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## IMPORTANT ONE LINERS

## NATIONAL

**POCSO Case Can't Be Quashed If Child Victim Turns Hostile**

**In the News:** The Delhi High Court upheld the 20-year jail term of a stepfather convicted of raping his minor stepdaughter under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, observing that guilt under the POCSO Act cannot be dismissed merely because the victim turned hostile, particularly when scientific evidence is available. The court emphasized that child victims are often defenceless against family pressure and may retract testimony due to fear of losing shelter, financial stability, and the desire to preserve the family unit, especially when the accused is a caregiver or breadwinner.

**Key Points:**

- **Case Background - Stepfather Convicted of Child Rape:** The Delhi High Court dismissed the appeal of a stepfather challenging his conviction and 20-year sentence under Section 6 of the POCSO Act for raping his minor stepdaughter. The victim girl was less than 12 years old at the time of the incident which occurred in March 2016. The victim alleged that she was sexually assaulted by her stepfather while she was sleeping at midnight. She later informed her mother about the incident and a complaint was lodged by the police. The trial court convicted the stepfather under Section 6 of the POCSO Act and sentenced him to 20 years rigorous imprisonment.
- **Victim and Family Turned Hostile During Trial:** During the criminal trial proceedings, the victim, her mother, and her sister all retracted their earlier statements and turned hostile, no longer supporting the prosecution's case. The accused stepfather argued that the sole eyewitness to the alleged incident—the victim herself—had not supported the prosecution's case during trial. He contended that since the victim and other witnesses had turned hostile, the prosecution case had collapsed and his conviction should be set aside. This presented a significant challenge to the prosecution's case, as the primary witnesses were no longer cooperating.
- **Understanding Why Victims Turn Hostile - Court's Analysis:** The Delhi High Court provided deep insight into the psychological and social pressures that cause child victims to turn hostile, particularly in incest and intra-family sexual abuse cases. The court observed: "A child who is confronted with the prospect of condemning someone who provides her shelter and financial stability is undoubtedly faced with a grave conflict. The child's instinct for survival coupled with the fear of ostracization and the desire to preserve the family unit may compel the victim to retract from the truth."
- **POCSO Act Provisions - Sections 29 and 30 Presumptions:** The court relied on the statutory presumptions created under the POCSO Act to protect child victims. Section 29 of the POCSO Act creates a presumption as to culpability when certain physical evidence is found. Section 30 of the POCSO Act creates a presumption of guilt in certain circumstances, shifting the burden of proof to the accused. These provisions recognize that child victims are particularly vulnerable and may not be able to provide consistent testimony due to trauma, intimidation, or other factors. The presumptions ensure that cases can proceed based on scientific evidence and initial statements even when victims become hostile during trial.
- **Legislative Safeguards - Section 19(5) of POCSO Act:** The court highlighted that the legislature has specifically recognized the vulnerability of child sexual abuse victims and provided protective measures. Section 19(5) of the POCSO Act specifically obligates the Special Juvenile Police Unit or local police to refer children who are victims of sexual offences to shelter homes and to make immediate arrangements for their care and protection. This provision aims to remove child victims from potentially coercive family environments and provide them with safe accommodation and support during investigation and trial.
- **Special Provision for Incest Cases:** The court specifically noted that model guidelines mandate special measures for cases involving incest or intra-family sexual abuse. It is mandated that support persons should conduct regular home visits to the child victim and submit monthly reports to the Committee regarding the child's well-being and safety. In incest cases specifically, the support person shall assist the child and the family in finding alternate residences, recognizing that victims cannot safely remain in the same home as the perpetrator. This acknowledges the unique challenges faced by victims when the accused is a family member and primary caregiver.

**Bombay High Court Bars Civilian Awards as Name Prefixes**

**In the News:** The Bombay High Court reiterated that India's civilian awards—including Bharat Ratna, Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan, and Padma Shri—are not titles and cannot be used as prefixes or suffixes to the names of awardees. Justice Somasekhar

Sundaresan issued this ruling while hearing a writ petition involving Padma Shri awardee Dr. Sharad Moreshwar Hardiker, emphasizing strict compliance with the 1995 Supreme Court Constitution Bench judgment that settled this legal position.

#### Key Points:

- **Court Ruling:** Justice Somasekhar Sundaresan of the Bombay High Court, presiding over a single-judge bench on December 24, 2025, clarified that civilian awards such as Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan, and Bharat Ratna are not official titles and must not be attached to recipients' names as prefixes or suffixes in official documents and legal proceedings.
- **Case Background:** The ruling was made during proceedings in a writ petition where one party was listed as "Padma Shri Dr. Sharad M. Hardiker & Ors." The court took exception to this naming convention and directed that the award designation be struck from the case records, stating that such usage lacks legal basis and is constitutionally impermissible.
- **1995 Supreme Court Precedent:** The Bombay High Court relied on the landmark Constitution Bench judgment delivered on December 15, 1995, in *Balaji Raghavan v. Union of India*. The five-judge Constitution Bench (comprising Chief Justice A.M. Ahmadi, Justice Kuldeep Singh, Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy, Justice N.P. Singh, and Justice S. Saghir Ahmad) had categorically held that national awards such as Bharat Ratna and Padma Awards "are not titles under Article 18 of the Constitution of India."
- **Article 18 of the Constitution:** Article 18(1) of the Indian Constitution states: "No title, not being a military or academic distinction, shall be conferred by the State." The provision was incorporated to abolish the British practice of conferring titles of nobility and to prevent the creation of distinct classes of citizens based on hereditary privileges or social hierarchy.
- **Article 141 Binding Effect:** Justice Sundaresan emphasized that under Article 141 of the Constitution, "the law declared by the Supreme Court shall be binding on all courts within the territory of India." The judge stressed that strict compliance with the 1995 Supreme Court ruling is mandatory and all courts and litigants are expected to ensure compliance in all future filings.
- **Historical Context:** The civilian awards were temporarily suspended twice in their history—from July 1977 to January 1980, and from August 1992 to December 1995. The second suspension occurred when Public Interest Litigations were filed in the Kerala High Court (by Balaji Raghavan on February 13, 1992) and Madhya Pradesh High Court (by Satya Pal Anand on August 24, 1992), challenging the constitutional validity of these awards as "titles" under Article 18(1).
- **Nature of Civilian Awards:** Padma Awards are announced annually on the eve of Republic Day in three categories: Padma Vibhushan (for exceptional and distinguished service), Padma Bhushan (distinguished service of higher order), and Padma Shri (distinguished service). The Bharat Ratna is India's highest civilian honor. The award statutes explicitly state that "the award does not amount to a title and cannot be used as a suffix or prefix to the awardees' name."

#### Govt's Green Panel Clears Dulhasti Stage-II Hydel Power Project

**In the News:** The Ministry of Environment's Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) on hydel projects approved the 260-megawatt Dulhasti Stage-II hydropower project on the Chenab River in Jammu and Kashmir's Kishtwar district. The clearance, granted during the committee's 45th meeting, comes in the backdrop of India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan following the Pahalgam terror attack in April 2025, paving the way for accelerated hydroelectric development in the Indus basin.

#### Key Points:

- **Project Approval:** The Expert Appraisal Committee on hydel projects accorded environmental clearance to the 260 MW Dulhasti Stage-II hydropower project during its 45th meeting held in December 2025. The approval enables the government to float construction tenders for this run-of-the-river project.
- **Project Cost and Location:** The project is estimated to cost over Rs 3,200 crore and will be constructed on the Chenab River in Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir. It is designed as a run-of-the-river scheme, which means it will generate power without significantly storing water.
- **Extension of Existing Facility:** Dulhasti Stage-II is an extension of the existing 390 MW Dulhasti Stage-I Hydro Electric Project (Dulhasti Power Station), which has been successfully operating since its commissioning in 2007 by National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Limited (NHPC).
- **Indus Waters Treaty Context:** The committee noted that while the project's parameters were originally planned in accordance with the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, the treaty stands suspended effective from April 23, 2025. Under the treaty, Pakistan had rights over the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab rivers, while India had rights over the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej rivers.

- **Suspension Following Pahalgam Attack:** India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan following the deadly Pahalgam terror attack in April 2025. This suspension has enabled India to pursue hydroelectric projects on rivers that were previously subject to treaty restrictions.
- **Accelerated Hydropower Development:** With the treaty now in abeyance, the Centre is pushing ahead with several hydroelectric projects in the Indus basin, including Sawalkote, Ratle, Bursar, Pakal Dul, Kwar, Kiru, and Kirthai I and II projects, marking a significant shift in India's water resource management strategy in the region.

### RPREX 2025 Regional Pollution Response Exercise Conducts By Indian Coast Guard

**In the News:** The Indian Coast Guard conducted the Regional Level Pollution Response Exercise (RPREX-2025) off the Mumbai coast to strengthen India's maritime environmental protection capabilities. The exercise, held on December 26, 2025, followed a two-phase approach with a planning conference on December 18, 2025, aimed at testing and validating the preparedness of all stakeholders in combating major oil spill incidents in the Arabian Sea.

#### Key Points:

- **Exercise Overview:** The Indian Coast Guard conducted RPREX-2025, a Regional Level Pollution Response Exercise, off the Mumbai coast on December 26, 2025 (Friday). The exercise was designed to test preparedness, coordination, and response effectiveness of all stakeholders involved in managing marine pollution incidents in accordance with the National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan (NOSDCP).
- **Two-Phase Approach:** The exercise followed a structured two-phase methodology. The first phase included a planning conference held on December 18, 2025, featuring technical lectures and a tabletop exercise to coordinate strategy among stakeholders. The second phase comprised a full-scale live sea exercise conducted on December 26, 2025, to test hardware, personnel, and real-time communication systems.
- **ICG's Nodal Role:** The Indian Coast Guard has been designated as the Central Coordinating Authority for coordinating oil spill response in Indian waters and undertaking oil spill prevention and control. The successful conduct of RPREX-2025 validated the National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan (NOSDCP), which provides the national framework for responding to oil spill emergencies in Indian waters.

### Why Supreme Court stayed Delhi HC order on Unnao rape convict Kuldeep Sengar

**In the News:** The Supreme Court of India stayed the Delhi High Court's order that had suspended the life sentence and granted bail to former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar, convicted in the 2017 Unnao rape case. This stay ensures that Sengar remains in jail while legal questions raised by the CBI's appeal are examined by the apex court.

#### Key Points:

- **Delhi High Court Order:** The Delhi High Court suspended Sengar's life sentence in the 2017 Unnao rape conviction and granted him bail pending appeal, citing that he had served significant time in custody.
- **Supreme Court Stay:** The Supreme Court stayed the High Court's order on December 29, 2025, effectively halting Sengar's release and ensuring he remains in jail while the case is heard further.
- **Reason for Supreme Court Intervention:** The apex court intervened after the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) challenged the High Court's order, highlighting serious legal questions, including interpretation of the law relating to whether an elected representative qualifies as a "public servant" under the POCSO Act and the implications for aggravated offences.
- **"Public Servant" Legal Issue:** A key point raised by the CBI is that the High Court's reasoning—that Sengar was not a public servant for the purposes of aggravated charges under the POCSO Act—could create anomalies in law (e.g., less powerful public servants defined in law could be treated more harshly than an elected lawmaker). The Supreme Court flagged this concern as part of its rationale for staying the order.
- **Continued Custody:** While the bail order was stayed, the Supreme Court noted that Sengar is already in custody in another case (related to the custodial death of the rape survivor's father), meaning he will remain in jail regardless of the interim stay.
- **Victim and Public Response:** The Unnao rape survivor and civil society welcomed the Supreme Court's decision to stay the High Court order, viewing it as a reinforcement of justice and due process in a high-profile sexual violence case.

### INSV Kaundinya Begins Maiden Voyage to Oman



**In the News:** The Indian Naval Sailing Vessel (INSV) Kaundinya embarked on its historic maiden overseas voyage from Porbandar, Gujarat, to Muscat, Oman. The vessel, built using ancient Indian stitched-ship techniques dating back to the 5th century CE, was formally flagged off by Vice Admiral Krishna Swaminathan, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Western Naval Command, in the presence of Issa Saleh Al Shibani, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to India. This wind-powered expedition retraces ancient maritime trade routes connecting India with the Indian Ocean world, marking a major milestone in India's efforts to revive, understand, and celebrate its ancient maritime heritage.

**Key Points:**

- **Voyage Launch - December 29, 2025:** INSV Kaundinya sailed on its maiden overseas voyage on Monday, December 29, 2025, from Porbandar, Gujarat, to Muscat, capital of the Sultanate of Oman. The vessel was formally flagged off by Vice Admiral Krishna Swaminathan, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Naval Command, in the august presence of His Excellency Issa Saleh Al Shibani, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to India, along with senior officers of the Indian Navy and distinguished guests.
- **Journey Details and Duration:** The voyage covers a distance of approximately 1,400 kilometers across the Arabian Sea from Gujarat's western coast to Oman. The vessel is expected to reach Muscat after an estimated 8-10 days to two weeks (15 days) at sea, depending on wind and weather conditions.
- **Design Inspiration - 5th Century CE Ajanta Caves:** The ship's design is based on a 5th-century CE merchant ship depicted in the murals of Cave 17 of the Ajanta Caves complex in Maharashtra. Inspired by historical sources and iconographic evidence from these ancient paintings, the vessel represents India's rich legacy of indigenous shipbuilding, seamanship, and oceanic navigation.
- **Tripartite Project Partnership:** The stitched ship project was initiated through a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in July 2023 between the Indian Ministry of Culture, the Indian Navy, and Goa-based shipbuilding company M/s Hodi Innovations (OPC) Private Limited, as part of India's efforts to rediscover and revive indigenous knowledge systems. The vessel was built by traditional artisans under the guidance of master shipwright Babu Sankaran from Kerala and builder Prathamesh Dandekar.
- **Cultural and Symbolic Features:** The newly inducted vessel incorporates several culturally significant features evoking India's rich maritime traditions. The sails display motifs of the Gandabherunda (a two-headed eagle associated with the ancient Kadamba dynasty) and the Sun. The bow bears a sculpted Simha Yali (a mythical lion figure from Indian iconography). A symbolic Harappan-style stone anchor adorns the deck, connecting to India's ancient Indus Valley Civilization. Each element evokes the rich maritime traditions and cultural heritage of ancient India, creating a tangible link to the country's oceanic past.
- **Naming After Legendary Mariner Kaundinya:** The vessel is named after Kaundinya (also known as Kaundinya I), a legendary first-century Indian mariner who is believed to have sailed from India across the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia in ancient times. Kaundinya married Queen Soma of Funan (which comprised most of present-day Cambodia) and became the second king of the Funan kingdom.
- **Crew Composition and Leadership:** Commander Vikas Sheoran will skipper the vessel as its Commanding Officer. Commander Y. Hemant Kumar, who has been associated with the project since its conceptualization, will serve as the Officer-in-Charge of the expedition. The crew comprises four officers and thirteen naval sailors (total 17 personnel).
- **Strengthening India-Oman Bilateral Relations:** The arrival of INSV Kaundinya in Muscat will serve as a powerful symbol of the enduring bonds of friendship, mutual trust, and respect that have linked the two maritime nations for centuries. The voyage highlights deep historical connections between Gujarat and Oman specifically, reflecting a legacy of cooperation that continues to the present day.

**8th Pay Commission Effective Jan 01, 2026: Will Central Govt Employees' Salary Really Increase?**

**In the News:** The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the formation of the 8th Central Pay Commission in January 2025, with recommendations expected to take effect from January 1, 2026. The commission will review and revise pay, pension, and service conditions for approximately 50 lakh (4.8-5 million) central government employees and 65-68 lakh pensioners, keeping fiscal prudence and economic conditions in view. The commission, comprising a Chairperson, one part-time member, and a Member-Secretary, has 18 months to submit its report after being formally constituted.

**Key Points:**

- **Cabinet Approval and Formation:** The Union Cabinet approved the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the 8th Central Pay Commission in January 2025, with official notifications released around November 2025. Information and Broadcasting

Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw confirmed that the government would soon appoint a chairperson and two members to the panel. The commission will be constituted as a temporary body to review and recommend comprehensive revisions in the pay structure, pensions, and service conditions of central government employees.

- **Official Effective Date vs Actual Implementation:** While January 1, 2026 is the official effective date, there is a critical distinction between when the commission "takes effect" and when employees actually receive revised salaries. The 7th Pay Commission is scheduled to conclude on December 31, 2025, making January 1, 2026 the natural start date for the 8th Pay Commission. However, the commission needs 18 months from its formal constitution to submit its report, followed by government review, Cabinet approval, and implementation.
- **Beneficiaries - Scale and Scope:** The 8th Pay Commission will benefit approximately 48.62 to 50 lakh central government employees, including defence personnel, and around 65 to 67.85 lakh pensioners, including those from defence services. This totals over 1 crore (10 million+) individuals whose financial lives will be directly impacted. The employee base includes all categories: Group D (entry-level staff), Group C (staff up to ministerial level), Group B (section officers to under secretaries), and Group A officers (deputy secretaries to cabinet secretary).
- **Pay Matrix and Level Structure - 18 Levels:** Central government employees are classified into 18 pay levels, which form the foundation of the pay matrix: **Level 1:** Entry-level or Group D staff (current minimum Rs. 18,000). **Levels 2-9:** Group C employees (staff to ministerial positions). **Levels 10-12:** Group B officers (section officers to under secretaries). **Levels 13-18:** Group A officers (deputy secretaries to cabinet secretary at Level 18). Each level has multiple stages representing incremental progression over years of service. The 8th Pay Commission will revise the pay matrix for all 18 levels, with the quantum of increase varying by level. Historically, lower levels receive proportionally higher increases to address income disparity, while higher levels receive larger absolute increases but lower percentage gains. The complete revised pay matrix will be announced only after the commission submits its report and the government approves recommendations.
- **Comparison with Previous Pay Commissions: 7th Pay Commission (2016):** Fitment factor 2.57, minimum salary Rs. 18,000, implemented after ~18 months, 10-year cycle. **6th Pay Commission (2006):** Fitment factor 1.86, 10-year cycle. **Historical Pattern:** Each commission typically increases the fitment factor, reflecting cumulative inflation and economic growth over the decade. The 10-year cycle is well-established, with 1996, 2006, 2016, and now 2026 following this pattern. The 8th Pay Commission is expected to continue this tradition, though fiscal pressures may result in moderation compared to 7th CPC's generous 2.57 factor. The government's approach balances maintaining parity with inflation and purchasing power while ensuring long-term fiscal sustainability.

