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SC says judge’s transfer is not related to ‘rumours’

SC says proposal to transfer Justice Yashwant Varma was based on Collegium’s procedure; Delhi HC has initiated an internal inquiry into ‘incident’, and findings will be reviewed by CJI, it adds

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court issued a statement on Friday that “misinformation and rumours” are being spread with regard to an “incident” at the residence of Delhi High Court judge, Justice Yashwant Varma, compelling the apex court Collegium to transfer him out.

The statement from the Supreme Court came after a report by *The Times of India*, followed by source-based online media reports, that a “huge pile of cash” was recovered when a fire broke out in the residential bungalow of the judge.

The press note issued by the Supreme Court, while confirming the existence of

Judicial path

A brief look at the career of Justice Yashwant Varma, born on January 6, 1969 in Allahabad

1992: Enrolled as an advocate

October 13, 2014

Appointed Additional Judge, Allahabad High Court

February 1, 2016

Took oath as Permanent Judge, Allahabad High Court



October 11, 2021

Appointed Judge, Delhi High Court

Is Allahabad HC a trash bin, asks bar association

NEW DELHI

Responding to the “proposed repatriation” of Justice Yashwant Varma to the Allahabad High Court, the Bar Association of the court has asked if the High Court was “a trash bin”. » **PAGE 9**

a proposal to transfer Justice Varma, stated categorically that it was unconnected with an in-house enquiry procedure into the “incident”.

“The proposal for transfer of Justice Yashwant Varma, who is the second seniormost judge in the Delhi High Court and a member of the Collegium to his parent High Court,

i.e., the High Court of Judicature at Allahabad, where he will be ninth in seniority, is independent and separate from the in-house enquiry procedure,” it informed.

The apex court note said the transfer proposal has been examined by the Supreme Court Collegium. The Collegium has further asked for feedback on the

proposal from consultee judges of the Supreme Court, the Chief Justices of the High Courts concerned and also from Justice Varma. “Responses received will be examined and, thereupon, the Collegium will pass a resolution,” the statement said.

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Trump must not give concessions to Russia on behalf of Ukraine: Norwegian Minister

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

U.S. President Donald Trump is giving away concessions on behalf of Ukraine, before negotiating with Russian President Vladimir Putin, said Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide.

Mr. Trump is giving Russia a “boost” at a time when Moscow is facing economic problems and military losses due to the Ukraine war, Mr. Eide said. The Norwegian Minister was in Delhi for the Ministry of External Affairs’ annual Raisina Dialogue con-



Espen Barth Eide

ference, where the U.S.’s role in negotiating a Russia-Ukraine ceasefire dominated discussions.

As U.S. and Russian officials prepare for another round of talks in Riyadh on

Monday, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said at the conference that India has suggested to both Moscow and Kiev to conduct “direct talks” rather than negotiating through other countries.

In an interview with *The Hindu*, Mr. Eide said, “Most of the Russian economy is in trouble, and Russia was not in a good spot. And then Mr. Trump came in and started suggesting some concessions, to be given prior to negotiations.”

“It is important that Mr. Trump does not give away positions on behalf of Uk-

rainians that they don’t agree to,” Mr. Eide said in a reference to Mr. Trump’s comments on recognising Crimea as part of Russia and calling on Ukraine to “forget about” joining NATO.

“The war is between Russia and Ukraine. So ceasefire has to be owned by the Ukrainians and obviously, by the Russians,” Mr. Eide said. “The way the Americans have been playing this has given a new boost to Russia,” the Minister added.

CONTINUED ON
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Chhattisgarh govt. announces special incentives for ‘Maoist-free’ panchayats

Shubhomoy Sikdar
RAIPUR

To encourage bulk surrenders in Chhattisgarh’s Bastar, the State government has announced a new scheme offering construction work worth ₹1 crore and other incentives for “Maoist-free” panchayats.

Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma said on Friday that under the ‘Elvad Panchayat Abhiyan’, a panchayat would have to facilitate the surrender of every resident of its constituent villages who has been involved in Naxal activities. Following this, the village will send a proposal declaring itself “Maoist-free”.

“Following this, construction work worth ₹1 crore will be immediately sanctioned to that pan-



Deputy CM Vijay Sharma

chayat. Along with this, a mobile network facility will be made available in that panchayat by installing a tower or transmitting it from a nearby tower. Electricity connection will also be provided and till the power connection is fixed, solar lights will be made available,” said Mr. Sharma at a press meet.

While the Minister, who holds the Home and Panchayati Raj portfolios, said the scheme to promote

bulk surrenders was on the lines of open defecation-free villages, he also discussed other aspects of the State government’s recently approved Chhattisgarh Naxal Surrender/Victim Relief and Rehabilitation Policy, 2025. “Naxalites who have laid down arms will be imparted skill development training and allotted land and houses under the PM housing scheme. Many other provisions, including financial aid, have been included in the new policy,” he told journalists.

At the press conference, held against the backdrop of Thursday’s twin encounters that left 30 alleged Maoists dead in Bastar, Mr. Sharma also discussed recent security gains made through anti-Naxal operations and opening new se-

curity camps in the State’s hinterland.

He highlighted how Pamed, a sensitive area, was now accessible from Bijapur via Tarrem and Kondapalli, by covering 90 km, unlike in the past when the travel would involve a detour via Telangana and a 250-km commute.

Deceased identified

On the Bijapur encounter, in which 26 alleged Maoists were killed, Mr. Sharma said they had gathered in the remote forest for a meeting when the security forces struck. A police statement said 14 of the 26 deceased were women, and 18 had been identified as of Friday. Those identified so far include several Maoist commanders of the West Bastar division.

Rajasthan to plant 10 crore trees for water conservation

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

The Rajasthan government has set a target for planting 10 crore trees in 2025-26 with the implementation of the ‘Mission Hariyalo Rajasthan’. The target was also mentioned in this year’s budgetary announcements along with the emphasis

laid on water conservation and resource efficiency. Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma made the announcement at a function organised here on Friday to mark International Day of Forests. He said the State had a long association with environment protection and called upon the people to preserve its biodiversity.



Navigating differences

India and New Zealand stand to benefit from greater collaboration

At the 10th edition of the Raisina Dialogue, visiting New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon – the conference’s chief guest – outlined three major geopolitical shifts shaping the world: the replacement of rules with power, the rise of security over economic considerations, and a move from trade efficiency to protectionism and resilient supply chains among trusted partners. In this context, Mr. Luxon suggested that India and New Zealand, despite their size disparity, could be ideal partners. Both democracies share an interest in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. While New Zealand is not part of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the United States) and does not seek membership, Mr. Luxon noted the ongoing dialogue among New Zealand, Australia, Japan and South Korea on regional issues. Following talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the two countries signed a defence Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance military cooperation, staff college exchanges, and naval port calls. They also agreed to restart talks on a free trade agreement, aiming to expand their modest bilateral trade, currently under \$2 billion. However, challenges remain, particularly around market access for dairy and agricultural products, which contributed to India’s decision to exit the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), of which New Zealand is a member. In contrast, New Zealand’s trade with China stands at approximately \$24 billion, despite broader strategic concerns. Connectivity between the two nations received a boost, with Air India and Air New Zealand signing a codeshare agreement that may also lead to the first direct flights between the countries by the end of 2028.

Despite the positive tone, Mr. Modi voiced concern over “anti-India activities by certain illegal elements” in New Zealand, referencing protests and a Khalistan referendum held by the ‘Sikhs for Justice’ group in Auckland last November. Although previously discussed between the Foreign Ministers, New Zealand police had ruled the protests to be lawful. In response, Mr. Luxon reaffirmed New Zealand’s commitment to free expression and noted the importance of not importing foreign political conflicts into its diverse immigrant communities. While such concerns are legitimate, raising them publicly risks deepening divisions within the 3,00,000-strong Indian diaspora and overshadowing growing strategic and economic ties. These sensitive issues may be better handled through diplomatic engagement in private. Ultimately, India and New Zealand stand to benefit from greater collaboration – particularly in trade, defence, and regional stability – as two democracies that “book-end” the Indo-Pacific.

