

THE PERFECT VOICE



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13 dead near Elephanta

A NAVY SPEED BOAT RAMS INTO THE FERRY OFF MUMBAI COAST CAUSING THE ACCIDENT

CM DEVENDRA FADNAVIS SAYS 101 RESCUED, SEVERAL PEOPLE STILL MISSING



By Correspondent

Mumbai: Thirteen persons died and 101 others were rescued after a Navy craft crashed into a ferry off the Mumbai coast on Wednesday, the Navy said. At about 4 pm, a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja near Mumbai, the Navy said in a statement. The ferry was carrying passengers from the Gateway of India to Elephanta Island, a popular tourist destination. "Search and Rescue efforts were immediately launched by the Navy in coordination with the Coast Guard and Marine Police. Four naval helicopters, 11 naval craft, one Coast Guard boat and three Marine Police boats were involved in the rescue efforts," the Navy said. Personnel from police, Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority and fishermen in

the area were also involved in the rescue work. "The survivors picked up by Navy and civil craft in the area have been transferred to jetties and hospitals in the vicinity. So far 99 survivors have been rescued," it added. The accident led to the loss of 13 lives, including a Naval personnel and two from the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) on board the Naval craft, the Navy said. Following the tragedy near a jetty off the Butcher Island, police stopped tourists entry at the Gateway of India and suspended boat services, docking them at their designated spots. However, the Mumbai-Alibaug boat services, remained operational till the evening. A musical event of a private financial institution was going on at the Gateway of India even as anxious relatives of the

missing persons waited outside the police post to know updates about their near and dear ones. Offices of tourist boat operators, teaming with people on normal days, were closed. These included the office of the operators whose boat had capsized following the crash. Tourists looked disappointed as the entry was restricted for them.

Police have heightened security in the area and ambulances were seen parked at the Gateway of India. The crash cast a sombre shadow over the landmark's vicinity. Khalashis (assistants) and boat drivers were seen discussing the incident or going about their routine tasks such as preparing food and fetching fresh water in their boats.

What the Navy said

At about 1600 hours on Wednesday, a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with a passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja, Mumbai. The ferry was carrying passengers from Gate Way of India to Elephanta Island. Search and Rescue efforts were immediately launched by the Navy in coordination with the Coast Guard and Marine Police. Four naval helicopters, 11 naval craft, one Coast Guard boat and three Marine Police boats are undertaking rescue efforts. The accident has reportedly led to the tragic loss of 13 lives including one Naval personnel and 2 OEM onboard the Naval craft.

What CM Fadnavis said

"According to information received from Vice Admiral Sanjay Jagjeet Singh till 7.30 pm, though 101 passengers on board the Neelkamal tourist boat have been saved, the search and rescue operations are still on and the final tally will be known only by Thursday morning," Fadnavis said. He also said that two passengers are still serious and are being treated at the Navy hospital. According to preliminary reports, the Navy boat was being tested in the waters after being fitted with a new machine and during the test it developed a technical snag with throttle and collided with the passenger vessel. The CM announced an ex gratia amount of Rs 5 lakh for the next to kin of the deceased and said that a thorough investigation will be conducted.



I was sure Navy craft will crash into us, says ferry passenger: Page 3

Kiran Jadhav wins national rifle crown

OLYMPIC BRONZE WINNER KUSALE THIRD

Bhopal: Indian Navy's Kiran Ankush Jadhav beat Paris Olympic bronze medalist Swapnil Kusale and another Olympian Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar to clinch the men's 50m rifle 3 positions (3P) title at the 67th National Shooting Championship Competitions (NSCC) here on Wednesday. Jadhav shot 465.8 in the final to leave Aishwary Pratap (463.1) of the home state in second place at the M.P. State Academy Shooting range. Swapnil of Railways led the 45-shot final till the 40th shot but bowed out in third ahead of the final gold-deciding shot, with a tally of 451.8. Earlier, Swapnil had topped the qualification with a world-class score of 593, leaving Aishwary a point behind in second. Jadhav had qualified fourth with a solid 590. After leading at every stage of the final, Swapnil could not hit the 10-ring af-

ter his 40th shot. His last four shots in the final Standing position read 9.2, 9.4, 8.9 and 9.5, putting paid to his title hopes. Jadhav was in third place till the 40-shot stage, before finishing with a series of 10.6, 10.4, 10.6, 10.0 and 10.8 to strike gold. Home favourite Aishwary's 41st shot for a 9.9 meant he could not take advantage of Swapnil's slip, holding on to second. In the junior final, West Bengal's Adriyan Karmakar, son of Olympian Jaidheep Karmakar, triumphed over Madhya Pradesh's Kushagra Singh Rajawat comfortably with a score of 462.0, a full four points ahead of the local boy. Rajasthan's Deependra Singh Shekhawat was third with a score of 445.6. Adriyan had qualified third for the final with a score of 586 while Haryana's Rohit Kanyan, who made both the finals, was on top of the qualification pile with a score of 587. -PTI



A child get his face painted as he prepares to dress up as Lord Shiva to attract tourists to Ganga ghat in Varanasi on Wednesday. Pic: PTI

'Laapataa Ladies' out of race

New Delhi: "Laapataa Ladies", India's official entry in the Best International Feature category at the 97th Academy Awards, is out of the Oscars race but Sandhya Suri's Hindi film "Santosh", representing the UK, has advanced to the next round. Directed by Kiran Rao, "Laapataa Ladies" ("Lost Ladies" in English) failed to make it to the shortlist of 15 films that will be vying for a spot in the final five, the Academy of Motion Picture

Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) announced on Wednesday. The final Oscar nominations will be announced on January 17. According to the Academy, 85 countries or regions had submitted films that were eligible for consideration in the International Feature Film category for the 97th Academy Awards. "Laapataa Ladies" did not make it to the Academy Awards shortlist this year, and we are of course disappointed, but equally we are

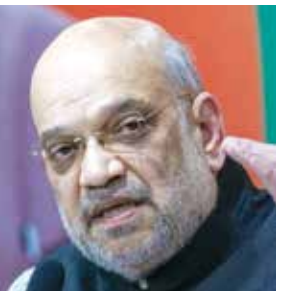
immensely grateful for the incredible support and belief we've received throughout this journey," Aamir Khan Productions, Jio Studios and Kindling Productions, which backed the movie. "Santosh", a Hindi-language crime drama from British-Indian filmmaker Suri and featuring acclaimed actors Shahana Goswami and Sunita Rajwar, has found a spot in the final 15 as the official entry from the UK. -PTI

Williams' more time in space

Cape Canaveral: NASA's two stuck astronauts just got their space mission extended again. That means they won't be back on Earth until spring, 10 months after rocketing into orbit on Boeing's Starliner capsule. NASA announced the latest delay in Indian-origin Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore's homecoming on Tuesday. The two test pilots planned on being away just a week or so when they blasted off June 5 on Boeing's first astronaut flight to the International Space Station. Their mission grew from eight days to eight months after NASA decided to send the company's problem-plagued Starliner capsule back empty in September. Now the pair won't return until the end of March or even April because of a delay in launching their replacements, according to NASA. A fresh crew needs to launch before Wilmore and Williams can return and the next mission has been bumped more than a month, according to NASA.

