortfall in tax revenue will be met by a cut back on expenditure. This can make the government's political promise to various sections of the people difficult to maintain. On the capital expenditure side, the government is proposing to increase the capital expenditure by around ₹15,000 crore as compared with RE 2025-26. The government has announced a number of infrastructure projects, new colleges and universities in the State. The additional capital expenditure is welcome. However, here too, the government could have spent more if it did not adhere to a policy of cutting back the deficit.

Laxmir Bhandar vs Annapurna Yojana

The Trinamool government's Laxmir Bhandar scheme covered around 2.4 crore women with a monthly transfer of ₹1,500. The BJP had promised to upgrade beneficiaries to the Annapurna Yojana, offering ₹3,000 per month. However, the ₹36,000-crore allocation announced for the scheme would cover only about 1.3 crore women, as announced by the government. The government has not clearly explained the basis for excluding the remaining beneficiaries. It was announced that individuals whose names were removed during the SIR process would not be eligible for benefits under the scheme. In the absence of transparent criteria, crores of women risk losing access to benefits that were promised without such restrictions. However, the number of women who will lose access to the scheme as compared to Laxmi'r Bhandar turns out to be more than a crore. BJP did not announce any targeting of the scheme in their election manifesto.

The government has raised Dearness Allowance by 20%, announced the 7th Pay Commission and promised one lakh new jobs. However, the higher DA will be paid only from October 2026, while DA arrears also remain to be settled. Given these commitments, it is unclear whether the ₹10,000-crore increase in salary and pension allocations will be sufficient.

The government has sought to balance fiscal prudence with its promises of expanded welfare and higher pay for employees. Its strategy relies on higher central transfers and a projected sharp rise in tax collections. If these projections fail to materialise, both its fiscal targets and political commitments could come under pressure. The coming year will test how successfully it can reconcile political promises with fiscal realities.

The author is Professor of Economics, Presidency University, Kolkata.

THE GIST

- The first Budget of the BJP government has tried to accommodate these pre-poll promises of the party, while simultaneously trying to reduce the fiscal deficit.
- The expectation of the government regarding an increase in State taxes amounting to ₹18,933 crore seems difficult to attain.
- On the capital expenditure side, the government is proposing to increase the capital expenditure by around ₹15,000 crore as compared with RE 2025-26

Why is the chargesheet in the Sarla Bhat case a milestone?

The killing of the 27-year-old was among the first targeted attacks on Kashmiri Pandits after the 1989 insurgency; the filing of the chargesheet is seen by her family and the entire community as a step towards justice

Peerzada Ashiq

The story so far:

After a gap of 36 years, the J&K Police's special cell State Investigation Agency (SIA) filed a chargesheet in the killing of Kashmiri Pandit Sarla Bhat, who worked as a nurse at Srinagar's Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS). The chargesheet named Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chief Yasin Malik among five accused, only two of whom are alive.

The SIA, which started re-investigation in 2020, decided to initiate proclamation proceedings against the absconding terrorist, Khurshid Ahmad Chalkoo, "the man who pulled the trigger".

He is believed to have exfiltrated to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). Meanwhile, the SIA chargesheet does not mention any rape.

What is the significance of this case?

The killing of the 27-year-old nurse was among the first cases of targeted killing of Kashmiri Pandits in the valley following the armed insurrection in 1989. According to official listing, the first such killing took place on September 14, 1989 of Pandit Tika Lal Taploo, an advocate and senior BJP leader and then Pandit Neelkanth Ganjoo, a former judge who had sentenced JKLF founder Maqbool Bhat to death in a murder case.

These targeted killings eventually led to mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits outside Kashmir valley. The SIA said Sarla Bhat was abducted from the vicinity of SKIMS on April 18, 1990, subjected to brutal torture and physical assault, and horrendously killed by automatic rifle fire at Omer Colony, Malbagh, Srinagar. The filing of the chargesheet is seen by the family and the entire Pandit community as a step towards justice. The magnitude of the migration, the militant violence triggered, can be gauged from the fact that over 60,452 Pandits registered themselves as migrants by 2014, as the community was displaced to different parts of the country, including Jammu.

Why the delay?

Kashmir witnessed targeted killings of both Muslims, mostly affiliated to the National Conference (NC), and Pandits in the 1990s as hundreds of youths joined militant groups and attacked security forces.

Violence by the JKLF declined after Yasin Malik announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1994. An unwritten understanding with the Union government meant that cases against him were largely not pursued, with a Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (TADA) court in 2009 keeping proceedings in abeyance in key cases, including the Rawalpora killings and the 1989 kidnapping of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's daughter. Reopening the Sarla Bhat case, the SIA said the investigation had stalled due to the climate of fear and intimidation during the peak years of militancy, which prevented witnesses from coming forward. It described the case as a symbol of one of Kashmir's darkest chapters of terrorism.

What does it mean for Yasin Malik?

The 59-year-old separatist is currently in the Tihar Jail. He faces sentence on two counts of life imprisonment and five 10-year prison sentences in a terror funding case in 2022. However, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has sought the death penalty in the case. Besides, Malik also faces fresh trials in two other major cases, including the kidnapping and the Indian Air Force attack. His outfit was also banned in 2019 under provisions of Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

The JKLF has distanced itself from the murder of Bhat. According to the banned JKLF, Malik on April 8, 1990, just 10 days before the gruesome murder of Bhat, jumped from a five-storey building in Narwara, Srinagar, to evade his arrest during a BSF raid.

The JKLF claimed that Malik suffered a head injury, which caused his facial paralysis, in the incident.

It claimed that the organisation had launched its own investigations into the killing "but could not carry it forward due to the continued raids by security forces on JKLF leadership". The fact remains that it will be the third major case of terror from the 1990s against Malik and he could face the death penalty if the charges are proven in the court.

Why is it tipped as a landmark development by police?

The police's SIA termed the chargesheet as a landmark development and a defining moment in J&K's fight against terrorism. The 737-page chargesheet was compiled after an "exhaustive investigation, bringing together a formidable body of oral, documentary, forensic, ballistic, medical and electronic evidence accumulated over decades and meticulously analysed".

The SIA says the chargesheet marks a historic milestone in the pursuit of justice for victims of terrorism and stands as one of the most significant breakthroughs in the investigation of legacy terror crimes in Jammu and Kashmir. The chargesheet, the SIA said, sends a powerful and unequivocal message that time can never become a shield for terrorism.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

Karl Urban and Laz Alonso as Billy Butcher and Mother's Milk in a still from *The Boys*, a satire of superhero culture.

All the world is a meme: when satire can no longer keep up with reality

From *The Boys* and *Game of Thrones* to *Karuppu* and politics in Tamil Nadu, a culture shaped by fandom, memes and star worship are reshaping how we consume stories, heroes and even reality itself, turning critiques into celebrations of the very myths they were meant to dismantle

Sudhish Kamath

When real world headlines resemble satire, does satire too reinvent itself as drama to appease fans of stars?

Eric Kripke's *The Boys* – the satire on superhero culture – just ended with "one of the good guys" turning evil for literally half a scene. The comics it was based on always headed that way. In fact, the comics eventually force Billy Butcher to confront the logical conclusion of his own crusade. The ending is a lot darker. Google or ChatGPT it at your own risk.

The Seth Rogen produced show glances in the same direction but barely lingers there. In the final episode, Butcher finally admits what had been obvious all along. He was "never going to stop." He felt self-righteous to the point of genocide and had become the person he was fighting.

Pleasing the fans

Given that Karl Urban's Butcher had become such a fan favourite, with his catchphrases and swagger becoming part of the appeal of the show itself, it is hard not to wonder whether modern stories are finding it increasingly difficult to sit with the idea that a much loved character you probably imitate in your head – maybe borrowing his "Oi"s – was always going to be as bad as they come.

A few years ago, in *Game of Thrones*, George R.R. Martin's take on politics as the domain of dynasts was always heading towards a reckoning for one of its most beloved rulers. But by the time the show reached its final seasons, people had named their children Khaleesi.

It also aired when people felt that feminism didn't need this demonisation or further witch hunting.

The challenge of catering to what fans want – during this flaky moment in our complex polarised times – is really messing with the political themes these stories originally set out to capture.

Martin's *Game of Thrones* was fundamentally a story about bloodline power and inherited entitlement. The trajectory was always headed towards a clash between merit and inheritance, democracy and dictatorship, outsiders and dynasts.

The audience simply fell in love with one of the monarchs.

In the first few seasons based on Martin's books, the specifics mattered. Characters took weeks to get to King's Landing. Political decisions had consequences. Once the books ran out, the show became entirely written for television.

lAnd now, geography didn't matter. Characters popped up from one location to another without having to ride for days as they once did.

It was always going to end this way. The lack of detail made the execution weak.

Tamil cinema offers a comparable example. R.J. Balaji started off making a parody with *Karuppu*. At the audio launch, Suriya himself described it as a spoof that would make people think.

But the marketing team had their own plan. The film was promoted more like a supernatural drama about the power of folk deities. More *Kantara* than parody.

People consumed it as a star-as-God mass entertainer while largely ignoring the satire.

R.J. Balaji himself chose to avoid the words spoof or parody in interviews and even put out a letter asking people to offer water to audience members who got possessed by God during the screening.

Diluted themes, altered meanings

I spoke to a filmmaker known for making parodies about this. He believes the filmmaker is in on the joke and is simply doing what is necessary to make sure the film reaches the larger mass audience.

The flip side is that audiences are increasingly diluting themes, altering meanings and changing the politics of stories. Director R.J. Balaji has spoken about how genre need not be consistent – he intentionally didn't want to continue it as a drama and wanted to make a jolly film. He deconstructed the film backwards from what audiences love. He had originally shot a climax that he himself called "average". It was only after watching the crowd response to *Kantara* that he became convinced that that was the route they had to take – the theatrical revelation of the hero in God's form, highlighting his glory through song, dance and action; the founding pillars of mainstream Indian star cinema. The place where audiences enter into a contract of worship the minute they stand for the national anthem at the altar of cinema.

The recent electoral success of C. Joseph Vijay in Tamil Nadu with a historic vote share suggests that this need for a hero may simply be the mood of the nation.

And that brings us back to *The Boys*.

Its final season was packed with parallels to current events: Homelander as Jesus, the "it's not AI, check the fingers" joke and other moments that felt uncannily timely. It was almost as if one of the writers had travelled through time and returned with the month's headlines before the show even aired.

This really is the challenge facing satire today. Truth is stranger. We now live in a culture where memes set news cycles.

If a digital wing can drop 150 memes and clips that travel further than actual reporting, then the meme is no longer commenting on culture.

The meme has become the culture. And like all cultures, it demands its deities.

The star must remain God.

When fandom starts driving politics, religion, entertainment and even the way we consume news, satire finds itself in a strange place.

Why let truth get in the way of a funny story? The joke is no longer on the outside looking in. The system is the joke.

All the world is a meme.

And we just play or get played.

The author is a film critic, filmmaker and screenwriter, most recently a writer on The Family Man Season 3.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

On this day, in 1908, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was arrested by the British government on charges of sedition. A quiz on the colonial-era law

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1
This newspaper opposed the Age of Consent Act, passed in 1891 after the death of a child bride Phoolmani, resulting in the first sedition trial under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code. Name the newspaper.

QUESTION 2
This lawyer successfully defended Tilak in his 1916 sedition case. Once celebrated as an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, he later became a leading proponent of the two-nation theory. Name him.

QUESTION 3
This lawyer, charged under sedition, famously said, "Affection [towards the government] could not be manufactured". Who was he?

QUESTION 4
This person was arrested on October 31, 1984 for allegedly shouting pro-Khalistan slogans near Neelam cinema in Chandigarh. In his case, the Supreme Court famously ruled that merely shouting slogans, without incitement to violence or public disorder, does not amount to sedition. Name him.

QUESTION 5
Which famous leader, who is almost always in the news these days, termed the sedition law "highly objectionable and obnoxious", adding that it should have "no place both for practical and historical reasons"?

