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Daily News Feed

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Solar firms ditch climate



Fresh tactics: The U.S. solar lobby had called for action against climate change during Mr. Biden's tenure. REUTERS

Reuters

The U.S. solar industry unveiled its lobbying strategy for the incoming Trump administration on Thursday, promoting itself as a domestic jobs engine that can help meet soaring power demand, without referencing its role in combating climate change.

The policy agenda marks a stark shift in tone for the solar sector, which is a major beneficiary of subsidies contained in outgoing President Joe Biden's landmark 2022 climate change law, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to rescind the law, something that would require action by Congress.

The Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA), the top U.S. solar trade group, called on the government to support policies to expand domestic solar manufacturing and reduce dependence on China, and urged looser restrictions on infrastructure investment and grid connections for solar projects. It also asked the incoming administration to keep taxes low and support consumer energy choice.

"Solar is critical to meeting America's growing need for electricity and providing power for manufacturing, data centers, cryptocurrency, and AI," SEIA CEO Abigail Ross Hopper said.

"This is a roadmap for the Trump administration and Congress to capitalize on strong federal solar and storage policies and achieve their vision of a dominant American energy sector."

The document did not mention climate change or the IRA. The SEIA did not respond to a request for comment. In the policy agenda it released in 2020 ahead of Mr. Biden's inauguration, SEIA advocated for a price on carbon and mentioned climate change several times.



Should the executive have the power to pardon?



Sanjay Hegde
Senior advocate based in Delhi



Alok Prasanna Kumar
Co-founder and Karnataka lead of Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

PARLEY

United States President Joe Biden's recent decision to pardon his son Hunter Biden for any federal crimes he committed or may have committed between January 1, 2014, and December 1, 2024 has brought renewed focus on the expansive clemency powers granted to the President by the U.S. Constitution. The President's volte-face has provoked strong condemnation from both Republicans and Democrats. Should the executive possess clemency powers? Sanjay Hegde and Alok Prasanna Kumar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

Should the executive power of clemency rest with the legislature to avert misuse?

Sanjay Hegde: Vesting clemency powers in the legislature could prove equally susceptible to corruption and majority rule. Historically, the power to pardon originated from the British monarchy as an attribute of sovereignty, enabling the king to absolve any wrongdoing. Even today, the Constitution acknowledges scenarios where it is imperative to trust a high officeholder to judiciously exercise such discretionary authority when required.

Alok Prasanna Kumar: I agree. During the debates on the U.S. Constitution, Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, acknowledged that the exercise of clemency is inherently political and cannot be reduced to a purely legal process. He argued that this power should be vested in a single constitutional officeholder, instead of being subjected to the whims of collective discretion. He also pointed out that the power of pardon introduced an element of mercy, which he believed was necessary to temper the rigours of the criminal justice system. He saw it as a means for true justice to prevail in cases where the law could not account for circumstances or moral factors beyond the scope of judicial proceedings.

Should an independent clemency commission replace the existing system to ensure more objective and informed decision-making?

APK: Even if an independent clemency commission were established, its advice would not be binding on the President. While the President may seek a range of information to make a reasoned decision, as former President Harry Truman famously stated, "the buck stops here." Transparency is important, and in today's age of social media and a free press, the public



U.S. President Joe Biden with his son Hunter Biden at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois. REUTERS

will likely be aware of the reasons behind a presidential decision. However, that does not guarantee that every decision will be immediately acceptable to the public at large.

SH: The public doesn't always agree with clemency decisions. One of the most notable examples is when U.S. President Gerald Ford pardoned his predecessor, Richard Nixon. He believed that the country had endured enough during the Watergate scandal and that the matter should be put to rest, as Nixon had already been punished by losing the presidency. He felt that a criminal trial would only prolong the nation's agony. At the time, special prosecutor Leon Jaworski chose not to challenge this decision.

In contrast, the clemency system in India has not been widely abused. Former Presidents such as A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Pratibha Patil have only sat on files, exercising a pocket veto whenever they disagreed with government advice. The pardon jurisdiction for non-capital offences has rarely been exercised.

Would expanding the scope of judicial review over executive clemency decisions prevent potential overreach or misuse?

SH: I don't think the U.S. will ever adopt such a system. President-elect Donald Trump has expressed an inclination to pardon rioters involved in the January 6, 2021, Capitol attack. There are also speculations that President Biden may pre-emptively pardon several individuals before he demits office. I doubt the judiciary will step in to second-guess the President's authority in these matters.

In India, both the President and the Governor



When it comes to clemency, defining what constitutes abuse or misuse is challenging, especially when the power itself is not clearly defined. For example, in 20 years, one might argue that granting clemency to Hunter Biden was one of Joe Biden's best decisions. We lack the foresight to deem such decisions egregiously wrong at this moment.