### Suspension of Sentence in Child Protection Cases

**In the News:** The Supreme Court of India stayed the Delhi High Court's December 23, 2025 order that had suspended the life sentence of former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the 2017 Unnao rape case involving a minor. A three-judge vacation bench led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, along with Justices J.K. Maheshwari and Augustine George Masih, found that the matter raised substantial questions of law regarding sentencing under the Indian Penal Code and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.

#### Key Points:

- **Background of Unnao Rape Case (2017):** In June 2017, a minor girl (aged 15 years and 10 months) from Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, was allegedly kidnapped and raped by Kuldeep Singh Sengar, then a sitting four-time MLA from the Bharatiya Janata Party. The victim's family faced severe intimidation, including the custodial death of her father in 2018. The case gained national attention only after sustained public protests by the victim, including an attempted self-immolation outside the Chief Minister's residence. The Allahabad High Court observed in 2018 that "the law and order machinery and government officials were directly in league and under the influence of Kuldeep Singh."
- **Delhi High Court's December 23, 2025 Decision:** A Division Bench of Justices Subramonium Prasad and Harish Vaidyanathan Shankar suspended Sengar's life sentence and granted him conditional bail. The High Court held that the POCSO Act does not define "public servant" and that Section 2(2) of the Act expressly imports definitions from the Indian Penal Code. Since Section 21 of the IPC does not include a Member of the Legislative Assembly within the definition of "public servant," the court ruled that aggravated offence provisions under Section 5(c) of POCSO and Section 376(2) of IPC were not applicable.
- **High Court's Reasoning on Sentence Duration:** The Delhi High Court noted that Sengar had already undergone 7 years and 5 months of incarceration as of November 30, 2025. Applying the law as it stood before the 2019 amendment to POCSO (which introduced a minimum sentence of 20 years), the court held that the minimum punishment under Section 4 of POCSO

was 7 years, which Sengar had already served. The court stated it would not examine the merits of whether Sengar could be held guilty under Section 3 of POCSO (simple penetrative sexual assault) at the interim stage.

- **Strict Bail Conditions Imposed by High Court:** The Delhi High Court ordered Sengar's release on bail subject to strict conditions including: furnishing a personal bond of ₹15 lakh with three sureties, staying at least five kilometers away from the survivor's residence in Delhi, refraining from threatening the survivor or her mother, and weekly reporting requirements. The court warned that any violation would result in cancellation of bail.
- **Section 42A of POCSO Act - Overriding Effect:** Solicitor General Mehta drew attention to Section 42A of the POCSO Act, which states that provisions of the Act shall have overriding effect over other laws in case of any inconsistency. He argued that the Delhi High Court did not deal with this provision at all, which was a critical oversight in interpreting the application of "public servant" definition.
- **Section 5(c) of POCSO Act - Aggravated Offences:** Section 5 of the POCSO Act lists circumstances under which penetrative sexual assault of a child becomes aggravated penetrative sexual assault, including when committed by: a public servant, police officer, member of armed forces or security forces, management or staff of hospital, jail staff, or any person in a position of trust or authority. Aggravated penetrative sexual assault under Section 6 attracts a minimum punishment of 20 years in jail (after 2019 amendment) and can extend to life imprisonment or death penalty.
- **Jamanlal v. State of Rajasthan (2025) Precedent:** In a recent 2025 judgment, the Supreme Court held that "a few lacunae or loopholes here or there in the case of the prosecution cannot be a ground to suspend the sentence, and that the Court has to arrive at a prima facie satisfaction that the conviction may not be sustainable." This principle was violated by the Delhi High Court which granted suspension based solely on the non-applicability of Section 5(c) without examining the sustainability of conviction under Section 3/4 POCSO.
- **Section 376(2)(i) IPC - Rape by Person in Position of Authority:** The Supreme Court questioned whether the Delhi High Court had adequately examined Sengar's conviction under Section 376(2)(i) of the IPC, which relates to rape by a person in a position of authority. This provision, separate from the "public servant" category, also carries enhanced punishment and may apply to legislators exercising dominance over constituents.

### Rakesh Aggarwal Gets Additional Charge as NIA Chief

**In the News:** The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) assigned the additional charge of Director General of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to senior IPS officer Rakesh Aggarwal following the premature repatriation of the incumbent DG, Sadanand Vasant Date, to his parent Maharashtra cadre. As per an Office Memorandum (OM) issued by the MHA on Monday, Aggarwal, a 1994-batch Indian Police Service officer of Himachal Pradesh cadre currently serving as Special Director General of the NIA, will hold the additional charge of NIA chief until the appointment of a regular incumbent or until further orders, whichever is earlier.

#### Key Points:

- **Additional Charge Assignment - December 30, 2025:** The Union Ministry of Home Affairs issued an Office Memorandum (OM) on Monday, December 30, 2025, assigning the additional charge of the National Investigation Agency Director General to Rakesh Aggarwal, IPS (HP:1994), Special Director General, NIA.
- **Appointment as Special Director General - September 29, 2025:** Rakesh Aggarwal was appointed as the Special Director General of the NIA on September 29, 2025, on an in-situ basis. An in-situ appointment means that his existing position as Additional Director General (ADG) was temporarily upgraded to the Special Director General rank without requiring him to move to a different post. The in-situ promotion recognized Aggarwal's contributions and capabilities while providing the NIA with additional leadership capacity at the senior management level.
- **Experience in High-Profile Cases:** During his tenure at the NIA, Rakesh Aggarwal has been associated with several high-profile cases involving terror financing, radicalization networks, and cross-border linkages. His work has encompassed investigations into cases related to Islamic State (ISIS) recruitment modules, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) networks, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) operations, and other terrorist organizations operating in and around India. He has expertise in tracking terror funding channels, including hawala networks and cryptocurrency-based financing.
- **About the National Investigation Agency (NIA):** The National Investigation Agency is India's premier counter-terrorism investigation agency, established under the National Investigation Agency Act, 2008, in response to the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks. The agency was constituted to combat terrorism and other national security threats in a coordinated and effective manner. NIA has jurisdiction across India and can investigate terrorism-related offenses, including those committed outside India (subject to international treaties and agreements). The agency's headquarters is located in New



Delhi, with regional offices in major cities including Mumbai, Kolkata, Guwahati, Kochi, Hyderabad, Jammu, Lucknow, and Raipur. NIA investigates cases related to: terrorism, bomb blasts, terror financing, radicalization and recruitment by terrorist organizations, cross-border terrorism, narco-terrorism, fake currency circulation, cyber terrorism, and offenses under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

### Cabinet Clears 6 Lane Nashik Solapur Akkalkot Greenfield Corridor

**In the News:** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the construction of a 6-lane greenfield access-controlled Nashik-Solapur-Akkalkot Corridor in Maharashtra on BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer) Toll Mode. The 374-kilometer corridor, with a total capital cost of ₹19,142 crore, will provide connectivity to critical regional cities such as Nashik, Ahilyanagar, and Solapur, with onward connectivity to Kurnool.

#### Key Points:

- **Cabinet Approval - December 31, 2025:** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the construction of the 6-lane greenfield access-controlled Nashik-Solapur-Akkalkot Corridor on Wednesday, December 31, 2025. The project will be developed on Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) Toll mode, ensuring private sector participation in financing, construction, and operation. This approval is part of a larger infrastructure push, with the Cabinet simultaneously approving widening and strengthening of NH-326 in Odisha, bringing the total investment in both projects to approximately ₹20,668 crore.
- **Regional Connectivity Enhancement:** The corridor will provide critical connectivity to major regional cities including Nashik, Ahilyanagar (formerly Ahmednagar), Solapur, and Akkalkot, with onward connectivity extending to Kurnool in neighboring Andhra Pradesh. This multi-city linkage addresses a significant gap in Maharashtra's highway infrastructure, connecting industrial and agricultural centers that have historically lacked efficient high-speed road connectivity. The project will enhance basic infrastructure across Nashik, Ahilyanagar, Dharashiv, and Solapur districts, contributing to overall economic development of these regions. The corridor creates a strategic east-west connectivity spine across Maharashtra, linking the state's western industrial belt with eastern agricultural regions.
- **Integration with Major Expressways:** The greenfield corridor is strategically designed to connect with multiple major highways and expressways, creating a comprehensive integrated transport network. The corridor will link to: (1) **Delhi-Mumbai Expressway** near the Vadhawan Port interchange, providing access to India's longest expressway and the upcoming deep-water Vadhawan Port, (2) **Agra-Mumbai Corridor** at Nashik, at the junction with NH-60 at Adegaon, enabling north-south connectivity, and (3) **Samruddhi Mahamarg** (Maharashtra Samruddhi Expressway) at Pangri near Nashik, connecting to Maharashtra's flagship 701-km expressway linking Mumbai and Nagpur. These strategic linkages position the corridor as a crucial connectivity hub integrating multiple transportation corridors.
- **PM Gatishakti National Master Plan Integration:** The project represents a significant step to facilitate integrated transport infrastructure development under the PM Gatishakti National Master Plan principle. PM Gatishakti is India's national master plan for multi-modal connectivity infrastructure, launched in October 2021, which aims to break departmental silos and bring 16 ministries together for integrated planning and coordinated implementation of infrastructure connectivity projects.
- **West Coast to East Coast Connectivity:** The proposed corridor will provide through connectivity from the west coast to the east coast of India, serving as a critical east-west transportation artery. From the Chennai Port end on the east coast, 4-lane corridors are already in progress from Chennai to Hasapur (Maharashtra border) via Tiruvallur, Renigunta, Kadapa, and Kurnool, covering 700 kilometers.
- **Pune-Nashik Expressway Component:** The Nashik-Talegaon Dighe portion of the corridor also addresses the long-standing requirement for development of the Pune-Nashik Expressway, as identified by the National Industrial Corridor Development Corporation (NICDC) as part of a proposed new expressway being undertaken by the State Government of Maharashtra.

### Assam Constitutes 8th State Pay Commission

**In the News:** Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced that Assam will become the first state in India to constitute the 8th Pay Commission following the Centre's formation of the 8th Central Pay Commission. The state's 8th Pay Commission will be headed by former Additional Chief Secretary Subhas Chandra Das and will undertake a comprehensive revision of the pay structure of state government employees. The announcement, made during an interaction with mediapersons in Guwahati,



marks a significant step towards employee welfare and progressive governance, with the Assam government last having constituted a pay commission in 2015 to review salaries, allowances, and service conditions.

**Key Points:**

- **Historic Announcement - January 2, 2026:** Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma announced on Thursday, January 2, 2026 (the first working day of the New Year), that Assam will become the first state in the country to constitute the 8th Pay Commission following the Centre's formation of the 8th Central Pay Commission. The announcement comes at a time when state government employees across India are watching closely to see how states will align their pay structures with the anticipated Central Pay Commission recommendations.
- **Chairperson - Subhas Chandra Das:** The Assam 8th Pay Commission will be headed by former Additional Chief Secretary Subhas Chandra Das (also referred to as Subhash Das in some sources), a highly respected bureaucrat with extensive experience in state administration. As former Additional Chief Secretary, Das served in one of the highest positions in the state's bureaucratic hierarchy, bringing deep knowledge of government operations, financial management, and administrative systems to the commission.
- **Previous Pay Commission - 2015:** The Assam government last constituted a pay commission in 2015, approximately 11 years ago, to review the pay structure, emoluments, and service conditions of state government employees. The gap of over a decade between pay commissions is typical in India, with both Central and state governments generally constituting pay commissions every 10 years. During this intervening period, employees typically receive periodic Dearness Allowance (DA) increases to compensate for inflation, but the basic pay structure remains unchanged.
- **Alignment with Central 8th Pay Commission:** The timing of Assam's announcement is strategic, coming shortly after the Centre's constitution of the 8th Central Pay Commission. The Central Government approved the formation of the 8th Pay Commission in January 2025, with its Terms of Reference (ToR) officially notified on November 3, 2025. The provisions of the Central 8th Pay Commission are scheduled to come into effect from January 1, 2026, with recommendations expected within 18 months of constitution.

**Goa Announces Third District Kushavati**

**In the News:** Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant announced the formation of the state's third district, named Kushavati, marking a major administrative reorganization in the coastal state. The revenue department officially notified the creation of this new district on December 31, 2025, which will comprise four talukas currently part of South Goa district.

**Key Points:**

- **District Formation and Naming:** The new district has been named Kushavati after the Kushavati River that flows through the region. Chief Minister Sawant explained that the name reflects the region's ancient geographical heritage and cultural identity, as the river has historically shaped the life, livelihoods, and ecology of these talukas over centuries.
- **Territorial Composition:** Kushavati district will comprise four talukas—Dharbandora, Quepem, Sanguem, and Canacona—which are currently part of South Goa district. With this reorganization, Goa's administrative structure will now consist of three districts: North Goa district (headquarters in Panaji) with five talukas (Pernem, Bardez, Bicholim, Sattari, and Tiswadi), South Goa district (headquarters in Margao) with three talukas (Ponda, Salcete, and Mormugao), and the new Kushavati district.
- **District Headquarters and Connectivity:** Quepem town has been designated as the headquarters of Kushavati district. To address concerns about accessibility from distant talukas like Canacona and Dharbandora, the government has announced plans for special bus services and improved road connectivity, including development of a district road connecting Dharbandora to Quepem and wider roads through the Ghat area to enable Canacona residents to reach Quepem within 30 minutes.
- **Aspirational District Status:** Chief Minister Sawant announced that Kushavati will be designated as an Aspirational District under the central government's Aspirational Districts Programme. This status makes the district eligible for special central funding, with approximately 120 aspirational districts across India receiving additional funding of about ₹15 crore each, primarily for infrastructure development. The district has a 27 per cent tribal population.
- **Institutional Development:** With the creation of the new district, a separate Zilla Panchayat (ZP) will be established, and the process will include the appointment of a third ZP Adhyaksh (President). The government will seek additional special funds from the Centre to build infrastructure in Kushavati district.

**Centre Appoints New Chief Justices for Kerala, Patna and Meghalaya High Courts**

**In the News:** The Union Government of India notified a set of key judicial appointments and transfers appointing new Chief Justices for the Kerala, Patna, and Meghalaya High Courts, acting on recommendations from the Supreme Court Collegium headed by the Chief Justice of India.

**Key Points:**

- **Judicial Reshuffle Notified:** The Ministry of Law and Justice issued notifications transferring and appointing top judicial posts at the Kerala, Patna and Meghalaya High Courts under Articles 217 and 222 of the Constitution.
- **Kerala High Court:** Justice Soumen Sen, previously Chief Justice of the Meghalaya High Court, has been transferred and appointed as the Chief Justice of the Kerala High Court. He will take charge following the retirement of incumbent CJ Nitin Madhukar Jamdar on January 9, 2026.
- **Meghalaya High Court:** Upon Justice Sen's transfer, Justice Revati Prashant Mohite Dere — a senior judge of the Bombay High Court — was appointed Chief Justice of the Meghalaya High Court.
- **Patna High Court:** Justice Sangam Kumar Sahoo, a judge of the Orissa High Court, has been appointed Chief Justice of the Patna High Court and will assume office from the date he takes charge.
- **Collegium Recommendation:** These appointments and transfer followed the recommendations of the Supreme Court Collegium made in its December 18, 2025 meeting.
- **Constitutional Basis:** The President of India issued the notifications under Article 217 (appointment of Chief Justices) and Article 222 (transfer of judges), after consultation with the Chief Justice of India.

**MoSPI Unveils New Logo and Mascot to Promote Data-Driven Governance**

**In the News:** The Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI) unveiled a new logo and mascot “सांख्यिकी (Sankhyiki)” to promote data-driven governance, strengthen public outreach, and highlight the role of official statistics in India's national development.

**Key Points:**

- **Launch of New Identity:** MoSPI introduced a redesigned logo and mascot as part of efforts to modernise its institutional image and amplify the significance of data in governance and nation-building.
- **Theme – “Data for Development”:** The logo is built around the theme “Data for Development”, emphasising how reliable statistics support evidence-based policymaking across key sectors.
- **Symbolism of the Logo:** The logo incorporates the Ashoka Chakra symbolising truth, transparency, and good governance; the rupee (₹) symbol highlighting the role of statistics in economic planning and policy; and numerical elements and an upward growth bar reflecting modern data systems and progress.
- **Colour Significance:** Its colour palette—saffron, white, green, and deep blue—draws from national values such as growth, sustainability, stability, and knowledge, reinforcing trust in official statistics.
- **Mascot “सांख्यिकी”:** MoSPI's mascot “सांख्यिकी (Sankhyiki)” is a friendly, citizen-centric character designed to make statistics more accessible, understandable, and engaging for the public.
- **Role of Mascot in Outreach:** The mascot will be used in national surveys, awareness drives, educational content, digital platforms, and public events to encourage wider participation, simplify complex concepts, and build trust in official data.