Visual question: Name this cartoonist who was charged with sedition a few years ago.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:
1. Who holds the record of having scored the fastest goal in World Cup history? **Ans: Hakan Sukur, Turkey – in 11 seconds vs South Korea in 2002**
2. Who is the oldest player in World Cup history to win a tournament? **Ans: Dino Zoff, Italy – 40 years**
3. What are the official mascots for the 2026 World Cup edition? **Ans: Maple™ the Moose (Canada), Zayu™ the Jaguar (Mexico), and Clutch™ the Bald Eagle (USA)**
4. Which is the only African nation to qualify for the semi-final of a World Cup so far? **Ans: Morocco in 2022**
5. Which spectator phenomenon started in the 1986 World Cup edition for the first time is now popularised by audiences watching other sports too? **Ans: Mexican Wave**
6. Visual: Name this player who scored the first-ever Golden Goal in the Football World Cup history? **Ans: Laurent Blanc of France versus Paraguay in a last 16 match of the 1998 edition**

Early Birds
Tito Shiladitya | Pulkit Sathe | Suchit Narottam | Jose Jogi | Varghese Joseph

Language in conversation

Vaishali R. Venkat

"Genie, you've been off the radar for so long. Where on earth have you been?"

"Oh! Little Moon, I flew back to my roots to let my voice echo through the ballot box."

"You giant Genie! You can't even squeeze your little finger into the box, yet you're bragging about a ballet inside it!"

"Oh! Moon! It's 'ballot,' not ballet. Long ago, people were afraid of whispering their voting choice out loud. So they dropped a secret ball into a box called 'ballotta' in the Venetian dialect of Italian. Over the years, it became the mighty 'ballot,' which means a system of secret voting to pick the leader of your choice."

"Is 'ballot' a noun or a verb, Genie?"

"Both, Moon! In the sentence, 'The villagers dropped their votes into the ballot box,' it's a noun. But in 'The committee decided to ballot its members on Martin's appointment,' it's a verb."

"I get it now. Ugh, I don't like elections a bit. People curse, shout and throw bad words at each other like confetti! It's all noise everywhere."

"My little sunshine! It isn't confetti that decorates the air during a celebration. It's 'mudslinging,' an act of throwing insults or unfair accusations at someone to damage their reputation. It's a noun, Moon. For example: The election campaign was full of 'mudslinging.'"

Little Moon scrunched her face. "Ha Ha! Genie, if enough mud gets splashed on a person, people would probably shut their doors on them forever."

"You naughty little Moon! You crack jokes that once someone's smeared with enough mud, nobody would welcome them anymore; in real life, secretly shutting someone out like that is called 'blackballing.'"

"OMG! Another little ball has bounced into elections now! What do you mean by that, Genie?"

"Ah, little Moon! 'Blackballing' means voting against allowing someone into a group or organisation. Long ago, secret clubs used tiny balls for voting. A white ball welcomed a candidate in, but even a single black ball could reject them completely. That's why secretly shutting someone out is called 'blackballing'. And Moon, it acts both as a noun and a verb. For instance, Blackballing was common in old secret clubs. It's a noun here. When you say, "They are blackballing the new candidate," it's a verb."

"Oh no, Genie! Do grown-ups ever play fair in elections?"

Genie scratched his beard. "Well... some do, Little Moon. But others try very sneaky tricks to win. For instance, sometimes people even redraw the voting maps so that their favourite side gets more seats. That twisty trick is called 'gerrymandering'."

"Gerry... what?" Moon blinked.

"Moon, some election maps get twisted and stretched like chewing gum in a child's hands. 'Gerrymandering' is when people in power change the borders of voting areas so that more people inside them will vote for their favourite party and help them win the election."

"How do we use it in sentence?"

"As a noun: The opposition accuses the ruling party of 'gerrymandering'. As a verb: The leaders try to 'gerrymander' the voting districts."

"Long live messy elections, Genie. At least I don't have to see my class teacher for one whole day!"

Word of the day

Gainsay: take exception to

Synonyms: contradict, deny, dispute

Usage: *It is impossible to gainsay the importance of a good education in today's job market.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/gainsay

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈɡeɪnˌseɪ/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Text & Context'

INBRIEF

Coal imports decline 13% to 21.13 million tonnes in April

India's coal imports in April this year declined about 13%, or 3.14 million tonnes (MT), to 21.13 MT, the Union Ministry of Coal informed on Thursday. This was particularly led by the decline in imports of power sector and plants that rely on imported coal. Power plants' coal imports dipped about 24.9% to 3.51 MT in April this year. Plants designed to run on imported coal observed the steepest reduction of 27.45%.

Rupee falls 19 paise to close at 95.35 against U.S. dollar

The rupee pared initial gains and settled for the day on a negative note, lower by 19 paise at 95.35 against the U.S. dollar on Thursday, as the support from easing crude oil prices was negated by robust dollar demand from importers and corporate hedgers. At the interbank forex market, the rupee opened at 94.95 and traded in a range of 94.90-95.42 during the session. On Wednesday, the rupee depreciated 60 paise to close at 95.16 against the U.S. dollar. PTI

Danish brewer Carlsberg files for India unit IPO

Danish brewer Carlsberg said on Thursday it had filed for an IPO confidentially for its Indian unit with the country's markets regulator. The progress and timing of the potential IPO will depend on regulatory approvals and prevailing market conditions, the company said in a statement. The confidential route allows companies to keep their IPO filings private until the launch. The potential listing will add to an already busy year for India's IPO market. REUTERS

'Fuel prices will fall only after cheaper crude reaches India'

Puri says fuel presently being sold was derived from crude oil purchased months ago when prices were elevated; OMCs incurred ₹74,781 cr. loss in June ended quarter from petrol, diesel, LPG sales

Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

Prices of petrol and diesel will come down only after cheaper crude oil reaches Indian shores and refiners, Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said, indicating that an immediate downward revision may not be possible.

The Minister also informed that State-run oil marketing companies incurred a loss of about ₹74,781 crore from the sale of LPG, petrol and diesel combined in the June-ended quarter. Speaking to reporters here on Thursday, Mr. Puri elaborated that the retail fuel presently being sold in pumps had been derived from crude oil that was purchased months in advance when their prices were elevated alongside that of their freight and insurance due to the conflict in West Asia.

Tank full: Mr. Puri stated India was presently holding crude stocks enough for 76-80 days. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

As a routine practice, refiners usually seal their crude oil purchases approximately two months in advance before receiving physical deliveries.

"The petrol and diesel that you buy from the dispensing stations today is derived from the crude oil that would have been obtained two months ago," he said, adding, "So, it was bought at the price available then. The price of crude oil [back then] was not this [about $70/barrel now]." "Today the crude oil that is sold at $70 per barrel or below will arrive much later," he added.

Strain on OMCs

Mr. Puri also stated that under recoveries stood at about ₹1.89 lakh crore in the June-end quarter.

This includes under recoveries of ₹19,905 crore on petrol, approximately ₹1.45 lakh crore on diesel and ₹24,148 crore on LPG.

On how prices may pan out in future, Mr. Puri said, "I am not worried about it, but I have to prepare for it," adding, "Stocking while [crude oil] prices are low, increasing storage space and intensifying outreach to bilateral partners - all that will go hand in hand."

Separately, in response to a query from *The Hindu* about expanding storage capacities, Mr. Puri stated India was presently holding crude stocks enough for 76-80 days.

This is inclusive of crude stocks at ports, refineries, pipelines and strategic petroleum reserves.

To queries about India's State-owned OMCs exporting gasoline to Russia, Mr. Puri stated that the purchases might be routed through traders and not directly from the OMCs.

Indian, Japanese PMs inaugurate Maruti Suzuki's fourth plant

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi on Thursday inaugurated Maruti Suzuki's fourth vehicle manufacturing facility at Kharkhoda in Haryana.

Two-thirds of Suzuki's cars are made in India and exported to more than 100 countries from New Delhi, Mr. Modi said during the launch at the India-Japan Joint Economic Forum.

"Kawasaki, Yamaha and Honda bikes too are exported to the entire world from here. Similarly, whether it is air conditioners or power grid equipment, precision manufacturing or medical technology, when Japanese expertise and investment and India's speed and scale join, then the whole world benefits," the Prime Minister said.

Today, the world is grappling with supply chain constraints, trade uncertainty, and a dip in global demand, Mr. Modi said.

PM Modi and Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi inaugurating the plant on Thursday. ANI

"When the going gets tough, the tough get going," he added.

The Kharkhoda plant will be scaled from half a million units to 1 million units, which would make it one of the largest car manufacturing plants, said Toshihiro Suzuki, president, representative director and chairman of Suzuki Motors. The projected total investment at the facility will be ₹35,000 crore.

Adani, IHC Group to set up aluminium project in Odisha for $11.5 bn

Lalatendu Mishra
BHUBANESWAR

Adani Enterprises Ltd. (AEL), the flagship company of the Adani Group, and International Resources Holding (IRH), the Abu Dhabi-based natural resources investment platform of International Holding Company (IHC) Group, on Thursday, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Odisha to develop an integrated greenfield aluminium project at an investment of $11.5 billion (₹1.08 lakh crore).

AEL and IHC will form a 50:50 joint venture for the proposed project. This will mark the entry of the Adani Group into the aluminium sector. The proposed investment is expected to be Odisha's largest foreign direct investment (FDI) proposal and India's largest FDI in the metallurgy sector, Odisha government officials said. The project comprises a 4 million metric tonnes per annum (MMTPA) alumina refinery to come up in Rayagada district on 3,200 acres, a 2 MMTPA aluminium smelter, a 4,000-megawatt (MW) captive power plant and a 1 MMTPA downstream manufacturing park, supported by enabling infrastructure, in Sundargarh district on 4,100 acres.

Bauxite will be sourced from Odisha Mining Corporation's Sasubahumali mines and Adani's Kutrumali and Bahalda mines. It will be transported via conveyor belt and rail to the smelter. The project is expected to generate about 53,500 jobs across construction and operations.

The MoU was signed in the presence of Odisha CM Mohan Charan Majhi and other dignitaries.

(The writer was in Bhubaneswar at the invitation of Adani group)

'Low-cost energy, growing demand led to aluminium'

Lalatendu Mishra
BHUBANESWAR

The Adani Group is entering the aluminium sector to capitalise on its low-cost energy business as well as on the growing demand for the metal, said Karan Adani, MD, Adani Ports & SEZ and Adani Cement.

"If you look at it, two aspects which is why we are entering into it. One, it's a very energy intensive business and it works in the advantage of the group as we are one of the lowest-cost producers of energy. And so, that is one of the biggest competitive edge that we bring on table," he said when asked the reason behind entering the business.

"And, second, obviously we see as digitisation. As manufacturing in the country increases, the demand for aluminium is going to rise. And we see that as a big opportunity, long-term opportunity for the country."

Karan Adani ANI

'Still importing'

Asked it the firm was entering an already-crowded market dominated by Nalco, Hindalco and Vedanta, he said despite such large capacities, India was still importing aluminium.

"So, this is a sign there is more demand. And there is going to be enough room for everybody to be in this market. And at the end of the day, if done at a very competitive pace, India can be a net exporter of aluminium as well."

Adani and it's proposed joint venture partner the International Holding Company (IHG) of UAE are expecting all approvals to be in place in the next 12 to 18 months.

"I would say it would take 4.5 to 5 years from now for this project to be commissioned and be up and running," he added.

Mr. Adani said the project would be funded via internal accruals of Adani Enterprise and 70% debt.

While the total project cost is pegged at $11.5 billion, 50% would be borne by Adani Enterprises, the holding firm of the Adani Group and balance by IHC.

Visa unveils OTP-less payment method

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Global payment technology company Visa rolled out Visa Payment Passkey (VPP), an OTP-less authenticated payment for credit card holders.

VPP users can authenticate transactions with the same method they use to unlock phones. This means One Time Password (OTP) will not be needed to verify the payment. One can use fingerprint, facial recognition, PIN, password or pattern.

"Whichever merchant apps you use, we will allow you to register biometrically and that gets used subsequently during transaction phase," said Ramakrishnan Gopalan head - products, India and South Asia, Visa.

BoB enters $600 mn out-of-court settlement with UAE's NMC Group

BL Bureau
MUMBAI

Bank of Baroda (BoB) has entered into a huge out-of-court settlement with the joint administrators of the collapsed UAE-based NMC Group, paying $600 million (approximately ₹5,700 crore) in a bid to avoid prolonged litigation, uncertainty and associated costs.

The public sector bank's stock closed at ₹260.15 apiece, down 4.18% (or ₹11.35) on the BSE on Thursday.