Heat plan

India must develop a comprehensive heat strategy ahead of COP30

Summer has arrived early in several parts of India. In the last week of February, heatwaves were officially reported in Goa and Maharashtra. States such as Odisha, Telangana, and Maharashtra have already recorded temperatures exceeding 40°C. Throughout most of February, 31 States and Union Territories experienced night temperatures at least 1°C above normal, with 22 States and Union Territories reporting night temperatures that were 3°C to 5°C above normal. Given that February is classified as ‘winter’ by the India Meteorological Department, these are signposts that point toward new climate normals. Scientists have long warned that rising global temperatures – both on land and sea – will result in more intense and frequent heatwaves. This underscores the need for countries and States to prepare for heat events just as they do for earthquakes or floods. However, a recent study by the Sustainable Futures Collaborative, which examined heat-related preparedness in nine Indian cities, found that none had long-term plans in place. Most responses are limited to short-term emergency measures such as providing drinking water, adjusting work hours, and boosting hospital capacity during heatwaves. Crucial long-term interventions such as ensuring access to household or occupational cooling for vulnerable populations, insuring workers against lost income on extremely hot days, improving fire management, and upgrading electricity grids for reliability are missing. Few cities have even begun planning for expanded local weather monitoring, mapping urban heat islands, or training those responsible for implementing heat plans. Other strategies, which include increasing green cover, creating open spaces to reduce heat, and deploying rooftop solar for active cooling, are often carried out without targeting the populations that are most at risk.

While global efforts to combat climate change largely focus on cutting greenhouse gas emissions, the limited progress on that front is shifting attention to adaptation – particularly in managing responses to heat. Affordable cooling devices are frequently recommended, but they raise concerns about increased use of ozone-depleting refrigerants. Experts now advocate having sustainable buildings, green infrastructure, and passive cooling solutions, although these too can impact land prices and urban planning. India must develop a comprehensive national heat strategy and embed it within its National Adaptation Plan ahead of the 30th UN Climate Change Conference (COP30) in Brazil in November.

India’s marginalised Parliament in budgetary affairs

The Budget is more than just a financial statement, as it reflects a nation’s priorities, economic vision and governance philosophy. Across democracies, parliaments exercise the power of the purse, which is critical in shaping national budgets, ensuring fiscal discipline, and promoting transparency. However, in India, parliamentary influence over the Budget remains minimal. The executive-driven process sidelines legislators, leaving them with little opportunity to effectively shape or scrutinise financial policies. Parliament must evolve from being a mere approver of the government’s financial proposals to actively shaping economic policy. This requires critical institutional reforms, including pre-Budget discussions and establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO).

The Budget, a pillar of democracy
Budgeting is a fundamental democratic exercise that allocates public resources and defines the government’s social and economic priorities. Historically, the power of the purse has been hard-won, with legislatures across the world asserting their right to oversee public finance. From the British Parliament’s financial control in the 19th century to the fiscal policies of modern democracies, legislative scrutiny has been essential in preventing executive overreach. Globally, the degree of legislative influence over budgets varies. Some parliaments actively draft and modify budget proposals, while others act as rubber stamps. Certain legislatures hold in-depth committee discussions on budgetary allocations, whereas others rely on centralised finance committees. However, one common thread remains – Budget transparency and parliamentary engagement correlate with better social outcomes and economic stability. Parliament’s role in Budget formulation and scrutiny in India is mainly ceremonial. The Finance Ministry single-handedly crafts the Budget, keeping even Cabinet Ministers uninformed until its presentation in the Lok Sabha. Unlike other legislative Bills, the Budget proposal is not subjected to thorough cabinet discussions before being introduced in Parliament. The executive monopoly over financial planning results in fragmented debates and limited oversight, weakening the core tenets of representative democracy.



