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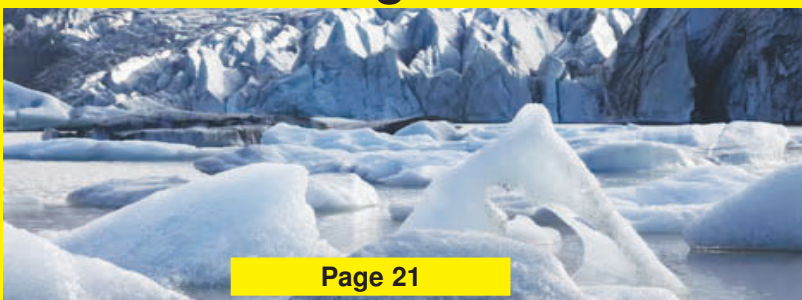
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Costa Rica agrees to be transit hub for Indian immigrants deported from US

The US will continue deportations on a bi-weekly basis until all illegal immigrants, including Indians, are returned to their home countries. Costa Rica announced that the country has agreed to act as a transit point.

(Sai Bureau)- With the Donald Trump administration in the United States deporting illegal immigrants, Central American country Costa Rica has agreed to serve as a transit point for repatriating illegal immigrants, including Indian nationals, according to an official statement released on Tuesday.

The first group of 200 migrants is scheduled to arrive at Juan Santamaría International Airport on a commercial flight this Wednesday, as confirmed by a statement from the office of Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves Robles. These individuals will be temporarily housed at a migrant care facility in Costa Rica before being repatriated to their countries of origin.

"The Government of Costa Rica agreed to collaborate with the United States in the repatriation of 200 illegal immigrants to their country. These are people originating from countries in central Asia and India," said the statement, adding



"Costa Rica will serve as a bridge for them to reach their countries of origin". However, the officials did not disclose the specific number of Indian deportees. This development follows closely on the heels of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bilateral discussions with US President Donald Trump at the

White House.

So far, the US has deported a total of 332 illegal Indian immigrants across three military flights as part of an intensified crackdown on undocumented migrants. The first flight, which arrived in Amritsar on February 5, carried 104 deportees. The second flight, with 116

deportees, arrived on February 15, followed by a third batch of 112 on Sunday.

The treatment of the deported Indians, who were reportedly shackled and handcuffed, sparked a major controversy. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) defends the practice as a standard security measure to prevent escape attempts or disruptions during deportation flights. Critics, however, argue that the practice is excessive and inhumane, particularly for individuals who have committed no crimes other than immigration violations.

The issue has prompted heated debates in the Indian Parliament, with opposition leaders calling for a formal enquiry into the deportation process and the treatment of returnees.

According to official sources, deportations will continue on a bi-weekly basis until all illegal immigrants are returned to their home countries.

India set to become high-income country by 2047 buoyed by services sector: Report

(Sai Bureau)-India is set to become a high-income country by 2047 with a projected GDP of USD 23 trillion to USD 35 trillion, buoyed by the services sector, a report has said.

By 2047, the services sector is projected to make up 60 per cent of India's GDP,

creation and unlock significant economic potential," the report said. A sectoral technology roadmap could play a pivotal role in enabling this transformation, it noted.

Advances in AI-driven chip design, touchless manufacturing, and backward

integration into component manufacturing and design could enhance cost competitiveness and innovation, driving the sector's export share from 24 per cent to 45 per cent-50 per cent by 2047 and its GDP contribution from 3 per cent to 8 per cent-10 per cent. India's proportion



while manufacturing will account for 32 per cent, both becoming crucial drivers of economic growth, the report by Bain & Company and Nasscom said.

"With nearly 200 million individuals expected to enter the workforce in the coming decades, India has a unique opportunity to drive high-value job

of renewable energy in its total energy production could increase from 24 per cent in 2023 to around 70 per cent by 2047, it noted. Likewise, the auto-component export sector is projected to reach USD 200-250 billion (2047) driven by share capture in ICE market and longer-term shift to EVs.



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Need to do something: Top court notice to Centre over obscene content on YouTube

Noting that YouTubers were misusing the lack of regulation of obscene content on YouTube, the Supreme Court issued notice to Centre and called for regulation of vulgar content amid Ranveer Allahbadia's 'India's Got Latent' row.

(News Agency)-The Supreme Court on Tuesday advocated for the regulation of obscene content on YouTube, stressing that "there was a need to do something", and that YouTubers were misusing the lack of regulation on online platforms. The top court's observation came after it heard YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia's plea seeking the clubbing of FIRs filed against him over a crass joke he made on comedian Samay Raina's 'India's Got Latent' show that was streamed on the platform.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kotiswar Singh issued notice to the Centre and said the bench would be "very happy" if the government was planning to take steps to regulate online content on YouTube. The bench asked Attorney General R Venkataramani and Solicitor General Tushar Mehta to assist the court to tackle the vacuum in the regulation of vulgar content on online platforms.

Venkataramani and Mehta were ordered to be present at the next hearing.



ALLAHBADIA GETS RELIEF, BUT GETS SUPREME COURT RAP

Earlier in the day, the Supreme Court protected Allahbadia, popularly known as 'BeerBiceps', from arrest over his vulgar remarks on the 'India's Got Latent' show and severely castigated him for his remarks, describing it as "showing a perverted mind".

"If this is not obscene, then what is? You

can show your vulgarity anytime and show depravity. There are only two FIRs. One in Mumbai and one in Assam. Liberty is a separate issue. It is not that every case is targeting you, and you are entangled. Suppose 100 FIRs are there he can say he cannot defend himself," Justice Kant said.

The top court also said that no FIR shall be registered against Allahbadia on the

basis of the 'India's Got Latent' show and allowed him to approach local police in Maharashtra and Assam for protection in case of any threat impeding him to join the probe.

He has been asked to deposit his passport with the Thane police and he "cannot leave the country without permission" from the Supreme Court.

WHAT IS THE CONTROVERSY?

A massive controversy erupted after Allahbadia recently made the crass joke while asking a contestant on the YouTube show. "Would you rather watch your parents have sex every day for the rest of your life or join in once to make it stop forever?" The joke did not sit well with the people and ignited a national debate on the regulation of such content on online platforms.

The show has since been removed from YouTube and Allahbadia issued an apology, saying the remarks were "not just inappropriate, it wasn't even funny".

"Comedy is not my forte. I'm just here to say sorry," he said.

SC protects Allahbadia from arrest; slams him for distasteful comment

We don't want to say, (but) there's something very dirty in his mind that has been vomited by way of this program,' a Bench led by Justice Surya Kant says

(News Agency)- In the eye of the storm over his comment about parents and sex during an episode of stand-up show 'India's Got Latent', podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia got a major relief on Tuesday from the Supreme Court which protected him from arrest in multiple FIRs lodged against him.

A Bench of Justice Surya Kant and Justice N Kotiswar Singh, however, pulled up Allahbadia for his irresponsible comments. Terming Allahbadia's comment as a "height of lack of responsibility" and a "condemnable behaviour," the Bench said, "Just because somebody thinks 'I am popular, I can speak anything and take society for granted'." "You tell us anyone on the earth would like these kinds of words to be told? You (Allahbadia) are insulting people, parents also. We don't want to say, (but) there's something very dirty in his mind that has been vomited by way of this program," the Bench said. Noting that there was a legislative vacuum on the



issue, the Bench said it would like to do something, if the Centre didn't do anything. "There was this case of YouTubers...the Union of India is a party...we would like to do something. If the Government of India will willingly do

it, we will be very happy. Otherwise, we are not going to leave this vacuum...the way it is being misused by so-called YouTube channels and all these things are going on...," Justice Kant said.

While issuing notice to the Centre, it

asked Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati to convey it to Attorney General R Venkataramani and Solicitor General Tushar Mehta to assist it on March 3, the next date of hearing. "We would like to do something. We may not overlook the importance and sensitivity of the issue," the Bench said. The top court protected Allahbadia from arrest in cases registered at Nodal Cyber Police, Thane, and Cyber Police Station, Guwahati, subject to the condition that he shall join investigation, as and when summoned by the investigating officers.

"The petitioner or his associates shall not air any show on Youtube or any other audio/visual mode of communication till further orders," it ordered. "The interim protection against arrest is granted further subject to the condition that the petitioner will extend full cooperation to the on-going investigation. He will not be accompanied by any counsel inside the police station during the course of investigation," the Bench ordered.

Congress' 'Soros agent' jibe over Smriti Irani's past USAID role, BJP claps back

Congress leaders Priyank Kharge and Pawan Khera took a jibe at former Union Minister Smriti Irani, calling her "real agent of George Soros". Amit Malviya hit back at the Congress and asked them to "stop obsessing over Smriti Irani".

(News Agency)- A war of words erupted between the Congress and the BJP after the former took a jibe at Smriti Irani for serving as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Goodwill Ambassador to India.

Congress leader Priyank Kharge on Tuesday shared a screenshot of a government document which detailed former Union Minister Smriti Irani's bio. The document mentions that TV actor-turned-politician Irani had served as the USAID Goodwill Ambassador to India for the WHO-ORS program before her political debut.

Priyank Kharge said, "Interesting. According to the government's official website, Ms. Smriti Irani's bio states that she has served as the USAID "Goodwill Ambassador" to India. Does this imply that BJP politicians are the real agents of George Soros?" Billionaire-philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundations have been called "agents of disruption" by a number of governments. The BJP alleged a nexus between the US hedge fund tycoon and Sonia Gandhi, a charge refuted by the Congress.



The Congress instead pointed fingers at Smriti Irani as the "real George Soros" agent.

Retweeting Priyank Kharge's post on X, Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera said, "This is brilliant. We finally have the answer to BJP's favourite question - Rasode Mein Kaun Tha? The actual agent of George Soros turns out to be Smriti Irani." The BJP dismissed the allegations, with Amit Malviya pointing out that Smriti Irani was the Goodwill Ambassador from

2002-2005 and the Congress-led UPA was in power between 2004 and 2005.

"The World Health Organisation (WHO) appointed Smriti Irani as the Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) Goodwill Brand Ambassador from 2002 to 2005. At the time, she was a household name due to the immense popularity of the television serial Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi," Malviya said. The BJP leader pointed out that WHO campaign featuring Smriti Irani was "endorsed by the Delhi Transport

Corporation (DTC), among others, which permitted promotional material to be displayed on its buses".

"Sheila Dikshit was the Chief Minister of Delhi then, and Pawan Khera served as her personal assistant, handling trivial tasks like carrying her chappals and suitcase. Matters of actual significance, such as this campaign, were likely above his pay grade at the time," Malviya added. He also shared a screenshot of an excerpt from a report by IIM Indore, which documented the program's success. "Do I even need to mention that the Congress-led UPA was in power between 2004 and 2005? This is what happens when men of no accomplishments find themselves in positions of presumed relevance within inconsequential organizations," Amit Malviya said. He then slammed the Congress and said the party "should stop obsessing over Smriti Irani". Amit Malviya added that Smriti Irani winning the Amethi seat, known as a Gandhi bastion, in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections will "remain a permanent nightmare in their (Congress) memory".

Maha Kumbh has turned into 'Mrityu Kumbh', stampede death toll suppressed, says Mamata

(News Agency)- West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday asserted that the Maha Kumbh had turned into a "Mrityu Kumbh" due to the incidents of stampede, claiming that the actual death toll at the religious gathering was suppressed by authorities. At least 30 people died and 60 were injured in a stampede in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj last month, while 18 people lost their lives in a recent stampede at an overcrowded New Delhi railway station.

"They have hidden hundreds of bodies to bring down the toll. The Maha Kumbh has turned into a 'Mrityu Kumbh' under the BJP rule," Banerjee said during an address in the state assembly. Banerjee termed the stampede at the Maha Kumbh "deeply heartbreaking", and stressed the need for better planning and management at large religious gatherings to ensure public safety.

"The tragic loss of lives in such incidents highlights the importance of careful planning, especially when it comes to the safety of citizens," she said. The chief



minister also criticised the Uttar Pradesh government for creating a hype around the Maha Kumbh "without making proper arrangements".

"So many people died in the Maha Kumbh (stampede) incident, but they are not releasing the correct death toll. They created such a hype about the event, and yet there were no proper arrangements at the venue," she said. Banerjee went on to highlight the plight of the West Bengal residents who died in the stampede, alleging that their bodies were sent back without proper documentation, making it difficult for the families to receive compensation. "We conducted post-mortem to ensure that their families got the death certificates," she said.

The chief minister also slammed the "VIP culture" at the Maha Kumbh.

"While I avoided the holy dip to prevent inconvenience to common people, the event saw special treatment for VIPs," Banerjee noted.

She also pointed out that despite the stampede incident, no investigation committee had been set up by the Uttar Pradesh government, unlike in West Bengal, where probe panels are constituted following such tragedies.

5 Odisha university staffers arrested after protests over Nepal student suicide

(News Agency)-Five staffers, including three directors and two security guards, were arrested on Tuesday in connection with the students protest over the alleged suicide of a Nepali student at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Bhubaneswar. The incident triggered widespread protests by more than 500 Nepali students across the campus. The matter escalated when the varsity authorities tried to forcibly evict some students from the campus, leading to diplomatic intervention.

The arrest followed a police report released today, which detailed an incident involving the alleged use of force by security guards and university officials to remove protesting students from the campus. Witnesses, according to the police, claimed that the guards verbally abused and physically assaulted the students, resulting in injuries.

The individuals arrested have been identified as two security guards, Ramakanta Nayak and Jogendra Behera, along with three university



officials. They now face charges under the relevant sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Meanwhile, the Vice-Chancellor of the varsity has issued an apology.

"KIIT has always been a home to students from across the world, fostering a culture of inclusivity, respect, and care. We deeply regret the recent incident and reaffirm our commitment to the safety, dignity, and well-being of all our students, including our dear

Nepali students," the apology letter reads. The Embassy of India in Nepal issued a statement, saying that they have been in contact with the Odisha government and KIIT following the death of Nepali student Prakriti Lamsal. "Odisha police have arrested a student and placed him in judicial custody. Authorities have also detained KIIT security staff accused of manhandling students. A fact-finding committee has been set up

to review the case," the embassy said in the statement. **WHAT HAPPENED AT KIIT?**

Prakriti Lamsal, a third-year BTech student, was found dead in her hostel room on Sunday evening. Her friends claimed that harassment by her ex-boyfriend, Advik Srivastava, led to her taking her own life. Prakriti's father also accused her former boyfriend of "harassing and emotionally blackmailing" his daughter. Following a complaint from Prakriti's brother, the police filed a case. Advik Srivastava was arrested and charged with abetment of suicide under Section 108 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). The incident led to protests by over 500 Nepali students at the campus. Tensions increased when the college attempted to evict some students, prompting diplomatic intervention.

On Tuesday, KIIT issued an apology. The institution stated that it was "actively persuading" students to return to the campus. "A dedicated control room is operational 24x7 at KIIT Campus 6 to facilitate the return of Nepali students," a statement said.

Mamata Banerjee's 'mrityu kumbh' remark stokes row, BJP hits back

A political showdown erupted on Monday after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday referred to the Maha Kumbh Mela as 'Mrityu Kumbh (Kumbh of Death)' over the stampede deaths. The BJP hit back, accusing her of hostility towards Hindus.

(News Agency)- West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday launched an all-out attack on Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath over the stampede deaths and alleged mismanagement of crowds at the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, calling the religious congregation "Mrityu Kumbh (Kumbh of Death)". Banerjee alleged that while VIPs were being given special privileges, the poor were being denied access to essential facilities.

The BJP swiftly retaliated against Banerjee, condemning her remarks as an attack on Hindus and accusing her of harbouring "disdain and hostility" toward Hindu traditions. BJP leader Amit Malviya alleged that her comments exposed Banerjee's "hypocrisy"-- appeasement for one community and outright hostility toward another.

Addressing the Budget Session of the Assembly, Banerjee slammed the BJP government, accusing it of "selling religion to divide the nation" and alleged



a lack of proper planning for the ongoing Maha Kumbh religious congregation in Prayagraj.

"This is 'Mrityu Kumbh'. I respect Maha Kumbh, and I respect the holy Ganga Maa. But there is no planning. How many people have been rescued? For the rich and VIPs, there are systems in place to get camps (tents) for as much as Rs 1 lakh. But for the poor, there are no

arrangements at Kumbh," the West Bengal Chief Minister said. Also mentioning that stampede situations are "common in a melas," she emphasised the need for proper arrangements and questioned, "Why did you overhype such a serious event? Proper planning should have been in place. How many commissions have been sent to Kumbh after the incident?"

Banerjee further alleged that dead bodies were sent to Bengal (from Kumbh) without even a post-mortem and said, "They will claim people died of heart attacks and deny them compensation". "We conducted the post-mortem here because you sent the bodies without death certificates. How will these people receive compensation?" she remarked.

DELIBERATE ATTACK ON HINDUISM: BJP RETALIATES

The BJP hit back at the Trinamool Congress supremo and the Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, called it an attack on Hindus and urged people to register a "strong protest". "I appeal to the Hindu community, saint community to register a strong protest. A little while ago, on the Floor of the House, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that this is not Maha Kumbh but 'Mrityu Kumbh'. Raise your voice against this attack on Hindus, on Maha Kumbh.

Maharashtra Ruling Alliance Rift Widens? Sources Say Latest Flashpoint Is...

(News Agency)- Less than three months after it won the Maharashtra elections by a landslide, the rift within the ruling BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP alliance seems to be widening with the withdrawal of 'Y'-security cover to some MLAs emerging as the latest flashpoint. Sources said that while the cover has been downgraded or withdrawn for legislators from all parties, the number is highest for the Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, which is upset over the move.



After Mr Shinde rebelled and joined hands with the BJP in 2022, the Maharashtra government had given Y-security cover to 44 state legislators and 11 Lok Sabha MPs who had supported him. Sources said that, based on a security assessment, the cover has now been downgraded or withdrawn for all Shiv Sena MLAs and other leaders, including key aides of the party chief, who are not ministers. Sources said the cover has been downgraded or withdrawn for leaders from the BJP and the NCP as well, but the leaders affected from the Sena are reportedly 20 - the highest, by far, of the three parties.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, however, said decisions on security cover are taken by the Security Review Committee. The panel reviews the security from time to time and decides accordingly. "There is no political interference in the decisions by the committee. Therefore, no one should do politics on it," he said. Mr Shinde, who is reportedly still smarting from being denied the chief minister's post and over the unresolved issue of the appointment of the Raigad and Nashik

guardian ministers, had recently been accommodated in the State Disaster Management Authority by modifying rules after he was unhappy over being left out of it. As chief minister, Mr Fadnavis heads the authority while his other deputy and NCP chief Ajit Pawar is also part of it because he holds the finance portfolio. Last week, the cabinet changed the rules of the panel to include the post of 'deputy chief minister'. All is reportedly not well between Mr Shinde and Mr Pawar either since the

government decided not to go ahead with the appointment of NCP leader Aditi Tatkar and the BJP's Girish Mahajan as the guardian ministers of Nashik and Raigad. From the Sena, Employment Guarantee Scheme Minister Bharatseth Gogawale and School Education Minister Dadaji Bhuse wanted to be given charge of the districts, especially because Nashik will be hosting the Kumbh Mela in 2027. Mr Shinde had also skipped a review meeting for the Kumbh Mela chaired by Devendra Fadnavis and held one of his own a few days later.