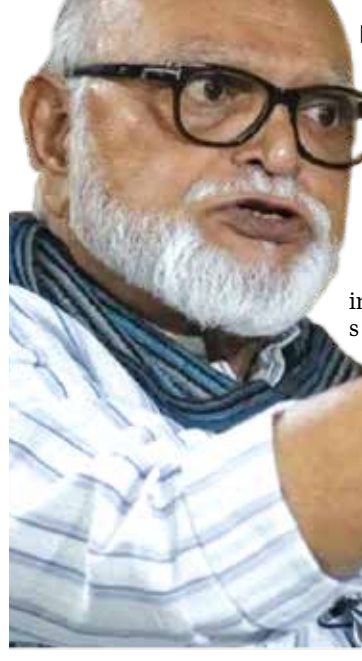
Congress twisted facts, distorted my statement: Shah

New Delhi: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday accused the Congress of twisting facts and distorting his comments in the Rajya Sabha related to B R Ambedkar after BJP leaders "exposed" the opposition party's repeated "insults" to the architect of the Constitution. Shah alleged that the Congress in the past has also misrepresented his and even PM Narendra Modi's comments to spread confusion. "I condemn the Congress for twisting facts. Why did it happen? It happened because BJP leaders spoke on how the NDA governments upheld the Constitution and established with facts that the Congress is anti-Ambedkar, anti-Constitution and anti-reservation," Shah told reporters here. The senior BJP leader said the Congress also insulted Veer Savarkar and blew to smithereens the values enshrined in the



Constitution by imposing Emergency. "When all these facts came out, the Congress used its old tricks and made an effort to mislead the society by presenting twisted facts." Shah said he comes from a party that can never insult Ambedkar. Asked about Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge's demand for his resignation, the home minister said in a lighter vein that he can quit if this will make the Congress president happy but it will never solve his problems. He has to remain in his chair, a reference to his party being in the opposition, for 15 more years.

Bhujbal episode sparks debate on BJP's OBC prospects



By Abhijit Mulye

Mumbai: Senior NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal, who is extremely unhappy because after not being included in the state cabinet, revealed his future strategy at a rally in Nashik on Wednesday, saying that he shal

been trying to turn the wheel of equality backwards. Bhujbal, without even mentioning Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis or his party leader DCM Ajit Pawar in his speech, blasted the leaders. He also revealed that even though the state BJP president Chandrashekar Bawankule was in favour of his inclusion, he was not included in the state cabinet. "I've worked even as a leader of opposition. Hence, I am not worried about the ministerial berth. But, I'm worried as to who shall not fight for the issues of the community? Who shall protect our people? Hence, I've decided to fight for them,"

Bhujbal said at the rally. While giving clear signals of rebellion, Bhujbal asked why the OBCs are being neglected even while everybody knows that the 'Ladki Bahin' (scheme) along didn't help you win the elections. Earlier, Bhujbal had said that he lost the cabinet berth because he spoke against Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange-Patil. He also hinted that he shall consult OBC leaders from across the Indian and shall tour all parts of the state and the nation to raise awareness among the community members. This makes it clear that he shall try to snatch away the massive support of OBC communities that the BJP enjoys today. The question is whether he, or even other BJP leaders like Sudhir Mungantiwar and Dr San-

jay Kute who too have expressed unhappiness over not getting a chance in the state cabinet, would be able to dissociate the OBC communities from the BJP. BJP insiders, however, feel that the rebellion is a temporary phase and shall be pacified very soon. They also point out at the dismal performance by the leaders in their own constituencies, to support their argument that they are unlikely to make any major difference for the party as the people in their own constituencies are more with the party than with the leaders. Bhujbal couldn't save the two Lok Sabha seats in Nashik district while Mungantiwar couldn't save the Chandrapur Lok Sabha seats even though he was contesting it, the party insiders say while stressing

that their dissatisfaction is unlikely to make much of a difference even in their own constituencies, let alone the other parts of the state. Secondly, the state cabinet has 16 OBC ministers. Saying that none of them would be able to protect the interests of the community won't go well with the support base of all these leaders, the BJP insiders feel. Also, they say that once the portfolio allocation is complete and the government beings rolling out its decisions, the dissidents will start falling in line. Meanwhile, Mungantiwar who left for Chandrapur after not being included in the state cabinet, made it clear today that he was hurt because the leaders didn't speak to him clearly. "Till 13th

evening, when I met Bawankule, I was assured that my name was there on the list. But, it was dropped on 15th when the list was announced. I never expected this to happen to me," Mungantiwar said. He also said that 196 MLAs in the state assembly didn't get a chance to be a minister and that this time he is one of them. "Millions have made sacrifices for the party. I shall see to it that none of my actions damage the party in any manner," he clarified while speaking to media later. Dr Sanjay Kute too has expressed similar sentiments in a long letter written to his followers and released on social media. This leaves Bhujbal and a few other Maratha leaders from the Shiv Sena who might still be in a state of rebellion.



Maharashtra Dy CM Eknath Shinde arrives at Winter session of the Legislative Assembly in Nagpur. Pic:PTI

Janet Vidhi storms into second round

Mumbai: Former champion Janet Vidhi of India overcame a strong challenge from Malaysia's Vini-kasheenie Kulasegaram posting a 3-0 win in a women's first-round match of the 79th Western India Slam, a USD 9,000 prize-money Professional Squash Association (PSA) Challenger event. Vidhi found the going tough initially and won the first game over extra points. She then won a close second game before she got into her stride and comfortably won the third game to complete a 12-10, 11-8, and 11-3 win in 21 minutes to advance to second round. Tanvi Khanna of India also progressed to the second round defeating Serbia's Jelena Dutina 11-4, 11-2, and 11-2 in just 14 minutes. In men's action, India's Rahul Baitha defeated Sri Lanka's Tuwin Nilakshana Herath 11-3, 11-8, and 11-7 in 27 minutes.

Bill aimed at curbing 'urban Naxalism' re-introduced

Nagpur: Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Wednesday re-introduced the Special Public Security Bill in the state assembly, and said the proposed law is not aimed at suppressing genuine dissenting voices, but to close down the dens of urban Naxals. The previous Maharashtra government led by Eknath Shinde had in July this year tabled this bill, named as 'Maharashtra Special Public Security Act, 2024', in the assembly during the monsoon session. However, it could not be passed at that time. With the new government led by Fadnavis at the helm after the November 20 assembly elections, he re-introduced the bill in the House. Fadnavis said the bill will be referred to the joint select committee of the state legislature so that all doubts related to it can be cleared. Views of the stakehold-

ers will be considered and the bill will be cleared in the monsoon session of the state legislature to be held in July next year in Mumbai. "Naxalism is not restricted to remote rural parts alone, but frontal organisations have come up in urban areas as well which work towards creating distrust about the country and its institutions," Fadnavis said. "Even the anti-Naxal squads in Maharashtra wanted such a law to stop the activities of urban Naxals. This proposed law is not aimed at suppressing genuine dissenting voices, but to close down the dens of urban Naxals." Congress leader Nana Patole questioned the need for a separate Act when existing laws have provisions to tackle Naxalism. To this, Fadnavis replied that Maharashtra does not have a law to tackle Naxalism.

"We have IPC (Indian Penal Code) and UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act). UAPA is for handling cases related to terror activities," he said. Fadnavis said Chhatishgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have enacted Public Security Acts for effective prevention of unlawful activities, and banned 48 frontal organisations. All offences under the proposed act will be cognisable and non-bailable. The offences will be investigated by a police officer not below the rank of a sub-inspector. The bill describes unlawful activities as indulging in or propagating acts of violence, vandalism or other acts generating fear and apprehension in the public. Indulging in or encouraging use of firearms, explosives or devices, encouraging disobedience to established law and its institutions unlawful.

Opposition walks out over Amit Shah's remarks

Nagpur: Opposition members walked out of the Maharashtra legislative council on Wednesday after not being allowed to discuss Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B R Ambedkar.

The matter also figured in the state assembly where Congress leader Nitin Raut said they will not tolerate "insult" of Ambedkar whom they revere as God.

Notably, the Congress has alleged that Shah's remarks in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday during a debate on the Constitution show the BJP and the RSS leaders have a "lot of hatred" for Ambedkar and demanded an apology from him.

When the Maharashtra legislative council proceedings began on Wednesday, Leader of Opposition Ambadas Danve raised the point of information to discuss Shah's comments on Ambedkar.

However, members of the ruling parties objected to Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Danve's move.

Deputy chairperson Neelam Gorhe said the happenings in Parliament cannot be discussed in the state council and added that they (opposition members) were doing politics on the matter.

Members of the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) gathered near the well of the House.