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The existing budgetary process diminishes the role of elected representatives, undermining democratic accountability

Moreover, the Rajya Sabha, despite its democratic credentials, has no substantive role in Budget discussions. Ironically, while India permits a Finance Minister to be a Rajya Sabha member, they lack the ability to vote on their (own) Budget proposals in the Lok Sabha. This absence of budgetary bicameralism contrasts sharply with the British House of Lords, which wields some influence over financial legislation despite being an unelected body. The decline of parliamentary authority over budgetary matters is evident in the poor quality and brevity of debates and the ineffective scrutiny by subject committees. Parliamentarians lack the power to amend or significantly influence budget proposals, effectively reducing their role to passive approval. This status quo is neither democratic nor conducive to accountability.

Pre-Budget discussions
Two key reforms must be implemented for Parliament to reclaim its rightful role in Budget-making: introducing pre-budget discussions and creating a Parliamentary Budget Office. Parliament should institutionalise pre-Budget discussions during the monsoon session to ensure meaningful engagement in the Budget process. A dedicated five to seven-day discussion period would allow legislators to assess the nation’s fiscal health, outline Budget priorities, and present a broad economic framework for the government’s consideration. Such discussions would also encourage better coordination among subject committees, enhancing their ability to provide informed input. Pre-Budget debates would democratise the Budget-making process, allowing elected representatives to voice public concerns, suggest equitable resource allocation, and engage in policy deliberations. More importantly, they would facilitate greater public involvement, fostering transparency and trust in financial governance. Scepticism about active legislative involvement in budgeting often stems from concerns over fiscal discipline. Some economists argue that empowering legislatures may lead to populist spending and weakened financial prudence. However, placing unchecked faith in the executive to act in the public interest is naive.

Regardless of ideology, no government has ever voluntarily ensured economic justice without oversight. A balanced approach, where the executive retains financial discretion but remains answerable to Parliament, is the hallmark of a healthy democracy. A crucial aspect of Budget reform is in strengthening Parliament’s analytical and research capabilities. India lacks an institutional mechanism that provides legislators with independent and non-partisan Budget analysis. Establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) would bridge this gap as there would be data-driven insights and expert economic forecasts. Modelled on institutions such as the U.S. Congressional Budget Office and similar bodies in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, a well-structured PBO in India would play a vital role in analysing government spending, revenue projections, and fiscal policies. It would conduct independent economic forecasts, assess the fiscal impact of proposed policies, and evaluate medium-term and long-term budgetary trends. Additionally, the PBO would offer policy briefs to parliamentarians, enhancing informed decision-making. Rather than encroaching upon the executive’s role, it would complement it by ensuring legislative scrutiny is backed by objective research. Such an institution would significantly enhance Parliament’s capacity to hold the government accountable and foster evidence-based policy discussions.

Reclaiming parliamentary authority
The current budgetary process diminishes the role of elected representatives, undermining democratic accountability. By integrating pre-Budget discussions and establishing a PBO, Parliament can transition from being a passive recipient of financial proposals to an active budget-influencing institution. These reforms are procedural adjustments and fundamental steps towards strengthening representative democracy. They would ensure public finance decisions reflect collective deliberation rather than executive fiat. A robust parliamentary engagement in budgeting would ultimately lead to more equitable economic policies, greater transparency, and a financial governance framework that genuinely serves the people’s interests.

Charting a route for IORA under India’s chairship

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is an apex regional organisation that promotes open regionalism between the countries of Asia, Africa and Australia, connected via Indian Ocean waters. As the Indian leadership prepares to step up to chair IORA from November 2025 – it is now Vice-Chair – it can bring impetus to increased resilience in its governance structure. As IORA chair for the next two years, India will have three priorities: creating funding opportunities to enlarge IORA’s budget; integrating technology for data management and policy analysis, and creating maritime-ready courses with academic and research institutions using collaborations.