ALOK KUMAR PRASANNA

act on the aid and advice of the Cabinet. In fact, the Supreme Court in *Eguru Sudhakar v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (2006) affirmed that a Governor's grant of pardon could be challenged in court if it was found to be mala fide or based on irrelevant considerations.

APK: I don't believe that clemency decisions can be judicially reviewable. The concept of mercy is inherently subjective, and there cannot be one inalienable understanding of it. We also have to understand that constitutional functionaries inevitably bring their personal biases to bear on these decisions. While courts, as seen in India, may intervene in instances of procedural violations, there are no definitive legal benchmarks to determine what constitutes an appropriate exercise of clemency. Ultimately, it is unreasonable to assert that mercy should have one fixed meaning under the Constitution, or that clemency should be confined to a specific category of political cases.

Should U.S. Congress play a greater role in the process? For instance, the Protecting Our Democracy Act, reintroduced in Congress last year, mandates the White House disclose all materials the President relies on when exercising clemency powers.

SH: Even if Congress were to pass a law, it could only serve to guide the process. Clemency powers are unique – they speak to the inherent humanity shared by both the one who grants mercy and the one who receives it. There may be cases where a penalty has been imposed and the legal process is complete, yet new evidence emerges that calls for reconsideration. It is impossible to legislate strict standards, especially since they would never be binding. We have seen this discretionary authority play out when President Andrew Johnson pardoned Dr. Samuel Alexander Mudd, the physician who treated John Wilkes Booth's broken leg after he assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

APK: No law can entirely prevent its misuse. If

someone in a position of authority is determined to break the law, there is little the law itself can do to stop them. While mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that such actions have stringent repercussions, total prevention is impossible to attain. For instance, we see police officers routinely abuse their powers of arrest.

When it comes to clemency, defining what constitutes abuse or misuse is challenging, especially when the power itself is not clearly defined. For example, in 20 years, one might argue that granting clemency to Hunter Biden was one of the best decisions made by Joe Biden. We lack the foresight to deem such decisions egregiously wrong at this moment.

What reforms are necessary in India's clemency process, and what lessons can be drawn from the Hunter Biden case?

SH: Given the nature of the power, one can at best have guidelines. However, ultimately executive discretion has to be trusted. We have seen our former Presidents exhibit varied views regarding the death penalty. One can also see how gubernatorial discretion played out in the release of A.G. Perarivalan, one of the convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. The Governor obstructed his release despite the Tamil Nadu government's recommendation. Ultimately, the Supreme Court had to intervene and order his release. The use of clemency powers in the case also signified the closing of a long and painful chapter. While public curiosity may lead to second-guessing these decisions, it is often not in the greater public interest to do so.

APK: I believe comprehensive reforms are needed in the system of release of convicts. The Supreme Court is already cognisant of a batch of petitions on this issue. We need to prioritise reformative justice. Reformation is only achievable when individuals are given the assurance that, through good behaviour and genuine repentance, they may earn an early release – serving, for instance, seven years instead of 14. While these convicts have been incarcerated for legitimate reasons, the state must focus on their rehabilitation, as some of them have the potential to become valuable members of society. We should expedite processes like parole and remission, ensuring mercy extends beyond just death penalty cases.



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Price worries

The inflation trajectory suggests a rate cut may remain elusive for some time

From a 14-month high of 6.2% in October, consumer price inflation moderated to 5.5% last month. Much of this minor respite stems from a decline in the inflation rate of some food items. For vegetables, it cooled from a 57-month peak of 42.2% to just under 30%, while foodgrain prices rose at the slowest pace in 28 months, and pulses cooled to just over 5% after a prolonged spell of double-digit spikes. Despite these pockets of relief, overall food inflation remained sharp at over 9% for the third straight month, with edible oil prices firming up 13.3%, the highest in 30 months as a global price spike has coincided with an import duty hike by the Centre. It is no surprise coconut oil prices are up over 42%, even as items such as garlic (85.1%), potato (66.7%), cauliflower and cabbage (well over 40%), are pinching consumers. While recent conversations about the economy have focused on decelerating urban demand, the price rise trend is hitting rural consumers harder with close to 6% inflation in November as well as higher food prices.

Despite assertions by the government that food prices are volatile and should be ignored for monetary policy purposes when growth is stumbling, higher spends on meals are spilling into other items' prices. Manufacturing and services firms have reported intensifying cost pressures last month compelling them to hike prices at the highest pace in 12 years. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which had originally estimated October-December inflation to average 4.8%, raised it to 5.7% at its monetary policy review last week. This implies inflation this month – which will be the last data before the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meets next – could still be high at 5.4%. This would be well above the central bank's median target of 4% – the MPC now expects average inflation to attain that level only by the second quarter of 2025-26. The government, whose clamour for an interest rate cut was ignored by the MPC last week, may be hoping its new appointee at the helm of Mint Street, another Finance Ministry insider, may oblige with more urgent and bigger rate cuts to support growth. While some assert a rate cut in February's MPC meet is virtually cemented, going by current trends, the data may not back such a move as growth might recover a bit and inflation may cool a tad more, thus diminishing any urgency. That the Centre would have presented its Budget 2025-26 by the next MPC meet, may help the rate cut case going forward, if it demonstrates fiscal prudence and steps to ease citizens' living costs.