'No Resentment'
Taking a dig at the perceived troubles of the ruling alliance, also known as the Mahayuti, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) MP Priyanka Chaturvedi wrote on X, "Mahayuti celebrating valentine month. Not."
Maharashtra IT Minister and BJP leader Ashish Shelar insisted that there are no differences within the alliance. "There is no resentment, everything is going well in Mahayuti, all this is just a pipe dream. Chief Minister Fadnavis and Deputy Chief Ministers Shinde and Pawar are running the government together," he said.

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HD Kumaraswamy alleges political vendetta behind Congress' land survey move

(News Agency)- Union Minister HD Kumaraswamy alleged that the survey of his land in Karnataka's Ramanagara district is politically motivated. He claimed that the Congress government in Karnataka is using land surveys as a tool to target him, as they are unable to challenge him politically. Mocking the state's actions, he remarked, "Earlier, SITs were formed under IPS officers, now, they are forming SITs under IAS officers as well."

Speaking to the media outside his Bengaluru residence on Wednesday, Kumaraswamy said, "I purchased this land 40 years ago, and since then, this issue has been kept alive to target me politically. I bought this land in 1984 using the money I earned as a film distributor. Since then, some people have had their eyes on this property." The land in question is located near Bidadi's Kethaganahalli area.

He accused the Congress government of attempting to intimidate him, alleging that he had been under scrutiny since 2012 but no wrongdoing had been found. "Unlike Siddaramaiah, I have not looted government land. Since all previous



investigations haven't yielded anything, they are now initiating an SIT investigation under IAS officers. Let them conduct any investigation they want—I have nothing to hide," he asserted. Kumaraswamy recalled that in 1986, former Congress MLA CM Lingappa and Zilla Panchayat member Ramachandra had written to the then Prime Minister and Home Minister regarding the land. "In their complaint, they mentioned that I had purchased the land—not encroached upon it. I have

been engaged in farming on this land, not in any illegal activities. I have all the necessary documents to prove my ownership," he said.

Taking a dig at social activist SR Hiremath of Samaja Parivartana Samudaya, Kumaraswamy alleged that Hiremath was making baseless claims. "This man, who pretends to protect the state's resources, has raised allegations against my land. However, I have not received any notice from the Karnataka High Court regarding this issue."

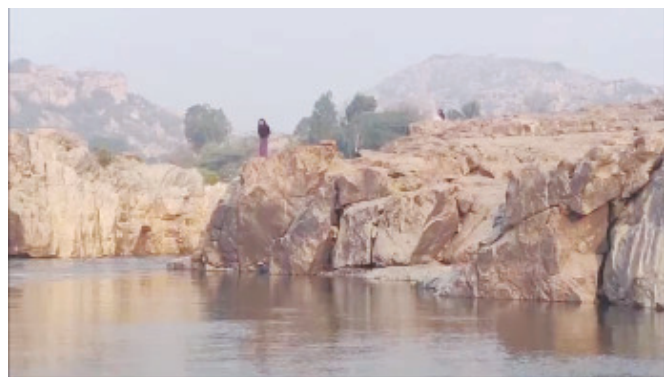
He further accused the government of orchestrating a campaign against him. "They are bringing in people to make allegations against me. Where did these complainants suddenly come from? For 40 years, no one raised any objections, but now, out of nowhere, they have surfaced," he questioned.

Kumaraswamy also criticised the manner in which the survey was planned, stating, "The Congress government's SIT was preparing to conduct a survey without even serving me a notice. I called the Deputy Commissioner and the Principal Secretary of the Revenue Department and told them to issue a notice and conduct the survey properly. I even suggested they bring in global-level land surveyors. There is no illegality in the land I purchased."

He further claimed to have information about others involved in illegal land dealings. "In this state, there is a long history of people looting government land. I know how constitutional institutions and investigative agencies have been misused. I also have records of those involved in such land grabs," he asserted.

Doctor on trip with friends goes missing while swimming in Tungabhadra

A 26-year-old doctor from Hyderabad went missing after being swept away by strong currents while swimming in the Tungabhadra River near Koppal, Karnataka. A search operation is ongoing.



A 26-year-old doctor from Hyderabad went missing while swimming in the Tungabhadra river in Karnataka, near the Tungabhadra dam in Koppal district.

According to the police, Ananya, who worked at a private hospital in Hyderabad, was on a trip with three friends. On Wednesday morning, she jumped into the river from a rock cliff, but was swept away by strong currents. In a video, taken just before she went missing, she can be seen getting ready to jump in for fun. A

voice in the background can be heard counting down for her. She surfaced for a bit after the jump, but reportedly went under moments later. Her friends sought help and called the fire and rescue department, and the police,

who then launched a search operation. Last known, she was yet to be found. Koppal Superintendent of Police Ram L Arasiddi said the police were still searching for her, but could not confirm whether she survived or not. "The fire

department, police force, and local swimmers are continuing the search, but nothing has been found yet. We cannot confirm her death unless we recover the body. They were tourists from Hyderabad who had come to enjoy the river. Unfortunately, she was swept away by the strong current when she jumped."

The incident falls under the jurisdiction of the Gangavathi Rural Police Station, in Gangavathi, which is close to the Tungabhadra dam.

India, China likely to hold talks on border conflict on sidelines of G20 Summit

(News Agency)-External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi are set to attend the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Johannesburg, raising expectations of a potential bilateral discussion towards resolving the India-China border



issue. Given the recent progress in disengagement and restart of patrolling in Depsang Plains and Demchok, along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the meeting is viewed as a significant step toward stabilising relations between the two countries. Since the October 2024 agreement on disengagement in Depsang Plains and Demchok, both nations have been engaging in regular high-level talks to implement a structured peace process. The focus has now shifted to de-escalation, which could lead to a

reduction in military presence in sensitive border areas. Diplomatic engagements in recent months, including National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to Beijing in December and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri's trip in January, have reinforced the commitment to

improving ties.

The December 2024 Special Representatives (SR) Meeting in Beijing marked a crucial turning point, with both sides affirming their intent to manage border peace effectively. This was followed by Foreign Secretary Misri's visit in

January, where key agreements were reached on reviving people-to-people exchanges, resuming the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, and improving economic cooperation. As the G20 summit unfolds, sources suggest that India and China may use the platform to further their dialogue, with the goal of achieving broader consensus on border stability. The meeting could set the stage for continued diplomatic progress, ensuring that peace along the LAC remains a priority for both countries in 2025.

Elon Musk has no official decision-making authority, White House clarifies

The White House clarified that Elon Musk serves as a senior adviser to President Trump but does not hold decision-making authority. His role is advisory, limited to guiding the president and communicating directives, without formal authority.

(News Agency)-The White House, in a court filing on Monday, clarified billionaire Elon Musk's role within the Trump administration. While Musk is serving as a senior adviser to President Donald Trump, the White House emphasised that he is not an employee of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and does not hold decision-making authority within the US government.

According to a filing signed by Joshua Fisher, the director of the Office of Administration at the White House, Musk's position is purely advisory. His responsibilities are limited to advising the president and communicating directives from the administration.



"Like other senior White House advisors, Musk has no actual or formal authority to make government decisions himself,"

the filing was quoted by news agency Reuters in its report. This clarification comes in response to a legal case brought by the

State of New Mexico against Musk, seeking to address the role of Musk in the government's efforts to combat inefficiencies.

Fisher's filing further emphasised that Musk is not an employee of the US DOGE Service, nor does he hold any administrative position within the agency. The filing explicitly stated: "Musk is not the US DOGE Service Administrator." DOGE, the organisation accountable for identifying and eliminating wasteful spending within the US government, has become a focal point of Trump's second term.

Under Trump's leadership, Musk has been tasked with overseeing a significant restructuring of federal agencies. This includes efforts to root out inefficiencies and reduce governmental overhead, with thousands of job cuts already made across various sectors.

CIA flying covert drone missions into Mexico to spy on drug cartels

The CIA under President Donald Trump has been covertly flying MQ-9 Reaper drones over Mexico to spy on drug cartels, current and former officials familiar with the matter told CNN, part of Trump's dramatic reorientation of national security assets to the US southern border.

The missions, which have not been previously reported, come as the Trump administration moves to treat transnational drug cartels as terrorist organizations — a designation it has yet to officially make.

The MQ-9 drones used for the missions are not currently armed. But they can be equipped with payloads to carry out precision strikes. The US regularly uses them to target suspected terrorists in Syria, Iraq and Somalia.

Some current and former officials say designating cartels as terrorist groups could



potentially lay the groundwork for direct US strikes against the cartels and their drug labs in Mexico.

The CIA has flown surveillance drones to hunt cartels inside Mexico before, according to a former and a current US official, under at least one small program that partnered with Mexican authorities.

But the more recent flights were communicated to Congress by the Trump administration using a particular notification reserved for new or updated covert

programs that the CIA intends either to conceal or deny, a source familiar with the matter said — suggesting that the flights represent a distinct escalation. The notifications made no mention of Mexican partners, the source said.

The CIA declined to comment specifically about the drone missions. But a spokesperson said that broadly "countering drug cartels in Mexico and regionally is a priority for CIA as a part of the Trump Administration's broader efforts

to end the grave threat from narco-trafficking. Director [John] Ratcliffe is determined to put CIA's unique expertise to work against this multifaceted challenge." The revelation that the CIA is flying drone missions over Mexico comes amid heightened tensions between the US and Mexican governments.

The Mexican government is already fielding questions about why American military spy planes have flown missions near the border in recent weeks.

In response to CNN's reporting about the dramatic uptick in military spy planes flying near Mexico, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and other senior Mexican officials have emphasized in recent days the importance of sovereignty and that those spy plane flights are occurring in international airspace and over US territory. Defense Minister Ricardo Trevilla said that he was not

previously aware of those spy plane flights.

"We cannot rule out espionage because we do not know exactly what was done," Trevilla said last week. "However, they did not violate national airspace."

The CIA's MQ-9 missions, however, are being flown inside Mexican airspace. The Mexican government did not respond to requests for comment.

On Friday, in response to a question about increased US overflights in international airspace, Sheinbaum said, "The important thing here, I think, in the declaration, which is what we have always proposed, is that they share information with the Government of Mexico."

Under longstanding bilateral agreements, the Drug Enforcement Administration and some other law enforcement agencies also routinely fly aircraft in Mexican airspace in cooperation with the Mexican government.

Judge orders hearing over Trump DOJ's bid to toss Eric Adams corruption case

A federal judge on Tuesday ordered U.S. prosecutors to appear in court this week to address why they are seeking to dismiss criminal charges filed against New York Mayor Eric Adams.

The hearing comes after a Justice Department official appointed by Republican President Donald Trump ordered prosecutors to seek dismissal of the case. At least a half-dozen federal prosecutors resigned rather than obey the order, but other officials eventually formally sought dismissal on Friday.

U.S. District Judge Dale Ho, an appointee of Democratic former President Joe Biden, ordered the parties to appear at a hearing on Wednesday at 2 p.m. EST (1900 GMT) to discuss the matter.

Neither Adams' lawyer nor the Justice Department immediately responded to requests for comment.

Four deputies to Adams said



on Monday they planned to resign in a withdrawal of support for the embattled Democratic mayor, who has warmed to Trump since being indicted last year on charges of taking bribes from Turkish officials. He has pleaded not guilty.

New York state Governor Kathy Hochul, who has the power to remove Adams, said in a statement on Monday night that she would meet with key leaders in Manhattan on

Tuesday to discuss "the path forward."

"Overturning the will of the voters is a serious step that should not be taken lightly," said Hochul, also a Democrat. "That said, the alleged conduct at City Hall that has been reported over the past two weeks is troubling and cannot be ignored."

Acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove, a Trump appointee who had defended Trump in a criminal case stemming from

hush money paid to a porn star, said the Justice Department's decision to dismiss charges had nothing to do with the merits of the case. Rather, he said the case was distracting Adams from helping Trump crack down on illegal immigration, one of the administration's top priorities. Adams has asserted, without presenting evidence, that the charges were brought in retaliation for his criticism of the Biden administration's immigration policies. Prosecutors with the Manhattan U.S. Attorney's office, which brought the charges, have denied this, pointing out that their investigation began before Adams began criticizing Biden's policies in 2022.

The Justice Department has asked Ho to dismiss the charges without prejudice, meaning they could be brought again later.

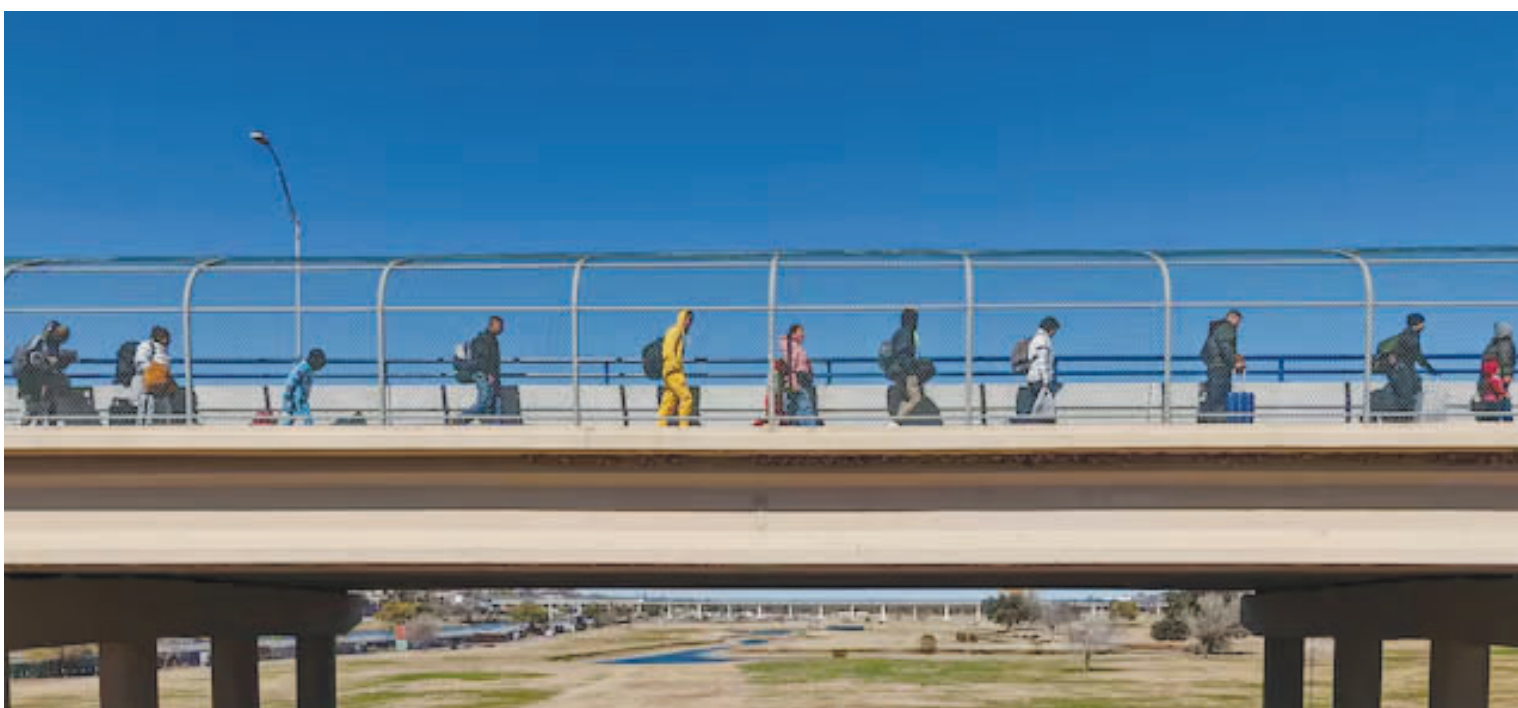
In a February 10 letter ordering former Manhattan U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon to

drop the case, Bove said the charges had improperly interfered with Adams' re-election campaign. He said prosecutors would reconsider the case after the November 2025 mayoral election in the largest U.S. city.

Sassoon, in a February 12 letter to Attorney General Pam Bondi expressing her opposition to Bove's order, said dismissing the case without prejudice would amount to the Trump administration's threatening Adams with future prosecution if he does not cooperate with enforcing immigration laws.

Another Justice Department attorney, Ryan Crosswell, wrote in a resignation letter to Bondi on Monday that the decision to dismiss the case was "not based on the facts or the law." Crosswell declined to comment on the letter, which circulated on social media on Tuesday and which Reuters confirmed as authentic.

US Border Patrol arrested 29,000 migrants illegally crossing Mexico border in January, lowest since May 2020



The U.S. Border Patrol arrested 29,000 migrants illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in January, the agency said on Tuesday, signaling that a drop in crossings over the past year could continue under President

Donald Trump.

The arrest tally in January was the lowest level since May 2020 and down from 47,000 in December, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection figures.

Trump, a Republican, issued an

array of executive orders after taking office on January 20 to crack down on illegal immigration, surging military troops to assist with border security and blocking migrants from claiming asylum. At the same time, he took steps to

ramp up deportations of migrants already in the U.S.

Former President Joe Biden, a Democrat, grappled with record numbers of migrants caught crossing the border, a trend that peaked at 250,000 arrests in December 2023.

Biden in June 2024 restricted the ability of migrants crossing illegally to claim asylum and worked with Mexico and other nations to limit illegal immigration, leading to a dramatic drop in arrests. At the same time, Biden opened new legal entry programs that his administration said discouraged illegal crossings.

Pete Flores, acting CBP commissioner, said in a statement that fewer crossings meant "more officers and agents are now able to conduct the enforcement duties that make our border more secure and our country safer."

The falloff in migrant arrests in January came even as Trump ended several of Biden's legal entry programs. The programs included one that allowed migrants in Mexico to use an app known as CBP One to schedule an appointment to request legal entry.

New York Governor Hochul to meet for talks on embattled NYC mayor

(News Agency)- New York Governor Kathy Hochul on Monday said she will meet key leaders on Tuesday for a conversation about the future of embattled New York City Mayor Eric Adams, as she faces pressure to remove him from office after President Donald Trump's Justice Department asked to drop criminal charges against him.

"Tomorrow, I have asked key leaders to meet me at my Manhattan office for a conversation about the path forward, with the goal of ensuring stability for the City of New York," she said in a statement.

The meeting comes after four deputies to Adams said they plan to resign in a withdrawal of support for the embattled mayor amid the DOJ citing his sympathies with Trump's immigration policy as a factor in dropping charges.

Hochul said that she had spoken with the deputies and that their intention to resign "raises questions about the long-term future of this Mayoral administration."

Adams has refused to step down.

The attempt drop the case against Adams had already prompted mass resignations in the Justice Department



by officials who refused to comply with the decision to drop charges, which had been affirmed in a grand jury indictment. City Comptroller Brad Lander has urged Adams to provide a contingency plan for the leadership vacuum the resignations would create, threatening to take measures that could force him from

office."Should your office be unable or unwilling to formulate such a plan promptly, I will seek to convene a meeting of the Inability Committee," Lander said in an open letter to Adams published on Sunday. The city charter enables the comptroller to call for the formation of a committee to force out the

mayor.