They raised slogans demanding a discussion over Shah's comments and then staged a walkout.

In the legislative assembly, Congress leader Nitin Raut criticised the purported remarks made in the Rajya Sabha.

"We will not tolerate insult of Ambedkar who is like God to us," he said.

State minister Ashish Shelar (BJP) objected to Raut and demanded that the Congress leader's comments be expunged.



Leader of Opposition in Maharashtra Legislative Council Ambadas Danve speaks with the media during the winter session of Assembly in Nagpur on Wednesday. Pic:PTI

Show old mentality of BJP: Ambedkar

Pune: Babasaheb Ambedkar's grandson Prakash Ambedkar alleged on Wednesday that Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on the father of the Constitution reflected the BJP's "same old mentality". "Before the BJP came into existence, its forerunners Jan Sangh and RSS had opposed Babasaheb while the Constitution was being adopted," Prakash Ambedkar, who heads Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, told reporters in Pune. He said Shah's statement has brought the same old mentality of BJP to the fore. "There is nothing new in the statement. They are not able to execute their old plans. Not because of Congress, but because of Babasaheb Ambedkar and they will continue to sulk," said Prakash Ambedkar.

"How can one discuss proceedings of the Rajya Sabha in the assembly?" Shelar asked.

Shah attacked the Congress in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday, saying the party treated the Constitution as the "private fiefdom" of one family and "played fraud" with Parliament.

Concluding a two-day debate on the "Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India", Shah had ripped into the Congress for its appeasement politics and claimed the party wanted to breach the 50 per cent quota limit to provide reservation to Muslims.

MLAs deplore Beed sarpanch's murder

Nagpur: Members cutting across party lines in the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday condemned the gruesome murder of a village sarpanch in Beed district and the desecration of a Constitution replica in Parbhani district. Legislators appeared stunned and shocked when Suresh Dhas (BJP) shared in the house details of the abduction and brutal murder of Massajog village sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh. Members demanded a high-level probe into both incidents, which took place in the last fortnight in the central Maharashtra districts, and strict action against the culprits. Initiating debate in the lower house, Nitin Raut (Congress) said Sopan Pawar, the man allegedly involved in the desecration of the Constitution replica in Parbhani, should be booked for treason. Raut demanded a judicial or special investigation team (SIT) probe into the Parbhani incident and added even (Nathuram) Godse was called mentally unstable when he killed Mahatma Gandhi". The Parbhani police af-

ter arresting Pawar had claimed he was "mentally unstable". Raut condemned police lathi-charge on peaceful protesters who were demonstrating against the desecration of the Constitution replica. He said law student Somnath Suryavanshi, arrested in connection with violence in Parbhani over the desecration of the Constitution replica, later died, while a woman, Vatsala Manvate, an onlooker, was beaten up mercilessly by police. Suryavanshi died in judicial custody after he was arrested. Raj Kumar Badole (NCP) also condemned the vandalization incident and demanded a thorough probe into it by an SIT. He maintained it should be checked whether accused Pawar was really "mentally unstable". Namita Mundada, the BJP MLA from Kaij in Beed district, raised the issue of murder of sarpanch Deshmukh. She lamented that the people of Beed district have lost trust in elected representatives and the local police. There is tremendous fear

about the Beed police and people wonder who controls them. Police know the killers, but after 10 days, only four of the seven accused have been arrested, said the ruling party legislator. "Let the murder of sarpanch Deshmukh be the last such incident in Beed district," she said. Suresh Dhas (BJP) said Deshmukh was a three-time sarpanch who intervened to resolve a fight in the village where a Dalit community watchman was beaten up. Dhas, the MLA from Ashti in Beed district, narrated the entire sequence of events related to the murder of Deshmukh and demanded that the scope of probe cover the role of "higher ups" involved in protecting the accused. The Massajog village sarpanch was abducted from his car near a toll plaza, and his body was later found in the Daitthana area of Kej tehsil. The state CID is investigating the murder. The sarpanch was also the local BJP booth committee president. -PTI



Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar with NCP(SP) chief Sharad Pawar during a meeting at Parliament House in New Delhi on Wednesday. Pic:PTI

Pawar meets Modi along with two farmers

New Delhi: NCP-SP chief Sharad Pawar met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday, weeks after the Maha Vikas Aghadi was trounced in the assembly elections in Maharashtra by the BJP-led Mahayuti. Pawar met the prime minister in his office in Parliament House along with two farmers from Phalant in western Maharashtra and presented him with a box of pomegranates from their farm.

Pawar had recently written to the prime minister, inviting him to inaugurate the 98th Marathi Sahitya Sammelan scheduled to be held at Talkatora Stadium in the national capital in February. "I did not broach the topic of Sahitya Sammelan," Pawar said after meeting with the prime minister. In a post on X, the Prime Minister's Office said Sharad Pawar, along with a group of farmers, met PM

Modi on Wednesday. It also posted pictures of the NCP-SP chief presenting pomegranates to PM Modi. In the Maharashtra assembly elections last month, the Congress-NCP(SP)-Shiv Sena(UBT) alliance -- MVA -- faced a humiliating defeat at the hands of BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP's Mahatuti alliance. The Mahayuti won 235 seats, while the MVA was restricted to 46 in the 288-member assembly.

MD wins cricket title

Mumbai: Maharshi Dayanand (MD) of Parel won the State-level Under-19 School Cricket Tournament held at the Pacific Cricket Ground, Hinganghat, Wardha. In the final, MD College defeated Kolhapur by three runs in a very close match to win the title for the first time. Batting first, MD College scored 91/6 in 10 overs as Yash Jadhav scored 42 runs to help the team build a respectable total. His teammate Tamir Chauhan added 19 runs. Kolhapur team also played strongly and scored 88/6 runs in 10 overs. In the last over, Kolhapur needed 6 runs to win. However, Aryan Deshmukh bowled wonderfully and gave away only two runs in six balls to help MD College win by 3 runs. Deshmukh was declared the man of the final. In the semi-final, MD College had defeated Nagpur. After Nagpur scored 81/6 runs in 10 overs, the MD College chased the target by scoring 85 runs without loss in 10 overs. Deshmukh scored 75 runs in 32 balls. He also took two wickets for 14 runs in 2 overs. In this competition, the winning teams from eight divisions namely Mumbai, Latur, Pune, Nagpur, Nashik, Amravati, Ch. Sambhajinagar and Kolhapur played in a knockout format. The MD College team had been trying to establish itself in cricket for the last several years, but its efforts had failed short. In the last three years,

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Elections are not over yet. Elections to local bodies are due. Do not forget that OBCs support in recent assembly elections paved the way for the grand success of Mahayuti, besides the role of Ladki Bahin scheme."



Chhagan Bhujbal, Leader, NCP

Old clip on Fadnavis falsely shared as recent

New Delhi: A video recently went viral on social media showing a differently abled girl performing 'aarti' and applying a 'tilak' on BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis' forehead with her toe. Those sharing the video claimed that it was shot recently after Fadnavis took oath as the Maharashtra chief minister on December 5. An investigation by the PTI Fact Check Desk revealed that the viral video is not a recent one but from June 2023, when Fadnavis was the deputy chief minister in the previous Maharashtra government. A Facebook user named 'Bimal Kumar Jain' shared the video on December 10 and wrote, "A Divyang girl performed aarti of Devendra Fadnavis, who was elected Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Both are great." Considering the video to be recent, many other users shared it with the same claim.



To verify the claim, the desk reverse-searched the keyframes of the video. We found information related to this in a report published on Dainik Bhaskar's website on June 27, 2023.

According to the report, Fadnavis was in Jalgaon at that time when a differently abled girl at the Deepstambh Foundation honoured him by applying a 'tilak' on his forehead and performing his 'aarti'. The foundation helps differently abled, orphaned and poor children and works to provide quality education to them. Meanwhile, a report by News18 stated that the girl's name is Laxmi Shinde. Fadnavis also posted this video on his X (formerly Twitter) handle. Sharing the video on June 27, 2023, he described the incident as an emotional moment of his life. The investigation made it clear that the viral video is not a recent one. Users are sharing this video on social media with the misleading claim that it is a recent clip. -PTI

CHANGE OF NAME
RENU DEVI has changed her name to RENU AJAY KUMAR SHARMA as per document.