The missing spotlight on urban local government polls

Urban local governments (ULGs) function as units of decentralised local self-governance, and are responsible for delivering civic services at the first mile, ensuring quality of life for citizens. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) was introduced in 1992 to codify this role of ULGs. Over 30 years later, the objectives of this landmark amendment are yet to be realised. The ongoing discourse on simultaneous elections, popularly known as One Nation One Election (ONOE), is a unique opportunity to spotlight a basic requirement of local democracy, i.e., elections to ULGs – a consideration that has generally been absent in deliberations on the ONOE.

'State subjects' as reasoning

The 79th report of the Parliament Standing Committee on Law and Justice on the 'Feasibility of Simultaneous Elections,' submitted in 2015, while advocating simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, was silent on elections to ULGs. A discussion paper (2017) by the NITI Aayog, on 'Analysis of Simultaneous Elections', kept ULGs out of its purview, arguing that the third-tier institutions are State subjects and that the sheer number of such institutions across the country makes it "impractical, and possibly impossible, to synchronise elections". Similar reasoning is put forward in the 2018 draft report of the Law Commission of India on simultaneous elections. But in a refreshing departure, the High Level Committee (HLC) constituted by the Government of India to provide a road map for implementation of simultaneous elections, deliberated on local body elections and recommended synchronising them within 100 days of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

India has over 4,800 ULGs that oversee nearly 40% of the population, a figure which is estimated to cross 50% by 2050. Cities are the backbone of the country's economy, contributing over 60% to India's GDP. Well-governed cities



Santosh Nargund

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Manager, Policy Engagement at the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy

The ongoing discourse on simultaneous elections, or ONOE, is the right opportunity for change

accelerate economic growth, and promote social and cultural well being. Thus, ensuring regular elections to install democratically-elected governments in our cities every five years ought to be a matter of mainstream political discourse and policy formulation. The HLC report, which was accepted by the Union government in September 2024, touched upon the procedure of elections to local governments and is a good start in this direction. However, deeper analysis is necessary to understand and address the current state of affairs of elections to ULGs.

Uncertainty and delays in elections

It may come as a surprise to many that despite the constitutional mandate of holding elections to municipalities every five years, elections are routinely delayed across thousands of ULGs – sometimes by several years. According to the Compendium of Performance Audits on the Implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 (published by the Comptroller and Auditor General, or CAG of India in November 2024), elections were delayed in over 60% of ULGs across India. Such ULGs are directly governed by State governments, violating the principle of decentralisation as envisaged in the Constitution. This also adversely impacts accountability as citizens lack representation and have limited avenues for airing their grievances and development needs. Elections that are held on time are the *sine qua non* for democracy – not just for Parliament and the State legislatures but also for every municipality in the country.

Holding elections to ULGs is not enough. After the results are announced, the elected councils have to be operationalised with State governments calling for their first meeting to enable elections to the offices of mayors/chairpersons and standing committees. A study undertaken by Janaagraha found that there was a delay by 11 months on average in the formation of councils after the declaration of election results of the municipal corporations in

Karnataka. In effect, ULGs continue to function under the administrative control of State governments. This defeats the electoral mandate given by the people, making elected city councillors powerless to attend to the development needs of their electorate.

Disempowered State Election Commissions

Another important issue is the disempowerment of the State Election Commissions (SECs), which are constitutional bodies responsible for supervising and conducting ULG elections. The CAG report notes that only four out of the 15 States assessed have empowered their SECs to carry out ward delimitation. The report further notes that elections to ULGs were delayed due to a delay in ward delimitation by State governments or because of court cases regarding reservations. Given the high political ramifications of ward delimitation and reservation exercises, it is necessary that these functions are carried out by independent authorities such as the SECs.

A holistic analysis of the challenges in conducting elections to ULGs promptly is important in the ongoing national discourse on the synchronisation of elections. There is an urgent need to build on the beginning made by the HLC to effect the reforms necessary in ULG elections.

The Government of India has proposed setting up an implementation group to prepare a plan of action that would execute the HLC's recommendations. The government has also expressed its intent to have consultations across the country on this topic. It is hoped and expected that the agenda for reforms to ensure regular and scheduled elections to ULGs will feature in these dialogues and that the Union and State governments will come together to make local democracy in our cities operational and vibrant.