Hochul also has the authority to initiate removal proceedings. In her Monday statement, she said a governor has not had to use these powers to remove a duly-elected mayor in the state's 235-year history.

"The alleged conduct at City Hall that has been reported over the past two weeks is troubling and cannot be ignored," she said.

Adams, a Democrat and former police officer elected in 2022, has been under pressure to resign since federal prosecutors brought a five-count criminal indictment last September charging him with accepting travel perks from Turkish officials and political donations from foreigners in exchange for taking actions to benefit Turkey.

Adams pleaded not guilty, has denied any wrongdoing, and said he would not resign. After Trump came back into office on January 20, however, the new leadership of the Justice Department sought to dismiss the charges.

U.S. District Judge Dale Ho still must sign off on the request.

No decision on Ukraine war behind Kyiv's back: Zelenskyy on US-Russia talks

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy postponed his Saudi Arabia visit. He insisted that any peace talks must include Ukraine and stressed the need for US and European involvement in Kyiv's security guarantees.

(News Agency)- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday said he had postponed his visit to Saudi Arabia, originally planned for Wednesday, until March 10. He said no discussions on ending the war could take place without Ukraine's involvement.

Zelenskyy said securing a just peace required the participation of the United States, Ukraine, and Europe in talks on Kyiv's security guarantees, news agency Reuters reported.

Speaking with the reporters, Zelenskyy said, "We want no one to decide anything behind our backs... No decision can be made without Ukraine on how to end the war in Ukraine." This comes hours after the US and Russia said that they had agreed to continue efforts to end the war in Ukraine after talks in Riyadh, where Ukraine was not represented. The meeting lasted four and a half hours. It was the first time US and Russian officials had sat together to discuss the conflict.



About the Russia-US talks in Riyadh, the Ukrainian President said, "We were not invited to this meeting, it was a surprise for us." Ukraine has said it will not accept any agreement imposed without its

consent. Before the talks, the US administration was criticised by some European politicians for ruling out NATO membership for Ukraine and saying it was unrealistic for Kyiv to reclaim all of

its territory now under Russian control. US national security adviser Mike Waltz said in Riyadh that ending the war permanently would require negotiations over territory. "Just a practical reality is that there is going to be some discussion of territory and there's going to be discussion of security guarantees," he was quoted as saying by news agency Reuters in its report.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said European involvement in talks was necessary and any agreement must be acceptable to all parties. "No one is being sidelined," he said.

During the talks, Russia reiterated its position. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it was "not enough" for NATO to keep Ukraine out. She said NATO must go further by reversing a commitment made in 2008 that Ukraine would join in the future. "Otherwise, this problem will continue to poison the atmosphere on the European continent," she said.

There's A New Negotiating Table In Town: Middle East

As world leaders gathered in Munich, Germany, for Europe's top annual security conference, placating, pleasing, and managing US President Donald Trump stood as a top agenda. Trump's phone call to Russia's Vladimir Putin, US Vice-President J.D. Vance's disruptive speech challenging Europe, and, by association, the very nature of trans-Atlantic alliances, and demands to end the Ukraine conflict, has led to a mad rush to host such a process, in the Gulf. The question that perhaps comes immediately to mind, even though the conflict in Gaza remains a major global flashpoint, is, why?

The Meeting Between Rubio And Lavrov- Russia and the US are preparing to start initial consultations on Ukraine following an ice-breaking meeting between US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh. For Saudi Arabia and its powerful heir-apparent, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, this is a moment of both regional and global reckoning. Gulf powers in the Middle East have now been for a while re-positioning and re-posturing their geopolitics. This process started much before Trump's return to the White House—arguably, prior to even the Russian war against Ukraine. The roots of this shift lie in two main realities. First, a change in the construct of global power

contestation, that is, a bi-polar competition between the US and China and a demand for multipolarity by a host of middle powers looking to secure their own interests and not get caught in the Washington-Beijing dynamics. The second reality relates to a general idea of the US becoming increasingly unwilling to mobilise military power to protect its allies.

Reconsidering America's Role

Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are evaluating the very fundamentals of the decades-long American hegemony, which has provided security blankets in the region. This also provides them with an opportunity to build their own geopolitical repertoire as middle powers with their own agency, instead of being viewed as client states, a tag that has plagued many of them for decades. The UAE as well has thrown its hat into the ring, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy landed in Abu Dhabi, mere hours after both Russia and the US eluded to excluding Kyiv from talks regarding Ukraine's own future (Zelenskyy later cancelled a planned visit to Saudi). While this position by the Trump administration delivered tremors across European capitals, it has also played into an increasingly constrained space between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for regional influence.

By Kabir Taneja

FOMO To Reel Filters To Faith: Why Maha Kumbh Is Drawing Gen Z

Besides the holy trinity of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, a fourth, gushing river has started flowing from the Maha Kumbh 2025. It is the unstoppable stream of Instagram reels. Its resident deity is Generation Z, or twenty-somethings. And it is not just FOMO (or the fear of missing out) driving this, although that is one of the more obvious reasons. More than 500 million people are expected to visit the Maha Kumbh. How many of them are Gen Z, particularly in the urban sense of the word, is not available as statistics. However, the sheer number of selfies and shorts on social media suggests there is a steep spike in interest among very young adults. "Being a Gen Z, I never considered religious rituals, worshipping or traditional practices a part of my daily life. However, my first experience at Maha Kumbh 2025 changed my perspective in ways I had never imagined," writes Yatharth Sikka in the Organiser. "Instead of chaos, I found discipline, devotion, and a deep sense of social harmony among the people. There are no barriers—only faith

and devotion." Let us examine some of the major reasons why Gen Z is braving oceanic—sometimes even fatal—crowds to visit the Kumbh. First, it is undoubtedly FOMO and curiosity. "Why is it that when one man builds a wall, the next man immediately needs to know what's on the other side?" Tyrion Lannister had remarked in A Game of Thrones. A wall of negative information about Sanatan Dharma's cynosure and the largest show on Earth, followed by a blitz of positive marketing, have raised the curiosity of youngsters. Many of them waited 25-30 hours in 200-300 km traffic jams with uncharacteristic patience to reach the venue. "But rather than feeling frustrated, my curiosity about Kumbh only grew stronger. What was so special about this event that made millions of people endure such hardships just to be there?" writes Sikka. Second, the waters of Kumbh dissolve the barriers of caste and hierarchy. After being poisoned against their own faith, young, rational Hindus find that surprising and attractive.

By Abhijit Majumder

Why Modi-Trump Meet Was More Productive Than Expected

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US has proved to be well-timed. Rather than wait for the mercurial and unpredictable President Donald Trump to say and do things on his pet peeves, which include an obsession with tariffs, Modi took the initiative to engage him directly on exploring together how his concerns could be met—and India's too—in a constructive way. It was a pre-emptive move by Modi, aimed at setting up at the earliest the tone of India-US bilateral ties during Trump's second presidency. Modi has gambled on the personal chemistry that he had established with Trump during his first term to make the visit and not let uncertainties cloud the existing positive atmosphere surrounding India-US relations.

Friends Inside

India could rely on the many Indian friends amongst the appointees to the second Trump administration—such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio, National Security Adviser Michael Waltz, and the director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard—to adequately cushion the ties from the unpredictable shocks that Trump could potentially administer. Trump, supremely self-confident in his second term, believes that he has the measure of all America's problems and is determined to use US power to get his way at the international level. It seems that he will listen to his advisors only to the extent that they support his thinking. This is positive in some ways, such as his desire to end the war in Ukraine, and highly negative in some other ways, such as his recipe for turning Gaza into a 'Riviera', ignoring the terrible human cost inflicted on its 2-million-plus inhabitants. It is in this

context that an early Modi visit and a personal contact with Trump was an astute move. It is apparent that Trump does not go into details, is guided by his impressions and has a loose grasp of facts and figures, as was evident in his joint press conference with Modi, where he spoke of the US having a \$100 billion trade deficit with India; the actual figure is \$45.6 billion. Similarly, he spoke of hundreds of years of India's problems with Bangladesh—what he probably had in mind must be the legacy of the Islamic invasions that resulted in the creation of Pakistan.

A Remarkable Statement

It is remarkable that within less than a month of the new US administration being in power and key posts in the State Department not yet filled, India and the US could produce a substantive joint statement on the occasion of Modi's visit. The document, which has many positive features, gives precedence to US priorities on defence and trade, but this is balanced by what India seeks in terms of continuation of the established areas of cooperation in technology, innovation, space, mineral security, etc. In the White House readout of the telephonic call the two leaders had had earlier, Trump had already made it known that balancing trade relations and India buying more defence equipment from the US were his priorities. Accordingly, unlike in previous cases with the US, as well as with other countries, the paragraph on defence takes prime place in the joint statement, and this is followed by trade.

By Kanwal Sibal



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Editor in Chief & Publisher: Sharanjit Singh Thind

Tel: 646 875 8495

Email: editor@thesouthasianinsider.com

Mailing Address:

Nu Way Media Group Inc.

Suite 223, West 32nd Street, Manhattan, New York 10018

For General and Advertising Inquiries:

thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com

www.thesouthasianinsider.com

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Trade, terror & tariffs



THE optics were perfect, but not the mathematics. US President Donald Trump heaped praise on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but he also raised the

hardware to bring down the trade deficit. The US is one of the few countries with which India has a trade surplus, but this advantageous situation might change if Trump has his way. And he usually does. The US President candidly admitted that Modi was a much better, tougher negotiator than him, but he stopped short of patting himself on the back for being a master of coercive diplomacy.

It is laudable that the two leaders have resolved to more than double the bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 and begin talks for a fair and mutually beneficial trade agreement. PM Modi's negotiating skills will be put to the test to ensure that the pact is not skewed in favour of the US. The Modi-Trump meeting has been particularly fruitful in the defence and security

domains. The two nations have unveiled an ambitious plan to ink a new 10-year defence pact and pursue co-production of key weapons and platforms. Trump's announcement that the US has approved the extradition of Tahawwur Rana, a 26/11 plotter, is a stern warning to Pakistan — it should no longer let its territory be used to carry out cross-border terror attacks. This tough talk will intensify the pressure on Islamabad to punish the perpetrators of the Mumbai and Pathankot terror attacks. And Pakistan will feel even more jittery if the proposed supply of US F-35 stealth combat jets to India sees the light of day. Trump's 'tariff terrorism' might be a bitter pill to swallow, but a bigger American role in India's defence preparedness is an attractive proposition for New Delhi.

Trump's Blunt 'No' To Europe Can Change Everything

By Harsh V. Pant

It's a new phase in the Ukraine war as the Trump administration moves to hold talks with Russia without the presence of Ukraine or Europe. The Saudis will be in the mediating role, and the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, Trump's Middle East special envoy, Steve Witkoff, and National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, all will be part of this enterprise, which might end up upending American policy of the last three years. It's a spectacular shift in Washington, and Europe is left scrambling for a response. Though Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has said that Ukraine would "never accept deals made behind our backs without our involvement", it's not readily evident what options he has at this juncture when the US seems more than ready to walk away from European security. Zelenskyy's call for the creation of an "army of Europe" came after US Vice-President JD Vance underlined the Trump administration's perspective that Europe must "step up in a big way to provide for its own defence". US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth also made it clear that



European nations must provide the "overwhelming" share of funding for Ukraine. More interestingly, he also said that it was "unrealistic" to expect Ukraine to return to its pre-2014 borders, and downplayed the prospect of Ukraine joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

A 'Once In A Generation' Moment

Though it was expected that the Trump presidency will bring its own set of challenges for Europe, there seems to be a complete rethink on the parameters of the

US-Europe partnership. In response, European leaders are in Paris trying to hammer out a response to what UK leader Keir Starmer has described as a "once in a generation" moment for national security. Starmer himself has suggested that he is ready to place UK peacekeeping troops in Ukraine "to contribute to security guarantees to Ukraine". Germany is also offering to do the same, but it might be too late in the game.

After investing three years of resources as well as diplomatic and military capital in trying to

fend off Russian territorial advances, along with the US standing as an ally, the shift in the tone and tenor of American support might be disconcerting. For many in Europe, the danger might be that in the name of peace, Trump would strike a deal with Putin, putting Europe at a perpetual disadvantage. That the long-term costs of short-term political expediency will be borne by Europe is the fear that is now shaping European response.

When Vance warned his

audience at the Munich Security Conference that they should fear neither Moscow nor Beijing but European leadership itself, he went further than many in Europe had anticipated. His argument, that "shutting down" unorthodox viewpoints is the "most surefire way to destroy democracy", and his calling upon European leaders to "embrace what your people tell you", was aimed more at putting mainstream European political leadership in their place rather than trying to find a common ground with allies to tackle regional and global challenges.

Shifting Priorities

For the Trump administration, Europe and its security are no longer the priority that many in the continent would like to believe. For the US, the centre of gravity of global politics has been gradually shifting to the Indo-Pacific, and Trump's policies are perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of this understanding. In his first term as President, Trump consistently challenged long-standing alliances, most notably NATO, questioning its relevance and urging European nations to increase their defence spending.



India must adjust to a whole new world

By NIRUPAMA RAO

In the chemistry of diplomacy, the camaraderie between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump provides a constructive environment for relations between India and the US. Such rapport eases tensions and builds trust, although diplomacy cannot depend entirely on leadership-level chemistry. Relations between India and the US, fortuitously, are built also on several years of evolution in multiple areas of mutual benefit, strategic convergence and a solid framework of public support as well as national interest. But the world we live in is a fragmenting world, and complacency is outmoded. The realities we confront today are very different from those during Trump's first presidency. The dynamics of global diplomacy have changed. War and conflict, predatory competition, trade tensions and the waning attractions of globalisation define geopolitics. Trump has come to power on his 'America First' agenda, he is playing to his MAGA (Make America Great Again) base and riding a tidal wave of populism and nativism in the American body politic. The outcomes of the Modi visit have been analysed across the media, and it is time for us to dwell on the impact of a Trumpian world on India. It is not that President Trump does not value the strategic partnership with India. During PM Modi's visit, it was clear that both sides are keen on elevating military cooperation to embrace various domains, including air, land, sea, space and cyberspace. There are plans to expand

defence sales and co-production with the potential inclusion of advanced aviation systems like the F-35 jets. There is also the shared strategic vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Trade and immigration offer more complex challenges. President Trump's 'reciprocal' tariffs will fundamentally disrupt norms of international trade; there will be increased business uncertainties and a deepening of geopolitical divides. Nations will have to reassess their trading relations with the US. Established supply chains may be affected, as also global economic stability. The imposition of US tariffs will impact production costs that will affect consumers and contribute to higher inflation. Of course, as the US diversifies its supply chains away from China, there are opportunities for our textiles, electronics and engineering goods sectors. However, Trump's protectionist approach to economic ties with the world poses challenges for India, and we should not downplay them.

There is a need for careful negotiation to balance our economic interests while maintaining and strengthening our strategic partnership with the US. The new reciprocal tariff policy should serve as a catalyst for India to rationalise its own tariffs, and for trade negotiations leading to a bilateral trade agreement that both countries want to conclude before the end of this year. Reaching such an agreement will be a true test of our negotiating skills. In the face of coercive American moves, our challenge will be to maximise the zone of potential agreement, as it is called in the science

of negotiation. On immigration, the summary manner in which America is expelling illegal Indian immigrants, bound in shackles, has not gone down well. The deportation procedures followed have sparked significant controversy. There is a feeling that our nationals have been inhumanly treated. There is a risk that this could be interpreted as a failure to protect our citizens abroad. The ability of a nation to safeguard its citizens internationally is a component of smart power. Legal immigration and H-1B visa issues can no doubt be managed well by the two countries. Our problem is how the human trafficking industry can be cracked down upon effectively by our agencies.

Another issue of concern is Trump's warning to the BRICS nations. He is playing the global hegemon on the power of the US dollar and threatening to serve a death warrant on BRICS if its members pursue alternative financial systems that deter the dollar's dominance. South Africa, a BRICS member, has come under a cloud because of land policies that allegedly affect the white Afrikaner minority, something that Elon Musk highlights as "racist ownership laws" (Musk has also faced challenges for his Starlink project in South Africa). This has led to a halting of all US financial aid to South Africa and Trump's decision not to attend the forthcoming G20 Summit in Johannesburg. What this demonstrates is that Trump is ready to sacrifice diplomatic relations if policy 'principles' are seen as threatened.

There is much talk of a multipolar world

today. In an interview, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio acknowledged this when he said, "It's not normal for the world to have a unipolar power. That was an anomaly. It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet." This may sound soothing, but an 'America First' world view has inbuilt presumptions about American primacy. And the warning to BRICS is a wake-up call for plurilateral groupings, too. Exist if you must, but play according to American rules. In the post-World War II world, America was what some call a 'benign hegemon'. Judging by statements from President Trump and Vice-President Vance, it is recasting its image as a hegemon that sets new rules for the rest of the world, where American slash-and-burn self-interest and interpretations of morality set global parameters, that America will not be "ripped off" by allies and adversaries alike. This is why some term the new Trump presidency as 'imperial'. The 'stark strategic realities' that US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth spoke of recently suggest that America will withdraw from the defence of Europe, leaving this responsibility to the Europeans themselves, that peace in the Russia-Ukraine conflict means that Russia is the stronger side and that Ukraine cannot be a part of NATO or seek a return of territory taken by Russia, that Palestine and Palestinians are a lost cause since Israel is the champion in a winner-take-all world.

Rebuilding Punjab from the new low of deportation flights

The next generation yearns for a path forward and needs a clear thought and vision for the future.



By GUNBIR SINGH

Punjab's slide has reached its nadir. The exodus of its youth through clandestine routes and the eventual cruel deportation of some of them from the US to the holy city of Amritsar lately are the new lows. Once the number one state of the country across indices, even up to 2003, it has fallen drastically over the past two decades. One may sound like a prophet of doom, but the reality truly bites. Mindboggling as it may seem, even during the era of militancy, the state's agrarian economy sustained itself remarkably.

Historically, the people of the state have been happy, progressive and extremely hardworking. The youth took to the armed forces, administrative services, entrepreneurship and innovative farming like fish to water. And yet, this industrious state and its enterprising people are now at a loss and looking for avenues of escape.

Punjab's industrial prowess and its avenues of trade and business, took multiple hits during the Partition of 1947, and further in the Indo-Pak wars, and still more during the over a decade of militancy. The state's debt exceeds Rs 3,50,000 crore and it ranks at the bottom of the 18-state Fiscal Health Index 2025. But the slide is not just economic.

There is also a severe political trust deficit, across party lines. The Akali Dal is decimated and its leadership lately shamed by the Sikh clergy itself. The Akali Dal under Prakash Singh Badal has had the longest reign of nearly 19 years, including the period of slide from 2007-2017, even though it was in partnership with the powerful national ally, the BJP, for much of this period.

The present-day ruling party of the state, the AAP, has done precious little to improve the lot of its people or its economy although it is halfway through its term of office. Since Independence, the Punjabis have been pivoting between the Congress and the Akalis and finally mandated the AAP for political control after lacklustre terms of the other two favoured parties. However, in the last two decades, every promise of prosperity by each party has been but a chimera for the people of Punjab.