The Indian Ocean Region and IORA
Geostrategically, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a subset of the Indo-Pacific, yet unique. The Indian Ocean, home to two-thirds of humanity, has a rich and diverse marine life. It also transports 75% of global trade and 50% of daily oil consumption. It produces \$1 trillion in goods and services, and its intra-IOA trade was \$800 billion in 2023. However, this region is also marred by poor development, troubled political systems, climate change-induced disasters, and environmental degradation. It also faces security challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and human and drug trafficking. These supranational issues compel the regional countries to cooperate and find workable solutions. Therefore, as one of the oldest regional inter-governmental organisations, IORA has been working to further cooperation among its members by facilitating dialogue on cultural and academic exchanges and crucial issues such as disaster risk management. While the United



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New Delhi must strengthen the foundation for meaningful and ground-level governance

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States, China and the European Union are IORA’s dialogue partners, it is mainly driven by only middle and small powers and, therefore, requires a tour de force to become more relevant. **Issues faced by IORA**
The Indian Ocean region is relatively free of the great power competition yet has its own set of challenges, including funding. IORA’s annual budget is member-dependent. Barring Singapore, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and France, the member-states are developing Asian and African economies. The budget is indicated to be just a few million. Incidentally, the Indian Ocean Commission, which has only five IO countries, has a \$1.3 billion budget for the 2020-25 time frame. Thus, the funds generated fall short of achieving IORA’s growing areas of engagement such as maritime safety and security, fisheries management, disaster risk management, technology and innovation, and the blue economy. Notably, each of these pillars is resource-intensive and requires constant engagement. One way to generate more funds would be to include private players as consultative partners as they are some of the biggest players in the maritime domain. From shipping companies to marine-related industries such as oil and gas, and marine tourism, these industries are relevant to the blue economy. These industries can be involved in maritime policy-making and also contribute to the IORA fund. The IORA has a small Secretariat with limited staff based in Mauritius. Since government-based structures and institutions have limited bandwidth for data processing, technology can be a big help in improving

governance. Accounting for data is laborious with a large margin of error, and quick and efficient policy analysis would be made easier with digitised record keeping. **Other suggestions for India**
India’s Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) vision complements IORA’s objectives and must leverage its excellent relations with IORA member-states to develop workable solutions. IORA members, such as Australia, have made significant contributions to research in marine science and technology. France and Singapore, have their strength in marine-related technologies, and the UAE and Oman can contribute through investments in sectors where IORA seeks help. Traditional knowledge that exists in coastal and small island nations (Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Mauritius) should be mainstreamed for developing sustainable methods of marine governance. To further productive outcomes, IORA needs sustained and improved collaborative avenues. Lastly, as marine and maritime-related employment opportunities will only multiply, industrial leaders should collaborate with educational and research institutions to provide problem statements and seek solutions, and to create newer, industry-related courses. Marine accounting is an interdisciplinary course that could help create a base for a blue economy. With the available talent in the region, scholars and practitioners are most likely to work out solutions. IORA holds immense promise for regional prosperity and India must use its leadership to overcome the existing issues at the institutional level.

From Page One

Judge’s transfer is not related to ‘rumours’: SC

On the “incident”, the top court said the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, Justice D.K. Upadhyaya, on receiving information, had commenced an in-house enquiry collecting details and evidence. The High Court Chief Justice had begun the enquiry even prior to a Supreme Court Collegium meeting on March 20. The enquiry report would be submitted to Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna on March 21. The Delhi High Court Chief Justice’s report would be “examined and processed for further and necessary action”, the press note said. The nature of the enquiry and report are confidential to protect the individual integrity of the judge concerned.

Stages of probe

The press note referred to the Supreme Court judgment in *Additional District and Sessions Judge ‘X’ versus Registrar General, High Court of Madhya Pradesh* of 2015. The judgment elucidates the stages of the in-house enquiry procedure, which is meant to “ensure exclusion of favouritism, prejudice or bias”.