The views expressed are personal



A legend, made

Gukesh is first among a cohort of young Indian chess geniuses to reach pinnacle

Eighteen-year-old D. Gukesh has made history by becoming the 18th world chess champion, which will make him the youngest to do so and emulating the doyen of Indian chess, Viswanathan Anand, the only other Indian to achieve the honour. Gukesh managed his feat after a blunder made by the reigning world champion, Ding Liren of China, on the 55th move, Rf2, in the 14th and final classical game of the match. The game was headed towards a draw, but with Gukesh pressing for any advantage in a rook-bishop-pawn endgame and having an extra pawn, it took just one misstep for Ding to lose his crown. Ding was in poor form prior to the match but the Chinese GM proved his mettle by winning the first game, setting up a strong contest. Gukesh won Game 4 to tie the match and after a series of draws, Gukesh played an enterprising Game 11 to take the lead; Ding fought back brilliantly to tie the match again with a strong win in Game 12. The strategies of both players were evident. Gukesh played strong openings and exhibited tenacity in trying to gain advantages in near equal positions as the games progressed. Ding's plan seemed to be to secure a stalemate in the classical games and to drag the match into the shorter rapid and if need be, blitz formats, and to use his strength in terms of experience. Sticking to his strategy of pushing through equal positions, Gukesh had the last laugh.

The Chennai-born Grandmaster's mental toughness and wisdom beyond his age have been his calling card. His steady rise was due to his dedication and his accelerated path to glory was helped by the work done by his seconds – Gukesh revealed their names only after the match – besides the mentoring by GM Anand's West-Bridge Anand Chess Academy. His versatile game, built on an innate ability to calculate moves deeply on the board, kept him in good stead against his more experienced opponent. The surge of young Indian talent to the top echelons of world chess in recent years – compatriot GMs Arjun Erigaisi and R. Praggnanandhaa are in the top 15 along with Gukesh – raised expectations of another Indian world champion in chess. The youngsters have pushed each other to do their best. Gukesh won a strong Candidates tournament to emerge as Ding's challenger and his prowess was evident following his individual gold winning performances in the Chennai and Budapest Chess Olympiads, the latter being India's first gold in the team event. His next frontier would be to reach the heights scaled by the world's strongest chess player, Magnus Carlsen. Gukesh becoming the world champion would also motivate his Indian compatriots and will add a fillip to the growth of modern chess as a sport and vocation in the country of its birth.



What is Disease X and why the world should prepare for it

COVID-19 is regarded as the first instance of a real Disease X. When SARS-CoV-2 emerged as an unknown pathogen causing a global pandemic, it exemplified the scenario that Disease X was meant to represent – an unpredictable, novel threat requiring rapid global response and adaptation

C. Aravinda

The story so far

The recent outbreak reported in the first week of December 2024 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has claimed over 400 lives and remains unclassified, has raised concerns that it could be an instance of Disease X. This unsettling event has reignited discussions about Disease X. Disease X is not an actual but a hypothetical disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term in 2018 to describe an unknown pathogen that could potentially unleash a devastating epidemic or pandemic. It was conceptualised by the WHO to prepare for future outbreaks that are difficult to predict or identify. While investigations continue to determine the cause in Congo, the outbreak underscores the importance of Disease X.

WHO's priority list of pathogens?

COVID-19 is widely regarded as the first instance of a real Disease X after the WHO introduced the concept in 2018. When SARS-CoV-2 emerged as an unknown pathogen causing a global pandemic, it exemplified the scenario that Disease X was meant to represent – an unpredictable, novel threat requiring rapid global response and adaptation. The concept of Disease X traces its origins in the aftermath of the West African Ebola epidemic of 2014-2016, which resulted in over 11,000 deaths and revealed significant gaps in global epidemic preparedness. After the outbreak, the WHO brought together scientists and public health experts to address how future outbreaks of similar scale could be prevented.

The WHO's priority list of pathogens is a strategic tool published in 2018 that is designed to focus global attention and resources on the most serious infectious disease threats. This list identifies diseases that have epidemic or pandemic potential for which there are insufficient or no medical countermeasures such as vaccines or treatments. The need for such a list arises from the urgency to guide research and development, allocate funding, and enhance preparedness. It helps policymakers, researchers, and health organisations prioritise efforts toward controlling the diseases. The current list (not exhaustive) includes Ebola virus disease, Marburg virus disease, Lassa fever, Nipah virus, Rift Valley fever, Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever, Zika virus, and Disease X. Each of these pathogens has been flagged due to factors like high mortality rates, potential for rapid spread, and the lack of adequate preventive or therapeutic options.

What is Disease X?