PUBLIC NOTICE
Notice is hereby given that I, Renu Devi, residing at [Address], presently residing at [Address], have had an original Khata/Deed (with all enclosures including Register of Consideration) dated 12.11.1983 which was recorded between the Anand Group of Companies & I, Mrs. Manoj Jagdish Patel and I, Manoj Jagdish Patel, in respect of the above mentioned property, hereby declare and state that I have already by my legal proceedings or otherwise, obtained the said Khata/Deed and have already by my legal proceedings or otherwise, obtained the saidic Khata/Deed concerning the subject matter of the said property to submit all their original documents and all other documents in writing to the undersigned within the period of 7 days from the publication of this notice. Failing which my clients will presume that no adverse claim or objection concerning the said property exist or if they do exist they shall stand waived and in such event my clients will proceed to complete the further transactions. Please do note.

SHARAD K. DESHMUKH
A piece of Land, Survey No. 22, Hissa No. 01, Lay out Plot No. 4 & Survey No. 02, Hissa No. 02, 1st and 2nd Block, A.P. Post, Taluka, District, Maharashtra, India, situated at [Address] District of [Address], with the assessment jurisdiction of [Address] Revenue Department.

Dilip Yashwant Lal
(ADVOCATE HIGH COURT)
B-22/26A, Sandhurst Road, Thakur Complex, Kandivli (East), Mumbai-400101, Maharashtra
Phone Number: 9820000000
E-mail: advdilip@gmail.com

Israel: Will occupy buffer zone inside Syria



Israeli soldiers in armoured vehicles before crossing security fence at Golan Heights. Pic: AP

Jerusalem: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that Israeli forces will stay in a buffer zone on the Syrian border, seized after the ouster of Syria's President Bashar Assad, until another arrangement is in place "that ensures Israel's security."

Netanyahu made the comments from the summit of Mount Hermon — the highest peak in the area — inside Syria, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the border with the Israel-held Golan Heights.

It appeared to be the first time a sitting Israeli leader had set foot that far into Syria. Netanyahu said he had been on the same mountaintop 53 years ago as a soldier, but the summit's importance to Israel's security has only increased given recent events.

Israel seized a swath of southern Syria along the border with the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights days after Assad was ousted by rebels last week.

Israel's capture of the buffer zone, a roughly 400-square-kilometer (155-square-mile) demilitarised area in Syrian territory, has sparked condemnation, with critics accusing Israel of violating a 1974 ceasefire and possibly exploiting the chaos in Syria in the wake of Assad's ouster to make a land grab.

"We will stay ... until another arrangement is found that ensures Israel's security," said Netanyahu who had traveled to the buffer zone on Tuesday with Defense Minister Israel Katz. Katz said he instructed the Israeli military to quickly establish a presence, including fortifications, in anticipation of what could be an extended stay in the area. "The summit of the Hermon is the eyes of the state of Israel to identify our enemies who are nearby and far away," he said.

An Israeli military official, who spoke on condi-

tion of anonymity in line with military regulations, said there is no plan to evacuate the Syrians living in villages within the buffer zone.

The buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was created by the U.N. after the 1973 Mideast war. A U.N. force of about 1,100 troops had patrolled the area since then.

A U.N. spokesman said Tuesday that the advance of Israeli troops, however long it lasts, violates the 1974 deal that set up the buffer zone.

That agreement "needs to be respected, and occupation is occupation, whether it lasts a week, a month or a year, it remains occupation," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

There was no immediate comment from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the insurgent group that led the ouster of Assad, or from Arab states.

Israel still controls the Golan Heights, which it

captured from Syria during the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed — a move not recognized by most of the international community. Mount Hermon's summit is divided between the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights, Lebanon, and Syria. Only the United States recognizes Israel's control of the Golan Heights.

With Assad gone, a top U.N. official said Tuesday that militant leaders who have taken over Syria have committed to "an ambitious scaling-up of vital humanitarian support" for millions in desperate need of food and other aid.

The leader of the insurgent HTS — Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Mohammed al-Golani — and the country's caretaker prime minister, Mohammed al-Bashir, pledged to support the movement of aid from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and other neighboring countries "for as long as humanitarian operations are required," said Tom Fletcher.

Fletcher, who heads the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, known as OCHA, spoke to the U.N. Security Council members from Damascus via a video link.

Germany said Tuesday that its diplomats had also met with insurgent leaders to discuss Syria's political transition and "our expectations regarding the protection of minorities and women's rights."



Palestinian children wait in line for food at a distribution center in Deir al-Balah of Gaza Strip. Pic: AP

Pak issues 84 visas to Indians

New Delhi: The Pakistan high commission on Wednesday said it issued 84 visas to Indian pilgrims to visit the Shree Katas Raj temples in Punjab province's Chakwal district. The group has been given visas to visit the Katas Raj temples from December 19 to 25.

The temples are also known as Qila Katas. It is a complex of several Hindu temples connected to one another by walkways. Under the provision of a bilateral protocol on visits to religious shrines, Sikh and Hindu pilgrims from India visit Pakistan every year. Pakistani pilgrims also visit India every year under the protocol.

Pakistan's Charge d'Affaires Saad Ahmad Warraich wished the pilgrims a "spiritually rewarding" and a "fulfilling" journey. "Under the Pakistan-India protocol on visits to religious shrines of 1974, each year thousands of Sikh and Hindu pilgrims visit to attend various religious festivals. -PTI

Trump: Will impose reciprocal tax on India

Washington: US President-elect Donald Trump has reiterated his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for the "high tariff" imposed by New Delhi on import of certain American products.

"Reciprocal. If they tax us, we tax them the same

amount. They tax us. We tax them. And they tax us. Almost in all cases, they're taxing us, and we haven't been taxing them," Trump told reporters on Monday.

He made the remarks while responding to a question on a potential trade agreement with China. Trump said India and Bra-

zil were among countries that impose high tariffs on certain US products.

"The word reciprocal is important because if somebody charges us — India, we don't have to talk about our own — if India charges us 100 per cent, do we charge them nothing for the same? You know, they send in a bicycle and we send them a bicycle. They charge us 100 and 200. India charges a lot. Brazil charges a lot. If they want to charge us, that's fine, but we're going to charge them the same thing," Trump said at a news conference at Mar-a-Lago.

Responding to a question, his Commerce Secretary pick Howard Lutnick said "reciprocity" is something that is going to be a key topic for the Trump administration. "How you treat us is how you should expect to be treated," he said. -PTI

We have to wait and watch: India

New Delhi: Imposing reciprocal duties violates global trade rules but one has to follow a "wait and watch" approach to US President-elect Donald Trump's remarks on imposing reciprocal tariffs, a senior official said on Wednesday. US President-elect Donald Trump has said that India charges a lot of tariffs, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the import of certain American products.

Trump made these remarks on Tuesday and also said that India and Brazil were among countries that impose high tariffs on certain US products.

"It will be very difficult to decipher from one or two sentences which Mr Trump makes but if I understand from what he was saying, one will have to wait and watch and see," Director General of Foreign Trade (DGF) Santosh Kumar Sarangi said at CII's export competitiveness event. -PTI

N Korean troops killed in Russia-Ukraine battle

Washington: A couple hundred North Korean troops fighting alongside Russian forces against Ukraine have been killed or wounded during battle in the Kursk border region, a senior military official said Tuesday.

The official didn't provide details on exactly how many have been killed, but said the North Korean forces don't appear to be battle-hardened, which contributes to the number of casualties they've had. The official was providing the first significant estimate of North Korean casualties, which comes several weeks after Ukraine announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost three-year war.