**Surat Set to Become India's First Slum-Free City**

**In the News:** Gujarat government announced that Surat is emerging as a frontrunner to become India's first major slum-free city with a population exceeding 7 million, with the slum-dwelling population drastically reduced from 38% in 2006 to just about 5% at present, as revealed by state spokesperson minister Jitu Vaghani after a cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel.

**Key Points:**

- **Historic Achievement and Scale:** Surat, known as India's "Diamond Capital" and a major textile hub, is set to become India's first large-scale slum-free city with an estimated population between 70-80 lakh (7-8 million). While Chandigarh already holds the distinction of being India's first slum-free city, its population is only around 10 lakh (1 million), making Surat's achievement far more significant in terms of scale and complexity.
- **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) Implementation:** A key driver of Surat's progress has been the effective implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Housing for All) along with state housing policies. Under the In-Situ

Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) component of PMAY-Urban, the central government provides a slum rehabilitation grant averaging ₹1 lakh per house.

- **Housing Schemes Utilized:** Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) has utilized various housing schemes including VAMBAY (Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana), JnNURM (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission), Mukhya Mantri GRUH Yojana (state housing scheme), and PMAY-Urban. By 2014, SMC had already constructed around 55,000 EWS (Economically Weaker Section) and LIG (Low Income Group) housing units with huge investment.
- **Three-Pronged Approach:** Surat Municipal Corporation employed three different approaches to address slums: (1) Slum Upgradation - improving existing slum infrastructure with basic amenities like water, sanitation, electricity while residents remain in place; (2) Slum Redevelopment - demolishing existing slum structures and constructing new multi-storey residential buildings on the same land with modern infrastructure; (3) Slum Rehabilitation - relocating slum dwellers to newly constructed housing in different locations (earlier used for sites like Kosad and Bhestan areas) while ensuring social cohesion and access to employment.
- **Gujarat Town Planning and Urban Development (GTPUD) Act, 1976:** SMC follows provisions to reserve EWS (Economically Weaker Section) housing land in Town Planning (TP) Schemes through implementation of The GTPUD Act, 1976. This legislative framework ensures that urban development plans mandatorily include affordable housing components, preventing the future formation of slums.

### NATGRID-NPR Integration

**In the News:** The Ministry of Home Affairs announced the integration of the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) with the National Population Register (NPR), allowing authorised law enforcement and intelligence agencies real-time access to family-level demographic data of nearly 119 crore residents, marking a significant expansion of India's intelligence and investigation architecture for counter-terrorism and criminal investigations.

#### Key Points:

- **Integration Announcement:** The Ministry of Home Affairs informed the Lok Sabha on December 9, 2025, that NATGRID has been linked with the National Population Register (NPR), which contains family-wise demographic details of approximately 119 crore (1.19 billion) Indian residents.
- **NATGRID Background and Origins:** The National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) is a secure, integrated intelligence-sharing platform designed to help law enforcement and security agencies access multiple government and private databases in real time for counter-terrorism and criminal investigations. NATGRID was conceived in 2009 in the aftermath of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks (2008) to overcome information silos among security agencies and enable faster, intelligence-led responses.
- **Operational Status and Funding:** NATGRID became operational in 2024 after years of development. The Cabinet Committee on Security approved the project with a total fund allocation of ₹3,400 crore (US\$402 million). The initial two phases were approved in 2011 and became operational by 2014 at a cost of ₹1,200 crore, with 10 user agencies and 21 service providers connected.
- **NPR Integration Details:** The National Population Register is a comprehensive database containing demographic and family-wise details of residents in India, first compiled during the 2011 Census and later updated in 2015 through door-to-door enumeration. NPR is prepared under the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003.
- **Gandiva Advanced Analytics Tool:** NATGRID employs an upgraded analytical tool called "Gandiva," which supports advanced capabilities including facial recognition, entity resolution (the process of identifying and linking records related to the same individual across multiple datasets), and multi-source data analysis.
- **Organised Crime Network Database (OCND):** An Organised Crime Network Database is being developed on NATGRID's IT platform to facilitate secure intelligence-sharing between the National Investigative Agency (NIA) and State Anti-Terror Squads (ATS).

## INTERNATIONAL

### Thailand and Cambodia agree to 'immediate' ceasefire: joint statement

**In the News:** On Thailand and Cambodia signed an immediate ceasefire agreement at the Prum-Ban Pak Kard International Point of Entry, ending 20 days of intense fighting along their disputed border that killed more than 100 people and displaced



over half a million civilians. The joint statement, signed by Thai Defence Minister Natthaphon Narkphanit and Cambodian Defence Minister Tea Seiha at the 3rd Special General Border Committee meeting, took effect at 12:00 noon local time (05:00 GMT) on December 27, 2025.

#### Key Points:

- **Immediate Ceasefire Implementation:** Both countries agreed to "an immediate ceasefire after the time of signature of this Joint Statement with effect from 12:00 hours noon (local time) on 27 December 2025." The ceasefire extends to "all types of weapons" and "attacks on civilians, civilian objects and infrastructures, and military objectives of either side, in all cases and all areas," ending the worst fighting between the Southeast Asian neighbors in years.
- **Troop Deployment Freeze:** The agreement stipulates that "both sides agree to maintain current troop deployments without further movement." Any reinforcement would heighten tensions and negatively affect long-term efforts to resolve the situation. The deal also prohibits violations of either side's airspace for military purposes and requires both parties to refrain from undertaking "provocative actions that may escalate tensions."
- **Duration and Scale of Recent Conflict:** The December 2025 fighting lasted 20 days, from December 7 to December 27, 2025, representing an escalation from earlier clashes. According to official reports, Thailand lost 26 soldiers and one civilian as direct result of combat since December 7, with an additional 44 civilian deaths reported from collateral effects. Cambodia reported 30 civilians killed and 90 injured, though official military casualty figures were not disclosed. Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from affected areas on both sides.
- **Historical Context - July 2025 Clashes:** The current conflict stems from earlier fighting that erupted on July 24, 2025, following a landmine incident on July 23 that injured five Thai soldiers. The July clashes lasted five days (July 24-28) across at least 12 border locations, involving gunfire, artillery, rockets, and Thai air strikes using F-16 fighter jets and Swedish-made Gripens. The July fighting left at least 48 people dead and displaced more than 300,000 civilians before a ceasefire was brokered on July 28, 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- **Root Cause - Territorial Dispute:** The conflict stems from territorial disputes along the neighbors' 817-kilometer (508-mile) border, where ancient temples are claimed by both sides, particularly the temples of Preah Vihear and Ta Muen Thom. The dispute has roots in ambiguities in boundary demarcations established under 1904 and 1907 agreements between the Kingdom of Siam (modern Thailand) and French Indochina, which included Cambodia. In 1962, the International Court of Justice ruled that the Temple of Preah Vihear belonged to Cambodia but left the status of surrounding land ambiguous.
- **U.S. Position and Trump's Role:** U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a statement welcoming the ceasefire and urging Cambodia and Thailand to "immediately honor this commitment and fully implement the terms of the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords." President Donald Trump had previously claimed credit for the July ceasefire, threatening to withhold trade privileges and impose 36% tariffs on exports unless both countries agreed to stop fighting. Trump spoke by phone with Thai and Cambodian prime ministers on December 12, 2025, though fighting continued afterward.
- **Regional and International Reactions:** Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim welcomed the agreement, stating it "reflects a shared recognition that restraint is required, above all in the interest of civilians." Japan's Press Secretary Toshihiro Kitamura said Tokyo "strongly hopes the ceasefire will be steadily implemented." The European Union thanked "ASEAN for playing a positive part" and called on both countries to implement the agreement "in good faith." UN human rights chief Volker Türk welcomed the ceasefire and hoped it would "pave the way for confidence building and peace."
- **ASEAN Observer Team Monitoring:** A team of observers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will monitor implementation of the agreement. The deal states that "both sides recognize the important role of ASEAN Observer Team (AOT) and agree to strengthen the roles of the AOT, in consultation with both the ASEAN Chair and the AOT, in verifying and ensuring the effective implementation of all the measures in this Joint Statement."

#### Myanmar Goes to Polls Amid Civil War and Humanitarian Crisis

**In the News:** Myanmar held the first phase of its general elections, the first vote in nearly five years since the military coup of February 2021. Polls opened across 102 of Myanmar's 330 townships amid a raging civil war, severe humanitarian crisis, and widespread international condemnation. The military junta, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, framed the multi-phased elections as a return to democracy, while critics, including the United Nations, denounced it as a "sham" designed to legitimize military rule. Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi remains imprisoned, her National League for Democracy (NLD) party has been dissolved, and more than half the country remains inaccessible due to ongoing conflict.

#### Key Points:



- **Election Schedule and Phases:** The general elections are being conducted in three phases spanning one month. The first phase took place on December 28, 2025, covering 102 townships. The second round of voting is scheduled for January 11, 2026, and the third phase on January 25, 2026. Altogether, voting will be held in 265 of Myanmar's 330 townships, meaning voting has been cancelled in 65 townships due to ongoing fighting and security concerns.
- **Background - February 2021 Military Coup:** The military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized power on February 1, 2021, overthrowing the democratically elected government led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup came just months after Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in the November 2020 general elections, securing 346 of 412 declared seats (73% of voters in 2020 cast ballots for parties that no longer exist).
- **Civil War Triggered by Coup:** The military's brutal crackdown on peaceful protests following the coup sent thousands of mostly young people into territory held by ethnic rebel groups in the jungles and hills of Myanmar's borderlands. There they formed "People's Defense Forces" (PDFs) dedicated to overthrowing the coup. Armed with limited and at times homemade weaponry, these PDFs initially surprised their opponents with their effectiveness, dragging the military into a bloody stalemate. The conflict escalated into a nationwide civil war involving a patchwork of ethnic armed groups and pro-democracy fighters battling the military for control across the hilly borderlands with Bangladesh, India, China, and Thailand, as well as the arid central plains.
- **Political Repression and Detentions:** According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), more than 22,000 people are currently detained for political offenses. Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's most popular politician and 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has been imprisoned since the coup. She has been convicted on multiple charges that international observers widely consider politically motivated, and remains isolated with limited access to family or legal counsel. Her son, Kim Aris, recently told Reuters he has no information about her condition, raising concerns about her health and safety.
- **Voting Restrictions and Accessibility:** Voting is taking place in only about one-third of Myanmar's 330 townships, with large areas inaccessible amid the raging civil war. Whole swaths of the country where voting will not take place include rebel-held areas (more than half the country according to some estimates) where ethnic armed groups and opposition militias maintain control. In northern Shan state alone, Myanmar's largest state, the military has recaptured only 11.3% of the territory it had lost, according to the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar think tank.
- **Electronic Voting Machines - First Time Use:** Election officials installed electronic voting machines (EVMs), which are being used for the first time in Myanmar's electoral history. The machines will not allow write-in candidates or spoiled ballots—a significant change from previous elections.
- **Expected Outcome - USDP Victory:** The ballot is dominated by parties perceived to be close to the military. More than 4,800 candidates from 57 parties are competing for seats in national and regional legislatures, but only six parties are competing nationwide with the possibility of forming a government. The military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by retired generals and fielding one-fifth of all candidates against severely diminished competition, is widely expected to emerge victorious.
- **Regional and Geopolitical Responses:** Responses to the election vary significantly by country. Western condemnation: The US, European nations, Japan, and Malaysia have denounced the election and cut foreign aid. The US has also ended visa protections for Myanmar citizens. Support from authoritarian allies: Russia, China, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand sent election observers. Russia and China have been two of Myanmar's biggest backers and have spoken favorably of the elections. India has also backed the electoral process.
- **Global Peace Index Rankings:** Myanmar ranks 153rd out of 163 countries on the Global Peace Index 2025, making it the least peaceful country in the Asia-Pacific region. Civilian casualties exceed 5,350 since 2021, including 2,414 deaths between April 2023 and June 2024 alone. The GPI 2025 identifies the Myanmar civil war as ranking alongside the South Sudan civil war, Syrian civil war, and Malian civil war in terms of conflict escalation factors. The collapse of governance, restricted civil liberties, and ongoing violence have created what analysts describe as "state failure" conditions.

### Jayshree Ullal Tops Hurun India Rich List 2025

**In the News:** Jayshree Ullal, President and CEO of Arista Networks, emerged as the wealthiest Indian-origin professional manager in the world, topping the Hurun India Rich List 2025 with an estimated net worth of ₹50,170 crore (\$5.7 billion). The achievement marks a significant milestone as Ullal surpasses prominent technology executives including Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and Google CEO Sundar Pichai, highlighting the growing global influence of Indian-origin leaders in the technology sector and the shift in wealth creation from consumer-facing platforms to AI and cloud infrastructure providers.

#### Key Points:

- **Top Ranking Achievement:** Jayshree Ullal secured the number one position on the Hurun India Rich List 2025 among Indian-origin professional managers with an estimated net worth of ₹50,170 crore (\$5.7 billion as of December 27, 2025). According to Forbes data, she ranks as the 713rd richest person globally, with her wealth recently increasing by \$34 million, reflecting the strong performance of Arista Networks and the booming artificial intelligence and cloud infrastructure sectors.
- **Comparison with Other Tech Leaders:** Ullal's net worth significantly surpasses other prominent Indian-origin technology executives on the list. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella ranks second with ₹9,770 crore (\$1.1 billion), while Google CEO Sundar Pichai ranks seventh with ₹5,810 crore (\$1.5 billion). Other notable Indian-origin executives on the list include Nikesh Arora of Palo Alto Networks at ₹9,190 crore (third position), Thomas Kurian at ₹5,900 crore, Shantanu Narayen of Adobe at ₹4,670 crore, and former PepsiCo CEO Indra K. Nooyi at ₹5,130 crore.
- **Leadership at Arista Networks:** Ullal has served as President and CEO of Arista Networks since September 2008, leading the Santa Clara, California-based cloud networking company for 17 years. Under her leadership, Arista has grown from a nascent startup into a major player in cloud networking, providing high-performance, software-driven networking solutions for hyperscale data centers, cloud service providers, and large enterprise environments, with particular strength in AI infrastructure.
- **Company Performance and Revenue:** Under Ullal's stewardship, Arista Networks has experienced exceptional growth and market success. The company reported revenues of \$7 billion in 2024, representing nearly 20% year-over-year growth from the previous year. This strong performance reflects increasing demand for cloud, data center, and AI-related infrastructure, sectors where Arista has established itself as a critical provider of backbone networking technology.
- **Stock Performance:** Arista Networks shares have delivered extraordinary returns to investors, surging more than 630% over the past five years, reflecting the company's strong market position in cloud and AI infrastructure. As of the latest U.S. trading session, the company's shares closed 0.82% higher at \$131.84, demonstrating continued investor confidence in the company's growth prospects and strategic positioning in critical technology infrastructure.
- **Recognition in Women's Leadership:** Earlier in 2025, Ullal was ranked second among the top five first-generation women wealth creators in the Candere Hurun India Women Leaders List 2025. This recognition underscores her status as a pioneering female executive in technology and highlights her achievement in building substantial wealth through professional leadership rather than inheritance or family business succession.
- **Broader Hurun India Rich List 2025 Context:** According to the M3M Hurun India Rich List 2025, India's billionaire count stands at 358 individuals. Anas Rahman Junaid, founder and chief researcher at Hurun India, described 2025 as a year shaped by multiple economic headwinds but one where entrepreneurs still performed strongly overall, with rapid wealth creation occurring amid uneven market conditions across various sectors.

### Israel Recognizes Somaliland as an Independent State

**In the News:** Israel became the first United Nations member state to formally recognise Somaliland — a self-declared republic in the Horn of Africa — as an independent and sovereign state, ending its longstanding international isolation and marking a major shift in diplomatic relations.

#### [Key Points:

- **Historic Recognition:** Israel officially recognised the Republic of Somaliland as an independent sovereign state on December 26, 2025, signing a mutual declaration with Somaliland's leadership. This makes Israel the first UN member to grant such recognition since Somaliland's 1991 declaration of independence from Somalia.
- **Diplomatic Relations:** The recognition deal was marked by a joint declaration signed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Somaliland's president, with both sides expressing intentions to cooperate in areas such as agriculture, health, technology and the economy.
- **Somaliland's Status:** Somaliland declared independence in **1991** and has since operated with de facto autonomy, but lacked formal international recognition despite having its own government, institutions, and relative stability in contrast to the rest of Somalia.
- **Somalia's Reaction:** The federal government of Somalia strongly condemned Israel's recognition as an illegal affront to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, calling the move a violation of international law and pledging to counter it through diplomatic, political, and legal means.
- **Global Backlash:** Numerous countries and international bodies — including Egypt, Turkey, the African Union, the East African Community, and several UN Security Council members — criticised the decision, warning it could undermine regional peace and stability and violate established norms on territorial integrity.

### Iran launches three satellites with Russian Soyuz rockets

**In the News:** Iran successfully launched **three domestically built satellites** into **low-Earth orbit** aboard a **Russian Soyuz rocket** from the **Vostochny Cosmodrome** in eastern Russia, marking a significant step in Tehran's expanding space programme and cooperation with Moscow. [GKToday+1](#)

#### Key Points:

- **Launch Mission:** A Russian Soyuz-2.1b rocket carried three Iranian satellites—Paya, Zafar-2 and Kowsar-1.5—into orbit on December 28, 2025, as part of a multi-payload mission that also included dozens of other spacecraft.
- **Satellite Roles:** The satellites are Earth-observation platforms designed for civilian uses such as monitoring agriculture, mapping natural resources, environmental tracking, and water resource management.
- **Domestic Production:** All three satellites were designed and built by Iranian scientists, with involvement from government bodies, universities, and private sector companies, demonstrating growing national space capabilities.
- **Iran-Russia Cooperation:** The launch reinforces **strategic space cooperation** between Iran and Russia; Iran has frequently relied on Russian launch vehicles due to Western sanctions limiting access to international launch services.