Disease X is not a specific illness but a placeholder for an unpredictable and



Swab samples being taken for a COVID-19 test. File THE HINDU

as-yet-undiscovered pathogen capable of sparking a global health crisis. The WHO included it in the Blueprint for Priority Diseases in 2018 to focus on the risks of emerging diseases that science has yet to encounter. The term sits at the intersection of two categories (among four) popularised by Donald Rumsfeld's matrix: "known unknowns" (threats we are aware of but cannot fully understand) and "unknown unknowns" (threats we are not aware of and understand). Disease X embodies both, as it acknowledges the likelihood of a future pandemic without specifying when, where, or how it might arise.

The potential culprits behind Disease X are varied. It originates from Pathogen X, which could be a virus, a bacterium, a parasite, fungi, helminths, or even a prion – a misfolded protein capable of causing severe neurological diseases. Historical data supports this uncertainty. Since 1940 (from where authentic records are available), researchers have identified more than 300 emerging infectious diseases, about 70% of which have zoonotic origins, meaning they are transmitted from animals to humans. This process, known as zoonotic spillover, is often linked to human encroachment on wildlife habitats, deforestation, and the intensification of agriculture. Meanwhile, the growing risks of antimicrobial resistance, bioterrorism, and accidental lab leaks add further layers of unpredictability.

Patterns in emerging diseases

While the exact nature of Disease X remains unknown, epidemiological patterns provide critical insights into how new diseases emerge and spread. The emergence of viruses such as HIV, SARS, MERS, and Ebola was closely linked to ecological disruptions caused by human activity. Deforestation, urbanisation, and climate change have pushed humans and wildlife into closer contact, increasing the

The interconnectedness of our world makes it easier for localised outbreaks to escalate into pandemics. While epidemiology cannot predict the exact moment or source of Disease X, it can help identify high-risk regions and behaviours

likelihood of pathogen transmission. Epidemiologists estimate that over 1.7 million undiscovered viruses exist in wildlife, with hundreds of thousands potentially capable of infecting humans. The frequency of novel outbreaks has also increased significantly since the mid-20th century, reflecting a combination of environmental, demographic, and global factors.

Regions with high biodiversity and inadequate healthcare systems, like the Congo Basin, are particularly vulnerable. The interconnectedness of our world, with frequent international travel and trade, makes it easier for localised outbreaks to escalate into pandemics, as seen with COVID-19. While epidemiology cannot predict the exact moment or source of Disease X, it can help identify high-risk regions and behaviours that increase the likelihood of its emergence.

Challenges of predicting Disease X

Forecasting the next Disease X is daunting, as its emergence depends on numerous unpredictable factors. Zoonotic diseases are the most likely source, given their history of driving major epidemics. However, other scenarios, such as pathogens mutating to evade treatment, laboratory mishaps, or deliberate biological attacks, cannot be ruled out. Climate change is also reshaping disease transmission dynamics, expanding the range of vector-borne illnesses like malaria and dengue fever while pushing pathogens to adapt to new

hosts and environments.

The sheer number of potential pathogens adds to the complexity. Scientists estimate that only a fraction of viruses capable of infecting humans have been identified, leaving a vast pool of unknown threats. Genomic sequencing and artificial intelligence are beginning to play an important role in narrowing this vast field of possibilities, but even with these tools, predicting the exact origin, timing, and behaviour of Disease X remains out of reach. What is certain, however, is that the conditions that gave rise to pandemics like COVID-19 and SARS continue to exist, making the emergence of Disease X a question of when, not if.

At the heart of preparation is the need for robust surveillance systems to detect new outbreaks early. Advances in genomic sequencing, artificial intelligence, and real-time data sharing are essential tools for developing diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. Strengthening healthcare infrastructure, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, is also crucial. Organisations like the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) are now investing in "prototype pathogen" platforms that can be adapted to target unknown diseases within 100 days of their identification.

Need for global collaboration

Fighting Disease X will require an unprecedented level of international cooperation. The WHO's ongoing efforts, such as its list of priority pathogens and the proposed Pandemic Treaty, aim to foster a unified global response to health emergencies. These initiatives recognise that pandemics do not respect borders and that fragmented efforts will be insufficient to counter a threat as elusive as Disease X. Governments must work together to share data, pool resources, and ensure equitable access to diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines.

The outbreak in the DRC serves as a sobering reminder of the risks the world faces. Disease X is no longer a distant hypothetical but an urgent call to action. By strengthening public health systems, investing in research and innovation, and fostering global solidarity, the world can prepare for the unpredictable and safeguard future generations from the devastating consequences of the next pandemic. Frameworks like the Nagoya Protocol, which ensure equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources, could be expanded to include biological materials like pathogens. It would promote global collaboration, ensuring fair access to research and medical countermeasures during outbreaks. A novel disease anywhere is a threat to everyone.