The White House and Pentagon on Monday confirmed that the North Korean forces have been battling on the front lines in largely infantry positions. They have been fighting with Russian units and, in some cases, independently around Kursk.

The casualty disclosure comes as the Biden administration is pressing to send as much military aid as

possible to Ukraine before President-elect Donald Trump takes over. But a senior defense official told reporters Tuesday that the Defense Department may not be able to send all of the remaining USD 5.6 billion in Pentagon weapons and equipment stocks intended for Ukraine before Jan. 20, when Trump is sworn in.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity to provide a U.S. assessment of the war.

According to the Pentagon, there is about USD 1.2 billion remaining in longer-term funding through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is used to pay for weapons contracts that would not be delivered for a year or more. The official said the administration anticipates releasing all that money by the end of this year.

The USD 5.6 billion is in presidential drawdown authority (PDA), which allows the Pentagon to take weapons off the shelves and send them quickly to Ukraine. That is a substantial amount of money, the defense official said, and while the U.S. will continue to provide weapons to Ukraine until Jan. 20, there

may well be funds remaining that will be available for the incoming Trump administration to spend.

Trump has talked about getting some type of negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia, creating some unease about whether he will provide Ukraine all the weapons funding approved by Congress.

Ukrainian and Russian forces have been in a fierce battle around Kursk, and the official said Russia has been able to take back about 20 per cent of the territory gained there by Kyiv. They said it will be possible for Ukraine to hold ground there for some time, but it will depend on how the rest of the fight is going, including the long-range strikes that Kyiv has been launching.

The officials said it's not clear if Moscow has asked Pyongyang for additional forces, but acknowledged that Russia continues to lose as many as 1,200 troops a day in casualties — including both dead and wounded. But so far, Russia has been able to generate enough forces to replace them. -AP



Kaeros No. 2 rocket, a Japanese commercial rocket carrying a set of satellites is launched from Space Port Kii in Kushimoto town. Pic: AP

Doval holds talks with Chinese FM

Beijing: India, China Special Representatives' talks being held after a gap of five years. The last meeting was held in 2019 in Delhi.

The talks began at 10 am China time. The two officials were expected to discuss a range of issues to rebuild the bilateral ties following the October 21 agreement of disengagement and patrolling in eastern Ladakh between the two countries.

On Tuesday, China expressed optimism about the talks saying that it is ready to work with India to

implement the commitments based on the common understandings reached between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping during their meeting at Kazan in Russia on the sidelines of the BRICS summit on October 24.

China is prepared to settle differences with sincerity, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a media briefing here when asked about the Special Representatives (SR) talks. -PTI

Indian-American crowned Miss India USA 2024

Washington: Chennai-born Indian American teenager Caitlin Sandra Neil has been crowned Miss India USA 2024 at the annual pageant held in New Jersey.

Caitlin, 19, is a second-year student at University of California, Davis. "I want to leave a positive lasting impact on my community and focus on women's empowerment and literacy," Caitlin was quoted as saying in a media release.

Born in Chennai, India, Caitlin has been living in the USA for the last 14 years. She wants to be a web designer and also pursue a modelling and acting career.

Sanskriti Sharma from Illinois was crowned Mrs. India USA and Arshita Kathpalia from Washington won the Miss Teen India USA in the pageant organised by the India Festival Committee (IFC).

Rijul Maini, Miss India USA 2023 and Sneha Nambiar, Mrs India USA 2023 crowned Caitlin Sandra Neil and Sanskriti Sharma, respectively. -PTI



Nirali Desia of Illinois and Manini Patel of New Jersey were declared first runner-up and second runner-up in the Miss India USA competition.

Sapna Mishra of Virginia and Chinmayee Ayachit from Connecticut were named first and second runner-up in the Mrs India USA competition. Dhriti Patel of Rhode Island and Sonali Sharma were declared as first runner-up and second runner-up in the teen category, the press release said.

Forty-seven contestants from 25 states participated in the three categories of the pageant. -PTI

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"We are confident that we'll be handing the bilateral relationship off to the incoming Trump team at its strongest possible apex. It was inspirational to see the manifestations of engagement between US and India in endeavours associated with space."



Kurt Campbell, Deputy Secretary of State, US

Good news for US H-1B visa aspirants

Washington: A month ahead of transferring power, the outgoing Biden administration announced a new set of rules on Tuesday for H-1B visas that makes it easier for American companies to hire foreign workers with special skill sets and facilitate a smoother transition from F-1 student visas to H-1B visas.

The rule, announced by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), aims to provide greater flexibility to employers and workers by modernising the definition and criteria for

special positions and non-profit and governmental research organisations that are exempt from the annual statutory limit on H-1B visas.

The changes will help U.S. employers hire as per their business needs and remain competitive in the global marketplace, an official release said.

Donald Trump will be the next president of the US after a swearing-in ceremony on January 20.

The rule also extends certain flexibilities for students on an F-1 visa seeking

to change their status to H-1B to avoid disruptions in lawful status and employment authorisation for students holding F-1 visas.

It also will allow US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to process applications more quickly for most individuals who had previously been approved for an H-1B visa.

It will also allow H-1B visa holders with a controlling interest in the petitioning organisation to be eligible for H-1B status subject to reasonable conditions. The latest move by the out-

going Biden administration builds on its previous efforts to ensure that the labour needs of American businesses are met to reduce undue burden on employers while adhering to all U.S. worker protections under the law.

"American businesses rely on the H-1B visa programme for the recruitment of highly-skilled talent, benefiting communities across the country," said Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas.

"These improvements to the programme provide

employers with greater flexibility to hire global talent, boost our economic competitiveness, and allow highly skilled workers to continue to advance American innovation," he said.

The changes made in the final rule will ensure that U.S. employers can hire highly skilled workers they need to grow and innovate while enhancing the integrity of the programme, he said.

The DHS said the rule also strengthens the programme's integrity by codifying USCIS' authority to

conduct inspections and impose penalties for failure to comply; requiring that the employer must establish that it has a bona fide position in a speciality occupation available for the worker as of the requested start date.

It clarifies that the Labor Condition Application must support and properly correspond with the H-1B petition; and requires that the petitioner have a legal presence and be subject to legal processes in the courts of the United States. -PTI

EDITORIAL

OBC Oversight

The expansion of the new Mahayuti cabinet led by CM Devendra Fadnavis has set tongues wagging. The conspicuous exclusion of OBC leaders like Chhagan Bhujbal, Sudhir Mungantiwar and Sanjay Kunte has sparked speculation of the move being an emerging risk for the Mahayuti coalition, especially BJP.

To offset this, the ruling coalition has done a 'strategic recalibration' by inducting the BJP's Pankaja Munde and her cousin, the NCP's Dhananjay Munde in the cabinet. However, this prompts the question whether the Munde cousins can fill the leadership vacuum among Maharashtra's OBCs. The BJP's dominance in Maharashtra has always been a delicate juggling act — satisfying the aspirations of its urban, upper-caste core while appeasing its growing OBC voter base. It was Pankaja's father, the late Gopinath Munde, whose deft welding of the diffuse OBC communities made it a potent vote-bank.

The last 18 months have seen Chhagan Bhujbal, a stalwart member of the ruling Ajit Pawar's NCP, emerge as the most vocal voice of the OBCs by taking a firm stance against Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange-Patil. Bhujbal, projecting himself as an 'elder' leader concerned with safeguarding the OBC community's reservation pie against Maratha encroachment, had managed to gather the fragmented OBC castes and sub-castes during his rallies to counter Jarange-Patil's insistent demand of securing a Maratha quota under the OBC category. Bhujbal's stance had resulted in strains within the erstwhile cabinet under CM Eknath Shinde.

Now, Bhujbal has cried foul over his exclusion in 'Mahayuti 2.0,' hinting that his advocacy for OBCs may have cost him a cabinet berth. While Bhujbal's outspokenness may have made him a liability in Ajit Pawar's calculations, sidelining him underscores the Mahayuti's tenuous position in balancing the demands of its OBC base and the politically assertive Marathas.