Terming the problems of Punjab today as existential may not be an overstatement. For too long, the youth have watched their leaders head for the national capital and return thumping their chests, parroting perceived victories, easily befogged and befooled by the powers-that-be, only to find their Punjab further diminished.

Also, its bargaining chips, political or otherwise, are few, and most have been

pawned away for the personal greed of politicians. In the numbers game of politics, our once numero uno state is today befuddled, landlocked, politically unimportant and hopelessly in debt.

The next generation, thus, yearns for a path forward and needs a clear thought and vision for the future. Look around you, they tell their elders: name one leader who can guide you through the morass and pull Punjab out of the quicksand!

They look at their remarkable legacy, the Khalsa sarkaar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, when Punjab's boundaries extended across the entire Indus Valley up to Tibet and Ladakh, all the way to Khyber, and down to Delhi. And yet, they find that the state has not had a single stalwart who could match the vision and dynamism of Partap Singh Kairon, who, in his term (1957-1964), ushered in not only the Green Revolution but also invited industry leaders. He even had Le Corbusier build the new capital city of the state, Chandigarh.

It was after his assassination in 1965 that the Punjab state was reorganised on a linguistic basis, a possibility that Kairon had resisted tooth and nail. With this new development, this proud state, which had lost over 2,00,000 square km of its territory to Pakistan due to the line drawn by Radcliffe partitioning the subcontinent,

lost another 58.8 per cent of itself to a three-state solution brought about by the Akali Punjabi Suba movement.

The Great Land of Punjab which comprised a massive 3,60,000 sq km pre-Independence, has been squeezed to just 50,362 sq km. Indeed, a Punjab diminished by stature and by size!

This remarkable downside of the land of the Khalsa has a contrarian upside as well. The faith moved on, so it seemed, across the globe.

Historically, the Sikhs were never backseat drivers and, thus, led from the front in the wars raged against the British (the Anglo-Sikh wars) and for the British later. Post the fall of the Khalsa Raj, evidence of Sikhs battling it out in Malta, China, Tibet, Japan, Somalia, Iraq, Mesopotamia, Sudan and elsewhere during the two World Wars is extensive. And, they dug roots in these territories.

In the contemporary times, they have expanded their universe manifold into the global village. It is this fact that makes the latest deportations of youth even more unpalatable.

The frustration of the young Punjabi flows from the downright illogic of Punjab's reality. It grows the staples, wheat and rice, in mindboggling tonnage, yet processes minuscule amounts into foodstuff. It has the iconic Golden Temple that attracts the highest number of visitors — 40 million per annum — but no MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) tourism and no plans for synergetic journeys across the state.

It has a border that opens out the subcontinent to the entire Asian plate and beyond, and no trade. It has nurtured entrepreneurship, but its businessmen have funnelled their major investments elsewhere. It has been the food basket for the nation, yet its farmers are in penury. Only a holistic overhaul can excite the youth again — perhaps, a short-term strategy to counter the fall, a mid-term policy to steady the boat and a long-term approach striding new technologies.

Diversifying the economy, enabling a surge in exports, reforming education, straddling environmental degradation; doubling down on such low-hanging fruits as tourism, entrepreneurship, and services; bringing young women centre stage; creating a calendar of events for tourism and business; rethinking the agrarian basket and adding value — all this requires a master plan and a systemic change in its execution methodology.

Beyond deportation

Joint efforts a must to curb illegal immigration



Planeloads of illegal immigrants are coming to India from the US, and it doesn't really matter how many of them belong to which state. They are all Indians, and their deportation is an embarrassment for the whole nation, not

just their respective states. The political blame game over their plight is just a diversionary tactic. Successive Central and state governments failed them so badly that they put their lives on the line to reach the US. Last week, Prime

Minister Narendra Modi said in Washington that India would take back any verified Indian illegal migrant in America — New Delhi doesn't have much choice anyway — and also crack down on human traffickers who

exploited vulnerable people. Insisting that he wanted to go beyond repatriation, the PM called for a joint fight against the menace. Such collaboration, however, should not be confined to India and the US. It must involve the Union as well as state governments, besides civil society and the people at large, as they are all key stakeholders.

In Punjab, it's a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. Over the past 15 years, the state has been ruled, in turn, by the Akali-BJP alliance, the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party. Passing the buck will not solve the lingering problem, which needs to be confronted unitedly, prioritising the state's long-term interests.

It's unfortunate that deportees continue to be shackled even after India flagged their unacceptable treatment with the US authorities. The fact that all flights with deportees are landing in Amritsar is another troubling issue. But these matters should not be allowed to obscure the larger picture. A major challenge for governments from here on is to persuade those who have returned to stay on rather than embark on another misadventure — and also to dissuade others from choosing a perilous course in a desperate pursuit of their American dream.

Mood of the Nation: Economy is the one thing Modi 3.0 has to get right

By **Yashwant Deshmukh & Sutanu Guru**

Sustained success has an uncanny ability to camouflage weaknesses that could turn fatal if the stars align in a malevolent manner. In India, a third consecutive mandate to the National Democratic Alliance under Narendra Modi is a classic example of sustained success. Yet, the third mandate came with a powerful caveat: the ordinary citizen was unhappy with how their family struggled to make ends meet.

Ever since the Covid-19 pandemic, the nation's mood has been consistently pessimistic about livelihood issues. Since elections are rarely one-issue referendums, the Modi regime has managed to ensure that unhappiness over economic prospects did not transform into raging anger the way it did in 2013 and 2014 for the United Progressive Alliance regime.

The exclusive Mood of The Nation Survey conducted by C-Voter for India Today indicates that the Modi regime confronts the formidable challenge of fixing the

livelihood issues of ordinary Indians. Thus far, doubts, scepticism, and worries about quality of life and standard of living have not turned into anger. But who knows when that might happen if they persist? Even a cursory look at the responses to the C-Voter survey reveals the extent of economic hardships Indian households face. When asked to highlight the biggest successes of the Modi government, a little more than 15 per cent of the respondents identified the construction of the Ram Temple and the Kashi

Vishwanath Corridor, and close to 11 per cent identified corruption-free governance as the biggest success. But when asked about the biggest failures of the regime, about 21 per cent each singled out inflation and unemployment. Recent data suggests that both inflation and unemployment have been declining.

For instance, retail inflation based on the consumer price index fell to 4.3 per cent in January 2025. But stubbornly persistent inflation in food, commuting, and energy hammers the family budgets of lower-middle-class and middle-class Indians.



When a housewife has to shell out Rs 65 for a litre of milk and often Rs 50 for a kilo of onion, telling her inflation is a moderate 4.3 per cent doesn't help. When close to two-thirds of citizens say that they find it difficult to manage daily household expenses, the government is failing somewhere. You can't keep blaming supply constraints and freak weather conditions for years when food inflation remains persistently high. It is a policy and management failure.

So far, the Modi regime has been lucky that such perceptions have not turned into

wrath. Other responses make it abundantly clear that this is not a temporary or transient challenge faced by the Modi regime. It has become a long-term problem.

For instance, 33 per cent said in January 2024 that their economic status had improved during the Modi regime, and more than 35 per cent said it had deteriorated. In January 2025, however, 35 per cent said it had improved while 31 per cent said it had deteriorated. That, by any yardstick, is not a ringing endorsement of the Modi regime. Perhaps Indian voters are convinced that the Opposition would perform even worse given a chance. That is the only logical explanation for the continued satisfaction with the performance of the Modi regime.

Ordinary Indians are not very optimistic even about their prospects. Many believe their family incomes will fall in a year than those who think it will rise. These are perceptions based on lived experience that drive the behaviour of citizens as consumers.

There's A New Negotiating Table In Town: Middle East



By Kabir Taneja

As world leaders gathered in Munich, Germany, for Europe's top annual security conference, placating, pleasing, and managing US President Donald Trump stood as a top agenda. Trump's phone call to Russia's Vladimir Putin, US Vice-President J.D. Vance's disruptive speech challenging Europe, and, by association, the very nature of trans-Atlantic alliances, and demands to end the Ukraine conflict, has led to a mad rush to host such a process, in the Gulf. The question that perhaps comes immediately to mind, even though the conflict in Gaza remains a major global flashpoint, is, why?

The Meeting Between Rubio And Lavrov

Russia and the US are preparing to start initial consultations on Ukraine following an ice-breaking meeting between US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh. For Saudi Arabia and its powerful heir-apparent, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, this is a moment of both regional and global reckoning. Gulf powers in the Middle East have now been for a while re-positioning and re-posturing their

geopolitics. This process started much before Trump's return to the White House—arguably, prior to even the Russian war against Ukraine. The roots of this shift lie in two main realities. First, a change in the construct of global power contestation, that is, a bi-polar competition between the US and China and a demand for multipolarity by a host of middle powers looking to secure their own interests and not get caught in the Washington-Beijing dynamics. The second reality relates to a general idea of the US becoming increasingly unwilling to mobilise military power to protect its allies.

Reconsidering America's Role

Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are evaluating the very fundamentals of the decades-long American hegemony, which has provided security blankets in the region. This also provides them with an opportunity to build their own geopolitical repertoire as middle powers with their own agency, instead of being viewed as client states, a tag that has plagued many of them for decades. The UAE as well has thrown its hat into the ring, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy landed in Abu Dhabi, mere hours after both Russia and the US

eluded to excluding Kyiv from talks regarding Ukraine's own future (Zelenskyy later cancelled a planned visit to Saudi). While this position by the Trump administration delivered tremors across European capitals, it has also played into an increasingly constrained space between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for regional influence. And peace diplomacy, or mediation, is the flavour of the day.

However, the proverbial gold-rush to host Ukraine talks has more solid foundations in regional competition than an international one. For long, Oman has been the state that has consistently pitched itself as the main mediator, playing the role of 'Switzerland of the Middle East', where Muscat seemingly prioritises neutrality and offers a common ground for warring parties, such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Houthi militia, or even the US and Iran, to talk.

The Qatar Question

Saudi Arabia and the UAE installed a blockade against Qatar between 2017 and 2021 for what they saw as Doha not aligning and punching above its weight, and, more specifically, for its support for Political Islam. But the Qatari leadership had another trick up its sleeve to ratchet its power quotient. In February 2020, under Trump's

first tenure, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the US signed a historic agreement for the latter's exit from a two-decade long war in the country. Doha hosted the political office for the Taliban, and managed Kabul, to deliver this outcome to a president who, more than anything else, adores deals. This "success" gained Qatar the title of becoming America's first and preferred 'major non-NATO ally' in the region. Today, Qatar also hosts America's largest military base in the Middle East. For others, such as the UAE, the meteoric rise of Qatar's influence in Washington was seen as a challenge. Within Abu Dhabi, questions were raised with Emirati diplomats in the US on why the Taliban's office was not hosted in either Abu Dhabi or Dubai.

Saudi And UAE Have Bigger Goals

For Saudi Arabia, despite its functional relations with Russia and China alike, a security relationship with the US remains paramount. The same strategic aim is consistent for the UAE as well, one of the few Arab states that normalised relations with Israel as part of the Trump-brokered Abraham Accords and which continues to have functional relations with Iran. Despite continuing pressures on Saudi Arabia and

the UAE to help deliver lasting solutions to the Israel-Palestine crisis and the Israel-Hamas war, both have broader, long-term aims with regard to their positions as poles-of-power within a multipolar framework. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi share this world view with the likes of India, but American power projection is infinitely more critical to political structures in the Middle East. This is truer today after the experience of the Arab Spring, and, more recently, the collapse of the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria at the hands of a self-styled 'lapsed' jihadist group, the Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS).

Is This The Future Of Mediation?

The Saudis are not stopping just at giving space to the US and Russia to debate Ukraine. As per reports, Riyadh is also open to hosting talks between Iran and the US over the former's nuclear programme. The Saudi-Iran détente was achieved in March 2023 with the help of China, the main competitor to the US, and a state that has unreservedly supported Arab positions in Gaza. Beijing, meanwhile, also remains open to mediating and helping to bridge political gaps across the region. Chinese President Xi Jinping's visits to the region have been welcomed with gusto by Saudi Arabia and the UAE alike, both as a function of being the world's second-largest economic power and using this position to hedge risk with Western partners. The future of mediation between the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi-Doha trifecta is a cat and mouse game within the Arab construct. External powers such as the US, Russia, and China, are part of the utility kit. This push for one-upmanship will have a tremendous impact on regional politics where in the coming years economic and political competition is only expected to increase.

Is Trump's US In A Constitutional Crisis?



By Ajay Kumar

Almost a month into Trump 2.0, with Trump's "muzzle velocity" of Executive Orders (EOs) spreading more disquiet than even the worst-case scenarios had envisaged, the question increasingly looming among US watchers is whether the US is in a constitutional crisis.

The US Constitution has stood out for its clear separation of powers among the three arms of the government: The executive (the elected President), the legislature (House and Senate), and the courts. But the trampling that the legislature has been subjected to by the Trump executive threatens to upend the constitutional system of checks and balances.

Trump's flurry of EOs has targeted several offices and agencies established by Congress-USAID being the most prominent and well-known and have terminated spending mandated by Congress, in executive overreach. Predictably, the many afflicted by the EOs have gone to court, and predictably again, the courts have stayed the execution of many of the EOs.

Until now, the Trump administration has either abided by the court's restraints or submitted that it would like the court to review its order in short, enter the process of thrashing the issue out in court. But Vice President JD Vance threw a "curve ball" by tweeting that just as no court would try to tell a General how to run a war, courts do not have the right to curb the "legitimate" powers of the executive.

The Constitution's founders had not foreseen a situation where the polity would be so polarized that the Congress and Senate would lose sight of their constitutional salience. Rare is the

legislator who has voted across party lines in recent years; under the vengeful Trump, rarer still. Hence the refrain: with Trump rampant, and the prospect very real that court orders could be disregarded or defied, how far is the US from a constitutional crisis?

The Trump administration's mission is to restore the executive's powers which, it argues, were curbed post-Watergate by the weakened Nixon presidency. His two chief point men to effect this mission are Elon Musk as the head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DoGE) and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Russell Vought.

The OMB is the White House's gatekeeper, overseeing the actual spending of the programs passed by Congress. Vought is a dyed-in-the-wool Christian Conservative who believes it is his Christian duty to re-establish the primacy of the executive. The congressional outlays, Vought argues, were meant to be a ceiling; instead, they have become a floor.

Federal Bureaucracy In Line Of Fire Worse, the Federal bureaucracy, he charges, has become a "fourth branch," an unelected mass of 2.4 million Federal employees, who are out of control. They are unaccountable and they can't be fired. They have to be brought to heel. Vought was quoted as saying at a conference in 2023: "We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work... We want to put them in trauma."

Understandably then, a recent article in The Atlantic on "How Hitler Dismantled Democracy in 53 Days in Germany" by Timothy Ryback, a historian who has written several books on Hitler's Germany, stayed in the magazine's

"Most Read" list for weeks on end. And a reading of "Autocracy Inc: The Dictators Who Want to Run The World" by the vastly experienced and knowledgeable Atlantic columnist Anne Applebaum, was almost delicious in the many moments of irony it evoked.

The playbook followed by MAGA devotees to demonize USAID followed exactly the playbook used by propagandists of Russia and China, as spelled out by Applebaum, in their repeated attacks on US democracy.

In the USAID case, it all began at 9 am on February 5 when an independent journalist posted an unsubstantiated claim online that USAID had paid \$8 million to Politico, a Washington-based online newspaper. Politico immediately clarified that USAID had paid it only \$24,000 for subscriptions, which the journalist acknowledged 10 hours later was indeed the truth. However, by then the post had gone viral. In the next 36 hours, it accumulated 15,000 posts, including from a Republican Representative from the House and from Viktor Orban, Hungary's autocratic Prime Minister whom Trump admires.

Conspiracy theorists, meanwhile, had seized upon the online storm to allege that Democrats had used USAID to fund a "fake news empire." Orban followed this up with an allegation on X that Politico had financed the "entire left-wing media in Hungary," notching 27 million views.

Then President Trump jumped in on his Truth Social account to criticise government news subscriptions to the likes of Politico as "pay-offs" for talking up Democrats. "This could be the biggest scandal of them all, perhaps the biggest in history," he wrote in all caps. The White House press office hurriedly announced

the cancellation of its Politico subscription.

Ms Applebaum is a Senior Fellow at Johns Hopkins, a long-term observer of Russia, and an acknowledged historian of authoritarianism. Her book is a primer on how the growing tribe of autocrats in the post-Cold War world are banding together to expand their sphere of influence. In it, she details how autocrats use the media to sow doubt and confusion about democracy itself. One example she elaborates is eerily similar to the USAID slur campaign.

In February 2022, as Russia invaded Ukraine, it alleged that secret US-funded bio labs in Ukraine were conducting experiments with bat viruses. The charge was immediately rubbished but not before conspiracy networks had spread the hashtag #biolab on Twitter, notching up nine million views. MAGA's favourite TV host, Tucker Carlson, played clips on Fox News of a Russian general and a Chinese spokesman discussing the allegation and demanded that the Biden administration should "stop lying and tell us what's going on here."

The Chinese foreign ministry, Ms Applebaum recounts, took the story further by declaring that the US controlled 26 bio-labs in Ukraine. Even as Xinhua ran headlines like "US-Led Biolabs Pose Potential Threats to People of Ukraine and Beyond," media outlets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with content-sharing agreements with Xinhua and other Chinese media entities amplified the charge.

China's motive, Ms Applebaum details, was clear: It wanted attention to be diverted from the charge that COVID-19 had spread from its labs in Wuhan. But the story also appealed to conspiracy sites in the US like the Q Anon network, who are virulently anti-vaccination.

In an eerie chorus, even as Ukraine joined battle with Russia, the Russian, Chinese, and "extremist American" interests all repeated the Russian accusations justifying the invasion and parroted that Ukrainians are "Nazis" and that Ukraine is a puppet state run by the CIA. So successful was the echo chamber effect that, according to one poll, Ms. Applebaum recounts, one out of four Americans believed that the biolab story was true!

Conspiracy Theories Abound

The story does not end there. In March 2022, Ms Applebaum writes, the Russian state media ran a story that Ukraine was planning to use migratory birds as a delivery weapon for bioweapons, first infecting the birds and then sending them into Russia to spread diseases.

Failure of planning

Will Vaishnaw take blame for stampede?



The horrific New Delhi station stampede, which claimed 18 lives, was not an accident—it was a failure of planning, foresight and accountability. As thousands of pilgrims flocked to board trains to Prayagraj, the authorities failed to anticipate and manage the massive rush, leading to tragic consequences. Former

Railway Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal was blunt in his assessment: the ultimate responsibility lies with the Railway Minister. The government's inability to put proper crowd control measures in place despite knowing the surge in travellers is a glaring oversight. The Maha Kumbh is not a surprise event; its scale and impact on railway traffic are well-documented. Why, then, was a tragedy of this magnitude allowed to unfold? In the wake of the disaster, the government swiftly announced Rs 10 lakh compensation for each victim's family and Rs 2.5 lakh for the seriously injured, as per Indian Railways' guidelines. However, reports of wads of cash being handed over at the station raise ethical concerns. The sheer optics of authorities distributing notes in violation of 2023 compensation guidelines that allow cash

distribution of up to Rs 50,000 only add insult to injury. Instead of fixing systemic issues, the government attempting damage control with cash payouts?

