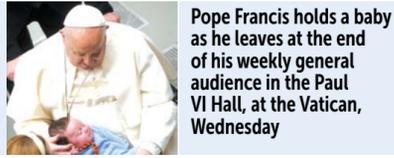


Russian President Vladimir Putin visits the Samara research and production centre for unmanned aircraft systems in Samara, Russia, Tuesday



Pope Francis holds a baby as he leaves at the end of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall, at the Vatican, Wednesday



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer departs 10 Downing Street to go to the House of Commons for his weekly Prime Minister's Questions in London, Wednesday



Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President Donald Trump's choice to be Secretary of Health and Human Services, appears before the Senate Finance Committee for his confirmation hearing, in Washington

allovertheworld



Britain's Prince William has fun with local school children as they filter DNA samples through a syringe after extracting water from a local pond in order to see what species live in it, during a visit to the 2024 Earthshot Prize Finalist, NatureMetrics, at their headquarters in Guildford, England, Wednesday

At least 18 killed after small plane crashes in remote part of South Sudan

JUBA: A small plane crashed in a remote part of South Sudan, killing at least 18 people on Wednesday, an official said. The flight, chartered by Chinese oil firm Greater Pioneer Operating Co., had 21 people on board, including two pilots, said Gätwech Bipal, the minister of information in the oil-rich Unity state, where the crash happened earlier on Wednesday. The plane crashed while it was taking off near an oil field to head to the international airport in Juba, the South Sudanese capital, he said. Local media reported that the plane was carrying oil workers. The UN-affiliated Radio Miraya, citing the flight manager, reported that the victims included mostly South Sudanese, one Indian and two Chinese nationals. It wasn't immediately clear what caused the crash, and authorities had not yet revealed the identities of the victims.

Hamas set to free 3 Israelis and 5 Thais in next hostage release: Israeli official

JERUSALEM: An Israeli official said Wednesday that Hamas will release three Israelis, including two women and an 80-year-old man, and five Thai nationals in the next hostage release, slated for Thursday. The official named the Israeli women as Arbel Yehoud, 29, Agam Berger, 19, and the man as Gadi Mozes, 80. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the record, said the hostages' families had approved publication of their names. The official did not name the Thai nationals set to be freed. The release is part of a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that has paused the war in Gaza in exchange for freedom for dozens of hostages held in the Palestinian territory and hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Brazil to set up deportee reception centre after contentious flight from US

RIO DE JANEIRO: The Brazilian government Tuesday said it will create a reception centre for deported migrants from the United States following controversy over conditions on a recent deportation flight. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva gave the green light to establish a humanitarian reception post at Corfins, a municipality in Minas Gerais state, Brazil's Minister of Human Rights and Citizenship Macaé Evaristo told journalists in the capital Brasília. That decision was made because of the possibility that more flights will follow the arrival of an initial flight to Brazil under the new Trump administration with 88 deportees on board this weekend. That followed dozens of flights during the Biden administration. Local media reported that government officials were disturbed by the fact that Brazilians were kept handcuffed after an unscheduled stop in the Amazon's biggest city, Manaus, prompted by technical problems with the plane.

Federal judge temporarily blocks Trump administration freeze on federal grants, loans

AP, WASHINGTON: A federal judge on Tuesday temporarily blocked a push from President Donald Trump to pause federal funding while his administration conducts an across-the-board ideological review to uproot progressive initiatives. The Trump administration plan plunged the US government — and states and organisations that rely on federal funding — into panic and confusion and set the stage for a constitutional clash over control of taxpayer money. The order from US District Judge Loren L. Alikhan came minutes before the funding freeze was scheduled to go into effect on Tuesday afternoon. The administrative stay, prompted by a lawsuit brought by nonprofit groups that receive federal funds, lasts until Monday afternoon and applies only to existing programmes.