In this context, the induction of the Munde siblings, Pankaja and Dhananjay, appears a calculated move. The BJP and the Mahayuti seek to tap into Munde's enduring appeal among OBC voters. Yet, the choice is fraught with challenges. Pankaja Munde, estranged from the BJP's leadership for years, has been a vocal critic of Devendra Fadnavis, even blaming him for her 2019 electoral defeat. Though all that is water under the bridge, the Munde family's chequered political record and internal dynamics could undermine the Mahayuti's efforts to project them as the new torchbearers of OBC politics.

Complicating matters further is the simmering tension between Maharashtra's OBCs and Marathas. Jarange-Patil, who remained quiescent during the Assembly polls, has again threatened to go on a collective strike from January 25 next year, intensifying his demand for Marathas to be included under the OBC category.

In Maharashtra's fractious politics, where caste and coalitions shape outcomes, the BJP's gamble hinges on the Munde cousins rising as credible OBC leaders. Whether this youthful shift strengthens the BJP or backfires remains uncertain.

PUBLIC INTEREST

Development Insured: Women Take the Lead with Modi's Bima Sakhi Yojana



By
Abhijit Mulye

India's economy cannot thrive while half its population remains sidelined. At just 20 percent, the female labour-force participation rate in India ranks among the lowest in the world, far below the global average and China's formidable 40 percent. Women contribute a meagre 17 percent to India's GDP—less than half the global norm. Estimates suggest that getting more women into the workforce could boost India's annual GDP growth rate by 1.5 percentage points, pushing it to a robust 9 percent.

Enter the *Bima Sakhi Yojana* (BSY), launched last week by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Panipat which aims to empower women economically by training them as LIC insurance agents. Targeting those aged 18 to 70 who have completed their Secondary School Certification (SSC), the scheme offers training, a stipend for the first three years, and commissions based on performance. Participants, addressed as *Bima Sakhis*, are expected to not only earn sustainable incomes but also expand insurance penetration in India's underserved regions.

The model cleverly merges social uplift with business objectives. LIC, India's state-owned insurance giant, benefits by tapping into unbanked rural markets, while *Bima Sakhis* are equipped to become self-sufficient earners and entrepreneurs. Modi's government has set an ambitious goal: enrolling 100,000 *Bima Sakhis* within a year. If successful, the program could quietly reshape India's rural economy while nudging more wom-

en into the workforce.

The *Bima Sakhi Yojana* builds on a growing ecosystem of women-focused schemes rolled out by Modi's government over the past decade. Initiatives like *Bank Sakhi* (banking facilitators), *Krishi Sakhi* (agriculture advisors), and *Pashu Sakhi* (livestock specialists) have sought to train women for roles traditionally dominated by men. Programs such as Lakhpati Didi aim to push rural women towards million-rupee incomes. The BSY fits neatly into this broader strategy of promoting financial inclusion through grassroots entrepreneurship.

At its heart, the scheme leverages microfinance principles—tools that have long been touted as game-changers for economic inclusion. Microfinance provides credit, insurance, and savings opportunities to the unbanked, often through self-help groups (SHGs). LIC, which already runs micro-insurance products like Jeevan Mangal and Jeevan Deep, has seen evidence that such models can drive socio-economic empowerment. A study on LIC-linked SHGs found improvements in the financial standing and decision-making abilities of women beneficiaries.

The BSY, however, ups the ante. Beyond offering women a safety net, it positions them as active participants in financial markets. *Bima Sakhis* will earn commissions on policies sold — Rs.48,000 annually, by government estimates — alongside a monthly stipend of Rs. 7,000 in year one, tapering to Rs. 5,000 by year three. For most rural households, these earnings are transformative. LIC agents typically bring home Rs. 15,000 a month, or Rs. 1.75 lakh annually — a figure that could double household incomes in India's poorest regions.

Yet the program is not without its challenges. Microfinance initiatives often struggle with patchy implementation, low financial literacy, and poor uptake in rural areas. Women — particularly in deeply patriarchal regions — may face resistance to stepping into public-facing, commission-based roles. A stipend of Rs.



7,000, whilst meaningful, may not be sufficient to attract candidates unless backed by robust awareness campaigns. Then there is the matter of sustainability. The scheme relies heavily on entrepreneurial success as women must renew policies and attract clients to maintain their income. Without adequate support, training, and mentorship, some *Bima Sakhis* may falter, leaving them with little more than a short-term stipend. Financial inclusion schemes are only as effective as their execution, and India's track record on rural outreach remains uneven.

Nonetheless, BSY's design shows promise. By positioning women as insurance agents, the scheme shifts the narrative around empowerment: rural women are no longer just beneficiaries of government programs but active contributors to the economy. The initiative also has far-reaching implications for India's insurance sector, where penetration remains abysmally low, especially in rural areas.

Prime Minister Modi has hailed BSY as a step towards gender parity. At the scheme's launch, he pointed to India's growing female workforce in other fields

— fighter pilots, police officers, and corporate leaders—as evidence of changing tides. "When women are empowered, new doors of opportunity open for the country," he declared. He highlighted the 1,200 women-led cooperatives already operating in agriculture and allied sectors, a quiet revolution that BSY seeks to amplify.

The scheme's success will hinge on its ability to tackle entrenched gender biases and ensure steady, sustainable incomes for participants. If Modi's goal of recruiting 100,000 *Bima Sakhis* materializes, the program could inspire similar models of financial inclusion across sectors.

India has miles to go before its gender gap begins to narrow. But as *Bima Sakhis* begin knocking on doors across rural India, selling policies and promoting financial literacy, they may just nudge the country's economy and society towards a more balanced, inclusive future.

By turning rural women into breadwinners, the scheme certainly has the potential to transform households and communities. If executed well, India's *Bima Sakhis* could become not just agents of insurance but agents of change.

The Long Road Ahead: Foreign Motivations in a Post-Assad Syria

AS THE HOUSE OF ASSAD COLLAPSES, SYRIA'S GREAT TRAGEDY COULD BE THAT IT IS NOT LEFT TO REBUILD IN PEACE



By
Shoumojit Banerjee

In the final chapter of the sixth and final volume (1788-89) of Edward Gibbon's monumental and endlessly quotable 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,' we come upon a famous fragment: "...as all that is human must retrograde if it does not advance." The inimitable Gibbon says this in regard to a wonderfully melancholic description of the decayed splendour of the western Roman Empire given by the 15th century Italian Renaissance scholar Poggius (Poggio Bracciolini), nine centuries after Rome's fall.

Gibbon's famous remark could well apply to Syria — once a cradle of civilization and home to the great cities of Palmyra and Damascus which today stares at an anxious future following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime.

History offers little optimism. The fall of a dictatorship, especially in a country as fractious and fragile as Syria, often unleashes chaos instead of peace. For more than a decade, Syria was a battlefield, a proxy war where foreign powers advanced their own agendas on Syrian soil. Today, those foreign powers are still deeply embedded, their ambitions unchanged.

Amid the fog of war, Israel and Turkey stand out as the two most significant foreign powers poised to shape Syria's future. But their motivations in the post-Assad era are not

just about land grabs but long-standing geopolitical calculations.

For Turkey, the demise of the Assad regime presents an opportunity to reshape the Middle East's map, with a particular focus on its Kurdish adversaries. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long seen the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a predominantly Kurdish militia—as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkey. With Assad's fall, Turkey now seeks to capitalize on the vacuum by securing the Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria. Already, Turkey has expanded its footprint in Syria through its proxy forces, the Syrian National Army (SNA), seizing Kurdish-held towns like Tel Rifaat and Manbij. Erdoğan's ultimate goal is to diminish Kurdish influence in the region, especially in areas like Kobane, which became a symbol of Kurdish resistance against the Islamic State (IS).