The in-house enquiry procedure against sitting High Court judges is compartmentalised into two stages. The first stage involves the *prima facie* ascertainment by the Chief Justice of the High Court concerned, in this case the Delhi High Court Chief Justice, of the veracity of the allegations and whether a deeper probe was called for. This would be done on the basis of a logical assessment made on a consideration of the response of the judge concerned.

The second stage of the procedure is monitored by the Chief Justice of India and is kicked off if he endorses the High Court Chief Justice’s report recommending a deeper probe. In such a situation, the CJI would constitute a three-member committee of two Chief Justices of High Courts and a judge of a High Court. The committee can devise its own procedure of investigation, provided it follows the principle of natural justice. The judge in question would have a fair opportunity to repudiate the allegations levelled against him.

It is important for Indian students in U.S. to comply with local laws, says MEA

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Ranjani Srinivasan, the U.S.-based Indian scholar who took refuge in Canada after Columbia University cancelled her enrollment in a PhD programme, has not approached Indian missions in the U.S., the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Friday. Official Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stated at a media briefing that neither Ms. Srinivasan nor Badar Khan Suri, a student at Georgetown University, had contacted Indian authorities.

“We are not aware of her getting in touch with our consulate or our embassy for any help. We only came to know of her departure from the United States through media reports,” said Mr. Jaiswal.

In response to a question on the arrest of Mr. Suri, he said, “We are given to



Randhir Jaiswal

understand through media reports that this particular individual has been detained. We, on our side, expect that when foreign nationals come into India, they abide by our laws and customs and that when Indian nationals are abroad, they must also comply with local laws and regulations,” said Mr. Jaiswal.

The detention of Mr. Suri has come days after Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian student was detained by the U.S. authorities for allegedly supporting Hamas.

Ms. Srinivasan had left the U.S. for Canada and could share her version with news outlets while Mr. Suri was taken away even before he could share what exactly had transpired that led to his detention for allegedly promoting “Hamas propaganda”.

Position on Hamas

India has maintained a consistent approach on the conflict and has been calling for a two-state solution to end the ongoing Israel-Palestine crisis. India condemned the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel but did not declare Hamas a terrorist organisation.

Mr. Jaiswal on Friday said, “Our position on Hamas is well known to you. So I would reiterate once again - our position,” indicating India has not changed its policy on Hamas.

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‘Trump must not give concessions to Russia’

The U.S. has claimed a limited ceasefire is now in place with both Russia and Ukraine agreeing to avoid attacking each other’s energy and infrastructure installations. However, differences over the way forward persist. Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, who held a meeting on the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue with Mr. Jaishankar and other Ministers has said Ukraine’s “red lines” include not ceding Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia formally, and not accepting curbs on their military power or foreign policy.

“Now is the time for diplomacy. We believe that with the help of U.S. President Trump we may have negotiations for a just and lasting peace, and we count on the support of the international community for an end to the war this year,” Mr. Sybiha said at the Raisina Dialogue. Senior Ukrainian diplomatic sources said that a negotiating team has already been officially formed, underlining Ukraine’s “serious approach toward peace”.

However, State Duma (Russian Parliament) member Vyacheslav Nikonov, who was present at the conference, said that no talks could be held with Ukrainian negotiators at present, as Russia considers the Volodymyr Zelenskyy government, whose tenure has ended, “illegitimate”.

There is progress on GM food crops, says official

Remark comes amid apprehensions over the Environment Ministry's approval for commercial cultivation of GM mustard in 2022; Supreme Court is set to hear pleas on the same next month

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

Ahead of a fresh series of hearings in the Supreme Court next month over genetically modified (GM) food crops, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) said there was “progress” on this front.

“The matter is *sub judice* but GM mustard stories are being taken up again,” DBT Secretary Rajesh Gokhale said at a biotechnology event on Friday. The DBT, which has for years funded research and development into transgenic and GM food crops, comes under the Ministry of Science and Technology.

