



HYDERABAD

Nalgonda officials chalk out plan to tackle water shortage **page 4**

NATION

Prez lists Ram Mandir as key success **page 7**

WORLD

EU to launch Red Sea mission to protect commercial ships **page 9**



Court allows puja in cellar of Gyanvapi

Pujari to be appointed; Muslim side to move HC

PTI
VARANASI

The district court on Wednesday ruled that a priest can perform prayers before the idols in a cellar of the Gyanvapi Masjid here, a significant development in the legal battle over the mosque adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple. The prayers will be conducted — apparently at regular intervals — by a 'pujari' nominated by the Kashi Vishwanath temple trust and the petitioner, who has claimed that his grandfather offered puja in the cellar up to December 1993.

While the VHP welcomed the order, Muslim side counsel Mumtaz Ahmed said they will challenge it in the High Court. The judge said the plaintiffs can submit their objections before the court on February 8. The court directed the local administration to make arrangements in seven days for prayers in the cellar. This will involve "proper arrangements" with metal barricades at the complex. According to Hindu side counsel Madan Mohan Yadav, the barricades before the Nandi statue facing the mosque's 'wazukhana' will be removed to make way. The order by judge AK Vishvesha comes day after an Archeological Survey of India (ASI) report on the mosque complex was made public. The ASI survey, ordered by the same court, in connection with a related case,

Gyanvapi mosque-Kashi Vishwanath temple dispute



MOSQUE LOCATED IN VARANASI, UTTAR PRADESH

HOW CURRENT ROW STARTED

- In 2019, lawyer Vijay Shankar Rastogi seeks archaeological survey
- In 2021, 5 Hindu women seek permission to conduct daily prayers at shrine behind western wall of mosque complex, protection of idols
- Hindu side claims 'Shivling' found in 'wazukhana' of mosque complex, but Muslim side says it was a 'fountain'
- In May 2023, Varanasi district court agrees to hear plea for ASI survey, following Allahabad HC order
- Asks ASI to submit survey report by December 11

Built by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1669 after demolishing a Shiva temple, Kashi Vishwanath temple, on the site

Presence of temple at mosque site highly contested

Many petitions filed in several courts, including Supreme Court, Allahabad High Court, Varanasi district court

LEGAL BATTLE BEGINS IN 1991

- Petition filed before Varanasi Civil Judge on behalf of Swayambhu Jyotirlinga Bhagwan Vishveswar and 5 others
- Seek restoration of Gyanvapi land to Kashi Vishwanath temple
- In 2020, plaintiffs approach Varanasi Civil Court again to reopen the case
- Allahabad HC stays proceedings

suggested that the mosque was constructed during Aurangzeb's rule over the remains of a Hindu temple. Wednesday's order was delivered on the plea of

Shailendra Kumar Pathak who claimed that his maternal grandfather, priest Somnath Vyas, offered prayers till December 1993, advocate Yadav said.

Soren arrested in PMLA case

Resigns as Jharkhand CM; Champai Soren named successor

RANCHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Wednesday arrested JMM leader Hemant Soren after over seven hours of questioning on money laundering charges in an alleged land fraud case, official sources said.

Before his arrest, Soren tendered his resignation as Jharkhand Chief Minister to Governor CP Radhakrishnan at Raj Bhavan and was then taken to the ED office here. Senior JMM leader Champai Soren was named as his successor.

Sources claimed that 48-year-old Hemant Soren was "evasive" in his replies during his questioning and

“ The ED put across 15 questions to Soren... He was evasive in his replies during questioning and hence the agency took him into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act

— SOURCES

hence was taken into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The ED is expected to produce Soren before a special PMLA court here and the agency will seek his remand for custodial interrogation, the sources said. The sources said the agency put across 15 questions to Soren

during the second round of questioning in the case. He was first quizzed on January 20 this year.

The JMM leader was shown the typed statements he recorded with the agency and before taking him in custody, his signatures were sought on these documents. It was, however, not clear if he signed them.

The allegations of money laundering against the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader pertain to the alleged illegal possession of certain immovable assets apart from his purported links with members of the 'land mafia'.

Meanwhile, JMM's Rajya Sabha MP Mahua Maji claimed that Hemant Soren was in the "custody" of the "Hemant Soren has resigned as the Chief Minister of Jharkhand. The ruling JMM-Congress-RJD alliance has proposed the name of senior JMM leader Champai Soren as the new CM," state Congress president Rajesh Thakur said. (SEE PAGE 2) (RELATED REPORTS PAGE 7)

Focus on students' well-being

HYDERABAD | PAGE 02

Biden labels Trump a 'loser'

WORLD | PAGE 09



Srikanth enters second round

SPORT | PAGE 11



PPBL told to stop services after Feb 29

MUMBAI

In a major action against Paytm Payments Bank (PPBL), the Reserve Bank on Wednesday directed the lender to stop accepting deposits or top-ups in customer accounts, wallets, FASTags and other instruments after February 29. However, any interest, cashbacks or refunds may be credited back to customers any time. PTI (FULL REPORT PAGE 8)

Punjabgutta PS staff transferred

CITY BUREAU
Hyderabad

In an unprecedented move, Hyderabad Commissioner of Police K Sreenivasa Reddy transferred the entire staff of the Punjabgutta police station and shifted them to police headquarters.