But Turkey's ambitions extend beyond just eliminating Kurdish autonomy. Erdoğan also seeks to create a 'safe zone' along Turkey's southern border to house over three million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey. The idea of sending refugees back to Syria, under Turkey's terms, serves a dual purpose: alleviating pressure on Turkey's overstretched resources while also stabilizing the region under Turkey's control. However, this strategy risks further alienating the Kurdish population, who are already facing a perilous future as they find themselves increasingly isolated. The potential for renewed conflict with Kurdish forces, backed by their former U.S. allies, looms large.

Turkey's involvement also has broader geopolitical ramifications. With its sights set on the Kurdish issue, Erdoğan's government is posi-



THE BROKEN CRESCENT
PART 4

tioning itself as the dominant player in post-Assad Syria. But this ambition will almost certainly inflame tensions with Iran, which has deepened its presence in Syria through various militias supporting Assad's regime. As Ankara's military presence expands, the risk of a direct confrontation between Turkey and Iranian-backed forces becomes ever more real.

While Turkey's focus is on reshaping the northern part of Syria, Israel's priorities are centered on its own security, particularly the need to limit Iran's influence in the region. For years, Israel has waged a covert war against Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, targeting weap-

ons convoys, missile sites, and Iranian-backed militias. With Assad's regime on the brink of collapse, Israel sees an opportunity to further diminish Iran's foothold in Syria and prevent the country from becoming an Iranian launchpad for future attacks.

Israel's involvement is rooted in a deeply entrenched history of conflict with Syria, dating back to the founding of the Jewish state in 1948.

The two countries fought multiple wars — the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War — each one focused on territorial disputes and geopolitical dominance. The most significant of these is the Golan Heights, the stra-

tegically vital plateau seized by Israel from Syria in the 1967 war. The Golan is a commanding position overlooking northern Israel and Syria's main water sources, making it a military and economic prize. Though Israel formally annexed the Golan Heights in 1981, the territory remains at the heart of Syria's ongoing territorial claims. Despite numerous peace talks, including the 1990s negotiations brokered by the United States, Syria has never relinquished its demand for the Golan's return.

Since the collapse of Assad's regime, Israel has seized the opportunity to further solidify its control over the Golan, taking advantage of Syria's weakened state. Israel's air force has waged a shadow war against Iran's military presence in Syria for years, targeting weapons convoys, missile sites, and Iranian-backed militias operating in the region. The fall of Assad presents Israel with a chance to eliminate what it perceives as an Iranian foothold in Syria, a move that could fundamentally alter the balance of power in the region. Israel's top priority in the coming days will be to ensure that Syria does not become a launchpad for future Iranian attacks.

Israel's approach is already playing out in the southern parts of Syria, where Israeli forces have conducted airstrikes to target Iranian positions. These strikes are part of a broader effort to limit the ability of Iranian-backed militias to establish a permanent presence in Syria. As the situation in Syria becomes more volatile, Israel's security calculations are likely to drive it toward even deeper involvement, further complicating any prospects for peace or stability in the region.

Syria, with its rich strategic value, has long been a prize for foreign powers eager to exert influence over the region. While Turkey and Israel are

the most prominent players today, they are hardly alone in their ambitions. Iran, Russia and the United States all continue to stake claims in Syria, each with their own objectives.

Russia, despite its challenges in Ukraine, remains deeply committed to its military presence in Syria, particularly along the Mediterranean coast. The Russian military bases in Syria serve as a foothold for Russian influence in the region and provide Moscow with a critical outlet to project power in the Middle East. Even as Russia's global influence wanes, its presence in Syria remains a key pillar of its foreign policy, and it will not easily relinquish control of its assets.

For the United States, its involvement in Syria is shaped by a mix of counterterrorism objectives and a desire to limit Iran's expansion. Washington's commitment to supporting Kurdish forces in the fight against IS has come into direct conflict with Turkey's interests, resulting in an uneasy and often contradictory relationship. As U.S. troops remain stationed in northeastern Syria, their presence serves as a check on both Turkish ambitions and Iranian influence. However, with the potential shift in leadership in the U.S. after the 2024 elections, the future of America's role in Syria remains uncertain. If the U.S. withdraws, the balance of power in Syria will likely tip in favour of Turkey and Iran, with significant consequences for the region.

As Assad disappears from the stage, Libya's descent into warlordism after Gaddafi, or Iraq's sectarian implosion after Saddam Hussein, is deeply etched into the Arab world's collective memory. With Syria's own mosaic of tribes, religions, and foreign interests, the same forces threaten to pull it apart once again.



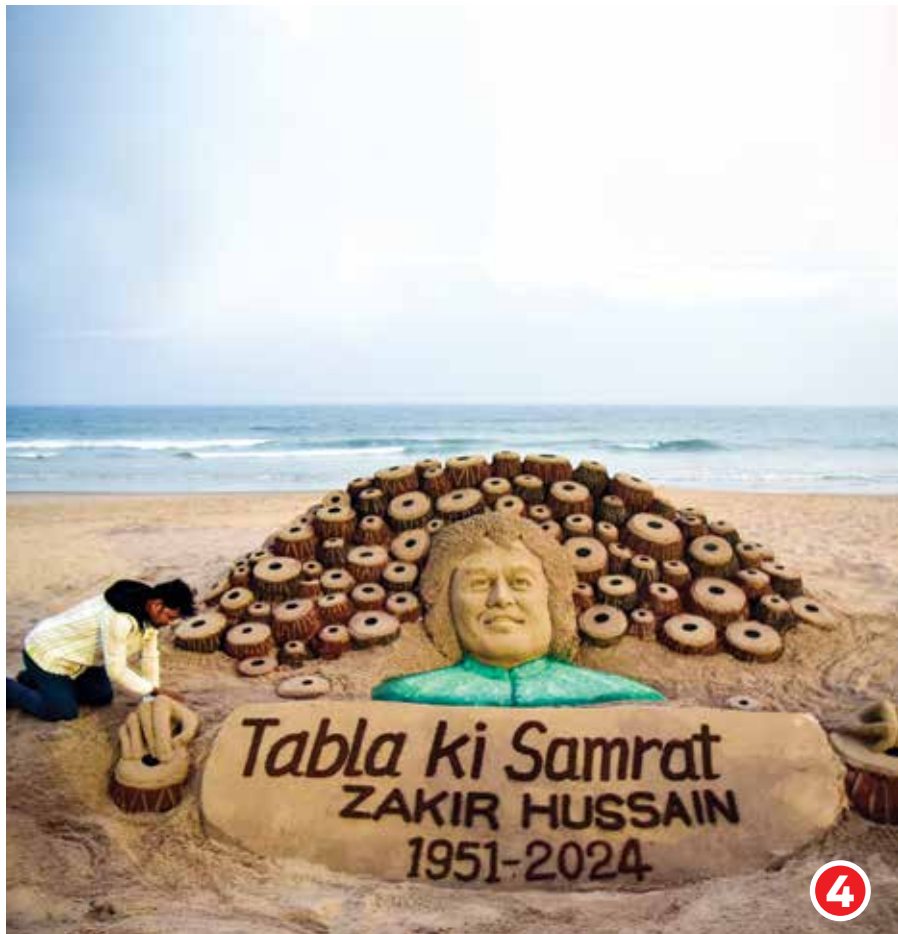
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KALEIDOSCOPE

1. Street vendors sit around a bonfire to warm themselves during a cold winter evening in Amritsar on Tuesday.
2. Bollywood actor Divya Dutta poses for pictures during the screening of the Indo-French joint-production 'Girls Will Be Girls'.
3. A person dressed as Santa Claus rows a boat as seagulls fly past, near Causeway of Tapi River in Surat of Gujarat.
4. Sand artist Sudarsan Pattnaik creates a sand sculpture to pay tribute to tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain at Puri beach in Odisha.
5. Visitors at Serendipity Art Festival's 'Multiply' curated by Thukral and Tagra in Panaji, Goa.

All Pictures PTI, AP



5

EXPLAINERS

Why Is Israel Interested In the Golan Heights?