At present, Bt cotton is the only genetically modified crop allowed to be cultivated. Though the Environment Ministry gave its conditional go-ahead for commercial cultivation of GM mustard in 2022, it has not taken off as it was challenged in the Supreme Court.

Science Minister Jitendra Singh who was also at the event, said, “There is so much dynamism in bio-



Awaiting hearing: Petitioners have challenged the Environment Ministry's approval for cultivation of GM mustard. R.V. MOORTHY
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Hearing from April 15

On March 6, a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court said it will begin hearing from April 15 petitions challenging the Environment Ministry's approval for cultivation of GM mustard. The court has told all parties to file their written submissions within a week.

A two-judge Bench of the top court, on July 23, 2024, gave a split verdict

first transgenic food crop to be approved for farmer fields by the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, a scientific body. However, it wasn't approved for cultivation following safety objections by activist groups.

However, the use of biotechnology to improve food crops – as in the case of GM mustard – is a key focus of the government's BioE3 policy.

This involves manufacturing new kinds of enzymes, pharmaceuticals and agricultural products while applying techniques, including genetic engineering.

A report released by the DBT at the event on Friday on the current state of India's ‘bio-economy’ says that bio-agriculture accounts for 8.1% – the smallest share – of the \$165.7 billion bio-economy in India.

“Valued at \$13.5 billion, this segment enhances agricultural productivity and resilience through genetically modified crops like Bt Cotton and precision agriculture technologies,” the report notes.

Safety concerns

GM mustard, developed using public funds, was the

Do not publish NIRF ranking for 2025: HC to Education Ministry

The Hindu Bureau
MADURAI

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court on Thursday restrained the Education Ministry and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) from publishing the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking for 2025.

The court was hearing a public interest litigation petition filed by C. Chellamuthu from Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu. He claimed that the ranking was without any basis and was misleading students.

The NIRF was launched by the NBA on the direction of the Education Ministry for evaluating higher education institutions.

The NBA publishes the ranking every year. Institutions are evaluated on five broad categories – teaching, learning and resources; research and professional practice; graduation outcomes; outreach and inclusivity; and perception – the petition said.

The NBA directs institutions to upload data on student and staff strength, staff salaries, graduation index, placement details, funds received for re-

NIRF ranking is done based on the data given by institutions without verification, says petitioner

search, and other parameters on its web portal. Based on this data, the ranking is awarded without further verification or auditing, the petitioner said.

Comparing it with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council's (NAAC) Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR), the petitioner said the NAAC-AQAR documents were audited and checked by expert committees sent by the NAAC to the institutions.

The petitioner sought a direction to the NBA to publish the NIRF ranking after comparing and verifying the data submitted by the institutions with the data in the government records and to disclose the calculation method.

A Division Bench of Justices J. Nisha Banu and S. Srimathy restrained the authorities from publishing the ranking for 2025. The court sought a counter affidavit and posted the matter to April 24.

In push for made-in-India browser, a mandate to trust govt. encryption

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

Making a push for an indigenous web browser, the Centre on Thursday awarded a prize of ₹1 crore to the Tenkasi-based Zoho Corporation for a web browser development challenge. A key condition for the browser, though, has highlighted the principal motivation behind the project: the browser, Ulaa, must trust India's so-called root certifying authority.

This is also meant to be contingency planning, to ensure that if India's access to the global Internet is ever cut off, due to some unforeseen security scenario, it will still be possible to have a completely operational browser within the country.

Indian root certificate

Root certifying authorities are around 100 organisations across the world who



Zoho Corporation accepts the first prize in the Indian web browser development challenge from Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw.

can confer trustworthiness tag on firms that issue Secure Socket Layer (SSL) certificates, which are represented by the “https” on a web address. On most mainstream web browsers, a green lock icon with the “https” in the URL indicates an encrypted and legitimate connection to any given website.