Not surprisingly, the demand for Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw's resignation has gained traction, with his history of deflecting blame for railway mishaps underlined. The government's initial dismissal of the stampede as a 'rumour' further exposes its reluctance to acknowledge failures. Historically, ministers like Lal Bahadur Shastri and Nitish Kumar stepped down, taking moral responsibility for railway disasters. Will Vaishnaw do the same? Beyond resignations, systemic reforms are necessary. The Railways must overhaul its crowd management protocols, particularly during religious and festival rushes.

Another stampede



The cruel irony is not lost on anyone. Even as a special crowd management plan is being implemented for the safety of Maha Kumbh pilgrims following the Sangam stampede that claimed 30 lives on January 29, tragedy struck devotees hundreds of kilometres away at New Delhi railway station, where they had gathered in large numbers to board trains to Prayagraj. At least 18 people were killed in a stampede on Saturday night. A senior railway officer's claim that the incident occurred after some passengers slipped and fell on others while coming down a foot overbridge tells only half the story. The possible

causes being cited are: Delays in train departures; a surge in ticket sale; wrong (or last-minute) announcement about change of platforms. The railway authorities should have anticipated the huge rush, considering that the mega festival is going to conclude in about 10 days' time. There was absolutely no margin for error. Overcrowding is par for the course in the world's most populous country. However, crowd management is rarely a top priority for the Central and state governments as well as the district administration. The response is mostly reactive, not proactive. Stampedes can be averted or minimised if the basics are followed religiously. Adequate deployment of security personnel to regulate crowd

movement and meticulous planning of the arrangements are prerequisites for ensuring that nothing untoward happens during events with mass participation. But who cares? A 'chalta hai' attitude is widely prevalent, marked by a lack of accountability and a brazen disregard for the value of human life. It was in 2014 that the National Disaster Management Authority came out with a guide on crowd management for state governments, local authorities, administrators and organisers. It laid stress on 'professionalisation' of the entire process with an integrated and structured approach. Sadly, the likelihood of a stampede will remain high unless this important document is taken seriously by all stakeholders.

India's Paradox: Booming Economy, But Where Are The Jobs?

By Sourav Roy

India, home to the world's largest youth population, stands at a crucial economic crossroads. Despite being Asia's fastest-growing major economy and a rising global force, the country is grappling with an unprecedented employment crisis that is unique to its context.

The Indian paradox is not the lack of jobs, but the scarcity of jobs that remain vacant due to a lack of skilled professionals who meet both industry requirements and cultural expectations. A staggering 83% of the country's unemployed workforce is between the ages of 15 and 29. This disparity highlights fundamental inefficiencies in India's job market, along with the widespread absence of employability skills among millions of graduates and postgraduates.

Data from the India Employment Report 2024 paints an unsettling picture: India produces nearly 50 lakh graduates every year, but almost half of them find themselves unemployable—not due to a lack of knowledge, but because of deficiencies in essential skills such as communication, interpersonal abilities, and personality development. These qualities have become indispensable in an era of intense competition and economic uncertainty.



Youth workforce participation remains alarmingly low, exacerbating an already pressing employment crisis. The impact extends far beyond individual career stagnation, fuelling widespread frustration among young professionals and deepening uncertainty for middle-class families who invest heavily in their children's education, expecting them to secure stable jobs and provide financial support. When these aspirations go unfulfilled, the repercussions are profound: unemployment disrupts household finances and creates a generational emotional setback, as families grapple with unanticipated financial strain and an uncertain future. Meanwhile, the job market's inability to

absorb this growing unemployable workforce—especially in fields like research and development—threatens to stifle innovation and productivity, further compounding the country's economic challenges.

While initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) and skill development programmes have taken commendable steps towards aligning academia with industry needs, the efforts have not yet fully addressed the gap. These programmes have encouraged a more cohesive ecosystem that equips graduates with the practical domain knowledge and interpersonal skills required to thrive in the evolving job market.

The Indian government has also quickly recognised that the country's job market is not suffering from a lack of opportunities, but from an acute skills gap.

Many students achieve high academic scores yet remain unemployable due to a lack of problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and industry-specific expertise.

Prior to the recent sweeping changes introduced by the NEP 2025, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), and the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), India's education system had long prioritised theoretical knowledge over practical application. This resulted in a workforce that, while technically proficient, lacked the adaptability and critical thinking required in professional settings.

As a result, the country has a surplus of certified graduates who have low employability and few job offers.

Today's employers seek professionals who can navigate complex challenges, demonstrate emotional intelligence, and apply their knowledge effectively in real-world scenarios. The notion that academic excellence guarantees employment is fading, as CEOs and market forces now value real-world people skills more than academic achievement.

Banks bend for rich corporates, break farmers

The inequality is grotesque. Responding to an RTI plea, the Reserve Bank of India has informed that since April 1, 2014, the banks have written off a staggering Rs 16.61 lakh crore of bad loans of corporate India. On the other hand, speaking in Parliament the other day, Hanuman Beniwal, an MP from Rajasthan, said the outstanding farm loans in the country now exceed Rs 32 lakh crore.

More than 18.74 crore farmers are saddled with outstanding loans.

In fact, the total outstanding farm loans are 20 times higher than the outlay for the annual agricultural budget, Beniwal said, and asked the Finance Minister why no mention was made of any farm loan waiver scheme for farmers. On the contrary, of the total write-off of Rs 16.61-lakh crore toxic loans of India Inc in the past 11 years (with only 16 per cent recovery), Indian banks appear not to have any second thought before writing-off Rs 10.6 lakh crore of the unpaid loans of India Inc in the past five years. Reports say that 50 per cent of the bad loans being struck belonged to large companies.

But when it comes to farmers, a bank in Shimoga, Karnataka, had showed the utmost urgency by summoning a small



farmer who had to walk 15 km in the absence of a regular bus service to clear an outstanding balance of just Rs 3.46. In the financial year 2023-24 alone, banks have written off Rs 1.7-lakh crore. A year earlier, in 2022-23, banks wrote off Rs 2.08-lakh crore. But when it comes to waiving farm loans, the Centre has done it only twice: in 1990 and 2008. Some state governments have done it separately, but it is not a burden on the banks as the states make the payments to the bank for the amount waived.

While the unpaid bank loans are written off with sagacity, as if the write-off adds to nation-building, it is so painful to see a video clip of a woman self-help group (SHG) member being dragged to a waiting police van for her inability to pay back Rs 35,000.

It appears as if it's only poor farmers and rural workforce that are responsible for upsetting the national balance sheet with their petty defaults, while the rich defaulters get an easy walkover. The rich defaulters include over 16,000 willful

defaulters with an unpaid amount of Rs 3.45-lakh crore in bank loans, and who even the RBI acknowledges had the money but did not want to pay back. Certainly, these are the wealth creators, and the nation must applaud them.

Now take a look at this farmer from Pilibanga in Rajasthan. He took a loan of Rs 2.70 lakh from a finance company and had paid back Rs 2.57-lakh (including Rs 57,000 support received from the state during the pandemic). But unable to pay back the remaining amount, he comes home one day to find his house locked. Later, the lock was broken by outraged villagers.

This unsavoury event must be viewed in the context of a 92 per cent 'haircut' that banks and lenders undertook when Adhunik Metaliks, a leading manufacturer of alloy and steel in the eastern region, settled for Rs 410 crore against their outstanding dues of Rs 5,370 cr after its resolution plan was approved by the Kolkata branch of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), in July 2018. Obviously, with such a huge 'haircut', the promoters of the company said they are willing to complete all activities and start working towards reviving the flagship company.

30 days of Trump and how he is turning the world upside down

From setting his sights on Greenland, planning to turn Gaza into the 'Riviera of the Middle East', imposing tariffs on China, to deporting illegal migrants to India - there is hardly any continent that has been untouched by the 'unpredictable' Donald Trump in his whirlwind first month of his presidency. In fact, the sheer volume of Trump's actions, making it to the front page of newspapers often, has also upended domestic policies, with federal job cuts and immigration crackdowns drawing backlash from opponents.

However, Trump, being Trump, has been unruffled by the inside criticism as he has gone on to reshape America's relationship with the world, tariff by tariff. In fact, he had made his intentions clear after withdrawing the US from the Paris climate agreement and the World Health Organisation a day after his inauguration on January 20. **USAID, DEPORTATION ISSUE ROCKS INDIA**

Even the US's allies and friends have not been spared, with Trump announcing reciprocal tariffs to match the taxes imposed by other nations on US products just hours before a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In India, Trump's out of the blue strategies, be it deportation of illegal migrants by the planeloads or withdrawal of USAID funding, has reverberated in the political corridors and Parliament too. The



US has already sent back nearly 330 illegal Indians, with the manner of their deportation in handcuffs and legs chained, triggering an opposition uproar and protests in the Budget session of Parliament. The topic soon shifted to possible foreign interference in elections after the Trump administration cancelled a \$21 million grant to India to "increase voter turnout". The issue sparked a slugfest between the BJP and the Congress after Trump went on to indicate that former US President Joe Biden's administration attempted to meddle with India's elections.

"Why do we need to spend \$21 million on voter turnout in India? I guess they were trying to get somebody else elected. We have

got to tell the Indian government... This is a total breakthrough," Trump said at a summit in Miami. India's neighbours too haven't been spared, with the US freezing funding for aid programs in Bangladesh and Pakistan and cancelling \$39 million allocated for Nepal's biodiversity conservation projects.

TIGHTENS TARIFF SCREWS ON CHINA, OTHERS

Trump has also turned on the tariff screws on China, introducing a levy of 10% on all products entering from Beijing -- which has responded with a tit-for-tat move. A 25% tariff on imports of steel and aluminium will also hurt China, which dominates the global industry of the two commodities. While Canada and Mexico were

also on Trump's tariff crosshairs, the countries received a breather after the fiery President agreed to a pause following their commitment to boost border security.

GAZA ALSO ON TRUMP'S CROSSHAIRS

Gaza and Ukraine, two regions ravaged by war, also felt the effect of Trump's punches. While Trump's push for a ceasefire agreement has been welcomed by many, his plan to relocate Gaza's 2.2 million Palestinian residents to turn the Strip into the "Riviera of the Middle East" has been met with shock and scorn.

The remark by Trump, known well for his real estate business, on "buying and owning Gaza" received a thumbs up from Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his visit to the White House. However, the Palestinian Authority has asserted that the land was "not for sale". Experts, however, view Trump's remarks as a pressure tactic on Arab nations to force terror group Hamas to relinquish control and influence in the Gaza Strip.

UKRAINE FEELS THE PINCH

The mercurial leader has now set his sights on ending the war in Ukraine through talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, it is his sharp jabs and taunts at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that have garnered the spotlight.

The US President has blasted Zelenskyy by calling him a "comedian" and a "dictator without elections" for strong-arming the US into spending billions of dollars "to go into a war that can't be won".

Trump's decision to initiate talks with Russia to negotiate an end to the war has not only stumped Ukraine but European Union members as well. The fact that Ukraine was not invited for the talks between US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Saudi Arabia rankled Zelenskyy. While Trump has kicked off his presidency with a bang, resorting to a lot of muscle-flexing from the White House, it remains to be seen how it upends the global political order.

From dating apps to Dine-and-Dash: The rise of new-gen 'romance scams'

The gifting and travel industry wait for the Valentine's season anticipating a surge in customer demands, creating new lines of offerings coinciding with the first two weeks of February. But recent trends suggest it's not just the legitimate business who eagerly wait for the festival of love. The prying eyes of cyber-scammers now eagerly waits as millions of people log in to their favourite apps or search platform to find a companion. Known as 'romance scams' these scams target individuals online using fake or sometimes stolen identities. Recent reports suggest a surge in such scams amid rise in generative Artificial

Intelligence (AI) tools. According to a 2024 report from cybersecurity firm McAfee, 39% of Indians' potential love interests turned out to be scammers, while 77% of Indians encountered fake profiles or photos that appeared to be AI-generated on social media and dating apps. Another recent report suggests, 52% of people who met someone online have either been scammed for money or pressured into sending gifts. As scammers exploit dating and social media apps to manipulate victims into sending money and valuables under the false belief of a genuine relationship, the victims are left emotionally and

financially ruined. Scammers have been using dating apps like Tinder, Bumble, and OkCupid, as well as social media and messaging platforms, but recent trends show frequent use of AI chatbots as well as image generating services to target victims. The use of AI tools has enabled perpetrators to create even more convincing virtual profiles making it difficult for the victims to suspect. One such example is a 53-year-old French woman, who was scammed out of ₹17.5 crore by fraudsters posing as Hollywood actor Brad Pitt. Using AI-generated images and videos, the scammers convinced the woman that she

was in a romantic relationship with fake Brad Pitt, who allegedly needed money for cancer treatment. The fraudsters even produced realistic visuals of the actor in a hospital bed using AI, along with fake documents to support their claims. The incident was reported by French media earlier this year. As many as 26% of surveyed users reported being approached by AI chatbots posing as real individuals on dating apps or social media globally. Impostor scams have duped 21% of users, with victims losing an average of Rs 1.7 Lakh, the report says. With the growing number of dating apps and online meeting

platforms, another pattern adopted by scammers is creation of duplicate apps and websites that mimic the user interface of a popular platform luring the victims to potential fraud.

Not Just Tech

The 'romance scams' are not just limited to the online world. Several user reviews for restaurants and bars suggest an offline scam that mostly targets single men looking for a date at a happening place. One such incident was reported at West Delhi's pub where according to a Google Review, the victim was lured by alleged 'hired girls' into ordering expensive food and drinks.

How big a health hazard is Sangam water with high level of faecal coliform

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has raised concerns over high faecal coliform bacteria levels in the Ganga and Yamuna rivers in Prayagraj as millions are taking a dip at the Sangam during the Maha Kumbh. This came after a report by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), filed on February 3, indicated high levels of faecal bacteria at various points along both the rivers near Prayagraj's Sangam, especially on Shahi Snan days. But what does high levels of faecal bacteria in water mean, and how big a health hazard is it?

Levels of faecal coliform, which get in water due to the mixing of human or livestock excreta, indicate water quality and help in monitoring the presence of disease-causing bacteria in any water sample.

A day after the CPCB report made headlines, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday assured that the water quality at Prayagraj was suitable for both taking a dip and performing aachman (ritualistic drinking of holy water). "The reasons for increased faecal coliform can be several, such as sewage leakage and animal waste, but the amount of faecal coliform in Prayagraj is, as per the standards, less than 2,500 MPN per 100 ml. This means that the false campaign is only to defame the Maha Kumbh. The NGT has also said that the faecal waste was less than 2000 per 100 ml," Adityanath said.

The report also revealed that total coliform levels (faecal plus other) in the Ganga were found to be around 1,400 times the standard,



while in the Yamuna, they were 660 times higher at certain locations in Prayagraj.

The CPCB report says the river water quality did not conform with the bathing criteria with respect to biochemical oxygen demand (BOD). It also didn't conform with the primary water quality for bathing with respect to faecal coliform (FC).

"Untreated faecal material adds excess organic material to the water which decays, depleting the water of oxygen," says US-based water research programme, KnowYourH2O, adding that it is a threat to the aquatic ecosystem.

High levels of faecal coliform are associated with several health risks, including typhoid, gastroenteritis and dysentery, it says.

The water quality mentioned by the CPCB was monitored on January 12-13 and the sewage treatment plants (STPs) were

operational.

WHAT IS FAECAL COLIFORM, AND WHAT ARE SAFE LEVELS?

"The strength of faecal matter in sewage is monitored by coliform counts, a water quality parameter that acts as an indicator of pathogens that most commonly cause diarrhoea, as well as typhoid and a whole host of enteric diseases," according to a report by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

A 2004 committee formed by the Ministry of Urban Development recommended that the desirable limit of faecal coliform should be at 500 MPN/100ml and said that the maximum permissible limit should be capped at 2,500 MPN/100ml for discharge into the river. MPN/100ml denotes the most probable number per 100 millilitre of water sample.

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change's CPCB, in its Maha

Kumbh 2025 dashboard on the water quality at the various spots along the Ganga and the Yamuna also notes that the faecal coliform in the water should be less than or equal to 2,500 MPN/100ml.

In the last recorded data on faecal coliform from February 4, the CPCB reported its levels in the Ganga at 11,000 MPN/100ml before Shastri Bridge and 7,900 MPN/100ml at Sangam.

The Shastri Bridge over the Ganga is about 2km ahead of the Sangam site.

In the Yamuna, before its confluence with the Ganga at Sangam, the reading was 4,900 MPN/100ml near the Old Naini Bridge.

The data mentioned above was recorded a day after Basant Panchami, one of the Shahi Snan days. Basant Panchami was on February 3 this year. **HOW DANGEROUS IS FAECAL COLIFORM?**

Though coliform bacteria itself isn't a cause of illness, it indicates the presence of pathogenic organisms of faecal origin like bacteria, viruses, or protozoa, in water samples, the CSE report explains.

Dr Atul Kakar, Senior Consultant in the Department of Internal Medicine at New Delhi's Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, said that "the level of sanitisation and preparedness required is not up to the mark, and the bacteria from our stool are entering the water".

"Therefore, it is not safe for consumption or even for bathing. This is what the report has indicated," added Dr Kakar.

"Whenever there is infected water, it can lead to various waterborne diseases, including skin diseases, and ailments like loose motions, diarrhoea, vomiting, typhoid, and cholera," Dr Atul Kakar told news agency PTI.

Contamination of water with faecal coliform bacteria in drinking-water, according to a paper in the World Health Organisation, "has been implicated in the spread of important infectious and parasitic diseases such as cholera, typhoid, dysentery, hepatitis, giardiasis, guinea worm and schistosomiasis.

Such bacterial contamination on "the surface of water bodies poses a health risk in its reuse, be it for a variety of domestic purposes including safe drinking water, as well as exposing farmers who often use raw sewage or polluted streams to meet their irrigation needs," noted a report by the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment. "Not a single city in India has been able, in entirety, to deal with its sewage problem," the report adds. The CSE report also says that the "lack of sewage treatment and bacteriological standards have been linked to adverse health impacts on farmers who use the contaminated water. It cites a study done in UP's Varanasi in the 1990s. The study showed that farmworkers using untreated sewage showed "a high prevalence of diarrhoeal disease, a haematic infection and skin diseases".