### China launches military encirclement drill near Taiwan

**In the News:** China launched "Justice Mission 2025," large-scale military drills encircling Taiwan involving army, navy, air force, and rocket force units. The exercises, described by Beijing as a "stern warning" against Taiwanese independence and "external interference," came less than two weeks after the United States approved a record \$11.1 billion arms sale to Taiwan. The drills—the largest ever by total coverage area and sixth major war games since 2022—include live-fire exercises across seven maritime zones, simulated strikes on land and sea targets, and blockade rehearsals of Taiwan's main ports, disrupting over 100,000 international air travelers and prompting Taiwan to place its military on high alert.

#### Key Points:

- **Exercise Launch and Code Name:** China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command launched "Justice Mission 2025" on Monday, December 29, 2025, mobilizing army, navy, air force, and rocket force troops for joint military drills around Taiwan. Senior Colonel Shi Yi, spokesperson for the Eastern Theater Command, announced that the exercises began with naval and air forces running combat readiness patrols from December 29.
- **Scale and Geographic Scope - Record Coverage:** The drills are being conducted across seven maritime zones encircling Taiwan—initially announced as five zones, but expanded to include an additional zone in Taiwan's eastern waters (conducted without prior Chinese announcement on Monday morning) and a seventh zone. China's Maritime Safety Administration designated these zones for military exercises including live-fire drills, making this the largest military exercise to date by total coverage area and with zones closer to Taiwan than any previous drills.
- **Military Assets Deployed:** As of 3:00 PM Monday, December 29, Taiwan's Defense Ministry detected: 89 Chinese military aircraft and drones operating around the Taiwan Strait (67 of which entered Taiwan's "response zone"—airspace under the military's monitoring and response), 14 Chinese naval vessels (navy ships) around the Taiwan Strait, 4 additional warships in the Western Pacific, and 14 China Coast Guard vessels conducting simultaneous maritime enforcement patrols around Taiwan and the Taiwan-held Matsu Islands and Wuqiu Islands off the coast of China.
- **Live-Fire Activities - December 30, 2025:** China's Eastern Theater Command released a notice announcing the closure of maritime and airspace zones around Taiwan for live-fire drills during daytime hours on Tuesday, December 30, 2025. Chinese authorities issued notifications establishing seven temporary dangerous zones around the Taiwan Strait for rocket-firing exercises from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM on December 30, barring aircraft from entering these areas.
- **Japan Factor - Additional Trigger:** Regional frictions around Taiwan have been heightened in recent weeks as Beijing unleashed a diplomatic and economic pressure campaign against US ally Japan. Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested in recent statements that Japan's military could get involved and respond militarily if China were to move to take control of Taiwan by force.
- **Taiwan Military Readiness - Rapid Response Exercises:** Taiwan's Defense Ministry announced that "Rapid Response Exercises are underway, with forces on high alert" designed to move troops swiftly in case the drills turn into an actual attack.
- **Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) Strategy:** Chieh Chung, associate research fellow at Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), told CNN: "The PLA aims to deny intervention by foreign military forces in conflicts around Taiwan and keep them out. Beijing is very explicit about that objective in this drill." This marks the first time China has publicly stated that drills around Taiwan are explicitly aimed at deterring foreign military intervention.



- **One-China Principle and Historical Context:** The regime of the Chinese Communist Party maintains a policy known as the "One-China principle," which claims the sovereign nation of Taiwan is a province of China. China and Taiwan have been governed separately since 1949, when the Chinese Civil War brought the Communist Party to power in Beijing while defeated Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) forces fled to Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek. The island has operated since then with its own democratically elected government, though Beijing's government claims Taiwan as sovereign territory that must eventually come under its rule.

### Israel Announces Peace Prize for Donald Trump In 2026

**In the News:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that President Donald Trump will receive the Israel Prize in 2026, making him the first American to receive Israel's highest civilian honor. The historic announcement was made during a meeting between Trump and Netanyahu at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, where Israeli Education Minister Yoav Kisch informed Trump of the decision via phone call.

#### Key Points:

- **Historic Announcement:** Education Minister Yoav Kisch announced on December 29, 2025, that President Trump will receive the Israel Prize under the category "special contribution to the Jewish people." This marks the first time in Israel's nearly 80-year history that the award will be given to a non-Israeli citizen (with one previous exception: Indian conductor Zubin Mehta in 1991).
- **Award Category and Justification:** Trump will receive the award for his "work in the fight against antisemitism, his contribution to promoting the return of the hostages to Israel, the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and his consistent support for the right of the State of Israel to defend itself."
- **Award Ceremony Details:** The Israel Prize is traditionally awarded on the eve of Israel's Independence Day, scheduled for April 21-22, 2026. Trump indicated he would consider attending the ceremony in Jerusalem to accept the award in person, stating "I look forward to meeting you."
- **Breaking Tradition:** Netanyahu emphasized that Israel decided to "break a convention" by awarding the prize to a non-Israeli. The Israel Prize regulations normally require recipients to be Israeli citizens or residents, with exceptions only for "candidates for the Israel Prize for Diaspora Jewry and/or for a special contribution to the Jewish people."
- **About the Israel Prize:** Established in 1953, the Israel Prize is Israel's highest civilian honor, awarded annually on Independence Day to individuals who have excelled in various fields or made exceptional contributions to the nation. The prize is overseen by the Education Ministry.

### India Becomes the World's 4th Largest Economy, Surpasses Japan

**In the News:** The Indian government officially announced in its year-end economic review that India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy with a nominal GDP of \$4.18 trillion in calendar year 2025. This historic milestone, confirmed by NITI Aayog CEO B.V.R. Subrahmanyam citing International Monetary Fund data, marks a significant shift in the global economic order, with India now trailing only the United States, China, and Germany. The achievement represents India doubling its GDP from \$2 trillion in 2014 to over \$4 trillion in 2025, positioning the nation as the fastest-growing major economy globally with real GDP growth of 8.2% in Q2 FY 2025-26.

#### Key Points:

- **Official Announcement and GDP Figures:** The Indian government released its year-end economic review on December 30, 2025, confirming India's GDP reached approximately \$4.18-4.19 trillion in 2025, marginally ahead of Japan's \$4.18 trillion. The IMF's April 2025 World Economic Outlook projected India's nominal GDP at \$4.187 trillion for 2025, surpassing Japan's \$4.186 trillion. Official confirmation will depend on final annual GDP figures released in 2026, though IMF projections suggest the crossover occurred in 2025.
- **Exceptional GDP Growth Performance:** India's real GDP grew 8.2% in Q2 FY 2025-26 (July-September 2025), up from 7.8% in Q1 and 7.4% in the last quarter of the previous fiscal year, marking a six-quarter high. For the first half of FY 2025-26 (April-September 2025), India recorded 8.0% year-on-year growth, significantly improving from 6.1% in the corresponding period of the previous year. The Reserve Bank of India revised its GDP growth forecast for FY 2025-26 upward to 7.3% from the earlier estimate of 6.8%.
- **Regulatory and Business Environment Improvements:** The government removed over 47,000 outdated compliances, significantly easing the cost of doing business. The Export Promotion Mission was approved with an outlay of ₹25,060 crore for FY 2025-26 to FY 2030-31 to boost trade competitiveness. The India-UK Free Trade Agreement concluded in July 2025



provides duty-free access on 99% of Indian exports. Government e-Marketplace (GeM) achieved over ₹15 lakh crore in transparent public procurement orders.

- **International Institutional Endorsements:** The World Bank projects 6.5% growth for India in 2026, while Moody's highlights India as the fastest-growing G20 economy with growth of 6.4% in 2026 and 6.5% in 2027. The IMF raised its projections to 6.6% for 2025 and 6.2% for 2026. The OECD forecasts 6.7% growth in 2025 and 6.2% in 2026. S&P expects 6.5% growth in FY 2025 and 6.7% in FY 2026. The Asian Development Bank lifted its 2025 forecast to 7.2%, while Fitch raised its FY26 projection to 7.4%, citing strong consumer demand.
- **Employment and Skill Development:** The PM Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana targets employment for 3.5 crore youth by incentivizing new employment between 2025 and 2027. Skill India Mission has trained over 6 crore citizens through PMKVY, JSS, and apprenticeship schemes. Unemployment is falling with improved job creation across sectors. The labor force participation rate needs to increase from current 56.4% to above 65% to sustain long-term growth.

### Google Now Lets Users Change Primary Gmail Address

**In the News:** Google began rolling out a long-awaited feature that allows Gmail users to change their primary @gmail.com email address without creating a new Google Account. This update, discovered through Hindi-language support documentation on December 24-25, 2025, ends a two-decade restriction that previously locked users into their original Gmail usernames.

#### Key Points:

- **Feature Overview:** Google is gradually rolling out the ability for users to change their @gmail.com email address to a new @gmail.com address while keeping all account data, emails, photos, and Google Drive files completely intact. This eliminates the need to create an entirely new account and manually transfer data, addressing a limitation that has existed since Gmail's launch over 20 years ago.
- **Alias System:** When users change their primary Gmail address, the old email address automatically becomes a secondary address or "alias." Users will continue to receive emails sent to both the old and new addresses in the same inbox, and can sign into Google services (Gmail, Maps, YouTube, Drive, Google Play) using either address. The old address remains permanently owned by the user and cannot be claimed by anyone else.
- **Change Limitations:** Google has implemented strict restrictions to prevent abuse: users can change their @gmail.com address a maximum of three times per account (resulting in four total addresses over the account's lifetime). Once a change is made, users cannot create another new @gmail.com address for 12 months, and the new address cannot be deleted during this period.
- **Reversibility:** Users can switch back to their old email address as the primary address at any time if they wish to revert the change.
- **Gradual Rollout:** The feature is being deployed gradually on a region-by-region basis. Early documentation appeared in Hindi first, suggesting initial testing in India before global availability. The feature may not be immediately available to all users, with Google stating "this option may not be available to you right now" during the phased deployment.
- **How to Access:** Users who have access can change their email address by going to myaccount.google.com, selecting "Personal Information," clicking on "Google Account email," and looking for the option "Change your Google Account email address." The system will verify if the requested new username is available before confirming the change.
- **User Impact:** The feature particularly benefits users who created Gmail accounts as teenagers with embarrassing usernames, individuals who have changed their names (including members of the transgender community), and professionals seeking to rebrand their digital identity. However, manual updates will still be required for professional contacts, mailing lists, subscription services, and account recovery settings that use the old address.

### Bulgaria joins eurozone: Why it's swapping the lev for the euro despite Russia tensions

**In the News:** Bulgaria became the 21st member of the eurozone, officially adopting the euro and replacing its national currency, the lev—meaning "lion," a symbol present in Bulgaria for centuries. The historic transition occurred at midnight with celebrations in Sofia, where Bulgarian euro coins were projected onto the Central Bank building. Despite 49% of Bulgarians opposing the switch according to Eurobarometer surveys, successive governments pushed forward with the adoption, arguing it would boost the economy of the EU's poorest member, reinforce ties to the West, and protect against Russia's malign influence.

#### Key Points:

- **Official Euro Adoption - January 1, 2026:** At midnight on January 1, 2026, Bulgaria gave up the lev and officially adopted the euro as its currency, becoming the 21st member of the eurozone. Bulgarian euro coins featuring national symbols

including the Madara Rider, Ivan of Rila, and other cultural motifs were projected onto the Central Bank building in Sofia during midnight celebrations. European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde warmly welcomed Bulgaria, calling the euro a "powerful symbol" of "shared values and collective strength."

- **Conversion Rate and Exchange Mechanism:** The EU set the conversion rate at 1 euro equals 1.95583 Bulgarian lev (BGN) under the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II), which Bulgaria joined in 2020 as a condition for adopting the euro. This conversion rate formally codified a relationship that had existed informally for decades—the lev had already been pegged to the euro since 1999 when Germany switched to the currency, because Bulgaria had tied its currency to the German mark in 1997 to stabilize its economy and rein in soaring inflation following hyperinflation in the 1990s.
- **Dual Currency Period and Exchange Process:** For the month of January 2026, both the lev and euro will be in dual use for cash payments, though consumers will receive only euros in change. From February 1, 2026, only euros can be used. For six months (through July 2026), Bulgarians can exchange leva in cash for euros at any commercial bank, post office, or the Bulgarian National Bank free of charge. After July, banks can charge for exchanges. Since August 2025, all sales prices have been displayed in both currencies using the same font and color to allow consumers to monitor for price gouging.
- **Deep Public Division - 49% Opposition:** Despite government support, Bulgarians have long been divided over the euro switch. The latest Eurobarometer survey indicated 49% of Bulgarians opposed adopting the single currency, with Alpha Research polling in May 2025 showing 46.5% supported adoption while 46.8% opposed it—a near-perfect split. A Bulgarian Finance Ministry survey showed 51% wanted to adopt the euro while 45% were against it. Opposition was strongest among residents of smaller towns and villages, pensioners, and semi-educated working-age individuals active on social media.
- **Anti-Euro Protest Campaign:** A significant protest campaign emerged in 2025 to "keep the Bulgarian lev," playing on public fears of price rises and a generally negative view of the euro among much of the population. The far-right, pro-Russian Revival (Vazrazhdane) party led much of the opposition, organizing rallies in May and September 2025. In June 2025, a physical fight broke out in parliament when the measure was adopted, with Revival Party members blocking the podium and staging protests.
- **Historical Context - 1997 Currency Crisis:** Bulgaria's relationship with currency stability is shaped by traumatic hyperinflation in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet-style economy. In 1997, Bulgaria introduced a currency board and pegged its currency first to the German mark (at 1,000 old leva = 1 Deutsche Mark) to stabilize the economy and control devastating inflation. When the euro launched in 1999, the peg automatically transferred to the euro at the rate of 1.95583 leva = 1 euro (the Deutsche Mark's fixed exchange rate to the euro).
- **Bulgarian Euro Coin Designs - National Symbols:** Bulgaria's euro coins feature distinctively Bulgarian cultural and religious motifs that were already present on the lev currency. The Madara Rider, a rock relief created at the beginning of the 8th century during the formation of the Bulgarian state, graces the 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50-cent coins. The artwork, showing a knight triumphing over a lion, is carved into a cliff near the village of Madara in northeast Bulgaria and has been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1979.

### India-UAE Desert Cyclone II Military Exercise Concludes in Abu Dhabi

**In the News:** The second edition of the India-UAE Joint Military Exercise "Desert Cyclone II" concluded with a formal closing ceremony at Al-Hamra Training City in Abu Dhabi, marking successful completion of intensive bilateral training between the Indian Army and UAE Land Forces conducted from December 18-30, 2025.

#### Key Points:

- **Exercise Duration and Location:** Exercise Desert Cyclone II was conducted from December 18 to 30, 2025 (13 days) at Al-Hamra Training City in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The exercise represented the second edition of this bilateral joint military training initiative, following the inaugural Desert Cyclone conducted in Mahajan, Rajasthan, India from January 2-15, 2024. The alternating host arrangement demonstrates reciprocal commitment, with the first edition held in India's desert terrain and the second in UAE's urban training facilities.
- **Training Focus - Urban Warfare Operations:** Exercise Desert Cyclone II concentrated on enhancing tactical capabilities in complex urban combat scenarios, reflecting contemporary security challenges where military operations increasingly occur in built-up areas. The exercise was structured around operations in urban settings under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter concerning peacekeeping operations.
- **Comprehensive Training Curriculum:** Troops from both sides undertook a balanced approach combining classroom-based instruction with realistic field training to ensure conceptual clarity and practical proficiency. The training curriculum

included: urban combat drills and fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA), building clearance operations and room-to-room combat techniques, IED (Improvised Explosive Device) awareness and counter-IED procedures.

- **First Edition Context - Desert Cyclone I (2024):** The inaugural Desert Cyclone exercise was conducted from January 2-15, 2024 in Mahajan, Rajasthan, India, in the Thar Desert's semi-desert terrain. The UAE contingent (45 personnel) was represented by troops from the Zayed First Brigade, while India fielded 45 personnel from the Mechanised Infantry Regiment. The first edition focused on sub-conventional operations including fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA) in desert/semi-desert terrain under UN Charter Chapter VII.
- **Broader Defense Cooperation Framework:** India and UAE established diplomatic relations in 1972, with UAE opening its Embassy in Delhi in 1972 and India opening its Embassy in Abu Dhabi in 1973. The first India-UAE Joint Air Forces exercise took place in September 2008 at Al-Dhafra base in Abu Dhabi, marking the beginning of structured military cooperation. India has been a regular participant in the biennial International Defence Exhibition (IDEX) held in Abu Dhabi, showcasing defense capabilities and exploring collaborative opportunities. In 2025, Indian Navy ships INS Visakhapatnam and INS Trikanth participated in bilateral naval exercise "Zayed Talwar" aimed at enhancing naval interoperability and synergy.

### India and Pakistan Exchange Prisoners Lists Under Consular Pact

**In the News:** India and Pakistan exchanged lists of civilian prisoners and fishermen in each other's custody under the 2008 bilateral Agreement on Consular Access, marking the continuation of a humanitarian practice conducted twice annually despite severely strained diplomatic relations following the May 2025 military conflict.