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LS proceedings now live on YouTube in English and Hindi

Aroon Deep

NEW DELHI

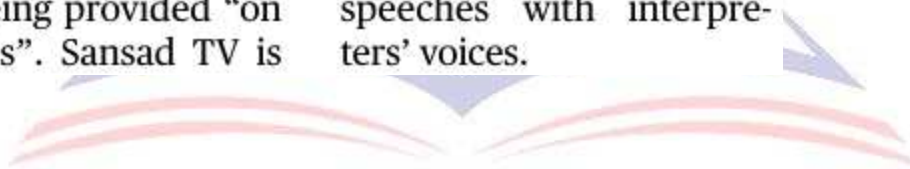
Sansad TV has since December 4 started live-streaming English and Hindi simultaneous interpretation versions of Lok Sabha proceedings on YouTube. These interpretation tracks have been available since the previous session only on cable and satellite TV providers, and within Parliament.

The simultaneous interpretation, Sansad TV says in a disclaimer, is not an authoritative translation, and is being provided “on trial basis”. Sansad TV is

not publishing recordings of these interpretations.

In July, languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Odia, Marathi, Gujarati and Punjabi started live-streaming on YouTube, but English and Hindi were not made available.

Some leaders initially chafed at the broadcast of these interpretations, as some DTH platforms started broadcasting the Hindi or English interpretation track by default. This, they charged, was an attempt at stifling the impact of their oratory by overlaying their speeches with interpreters’ voices.



Union Cabinet gives approval for Bills on simultaneous polls

Move paves way to introduce draft legislation in Parliament; Tamil Nadu and West Bengal CMs term it an attack on democracy and federalism

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved two Bills related to the implementation of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies, paving the way for the introduction of the draft legislation in Parliament in the ongoing Winter Session.

One of the Bills is to amend the Constitution to introduce simultaneous elections, while the other is to amend provisions in laws dealing with Union Territories that have Legislative Assemblies to align their terms with those of other Assemblies.

The development evoked sharp responses from the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, who called the draft Bills “an attack on democracy and federalism”.

No official announcement has been made so far, but sources said the Bills would be referred to a joint committee of Parliament, once they are introduced in the House.

For now, the Cabinet has given its approval to the draft legislation for simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies. The Constitution amendment Bill to hold simultaneous polls will not require to be ratified by at least 50% of the States, the



 Our MPs will oppose this draconian legislation tooth and nail in Parliament. Bengal will NEVER bow to Delhi's dictatorial whims

MAMATA BANERJEE
West Bengal CM

sources added.

A high-level committee, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, had also recommended holding simultaneous polls to municipalities and panchayats, but the Cabinet has decided not to get into the issue of synchronising local body polls. This would have not only required a Constitution amendment, to insert a new Article 324A, but also ratification by half the Assemblies.

Taking to the social media platform X, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin said, “This impractical and anti-democratic move will erase regional voices, erode federalism, and disrupt governance. Rise up #INDIA! Let us resist this attack on Indian democracy with all our strength!”

In a separate X post, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee called it “an authoritarian imposition designed to undermine India's democracy and federal structure”.

“Our MPs will oppose this draconian legislation

tooth and nail in Parliament. Bengal will NEVER bow to Delhi's dictatorial whims. This fight is about saving India's democracy from the clutches of autocracy!” she said.

Congress communications chief Jairam Ramesh, in an X post, reiterated the party's opposition to simultaneous polls and shared Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's letter to the Kovind panel. “There is no place for the concept of simultaneous elections in a country that has adopted parliamentary system of government. Such forms of simultaneous elections that are being floated by the government go against the guarantees of federalism contained in the Constitution”.

The second Bill on simultaneous elections pertains to aligning the terms of the Legislative Assemblies of the Union Territories of Puducherry, Delhi and Jammu and Kashmir with other Legislative Assemblies and the Lok Sabha.



Lok Sabha passes Bill to amend the Disaster Management Act of 2005

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Lok Sabha on Thursday passed a Bill to strengthen the working of national and State disaster management authorities, with the Centre stressing that the legislation will help State governments deal with disasters better.

The House cleared the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024 by a voice vote. Several amendments moved by the Opposition members were negated.

Pointing out that State governments had flagged several difficulties in implementing the Disaster Management Act of 2005, Union Minister Nityanand Rai said the new Bill would not only overcome them but also strengthen the disaster management system. The Bill seeks to bring clarity and convergence among stakeholders working in the field of disaster management.

“When a disaster hits, it hits the country as a



The new Bill seeks to bring clarity and convergence among stakeholders in the field of disaster management. THULASI KAKKAT

whole; this Bill will prepare the country to handle disasters better,” he said.