Sajjan guilty 40 years after 1984 riots, it feels like injustice

The conviction of former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar for his role in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots is a grim reminder of the excruciatingly slow pace of justice in India. Over four decades after the horrific violence that claimed the lives of thousands of Sikhs, legal proceedings continue to stagger forward, offering little solace to the victims' families. A Delhi court has found Kumar guilty of murder in connection with the killings of Jaswant Singh and his son Tarundeep Singh in Delhi's Saraswati Vihar. He has also been convicted of rioting, dacoity and other crimes. Yet, this verdict, while significant, does little to erase the

anguish of those who have spent a lifetime fighting for accountability. Kumar is already serving a life sentence for another 1984 case and has managed to evade justice for decades. His political influence, coupled with institutional apathy, ensured that the victims' cries were drowned in legal complexities and adjournments. The 1984 riots were not spontaneous acts of violence but a well-orchestrated pogrom enabled by political and police complicity. The involvement of prominent Congress leaders in inciting mobs was widely alleged, yet accountability was scarce. Investigative commissions were formed, cases were

reopened, but convictions remained elusive. While Kumar's sentencing may appear as a step forward, it also underscores the systemic failures that allowed perpetrators to roam free for so long. For survivors and their families, justice delayed is justice denied. Many have passed away waiting for closure, while others live with the trauma of reliving their loss every time a long-overdue conviction makes headlines. The judiciary's role in delivering justice is crucial, but without political will and institutional reform, such delayed verdicts serve as bitter reminders of how the system protects the powerful while failing the victims.

Thousands rescued from illegal scam compounds in Myanmar as Thailand launches huge crackdown

About 7,000 people have been rescued from illegal call centre operations in Myanmar and were waiting to be transferred to Thailand, prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra said on Wednesday, as the country launched a large-scale crackdown on scam centres operating on the border.

The prime minister's announcement came after Thai police said they were preparing to receive up to 10,000 foreigners rescued from a network of notorious scam centres. Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, which share borders with Thailand, have in recent years become havens for transnational crime syndicates operating online scam operations, including romance scams, bogus investments and illegal gambling.

"It's massive and there are thousands of people in there that have been

brought in, typically through Thailand, so it's a huge move if they clean the compounds and scams out," said Jeremy Douglas, from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), ahead of the PM's confirmation.

Myanmar's border area of Myawaddy, where foreign nationals are expected to be released, has among the largest single cluster of scam compounds in the region, and possibly the world, said Douglas. The operations have become increasingly globalised, with victims from across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East tricked into enslaved work. Scams targeting east and south-east Asians resulted in financial losses between \$18bn and \$37bn in 2023, the UN estimates.

At least 120,000 people across Myanmar and another 100,000 in Cambodia may be held in situations where they are forced to execute lucrative online scams,

the UN has reported. Many are lured by false promises of well-paying jobs.

Thailand has renewed efforts this year to crack down on the operations after a high profile kidnapping of a Chinese actor into Myanmar in January. The 22-year-old man, Wang Xing, was abducted after arriving in Thailand for what he believed was a casting call with film producers.

Thai authorities this month cut internet, electricity and fuel supplies to five areas in Myanmar where crime groups are known to operate. Douglas noted the Myanmar military's border guard force (BGF), which controls Myawaddy, has been under immense pressure to crack down on the compounds.

"It has reached a breakpoint recently where they [the BGF] felt they had no choice but to step in and shut down compounds," he said.

About 200 Chinese nationals are scheduled to be flown back to China

on a China Southern Airlines flight on Thursday, said secretary to the defence minister General Traisak Intarassamee, as reported by the Bangkok Post.

About 260 people from scam operations were deported from Myanmar last week, the Thai Army said in a statement. The group represented 20 nationalities, including 138 Ethiopians.

Rescued Malaysians said they had been electrocuted, caned and confined in a dark room when they did not meet the targets set by the scam company. "There were extreme beatings, lots of bruising. There were broken bones," said Judah Tana, international director of the anti-human trafficking NGO Global Advance Projects, "It's horrific to see them. It's as if they have walked out of a minefield or a war zone."

Melting glaciers caused almost 2cm of sea level rise this century, study reveals

Melting glaciers have caused almost 2cm of sea level rise this century alone, a decades-long study has revealed.

The research shows the world's glaciers collectively lost 6.542tn tonnes of ice between 2000 and 2023, causing an 18mm (0.7in) rise in global sea levels.

The world's glaciers lost an average of 273bn tonnes of ice every year – the equivalent of 30 years of water consumption by the entire global population. The assessment, led by scientists from the University of Edinburgh and the University of

of Earth observation at the University of Edinburgh's school of geosciences. A stark contrast in the amount of ice lost each decade was also discovered, with 36% more ice having melted

Zurich, found that so far this century, glaciers have lost approximately 5% of their total volume. Regional losses were highly variable; the Antarctic and subantarctic islands lost 2% of their volume but central Europe's glaciers lost 39%.

"These numbers are staggering. They serve as a reminder that things are changing fast in some regions," said Prof Noel Gourmelen, the co-lead author of the study and personal chair

exposes another 2 million people to annual flooding somewhere on our planet."

Glacier loss also leads to a depletion in regional freshwater supplies for

remote communities and those who already face water scarcity. "Around 2 billion people depend on meltwater from glaciers and so their retreat is a big problem for society," said Shepherd. "It's not just that we are losing them from our landscape, they are an important part of our daily lives." "Glaciers are also important for power generation," said Gourmelen. "For instance, 70% of electricity in Iceland

comes from hydropower. They rely on the water melt from glaciers to function. You have this in the Andes as well as parts of Europe, such as Switzerland." Published in the journal Nature, the latest research is part of the Glacier Mass Balance Intercomparison Exercise – known as Glambie. It combines and analyses data available from field measurements as well as optical, radar and laser satellite missions. After ocean warming, melting glaciers are the second largest contributor to global sea level rises. "This research is concerning because it predicts further glacier loss," said Martin Siegert, professor of geosciences at the University of Exeter. "Two centimetres might not sound a lot, but this is the contribution from small glaciers – not the whole of the ice on the planet or that from Greenland and Antarctica." "Glaciers have a real impact," says Gourmelen. "They are a biometer for climate change, so the findings are a measure of the impact climate change has had over the past 20 years. "As we take action to try to mitigate this, following glacier activity will be a way of measuring our effectiveness in dealing with a changing climate."



Trump's reciprocal tariffs could hurt Indian exports. Which sectors are at risk?

US President Donald Trump's plan to impose reciprocal tariffs on Indian exports from April has raised serious concerns in India, especially in industries ranging from automobiles to agriculture. According to Citi Research, the move could lead to losses of up to \$7 billion annually for India's economy. While officials are still waiting for details on how these tariffs will be calculated, they are already preparing countermeasures and working on a trade deal proposal to reduce tariffs and boost two-way trade.

WHICH SECTORS COULD BE HIT?

Several sectors in India are particularly vulnerable. Chemicals, metal products, and jewellery are at the highest risk, followed by automobiles, pharmaceuticals, and food products. India's total merchandise exports to the US in 2024 are estimated at \$74 billion, with pearls, gems, and jewellery worth \$8.5 billion, pharmaceuticals at \$8 billion, and



petrochemicals around \$4 billion.

It may be noted that India's tariffs on US imports are generally much higher than the US tariffs on Indian exports. For instance, India charges a 100% tariff on US motorcycles, whereas the US only charges 2.4% on Indian motorcycles.

The agriculture sector is also at risk,

especially if the US expands the tariffs to include more farm products. While trade volumes are currently low in agriculture, the tariff differences are large, making the sector highly vulnerable.

However, industries like textiles, leather, and wood products face less risk due to smaller tariff gaps or their relatively

smaller share of trade with the US.

Many American companies also manufacture these products in South Asia, benefiting from India's free trade agreements that lower tariffs for goods sold in the US.

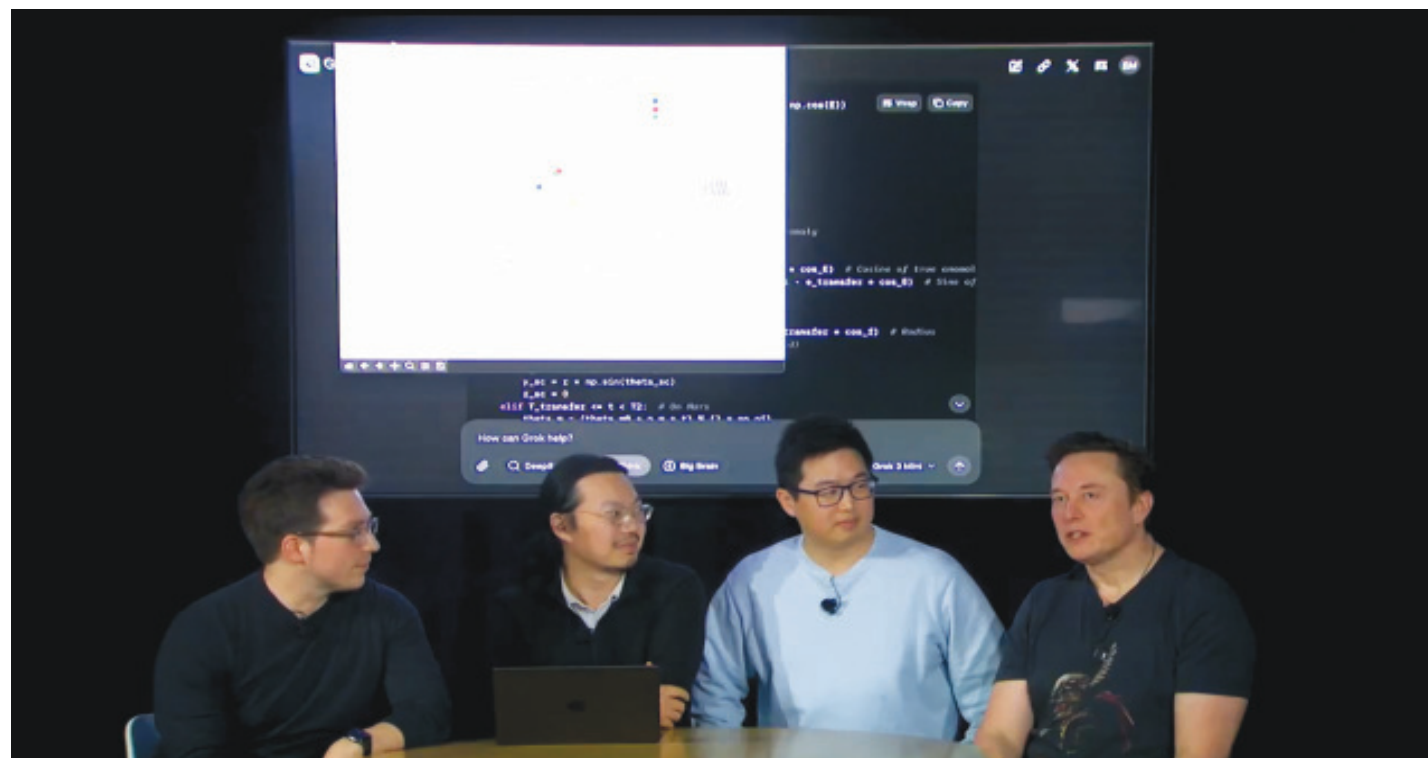
In the worst-case scenario, economists from Standard Chartered predict a 10% uniform tariff increase could cost India 50 to 60 basis points of GDP, mainly due to an 11% to 12% drop in exports. Sectors most dependent on US trade would be hit hardest.

HOW DOES INDIA PLAN TO TACKLE SITUATION?

India is already taking action to soften the blow. The government has lowered tariffs on high-end motorcycles from 50% to 30% and cut tariffs on bourbon whiskey from 150% to 100%.

The country is also looking to increase its energy imports from the US and buy more defence equipment to help ease trade tensions as both countries gear up for negotiations.

Elon Musk debuts Grok 3, an AI model that he says outperforms ChatGPT and DeepSeek



xAI on Monday unveiled its updated Grok 3 artificial intelligence model, as the Elon Musk-led startup pushes to keep pace with the advanced reasoning and search capabilities in competitors' models. In an event livestreamed on Musk's X, leaders at the startup claimed Grok 3 performs better across math, science and coding benchmarks than Google's Gemini, OpenAI's GPT-4o, Anthropic's Claude 3.5 and DeepSeek's V3 model, although

it's not clear how it compares to other top reasoning models such as OpenAI o3-mini and DeepSeek R1. The company also described the tool's new features, such as advanced web searching with "deep search," the ability to code online games and a "big brain" mode to reason through more complex problems. Grok 3 is immediately available to members of X's \$40 per month "Premium+" subscription plans, or users who subscribe directly on Grok's

standalone app or website. The xAI announcement comes as competition in AI continues to ramp up, with big tech players racing to invest in bigger, stronger data centers to fuel more powerful AI models. Tech giants believe AI is on its way to revolutionizing how people work, communicate and navigate the internet, including by replacing traditional search engines and coding processes. American tech firms are now also up against a new kind of

competition from DeepSeek, the Chinese startup whose recently launched R1 model raised big questions about Silicon Valley's AI infrastructure investments because it suggested that advanced models could be trained more efficiently. Musk said Grok 3 was built with 10 times the computer power of xAI's previous model, Grok 2, after the company opened a new data center in Tennessee last year. The billionaire referred to Grok 3 as "kind of a beta" test for now. "Expect some imperfections at first, but we'll improve it rapidly," he said. Musk also teased a "voice mode" for Grok 3 — similar to the natural conversation feature on competitor apps including ChatGPT — that he said would roll out in the coming days.

At the same time, Musk, who has also taken on a key role reshaping the federal government as a "special government employee" under President Donald Trump, has sought to grow his influence in the AI space. Musk last week led a group of investors offering to buy OpenAI for \$97 billion, the latest move in his ongoing rivalry with the ChatGPT parent company's CEO Sam Altman, which the rival company's board rejected. Musk has accused OpenAI of abandoning its mission to help humanity because it plans to transition away from its non-profit structure.

A perfect boiled egg in 32 minutes? Don't let science ruin the joyful imperfection of home cooking

By Alicia Kennedy

To make pearls of balsamic vinegar, first chill a good amount of olive oil in a tall glass. While it waits in the fridge, in a small saucepan over a medium heat, bring the vinegar and agar-agar to the beginning of a boil – just until the agar-agar has dissolved. Let this mixture cool, remove the oil from the fridge, and use a pipette to drop balls of the agar-stiffened vinegar into the oil to form the pearls. Drain into another container using a small sieve to catch the pearls. Reserve the oil for another use. I remember making these, my first and only foray into what is known as “molecular gastronomy”, in 2013. It was already a bit passe at that time, but the science experiment aspect of creating a simple acidic garnish for a chocolate and strawberry cupcake that Valentine’s Day was undoubtedly fun. The lesson influenced how I’d go on to use agar-agar, a seaweed-derived



vegan gelatin, in dishes like panna cotta or flan, but I never made the pearls again. They were a novelty, and now I have a fond memory of cosplaying as Ferran Adrià, a Spanish chef who popularised these sorts of processes through the restaurant El Bulli. The pearls came to mind while reading about an experiment conducted by Ernesto Di Maio at the University

of Naples in Italy. His team found that if you swap an egg between boiling water and 30C water every two minutes for eight cycles, totalling 32 minutes, the egg will be perfectly evenly cooked between white and yolk. New Scientist reported on this finding rather credulously, as though home cooks are truly perplexed about how to boil an egg to their liking.

Rather than cooking science

that’s about making something pretty and fun, like the vinegar pearls, this experiment was about making an instance of everyday cooking labour intensive, water-wasteful and time-consuming. I could see someone doing this experiment once, the way I made the vinegar pearls, and then going back to their tried-and-true method. (For what it’s worth, dropping eggs into already boiling water and letting them cook for seven minutes is how I get my preferred texture of jammy orange yolk.) In the long history of the relationship between cooking and chemistry, there’s often been this kind of push-pull between what is actually going to enliven and enlighten a home cook, and a pursuit of perfection – whether in technique and taste or in nutrition. Indeed, cuisine in the US throughout the early part of the 20th century was defined by a divide between gourmards, who were interested in food and

wine for the pleasure it gave them, and the “scientific cooks”, who were obsessed with eating as a means of ingesting the proper amount of vitamins, minerals and calories without any interest in the joys of the table.

“Food science” differs from the restaurant-driven style of molecular cooking because it’s usually focused on nutrition, flavour chemistry and shelf stability to the most common ends of creating industrial products. Molecular gastronomy, a term coined in 1988 by Hungarian-born British physicist Nicholas Kurti and French physical chemist Hervé This, has been focused on culinary applications of scientific principles and processes: sous-vide cooking a steak by sealing it in a vacuum bag and cooking it slowly in a water bath; using liquid nitrogen to create a carrot foam; or transforming the texture of olive juice through spherification.

Eric Adams, Trump and a New York story that’s stress-testing the rule of law

In both real life and on film, New York City has often been a city linked with public scandals, corruption and high drama.

But even Hollywood scriptwriters, so often keen on using the Big Apple as a backdrop, would have been hard-pushed to describe the astonishing events that have played out around the mayor, Eric Adams, in recent days.

Last week, the US Department of Justice moved to drop criminal charges against Adams, in what many see as a blatant quid pro quo for getting Adams onboard as a political ally to a Donald Trump administration seemingly intent on launching a radical remaking of American government.

It was a move that raised alarm among many residents of the city and legal experts about what many see as Trump – and Adams – undermining the integrity of the US judicial



system and American democracy. Earlier this week, a top official at the justice department ordered the acting US attorney in the southern district of New York to stop prosecuting Adams for allegedly accepting bribes and illegal campaign contributions from foreign sources.

The move was the latest stop in a dramatic term for America’s highest-profile mayor, which has seen the former cop elected as

a Democrat but then drift rightwards, especially after Trump was elected and Adams faced prosecution. In heavily Democratic New York, Adams is now seen as an ally to Trump and has even reportedly flirted with the idea of becoming a Republican.

Since being indicted in September, Adams has made regular overtures to Trump, including visiting him at his resort in Florida and skipping scheduled Martin Luther King Jr

Day events in the city to attend Trump’s inauguration.

Some observers said Adams was trying to obtain a pardon from Trump and ignoring his responsibilities as mayor. Adams claimed he has not discussed his legal case with Trump and that he had been talking with the president to help the city.

Whatever Adams’s intentions were, Trump now appears to have helped him and, in doing so, added to the perception he will ignore the rule of law when it benefits him politically.

“We have an administration that is willing to use its power to benefit favorite people, to the extent it’s able to do so without controversy – or even with controversy,” said Stephen Gillers, a legal ethics professor at New York University School of Law. “It’s a truly aggressive decision on the part of DoJ and an indefensible decision.”

Adams was elected mayor in

November 2021. Before the indictment, he already faced criticism because of the criminal histories of people in his inner circle, his frequent participation in the city’s nightlife and allegations that he did not actually live in the city, among other complaints from residents. “You would see him partying at clubs that my peers were at, and he seemed to fit there very well, more so than the office he was holding,” said Maedot Yidenk, a 27-year-old neuroscientist from Seattle who now lives in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn.

After his indictment, Adams said the Biden administration had targeted him for prosecution because he had criticized its immigration policies. Prosecutors countered that the investigation had begun before Adams started attacking the federal government over its response to the number of immigrants entering the country.



Trump and Vance have smashed the old order – how should Europe respond?

By *Nathalie Tocci, Yanis Varoufakis, Rokhaya Diallo, Shada Islam, John Kampfner and Lorenzo Marsili*

For years, many of us assumed that with the decline of the US-led liberal international order, the split between democracies and autocracies would be what shaped the contemporary world. Liberal democracies in America, Europe and Asia would stick together, while China, Russia, Iran and North Korea would increasingly cooperate. The pessimists worried about the decline of multilateralism giving way to a “multi-order world” in which like-minded autocracies would start to cluster, making the search for global peace and prosperity ever harder.