Undisclosed debt

The NMC Group was put under administration in 2020 after investigators uncovered billions of dollars of undisclosed debt and evidence of alleged fraud. This was one of the biggest corporate scandals in the Gulf. Incidentally, NMC Group's founder B.R. Shetty was conferred Padma Shri, India's fourth highest civilian award, by the then UPA government in 2009.

The U.K. proceedings are in the process of being discontinued, Bank of Baroda said. FILE PHOTO

In a regulatory filing, BoB said the case involved proceedings under Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) Court of First Instance as also the UK insolvency law and the UAE civil law, in relation to NMC Health PLC, NMC Holding Ltd and NMC Healthcare Ltd. BoB observed that NMC Health PLC, NMC Healthcare Ltd., NMC Holding Ltd. and their respective joint administrators resolved the claims between them and BoB in consideration for payment $600 million, pursuant to a settlement agreement.

"All claims, causes of action between them have been resolved without admission of liability or wrongdoing. The settlement agreement and its terms otherwise remain confidential. The liability of the bank in these proceedings is limited to this sum. Pursuant to the settlement agreement, the ADGM proceedings have been discontinued. The U.K. proceedings are in the process of being discontinued," said BoB.

"The settlement is to bring the disputes to conclusion thereby avoiding prolonged litigation, uncertainty and associated cost," the bank added.

IRDAI gives nod for Prudential HCL Health Insurance

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Insurance regulator IRDAI has granted certificate of registration to Prudential HCL Health Insurance to carry on health insurance business in India.

With this registration, the number of standalone health insurers operating in India has increased to eight. The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) said it took the decision to grant the registration at its meeting on June 29. This is the third registration granted during the calendar year 2026, IRDAI said in a release on Wednesday.

Prudential HCL Health Insurance Limited is a joint venture between the Prudential Group (UK) and the HCL Group (India).

In March 2025, Prudential had announced its plan to establish a JV with Vama Sundari Investments (Delhi), an HCL Group's promoter company, to operate a standalone Indian health insurance business. The JV aims to address the growing healthcare needs of the Indian consumer and contribute to the government's vision of Insurance for All by 2047, it had said.

Submarine cable project linking India, Malaysia, Singapore unveiled

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

A consortium comprising Microsoft, Singtel, Tata Communications and AI connectivity platform Lightstorm will build a submarine cable system connecting India, Malaysia and Singapore.

"The facility is designed to cater to the rapidly-growing demand from hyperscalers, GPU infrastructure providers and enterprises running AI training and inference workloads across the India-Southeast Asia corridor," Lightstorm said announcing signing of contracts to launch the building of the cable system. No details of the proposed investment on the project were shared.

Dual landings

I-2SEA, the cable system, would link India's east coast, home to the fastest-growing AI and hyperscaler data centre clusters in Hyderabad and Chennai, directly to Singapore, the region's cloud interconnect and AI hub as well as Malaysia's emerging data centre corridor in Kuala Lumpur. It would have dual landings in India, with the one at Machilipatnam providing shortest subsea access to Hyderabad and the other at a new diverse landing location in South Chennai.

Picture for representational purpose only.

"The I-2SEA consortium will operate under a joint build agreement. NEC Corporation has been appointed as system supplier and ASEAN Cableship (ACPL) as marine installation partner. The system is now open for capacity commitments," Lightstorm said.

I-2SEA is targeted to be ready-for-service in Q4 2029 and estimated length of the high-capacity cable is 3,600 km from Singapore to Machilipatnam with onward connectivity to Hyderabad.

"It is expected to deliver the fastest transmission on the Singapore/Malaysia-Hyderabad corridor, which is the most strategically critical city pair for AI workloads in the region," the company said.

Supermarket Chain Ratnadeep Retail files DRHP for IPO

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Supermarket chain Ratnadeep Retail, which has presence across Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka, has filed draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) with markets regulator SEBI to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO).

The proposed IPO will be a combination of a fresh issue of equity shares aggregating up to ₹400 crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of up to 1,48,60,000 equity shares by the promoter selling shareholders.

Ratnadeep Retail proposes to utilise ₹ 40 crore from the net proceeds of the fresh issue towards repayment/ prepayment of loan, ₹260 crore for setting up of new stores and the remaining amount for general corporate purposes.

For FY26, the company's revenue from operations stood at ₹2,223 crore and profit after tax ₹36.7 crore.

As on March 31, 2026, it operated 190 stores under two formats, Ratnadeep and National Mart with the latter also consisting of Style Mart focused on affordable fashion products.

New, inexpensive Chinese AI model is catching up with OpenAI

Lurking competition: OpenAI and Anthropic logos are seen in this illustration. REUTERS

Reuters
BEIJING/BENGALURU

Since DeepSeek shocked markets early last year with its cheap but powerful AI model, global consumers have been faced with a choice: Chinese offerings with lower prices and less capability or OpenAI or Anthropic, which have poured billions into development.

A model called GLM-5.2, launched last month by Beijing-based startup Z.ai, may finally be closing that gap in terms of Western interest.

Rival U.S. offerings

GLM-5.2 has Silicon Valley buzzing with its coding and agent capabilities, or the ability to execute complex tasks with minimal prompting, that almost rival leading U.S. offerings at a fraction of the cost, in what some experts are calling a "mini DeepSeek moment."

It has quickly climbed the usage charts on third-party AI developer platforms like OpenRouter, where it now ranks above Anthropic's models, while executives from cloud data platform Snowflake's CEO Sridhar Ramaswamy to venture capitalist Marc Andreessen have lauded its abilities.

"We now have a Chinese open-weight model that is as good as the currently available models from OpenAI and Anthropic," said David Sacks, U.S. President Donald Trump's former AI czar, last week before Washington lifted curbs on Anthropic's Fable and Mythos models on Tuesday.

Those capabilities have put Z.ai's GLM-5.2 model at the heart of a growing debate about whether China is finally catching up to the U.S. in the AI race, as technology executives warn that Washington's unpredictable regulation of the industry risks hampering its lead in the frontier technology.

NEWS ANALYSIS

"It is just a tick below Opus 4.8 (from Anthropic) and right up there with GPT 5.5 (from OpenAI)," Sacks said of GLM-5.2 on the All-In podcast, adding that "we cannot afford to do things that slow our companies down."

U.S. curbs fuel demand

The Anthropic curbs and the delayed public rollout of OpenAI's latest GPT-5.6 model have fuelled global demand for the Chinese model, some experts said.

"The international developer community is increasingly aware that relying solely on proprietary, U.S.-based API models carries significant risk," said Brian Tse, founder and CEO of Concordia AI, a Beijing-based consultancy focused on AI safety.

GLM-5.2's positive global reception also suggests increased interest in cheaper open-source development because businesses are getting stung by the rising and often unpredictable costs of using AI to complete tasks, as closed-source agentic AI tools consume more tokens, the units used to measure AI usage.

Z.ai, also known as Zhipu AI, declined to comment. Anthropic and OpenAI did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

GLM-5.2 currently holds fifth place on Artificial Analysis' large language model (LLM) intelligence leader board, which ranks performance across a range of benchmarks designed to measure overall capability, including reasoning and coding skills. And it is in the second spot on Code Arena's front-end coding rankings, measuring how well models generate websites and front-end applications, while operating at roughly a sixth of the cost of closed U.S. frontier models like Claude and the GPT series.

Z.ai has not disclosed how much it spent to develop GLM-5.2.

In a reply to Elon Musk on X last month, Z.ai founder Tang Jie said that the Chinese startup could produce a model on par with Anthropic's Fable before the first quarter of next year.

"The shift GLM-5.2 brings is that the open-source model has become a plug-and-play, out-of-the-box product," said Tiezhen Wang, former APAC lead at Hugging Face, a startup that serves as a hub for developers tinkering with open-source models.

"You just deploy the model and without doing any complex fine-tuning systems, it is in a highly usable, ready-to-use state. This drastically lowers the barrier to entry for open-source adoption."

President Donald Trump's biofuel goals hit reality as U.S. plants lag

U.S. biodiesel producers operated about 77% capacity in May, below the EPA's 90% assumption for mandates; May generated 736 mn biomass-based diesel RINs versus roughly 915 million needed monthly; AFPM has sued and urged lawmakers to reconsider the 2026 biofuel mandates

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
NEW YORK

President Donald Trump's effort to boost production of bio-based diesel and deliver on promises to farmers and rural communities is colliding with a market reality: U.S. plants are not keeping up with his targets. The production gap carries political and economic risks.

A sustained shortfall could send renewable fuel credit prices sharply higher and force the Trump administration to invoke a rarely used provision allowing it to lower the mandates it previously set to reflect market conditions.

Such an unusual retreat would upset farmers and biofuel producers who fought for larger quotas and who make up an important political constituency heading in to midterm elections.

The Environmental Protection Agency, which administers U.S. biofuel policy, set record biofuel blending targets for 2026 under the Renewable Fuel Standard, a law that requires refiners to blend prescribed volumes of ethanol and biodiesel into the fuel supply or buy compliance credits known as RINs.

For 2026, oil refiners must generate or purchase 8.86 billion RINs, the equivalent of blending a record 5.4 billion gallons of biodiesel and renewable diesel – a target that is over 60% higher than 2025 levels. Trump has touted the moves as a sign of his support for farmers. The EPA mandate assumes producers can run at about 90% of capacity over the course of the year. Instead, operating rates at U.S. biodiesel plants were just under 77% in May, while renewable diesel facilities were at 78%, according to Zander Capozzola, principal consultant at Argus Media. Some production is also committed to export contracts, where prices have been stronger because of supply disruptions tied to the Iran war. Those gallons do not generate credits toward EPA mandates. Refiners generated 736 million RINs in May, according to EPA data, well below the roughly 915 million needed each month to stay on pace, said Scott Irwin, an agricultural economist at the University of Illinois.

In focus: The Front Range Energy ethanol plant at Windsor, Colorado, U.S. REUTERS

> Sustained shortfall could send renewable fuel credit prices sharply higher and force the Trump administration to invoke a rarely used provision allowing it to lower the mandates

He estimates production through the first four months of 2026 lagged required levels by 1.41 billion RINs, a gap that would require output to exceed the industry's highest monthly production by more than 20% for the remainder of the year.

Run at highest pace

"The mandates effectively require biodiesel plants to run at their highest sustained pace on record and renewable diesel plants to operate well beyond any pace they've ever achieved,"Irwin said.

"There is no way the industry is going to meet its targets at the rate they are going," said Paul Niznik, director of energy at Washington, D.C.-based Capstone LLC, which advises refineries, fuel marketers and hedge fund clients. "The shortfall is causing widespread concern across the industry and what the policy reaction might be."

He added that market participants do not expect the EPA to intervene, despite having the authority to grant a waiver, and instead could consider measures such as lowering 2028obligations by changing how imported volumes are counted toward obligations.

Policy uncertainty

Production was held back for months as biodiesel and renewable diesel producers waited for the Trump administration to finalise guidance for the federal 45Z clean fuel production tax credit.

The guidance, released in recent weeks, removed some land-use restrictions and increased incentives for soy-based renewable diesel, changes the industry had sought for a year.

The changes provide greater certainty to expand production and sign feed stock contracts with farmers, said Jeramie Weller, general manager of Minnesota Soybean Processors, a biodiesel producer. Though the changes will likely hike output, it remains unclear whether they came soon enough to offset earlier production losses.

A surge in petroleum prices tied to the Iran conflict also dampened growth in biodiesel production, as supply disruptions boosted margins for conventional fuels, giving refiners greater incentive to maximise petroleum-based output rather than increase renewable fuel production.

Shrinking credit market

Lower-than-expected production is also depleting a cushion that has historically helped the market absorb shortfalls.

The so-called RIN bank – a stockpile of unused credits refiners can draw on to meet mandates – has been steadily depleted this year as production falls short and demand remains high. If the trend continues, analysts warn the buffer could be exhausted by the end of 2026, boosting prices for the credits. RIN prices have already surged to record highs, raising compliance costs for smaller refiners that rely on buying credits rather than blending fuel themselves. The tightening outlook has intensified lobbying pressure in Washington. The nation's largest refining trade group, the American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers, has been meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill to push the administration to reconsider the 2026 biofuel mandates. It has also filed alawsuit against the EPA. "Americans will pay billions more than they should if the RFS isn't right-sized," AFPM said.