A total of 85 personnel, right from the rank of Sub Inspector to Constable, were shifted to the City Armed Reserve headquarters by the Hyderabad CP. It is the first time in recent years that such a big move

has been initiated by the police higher-ups in Hyderabad. The wholesale transfers have come at a time when the Punjabgutta police station is in the news for alleged favouritism, professional negligence and charges of corruption.

Last month, the Hyderabad CP had placed under suspension Punjabgutta Station House Officer P Durga Rao for allegedly helping Rahil Shakil, the son of former Bodhan MLA Amir Shakil, escape in a rash and drunk driving case by citing

some other person as an accused in the case.

When the truth came out during the inquiry, Rahil Shakil managed to escape to Dubai and Bodhan Inspector Prem Kumar was arrested, along with others, in the case. Durga Rao, who is cited as an accused in the case, is absconding. In another recent incident, a man, who was arrested for driving a car rashly and injuring several persons at Punjabgutta, escaped from police custody at Gandhi Hospital. (SEE PAGE 2)

Imran, wife get 14 years in jail

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced on Wednesday to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment each in a corruption case, a day after the beleaguered leader was given a 10-year jail term for leaking state secrets.

Khan is serving a three-year jail term after being convicted of corruption in a separate Toshakhana case on August 5 last year. (FULL REPORT PAGE 9)

'Will stop schemes if Cong loses polls'

BENGALURU

Ruling Congress MLA HC Balakrishna has advocated stopping the Karnataka government's guarantee programmes in case the party fails to win the maximum number of seats in the State in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, assuming that the people have rejected the schemes.

The Magadi MLA said he spoke to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, and added that it was for the people to decide whether they want "akshate" (rice grains mixed with turmeric and ghee distributed by the organisers or volunteers of RSS/VHP ahead of Ayodhya's Ram Mandir consecration) or five guarantee schemes.

While the opposition BJP hit out at the MLA and the Congress government, Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar seeking to clarify, said no guarantee scheme will be stopped and they will be continued. "We will work, our government will be there for five years, I ask you one thing whether your vote is for akshate or five guarantees," Balakrishna said. Addressing a gathering in his constituency near here, he said, "We are all

“ Our govt will be there for 5 years... I ask you, is your vote for akshate or five guarantees

— HC BALAKRISHNA, Congress MLA

Hindus, we too have respect for the construction of the temple, but our argument is that seeking votes in the name of temple is not right." "In this situation, if people vote (in BJP's favour) for construction of the temple... I told our Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister that — let's continue the guarantee schemes if people make us (the Congress) win a majority of the seats in the MP (parliamentary) elections. If not, it can be assumed that the people have rejected the guarantees," he added.

Asking the people what else the Congress should think if votes are not in its favour, he told womenfolk that 80-85% of money from these schemes are coming to women — who are matriarchs of the family. PTI

H-1B: US announces major overhaul

WASHINGTON

The US has announced a major overhaul of its annual lottery for the H-1B speciality occupation visas, popular among Indian IT professionals, to curtail the potential for fraud and improve and streamline the registration system.

Separately, the US on January 29 formally launched a pilot programme to renew the much sought-after H-1B visas domestically, a move that is likely to benefit thousands of Indian tech professionals. The new overhauled system, among other

things, includes the provision of a beneficiary-centric selection process for registrations by employers. As a result, unlike in the past when multiple applications by an individual often resulted in abuse in fraud of the system, the H-1B visa applications would now be counted and accepted based on individual applicants.

Even if one individual files multiple applications for various companies, they would be counted as one application based on their personal credentials like passport numbers. (SEE PAGE 2)

Winter waning, brace for early summer

SOWMYA SANGAM
Hyderabad

Winter's grip on Hyderabad appears to be loosening as the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has now predicted a surge in temperatures after mid-February, marking an early onset of summer.

According to Dr A Shravan, a scientist at IMD-Hyderabad, the next five days will witness a notable increase in temperatures across Hyderabad and even other parts of Telangana before returning to



The next five days will witness a notable increase in temperatures across Hyderabad and parts of Telangana.

normal. However, post-mid-February, a constant rise in temperatures is anticipated.

On Wednesday, Chandanagar reported the highest maximum temper-

ature of 35.2 degrees C, marking a significant departure from the seasonal norms. This is the first instance of such high temperatures in the locality since the onset of winter. Ameerpet also experienced a spike in daytime temperatures, recording a high of 34.7 degrees C, signalling the gradual transition towards warmer weather. The IMD-H predicts a continued upward trend in daytime temperatures over the next five days, with the average maximum temperature expected to range from 31-32 degrees C. (SEE PAGE 2)