#### Key Points:

- **2008 Consular Access Agreement Framework:** The exchange took place under the provisions of the bilateral Agreement on Consular Access signed on May 21, 2008, which mandates that both countries exchange lists of prisoners in each other's custody twice every year on January 1 and July 1. The lists were shared simultaneously through diplomatic channels in New Delhi and Islamabad, maintaining a humanitarian channel of communication that has persisted despite deep political tensions.
- **India's Prisoner List Disclosure:** India shared comprehensive lists containing details of 391 civilian prisoners and 33 fishermen currently in its custody who are Pakistani nationals or believed to be Pakistani. The Indian government provided this information to Pakistan's High Commission in New Delhi, detailing the status, location, and circumstances of detention for these individuals.
- **Pakistan's Prisoner List Disclosure:** Pakistan shared lists containing details of 58 civilian prisoners and 199 fishermen currently in its custody who are Indian nationals or believed to be Indian. This information was officially handed over to representatives of the Indian High Commission in Islamabad at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The significantly higher number of Indian fishermen (199) compared to Pakistani fishermen in Indian custody (33) reflects the geographic realities of maritime boundaries and fishing patterns in the Arabian Sea, where Indian fishermen from Gujarat, Maharashtra, and other coastal states frequently face detention for alleged territorial violations.
- **India's Release and Repatriation Demands:** The Government of India called for early release and repatriation of all civil prisoners, fishermen along with their boats, and missing Indian defence personnel believed to be in Pakistan's custody. India specifically urged Pakistan to expedite the release and repatriation of 167 Indian fishermen and civilian prisoners who have already completed their sentences but remain detained in Pakistani jails. New Delhi emphasized that continued detention of individuals who have served their full sentences violates humanitarian principles and requested immediate action for their return to India.
- **Consular Access Request for 35 Detainees:** India requested Pakistan to provide immediate consular access to 35 civilian prisoners and fishermen in Pakistan's custody who are believed to be Indian nationals but have not been provided consular access so far. Consular access is a fundamental right under international law allowing diplomatic representatives to visit, communicate with, and provide assistance to detained nationals.

### Amazon Stingless Bees Get Legal Rights

**In the News:** In a world-first legal development, Amazonian stingless bees became the first insects anywhere in the world to be granted legal rights. The Provincial Municipality of Satipo, Peru, approved Municipal Ordinance No. 33-2025-CM/MPS in late 2025, granting native stingless bees legal rights within the Avireri VRAEM Biosphere Reserve. The legislation marks a revolutionary step in protecting Peru's biodiversity and biocultural heritage, as stingless bees pollinate over 80% of Amazonian



flora including globally important crops like coffee, chocolate, avocados, and blueberries, but face threats from climate change, deforestation, pesticides, and competition from invasive European honeybees.

#### Key Points:

- **Historic Legal Precedent - First Insect with Legal Rights:** Amazonian stingless bees became the first insects in history to receive formal legal recognition as rights-bearing subjects, establishing an unprecedented legal precedent with no equivalent worldwide. The Provincial Municipality of Satipo, Peru, approved Municipal Ordinance No. 33-2025-CM/MPS granting legal rights to native stingless bees within the Avireri VRAEM Biosphere Reserve, a large protected area in central Peru established by UNESCO in 2021 encompassing nearly 16,000 square miles of diverse ecosystems from the Amazon rainforest to the Andes mountains.
- **Municipalities Involved - Satipo and Nauta:** Two Peruvian municipalities took the lead in granting legal rights to stingless bees. Satipo, the largest and easternmost province in Peru's department of Junín, perched at the edge of the rainforest, approved the landmark ordinance in late 2025. Nauta municipality also passed similar legislation recognizing stingless bee rights. The Satipo ordinance specifically applies to the Avireri VRAEM Biosphere Reserve, positioning Satipo at the forefront of the global "rights of nature" movement. Campaigners hope this development will be a catalyst for similar moves to protect bees elsewhere in Peru and potentially inspire biodiversity policy changes far beyond South America.
- **Species Protected - Native Stingless Bees (Meliponines):** The ordinance protects native stingless bees, scientifically known as meliponines, including species such as *Melipona eburnea*, *Tetragonisca angustula*, *Melipona illota*, and *Melipona grandis*. Unlike their European honeybee cousins (*Apis mellifera*), stingless bees have no sting, making them gentle and safe to work with. These insects rank among the oldest bee species on planet Earth, having shaped tropical forests for tens of millions of years. Nearly half of the world's roughly 500 known stingless bee species live in tropical forests, with many concentrated in the Amazon rainforest.
- **Critical Ecological Role - Pollinating 80% of Amazonian Flora:** Stingless bees are considered "primary pollinators" in the Amazon rainforest, contributing not just to plant reproduction but also to biodiversity, forest conservation, and global food security. Researchers credit them with pollinating more than 80% of native Amazonian plant species, from forest trees to crops that support wildlife, Indigenous food systems, and global markets. Globally, wild bees play a role in pollinating more than 90% of the crops that feed the world, and stingless bees are among the most important of these species in tropical regions.
- **Specific Legal Rights Granted:** Under the new ordinance, stingless bees and their ecosystems are entitled to comprehensive legal protections. The bees have the right to exist and flourish in their natural habitats without interference. They have the right to regenerate and maintain healthy populations within their natural environment, free of harm from invasive species or human activity.

### India, Pakistan Complete Exchange of Nuclear Facility Information

**In the News:** India and Pakistan completed the 35th consecutive annual exchange of nuclear facility information under the 1988 Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities, continuing a three-decade-old confidence-building measure despite severely strained bilateral relations following the May 2025 four-day military conflict.

#### Key Points:

- **35th Consecutive Annual Exchange:** India and Pakistan simultaneously exchanged lists of nuclear installations and facilities on January 1, 2026, through diplomatic channels in New Delhi and Islamabad, marking the 35th consecutive year of this practice since the first exchange on January 1, 1992. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) confirmed that both countries exchanged information covered under the bilateral Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities, maintaining an unbroken tradition despite deep diplomatic freeze following Operation Sindoor during May 7-10, 2025.
- **The 1988 Agreement - Origins and Legal Framework:** The Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities between India and Pakistan was signed on December 31, 1988, and entered into force on January 27, 1991. The agreement mandates that both countries inform each other of nuclear installations and facilities covered under the pact on January 1 of every calendar year, providing inter alia (among other things) the obligation to share detailed information about specified nuclear sites.
- **Facilities Covered Under Agreement:** The agreement covers a broad spectrum of nuclear facilities including nuclear power plants, research reactors, fuel fabrication units, uranium enrichment facilities, isotope separation plants, spent fuel reprocessing units, and storage sites containing large quantities of radioactive materials.



- **Context of Strained Bilateral Relations:** The exchange occurred despite bilateral ties remaining under "deep freeze" following India's Operation Sindoor launched in response to a major terror attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, resulting in four days of military hostilities from May 7-10, 2025.
- **India's Release and Repatriation Demands:** The Government of India called for early release and repatriation of all civil prisoners, fishermen along with their boats, and missing Indian defence personnel from Pakistan's custody. India specifically urged Pakistan to expedite the release and repatriation of 167 Indian fishermen and civilian prisoners who have already completed their sentences but remain detained in Pakistani jails.
- **Repatriation Statistics Since 2014:** As a result of sustained efforts by the Government of India, 2,661 Indian fishermen and 71 Indian civilian prisoners have been repatriated from Pakistan since 2014, demonstrating some humanitarian cooperation despite political tensions. This includes 500 Indian fishermen and 13 Indian civilian prisoners who have been repatriated from Pakistan between 2023 and early 2026.

### Turkmenistan Legalises Crypto Mining and Exchanges

**In the News:** Turkmenistan officially legalized cryptocurrency mining and exchanges, marking a major policy shift for one of the world's most isolated and tightly-controlled economies. President Serdar Berdimuhamedov signed the "Law of Turkmenistan on Virtual Assets" in November 2025, bringing digital assets under civil law for the first time and establishing a comprehensive licensing regime for miners, exchanges, and custodial services overseen by the Central Bank of Turkmenistan. The legislation, which aims to attract foreign investment and stimulate digitalization in the gas-dependent economy, defines cryptocurrencies strictly as "property or investment instruments" rather than legal tender, prohibiting their use for purchasing goods or services.

#### Key Points:

- **Law Signed and Effective Date:** President Serdar Berdimuhamedov signed the "Law of Turkmenistan on Virtual Assets" on November 28, 2025, with the legislation officially taking effect on January 1, 2026. The timing marks a significant New Year development for the Central Asian nation, bringing cryptocurrency activities into the country's formal legal framework after years of operating in a regulatory gray area. The implementation represents one of the most significant economic policy shifts in Turkmenistan since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.
- **Two Categories of Virtual Assets Defined:** The law divides virtual assets into two distinct legal categories with different characteristics and regulatory implications. **Secured Virtual Assets** are defined as those backed by underlying property or tangible assets, providing holders with claims on real-world value through asset-backing mechanisms similar to asset-backed securities. **Unsecured Virtual Assets** include cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and similar tokens that derive value from market demand, technological utility, and network effects rather than backing by physical assets or government guarantees.
- **Mandatory KYC, AML Compliance, and Transparency Requirements:** Cryptocurrency exchanges and custodial platforms must enforce rigorous Know Your Customer (KYC) and Anti-Money Laundering (AML) rules in accordance with international standards and domestic regulations.
- **Covert Mining and Cryptojacking Banned:** The legislation explicitly prohibits covert mining practices, including cryptojacking—the unauthorized use of others' computing resources to mine cryptocurrencies. Cryptojacking typically involves malware that secretly installs mining software on victims' computers or exploits website visitors' processors without consent.

### Explained: Iran's latest protests, where Trump said the US was 'locked and loaded'

**In the News:** US President Donald Trump warned Iran that America is "locked and loaded and ready to go" if the Islamic Republic violently kills peaceful protesters, as nationwide economic demonstrations that began in late December 2025 turned deadly with at least seven fatalities reported, prompting sharp exchanges between Washington and Tehran.

#### Key Points:

- **Trump's "Locked and Loaded" Warning:** President Trump posted on Truth Social early Friday, January 2, 2026, stating "If Iran shoots and violently kills peaceful protesters, which is their custom, the United States of America will come to their rescue. We are locked and loaded and ready to go." The warning came after economic protests in Iran took a violent turn with multiple deaths reported among both protesters and security forces, marking the most significant intervention threat by a US president regarding Iranian domestic unrest.
- **Trigger - Currency Collapse and Economic Crisis:** Protests erupted on December 28-29, 2025, after Iran's rial plunged to a historic low of 1.45 million rials per US dollar (later recovering slightly to 1.38 million), compared to 820,000 rials a year earlier and just 32,000 rials at the time of the 2015 nuclear accord. The currency lost nearly half its value in 2025 alone,

devastating purchasing power and triggering shopkeeper strikes initially in Tehran's Grand Bazaar and Alaeddin Shopping Centre before spreading nationwide to cities including Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Kermanshah, Hamadan, Yazd, and Fasa.

- **Devastating Inflation and Cost of Living:** Iran's inflation rate reached 42.2% in December 2025 (up from 48.6% in October), with food prices surging 72% year-on-year and health/medical goods increasing 50% according to Iran's state statistics center. The economic collapse made basic necessities unaffordable for ordinary Iranians, with shopkeepers warning that continued conditions would lead to bankruptcy of many small and medium-sized businesses. Iran's economy contracted by 0.6% (0.8% excluding oil) in the first half of fiscal year 1404 despite modest oil sector growth of 1.1%.
- **Root Causes - Sanctions and Regional Conflicts:** Iran's economic crisis stems from years of Western sanctions intensified after Trump withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal in 2018 during his first term and reimposed maximum pressure sanctions. The situation worsened in 2025 following the Twelve-Day War with Israel in June 2025 (when US and Israel struck Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities), and September 2025 reimposition of UN nuclear-related sanctions through the "snapback" mechanism, freezing Iranian assets abroad, halting arms transactions, and imposing ballistic missile penalties.

## US Strikes Venezuela

**In the News:** The United States launched "Operation Absolute Resolve"—a large-scale military strike on Venezuela that resulted in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, First Lady Cilia Flores, marking an extraordinary intervention that plunged Venezuela into uncertainty and raised questions about international law, US constitutional authority, and the future of the oil-rich South American nation.

### Key Points:

- **Operation Absolute Resolve—The Strike:** On January 3, 2026, at approximately 2:00 a.m. local time (VET), the United States Armed Forces launched a series of airstrikes on locations across northern Venezuela, particularly around the capital city of Caracas. The operation involved more than 150 aircraft launching from 20 bases across the Western Hemisphere. President Donald Trump gave final approval for the mission at 10:46 p.m. ET on Friday, January 2, 2026.
- **Maduro's Capture and Detention:** At 5:21 a.m. VET on January 3, 2026, Donald Trump posted on Truth Social that Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, had been captured and flown out of the country. Trump later posted a photograph on Truth Social showing Maduro on board the USS Iwo Jima—the image depicted Maduro blindfolded, wearing noise-cancelling headphones, a flotation device, a gray fleece Nike Tech sweatsuit, and holding a plastic water bottle.
- **US Justification and Legal Claims:** The Trump administration justified the operation primarily on narcoterrorism charges. A new indictment filed in US District Court for the Southern District of New York alleges that Maduro ran "state-sponsored gangs" and facilitated drug trafficking in Venezuela. The US had announced a \$50 million reward for information leading to Maduro's arrest (increased from \$25 million in January 2025 and originally \$15 million).
- **Trump's Unprecedented Declaration:** At a press conference at Mar-a-Lago on January 3, 2026, President Trump stated: "We are going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition." He indicated that the US may send troops to Venezuela as part of this transition and stated that US companies would be "very strongly involved" in the Venezuelan oil industry.

## Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

**In the News:** The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal strategic forum comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, continues to strengthen as a key mechanism for promoting a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region, with recent high-level meetings in 2025-2026 demonstrating the grouping's resilience and growing importance amid rising geopolitical tensions, particularly concerning China's assertive behavior in the region.

### Key Points:

- **Formation and Member Countries:** The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is an informal strategic forum comprising four democratic nations: the United States of America, Japan, India, and Australia. Known formally as the "Quad" rather than the "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue" the partnership is maintained through summits, ministerial meetings, information exchanges, and military drills.
- **Origins—2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami Response:** The Quad's origins, also referred to as "Quad 1.0," trace back to December 26, 2004, when a devastating Indian Ocean tsunami killed approximately 228,000 people across 14 countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia formed an ad-hoc "Tsunami Core Group" to coordinate emergency response, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts.

- **First Official Meeting (May 2007):** The Quad countries held their first official senior officials' meeting on May 25, 2007, on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila, Philippines. The Prime Ministers of India, Japan, and Australia met with US Vice President Dick Cheney. The meeting focused on shared interests in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region.
- **Revival of the Quad (2017):** The Quad was resurrected in 2017, driven by shared concerns regarding China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region and the need to promote cooperation and stability. In November 2017, during the ASEAN Summit in Manila, officials from all four countries—Japan, India, Australia, and the US—met at the working level for the first time in 10 years. During the 2017 ASEAN Summits, all four leaders—Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull, Indian PM Narendra Modi, and US President Donald Trump (represented by VP Mike Pence)—participated in discussions that led to the Quad's renewal.
- **10th Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting (July 1, 2025):** The 10th Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting took place in Washington DC on July 1, 2025, attended by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the Foreign Ministers of Australia, India, and Japan. The ministers announced the launch of the Quad Critical Minerals Initiative, aimed at strengthening and diversifying supply chains for critical minerals essential to clean energy transition and advanced technology manufacturing.
- **Malabar Naval Exercises:** The annual Malabar naval exercises serve as a key mechanism for Quad military interoperability and cooperation. The Malabar series began as a bilateral naval exercise between India and the US in 1992. Japan joined the exercises in 2015. In 2020, India, Japan, and the US invited Australia to the coordinated navy exercise, marking Australia's return to Malabar after being dropped in 2008.

## SCIENCE AND TECH

### Fake rabies vaccine available in India since 2023, claims Australia: Pharma co refutes charges

**In the News:** The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) issued a public health advisory warning that counterfeit batches of the rabies vaccine Abhayrab® have been circulating in India since November 1, 2023, and advised Australian travelers who received the vaccine in India to consider it invalid and seek replacement doses. Indian Immunologicals Limited (IIL), the manufacturer of Abhayrab, strongly refuted the claims on December 25-27, 2025, calling the advisory "over-cautionary and misplaced," stating it was an isolated incident involving one specific batch identified in January 2025 that is no longer in circulation, and requesting Australia review its advisory to prevent unnecessary public anxiety.

#### Key Points:

- **Australian Advisory Details:** The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI), a subsidiary of the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, released a statement on December 19, 2025, warning that counterfeit (fake) batches of the rabies vaccine Abhayrab® have been circulating in India since 2023.
- **Valid Vaccine Brands in India:** According to the ATAGI advisory, valid vaccine doses that can be considered genuine if given in India include: Vaxirab-N, RABIVAX-S, Lyssavac, Vaxirab, and Indirab. People not affected by the alert include those who "completed their full rabies vaccine course in a country other than India, including Australia" or those who "were in India from 1 November 2023 but have evidence that the doses received were a vaccine other than Abhayrab®."
- **About Abhayrab® Vaccine and IIL:** Abhayrab® is a human anti-rabies vaccine manufactured by Indian Immunologicals Limited (IIL), a Hyderabad-based public sector vaccine manufacturer promoted by the National Dairy Development Board. IIL is one of Asia's largest vaccine manufacturers and exports to over 60 countries. Abhayrab has been manufactured by IIL since 2000, with more than 210 million doses supplied across India and 40 to 43 countries over the past 24+ years. The vaccine currently holds approximately 40% market share in India's anti-rabies vaccine sector, making it one of the most widely used rabies vaccines in the country.
- **IIL's Account - Isolated Incident in January 2025:** IIL clarified that the concern revolves around one specific batch identified in January 2025, not a widespread problem dating back to November 2023 as the Australian advisory suggests. The company's December 25 letter to ATAGI stated: "The counterfeiting incident that has been mentioned involves Abhayrab, Batch No. KA24014 (manufacturing date: March 2024; expiry date: February 2027) was identified by us in early January 2025."