Administration officials said the decision to halt loans and grants — a financial lifeline for local governments, schools and nonprofits — was necessary to ensure that spending complies with Trump's recent blitz of executive orders. The Republican president wants to increase fossil fuel production, remove protections for transgender people and end diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. But a vaguely worded memo issued by the Office of Management and Budget, combined with incomplete answers from the White House throughout the day, left lawmakers, public officials and average Americans struggling to figure out what programs would be affected by the pause. Even temporary interruptions in funding could cause layoffs or delays in public services.

"This sort of came out of the blue," said David Smith, a spokesperson for the Shawnee Mission School District in Kansas, one of countless districts that receive federal funding. Now they're trying to figure out what it means "based on zero information." Democrats have described the Trump administration's decision as capricious and illegal. They argued that the president had no right to unilaterally stop spending money appropriated by Congress. Just minutes after Alikhan ruled, Democratic attorneys general from 22 states and the District of Columbia filed their own lawsuit seeking to block and permanently prevent the administration from cutting off federal funding. "There is no question this policy is reckless, dangerous, illegal and unconstitutional," New York Attorney General Letitia James said.

Alikhan, who was appointed by President Joe Biden, said in halting the spending freeze, "It seems like the federal government currently doesn't actually know the full extent of the programmes that are going to be subject to the pause." Jessica Morton, an attorney for the National Council of Nonprofits which brought the suit, said the group has tens of thousands of members around the country that could be affected. "Our client members have reported being extremely concerned about having to shutter if there's even a brief pause," Morton said. Justice Department attorney Daniel Schwei said the plaintiffs hadn't identified anyone specifically who would lose funding right away if the pause does go into effect. The White House did not immediately comment on the court-imposed stay.

Trump administration officials said programmes that provide direct assistance to Americans would not be affected, such as Medicare, Social Security, student loans and food stamps. They also defended the funding pause, saying Trump was following through on his promise to turn Washington upside down if elected to a second term. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt on Tuesday initially would not say Medicaid was exempted from the freeze, but the administration later clarified that it was. "Trump's actions would wreak havoc in red and blue communities everywhere," said Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee. "We are talking about our small towns, our cities, our school districts."

Trump invites Israeli PM to meet

AP, WADI GAZA: President Donald Trump has invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House next week as the first foreign leader to visit in Trump's second term, Netanyahu and the White House said Tuesday. The announcement came as the United States pressures Israel and Hamas to continue a ceasefire that has paused a devastating 15-month war in Gaza. Talks about the ceasefire's more difficult second phase, which aims to end the war, begin next Monday. The White House letter shared by Netanyahu's office, dated Tuesday, said "I look forward to discussing how we can bring peace to Israel and its neighbours, and efforts to counter our shared adversaries."

Jaishankar meets Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, discuss ways to enhance ties

PTI, ABU DHABI: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Tuesday met Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and discussed ways to enhance and develop bilateral ties. Jaishankar, who arrived in the UAE on Monday on a three-day visit, recalled the crown prince's visit to India during the meeting. "Pleased to meet Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi HH Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Recalled his recent visit to India and discussed further advancement of partnership," Jaishankar said in a post on X. During the meeting, the two leaders discussed the friendship and cooperation between the UAE and India, and explored ways to further enhance and develop them to serve the common interests of both countries and their peoples, the state-run WAM news agency reported. They also discussed the strategic



Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar during a meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

and conveyed greetings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "Honoured to call on HH @MohamedBinZayed. Conveyed warm greetings of PM@narendramodi," he said in a post on X. "Discussed the continued progress in our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Value his guidance for its future growth," he said. Earlier in the morning, Jaishankar met Anwar Gargash, Diplomatic Advisor to the UAE President, and discussed the special partnership between India and UAE and its further progress. He also delivered the keynote address at the inaugural session of Raisina Middle East. "The visit will provide an opportunity to advance the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries and add new momentum to the India-UAE relationship," the Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement ahead of his visit.