The reality looks much worse. Donald Trump’s US is now subverting the very idea of liberal democracy in order to undermine it, both in the US and, as has become painfully obvious, in Europe too.

At the Munich security conference, the US vice-president, JD Vance, accused Europe of abandoning the values of democracy by erecting firewalls to exclude the far right from government; of fearing its peoples, and of restricting free speech. This was to a mainly European audience eagerly expecting

Vance to address the big security questions of our time, from Ukraine and Russia to China and the Middle East. His assault on European democracy left the room dumbfounded and seething. His chilling suggestion that the waging war against disinformation amounts to war on democracy felt like a genuinely shocking moment.

Vance’s extraordinary assault, and his electoral interference on behalf of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland in Germany just days out from a general election (he had earlier met the AfD’s co-leader Alice Weidel) have little to do with democracy. Rather he was outlining the Mega (Make Europe Great Again) project in support of the far right across Europe. The strategic goal is clear: a Europe in which the nationalist far right is empowered is a divided Europe, far easier to subjugate by imperial powers, be that the US, Russia or China.

If Trump’s goal is the neo-Nazification of Germany, then that ties in with the Russification of Ukraine, the first under the banner of “free speech” and the second as an invocation of “common sense”. Trump and Putin share an imperial vision of the world, which includes an imperial “peace” for Ukraine. It is imperial because it will be decided –

just as at Yalta in 1945 – by empires; the US and Russia, perhaps with China’s help, but without Ukraine. It is also imperial because it concedes to Russia’s imperial ambitions for a sphere of influence, which Trump shares, as made clear by his approach to Canada, Mexico, Panama, Greenland, and, in fact, Europe as a whole.

What we are also learning is that rather than a reformed multilateral order, or even a more chaotic multi-order world, we are moving into a phase in which there is no order at all. It is a world in which international courts are sanctioned, international institutions thrown under the bus, international law systematically violated and international aid eviscerated. China will try to step into the void by talking up multilateralism, cooperation, predictability and free trade, as the Chinese minister of foreign affairs, Wang Yi, did in Munich. But China is most likely to be motivated to capture the spoils from a disaffected Europe betrayed by the US. During a panel discussion at Munich with the Indian foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, I referred to the dangers of a world devoid of any rules of the road. He rebutted this by saying that India quite liked the transactionalism baked into this survival-of-the-fittest

scenario. He had travelled to Munich after having accompanied the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, in what was, for them, a successful visit to Washington, in which Modi and Trump agreed on gas, weapons and more.

There is a certain (perhaps understandable) glee among many in the global south, who see Vance’s election interference in Germany as Europe getting a dose of the medicine that it has shoved down the throats of many countries in the global south, having lectured them for decades on democracy and rights. And yet no nation, large or small, whether in the global north or south, will thrive in a world without international institutions and internationally agreed norms, even if those rules have been violated for years. A fractured Europe will only be poorer, more insecure and less free in a world devoid of meaningful laws and institutions.

In response to Trump’s gratuitous gifts to Putin, Emmanuel Macron convened Monday’s emergency summit of Europe’s defence powers. The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, warned that the choice for European leaders was between Brussels and Moscow: the time had come for a European army.

Burundi troops withdraw in eastern Congo as M23 rebels expand reach, sources say

Burundi is withdrawing its forces from eastern Democratic Republic of Congo where they had been fighting against M23 rebels, four sources said on Tuesday, in a further blow to Congo's army as it struggles to halt a rebel advance. But a spokesman for the Burundian military dismissed reports of the ongoing pull-out as "fake", and said in a post on X that his country's soldiers were "continuing to execute their missions in their areas of responsibility" in Congo.

The pull-out came as the United Nations human rights office accused M23 rebels of executing children in eastern Congo during their advance, which has seen the group seize the region's two largest cities.

"A number of trucks filled with (Burundian) military arrived in the country since yesterday" through a border post, a Burundian army officer said, confirming movements also described by two U.N. sources and an African diplomat.



Burundian soldiers fought alongside the Congolese to try to defend Kavumu, home to the airport that services Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, which fell over the weekend. It was the rebels' most significant prize since they seized Goma, the biggest city in eastern Congo, in late January.

Burundi has had soldiers in eastern Congo for years, initially to hunt down Burundian rebels there, but more recently, to aid in the fight against M23.

The well-equipped M23 is the latest in a long line of ethnic

Tutsi-led rebel movements to emerge in Congo's volatile east. In their march south, the rebels on Tuesday entered the town of Kamanyola, some 50 km (31 miles) south of Bukavu, according to two residents and an M23 source. A Congolese army spokesperson did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Fighting between rebels and the Congolese army also took place on Tuesday in Lubero territory, north of Goma, local official Kambale Vighuliro and army colonel Alain Kiwewa told

Reuters.

Congo President Felix Tshisekedi met his Angolan counterpart Joao Lourenco in Luanda, the Angolan capital, to discuss the accelerated deterioration of the security situation in eastern Congo, the Angolan presidency said in a statement posted on Facebook. Rwanda rejects allegations from Congo, the United Nations and Western powers that it supports the group with arms and troops. It says it is defending itself against the threat from a Hutu militia, which it says is fighting with the Congolese military.

Congo rejects Rwanda's complaints and says Rwanda has used its proxy militias to loot its minerals. On Tuesday evening Rwanda said it was suspending development cooperation with Belgium over what it called an aggressive campaign to sabotage Rwanda's access to development finance, including through multilateral institutions. Various militias are vying for

control of the region's abundant mineral resources such as tantalum and cobalt, key components of electric vehicles, mobile phones and other technological products used across the world.

Congo is also the top supplier of copper to China.

EXECUTIONS

In Geneva, the U.N. Rights Office said conditions were deteriorating sharply for civilians caught up in the fighting in eastern Congo, with reported abuses including summary executions and sexual violence.

"Our office has confirmed cases of summary execution of children by M23 after they entered the city of Bukavu last week," spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told a press briefing. Three boys likely no older than 15 were killed during an altercation with rebels after they refused to give up weapons they had taken from an abandoned military camp, she said.

Why is Spain's economy booming? Thanks to migration – which proves xenophobia doesn't pay

The world's fastest growing major advanced economy last year was most likely Spain. According to preliminary official data for 2024, Spain's GDP grew by 3.2%, almost five times the eurozone average and more than the US, which did pretty well too. In December, the Economist ranked Spain first among 37 mostly wealthy countries based on five indicators: GDP, stock market performance, core inflation, unemployment and government deficits. Forecasts for 2025 look good.

Why is Spain doing so well? One key reason is immigration. Recent population flows, particularly but not only from Colombia, Venezuela and other Latin American countries, as well as Morocco, have boosted domestic demand and rejuvenated the workforce. According to the main labour national survey, nearly 90% of new jobs were filled by workers of foreign origin or dual nationality. Unemployment is at its lowest level since 2007.



Spain's growth is driven by a wide range of factors: a booming tourism industry, public investment supported by the EU's pandemic recovery funds, rising services and industrial exports to the European single market and beyond (especially since 2021), the growth of financial and technology businesses, and low energy costs thanks to Spain's expansion of renewables. Some of the labour reforms enacted by the centre-left coalition government have also put more money into low-income

consumers' pockets – notably, the steady increase in the minimum wage, which has risen more than 50% since the prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, took office in 2018. While the weight of each of these factors remains debated, migration is still the most frequently cited reason for Spain's strong performance and perhaps its most distinctive advantage compared with other countries. Immigration has also visibly changed Spain in recent years, particularly in major cities. Madrid,

for instance, now has more than 1 million residents from Latin America – up from just 80,000 only 25 years ago.

Anecdotal evidence shows this transformation. In my own neighbourhood in central Madrid, the most popular bookstore is run by two Argentinian journalists; the cool artisan bakery that keeps expanding was co-founded by a Hungarian woman who moved her business from Budapest. A Latin American evangelical church rents an old adult cinema for its worship and gatherings; a traditional Spanish pastry shop has started selling Venezuelan delicacies next to the long queue that forms every other day outside the consulate. Not far away, a large sign supports the party of the Argentinian president, Javier Milei (with graffiti from his detractors scrawled across it). Not all the economic data tells a rosy story. Spain still struggles with low productivity, an overreliance on the public

sector and low wages (GDP per capita has not grown as much as GDP), even if it has improved in these measures too. Tourism, while a driving force for the economy, has exacerbated housing shortages and fuelled a backlash against visitors, short-term rental platforms and investment funds pushing locals out of the city centres. Immigration has added to the pressure on affordable housing, with demand outpacing supply as the population grows. Some politicians blame rich Venezuelan and Colombian buyers for the rising prices in the most expensive neighbourhoods of Madrid. And poorer immigrants, particularly those from north African countries, continue to face discrimination and exploitation by unscrupulous and criminal employers or landlords. Meanwhile, regional and national politicians are often locked in disputes over housing migrant minors who have arrived in Spain alone.

Why is Saudi Arabia hosting talks between the US and Russia?



By Mostafa Salem

Saudi Arabia's hosting of top American and Russian officials for a high-stakes rapprochement meeting underlines the kingdom's aspirations to become a global actor capable of successfully mediating international conflicts. Another likely aim: added leverage for Riyadh in future talks on the fate of postwar Gaza.

At the Tuesday meeting between the US and Russia, the kingdom expects to go beyond hosting to play a mediation role, a Saudi official told CNN. The Saudi team will be led by the country's national security adviser.

The location for these talks – described by Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov as one that “generally suits” the United States and Russia – is widely considered a win for the kingdom's 39-year-old de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. He's on a mission to transform his oil-rich country and its fundamentalist Islamist past, into a nation that can cultivate soft power from immense wealth. “I don't think there's another place where the leader has such a good personal relationship with both Trump and Putin,” Saudi commentator Ali

Shihabi said, adding that for “Saudi Arabia, (the event is) prestigious and enhances the Saudi soft power regionally and globally.”

It's all part of a wider shift. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has realigned its policies towards neutrality in global conflicts with



the hope of attracting billions of investments that could help achieve “Vision 2030” – the crown prince's plan to diversify the Saudi economy away from oil. Prince bin Salman has significantly pulled back from Yemen after years of war with neighboring Houthis, he is mending ties with regional rival Iran and has maintained close relationships with China and Russia – all while preserving the

close Saudi relationship with the West.

Ties with both Putin and Trump In addition to hosting international boxing bouts and electronic music festivals, Saudi Arabia has sought to project an image of being a global peacekeeper, hosting aid donor

meetings and peace conferences. In August 2023, it hosted a two-day peace summit on Ukraine with representatives from more than 40 countries (albeit without Russia), and in February of the same year, pledged \$400 million in aid to Ukraine.

Prince bin Salman's ascension as a powerbroker in the talks stem from his close relationship with US President Donald

Trump, who supported the young royal when he was internationally shunned following the killing of columnist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents.

In 2017, Trump broke with tradition by choosing Saudi Arabia for his first international presidential visit. Even after he lost the 2020 election, Saudi Arabia continued close business ties with Trump, investing \$2 billion in a firm chaired by his son-in-law Jared Kushner and announcing plans to build Trump towers in the kingdom. The crown prince also has warm ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who refused to isolate the prince after the Khashoggi murder. Prince bin Salman resisted Western pressure to alienate Moscow after Ukraine's invasion and continued coordinating closely with Putin to control global oil supply, even siding with Russia by rebuffing calls from the Biden administration to ramp up oil production in 2022. Putin visited the kingdom in 2023 and has courted Riyadh to join BRICS – a bloc of countries seeking to counter US economic influence.

The hedging of Saudi Arabia's relations in an increasingly

polarized world has proven beneficial, analysts say. Prince bin Salman was “instrumental” in the release of American teacher Mark Fogel from Russian custody last week, Trump's envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff said. Saudi Arabia, along with its neighbor the United Arab Emirates, was also successful in mediating several prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia.

On Monday, Witkoff joined US National Security Adviser Mike Waltz and Secretary of State Marco Rubio for a meeting with Prince bin Salman in the Saudi capital Riyadh, just one day ahead of the scheduled talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Putin's aide Yury Ushakov and Russia's sovereign wealth fund chief Kirill Dmitriev. Notably, Tuesday's talks will not include Ukraine. However, President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is in the United Arab Emirates capital Abu Dhabi, said he will travel to Saudi Arabia later this week for separate talks with Saudi officials.

European leaders will be meanwhile meeting in Paris to discuss a coordinated response to the talks in Saudi Arabia, having been left out of direct participation – a signal from Washington that Europe's security role may no longer be a priority for the United States.

An eye on Gaza

onger term, Saudi Arabia may aim to use its role as a mediator in the meeting between Russia and the US to capitalize on a pressing regional matter – Trump's controversial suggestion that the US take ownership of Gaza and permanently relocate its residents.

Earlier this month, Trump laid out a vision of bringing peace to the Middle East by redeveloping the war-torn Gaza strip with “Riviera”-style premium housing and permanently relocating its more than 2 million residents. Arab countries swiftly rejected the idea. There will be a summit at the end of this week in Saudi Arabia where a counter proposal will be discussed before presenting it to Trump.



The \$21-million USAID joke, and it isn't on India

By Purav Thakur

USAID used \$21 million of American taxpayer money to boost voter turnout in India, according to Elon Musk's DOGE. India has been spending more on elections than the US and sees a better voter turnout too. That's the \$21-million joke. On a serious note, the money could have been used to interfere in India's electoral process.

When US President Donald Trump revealed the rationale behind his administration cancelling the funding of \$21 million to India for 'voter turnout', he put forward a very interesting question. "... We're giving \$21 million for voter turnout. It's voter turnout in India. What about voter turnout here," Trump asked. He didn't just question the motive behind US spending in India but also highlighted an irony.

While the US allocated \$21 million through USAID to "boost voter participation" in India, its own 2024 presidential election saw a turnout of 63.9%, lower than India's 66.1%. India not only outdid the US in voter participation, it also spent more than the US in the electoral process in 2024.

India spent nearly Rs 1.35 lakh crore (\$16.3 billion at February 19, 2025, exchange rate) on the 2024 general election.

The 2024 presidential election, at \$15.9 billion, was the most expensive ever in the US, according to a Forbes report.

So, India, the world's biggest democracy, spent more than the US in 2024.

Much of that money would have gone into wooing voters and getting their votes. Therefore, the \$21 million (Rs 182 crore) that USAID allegedly spent in India is a tiny fraction of the money.

These facts make the scrapped US aid for Indian voter turnout seem absurd, and begging the question, shouldn't that money have fixed the US' own turnout instead?

WHY TRUMP SHUT \$21 MILLION VOTER TURNOUT AID TO INDIA

Days after Elon Musk-led DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) said that USAID would not send money to India meant for boosting voter turnout, US President Donald Trump on Wednesday defended the move.

"Why are we giving \$21 million to India? They have a lot more money. They are one of the highest taxing countries in the world in terms of us; we can hardly get in there because their tariffs are so high. I have a lot of respect for India and their Prime Minister, but giving \$21 million for voter turnout?" Trump said after signing executive orders.

The DOGE on Sunday said it decided to slash \$723 million in foreign aid funding as part of its broader budget overhaul plans. The funding included the \$21 million grant for elections in India, which sees the highest number of people exercising their franchise.

VOTER TURNOUT IN INDIA HIGHER THAN IN US

As USAID kept financially aiding India to enable voters to turn up to their polluting

booths, the US in its successive elections had voter turnouts lower than that of India.

Voter turnout in US presidential elections has fluctuated over the years, with 58.0% in 2012, 59.2% in 2016, a peak of 65.3% in 2020, and a slight dip to 63.9% in 2024. In contrast, voter turnout in the last few Indian Lok Sabha elections has generally been higher than in US presidential elections.

In 2009, approximately 58.21% of eligible voters cast their ballots, which rose significantly to 66.38% in 2014. The 2019 election saw a record-high turnout of 67.40%, while in 2024, it slightly decreased to 65.79%, still surpassing the US presidential election turnout.

However, it isn't just this contrast that makes the U.S. voter aid of \$21 million seem absurd.

INDIA'S EXPENDITURE ON VOTERS MANY TIMES MORE THAN US GRANT
Donald Trump rightly questioned why the US was giving \$21 million (Rs 182 crore) to boost voter turnout in India, when the world's largest democracy had enough money.

A study by the New Delhi-based Centre for Media Studies in May 2024 revealed that the total estimated expenditure for the 2024 elections was expected to be Rs 1.35 lakh crore. The projection, the study said, would have surpassed the spending in the 2020 US elections, which stood at Rs 1.2 lakh crore.

The projection by the Centre for Media Studies of Rs 1.35 lakh crore expenditure

in India in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, is approximately \$16.2 billion, more than \$15.9 billion spent on the 2024 US Presidential election.

The figure for India is the total of the expenditure of the participating candidates, political parties and the organising Election Commission of India. While the government, through the Election Commission, spends money mostly on organising the election, training and mobilising poll officials and security personnel, funds are spent on voter awareness and to boost participation in polls too.

Money spent by the political parties on campaigning is mostly directed at wooing votes and voters. Various organisations work towards getting voters to the voting booth.

Therefore, the \$21 million looks like a joke. However, it might have been serious business, as some politicians are suggesting.

The BJP called it a foreign interference in India's election process and said it was definitely not it that had gained.

BJP IT Cell head Amit Malviya wrote, "...\$21M for voter turnout? This definitely is external interference in India's electoral process. Who gains from this? Not the ruling party for sure!"

It is for government agencies to delve deeper into the funding web. But with the data in public, it is safe to call the \$21 million of USAID for India nothing but a big joke. Uncle Sam could have kept that and used it to boost its voter participation.

Why the Election Commission is in the dock

The appointment of Gyanesh Kumar as the new chief election commissioner of India has invited controversy. Is the process flawed?

By S.Y. Quraishi

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is designed to be one of the most powerful institutions in the world. It is not only the guardian of the world's largest elections but has been a beacon of excellence, precision and legitimacy for the world ever since India's first general election in 1952. In the 2019 election, though, the ECI finds itself in the dock-first for delaying its order on petitions alleging that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah had multiply violated the Model Code of Conduct and then for issuing summary clean chits just ahead of the Supreme Court's deadline of May 6.

Commissioner Ashok Lavasa reportedly dissented, but then all ECI decisions are taken by majority vote. Dissent implies objective deliberation, and is therefore welcome. It is significant that the Supreme Court had to step in-not once but twice-even though Article 329 debars courts from intervening once the election process has been set in motion. The apex court first intervened to remind the ECI of its powers and then again to ask why it was delaying an order on alleged violations of the Model Code. This has certainly dented the image of the ECI as a powerful, effective and even-handed organisation. An institution is only as strong as its incumbents choose to be-or are allowed to be. The ultimate



judge is their conscience. To my mind, the core issue is the flawed system of appointment and removal of election commissioners. It is unfortunate that contrary to the practice in other democracies, here in India, they are appointed unilaterally by the government. Appointment by collegium; screening by a parliamentary committee; hearing by a full House of Parliament and even live telecast of the interview of candidates are settled practice in other democracies. The Law Commission's 255th report had recommended a Collegium, consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of India. Prominent political leaders such

as L.K. Advani and former Chief Election Commissioners B.B. Tandon, N. Gopalaswami and I have backed the idea-even while in office. But governments continue to evade the proposal, evidently reluctant to let go of their power. A PIL was also filed in the Supreme Court in 2018, calling for a "fair, just and transparent process of selection by constituting a neutral and independent collegium/selection committee". Despite the manifest urgency, the matter has been referred to a constitutional bench, which is yet to be constituted. The system of removing Election Commissioners is also deeply flawed; at present, only the CEC has protection. Although the other two Election Commissioners, added in

1993, have equal voting power and can outvote the CEC, the uncertainty of automatic elevation by seniority makes them highly vulnerable to government pressure. The government can control a defiant CEC through the majority voting power of the other two commissioners, who consider themselves on probation.