Persistent plans mulls AI engineering edge by buying German firm Nagarro in ₹11,820 cr. deal

EXPLAINER

Lalatendu Mishra
MUMBAI

On early Saturday morning Pune-based mid-sized company Persistent Systems Ltd. announced entering into an agreement to acquire Nagarro, a Munich, German-headquartered digital engineering company, through a voluntary public takeover offer valuing that company at €1.1 billion (₹11,820 crore).

The acquisition will be done by Persistent Systems and its wholly owned direct subsidiary Galaxy Germany Holding SE.

Once completed, the deal would create one of the world's largest AI-led digital engineering companies with almost $2.9 billion in annual revenue and more than 46,000 employees across more than 40 countries.

What it is about?

Persistent Systems has signed a Business Combination Agreement (BCA) with Nagarro and will offer €81 per Nagarro share in cash to all shareholders which represents about a 140% premium over Nagarro's closing share price before the announcement.

Persistent wants to buy all outstanding shares of Nagarro and delist the company from the stock exchange of Germany.

Persistent has also entered into a fully binding share purchase agreement with Lantano Beteiligungen GmbH, the investment vehicle of the largest shareholder of Nagarro, under which Lantano has agreed to sell its entire approximately 21% stake in Nagarro (excluding treasury shares) to the bidder at the offer price.

Win-win deal: Customers can avail end-to-end digital transformation from strategy to execution.

Why this deal?

The acquisition is driven by one major theme which is building a global AI powerhouse.

Both companies believe the next generation of IT services will revolve around Artificial Intelligence, Digital Engineering, Cloud, Enterprise Modernization, ERP and Customer Experience (CX).

Rather than building these capabilities over many years, the merger allows Persistent to combine strengths immediately.

The transaction is expected to be cash EPS accretive for Persistent shareholders in the first year of the transaction. Persistent will fund the transaction with committed financing from Barclays.

Deal synergies

While Persistent has strong capabilities in AI-led software engineering, cloud and platform engineering also has sizeable business in North America with banking and healthcare clients, Nagarro has strength in digital engineering, AI consulting, ERP implementation, Customer Experience (CX), cloud & platform engineering and strong presence in Europe. Persistent with revenue of $1.7 billion has over 27,500 employees and has operations in 21 countries. Nagarro on the other hand has €1 billion revenue, 18,500 employees and operations in overc40 countries.

> **The combined entity will have over 350 major enterprise customers and aid cross-sale of services**

Combined entity

After the merger the combined entity will have revenue of $2.9 billion, over 46,000 employees and operations in over 40 countries. With North America revenue of $1.7 billion and Europe revenue of $600 million, the combination will serve clients across Banking, Healthcare, Automotive, Manufacturing, Consumer Goods, Technology, Media, Telecommunications.

Why deal is crucial

Stronger AI capabilities: The combined entity will have more AI engineers, large AI platforms, better enterprise AI solutions, greater ability to deliver large AI transformation projects.

Geographic balance

Persistent has traditionally been stronger in North America. Now, Nagarro brings deep European customer relationships, four of Europe's top five automotive manufacturers as clients, local delivery teams across Europe. This will significantly boost Persistent's Europe presence.

Larger customer base

The combined entity will have over 350 major enterprise customers, top global banks, leading healthcare companies, major automotive manufacturers and technology companies.

This would create more opportunities to cross-sell services.

What about Nagarro?

If shareholders approve the offer it will become part of Persistent which plans to delist Nagarro from the Frankfurt Stock Exchange. Nagarro's management and culture are expected to be retained.

Persistent says it does not intend to implement a domination and profit transfer agreement (DPLTA) for at least two years after closing of the deal.

What about staff?

According to Persistent the deal is focused on growth rather than cost-cutting. It has said employees can expect larger international projects, more career opportunities, greater exposure to AI technologies and continued respect for Nagarro's culture and leadership.

Persistent has also stated it does not intend to terminate existing collective bargaining or employee agreements.

For customers

Customers gain access to larger technology partner offering AI solutions, Software engineering, ERP implementation, Cloud services, Customer experience transformation, Data and analytics and Global delivery capabilities. They can avail end-to-end digital transformation from strategy to execution.

Next steps of deal

It needs approval of the offer document by Germany's financial regulator (BaFin), acceptance by at least 50% plus one share of Nagarro shareholders, regulatory approvals in relevant jurisdictions. The companies expect the transaction to close between Q4 2026 and Q1 2027.

Persistent, founder

Persistent Systems Ltd listed on the BSE and NSE is a global services and solutions company delivering AI-led, platform-driven Digital Engineering and Enterprise Modernization to businesses across industries. It is part of the MSCI India Index.

With 468% growth in brand value since 2020, Persistent is the fastest-growing IT services brand in 'Brand Finance India 100' 2025 Report.

The company was founded in 1990 in Pune by Dr. Anand Deshpande who is also the Chairman and Managing Director. Over the last three and a half decades, he has helped build Persistent from a small start-up in Pune into a globally recognised digital engineering company, contributing to India's emergence as a trusted destination for technology innovation and product development.

He has long believed that engineering, entrepreneurship and strong institutions are the foundations of enduring economic and social progress. Throughout his career, he has worked at the intersection of technology, education, research and public impact, helping create organisations and platforms that expand opportunity, strengthen institutions and build long-term capability.

He holds a B.Tech. (Hons.) in Computer Science and Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Computer Science from Indiana University, Bloomington (USA). Prior to founding Persistent in 1990, he worked as a Member of Technical Staff at Hewlett-Packard Laboratories in Palo Alto, California.

Conclusion

This is one of the largest acquisitions announced by an Indian IT services company. By combining Persistent's strength in AI-led engineering and North America with Nagarro's strong European presence and digital engineering expertise, the companies aim to create a global technology services leader capable of competing more effectively for large, AI-driven enterprise transformation projects.

DOHA

'Positive progress' in U.S.-Iran indirect talks: Qatar spokesperson

REUTERS

U.S. and Iran negotiators made "positive progress" during indirect talks in Doha, with the next round expected after the late Iranian Supreme Leader's funeral, Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Majed Al Ansari said on X. "The parties agreed to continue discussions over the coming period," he added. AFP

BERLIN

German ruling coalition agrees on major reform package, says Merz

AFP

Germany's ruling coalition has agreed on sweeping tax, labour and pension reforms, Chancellor Friedrich Merz said on Thursday, a breakthrough aimed at reviving the struggling economy and countering the rise of the far right. "We are working to increase the flexibility of our businesses," Mr. Merz told a Berlin press meet. AFP

BANGKOK

Thailand denies claim that Macron knelt before king during state visit

AFP

Thailand's Foreign Ministry denied on Thursday that French President Emmanuel Macron knelt before the country's king during his state visit to Paris this week, after an AI-generated picture circulated online. King Maha Vajiralongkorns trip was the first official visit by a Thai monarch to France since 1960. AFP

BERLIN

NATO plans to replace AWACS with Saab GlobalEye jets, say sources

AP

NATO plans to replace its ageing fleet of AWACS aircraft with GlobalEye surveillance planes from Sweden's Saab, four sources said, a move that could test uneasy relations with U.S. President Donald Trump. They said NATO will announce the GlobalEye plans during a meeting of its members in Ankara on July 7 and 8. REUTERS

Russian attack kills 21 in Kyiv as Ukraine hits Moscow's oil sector

Moscow says strikes were retaliation for Ukrainian attacks on oil facilities, adding that the bombardment was 'exclusively against military or military-linked targets'; Kyiv's long-range strikes have triggered the worst fuel crisis in Crimea since 2014

Associated Press
KYIV

Russia hammered Kyiv in an 11-hour drone and missile attack overnight into Thursday morning, killing at least 21 civilians in the city and injuring more than 90 others in what Moscow said was retaliation for Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil facilities.

Loud explosions shook the Ukrainian capital, where more than 50,000 people sheltered in subway stations after authorities issued air raid warnings, the Kyiv Metro said. Emergency crews dug through the rubble of collapsed and charred apartment buildings all day in search of victims.

People look at the site of a Russian missile strike that hit a residential building in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Thursday. AP

Russia's Defence Ministry said in a statement that the bombardment was in response to Ukraine's recent barrage of long-range strikes, which have caused severe fuel shortages and put pressure on President Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine's frequent attacks inside Russia – described by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a 40-day blitz – have especially targeted oil refineries, causing a fuel crisis that has frustrated Russians already feeling the war's economic toll.

More than four years after Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbour, Ukraine's technological advances in drone engineering have in recent months given it an edge, analysts and Western officials say. Its strikes on supply routes behind the front line have robbed the Russian army of momentum on the battlefield and made its progress slow and costly, they say.

Kyiv's forces have especially targeted supplies to Crimea, triggering the worst fuel crisis on the Black Sea peninsula since it was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014 and delivering a blow to the Kremlin's narrative that Moscow is winning the war.

Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said it was a "night of horror" in the capital, which had a pre-war population of roughly 3 million people.

The bombardment was "exclusively against military or military-linked targets," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said.

'Ukrainian state ordered Nord Stream sabotage'

Agence France-Presse
BERLIN

German prosecutors said on Thursday that the Ukrainian state ordered a 2022 bomb attack on the Nord Stream gas pipelines, complicating relations between Kyiv and its key military backer Berlin.

The sabotage, never claimed by any actor, destroyed three of the four Baltic seafloor pipelines of the major energy link from Russia to Germany and released huge amounts of methane into the atmosphere.

The Ukrainian government has always denied ordering the destruction of the pipelines, which had in earlier times allowed Russia to earn billions through gas sales to Germany and beyond.

Gas leak at the Nord Stream 2 pipeline off the Danish Baltic island of Bornholm, south of Dueodde in 2022. AFP

News broke on Wednesday that German prosecutors had now levelled charges against the Ukrainian suspect Serhii Kuznetsov, who is alleged to have led a team of divers in the high-stakes operation.

He was arrested while on holiday in Italy last summer and extradited to Germany in November.

In a statement on Thursday detailing the charges, including the alleged war crime of targeting civilian infrastructure, German prosecutors said that he was "an officer in the Ukrainian army" and that he and other military personnel had acted "on the orders of state authorities in Ukraine".

Iran tells tankers to use approved routes in Strait of Hormuz

Associated Press
DUBAI

Iran's joint military command warned on Thursday that all oil tankers moving through the Strait of Hormuz must use its approved routes or face a "forceful response," again ratcheting up tensions over a waterway crucial for international energy supplies.

The statement from the Khatam al-Anbiya military command, reported by Iranian state television, comes after both U.S. and Iranian diplomats met with mediators on Wednesday in Qatar.

It wasn't immediately clear what sparked the threat from Iran. However, the U.S. military's Central Command had put out a statement about having a meeting with officials from West Asia nations in Bahrain that said "leaders underscored their shared commitment to the free flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz". That appears to have been the phrase to anger Iran.

"Any failure to comply, deviation from the designated route, or disregard for the navigation protocols of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Strait of Hormuz will be met with an immediate and forceful response from the armed forces, endangering the security of the violating vessels," the statement said.

Unspoken conflict

Bold reflection: Chinese artist Ai Weiwei poses with one of his new works entitled 'History of Bombs', during a photocall to promote his forthcoming exhibition 'Ai Weiwei: Button Up!', at the Aviva Studios in Manchester, northern England, on Wednesday. AFP

Pakistan PM Sharif to visit Iran to attend Khamenei's funeral

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his top Ministers will visit Iran on Friday to participate in the funeral of late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was assassinated in U.S.-Israeli strikes in February, the Foreign Office announced on Thursday.

"The Prime Minister will convey condolences on behalf of the people and government of Pakistan to the Iranian leadership and the bereaved families while reaffirming solidarity with the brotherly nation in their hour of profound grief," Foreign Office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi said.

Shehbaz Sharif

Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Cabinet members and senior officials will accompany the premier on his visit. From Tehran, PM Sharif would travel to Turkiye at the invitation of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he said.

Vatican excommunicates schismatic bishops and priests, warns followers

Agence France-Presse
VATICAN CITY

The Vatican excommunicated six bishops from the ultraconservative Society of St Pius X on Thursday, while warning that any lay believers who "formally adhere" to the breakaway Catholic group would suffer the same fate.

The Vatican decree comes a day after the traditionalist group consecrated four new bishops, openly defying a plea from Pope Leo XIV to desist and exacerbating a rift dating from 1988 when the group earlier consecrated four bishops.