2 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire in occupied West Bank, say officials

AP, JERUSALEM: The Palestinian Health Ministry says two Palestinians were killed by Israeli fire in the occupied West Bank overnight and into Wednesday. A 23-year-old man was shot dead in Tulkarem and a 25-year-old man was killed in a strike on Jenin, where Israel launched a large operation earlier this month. The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its reports. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military. The West Bank has seen a surge in violence since Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack out of the Gaza Strip ignited the war there. The ministry says over 800 Palestinians have been killed. Most appear to have been militants killed in battle during Israeli arrest raids, but the dead also include people killed during violent protests, as well as civilian bystanders. There has also been an uptick in settler violence against Palestinians and Palestinian attacks on Israelis since the start of the war. Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for their future state.

Western officials warn Ukraine over weapons procurement dispute

AP, KYIV: Western officials have warned Ukraine that an escalating rift between the defence minister and procurement chief may jeopardise trust in the country and urged the government to resolve the situation quickly so as not to disrupt weapons supplies. The conflict began last week when the Defence Procurement Agency's board unanimously voted to extend director Maryna Bezrukova's contract for another year. However, Defence Minister Rustem Umerov overruled the decision, refusing to renew her contract. He accused her of poor performance and failing to deliver weapons and ammunition to front-line troops. The decision provoked an outcry from lawmakers and anti-corruption watchdogs who said the minister's move was illegal because Bezrukova had her contract extended by the agency's supervisory board

in January. They also came to Bezrukova's defence, saying she has been instrumental in creating greater transparency and reforms within the DPA, which has long faced corruption allegations. Under Ukrainian law, Umerov's decision to go ahead with her dismissal is illegal. The incident comes at a politically sensitive time for Ukraine as the country's leadership is eagerly watching the Trump ad-

ministration's next moves, and as Ukrainian troops continue to face challenges in holding the line in the east amid fierce Russian attacks. In a statement posted Monday on social media platform X, the ambassadors representing Group of Seven nations urged the government to resolve the situation expeditiously and focus on keeping defense procurement going. Consistency with good governance principles and

NATO recommendations is important to maintain the trust of the public and international partners, they said. Following Umerov's decision, the Anti-Corruption Action Centre filed a complaint urging the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) to investigate him for alleged abuse of power. Local media reported that NABU opened proceedings against Umerov at the Anti-Corruption Action Centre's request.

FROM PAGE 1

TRAGEDY & TEARS AT MAHA KUMBH: 30 DIE IN STAMPEDE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered his condolences to the devotees who lost their family members in the stampede, describing the tragedy as "extremely saddening". Later in the night, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath announced a three-member judicial commission, comprising Justice Harsh Kumar, former DG VK Gupta and retired IAS VK Singh to look into the reasons behind the stampede. He also announced an ex gratia of Rs 25 lakh each for the kin of the deceased. "It is important to get to the bottom of the whole episode on how such a tragedy occurred," Adityanath said, adding that the chief secretary and DGP would visit the Maha Kumbh on Thursday for an in-depth probe into the tragic incident. Adityanath said the incident took place between 1 am and 2 am when some devotees climbed over the barricades at Akhara marg. "Between 1 am to 2 am, at the akhara route where arrangements were made for the Amrit Snan of the akharas, some devotees crossed over the barricades and were critically injured. They were immediately rushed to hospital where treatment was promptly ensured," he said after a high-level meeting in Lucknow. On the Amrit Snan by akharas deferred till afternoon, Adityanath said a consensus was reached with the akharas that they would take the holy dip only after the crowd pressure has decreased at the ghats. DIG Krishna said barricades have been placed in the mela and akhara areas for lane management but they gave way under the pressure of the jostling. As the barricades broke, people fell on those sitting and waiting for taking the holy dip during the 'brahm muhurt' (early morning time considered auspicious to perform

certain activities), he said. Many ordinary people, including women and children, fell down and were crushed. The officer said the government has issued strict directives there will be no VIP protocol in the mela now onwards. According to eyewitness accounts, one of the reasons for the tragedy was the sudden surge of pilgrims at the Sangam - all driven by an obvious desire to take the holy dip at 3 am, the start of the auspicious hour. After the stampede, Amrit Snan, the traditional bathing ritual of akharas, was deferred but it resumed in the afternoon. The bathing for devotees, however, continued at the tightly-packed Sangam and other ghats along the Ganges which were less crowded. Nearly six crore devotees took a dip Wednesday.