### World's First ITVISM Gene Therapy Given in Abu Dhabi

**In the News:** Abu Dhabi marked a landmark achievement by becoming the first in the world to administer ITVISM (onasemnogene abeparvovec) gene therapy for the treatment of spinal muscular atrophy (SMA). Sheikh Khalifa Medical City



(SKMC), under the supervision of the Department of Health – Abu Dhabi (DoH), successfully administered this groundbreaking one-time gene therapy developed by Novartis, reinforcing the emirate's position as a global leader in genomics and precision medicine.

**Key Points:**

- **World's First Administration:** Abu Dhabi became the first location globally to deliver ITVISMA gene therapy to a patient in late December 2025. The treatment was administered at Sheikh Khalifa Medical City (SKMC), part of SEHA, a subsidiary of PureHealth, marking a historic milestone in advanced healthcare.
- **UAE Regulatory Approval:** ITVISMA received accelerated approval from the UAE's Emirates Drug Establishment on November 25, 2025, positioning the UAE among the first countries globally—after the United States—to endorse this pioneering treatment. This underscores Abu Dhabi's commitment to bringing cutting-edge medical innovations to patients across the region.
- **About ITVISMA Therapy:** ITVISMA (onasemnogene abeparvovec) is a one-time gene replacement therapy specifically designed to target the underlying genetic cause of spinal muscular atrophy in patients aged 2 years and older with a confirmed SMN1 gene mutation. The therapy replaces the missing or defective SMN1 gene to improve motor function, reducing the need for continuous treatments required by other therapies.
- **About Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA):** SMA is a rare genetic neuromuscular disorder caused by mutations in the survival motor neuron 1 (SMN1) gene on chromosome 5. The condition leads to the degeneration of motor neurons in the spinal cord, causing progressive muscle weakness, muscle atrophy, and loss of voluntary movement. SMA has an estimated incidence of 1 in 10,000 live births and a carrier frequency of 1 in 40-50 individuals.
- **Treatment Mechanism:** The therapy works by delivering a functional copy of the SMN1 gene to patients' cells using an adeno-associated virus (AAV) vector. This enables the production of survival motor neuron (SMN) protein, which is critical for the health and normal function of motor neurons. Without adequate SMN protein, motor neurons die, preventing muscles from receiving proper signals from the brain.
- **Government Leadership:** Dr. Noura Khamis Al Ghaithi, Undersecretary of the Department of Health – Abu Dhabi, stated: "This milestone reflects Abu Dhabi's commitment to delivering world-class care and strengthening its position as a global leader in healthcare driven by genomics and precision medicine. Our priority remains safeguarding the health of our community members and beyond, ensuring access to cutting-edge therapies for rare diseases."
- **Industry Partnership:** Mohamed Ezz Eldin, Head of the GCC Cluster at Novartis, noted: Today's milestone is ultimately about patients and families. By working closely with the Department of Health – Abu Dhabi and SKMC, we are proud to support accelerated access to breakthrough therapies such as ITVISMA, and to contribute to Abu Dhabi's growing role as a regional and global reference for advanced neuromuscular care.

**ISRO Tests Upgraded SSLV Third Stage Successfully**

**In the News:** The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully conducted a static test of an improved version of the third stage (SS3) of the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) at the Solid Motor Static Test Facility of Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh. The upgraded third stage features a carbon-epoxy motor case that has significantly reduced the stage's mass, thereby improving the payload performance of SSLV by 90 kg. The test, which lasted 108 seconds, validated all parameters as matching predictions, qualifying the improved SS3 motor for induction in flight operations. This achievement marks a significant milestone in India's push toward faster and more efficient small satellite launches with quick turnaround capabilities.

**Key Points:**

- **Successful Static Test - December 30, 2025:** ISRO carried out a successful static test of an improved version of the third stage (SS3) of the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) on December 30, 2025, at the Solid Motor Static Test Facility at Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC), Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh. The static test is a ground-based trial where the solid rocket motor is fired while restrained on a test stand to evaluate its performance under controlled conditions.
- **About SSLV - Launch-on-Demand Vehicle:** The Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) is a three-stage all-solid launch vehicle developed by ISRO, designed to be amenable to industrial production and capable of meeting launch-on-demand requirements with quick turnaround time between launches. Unlike larger launch vehicles, SSLV is specifically optimized for deploying small satellites (up to 500 kg) into low Earth orbit.
- **Third Stage Critical Role:** The upper stage or third stage solid motor of SSLV delivers as high as 4 km/s (approximately 14,400 km/h) velocity to the launch vehicle, providing the final acceleration needed to place satellites into their designated



orbits. The third stage employs a monolithic composite motor case and a free-standing nozzle divergent specifically designed to limit the stage inert mass (the non-propellant weight). Minimizing inert mass is critical because every kilogram saved in structural weight can be converted into additional payload capacity.

- **2025 Capacity Enhancement Initiatives:** According to ISRO, multiple facilities have been commissioned in 2025 to enhance the capacity of realizing (producing) solid motors for India's space programme, supporting increased launch frequency and industrial participation. In July 2025, Solid Motor production facilities were commissioned at Sriharikota specifically to augment production capacity for vehicles like SSLV and larger launch vehicles. These new facilities enable parallel production of multiple motors, reducing manufacturing time and supporting higher launch rates. The expansion reflects India's growing space ambitions, including plans for commercial satellite launches, future human spaceflight missions, and interplanetary exploration that all require robust solid motor production capabilities.
- **World's Largest Solid Propellant Mixer:** An indigenous 10-tonne vertical mixer for the solid motor production line was commissioned in 2025 at SDSC, which is the world's largest solid propellant mixing equipment. Solid propellant mixing is a critical and delicate process where oxidizer particles (Ammonium Perchlorate), metal fuel (typically aluminum powder), and polymer binder are combined in precise proportions and mixed thoroughly to ensure uniform composition. The 10-tonne capacity refers to the batch size that can be mixed in a single operation. Larger mixers enable more efficient production of motors for heavy-lift launch vehicles and reduce the number of mixing batches required for large motors, improving consistency and reducing production time. The vertical design offers better mixing efficiency and safety compared to horizontal mixers.
- **Contribution to Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India):** The indigenous development of advanced carbon-composite motor cases, high-capacity propellant mixers, and expanded production facilities aligns with India's Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiative in critical technologies. By developing these capabilities domestically rather than importing components or technology, India strengthens its strategic autonomy in space access, which has both civilian and security implications.

### DRDO Successfully Tests Pralay Missile With Consecutive Salvo Launch

**In the News:** The Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) successfully conducted a salvo launch of two Pralay missiles in quick succession from the same launcher off the coast of Odisha at approximately 10:30 AM. This milestone test, conducted as part of user evaluation trials, demonstrated the reliability and operational readiness of India's indigenously developed tactical ballistic missile system.

#### Key Points:

- **Salvo Launch Achievement:** DRDO successfully fired two Pralay missiles consecutively from the same mobile launcher at the Integrated Test Range in Chandipur, Odisha. Both missiles followed their intended quasi-ballistic trajectories and met all flight objectives with high precision, as confirmed by tracking sensors and telemetry systems deployed near impact points.
- **Missile Specifications:** Pralay is an indigenously developed solid-propellant, quasi-ballistic, surface-to-surface tactical missile designed for high-precision conventional strikes. The missile has a range of 150-500 km and can carry warheads weighing 350-700 kg and 500-1,000 kg, including High Explosive Preformed Fragmentation (HEPF), Penetration-Cum-Blast (PCB), and Runway Denial Penetration Submunition (RDPS) warheads.
- **Strategic Capabilities:** The missile employs state-of-the-art guidance and navigation systems for high accuracy and can target radar installations, communication centers, command and control facilities, and advance airfields. Its quasi-ballistic trajectory makes interception difficult for enemy air defense systems, while its solid propellant ensures quick launch readiness and high reliability.
- **Operational Features:** Pralay is a road-mobile, canisterized missile system that can be launched within 10 minutes and transition from command to launch in just 60 seconds. A single 12×12 vehicle can carry two Pralay missiles, each capable of targeting different locations or striking a single target from two different trajectories to enhance kill probability.

### Hyderabad Start-ups Build Mini Satellite for ISRO's PSLV Launch

**In the News:** Hyderabad-based space-tech startups, particularly TakeMe2Space and EON Space Labs, are pioneering India's private satellite development sector, with multiple mini satellites scheduled for launch on ISRO's PSLV missions in late 2025 and 2026, demonstrating the rapid growth of India's commercial space ecosystem and the city's emergence as a major hub for space technology innovation alongside established players like Skyroot Aerospace and Dhruva Space.

#### Key Points:

- **TakeMe2Space—India's First 'Thinking' Satellite:** Hyderabad-based startup TakeMe2Space, founded by software engineer Ronak Samantray, launched India's first 'thinking' satellite named MOI-TD (Mission: Orbital Infrastructure – Technology Demonstrator) on ISRO's SSLV (Small Satellite Launch Vehicle) 30<sup>th</sup> December 2025. Just over a year old, TakeMe2Space is creating a stir in India's space tech ecosystem by introducing AI-inference capabilities that allow satellites to not just collect data but also make sense of it while in space.
- **Company Background and Vision:** TakeMe2Space was founded by Ronak Samantray, a software professional who started with Microsoft in Hyderabad in 2008 and co-founded NowFloats Technologies in 2011, which was later acquired by Reliance Strategic Business Ventures Limited (RSBVL) in December 2019. Samantray's vision is to "put a brain in space," democratizing satellite access which has historically been limited to those who could write scientific papers.
- **Building Satellites from Scratch:** TakeMe2Space's vast office space in IIIT Hyderabad thrums with activity in what is essentially an engineer's workshop. The company claims it is making building satellites as easy as putting together a Lego set, with plans to deploy a "Satellite Playground" in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) serving satellites up to 30 kg payload with a "pay per use" revenue model. Interestingly, none of the core team members comes from a space background, demonstrating the democratization of space technology.
- **Previous Space Validation Success:** On January 1, 2024, TakeMe2Space's prototype product called the Radiation Shielding Experimental Module (RSEM) was validated by ISRO on its POEM platform (PSLV Orbital Experimental Module), which allows in-orbit scientific experiments. The PSLV C58 had placed the XPoSat (X-ray Polarimeter Satellite) and 10 other payloads into Low Earth Orbit from Sriharikota.
- **EON Space Labs—India's Lightest Space Telescope:** Another Hyderabad startup, EON Space Labs, has successfully developed MIRA—India's first indigenously developed miniaturized space telescope weighing just 502 grams. MIRA successfully completed NASA-standard thermo-vacuum testing in Ahmedabad this year, where technicians drained air to 10<sup>-5</sup> torr (emptier than the space between stars) and swung temperatures between -20°C and +60°C, mimicking conditions 400 km above Earth.
- **Hyderabad's Space Startup Ecosystem:** Hyderabad is emerging as a major hub for India's private space sector. Skyroot Aerospace, founded in 2018 by former ISRO scientists Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bharath Daka, became the first Indian private company to successfully launch its own rocket (Vikram-1) in 2022, and in 2023 inaugurated a 60,000 square-foot headquarters at GMR Hyderabad Aviation SEZ. Dhruva Space, founded in 2012 by Sanjay Nekkanti, provides end-to-end solutions from building small satellites to ground sensors, launching and monitoring, working with ISRO and European Space Agency.

## SPORTS

### Smriti Mandhana Becomes Second Indian to Reach 10,000 International Runs

**In the News:** Indian vice-captain Smriti Mandhana scripted history by becoming the second Indian woman and fourth overall in women's cricket to reach the landmark of 10,000 runs in international cricket. The 29-year-old left-handed opening batter achieved this historic feat during the fourth T20I of the five-match series against Sri Lanka at the Greenfield International Stadium in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

#### Key Points:

- **Historic Milestone Achievement - December 28, 2025:** Smriti Mandhana completed 10,000 runs in women's international cricket during India's fourth T20I against Sri Lanka at the Greenfield International Stadium in Thiruvananthapuram on Sunday, December 28, 2025. She entered the match needing 27 runs to reach the landmark and achieved it in just 20 deliveries. In the seventh over of Team India's innings, Mandhana drove left-arm spinner Nimasha Meepage down to long-on for a single to complete the historic milestone.
- **Fastest to 10,000 Runs - Record Speed:** Smriti Mandhana became the quickest player to reach 10,000 runs in women's international cricket, achieving the feat in just 281 innings across all three formats (Tests, ODIs, and T20Is). This surpasses the previous records held by other legends: Mithali Raj took 291 innings, Charlotte Edwards required 308 innings, and Suzie Bates needed 314 innings. Mandhana's achievement in 10 fewer innings than Mithali Raj demonstrates her exceptional consistency and scoring rate across formats. The 29-year-old accomplished this milestone in approximately 12 years since her international debut in April 2013, showcasing sustained excellence throughout her career.
- **Fastest ODI Century by an Indian - Breaking Virat Kohli's Record:** Mandhana rewrote the record books by registering the fastest ODI century by any Indian cricketer (male or female), reaching the milestone in just 50 balls against Australia.

This extraordinary achievement surpassed Virat Kohli's long-standing record of 52 balls, which he had also scored against Australia.

- **ICC Women's Cricket World Cup 2025 Performance:** Mandhana was vice-captain of the Indian team that won the 2025 ICC Women's Cricket World Cup for the first time in history. India defeated South Africa by 52 runs in the final at the DY Patil Stadium in Navi Mumbai on November 2, 2025, with Harmanpreet Kaur becoming the first Indian captain to lift an ICC trophy at home
- **Joint Record - Most International Centuries:** Smriti Mandhana is now level with Australian great Meg Lanning for the most international centuries in women's cricket, with 17 hundreds each across all formats. During the 2025 World Cup, she scored her 14th WODI century against New Zealand, which made her the joint record holder for most centuries in international cricket along with Lanning (who had 17 at that time).
- **T20I Records and Achievements:** Earlier in the same series against Sri Lanka in December 2025, Mandhana became the second woman batter globally (after Suzie Bates) and the first Indian to reach 4,000 runs in Women's T20 Internationals.
- **First Indian Woman with Centuries in All Three Formats:** On June 28, 2025, during a series against England, Smriti Mandhana scored her first WT20I century and became the first Indian woman cricketer to score a century in all three formats of international cricket (Tests, ODIs, and T20Is). This rare achievement demonstrates her versatility and adaptability across different formats of the game, showcasing technical prowess in the longer format (Tests), consistency in ODIs, and explosive power in the shortest format (T20Is). The ability to succeed across all formats is considered one of the hallmarks of complete batters in modern cricket.
- **ICC Awards and Recognition:** At the 2024 ICC Awards, Mandhana was named ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year and ICC Women's ODI Cricketer of the Year, recognizing her exceptional performances throughout the year. In January 2025, Wisden named her the Women's Leading Cricketer in the World for 2024, one of cricket's most prestigious individual honors. She received the Best International Cricketer award by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) in both 2018 and 2025, and was awarded the Arjuna Award by the Government of India in 2019 for excellence in sports.
- **Women's Premier League (WPL) Success:** In the inaugural auction of the Women's Premier League in February 2023, Mandhana was signed by Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) for ₹34 million (US\$400,000), making her the highest-paid player in the auction. She was appointed as the team's captain and led RCB to its maiden WPL title during the 2024 season, finishing as the second-highest run-scorer in the title-winning campaign.
- **Comparison with Mithali Raj's Legacy:** By becoming the second Indian woman to reach 10,000 international runs, Mandhana is carrying forward the legacy established by Mithali Raj, India's greatest run-scorer who retired with 10,868 runs across formats.

### Bhutan's Sonam Yeshey scripts historic 8-wicket T20I haul

**In the News:** Bhutan's left-arm spinner Sonam Yeshey created cricket history by becoming the first bowler ever to take eight wickets in a Twenty20 International match. The 22-year-old achieved this unprecedented feat during the third T20I against Myanmar at Gelephu International Cricket Ground in Gelephu Mindfulness City, returning remarkable figures of 8 for 7 from four overs to help Bhutan secure an 82-run victory.

#### Key Points:

- **Historic World Record:** Sonam Yeshey became the first bowler—in men's cricket, women's cricket, or any T20 format (international or domestic)—to claim eight wickets in a single T20 match. His final bowling figures of 8 for 7 from four overs (including one maiden) surpassed all previous T20 bowling records and have been officially recognized by the International Cricket Council (ICC).
- **Match Details:** In the third T20I played on December 26, 2025, at Gelephu International Cricket Ground, Bhutan batted first and scored 127 for 9 in their 20 overs. Yeshey's devastating spell then dismantled Myanmar's batting lineup, bowling them out for just 45 runs in 9.2 overs. Of his eight dismissals, six batters were caught, one was bowled, and one was dismissed leg before wicket (lbw).
- **Previous T20I Bowling Records:** Before Yeshey's achievement, only two bowlers had taken seven wickets in a men's T20I: Malaysia's Syazrul Idrus (7 for 8 against China in July 2023) and Bahrain's Ali Dawood (7 for 19 against Bhutan in 2025). Even in domestic T20 cricket, seven-wicket hauls were rare, achieved only by Colin Ackermann (7 for 18 for Leicestershire against Birmingham Bears in 2019) and Taskin Ahmed (7 for 19 for Durbar Rajshahi against Dhaka Capitals in 2025).



- **Women's T20I Records:** In women's T20I cricket, the best bowling figures remain 7 for 0 by Indonesia's Rohmalia against Mongolia in 2024. Four other women have achieved seven-wicket hauls in T20Is: Netherlands' Frederique Overdijk (7 for 3 vs France), Argentina's Alison Stocks (7 for 3 vs Peru), and Cyprus's Samantha Dunukedeniya (7 for 15 vs Czech Republic).
- **Sonam Yeshey's Career:** Born on December 3, 2003, Yeshey is a 22-year-old left-arm orthodox spinner who exclusively represents Bhutan in T20 Internationals. He made his T20I debut in July 2022 against Malaysia and immediately impressed with figures of 3 for 16. Following this historic performance, he has taken 38 wickets in 35 T20I matches, establishing himself as a key figure in Bhutan's national cricket team.
- **Player of the Match:** Yeshey was named Player of the Match for his extraordinary performance of 8 for 7, along with taking 2 catches in the field. His economical and destructive spell is being hailed by the ICC and global cricket community as "a spell for the ages" that has reset the boundaries of excellence in T20I bowling.