Calling the ceremony "an act of schismatic nature," the Vatican's powerful Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith – which is charged with defending Catholic doctrine – explained in an accompanying note that the consecrations were "in open violation of canonic law" and the excommunicated bishops "schismatics".

Newly consecrated bishops pray at the end of their consecration ceremony in Econe, Switzerland, on Wednesday. AP

For the Holy See, consecrating bishops without the approval of the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church ruling over some 1.4 billion faithful, is a direct act of insubordination, leading to the automatic excommunication of the bishops involved.

The excommunication covers the newly-ordained bishops – two French, an American and a Swiss – and the two existing bishops who presided over the ceremony in Econe in southwest Switzerland.

The rite, attended by thousands of worshippers from around the world, began with the society's secretary general, Foucault Leroux, stating that "any penalties and censures... are null and void".

The Society of Saint Pius X, which has around 600,000 followers around the world, comprises fundamentalist Catholics who strongly oppose the liberal reforms imposed by the Vatican II Council in the 1960s.

Nine killed and 20 injured as explosive device goes off at cafe in Syria's capital

Associated Press
DAMASCUS

An explosive device was detonated on Thursday in a cafe in the Syrian capital of Damascus, killing at least nine persons, Syria's Health Ministry said.

The explosion near the main courthouse complex left 20 others wounded, the Ministry said as reported by Syria's state-run *Al-Ikhbariya* network.

No group immediately claimed responsibility. Security forces rushed to the cafe and cordoned off the area as they investigate the attack.

The Interior Ministry is set to announce its initial findings soon, said Damascus Governor Maher Idlibi.

Syrian security inspects the site after an explosive device detonated in a cafe in Damascus, Syria, on Thursday. AP

Mr. Idlibi said the device appeared "primitive" and vowed that the perpetrators will be held to account.

A video circulating on social media showed several wounded people lying on the ground, with police officers nearby. Ambulances later rushed to the scene treating people on site and taking the more severely wounded to hospitals in the Syrian capital. The cafe was frequented by lawyers who worked in the neighbourhood.

Since overthrowing the Assad dynasty and taking power in a lightning insurgency in December 2024, Syria's new rulers have cracked down on militants from the extremist Islamic State group in an attempt to thwart attacks in and around the capital.

Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, since coming to power, has vowed to protect Syrians and reasserted the government's full authority across the vast majority of the country, wresting control back from extremist groups or Kurdish-led forces. However, several incidents such as suicide bombing in a Church in July 2025 have raised concerns among many Syrians.

People visit the site of the deadly October 7, 2023 Hamas attack in Reim, Israel, on Thursday. REUTERS

Israel marks 1,000 days since Oct. 7 attack by Hamas

Agence France Presse
JERUSALEM

Israel on Thursday marked the 1,000th day since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack with calls for a state commission of inquiry into the unprecedented assault that triggered the war in Gaza.

A series of sombre commemorations were due to be held across the country, as well as protests against the government's handling of events during and after the attack. The first began at 6.29 a.m. (0329 GMT) – the exact time at which the Palestinian Islamist movement launched its attack on Israel, triggering the war in Gaza.

"What weighs on me most is the fact that even now, 1,000 days after the event, we are still in the middle of it, and what could have been done to reach some kind of closure has not been done," Dina Hertz, a Jerusalem resident, told *AFP*. "I mean a genuine commission of inquiry, genuine taking of responsibility, drawing real conclusions, and a true sense of shame and pain by those who were at the head of the system on October 7."

The Hamas-led attack resulted in the deaths of 1,221 people, according to an *AFP* tally based on official Israeli figures. Militants also took 251 hostages to Gaza.

Israel's retaliatory military campaign in Gaza has killed more than 73,000 people, according to the territory's Health Ministry, which operates under Hamas authority and whose figures are considered reliable by the United Nations.

According to polls, a large number of Israelis across the political spectrum support the establishment of a body to determine who is responsible for the failure to prevent the deadliest-ever attack on Israel. Mr. Netanyahu's government, however, has long refused to establish such a panel, the likes of which Israel has commonly set up in the past to probe major state-level failings.

Trump's barbs, attacks help draw European leaders closer together

In the latest example of how the often-divisive American President is helping to draw Europe closer together, after questioning Italy's reliability as an ally and claiming that Meloni had grovelled for his attention, European leaders rallied to the Italian Premier's side, thawing what had been frosty ties

Associated Press
ROME

U.S. President Donald Trump's attacks on Italy's Premier have had an unintended consequence.

After Mr. Trump questioned Italy's reliability as a wartime ally and claimed Giorgia Meloni had grovelled for his attention, European leaders rallied to Ms. Meloni's side, thawing what had been a frosty relationship over her hard-right political roots.

It is the latest example of how the often divisive American President is helping to draw Europe closer together.

European leaders are finding more reasons to coordinate on defence, tariffs and foreign policy as they confront wars in Ukraine and Iran, a ballooning trade deficit with China, and threats from Russia. That leaves Mr. Trump, who has often preferred to negotiate with European countries individually, with less ability to do so, analysts say.

"Most of the mainstream leaders realise that Europe is getting squeezed between China and America, and so, if not now, then when?" said Sudha David-Wilp, vice president at the German Marshall Fund. "They need to act as a bloc in order to maintain Europe's place in the world."

This newfound European unity could be tested next week at a NATO summit in Turkey. Ms. Meloni's spat with Mr. Trump has helped her strengthen ties with European leaders once wary of her party's post-fascist roots.

A pivotal moment came in March when she wouldn't allow U.S. bombers headed to West Asia to use a base in Sicily without parliamentary approval.

For years before then, France and Germany often kept Ms. Meloni outside the small-group talks that helped shape Europe's response to major foreign policy crises. That persisted into 2026 amid disagreements over the Russian war on Ukraine, including Ms. Meloni's rejection of a proposal by Britain and France to send European troops there following a possible ceasefire.

Shifting dynamic

But Mr. Trump's escalating attacks on Ms. Meloni – who called Mr. Trump's criticism of Pope Leo "unacceptable" – helped shift the dynamic, prompting European leaders to rally around her.

After all, they, too, have been on the receiving end of Mr. Trump's barbs.

Ms. Meloni was firmly in the fold at a late June meeting in Berlin with the leaders of Germany, France, Britain and Poland. And she met the next day with French President Emmanuel Macron in southern France – the first bilateral summit since the pandemic.

Bitter spat: In one attack, Donald Trump said Giorgia Meloni had 'begged' to be photographed with him at the recent G7 summit. AP

Even nationalist parties across the continent once aligned with Mr. Trump are recalibrating their stances because his trade policies and war with Iran are proving unpopular with voters. In France, far-right leader Jordan Bardella recently blasted U.S. actions as "foreign interference" and described Mr. Trump as "erratic" and "extremely unsteady." Mr. Bardella had previously welcomed Mr. Trump's brand of nationalism as a "wind of freedom."

In Germany, leaders of the far-right Alternative for Germany party have criticised the U.S. military campaign against Iran. The co-leader of the party, Tino Chrupalla, said in March he was "extremely disappointed" with Mr. Trump, whom he had viewed as a politician who would avoid new conflicts.

The changing rhetoric comes as elections approach, putting more focus on domestic issues.

"This pushes everyone to consider a European horizon more than an international one," said Lorenzo Castellani, a political analyst and professor at Rome's LUISS University,

These dynamics are playing out beyond the European Union, from the Arctic Ocean to the Balkans. When Mr. Trump threatened to take Greenland by force, protests erupted in its capital, Nuuk, and in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. Leaders across the political spectrum bristled at the threatened infringement of European sovereignty and feared it could shatter the already stressed NATO military alliance.

In Albania, a luxury development being planned that is linked to Mr. Trump's family business has become a major political issue, drawing protests in June.

The political risks of close alignment with Mr. Trump were perhaps most clearly illustrated in Hungary. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán – long regarded as Mr. Trump's closest ally in the European Union – was voted out of office in April despite support from the U.S. President and prominent figures in the MAGA movement.

An analysis by the consultancy Maplecroft suggested that negative perceptions of the Trump administration may have weighed on Mr. Orbán politically.

Unpopular friendship

Though Ms. Meloni remains closely aligned with Mr. Trump on issues like immigration and security, she has long diverged from him on Ukraine. Her steadfast support for Kyiv made her more palatable for European leaders and has been a key factor in forging a more united European front toward the U.S. During their public spat last month, Ms. Meloni said her friendship with Mr. Trump came with a heavy political cost.

In her response to his accusation that she had "begged" to be photographed with him while at the recent G7 summit in France, she wrote on social media: "As for my popularity, being your friend has certainly not helped it, nor does it depend on my relationship with you."

A recent Pew Research Center survey found Mr. Trump is deeply unpopular in Italy. According to the survey, 83% of Italians have no confidence in Mr. Trump's ability to do the right thing regarding foreign affairs. His handling of a range of issues – including Iran, tariffs, and U.S. immigration policies – received a low level of support.

With a national election due by 2027 – and possibly as early as next spring – Ms. Meloni faces mounting political pressures, including fallout from the unpopular Iran war and her former ties to Mr. Trump.

Voters across Europe could hold their own politicians accountable for the actions of an American President beyond their control, said Castellani, the political analyst. "At a certain point, when voters see the price of gasoline rising because of a war perceived as distant, they ask Meloni for the bill, not Trump."

Washed over

Rift over resort: Police use a water cannon during a protest against a planned luxury resort backed by a company linked to U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, on an ecologically sensitive stretch of the Adriatic coast, in Tirana, Albania, on Thursday. REUTERS

Hope fades, hunger grows a week after Venezuela twin earthquakes

Agence France Presse
LA GUAIRA

Hope of finding more survivors faded on Wednesday as Venezuela marked a week since twin earthquakes killed almost 2,300 people, while many who lived through the disaster were running desperately short on food. As the death toll mounted, Venezuela's interim President Delcy Rodriguez declared seven days of mourning, saying the country's "soul is torn apart by the human losses."

Tens of thousands of people remain unaccounted for. The majority of collapsed buildings in the hardest-hit city of La Guaira, just north of Caracas, have been marked with the letter 'D' for 'deceased' – a sign they had been searched with no signs of life found.

Rescuers at the site of a collapsed building after the June 24 earthquakes in La Guaira, Venezuela, on Thursday. REUTERS

"Time isn't wasted in a place where there is no expectation of recovering people alive," said Javier Rodes, the coordinator of a Spanish rescue team whose sniffer dog Nala searched in vain through the rubble for traces of life.

There have been miracle survivors, such as a three-year-old boy found alive Tuesday, six days after Venezuela's most powerful quake in over a century. A 44-year-old security guard was dug out alive on Thursday morning. But experts say trapped victims are unlikely to survive more than 72 hours. Venezuela's National Assembly President Jorge Rodriguez said Wednesday that deaths had risen to 2,295, and more than 11,000 people were injured. He said almost 13,000 people had been left homeless.

The United Nations estimates 50,000 people are missing. The two powerful quakes, measuring 7.2 and 7.5, shattered entire neighborhoods in oil-rich Venezuela, which has suffered decades of economic crisis that devastated infrastructure and health services.

With daily life in ruins, the focus is now shifting to survival. Many are homeless and food and water are becoming scarce.

Trump's $46 billion 'smart wall' project races ahead along U.S.-Mexico border

Associated Press
PHOENIX

For decades, all that separated the U.S. from Mexico was barbed wire.

Now, after a massive infusion of cash from Congress, President Donald Trump's administration is swiftly building what it has dubbed a "smart wall," a combination of 30-foot-tall (9-metre-tall) steel fencing and an array of sophisticated technology like sensors, cameras and towers allowing Border Patrol to surveil the territory.

The wall is under heavy scrutiny for the billions of dollars being dedicated to it when border crossings are at their lowest in decades. Critics say the U.S. is militarising the border as it increasingly deploys sophisticated surveillance technology to the area, impacting local communities.

"We are seeing a massive expansion of surveillance and surveillance technology across the borderlands," said Ricky Garza, border policy counsel at the Southern Border Communities Coalition, an advocacy group. "The wall in all its forms is harmful to communities."

Top priority

Officials say the technology is complementary to the physical wall and frees up agents for other tasks.

"It's a smart wall. It's not just a barrier," Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Rodney Scott said during recent congressional testimony. "It maximises the use of our most valuable resource, which is our agents." The wall has been a top priority for Mr. Trump, a Republican, since he first ran for President.