POLITICAL FIRESTORM OVER SOUTH GOA SP'S TRANSFER

The wife of the accused, who was at home with her elderly mother-in-law, posted the exchange on social media, prompting SP Sawant to enquire into the case and take action against the high-handed behaviour of her subordinates, who were in turn reportedly acting under pressure from a local politician. During this same eventful week, SP Sawant and her team received accolades for cracking the kidnapping and gang rape of a mentally challenged woman at Vasco - the accused in this case were arrested within a few hours of the crime being reported. Sources say Sawant was a thorn in the flesh for a few corrupt cops, who blindly did the bidding of industrialists and MLAs from South Goa. The Opposition Congress on Wednesday slammed the Goa government for the unusual move and called it "an act of intimidation against an hon-

est officer who was merely doing her job." Chief Minister Pramod Sawant told reporters on Wednesday that he did not have the details about the SP's transfer yet, which begs the question, if the CM, who also holds the Home Department portfolio, was not aware, who issued the wireless message for her transfer? Former State Election Commissioner and political analyst Prabhakar Timble said, "Police department and home department are now saying that if you require protection do not come to us. Do not even go to police station. You visit the Bajrang Dal office. This is the message being conveyed by this transfer. Everyone knows that Bajrang Dal activists take law in their hand and provide protection." Goa Forward Party (GFP) President and MLA Vijai Sardesai said, "This is not surprising. There is no guarantee of anybody. Nobody has an idea what is going to happen during the next two years. Such a situation has been created that nobody knows what will happen tomorrow."

WAQF BILL: OPN SLAMS GOVT MOVE

BJP members insisted that the bill, introduced in Lok Sabha in August last year, seeks to bring modernity, transparency and accountability in the management of Waqf properties, while the opposition termed it as an attack on the constitutional rights of the Muslim community and interference in the functioning of the Waqf boards. Speaking to reporters after the 38th sitting of the committee, Pal said the report will be presented to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla on Thursday and tabled in both Houses of Parliament during the Budget Session beginning Friday. A key concern of the opposition was the appointment of non-Muslims on the Waqf Board, which they claimed was violative of Article 26 of the Constitution that granted citizens freedom to manage their religious affairs, includ-

ing establishment and maintenance of institutions for religious and charitable purposes. "You have violated our rights granted under Article 26 of the Constitution. You talked about Uniform Civil Code, but there are Hindu Endowment Board, Sikh Boards, Christian boards which do not have non-Hindus, non-Sikhs, and non-Christians as members. But why does this not extend to Muslims? This is an attempt to destroy the Waqf Boards," Congress member Imran Masood told reporters here. At its meeting on Monday, the committee had adopted 14 amendments to the bill, all proposed by BJP members and rejected every change suggested by the opposition members, including Congress, DMK, TMC, AAP, Shiv Sena-UBT and the AIMIM.

SITE OF FATAL BRAWL, ARAMBOL SHACK TO BE PULLED DOWN

Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte expressed concern over the lack of documentation in subletting cases, and emphasised that the department would be using technology to monitor beach shacks more effectively. Khaunte also referred to a separate incident involving a shack in Gauravaddo, Calangute, which was burned down on New Year's Day. The shack had been sublet to an Rajesh Sharma, and the Calangute police have already booked the owner and staff for negligence in handling firecrackers. "The government has always supported shack operators with relaxations, but we will not tolerate the practice of subletting to outsiders. Strict enforcement of regulations is our priority," Khaunte said. Meanwhile, opposition leaders have raised concerns about the growing prevalence of subletting and accused the government of breaching legal regulations by increasing the number of temporary beach shacks in Pernem to benefit MLAs and ministers associated with the ruling party.