Many Opposition members, however, said that the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024 only talks about creation of a plethora of organisations. Saugata Roy of the Trinamool Congress alleged that the Modi government was not able to manage the pandemic properly and a large number of people died.

He said, “This Bill creates a plethora of organisations and has added a number of English terms”.

Captain Viriato Fernandes of the Congress

said that while the members were talking about following a holistic approach to deal with disasters, the Bill seemed to have gone against that approach.

Another Congress member, G.K. Padavi, pointed out that climate change had not been included in the Bill and the word “compensation” had been replaced with “relief”. “It (promotes) over centralisation,” Mr. Padavi said.

Taking a dig at the Opposition, BJP member Arun Govil said disruptions in Parliament on a daily basis was a man-made disaster as it hurt Parliament’s dignity.

India votes in favour of ceasefire in Gaza

Press Trust of India

UNITED NATIONS

India on Wednesday voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution that demanded an immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire in Gaza and reiterated the demand for unconditional release of all hostages.

The 193-member UN General Assembly has overwhelmingly approved resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and backing the UN agency for Palestinian refugees that Israel has moved to ban.

India was among the 158 nations that voted in favour of the resolution. Nine member states, including Israel and the US, voted against it.

Among the 13 nations that abstained were Albania and Ukraine.



Centre is committed to protecting country's heritage, says Shekhawat

India is making 'transformative strides' in tourism, says Culture Minister, slamming those who have a problem with pace and scale of development; he says the Kumbh Mela will be showcased as a confluence of cultures from across the country

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Against the backdrop of the controversy over contesting claims on heritage sites of a religious nature, Union Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat on Thursday said the government was committed to protecting the country's heritage.

Addressing a press conference here, Mr. Shekhawat said there were people who had a problem with the pace and scale of India's development.

The government was committed to exposing such people as well as preserving the country's heritage for the coming generations, Mr. Shekhawat said.

The Minister said the Kumbh Mela, to be held from next month, would be showcased as a confluence of cultures from



Mega festival: Preparations under way for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Prayagraj ahead of the Maha Kumbh Mela. ANI

across the country and nearly 45 crore people would be visiting the mega fair.

"The Maha Kumbh being organised at Prayagraj from January 13 to Febru-

ary 26, 2025 will showcase the rich, spiritual and cultural heritage of our country to the world," he said.

He also spoke about the "transformative strides" in tourism, detailing infras-

tructure developments, global promotional campaigns, and projects aimed at enhancing India's cultural and tourism landscape. He said intensified efforts were being made to make

tourism an integral part of building a *Viksit Bharat*.

A total of 76.17 million jobs had been created in the tourism sector. The 'Paryatan Mitra' & 'Paryatan Didi' programmes had been launched. Foreign exchange earnings were estimated to be \$28.07 billion, marking a 42.53% increase compared with 2014. He said domestic tourist numbers had seen a remarkable increase of 95.64%. India's ranking in the global travel and tourism development index had improved to 39 from 65.

Over ₹6,800 crore had been spent on destination development projects. Projects worth ₹3,295.76 crore had been approved for development of lesser-known tourism sites.

The e-tourist visa facility had proven to be very beneficial for the visitors, the Minister said.



RTI award for Kerala for exemplary performance

The Hindu Bureau

KOCHI

Kerala has been recognised as a leader in transparency, public accountability and dissemination of information, Chief Information Commissioner Hiralal Samariya said.

Speaking at the National RTI Award ceremony, where Kerala's State Information Commissioner A. A. Hakkim was presented with the award, Mr. Samariya lauded Kerala as a model State for its "exemplary performance in resolving RTI petitions efficiently and effectively."

'Proactive promotion'

He said that the State's achievements in implementing social-welfare schemes, like providing pensions, and its proactive promotion of the RTI Act among the public, were laudable.



INBRIEF



GRAP II can continue in Delhi NCR for now: Supreme Court

The Supreme Court on Thursday allowed the relaxed levels of stage two of Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) in the National Capital Region (NCR) to continue after being assured that pollution was largely under control. A Bench headed by Justice A.S. Oka said the court would review the situation next week. The court gave the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) permission to implement a hybrid of GRAP II and the higher GRAP III anti-pollution measures. The court suggested shifting all government vehicles to electric.



Retail inflation moderates to 5.5% in November after new high in October

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

India's retail inflation cooled slightly to 5.5% in November from a 14-month high of 6.2% in October, but remained significantly elevated for rural consumers at 5.95%, while dropping to 4.8% for their urban counterparts.