During the administration of President Joe Biden, a Democrat, the border emerged as a flashpoint, with thousands of people seeking to cross into the country each day. Those numbers started to taper off shortly before Mr. Trump returned to office last year and then slowed to a trickle, with his broader immigration crackdown serving as a deterrent for would-be migrants.

Flush with $46 billion to finish the wall after an infusion by Congress for immigration enforcement, CBP is inking tens of billions of dollars in contracts to build the wall and push along the President's signature project.

Tightening control: U.S. Army soldiers look at the border wall next to a surveillance vehicle in Sunland Park, New Mexico. AP

Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin said recently that a preliminary part of the wall will be finished by "this time next year." Mr. Scott said his agency is putting up 6 miles (10 kilometres) of wall a week. Hundreds of miles had already been built before Mr. Trump returned to office. As of mid-June 2026, CBP has erected another 74 miles (119 kilometres) and aims to build hundreds more. There is no wall planned for roughly 535 miles (861 kilometres) of the roughly 2,000-mile-long (3,200-kilometre-long) border, because rugged terrain already serves as a barrier. Ground sensors and towers will be used instead.

CBP is also going back to hundreds of miles of already built wall and adding more technology, lights and roads. Along the long stretches of river in Texas that mark the border with Mexico, they're deploying 12- to 15-foot-long (3.7- to 4.5-metre-long) cylinder-shaped buoys meant to keep migrants or smugglers from crossing the border.

Technology is playing a greater role in the Trump administration's effort to make illegal crossings along the border more difficult, part of a broader transformation of CBP in the years since September 11, 2001, into an intelligence operation with a mass surveillance network whose reach extends far beyond the nation's frontiers, according to reporting by *AP*.

Privacy infringement

And critics say the border technology poses a threat. The Southern Border Communities Coalition says surveillance technologies can push migrants into more dangerous routes to avoid being detected.

Garza, the group's policy counsel, warned that surveillance technology infringes on the privacy rights of border residents and that locals have found ground sensors used to detect smuggler or migrant traffic placed on their property without their consent. Nayda Alvarez and her relatives own land along the Rio Grande roughly 125 miles (200 kilometres) inland from the Gulf of Mexico. She has found cameras placed on her family's land, and just last week she spotted a surveillance tower about a quarter of a mile (almost half a kilometre) down the river from her house.

"Are we expecting a war or something?" she said. "It doesn't make me feel safer."

Dave Maass, director of investigations for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on civil liberties related to digital technology, said the technology has made the border area "a hostile environment" for locals and would-be migrants.

RELENTLESS PURSUIT

You keep knocking at the rock until it breaks, says Tuchel

AFP

Head coach Thomas Tuchel likened England's comeback victory over DR Congo to "knocking at a rock until it breaks." "When the going got tough, they showed up. It was a difficult match against a team that played with discipline. But the players didn't accept defeat as an outcome. The message at half-time was to not give in".

STRONG STANCE

Pape Gueye lashes out at coaches, to take a break from Senegal team

AP

After Senegal blew a two-goal lead against Belgium to go out of the World Cup, midfielder Pape Gueye said he would not play for the team while the coaching staff stays. Gueye posted on Instagram that "as long as this technical staff is in place, I will take a break from the national team".

ELITE CLUB

Kane second to score 20 or more goals across World Cup and Euro

REUTERS

England captain Harry Kane became just the second player to score 20 or more goals across the FIFA World Cup and Euro Championships. Kane's tally touched 20 (13 in WC and seven in Euro) following his brace against DR Congo. Portugal icon Cristiano Ronaldo has 24 goals (10 in WC and 14 in Euro) as of Wednesday.

RAMPING IT UP

Ancelotti, we're coming for you: Solbakken issues playful warning

AFP

Norway head coach Stale Solbakken has sent a playful but highly confident warning to Brazil ahead of their pre-quarterfinal. He delivered a passionate speech to his squad in Norwegian before switching to English and saying "Carlo Ancelotti, we're coming for you!" prompting immediate cheers and applause from the players.

Belgium pulls off a Houdini against Senegal

The Lions of Teranga were on the cusp of victory with a two-goal lead through strikes from Diarra and Sarr; Lukaku and Tielemans score in the final five minutes to level things before the skipper completes a remarkable turnaround by converting a penalty in the 125th minute

FIFA WORLD CUP

Agence France-Presse
SEATTLE

Youri Tielemans scored the latest winner in World Cup history as Belgium mounted an incredible comeback from two goals down to beat Senegal 3-2 and qualify for the last 16 on Wednesday.

Senegal appeared on course for a first win in a World Cup knockout match since its 2002 debut after taking a 2-0 lead through strikes from Habib Diarra and Ismaila Sarr in Seattle.

However, Belgium forced extra time as Romelu Lukaku and Tielemans scored in the final five minutes, before the Aston Villa midfielder completed a remarkable turnaround by converting a penalty in the 125th minute.

The Lions of Teranga took the lead when Sarr's header from Sadio Mane's cross came back off the same post, with Diarra reacting quickest to turn the rebound home.

Belgium's best chance of the half fell to Maxim De Cuyper, whose curling effort from outside the area drew an outstanding full-stretch save from Mory Diaw. Belgium unsurprisingly turned to its all-time leading scorer at the interval, with Lukaku having already proven his value as a substitute.

But Belgium fell further behind six minutes into the second half when Sarr chested down Moussa Niakhate's long pass over the defence before firing an emphatic finish beyond Courtois.

Kevin De Bruyne and Jeremy Doku were hauled off as Belgium appeared to be heading out, but Lukaku grabbed his team a lifeline in the 86th minute.

Just three minutes later, Belgium drew level. Diaw failed to deal with Leandro Trossard's delivery into the box and Tielemans held off two defenders to nod into an empty net.

The match appeared destined for a penalty shootout until Tielemans went down under a challenge from Lamine Camara, prompting referee Said Martinez to award a penalty after a VAR review.

Delirious: Belgium players converge on Tielemans after his match-winning penalty. REUTERS

Saturday's matches

ROUND OF 32

Argentina vs. **Cape Verde,** 3.30 a.m.

Colombia vs. **Ghana,** 7 a.m.

ROUND OF 16

Canada vs. **Morocco,** 10.30 p.m.

The day and time(s) pertain to India

Stat attack

2 **TIELEMANS** is the second Belgian to score two or more goals in a knockout game after Voorhoof (1934)

2 Belgium becomes the second country to win two games after trailing by two goals, the first being West Germany

2 USA registers its second win in a knockout game, and the first since 2002 (2-0 vs. Mexico, round of 16)

4 USA has scored the most set-piece goals in this edition

4 Balogun is the fourth player after Zidane (2006 final), Ronaldinho (2002 quarterfinals) and Garrincha (1962 semifinals) to find the back of the net and also get a red card in a knockout match

32 Tillman is the first American to strike off a direct free-kick since Wynalda in 1994 (vs. Switzerland)

1 Gordon became the first man to provide two or more assists as a substitute

4 The number of headed goals by Kane. Only Klose (7) and Gerd Muller (5) have more

6 Kane has become the sixth to score five or more goals in two different editions after Cubillas, Klose, Thomas Muller, Messi and Mbappe

13 Kane has gone past Pele's tally (12) and is now level with Fontaine

124m 44s Tielemans' strike is the latest goal and the latest game-winning goal ever in the quadrennial showpiece

Compiled by **ANIRUDH VELAMURI**

Hero moment: Balogun nets USA's first goal. REUTERS

USA sails as Balogun sees red after scoring

Agence France-Presse
SANTA CLARA

Folarin Balogun scored and was sent off as the United States beat Bosnia and Herzegovina 2-0 to reach the last 16 of the World Cup on Wednesday.

The co-host's first World Cup knockout victory in nearly a quarter-century – and only its second ever – sets up a clash with Belgium in Seattle on Monday.

Balogun's goal on the stroke of half-time had sent the California crowd into delirium, with some 30 million Americans expected to be watching the blockbuster clash across the nation.

But the striker saw red as VAR intervened following a nasty clash with Bosnia's Tarik Muharemovic. But even with the USA forced into a 10-man rearguard action, Malik Tillman curled in a free-kick to secure the win.

The Americans rode out a nervy 10 minutes of stoppage time, substitue Ermin Mahmic's shot flashing inches wide of the far post.

But they ultimately claimed a clean sheet and a historic win.

THE RESULTS

Round of 32:
Belgium 3 (Lukaku 86, Tielemans 89, 120+5-pen) bt Senegal 2 (Diarra 24, I Sarr 51) (aet).
United States 2 (Balogun 45, Tillman 82) bt Bosnia and Herzegovina 0.

A clash of styles as Australia meets Egypt

Ayon Sengupta
DALLAS

Australia has made a habit of stretching World Cup matches into something uncomfortable, and that may yet be its greatest weapon in Arlington. Tony Popovic's side arrives in the round of 32 not with the glamour of some of the tournament's more expansive teams, but with defensive discipline and resilience that can carry sides deep into knockout football. Standing opposite is an Egyptian team enjoying one of the finest World Cups in its history and sensing the chance to turn a breakthrough campaign into something even bigger.

For the Socceroos, this is an opportunity to reach the last 16 in back-to-back editions and, more significantly, to win a World Cup knockout match for the first time. Popovic's men have been difficult to break down throughout the tournament, and relying on the authority of Harry Souttar, the calm of Alessandro Circati and the industry around them to keep matches under control. Only Spain has faced shots of a lower average xG value than Australia in the group stage. But it has scored only twice in the group stage and generated the lowest xG among all teams to finish in the top two. That places extra pressure on the likes of Riley McGree and Nestory Irankunda to inject thrust on the break, especially against an Egyptian side that can leave spaces when it commits numbers forward.

Egypt, though, arrives with momentum and more attacking variety. Hossam Hassan's team came through Group G unbeaten. Omar Marmoush has been the chief source of danger while the possible return of Mohamed Salah after a hamstring strain gives Egypt an extra layer of unpredictability, even if he is not fit enough to start.

The contest feels like a clash of temperaments as much as styles. Australia will try to shrink the game into duels, second balls and defensive concentration while Egypt will seek enough rhythm and craft to prise it open.

With Argentina likely waiting in the next round, both sides know this may be the match that defines their tournament.

Match starts at 11.30 p.m. IST.

Salah. REUTERS

Zverev marches into the third round

WIMBLEDON

Reuters
LONDON

French Open champion Alexander Zverev continued his bid for a second straight Grand Slam trophy as the German beat unseeded Valentin Royer 6-1, 6-3, 7-6(3) on Thursday to move into the Wimbledon third round.

Just weeks after ending his long wait for a maiden Major at Roland Garros, Zverev barely put a foot wrong against his French opponent, taking full control of the Court One contest from the outset and overcoming some late resistance to advance.

Last year's semifinalist Taylor Fritz continued his smooth progress by mowing down fellow American Patrick Kypson 6-2, 6-2, 7-5 to make the third round and remain on course for a maiden Grand Slam title.

"It feels great, especially when you're first on," Fritz said about going through in three sets. Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff, ranked 74th in the world, edged American 28th seed Brandon Nakashima 4-6, 7-6(6), 7-6(5), 6-7(6), 7-6 [10-7] in a battle that lasted four hours and 21 minutes to set up a meeting with Russian eighth seed Daniil Medvedev in the third round.

Indians exit

In men's doubles, three Indians – Sriram Balaji, Yuki Bhambri and Anirudh Chandrasekar – all lost in the first round.

In the women's section, defending champion Iga Swiatek cleared a potentially dangerous early hurdle with ease as she defeated former World No. 1 Karolina Pliskova to advance.

The Czech, back on the rise after an ankle injury almost ended her career, was no match for the Pole who won 6-1, 6-3.

Last year's finalist Amanda Anisimova overcame American compatriot Sofia Kenin to clinch a 6-2, 4-6, 7-6 [10-3] win and set up a third-round clash with 2025 Australian Open winner Madison Keys, who beat British wildcard Katie Swan 6-1, 6-4.

In another match, last year's quarterfinalist Liudmila Samsonova ousted 15th seed Diana Shnaider 6-4, 4-6, 6-2.

Djokovic rolls on

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, Novak Djokovic beat Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 to cruise into the third round where he faces 25th-seeded Frenchman Arthur Rinderknech.