The Controller of Certifying Authorities (CCA) – a body set up under the Electronics and Information Technology Ministry –

has already created an Indian root certificate. But after a security breach in 2014, where the government's National Informatics Commission's systems were used to generate fake SSL certificates for sites like Google and Yahoo, web browsers and operating systems stopped including the CCA's certificates in their software repositories.

The ₹1 crore prize – announced in 2023 – was to create a web browser that

trusts the latest iteration of this root certificate.

Only one Indian organisation – the private company eMudhra's emSign – is currently trusted as a root certifying authority by browsers around the world.

Arvind Kumar, the current CCA, said on Thursday that Ulaa would help the government to navigate “the multiple kind of negotiation compliances which [major browsers] are proposing on us”, and that “we should be able to have a good negotiating stage while developing while working with Mozilla or Google”.

Mr. Kumar added that the browser would allow for an “indigenous authentication mechanism and enhance cybersecurity”.

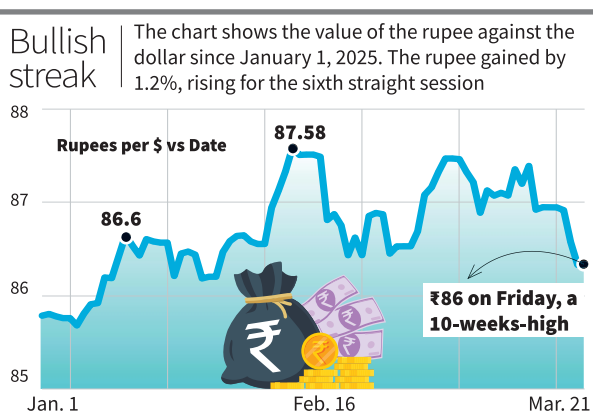
IT Secretary S. Krishnan said that a domestic browser would be “a key step in achieving Internet resilience for the country”.

Rupee climbs to a 10-week high

The domestic currency's gain was supported by stronger-than-expected trade data and a rise in foreign exchange reserves following the RBI's USD/INR swap intervention; rupee emerges 'top performer' among Asian currencies so far this month

Lalatendu Mishra
Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

The rupee on Friday climbed to a 10-week high of ₹86 against the U.S. dollar due to a surge in foreign inflows into domestic equities and debt markets, analysts said. The domestic currency was trading at ₹85.89 a dollar on January 9, 2025. The rupee surged nearly 0.1% on Friday, making it the eighth consecutive day of appreciation against the dollar. It closed at ₹85.98 against the U.S. dollar. On a weekly basis, the



rupee surged 1.1% with the appreciation on Friday. “The rupee's gain was supported by stronger-than-expected trade data and a rise in foreign exchange reserves following the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) USD/INR swap intervention,” said Dilip Par-

mar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities. “The central bank's efforts have paid off, with the rupee emerging as the top performer among Asian currencies so far this month,” he said, adding that in the short term, the rupee is expected to receive support at 85.70 and resistance at 86.45. Jateen Trivedi, Vice President, Research Analyst – Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities said, “Rupee strengthened as FII inflows surged with strong buying figures in recent days.” “The Fed's decision to hold rates steady and its

forecast for lower interest rates ahead pulled the dollar down, providing significant support to the rupee but major capital market strengthening gives rupee the strong push higher,” he added. Equity markets also reported gains on Friday, with frontline indices rising by 0.7%. The NSE Nifty extended its bullish run for a fifth consecutive session, closing higher by 159 points, or 0.69%, at 23,350. NSE cash market volumes surged dramatically by 53% from the previous day, reaching their highest level since November 25, 2024.

JAKARTA
Indonesia's Mount Lewotobi Laki
Laki volcano erupts with high alert



AP

Indonesia's Mount Lewotobi Laki Laki erupted thrice on Friday, sending ash 8,000 metres (26,000 feet) high and injuring several residents in the nearby villages. Authorities raised the eruption alert to the highest level and expanded the danger zone from seven to eight kilometres. Flights to Bali were cancelled. AP

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