### Deepti Sharma Sets New Wicket Record in Women's T20 Cricket

**In the News:** India's star all-rounder Deepti Sharma etched her name in cricket history by becoming the highest wicket-taker in Women's T20 Internationals, surpassing Australia's Megan Schutt with her 152nd scalp. The milestone came during the fifth and final T20I against Sri Lanka at the Greenfield International Stadium in Thiruvananthapuram, where Deepti dismissed Nilakshika Silva with a sharp, skidding delivery that beat the inside edge to claim an LBW. India successfully defended 175 to win the match by 15 runs and complete a dominant 5-0 series sweep, capping off what Deepti described as a "transformative year" that included India's maiden ICC Women's World Cup triumph and her recognition as Player of the Tournament.

#### Key Points:

- **Historic Record Achievement - December 30, 2025:** Deepti Sharma became the highest wicket-taker in Women's T20 Internationals with 152 wickets, surpassing Australia's Megan Schutt who held the previous record of 151 wickets. The record-breaking moment arrived in the 14th over of Sri Lanka's innings when Deepti trapped middle-order batter Nilakshika Silva leg before wicket with a sharp, skidding delivery. The umpire's finger went up, marking wicket No. 152 in her T20I career — one more than Schutt's tally. Deepti had equalled Schutt's record of 151 wickets in the third T20I earlier in the series and had a chance to break it in the fourth T20I but went wicketless, meaning the wait continued into the final match.
- **First Player with 1000 Runs and 150 Wickets in T20Is:** Earlier in the same series against Sri Lanka (during the third T20I), Deepti Sharma became the first-ever cricketer across both men's and women's cricket to record the double milestone of 1,000 runs and 150 wickets in T20 Internationals. This unprecedented all-round achievement highlights her status as a complete cricketer in the format. Deepti has scored more than 1,100 runs in T20I cricket with an average of 23.40 and a strike rate of 104.26, including two half-centuries.
- **First Indian to 150 T20I Wickets:** Deepti Sharma became the first Indian cricketer, male or female, to reach 150 wickets in T20 Internationals. This milestone underscores her dominance and longevity in the format representing India. The second-best Indian bowler in Women's T20Is is spinner Radha Yadav with 103 wickets in 86 matches. Deepti and Radha are the only two Indian bowlers with more than 100 T20I wickets on the women's list. In men's cricket, no Indian bowler has yet reached the 150-wicket mark in T20Is, making Deepti's achievement even more remarkable. Pakistan's Nida Dar is the third-highest wicket-taker in Women's T20I cricket with 144 wickets in 152 matches, significantly behind Deepti's 152.
- **2025 ICC Women's World Cup Player of the Tournament:** Deepti Sharma was named Player of the Tournament at the 2025 ICC Women's World Cup held on home soil, where India lifted their maiden title. She delivered a rare tournament double, scoring over 215 runs (some sources cite 200+) and claiming 22 wickets (some sources cite 20+) in 9 matches during the competition.
- **Major Career Achievements:** Deepti Sharma was part of the Indian team that won the 2025 Women's Cricket World Cup (India's first), the 2022 Women's Asia Cup, and the gold medal at the 2022 Asian Games. She was part of the team that reached the final of the 2017 Women's Cricket World Cup where India lost to England by nine runs. In that tournament, she scored 216 runs from 8 matches at an average of 30.86 and picked up 12 wickets with best bowling figures of 3/59 against Australia. In June 2018, she was awarded the Jagmohan Dalmiya Trophy for Best Domestic Senior Women's Cricketer by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). She has also played in international T20

### Indian Women's Hockey End 2025 With Asia Cup Silver

**In the News:** The Indian Women's Hockey Team concluded 2025 with a standout silver medal at the Women's Asia Cup held in Hangzhou, China, in September 2025, after losing the final 1-4 to hosts China. Despite the absence of penalty corner specialist Deepika and veteran goalkeeper Savita, India delivered a compelling campaign, powering through the group stages with

convincing wins before advancing to the final. The team's 2025 journey was marked by contrasts—continental success with the Asia Cup silver reinforcing India's consistent threat in Asian competitions, while global challenges in the 2024-25 FIH Hockey Pro League resulted in relegation to the FIH Nations Cup after finishing last with just 10 points from 16 matches.

#### Key Points:

- **Asia Cup Silver Medal - September 14, 2025:** The Indian Women's Hockey Team clinched the silver medal at the Women's Asia Cup 2025 in Hangzhou, China, on September 14, 2025, after a 1-4 loss against the host nation in the final. India made a strong start by taking the lead in the very first minute through a penalty corner converted by veteran forward Navneet Kaur with a powerful strike. However, China increased the tempo and attacked with intent throughout the match. China's goals came from Captain Ou Zixia (21'), Li Hong (40'), Zou Meirong (51'), and Zhong Jiaqi (53').
- **Starting 2025 with Confidence - 2024 Asian Champions Trophy Victory:** The Indian team began 2025 with strong confidence and credibility as one of Asia's top sides, riding high after their stellar triumph at the 2024 Women's Asian Champions Trophy in Rajgir. The team sealed that championship with a narrow 1-0 victory over China in the final, demonstrating their ability to prevail in tight, pressure-filled contests. This victory established India as a formidable force in Asian hockey and raised expectations for 2025
- **Australia Tour - April 2025:** India started 2025 strongly with a five-match tour of Australia in late April, where the squad secured valuable international exposure against the world-class Hockeyroos. Though India finished the Perth campaign with mixed results—losing the opening two matches 2-0 and 3-2—the team showed resilience by claiming a spirited 1-0 victory in the final encounter through Navneet Kaur's 21st-minute strike
- **FIH Hockey Pro League Struggles - Relegation:** On the global stage, the 2024-25 FIH Hockey Pro League proved to be a difficult campaign for the Indian Women's Team. Facing top-ranked opposition including Australia, Argentina, Belgium, and China, India struggled for consistency and finished last in the standings with just 10 points from 16 matches. The team registered only two wins while losing 11 matches, including a devastating run of defeats in their final eight games that confirmed relegation to the FIH Nations Cup.
- **Navneet Kaur - Standout Performer:** Veteran forward Navneet Kaur emerged as one of India's most consistent performers throughout 2025. She scored crucial goals at key moments: the winning goal (21st minute) in the final match of the Australia tour (1-0 victory), the opening goal in the Asia Cup final (1st minute) through a powerful penalty corner strike, and likely contributed in multiple other matches throughout the year.

## ENVIRONMENT

### Supreme Court special bench to hear suo motu case on 'definition' of Aravalli

**In the News:** The Supreme Court of India took suo motu cognizance of concerns surrounding the definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges, scheduling a hearing before a special vacation bench led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on December 29, 2025. The development comes amid mounting controversy over the court's November 20, 2025 judgment that adopted a uniform elevation-based definition for the Aravalli Hills, with environmentalists and opposition parties raising concerns that the revised definition could open vast stretches of the ancient mountain range to mining activities.

#### Key Points:

- **Suo Motu Case Registration:** The Supreme Court registered a suo motu writ petition titled "In Re: Definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges and Ancillary Issues," to be heard by a three-judge vacation bench comprising Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, Justice JK Maheshwari, and Justice Augustine George Masih on December 29, 2025. The court took cognizance on its own motion amid widespread concerns over environmental protection of the ecologically fragile Aravalli range.
- **November 20, 2025 Judgment Background:** The Supreme Court had delivered a 29-page judgment on November 20, 2025, in proceedings arising from the long-running environmental litigation in T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India case. The bench, then headed by Chief Justice BR Gavai along with Justices K Vinod Chandran and NV Anjaria, accepted recommendations from a Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) committee regarding a uniform definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges across Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.
- **Elevation-Based Definition:** The court approved an elevation-linked definition wherein "any landform located in the Aravalli districts, having an elevation of 100 metres or more from the local relief, shall be termed as Aravalli Hills." The entire landform lying within the area enclosed by the lowest contour line, together with the hill, its supporting slopes and associated landforms irrespective of their gradient, is deemed to constitute part of the Aravalli Hills.

- **Aravalli Range Definition:** The court defined "Aravalli Range" as "two or more Aravalli Hills located within a proximity of 500 metres from each other, measured from the outermost point on the boundary of the lowest contour line on either side." The entire area of landforms falling between the lowest contour lines of these hills, along with associated features such as hills, hillocks, and supporting slopes, is included as part of Aravalli Range.
- **Historical Context - Two Parallel Cases:** The Supreme Court noted that issues related to Aravalli mining were being heard in two separate cases: M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (1985, focused on Haryana mining) and T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India (1995, broader forest conservation including Rajasthan). In January 2024, the court directed that both matters be consolidated and placed before the Chief Justice of India to be heard by a single bench to avoid conflicting orders..
- **Mining Ban and Management Plan:** The Supreme Court directed that no new mining leases shall be granted until the finalization of a Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM) for the entire Aravalli Hills and Ranges. The court mandated that the MoEF&CC, through the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE), prepare a comprehensive, science-based MPSM involving geo-referenced ecological assessment to identify permissible mining areas, ecologically sensitive zones, conservation-critical areas, and restoration priority areas.

### Energy storage, green hydrogen to fundamentally reshape India's renewable energy ecosystem"

**In the News:** India's renewable energy sector entered a transformative phase with energy storage and green hydrogen emerging as fundamental pillars reshaping the country's clean energy ecosystem. The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy announced that India's focus is shifting from rapid capacity addition to building a robust, dispatchable, and resilient energy system, with Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) and the National Green Hydrogen Mission driving the transition toward firm renewable power and decarbonization of hard-to-abate industrial sectors.

#### Key Points:

- **Strategic Shift in Renewable Energy:** India's renewable energy sector is transitioning from quantity-focused growth to quality and integration, with current installed renewable capacity exceeding 197 GW (excluding large hydro). The emphasis is now on hybrid projects, energy storage, grid integration, and green hydrogen to ensure firm, dispatchable clean energy by 2030.
- **BESS Market Growth:** India's Battery Energy Storage Systems market was valued at approximately ₹65,130 crore (\$7.8 billion) in 2024 and is projected to reach ₹2.67 lakh crore (\$32 billion) by 2030, representing an impressive compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 26%. As of December 2024, India's installed BESS capacity reached 442 MW, projected to expand to 74 GW by 2032.
- **National Green Hydrogen Mission:** Launched in January 2023 with an outlay of ₹19,744 crore until Financial Year 2029-30, the National Green Hydrogen Mission aims to make India a global hub for production, use, and export of green hydrogen. The mission targets production of 5 million metric tonnes per annum (MMT) of green hydrogen by 2030, requiring 125 GW of additional renewable energy capacity and over ₹8 lakh crore in total investments.
- **Green Hydrogen Production Capacity:** As of May 2025, 19 companies have been allocated a cumulative annual production capacity of 862,000 tonnes of green hydrogen, and 15 firms have been awarded 3,000 MW annual electrolyzer manufacturing capacity. As of August 2025, India had 158 green hydrogen projects at various development stages, though 94% of planned capacity is yet to move beyond the announcement stage.
- **Green Hydrogen Hubs:** In October 2025, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy recognized three major ports—Deendayal Port Authority (Gujarat), V.O. Chidambaranar Port Authority (Tamil Nadu), and Paradip Port Authority (Odisha)—as Green Hydrogen Hubs under the National Green Hydrogen Mission. These coastal gateways will serve as integrated centers for production, consumption, and future export.
- **Green Hydrogen Certification Scheme:** Launched in April 2025, the Green Hydrogen Certification Scheme of India (GHCI) provides a national framework to certify hydrogen as "green" by assessing greenhouse gas emissions across the entire production cycle. The scheme ensures only hydrogen produced using renewable energy within prescribed emission limits can be officially labeled as Green Hydrogen, providing transparency and credibility for domestic and export markets.

### Supreme Court Pauses Aravalli Hills Order, Seeks Fresh Expert Review

**In the News:** Supreme Court of India stayed its own November 20, 2025 judgment on the definition of the Aravalli Hills, acknowledging that the approved definition could have far-reaching environmental consequences. A vacation bench led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant placed the earlier order in abeyance, responding to widespread protests and concerns that the 100-metre elevation criterion could open nearly 90% of the Aravalli range to mining.



**Key Points:**

- **Stay Order - December 29, 2025:** In a rare course correction, the Supreme Court on Monday, December 29, 2025, stayed its own November 20, 2025 ruling on the Aravalli Hills definition, placing the Committee's recommendations together with the findings and directions in the earlier judgment in abeyance. The court clarified that the stay would remain in force until the proceedings reach finality, ensuring that no irreversible administrative or ecological measures are undertaken under the current framework. This represents a dramatic turn of events, with the apex court pausing a controversial redefinition that had ignited widespread protests and environmental alarm barely a month after its issuance.
- **Suo Motu Cognisance Amid Public Outcry:** The Supreme Court took suo motu (on its own) cognisance of the controversy surrounding the Aravalli Hills definition on December 28, 2025 (Saturday), following widespread protests and mounting criticism from environmentalists, opposition parties, scientists, and residents. Public anger spilled onto the streets with protests erupting after the revised definition left vast stretches vulnerable to regulated mining.
- **Background - November 20, 2025 Judgment:** The controversy stems from the Supreme Court's judgment delivered on November 20, 2025, by a bench led by then Chief Justice of India BR Gavai (also comprising Justice K Vinod Chandran and Justice NV Anjaria). The court had accepted recommendations from a government-appointed expert committee to define the Aravalli Hills uniformly across Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.
- **Environmental Concerns - 90% Exclusion:** The November 20 definition was widely criticized as being exclusionary and inconsistent with the Aravalli range's geological and ecological characteristics. According to Forest Survey of India (FSI) internal assessment and mapping cited in the judgment, only 1,048 out of 12,081 identified hills in Rajasthan met the 100-metre height threshold—meaning over 90-91% of the range's hills would lose their protected status under the new definition.
- **Court's Recognition of Ambiguities:** Chief Justice Surya Kant acknowledged during the December 29 hearing that the earlier definition left room for significant ambiguity, especially regarding whether it broadened "non-Aravalli" areas and reduced the scope of protected areas. The bench expressed concern that the ecological impact of narrowing the definition had not been sufficiently examined. The court cautioned that allowing mining in gaps between hills could irreversibly weaken the range's environmental functions, emphasizing that ecosystems do not function in fragments and the structural integrity of the Aravalli range must be preserved as a whole.
- **New High-Powered Expert Committee:** The Supreme Court directed the formation of a new High-Powered Expert Committee "comprising domain experts" to critically reassess the earlier committee's report and to clarify the definition of the Aravalli Hills and Ranges. This fresh committee will replace the previous bureaucrat-heavy panel and will be composed of independent scientific experts. The new committee has been tasked with conducting a comprehensive, holistic scientific reassessment of the framework governing protection and potential mining in the region, examining the matter from multiple ecological, geological, and environmental perspectives.
- **Five Key Areas for Expert Assessment:** The Supreme Court tasked the new High-Powered Committee to investigate and clarify five specific critical areas: **(1) Specific Enumeration:** A detailed identification of the specific regions/territories that would be covered by the new definition. **(2) Territories Excluded:** Identification of territories that would be excluded from the Aravalli area under the proposed definition, examining whether such omissions risk erasure or degradation and thereby compromise the ecological integrity of the range. **(3) Sustainable Mining Analysis:** An analysis of whether "sustainable mining" or "regulated mining" within the newly demarcated Aravalli area, notwithstanding regulatory oversight, would result in any adverse ecological consequences. **(4) Definitional Scope Issues:** Whether defining the Aravalli Hills and Ranges only as hills above 100 metres with a 500-meter strip between them paradoxically shrinks protection, narrowing the safeguarded area instead of covering the broader ecosystem. **(5) Temporal Environmental Impact Assessment:** Multi-temporal evaluation of the short-term and long-term environmental impacts resulting from implementation of the recommended definition and its associated directions.

**Govt Declares Parvati Arga Bird Sanctuary as Eco-Sensitive Zone**

**In the News:** The Government of India has declared the Parvati-Argha Bird Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh as an **Eco-Sensitive Zone** to protect its unique biodiversity and regulate activities around the protected area for ecological preservation and responsible tourism development.

**Key Points:**

- **Declaration:** The Government has officially declared the Parvati-Argha Bird Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh as an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) to strengthen environmental protection.

- **Location:** The sanctuary is situated in the **Gonda district** of Uttar Pradesh.
- **Sanctuary Size & Habitat:** The area covers around **1,084 hectares** and consists of wetland habitats that support diverse avifauna.
- **Biodiversity Importance:** It is home to resident and **migratory birds**, including species that travel from Central Asia and Tibet during winter, highlighting its ecological significance.
- **Objectives of ESZ:** The declaration seeks to protect biodiversity by **regulating developmental and human activities** in the surrounding areas and developing the sanctuary as a **responsible ecotourism destination**.
- **Eco-Sensitive Zone Role:** An ESZ acts as a **buffer zone** around protected areas, regulating activities that could harm the environment, such as industrial projects and unplanned construction, thereby preserving ecological balance.