Mirra Andreeva's dream of becoming the first female player since Serena Williams in 2015 to win the French Open and Wimbledon back-to-back was shattered by former champion Barbora Krejcikova despite saving six match points.

Pulling through: Anisimova beat back the challenge of Kenin to keep her hopes alive. AFP

IMPORTANT RESULTS

Men: Second round:
2-Zverev (Ger) bt Royer (Fra) 6-1, 6-3, 7-6(3); 5-de Minaur (Aus) bt Mannarino (Fra) 6-3, 6-2, 6-2; 6-Fritz (USA) bt Kypson (USA) 6-2, 6-2, 7-5; 23-Jodar (Esp) bt Carreno Busta (Esp) 3-6, 6-3, 1-6, 6-3, 6-4.
Struff (Ger) bt 28-Nakashima (USA) 4-6, 7-6(6), 7-6(5), 6-7(6), 7-6(7). 19-Khachanov bt Hanfmann (Ger) 6-3, 6-4, 6-4; Berrettini (Ita) bt 20-Fils (Fra) 6-4, 7-5, 3-6, 6-3; 9-Cobolli (Ita) bt Duckworth (Aus) 7-6(4), 3-6, 7-6(3), 6-1.
3-Auger-Aliassime (Can) bt Prizmic (Cro) 7-6(2), 6-3, 7-5; 7-Djokovic (Srb) bt Tsitsipas (Gre) 6-3, 6-4, 6-2.
Doubles: First round: Gille (Bel) & Verbeek (Ned) bt Demoliner (Bra) & Balaji (Ind) 3-6, 7-6(2), 6-4; Trungelliti (Arg) & Buse (Per) bt Anirudh (Ind) & Yuzuki (Jpn) 6-4, 6-7(3), 7-6(7); Rojer (Ned) & Winegar (USA) bt Venus (NZ) & Yuki (Ind) 6-3, 6-4.
Women: Second round:
21-Bouzkova (Cze) bt Grant (Ita) 7-5, 6-3; 23-Navarro (USA) bt Selekhmeteva 3-6, 6-4, 6-1; Samsonova bt 15-Shnaider 6-4, 4-6, 6-2; 26-Keys (USA) bt Swan (GBr) 6-1, 6-4; 3-Swiatek (Pol) bt Pliskova (Cze) 6-1, 6-3.
29-Eala (Phi) bt Joint (Aus) 3-6, 6-2, 6-0; 12-Kostyuk (Ukr) bt Blinkova 6-7(5), 6-3, 6-3; 6-Anisimova (USA) bt Kenin (USA) 6-2, 4-6, 7-6(3); Krejcikova (Cze) bt 5-Andreeva 4-6, 7-5, 6-4; 18-Alexandrova bt Tararudee (Tha) 7-5, 7-5.
Fallen seeds: Men: 20-Fils, 28-Nakashima.
Women: 5-Andreeva, 15-Shnaider.

Counterpunch: Knight and Sciver-Brunt put on 133. REUTERS

Sciver-Brunt, Knight lift England to 169 for five

T20 WORLD CUP

P.K. Ajith Kumar
LONDON

Not many women have stands named after them. Nat Sciver-Brunt has one.

That is right here at the Oval, where she came up with a captain's knock (75, 47b, 11x4, 1x6) to pull England out of deep trouble and post a challenging 169 for five in the semifinal against South Africa at the Women's T20 World Cup.

And this was Sciver-Brunt's first match in the tournament after retiring hurt against Ireland a couple of weeks ago. That the Englishwomen didn't miss her batting is creditable no doubt, but on this Thursday afternoon, they needed all her class and experience. She didn't let them down.

With England reeling at 23 for three, as a result of some fine bowing up front by Marizanne Kapp and Shabnim Ismail, Sciver-Brunt needed someone to stay along with her and steady the ship. There could not have been a better batter than Heather Knight to drop anchor.

Knight (58, 47b, 6x4, 1x6) and Sciver-Brunt added 133 for the fourth wicket to ensure their team had enough runs for their bowlers to have a go at the Proteas.

Earlier, Ismail had Amy Jones trying hard against the first ball of the second over – it was wide and short – only to slash it straight to Annerie Dercksen at point. Then Danni Wyatt-Hodge, the leading batter of the tournament, struck Ismail for a couple of fours.

Kapp brought one back into Wyatt-Hodge and bowled her. In the very next over, Ismail trapped Alice Capsey in front. Suddenly, England was in some trouble. But the captain and Knight came to the home team's rescue.

The scores: England 169/5 in 20 overs (Nat Sciver-Brunt 75, Heather Knight 58, Shabnim Ismail 2/31, Nonkululeko Mlaba 2/25) vs. South Africa.
Toss: SA.

INBRIEF

Norris says Verstappen's move to McLaren 'not serious'

Lando Norris says reports that Max Verstappen has considered a move to McLaren are "a cool thing" to hear but "not a serious thing" as speculation swirls in Formula One about a switch which could create a line-up of two champions. "It's good that a four-time World champion wants to come on board and wants to potentially join the team. I don't know how much of it's true and if there's an opportunity for me to drive with other people, it's something I've always looked forward to. But it's not a serious thing for now".

India to play two-Test series in Sri Lanka next month

India will play two Tests against Sri Lanka in Galle (from August 15) and SSC Colombo (from August 23), SLC announced on Thursday. The series is part of the World Test Championship. India, which has made two finals but never won the WTC title, is currently fifth in the standings, while Sri Lanka is sixth. The last time India toured Sri Lanka for a Test series was in 2017 when it had won 3-0.

Man City signs Anderson in record club transfer

Elliot Anderson joined Manchester City from Nottingham Forest on Thursday, in a deal reported to be the most expensive transfer for a British player. The clubs did not disclose financial details, but British media reports said the deal is worth up to £116 million, surpassing the £105 million Arsenal paid West Ham United for Declan Rice.

BAI introduces 3x15 scoring system in domestic circuit

The high-intensity 3x15 format will take effect across domestic rankings, zonals and National championships from this month onwards with the Badminton Association of India (BAI) implementing the new BWF scoring system across the domestic circuit to ensure a seamless transition for the Indian shuttlers. Under the revised format, matches will continue to be played as best-of-three games under rally-point scoring, but each game will now be played to 15 points instead of 21. A two-point lead remains mandatory from 14-all, with games capped at 21 points, where the next point becomes decisive at 20-all.

WTA Finals moved from Riyadh to Indian Wells

The WTA Finals, the traditional season-ender for women's tennis, has been moved from Riyadh to Indian Wells this year, the women's tour announced in a statement on Wednesday. The event, which brings together the eight best players of the year at the end of the season in November in both singles and doubles, had been staged since 2024 in the Saudi capital and was supposed to remain there for at least three years. The final year has been terminated by mutual consent. Elena Rybakina won the 2025 event, beating Aryna Sabalenka in the final.

West Ham's Mateus Fernandes joins Spurs

West Ham's midfielder Mateus Fernandes has joined Spurs after the Hammers's relegation from PL, the clubs announced on Thursday. The 21-year-old's move across the capital city is worth a reported club record fee of £85 million.

Rain mars opener after India sets a target of 190

Quick-fire fifties by Abhishesk and skipper Shreyas help the Men in Blue recover from a poor start after opting to bat; Dube chips in with a cameo; pacer Mahmood impresses for England

No holding back: Abhishek counter-attacked after Samson and Kishan fell early. AFP

INDIA IN ENGLAND

Agence France-Presse
CHESTER-LE-STREET (UK)

Teenage batting sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi was once more denied an India debut before rain saw the first Twenty20 International against England abandoned after the tourist's innings here on Wednesday.

Spectators at Durham's headquarters were given a tantalising glimpse of the 15-year-old prodigy as he warmed up on the outfield before play started.

But for the third match in a row this tour, following T20 world champion India's shock 2-0 series loss to Ireland in Belfast, Sooryavanshi was not picked in the playing XI.

It looked like India might regret its decision to do without Sooryavanshi when it slumped to six for two after winning the toss.

But the Men in Blue recovered to post a total of 189 for seven, compiled through steady rainfall.

Heavier rain came during the interval, bringing the covers on to the ground, with the match called off at 19.15 GMT.

India lost Sanju Samson and Ishan Kishan in the second over.

Samson was superbly caught by a leaping Tom Banton off Saqib Mahmood, while Kishan was run out in a mix-up with Abhishek Sharma.

Abhishesk made amends with a dynamic 59 from 24 balls – one Mahmood over went for 21, including two pulled sixes – before he was was trapped in front by a Sam Curran slower one.

Captain Shreyas Iyer and Shivam Dube added late impetus, with 64 runs scored off the final six overs. Shreyas struck 68 from 47 balls and Dube 42 not out off 21 before rain cut short the first of a five-match campaign.

The series now moves on to Old Trafford for the second T20I on Saturday.

The scores:
India 189/7 in 20 overs (Abhishek 59, Shreyas 68, Dube 42 n.o., Mahmood 3/33) vs England.
Toss: India.

Stellar show: Cape Verde enters the knockouts unbeaten. REUTERS

No stars, no problem for Cape Verde

FIFA WORLD CUP

R.K. Arjun

The script was written long ago – small island nation, eliminated at the group stage, goes home with a good story. But, Cape Verde has not read it.

Three games in at the 2026 World Cup, it is unbeaten, through to the knockouts, and nobody is quite sure what to expect from the African nation.

Cape Verde became a FIFA member in 1986. After failing to qualify for the 2002 extravaganza, the country made steady progress.

Cape Verde attained its first AFCON qualification in 2013 and came close to sealing a World Cup berth in 2022, only to fall short at the final hurdle.

Four years later, it went one better – topping its CAF group ahead of Cameroon to book its tickets for the North American showpiece.

Cape Verde's first test was against a Spanish side that had dismantled defences on the way to the EURO 2024 title. The Sharks held the Spaniards to a goalless draw through an exemplary display from their 40-year-old goalkeeper Vozinha. They then came from behind to hold Uruguay 2-2.

Saudi Arabia, too, could not find a way past the Cape Verde defence.

It now has a date with Lionel Messi's Argentina in the round of 32. A year ago, that sentence would have read as fiction. However, Bubista's men have spent the last three weeks making the football world question everything it thought it knew. Why stop now?

Arachchige's unbeaten 83 guides SL-A to 288 for five

Press Trust of India
GALLE

Medium-pacer Yash Thakur and off-spinner Saransh Jain took two wickets apiece but Sri Lanka-A rode on skipper Sahan Arachchige's unbeaten 83 to reach 288 for five on the opening day of the second 'Test' against India-A here on Thursday.

Arachchige, whose 148-ball innings had nine fours and a six, enjoyed a 99-run stand for the fifth wicket with wicketkeeper Anjala Bandara (42). For the visiting side, lanky speedster Gurnoor Brar was also among the wickets while leg-spinner Zeeshan Ansari, playing his first red-ball game after a gap of six years, gave away 64 off his 16 wicketless overs. Ansari was the biggest disappointment of the day.

The scores:
Sri Lanka-A 288/5 in 85 overs (Arachchige 83 batting, Fernando 44, Anjala Bandara 42, Saransh 2/77, Yash 2/32) vs. India-A.

Praggnanandhaa in joint second spot

Mind games: Praggnanandhaa and Gukesh played out a hard-fought draw. FLICKR/GRANDCHESSTOUR

CHESS

Press Trust of India
ZAGREB

Grandmaster R. Praggnanandhaa began his campaign in the Zagreb leg of the Grand Chess Tour with a victory over top seed Vincent Keymer of Germany before drawing his next two games to finish the opening day of the Rapid section in joint second place on Wednesday.

Praggnanandhaa held France's Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and compatriot and World champion D. Gukesh to hard-fought draws to end the day on four points.

Alireza Firouzja of France emerged sole leader with five points

The nine rounds of rapid will be followed by an 18-round Blitz marathon and the winner will be decided with cumulative points in both sections.

Standings (after round three, Rapid): 1. Alireza Firouzja (Fra, 5); 2-5: Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (Fra), R. Praggnanandhaa, Anish Giri (Ned), Vincent Keymer (Ger) 4; 6-7: D. Gukesh, Deac Bogdan-Daniel (Rou) 3; 8. Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb, 2); 9. Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 1); 10. Ivan Saric (Cro, 0).

World Cup offers a chance for the immigrant communities to reunite

Ayon Sengupta

For 90 minutes in Philadelphia, Haitians were home again.