By Ruddhi Phadke

It's been not just two weeks since the Syrian rebels sprung into a spree of excitement and joy of freedom with celebratory tunes being heard across the streets of Damascus, after former President Bashar-Al-Assad fled the country over night. Unfortunately, the celebration was indeed short lived as the territory became exposed to the world. Especially Israel, a country that has been struggling to have a clear territorial outline since decades and has been mired by conflicts, tussle and bloody battles with all the neighbouring Arab settlements.

The conflict that Israel has been constantly putting up a strong face to dates back to 1917 when the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, which expressed support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1920, the British Mandate for Palestine was established, which allowed for Jewish immigration and the development of Jewish settlements. Between 1920 and 1947, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine, leading to tensions with the Arab population. Needless to say, the tensions are still simmering even today.

The moment Assad fled from Syria, there were two major concerns that haunted Israel. One being the biggest opportunity to strengthen presence in a land that has got freed up for all and second, to protect the Israeli population that has now turned vulnerable to the Syrian rebels. Over night Netanyahu approved of a plan to launch attacks in Syria, especially the Golan Heights

region that acts as a buffer zone between Israel and Syria.

Israel vs Syria over Golan Heights

The Golan Heights has been a focal point of contention between Israel and Syria since the mid-20th century. Israeli occupation in Golan heights dates back to 1967 when Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria during the Six-Day War. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Syria attempted to take back the Golan Heights but failed to do so. In 1974 the UN jumped into picture and deployed peacekeeping forces Golan Heights after Israel and Syria signed an armistice. The Security Council established the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in 1974 as an attempt to maintain a ceasefire and creating a ceasefire buffer zone in the area. As of April, 1,274 UN personnel are deployed in the Golan Heights. Later in 1981, came Israel's move to take over the Golan Heights inviting worldwide condemnation. Golan Heights region continues to remain under Israeli occupation, with approximately 20,000 Israeli settlers living in the region. However, this move has not been internationally recognized, except by the United States under the Trump administration in 2019. The region is considered to be a disputed territory by the international community, with the United Nations recognizing it as part of Syria. The dispute over the Golan Heights remains a major point of contention between Israel and Syria, with periodic clashes and tensions reported in the region.

Strategic relevance

The Golan Heights region is of immense strategic interest to Israel making the reasons behind Netanyahu's move to approve of the action by Israeli Defence Forces to occupy the territory even more obvious. Netanyahu himself entered Syrian territory on Tuesday claiming it to be a security tour of the buffer zone seized by Israel. The strategically located region provides Israel with a military vantage

point and control over the surrounding region. It is a plateau overlooking northern Israel, providing a significant military advantage. It is a critical source of water for Israel as it contains the headwaters of the Jordan River and feeds into the Sea of Galilee, an essential water reservoir. Control of the Golan Heights helps Israel secure its water supply. Needless to say, it facilitates Israel to detect and prevent potential attacks or infiltration in the backdrop of ongoing conflicts and the presence of groups like Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias. Besides, the region has fertile land suitable for agriculture and is home to vineyards, orchards, and cattle ranches, and has strong potential for tourism. Lastly, potential oil and natural gas reserves in the region add more strategic value to Golan Heights. Above all, religious and ethnic sentiments cannot be overlooked when it comes to human beings. Golan Heights has ancient Jewish connections, with archaeological sites and evidence of Jewish settlement during biblical times.

Security threat

While Israel's motive behind entering Golan heights is clear in the region's strategic importance, another factor being current chaotic situation in Syria. An entire Syria has fallen into the hands of rebel forces primarily comprised of Kurdish forces supported by Turkey. Left over Assad's Syrian army is fast changing its loyalty to the stronger rebel group. This chaotic condition resulting out of political vacuum has created a possibility of revival of ISIS or Islamic hardliners in Syria. This has alarmed Israel and hence it has taken the preemptive action to destroy Syria's arms depots & bases completely. It was an easy cakewalk for Israel as there was no opposing or defending force, with dismantling of Syrian army & rebel forces still lingering in rejoicing phase of Assad's ouster. This eliminated possibility of rebels attacking Israel using modern arms supplied by Russia.

Where Turkey Stands As Syrian Government Falls?

Syrian refugees across Turkey jubilantly welcomed the downfall of Bashar Assad's government Sunday, with many embracing the chance to return to their homeland.

Large crowds waving Syrian and Turkish flags gathered in the main square of Kilis, a border city in southern Turkey.

In Hatay province, which also lies on the Syrian frontier, many said it was time to go home after years of living in Turkey, which hosts some 3 million Syrians.

"We are free now, everyone should return to their homeland," Mahmud Esma told the DHA news agency at the Cilvegözü border gate.

Turkey, which shares a 911-kilometre-long frontier with Syria, has been a main backer of opposition groups aiming to topple Assad since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.

While Turkish officials have strongly rejected claims of any involvement, observers believe that the offensive, which appears to be aligned with Turkey's long-time goals, could not have gone ahead without Ankara's consent.

It has allowed Turkey, through its Syrian proxy the Syrian National Army, to push back against Kurdish forces in Syria allied to its sworn enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK.

The jihadi group that spearheaded the 10-day march on Damascus, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, is listed as a terrorist organisation by Ankara. However, Turkey has operated alongside it for years in northern Syria and is believed to exert significant influence over the group.

Here's a look at Turkey's position, how Assad's removal could serve the country's objectives and possible risks ahead:

Ties with Syria

Turkey has stated its support for Syria's territorial integrity: the last thing it wants is a Kurdish-controlled autonomous region on its border or a fresh exodus of refugees created by instability.

Ankara has conducted several incursions into Syria since 2016 with



the aim of pushing back the Islamic State group or Kurdish militants and creating a buffer zone along its border, and now controls a stretch of territory in northern Syria.

Turkey was previously involved in diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict between the regime and insurgents, including holding talks with Assad's main supporters, Russia and Iran.

Recently Ankara sought a reconciliation with Assad in order to mitigate the threat to Turkey from Kurdish militias and ensure the safe return of refugees. Assad rebuffed Turkey's overtures.

Where Turkey stands

Turkish officials have strongly rejected claims of involvement in the anti-government offensive, stating opposition to developments that increase instability in the region.

"All statements that claim Turkey provoked or that Turkey supported this are untrue. They are all lies," Omer Celik, spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party, said this week.

Analysts say, however, that the rebel offensive would have been impossible without a green light from Turkey.

Turkish officials say Ankara stalled the offensive for months. Opposition forces finally went ahead with the assault after the Syrian government attacked opposition-held areas, violating agreements between Russia, Iran and Turkey to de-escalate

late the conflict.

The offensive was initially meant to be limited, the officials said, but expanded after Syrian government forces began retreating from their positions.

Speaking in Qatar on Sunday, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Turkey "attaches great importance for the national unity, stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and the well-being of the Syrian people."

"Thereby millions of Syrians who were forced to leave their homes can return to their land."

Risks ahead

The Syrian government's fall could pose several risks to Turkey, including sending a new wave of refugees toward the Turkish border if chaos ensues.

Sinan Ulgen, director of the Istanbul-based Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, said that first and foremost Turkey wants a stable Syria.

"The first risk that Turkey would want to avoid that all cost is the territorial disintegration of Syria, with different power structures vying to obtain autonomy on their territory," he said, highlighting the PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units, the YPG, in northeast Syria.

A stable period of transition would allow Turkey to channel economic aid to Syria to create the conditions for the return of refugees, Ulgen added.

Some analysts have suggested that the rebel offensive could stoke tensions with Syria's backers, Iran and Russia. Turkey, a NATO member, has sought to balance close relations with both Ukraine and Russia in the face of Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbour.

Ulgen noted that Russia has not accused Turkey of stoking the insurgents' advance. He said this was due in part to not wanting Turkey to "switch to become more anti-Russia" in its stance on the war in Ukraine.

"I don't think that this creates a breaking point in Turkey-Russian relations."