The ECI's reputation suffers when it is unable to rein in recalcitrant political parties. Despite being the registering authority under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, it has not been empowered to de-register them even for the gravest of violations. The Commission has been seeking this reform for the past two decades.

The Election Commission's credibility is central to democratic legitimacy. The most powerful electoral body should not only be fair but also appear to be fair. To this end, constitutional appointments need to be de-politicised and the ECI empowered to de-register parties for electoral misconduct. These two steps will go a long way in restoring public faith in the institution. Meanwhile, nothing should stop the ECI from asserting the ample authority it already has constitutionally. It must act tough and do so uniformly, urgently and proactively-not merely at discretion but in the service of a pious constitutional mandate.

Ganga Water At Kumbh's Sangam Unsafe On Another Parameter Too: Data

The Ganga water at the Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj, where lakhs of people are taking a holy dip every day during the ongoing Maha Kumbh, is currently unsafe for bathing as it exceeds the prescribed limit for biological oxygen demand (BOD), a key parameter to determine water quality, according to government data.

BOD refers to the amount of oxygen required by aerobic microorganisms to break down organic material in a water body. A higher BOD level indicates more organic content in the water.

River water is considered fit for bathing if the BOD level is less than 3 milligrams per litre.

The Central Pollution Control Board recently told the National Green Tribunal that several locations in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj do not conform to the primary water quality standards for bathing with respect to faecal coliform levels.

However, it said that the river water quality

met the bathing criteria in terms of BOD after January 13 "due to freshwater intrusion at upstream locations." Government data shows that the river water at Sangam is currently exceeding

the safe limit for BOD as well.

The BOD level at Sangam was 5.09 milligrams per litre at 5 am on February 16. It was recorded at 4.6 milligrams per litre at 5 pm on February 18 and 5.29 milligrams per litre at 8 am on February 19 (Wednesday).

According to Central Pollution Control

Board (CPCB) data, the BOD level at Sangam was 3.94 milligrams per litre on January 13 when the Maha Kumbh started.

It improved to 2.28 milligrams per litre on Makar Sankranti (January 14) and further dropped to 1 milligram per litre on January 15. However, it rose to 4.08 milligrams per litre on January 24 and was recorded at 3.26 milligrams per litre on Mauni Amavasya (January 29). According

to Uttar Pradesh government officials, 10,000 to 11,000 cusecs of water is being released into the Ganga to ensure it meets bathing standards.

The Maha Kumbh, which started on January 13, will conclude on February 26, Maha Shivaratri day. Over 54 crore people have taken a dip in the sacred waters of

Triveni Sangam so far.

Mahakumbh Nagar is the world's largest temporary city, accommodating 50 lakh to 1 crore devotees at any given time.

These pilgrims generate at least 16 million litres of faecal waste and 240 million litres of greywater daily from activities like cooking, washing, and bathing. Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Manoj Kumar Singh told reporters on Sunday that the rise in footfall is due to the government's success in improving river water quality and sanitation since the 2019 Ardh Kumbh. "Before 2019, there would be no toilets at Kumbh. Officials would earmark an area with a red flag, provide tents, and open defecation used to take place.

"For the first time in 2019, we built 1.14 lakh individual toilets with Sintex (plastic) tanks underneath to collect wastewater and excreta. Desludging would be done every two-three days and the faecal sludge would be taken to open oxidation ponds far away.

Hrithik Roshan and Ameesha Patel's reunion ignites fans' wishes for 'Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai 2'

Actors Hrithik Roshan and Ameesha Patel's recent reunion sparked a wave of excitement among fans on social media. The duo, who shared screen space in the iconic "Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai," has left fans eagerly hoping for a sequel. As photos and videos from their reunion went viral, many are now demanding "Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai 2." Ameesha also took to her Instagram handle and shared a heartwarming photo of herself posing with Hrithik, adding their popular song "Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai" to the post. In the image, both flaunted radiant smiles as they posed together. For the caption, the 'Gadar actress wrote, "About last night — lovely evening with SONIA's ROHIT — for me, you'll always be my Duggu BROSAN first and then @hrithikroshan the superstar later." Notably, fans were quick to react, with many demanding 'Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai 2.' Echoing similar sentiments, one fan commented, "Really looking forward to watching them together as a lead pair opposite each other! Really wish a producer-director is reading this!! Big fan of @ameeshapatel9 & @hrithikroshan." Another said, "Vote for — Kaho Naa Pyaar

Hai 2." A third user wrote, "My favorite couple, plissss Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai 2 plisssss, we wait." "Part 2 banana chaiye," read another comment. Directed and produced by Rakesh Roshan, "Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai" marked the Bollywood debut of both Hrithik and Ameesha. The 2000 romantic thriller also featured Anupam Kher, Dalip Tahil, Mohnish Bahl, Ashish Vidyarthi, Satish Shah, Farida Jalal, Asha Patel, Rajesh Tandon, and Tannaz Irani. Upon its release on January 14, 2000, the film became an instant blockbuster, grossing over ₹800 million worldwide. It went on to become the second-highest-grossing film of 2000 globally. At the star-studded success bash of Netflix's 'The Roshans,' Hrithik shared a heartwarming moment with Ameesha. The glitzy event was attended by an array of celebrities, including Rekha, Neetu Kapoor, Ameesha Patel, Anu Malik, Saba Azad, Shabana Azmi, Javed Akhtar, Bhushan Kumar, Sam Kaushal, Mallika Sherawat, Pashmina Roshan, Jeetendra, Alka Yagnik, Jackie and Tiger Shroff, Anupam Kher, Vaani Kapoor, Siddharth Anand, Udit Narayan, and David Dhawan, among many others.



Sunny Deol prepares for Baisakhi in the fields, embraces his 'Jaat' roots

Actor Sunny Deol, who is awaiting the release of his upcoming film, "Jaat," has shared several photos of himself in a field. Taking to his Instagram handle, the 'Gadar' actor posted a couple of his photos where he is seen striking different poses in the fields. He looked stylish in a white shirt, pants, and his signature beanie. He captioned the post in Hindi, "Jaat kheton ke beech taiyyari kar raha Baisakhi ki, '#BaisakhiWithJaat.'" Last year In October, the makers revealed the first look of Sunny from "Jaat." The actor was seen holding a massive



blood-stained fan in the poster. For the caption, they wrote, "Introducing the man with a national permit for Massive Action @iamsunnydeol in and as #JAAT #SDGM is #JAAT MASS FEAST LOADING. Directed by

@dongopichand Produced by @MythriOfficial & @peoplemediafactory." The teaser, just over a minute long, showcased intense scenes, including characters crushed by dumbbells, flying police offic-

ers, and dramatic confrontations. Sunny Deol's character was introduced as a formidable figure, initially seen chained up before he unleashes his wrath on his enemies. The 'Ghatak' actor faces off against Randeep Hooda in the forthcoming thriller. The film also stars Vineet Kumar Singh, Regina Cassandra, Saiyami Kher, and Swarupa Ghosh. Directed by Gopichandh Malineni, the film features music by Thaman S. It is produced by Naveen Yerneni and Ravi Shankar under Mythri Movie Makers, alongside TG Vishwa Prasad from People Media Factory. "Jaat" is set to

release on April 10. Announcing the release date of the film, the 'Betaab' actor had written on his Instagram, "JAAT GRAND RELEASE WORLDWIDE ON APRIL 10th In Hindi, Telugu and Tamil MASS FEAST GUARANTEED Directed by @dongopichand Produced by @MythriOfficial & @peoplemediafactory A @musicthaman Mass Beat." Meanwhile, Sunny Deol has several exciting projects lined up. Following "Jaat," he will appear in the upcoming actioners, "Lahore 1947" and "Border 2," both of which are highly anticipated.

Priyanka Chopra says 'bye bye to the wedding nails'

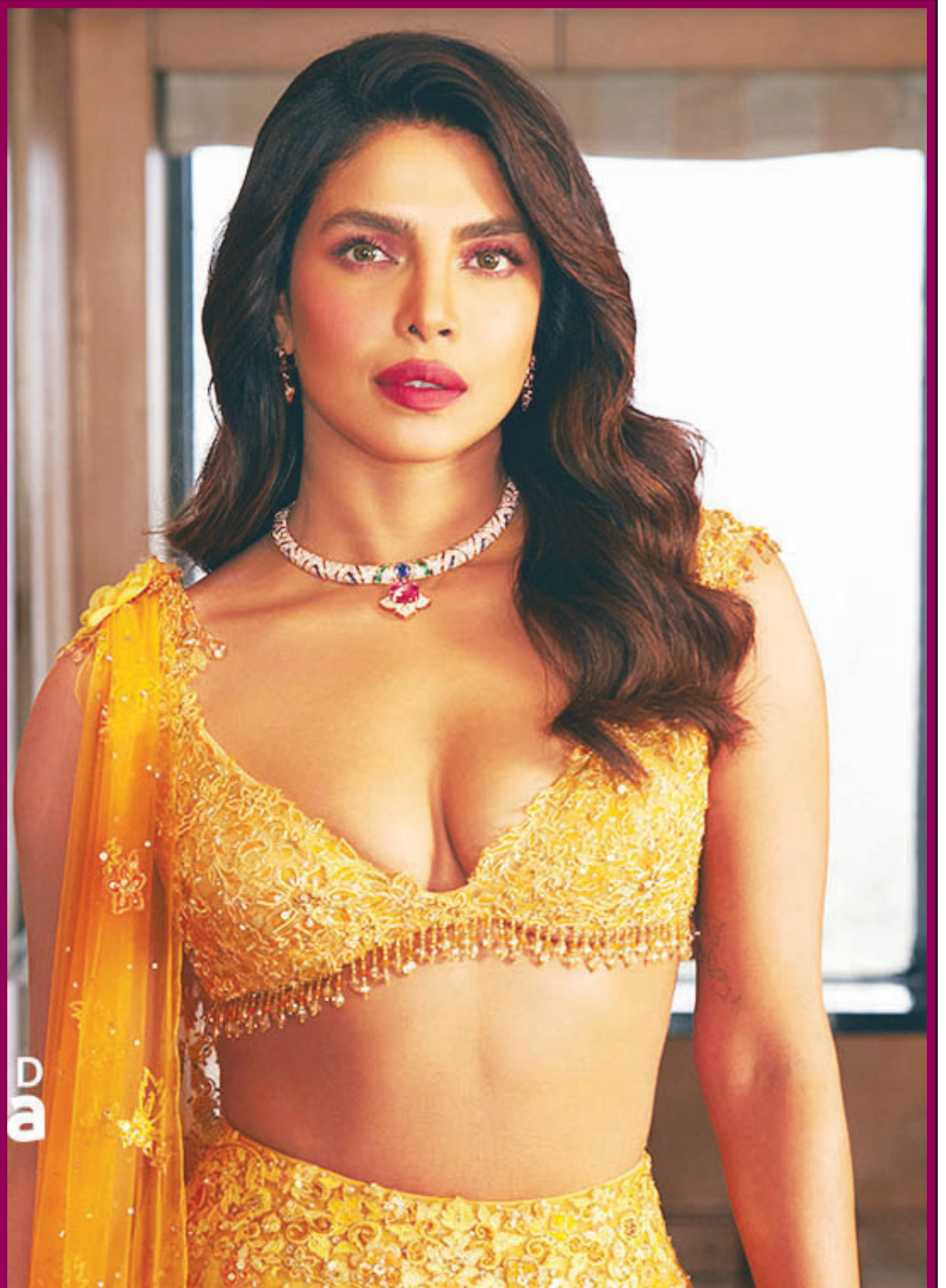
Seems like Priyanka Chopra is back to her work mode after attending her brother Siddharth Chopra's wedding in Mumbai, where she was accompanied by her husband Nick Jonas and her in-laws. Recently, PeeCee took to the stories section of her Instagram handle and dropped a video of getting her nails done. "Bye bye wedding nails.." she wrote in the caption. It seems like the 'Desi girl' is prepping to shoot for her next. The reports suggest that PeeCee has been roped in as the leading lady in South superstar Mahesh Babu's next, titled 'SSMB29' for now. The highly-anticipated project is being helmed by 'RRR' maker SS Rajamouli. Meanwhile, Priyanka Chopra was papped at the Mumbai airport today as she was headed to Hyderabad, most likely to shoot for "SSMB29". The diva garnered a lot of eyeballs in a neon green co-ord set. She further took to her Instagram stories to share a short clip after landing in

Hyderabad. However, the movie buffs are still awaiting an official confirmation.

Touted to be a global adventure set across exotic locations, Mahesh Babu's role in the film is reported to be inspired by Lord Hanuman. If the reports are to be believed, the ambitious project will be made on a massive budget of Rs 900–Rs 1,000 crores. The highly-awaited drama is expected to be made in two parts. "SSMB29" will mark Priyanka Chopra's return to Telugu cinema after a long gap of 23 years. She was last seen in P Ravi Shankar's 2002 romantic entertainer "Apuroopam". Aside from this, PeeCee's last Bollywood release was Shonali Bose's 2016 drama, "The Sky Is Pink".

Along with "SSMB29", Priyanka Chopra has joined hands with her husband Nick Jonas, and the Jonas brothers for a holiday film.

In addition to this, PeeCee will also be a part of the second season of her blockbuster show "Citadel".



Shilpa Shetty 'unleashes her inner beast' with Gorilla jumps

Actress Shilpa Shetty Kundra is back with another powerful fitness challenge, this time showcasing her impressive gorilla jumps workout. In her latest Instagram post, the actress encouraged her followers to "unleash their inner beast" and take on this intense plyometric move, designed to boost strength, agility, and cardiovascular endurance. On Monday, the 'Hungama 2' actress took to her Instagram handle and shared a video wherein she is seen doing gorilla jumps workout. Alongside the clip, Shilpa wrote in the caption, "Go Wild, Not Mild! Unleash your inner beast with 3 rounds of Gorilla Jumps—each lasting 60 seconds, followed by a 60-second rest between rounds. This powerful plyometric move boosts agility, explosiveness, and full-body strength, all while firing up your cardiovascular endurance." She added, "Incorporate it into your HIIT routine for an intense burn or super-set it with weight training to level up your workout game. Ready to jump into action? Let's go! #MondayMotivation #SwasthRahoMastRaho #HIIT #Intense #Strong." The workout, which involves three rounds of 60-second gorilla jumps with a 60-second rest in between, is designed to

improve agility, explosiveness, full-body strength, and cardiovascular endurance. The 'Dhadkan' actress had previously demonstrated how to achieve balance with a Bosu Ball workout. She posted a video wherein she explained how a Bosu Ball workout challenges the body on an unstable surface, activating multiple muscle groups. She highlighted its ability to enhance functional fitness, reduce injury risks, and build overall strength and stability. For the caption, Shilpa wrote, "Mondays are for BALANCE A Bosu Ball workout targets your core and stabilizing muscles, improving balance, strength, and coordination. It challenges your body on an unstable surface, activating multiple muscle groups, enhancing functional fitness, and reducing injury risks while building overall stability and strength. #MondayMotivation #SwasthRahoMastRaho #BosuBallWorkout #BalanceYourWay #Balance." On the professional front, Shilpa Shetty was last seen in the Amazon Prime Video series "Indian Police Force," where she portrayed Delhi Police Special Cell Chief Tara Shetty IPS. She also appeared in the 2021 comedy film "Hungama 2."



Kareena Kapoor Khan asks media to not click her kid's pictures



It seems the breach in privacy has scarred Bollywood diva Kareena Kapoor Khan, as she asked the paparazzi to refrain from taking the pictures of her children.

The actress was seen paying a visit to her father Randhir Kapoor on his birthday on Saturday. The actress was seen dressed in a white shirt, and

a pair of denims. This comes after the stabbing incident on the actress' husband, Saif Ali Khan. Earlier, Saif Ali Khan made his first public appearance after he returned to his home following the knife attack on him. The actor was seen at a five star property in the Juhu area of Mumbai for a Netflix event. The actor attended the trailer launch of his

upcoming streaming title 'Jewel Thief – The Heist Begins' in which he shares the screen with Jaideep Ahlawat.

Last month, Saif was attacked by an assailant who barged into his Bandra house through his youngest son, Jeh's room. The actor reportedly went to the hospital on his own, and was accompanied by his son Taimur.

As per media reports, doctors removed the 2.5 inches of knife from his wound. The actor was stabbed multiple times in an attempt to fight off the accused. The actor sustained six stab wounds, two of which were said to be serious as they were closer to his spine. The incident took place as the accused allegedly barged into their Bandra home,

and attacked their house help and then Saif when he intervened.

Saif was woken up by the commotion in his son Jeh's room. He went inside the room to see the culprit arguing with their house help, looking at this, Saif intervened to save the house help with bare hands to fight off the intruder.

Ileana D'Cruz confirms her second pregnancy

Actress Ileana D'Cruz embraced motherhood in 2023 as she welcomed her first child, son Koa Phoenix Dolan with hubby Michael Dolan. Now, the 'Rustom' actress has confirmed that she is expecting her second child.

Ileana D'Cruz took to her Instagram stories and shared a sneak peek into her midnight cravings. She dropped a picture of packets of puffcorn snacks and antacid chews and time-stamped the post at 12:43 am. "Tell me you're pregnant without telling me you're pregnant..", the mommy-to-be captioned the post.

It has been speculated for some time now that Ileana D'Cruz will be welcoming her second child soon. Back in January 2025, the stunner



shared a reel of some precious moments from the past year. It included glimpses of her time with her husband Michael Dolan and son Koa Phoenix Dolan. The October segment

of the post featured Ileana D'Cruz looking emotional as she held a pregnancy test kit. She wrote along with the post, "Love. Peace. Kindness. Here's hoping 2025 is all

that and so much more." Ever since then, the fans have been speculating that the actress is pregnant.

Meanwhile, Ileana D'Cruz made her first pregnancy an-

nouncement in April 2023. The 'Raid' actress shared a picture of a onesie on her Insta, and wrote, "Coming soon. Can't wait to meet you my little darling."

Back in August 2024, Ileana D'Cruz dropped the first picture of her little bundle of joy. She penned, "Introducing Koa Phoenix Dolan. Born on August 1, 2023. No words could explain how happy we are to welcome our darling boy to the world. Heart's beyond full." Additionally, looking back at her pregnancy days, Ileana D'Cruz wrote on her IG, "One year ago today, my little baby boy was the size of a tiny little poppy seed growing inside me I remember the feelings going through me, the excitement, the nerves, this overwhelming need to protect him and keep him safe."