### India Records 166 Tiger Deaths in 2025, NTCA Data Shows

**In the News:** India recorded the loss of 166 tigers in 2025, marking a sharp rise of 40 deaths compared to 126 in 2024, according to the latest official data compiled by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and state forest departments. The figures, released on the first day of the New Year, represent the highest annual tiger mortality in the country in over a decade. Of the 166 deceased tigers, 31 were cubs, with experts attributing a large share of deaths to territorial infighting driven by space constraints, while approximately 60% of fatalities occurred outside protected areas, raising concerns over habitat fragmentation and human-wildlife conflict despite India's growing tiger population of 3,682 as per the 2022 census.

#### Key Points:

- **Total Tiger Deaths - 166 in 2025:** India, home to the world's largest tiger population, lost 166 tigers in 2025 due to various natural and human-induced causes, as per the latest data from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). This figure represents a significant increase of 40 deaths—a 31.7% rise—compared to 126 tiger deaths reported in 2024. The 166 fatalities mark the second-highest annual tiger mortality in the last five years, surpassed only by 2023 when India recorded its worst year with 182 tiger deaths.
- **State-wise Breakdown - Madhya Pradesh Tops:** Madhya Pradesh, dubbed the country's 'tiger state' and home to the highest tiger population in the world with 785 tigers according to the 2022 census, recorded the highest number of deaths at 55 tigers—accounting for approximately 33% of the national total. Following Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra reported 38 tiger deaths (some sources cite 28, reflecting reporting variations), making it the second-most affected state. Karnataka recorded 22 tiger deaths (some sources cite 15), followed by Uttarakhand with 18 deaths. Other states with significant losses included Kerala with 13 tiger deaths, Assam with 12, and Rajasthan with 11.
- **Cub Mortality - 31 Cubs Lost:** Of the 166 deceased tigers, 31 were cubs, highlighting the particular vulnerability of younger animals to various threats. However, in 2025, the NTCA began comprehensively reporting cub deaths, providing a more complete picture of tiger mortality across all age groups. The 31 cub deaths represent approximately 18.7% of total fatalities. Wildlife biologists note that cub mortality is a natural part of tiger population dynamics, with typically only 50% of cubs surviving to adulthood even under favorable conditions.
- **First Death of 2025 - January 2 in Maharashtra:** The year's first tiger fatality was reported from the Bramhapuri forest division in Maharashtra on January 2, 2025, where an adult male tiger died. This incident, involving a dominant male in Maharashtra's Bramhapuri region, set a grim tone for the year ahead.
- **India's Tiger Population - 3,682 in 2022 Census:** According to the last official All-India Tiger Estimation (AITE) data released on International Tiger Day in 2023, the number of tigers in India increased from 2,967 in 2018 to 3,682 in 2022—an addition of 715 tigers representing an annual growth rate of approximately 6%. India is estimated to host nearly 75% of the world's tiger population, making it the global stronghold for this critically endangered species. The country now has 53 tiger reserves covering approximately 75,000 square kilometers.
- **Project Tiger - 50+ Years of Conservation:** The current tiger mortality challenges must be viewed against the backdrop of Project Tiger, India's flagship conservation program launched in 1973 when tiger numbers had plummeted to an estimated 1,800 or fewer. Over five decades, Project Tiger has achieved remarkable success, elevating India's tiger population from critically low levels to 3,682 by 2022—nearly doubling from around 2,000 in the early 2000s.

## STATIC

**Congress's 140th Foundation Day: 3 Things to Know About the Party's History, and How Gandhi Viewed It**

**In the News:** The Indian National Congress celebrated its 140th Foundation Day with a flag-hoisting ceremony at Indira Bhawan in New Delhi. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, Parliamentary Party Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, and other senior leaders attended the ceremony. Kharge paid tribute to Congress freedom fighters, highlighted the party's historic role in India's independence movement, and warned that democracy in the country is currently under threat while criticizing the BJP-led government for weakening institutions built by the Congress.

**Key Points:**

- **Foundation in 1885 - First Modern Nationalist Movement:** The Indian National Congress was founded on December 28, 1885, in Bombay (now Mumbai) at Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College (also called Das Tejpal Sanskrit College) in the presence of 72 delegates. The founder and General Secretary was Allan Octavian Hume, a retired British Civil Servant and former Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer who had resigned from government service in 1882. Besides Hume, two additional British members (both Scottish civil servants) were among the founding group: William Wedderburn and Justice (later Sir) John Jardine. The INC was the first modern nationalist movement to emerge in the British Empire in Asia and Africa, marking a watershed moment in organized political resistance to colonial rule.
- **Hume's Vision and the "Safety Valve" Theory:** Allan Octavian Hume had been a British civil servant assigned to an administrative position in India in the late 1840s. The 1857 Indian Rebellion profoundly touched Hume, who noted with horror the violence committed by British forces against the Indian people during the revolt. The "Safety Valve Theory" suggested Hume established Congress to provide a controlled outlet for mounting discontent among educated Indians, though modern historians believe early Congress leaders utilized Hume as a "lightning conductor" to unite nationalist forces while maintaining this facade.
- **Mahatma Gandhi's Transformational Role (1915-1948) - The Gandhian Era:** Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) returned to India from South Africa in 1915, and his efforts in South Africa were well known among both the educated class and the masses. During 1917 and 1918, Gandhi was involved in three successful struggles: Champaran Satyagraha, Ahmedabad Mill Strike, and Kheda Satyagraha, giving India its first victories in the freedom struggle and building public confidence that the British could be defeated through organized resistance. After World War I, the Congress came to be associated with Gandhi, who remained its unofficial spiritual leader and icon even though he served as INC President only once—at the 1924 Belgaum session.
- **Karachi Resolution 1931 - Foundation of India's Constitution:** The Karachi Session of the Indian National Congress, held in March 1931 under the presidency of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, adopted historic resolutions on fundamental rights and economic policy that profoundly influenced the drafting of India's Constitution.

**Savitribai Phule 195th Birth Anniversary: Life and Legacy of India's First Woman Teacher**

**In the News:** India commemorated the 195th birth anniversary of Savitribai Phule, widely celebrated as India's first female teacher and a pioneering social reformer who dedicated her life to women's education and social equality. The day is observed as Women's Education Day nationwide, with Telangana becoming the first Indian state to officially declare January 3 as Women Teachers' Day through a government order dated January 2, 2025.

**Key Points:**

- **Birth and Early Life:** Savitribai Phule was born on January 3, 1831, in the village of Naigaon in Satara District, Maharashtra, located about 15 km from Shirval and 50 km from Pune. At the age of 9 or 10, she was married to Jyotirao Phule (then 13 years old), a fellow social reformer who would become her lifelong partner in revolutionary social work. At the time of her marriage, Savitribai was completely illiterate, which was typical for girls of her time and social background.
- **Educational Transformation:** After completing her primary education under Jyotirao's guidance, she pursued further studies with his friends Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar. She received formal teacher training at two institutions: one run by American missionary Cynthia Farrar in Ahmednagar, and another at a Normal School in Pune. Through this rigorous training, Savitribai became India's first professionally trained female teacher and headmistress, transforming from an illiterate child bride to the nation's pioneering woman educator.
- **India's First Girls' School—Bhidewada (1848):** In January 1848, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule, along with Sagunabai Kshirsagar (Jyotirao's sister, herself a revolutionary feminist and mentor), opened India's first girls' school at Bhidewada in Pune, with a progressive curriculum of mathematics, science, and social studies—revolutionary subjects that defied traditional expectations for female education. Bhidewada was the home of Tatyasaheb Bhide, who was inspired by the trio's work and provided them space.



- **Mahila Seva Mandal (1851-1852):** In 1851-1852, Savitribai founded the Mahila Seva Mandal, a platform aimed at empowering women and challenging oppressive societal norms. The organization welcomed members from all castes, fostering a sense of unity and breaking the chains of caste-based discrimination at a time when caste segregation was rigidly enforced.
- **Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha—Preventing Infanticide (1853-1863):** Savitribai's vision extended far beyond literacy to dismantling multiple oppressive structures simultaneously. In 1853, the Phule couple transformed their Pune home into a shelter for Brahmin widows who had been sexually exploited by men, providing them with safe space and dignity. In 1854, she opened a larger shelter for widows, destitute women, and child brides rejected by their families, offering them not just refuge but also education. The shelter offered safe space for pregnant widows and rape victims to deliver their children, saving countless lives that would otherwise have been lost to infanticide.
- **Satyashodhak Samaj—Society of Truth Seekers (1873):** Savitribai played a key role in the Satyashodhak Samaj ("Society of Truth Seekers"), founded by her husband Jyotirao Phule in 1873 to promote social equality and unite lower castes and marginalized communities against Brahminical oppression. The organization advocated for Satyashodhak marriages where dowries were abolished, ceremonies were conducted without Brahmin priests, and equality in relationships was emphasized.
- **Telangana's Historic Recognition—Women Teachers' Day:** On January 2, 2025, the Government of Telangana issued G.O.Rt. No.9, officially declaring January 3 as "Women Teachers' Day" throughout the state, making Telangana the first state in India to celebrate Savitribai Phule's birth anniversary as an official state function.

## OBITUARY

### Khaleda Zia, Bangladesh's First Woman Prime Minister, Dies

**In the News:** Begum Khaleda Zia, Bangladesh's first female Prime Minister and a towering figure in the nation's turbulent politics, passed away at the age of 79-80 at Evercare Hospital in Dhaka following prolonged illness. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairperson died at 6:00 AM local time (00:00 GMT), shortly after the Fajr (dawn) prayer, with her son Tarique Rahman and family members by her side. Bangladesh's interim government declared three days of state mourning, with funeral prayers scheduled at the National Parliament building on December 31, 2025, before burial alongside her late husband, assassinated former President Ziaur Rahman

#### Key Points:

- **Historic Significance - First Female Prime Minister:** Khaleda Zia was the first female Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the second female Prime Minister in the Muslim world after Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto. She served as Prime Minister of Bangladesh twice: first from 1991 to 1996, and again from 2001 to 2006 (some sources specify 2001-2004 for her second cabinet). She was the chairperson and leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) from 1984 onwards until her death, maintaining this position for over 40 years. The party was founded by her husband, former President Ziaur Rahman, in 1978.
- **Husband - President Ziaur Rahman:** Her husband, Ziaur Rahman, rose to prominence after Bangladesh's 1971 independence war against Pakistan. He grabbed power as a military chief in 1977 and became President of Bangladesh. In 1978, he formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), establishing a political platform centered on nationalism, multi-party democracy, and a market-oriented economy.
- **Entry into Politics and Democracy Movement:** After her husband's assassination in 1981, Khaleda Zia was silent about politics for years. However, she eventually assumed the chairmanship of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1984, inheriting her husband's political ideology. Her efforts contributed significantly to the ousting of dictator and former army chief H.M. Ershad in 1990, paving the way for democratic elections and civilian government. Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, former commerce minister in Khaleda's 2001-04 cabinet and current BNP leader, stated: "Her commitment to democracy and her patriotism had a profound impact on party workers."
- **Rivalry with Sheikh Hasina - "Battling Begums":** Khaleda Zia's archrivalry with Sheikh Hasina, another former Prime Minister and daughter of Bangladesh's independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, defined the country's politics for over three decades. The two leaders came to be known as the "battling begums" (begum being an honorific traditionally reserved for Muslim women of authority). Both women fought for democracy against authoritarianism. Their bitter rivalry shaped Bangladeshi politics from 1991 onwards, with power alternating between the two leaders and their parties—Khaleda's BNP and Hasina's Awami League. With Hasina now in exile in India following her ouster in 2024, Khaleda's death on December 30, 2025, closes this more than three-decade-long chapter of the "battling begums" era in Bangladeshi politics.

- **Supreme Court Acquittal - January 2025:** In January 2025, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh acquitted Khaleda Zia in the last corruption case against her, clearing all charges. On November 27, 2024, she was acquitted in the graft cases. This acquittal would have allowed her to run in the February 2026 general election (some sources refer to it as February 12, 2026). Following her acquittal, various privileges that had been removed by Sheikh Hasina's government were restored: on August 13, 2024, the home ministry restored her police escort privileges (removed in 2015), and on August 19, 2024, her bank accounts (frozen since 2007) were ordered unblocked by the National Board of Revenue.
- **International Recognition:** On May 24, 2011, the New Jersey State Senate in the United States honored Khaleda Zia as a "Fighter for Democracy," recognizing her contributions to democratic governance and her resistance against authoritarian rule in Bangladesh.
- **Characterization as "Mother of Democracy":** Despite controversies, Khaleda Zia was widely referred to as the "Mother of Democracy" in Bangladesh for her role in the pro-democracy movement against military dictatorship in the 1980s and her subsequent leadership in establishing multi-party democracy.

## ECONOMY

### Why silver surfed a 160% wave in 2025

**In the News:** In 2025, silver experienced its most spectacular price surge in over four decades, soaring by approximately 160% to reach a historic peak of \$80 per troy ounce in late December. The precious metal started the year at around \$30 per ounce and climbed to record highs, outperforming even gold's impressive 65-70% rally. This unprecedented rise was driven by a perfect storm of factors including Trump administration's trade policies, severe supply constraints, explosive industrial demand, China's upcoming export restrictions, and heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

#### Key Points:

- **Record Price Performance:** Silver prices surged from approximately \$30 per ounce in January 2025 to a historic high of \$80 per troy ounce on December 30, 2025, representing an increase of 160-166% year-to-date. This marks silver's best annual performance since 1979 when it rose 434.8%. The London silver bullion fixed at around \$72 per ounce on December 31, 2025, recording a 144.4% gain for the year.
- **Trump Administration and Economic Uncertainty:** The rally accelerated sharply in late April 2025 following President Donald Trump's volatile tariff rollout on "Liberation Day," creating widespread economic uncertainty. Concerns over chaotic trade policies, potential dollar weakening, and global economic instability drove investors toward precious metals as safe-haven assets. The U.S. dollar declined more than 9% in 2025 against a basket of major currencies, making silver more attractive to foreign buyers.
- **China's Export Restrictions (January 1, 2026):** China announced stringent silver export controls effective January 1, 2026, requiring government-issued licenses for all silver exports. Only large state-certified companies with annual production capacity of at least 80 tons will qualify for export permits. This policy affects 60-70% of global silver supply, as China controls the majority of global silver refining infrastructure. Tesla CEO Elon Musk publicly warned on December 26, 2025, that "this is not good" as silver is critical for industrial processes.
- **Industrial Demand Explosion:** Silver's industrial applications now account for over 50% of global demand, driven by rapid growth in renewable energy, electric vehicles, and technology sectors. Solar photovoltaic (PV) manufacturing consumed over 25% of annual global silver supply in 2024-2025, with demand continuing to surge as global solar capacity expands. A standard electric vehicle contains 25-50 grams of silver in components. AI data centers, semiconductors, and 5G infrastructure also require significant silver quantities.
- **Record October Exports from China:** In October 2025, China recorded record exports of over 660 tons of silver, much of which went to Western warehouses in London and New York. These shipments represented "front-loading" as Chinese exporters rushed to deliver goods ahead of anticipated U.S. tariffs and the January 1, 2026, export restrictions. This flow is expected to cease abruptly with the new licensing requirements.
- **December 2025 Volatility:** Silver experienced extreme volatility in late December 2025. On December 30, it hit a record \$80 per ounce overnight but then suffered its largest single-day drop since February 2021, falling 8.7% in one session. The Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) raised margin requirements for silver futures on December 27, requiring traders to post more cash to hold positions, which temporarily dampened prices. Silver rebounded 10.59% the following day to close at \$77.92.

## RBI's Financial Stability Report 2025 Highlights Strong Capital Buffers, Rising Risks

**In the News:** The Reserve Bank of India released its biannual Financial Stability Report for December 2025, affirming that India's financial system remains robust and resilient despite global uncertainties, with scheduled commercial banks maintaining strong capital buffers and asset quality reaching multi-decadal lows, while cautioning against emerging risks from unsecured retail lending, fintech expansion, stablecoins, and external vulnerabilities.

### Key Points:

- **Report Release and Assessment Body:** The Reserve Bank of India released the December 2025 edition of its half-yearly Financial Stability Report (FSR) on Wednesday, December 31, 2025. The report reflects the collective assessment of the Sub-Committee of the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC), which includes all major financial sector regulators in India. The FSR is a biannual publication (released in June and December) that evaluates systemic risks, banking sector resilience, and emerging threats to India's financial stability.
- **Strong GDP Growth Performance:** India's real GDP growth has consistently surprised on the upside in the first half of FY 2025-26, registering 7.8% in Q1 (April-June 2025) and 8.2% in Q2 (July-September 2025). Growth was primarily driven by strong private consumption and sustained public capital expenditure.
- **Improved Asset Quality—Multi-Decadal Low in NPAs:** The asset quality of Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs) has improved significantly, with the Gross Non-Performing Assets (GNPA) ratio declining to 2.1% in September 2025 (some sources cite 2.2%), marking a multi-decadal low. The Net NPA ratio stood at a record low of 0.5%, reflecting rigorous credit discipline and high provisioning. This represents a dramatic improvement from the GNPA ratio of 6.9% in September 2021 and 5.0% in September 2022.
- **Strong Capital Adequacy—Robust Capital Buffers:** Banks in India continue to maintain adequate capital buffers well above regulatory minimums. The Capital to Risk-Weighted Assets Ratio (CRAR) remained strong as of September 2025. Public sector banks reported a CRAR of 16%, while private sector banks stood higher at 18.1%. Strong capital adequacy ensures that banks can absorb potential shocks and continue lending even during periods of stress.
- **Sectors Exposed to US Tariff Risks:** The RBI analyzed sectors potentially exposed to higher US tariffs, noting that the share of banks' lending to these sectors remained steady at 12.6% as of end-September 2025, with advances to the textiles sector forming the largest share. In terms of asset quality, while the Special Mention Account (SMA) ratio in these sectors remained broadly stable, the GNPA ratio remained higher than the overall banking system average.