Outside the Lincoln Financial Field, vendors sold griot and patties from food trucks while Creole floated through the humid afternoon air. Families arrived wrapped in blue and red flags. Children who had never lived in Haiti knew every word of the 'La Dessalinienne', the national anthem.

The team eventually lost to Brazil, but the result almost felt beside the point.

For a country that has endured political violence, earthquakes and humanitarian crises, simply returning to the World Cup had become a celebration of survival.

Many of those in the stands had travelled not from Port-au-Prince but from Brooklyn, Miami, Boston and Montreal. They carried two homes with them – one that they had left behind and the one they had built in the United States of America.

The expanded 48-team World Cup has not just introduced new footballing nations, but it has reunited immigrant communities scattered across North America. Every match has become a family reunion of sorts, where flags stored away for years have reappeared.

Vociferous support: Ivory Coast fans cheer their team during the round of 32 match against Norway. REUTERS

Dallas, home to one of the largest and most active West African populations in the US, welcomed the Ivory Coast team with the Abidjan Farot Welcome Party on the eve of its round of 16 clash. "My son has never been to Abidjan or anywhere in Ivory Coast. So, I brought him here so that he could feel to be part of the nation. We are incredibly proud of our team who has connected us in this World Cup," said N'Guessan, who had travelled from Atlanta with his four-year-old son.

Tanya Marie surprised his mother Chilemb Munung with World Cup tickets to see the Democratic Republic of Congo play Portugal at the Houston Stadium. "I can't even express to myself what I was feeling there, but it was like oh my God," Chilemb said after the match.

For 90 minutes, football has dissolved the distance between where these communities came from and where they live now.

Srikanth retires; Aakarshi and Tanya advance in Canada Open

Press Trust of India
MARKHAM

India's K. Srikanth retired early from his opening match due to fitness issues even as Tanya Hemnath and Aakarshi Kashyap progressed to the women's singles second round at the Canada Open Super 300 badminton tournament here.

The 33-year-old Srikanth, who finished runner-up at the US Open Super 300 last Sunday, was lagging 10-11 against Paris Olympic bronze medallist Lee Zii Jia of Malaysia in the men's singles opening round when he decided to throw in the towel after consulting with coach B. Sai Praneeth.

Aakarshi saw off Anna Tatranova of France 21-14, 21-12, while Tanya prevailed 21-16, 21-18 over USA's Disha Gupta.

It was otherwise a dismal show for India as seven out of nine shuttlers failed to cross the opening hurdle on Wednesday.

Fifth seed Devika Sihag lost 14-21, 15-21 to Taiwan's Tung Ciou-Tong while Rakshitha Ramraj went down fighting 15-21, 21-14, 21-15 against Canada's Rachel Chan.

Shriyanshi Valishetty lost 9-21, 18-21 against Taiwan's Huang Ching Pi.

Anmol Kharb played out of her skin before going down 6-21, 26-24, 13-21 against home favourite and top seed Michelle Li.

In men's singles, Saneeth Dayanand and Sankar Subramanian, also fell by the wayside in the opening round.

While Saneeth lost 7-21, 11-21 against third seed Yudai Okimoto of Japan, Sankar's fight ended with a 21-19, 15-21, 15-21 loss to Korea's Yoo Tae-bin.

The results (first round): Men: Lee Zii Jia bt K. Srikanth 11-10 retd.; Yudai Okimoto bt Saneeth Dayanand 21-7, 21-11; Yoo Tae-bin bt Sankar Subramanian 19-21, 21-15, 21-15.
Doubles: T.A. Lindeman & K. Lee bt Achutaditya Rao Doddavarapu & Arjun Reddy Pochana 21-9, 21-7.
Women: Tanya Hemnath bt Disha Gupta 21-16, 21-18; Aakarshi Kashyap bt Anna Tatranova 21-14, 21-12; Tung Ciou-Tong bt Devika Sihag 21-14, 21-15; Rachel Chan bt Rakshitha Ramraj 15-21, 21-14, 21-15; Huang Ching Pi bt Shriyanshi Valishetty 21-9, 21-18; Michelle Li bt Anmol Kharb 21-6, 24-26, 21-13.

'Asian Games not an exposure tour'

Uthra Ganesan
NEW DELHI

The Sports Ministry has categorically said that major events including the Asian and Commonwealth Games are not "exposure tours" and only those who qualify and can deliver performance will be cleared by the government.

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Thursday made it clear that there would be complete transparency in selections but, at the same time, there would be strict scrutiny of entries and travellers would not be included simply to make up the numbers.

"Asian Games or Commonwealth Games is not for exposure, it is a platform for athletes who can make the country proud. That is why we have the selection criteria saying only the top six in continental rankings would be considered. Exposure can be gained elsewhere, there is enough time and competition through the years.

"The ministry will never stop anyone from that. If federations prepare a training or exposure plan for LA 2028 and submit it to us now, they will have our full support for the next two years. Even individual athletes who wish to train anywhere in the world will be given assistance. But going to Asian Games simply because participation means jobs will not be cleared," he declared during an interaction.

The Indian athletes' contingent for Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya this year is expected to be capped at 560 and Mandaviya insisted that while all federations had to follow the ministry guidelines for selections, the ministry had the final word in clearing names.

Strict norms

"Videography in the presence of a government observer is mandatory. The selected names are then sent to the IOA, who forwards it to Sports Authority of India for vetting. That list then comes to the ministry for final clearance and only those will be allowed," he added.

Ministry sources said that the practice of parents or relatives travelling as part of the official contingent by doubling up as team managers or coaches would not be entertained. "A federation's list does not constitute the final contingent," they added.

Perry and Gardner – linchpins of an imperious Aussie machine

The all-rounders have shown time and again that they are among the creme de la creme of elite cricket; they are now one hurdle away from adding another T20 World Cup to their cabinets

P.K. Ajith Kumar
LONDON

When Radha Yadav ran towards the chance offered by Beth Mooney at long-on, there was tension in the air at Lord's. Under normal circumstances, you would expect Radha to take the catch with ease; she has taken much tougher, more spectacular ones all through her career. She is one of the best fielders in women's cricket.

But at the Women's T20 World Cup, she had been going through a terrible time. She was just failing to catch. It looked like she was incapable of even catching a cold. The 26-year-old did catch Mooney, though. And she was relieved and happy, she threw the ball down furiously.

The Women in Blue celebrated. They had posted what appeared to be a competitive total of 170 for four, thanks largely to skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's brilliant shot-making towards the end. But for her 27-ball 56, Australia would have finished off the match well ahead of schedule.

When Deepti Sharma accounted for Mooney, the Australian scorecard read 68 for three in 9.1 overs. Another 103 runs were still required in less than 11 overs. The Indian players, and the large crowd that came to cheer them on, had reasons to hope.

The one that took it away

Watching Mooney depart was her long-time teammate Ellyse Perry. She was joined by Ashleigh Gardner. Together, they ended India's hopes of reaching the semifinals.

They forged what was one of the best partnerships you would come across at this level. There was still plenty of batting left for Australia – no team bats as deep as it – but they were determined to finish the job themselves. If one of them had been dismissed, India would have been back in the game. They did not get out until the match was decided. When Perry finally fell, skying a catch to Shafali Verma off the impressive Shree Charani, Australia needed just three to win.

Perry and Gardner showed yet again how crucial they are in a side filled with match-winners. This may be a team in transition, after the retirements of Meg Lanning and Alyssa Healy, but it remains well ahead of main rivals like England and India, especially in the shortest format.

In the semifinal against the West Indies at the Oval on Wednesday, Perry had to go back to the dressing room after playing just seven balls, retired hurt. But it was just a precaution, Mooney would later clarify. Gardner had another starring role. She made an unbeaten 35 off 20 balls to help Australia finish the chase of a very modest total with seven overs to spare.

Back in the groove

She had been amongst the wickets, too. That is good news for Australia ahead of Sunday's final at Lord's. Gardner is glad to have got her bowling rhythm back.

"I feel like I probably haven't had the impact that I would have liked, especially with the ball," she said shortly after winning the Player-of-the-Match award in the last-four clash. "I've probably just been a little bit inconsistent. When Sophie (Molineux) has thrown me the ball, I probably haven't played the role that she has probably wanted."

But Gardner delivered against the West Indies, taking two for 13. "In this game, I had that type of performance, certainly when it mattered," she said. "It is always really pleasing. I guess that it gives me a lot of confidence going forward."

Shift in mindset

The 29-year-old said it was more of a mindset thing. "I feel like I just tried to make my game really simple. I focused on looking at the stumps when I was bowling. That sounds really silly, but when I was narrowing my focus, I could execute a little better. We knew that keeping the stumps in play for a long period of time, just with the variability in the bounce, really helped."

Gardner felt that her performance against India was a morale-booster. "Cricket is a very humbling sport at times, but you try to ride that confidence to really utilise it," she said. "Cricket is such a unique game where you can feel like you are hitting the ball well but then you make no runs. So I guess it is about trying to take out the positives that you can."

Looking back at Australia's convincing win over India, Gardner said she enjoyed the 100-run partnership with Perry. "That was one of the best partnerships I have been involved in. There are not too many other people within this unit that I have played so much cricket with. I have played with Perry for well over 10 years now, so we have a great understanding of each other's game."

Blindly trusting each other

Both had tremendous trust in each other. "We were really specific and deliberate in the way we were speaking in the middle," she said. "Understanding each other and giving each other options out there... to have that is pretty cool."

Perry relished that alliance just as much. "It was a really enjoyable partnership with Ash," said the woman regarded by many as the greatest female cricketer of all time. "Having had the opportunity to watch the way the first innings played out, we knew that it was sort of possible to accelerate through the middle and back end."

She was all praise for Gardner's approach. "The way Ash came out was really important in the context of the game. I thought that she shifted the momentum beautifully. We spoke a lot about targeting the first couple of balls of an over, and she did that incredibly well. It just gave us some momentum in the chase. On a good ground, once you get that, you sort of put yourself in a good position. So, it was a lot of fun."

Gardner was as effusive in the praise of Perry. "She is like red wine," Gardner said. "She is someone who has gotten better and better. Just the evolution of her game.. she has known that the global game has gone at such a fast pace and that it doesn't settle or slow down for anyone. So she knows that she needs to keep up with that pace."

Gardner admires Perry's bravery. "It can be quite hard at times when you feel like you don't have that confidence, but she is someone who always tries to take the game on. For someone with so much experience and so much willingness to keep evolving, it just shows younger players like me that there is no real ceiling on that stuff. She is a fantastic leader within our group, within that space, and generally as well."

Unique in their own way

While Perry is at the top of her game more often than not, she stressed that every tournament had its own challenges. "This one has been extremely enjoyable and the quality of cricket that has been played right across the competition... the response from the English public to watch the matches has been amazing, too," she said. "The atmosphere at various grounds has been so cool to play at. Beating India was a real highlight."

Perry described skipper Molineux as "unique". "Every captain I play with is unique, but Soph brings a very unique style," Perry said. "She is such a people's person. She makes everyone laugh. She knows when to have fun, when to be serious.

"She makes sure that they are heard all the time and are valued for their contribution to the group. I hope that kind of comes across in the way we are playing because it's been so much fun. It doesn't guarantee you anything but when you are playing with that kind of enjoyment, it creates an opportunity for a team to do some really good things."

The two brave women are now ready for the final. They will go into that match at Lord's with impressive numbers.

Perry has 2,482 T20I runs and 131 wickets, while Gardner, who has played lesser games, has 1,630 runs and 84 wickets.

It is to be recalled that Australia hasn't won an ICC event since 2023. "Not having any trophies in the cabinet has probably been frustrating over the last 18 months," Gardner said.

"It is really pleasing that going forward we can take the confidence out of what we have done. Hopefully, we win another trophy on Sunday".

> Skipper Molineux brings a very unique style. She is such a people's person. She makes everyone laugh. She knows when to have fun, when to be serious
>
> **PERRY**

> There are not too many other people within this unit that I have played so much cricket with. I have played with Perry for over 10 years now, so we have a great understanding of each other's game
>
> **GARDNER**

THE GIST

- In the ongoing T20 World Cup, Perry and Gardner ended India's hopes of reaching the semifinals with a 100-run partnership
- In the last-four stage, Gardner proved her class with a Player-of-the-Match performance
- The duo, which enters the title clash with impressive numbers, will look to end Australia's three-year wait for an ICC title