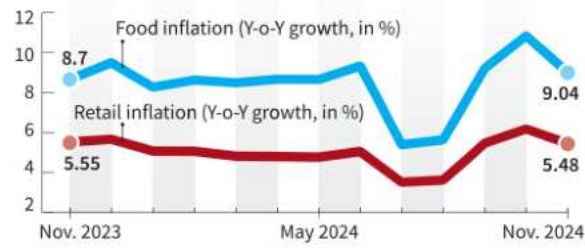
Food inflation, which has been a bugbear for hopes of an interest rate cut, also eased a tad from October's 15-month peak of 10.9% to 9.04% in November. Rural consumers experienced a slightly higher uptick of 9.1% while urban consumers saw an 8.74% gain in prices.

Vegetable prices ease

This marks the third straight month of food inflation staying above the

A mild respite

For the third straight month, food prices surged by over 9%, and consumer inflation stayed closer to 5.5%



SOURCE: MOSPI

9% mark, and overall consumer price rise of over 5%.

Vegetables inflation eased from a 57-month high of 42.2% in October to 29.33%. However, oils and fats inflation shot up 13.3%, the highest pace in two and a half years, and significantly over the 9.5% rise in the previous month and

the mere 2.5% inflation in September.

"The decline in inflation in November 2024 is mainly due to decline in inflation in 'food & beverages' group," the National Statistics Office (NSO) said, pointing to a significant drop in price rise observed in vegetables, pulses, sugar, fruits, eggs, milk, spic-

es, transport, communication, and personal care and effects. But these moderations were only marginal in some cases.

Fruits inflation eased only marginally from 8.4% in October to 7.7% in November. Pulses inflation dropped to 5.4%, the lowest in at least two years, and cereals inflation stood at 6.9%.

Six of the 22 States (including the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir), for which the NSO calculates monthly inflation rates, observed a price rise of over 6% – the upper limit of the Central bank's inflation target – in November. These included Chhattisgarh (8.4%), Bihar (7.55%), Odisha (6.8%), Uttar Pradesh (6.6%), Kerala (6.3%), and Madhya Pradesh (6.05%).



Gukesh is youngest world chess champion

The 18-year-old from Chennai beats Ding Liren of China in the final game; breaks the record held by the Russian Garry Kasparov for nearly 4 decades; the game was heading towards a draw until Ding made a fatal error with his rook; Gukesh is also only the 18th world champion in history; this was the first World Championship final between Asians

P.K. Ajith Kumar
SINGAPORE

History was made in the small island of Sentosa here on Thursday, as D. Gukesh became the youngest World chess champion ever after defeating Ding Liren of China in the final game of their match. The 18-year-old from Chennai broke the record held by the Russian Garry Kasparov for nearly four decades.

With his victory against the defending champion, which came after 58 moves, Gukesh took his points tally to 7.5 points. That was the requirement for a player to win the World title.

Heading to a draw
If the 14th game had ended in a draw, a series of tie-breaker games of speed chess were scheduled to be played on Friday.

The game was heading

towards a draw in fact, until Ding made a fatal error on the 55th move with his rook. There was no coming back for the Chinese Grandmaster after that.

This was the first-ever World championship match contested by two Asian players.

And it was a match between the players from India and China, the world's two most populous countries and the continent's superpowers.

Third Asian

Gukesh is only the third Asian to win the World championship. Viswanathan Anand, who is now a mentor for Gukesh, was the first, and Ding the second.

Gukesh is also only the 18th world champion in history, which dates back to 1886. That there have been only 17 undisputed world champions before him puts into perspective



On top of the world: D. Gukesh reacts after beating title-holder China's Ding Liren in the 14th and last game of the World Chess Championship 2024, in Singapore, on Thursday. PTI

the enormity of the achievement.

Gukesh's campaign had begun on the wrong foot, though.

He lost the first game, despite having white pieces (considered slightly advantageous usually). The second game was drawn,

and Gukesh won the third to equalise the match at 1.5-1.5.

All the following seven games were drawn.

Then Gukesh won the 11th game to take the lead for the first time in the match, but Ding struck back immediately to draw level. That meant the match would go to the bitter end, contrary to the expectations of most top players, who had tipped Gukesh as the clear favourite, based on current form.

Candidates tournament

By virtue of being the champion, Ding, who defeated Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi in last year's World title match, had booked his flight ticket to Singapore. Gukesh qualified for the World championship by winning the qualifying tournament – the Candidates, which was held earlier this year in Toronto.

There were two other Indians in the Candidates (R. Praggnanandhaa and Vidit Gujrathi), as well as

two in the Women's event (Koneru Humpy and R. Vaishali).

After that, Gukesh went on to play a major role in India's stunning twin triumph at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest.

India's men's and women's teams won the team gold. Only two other countries had done it before – the erstwhile Soviet Union and China.

Gukesh played on the top-board (where every country would usually field its best player) and won the individual gold.

Back in 2022, Gukesh had clinched the same medal at the Chennai Chess Olympiad, winning an incredible eight games in a row.

That was the turning point in his career.

A LEGEND, MADE

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