

Oppn 'mahagathbandhan' an illusion; BJP will win in 2019: Shah

Agency
Mumbai, Dec 19

BJP president Amit Shah Wednesday made light of the the opposition 'mahagathbandhan' (grand alliance), calling it an illusion and expressed confidence that the BJP will retain power after the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Speaking at the Republic Summit here, Shah also said he was sure that the Shiv Sena will be with the BJP in the next Lok Sabha elections. Talks are on (with them), he added. "The reality of the opposition 'mahagathbandhan' is different. It (the opposition alliance) doesn't exist and is a 'bhranti' (illusion)," Shah said. "The mahagathbandhan does not exist anywhere. We have fought against all of them in 2014 and defeated them to form

the government. They are all regional leaders, they can't help each other," the BJP president said. Shah said the BJP will gain in West Bengal, North-East and Odisha in 2019. "The issues of elections are: in five years how have we ensured national security and defeated corruption. We have provided toilets in eight crore homes and electricity in 2.5 crore homes," Shah said. "Not only for the BJP, but it is also necessary for the country that a strong govt comes to power," the BJP president said. The election results in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were definitely not favourable for BJP, but it is not right to link them with the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, he said. State polls can't be linked to Lok Sabha poll results as both elections are

fought on separate issues, Shah said. "It is our duty to work for the people and convince them, but if the mandate is against us we accept that too," he said. "I am not against analysis, but the elections are fought on different issues. The issues on the ground are different," he added. "In 2014, BJP had government in six states, now we have it in 16 states. So tell me who will win the 2019 elections," the BJP president said. "We accept the people's mandate (in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh). We will introspect on the poll results," he said. The BJP chief said it does not matter who is pitted against Narendra Modi in the 2019 polls (as prime ministerial aspirant). "We are going ahead on the basis of our strength and not on the basis of someone's weakness," he added.

Lok Sabha adjourned again amid sloganeering by members

Agency
New Delhi, Dec 19

Lok Sabha proceedings were adjourned for the second time on Wednesday after the House reconvened at noon, amid sloganeering and protests by AIADMK, Congress and TDP members over various issues. While AIADMK members protested against construction of a dam across the Cauvery river, those from the Congress demanded a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) probe into the Rafale deal. The government rejected the demand for a JPC. As the protests

continued, Speaker Sumitra Mahajan adjourned proceedings till 2pm. Earlier as soon as the House met in the morning, members from the three parties trooped into the Well, holding placards and later started shouting slogans. More than 40 members were in the Well. Some members from the ruling BJP also sought to raise certain issues from their seats. Little over ten minutes into the Question Hour, where one question and various supplementaries were taken up, the Speaker adjourned proceedings till noon following vociferous protests.

SSB jawan shot dead in UP's Ghazipur

Agency
Ghazipur, Dec 19

A 35-year-old Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) jawan was shot dead by unidentified bike-borne assailants in a village here, police said Wednesday. The incident happened on Monday in Katria village. A d i s t r i c t Superintendent of Police (City) Pradeep Kumar said. "On Monday, unidentified persons had attacked SSB

jawan Ramniwas Nishad (35), who was on leave and was in his native village of Katria under the Karanda police station area. He was shot at by motorcycle-borne assailants," Kumar said. The jawan was rushed to a district hospital, where he was declared brought dead, he added. Kumar said a case of murder was registered against unidentified accused and an investigation was underway to arrest them.

President wishes Goans on state Liberation Day

Agency
Panaji, Dec 19

President Ram Nath Kovind Wednesday wished the people of Goa on the State Liberation Day. Goa, which was freed from the Portuguese domination of 450 years through an extended freedom movement and Army operation on this day in 1961, is celebrating the 57th Liberation Day. "Greetings to the people of Goa on Liberation Day. We remember all those

who dedicated their lives in the struggle to free Goa from colonial rule. My best wishes to everybody in this beautiful state for a bright and prosperous future", the President tweeted. Various functions were held across the coastal state to mark the occasion. Speaker of Goa Legislative Assembly Pramod Sawant unfurled the national flag during a state function held in Panaji this morning in absence of ailing Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar.

Gold slips Rs 210 on sluggish demand

Agency
New Delhi, Dec 19

Gold prices fell by Rs 210 to Rs 31,850 per 10 gram at the bullion market Wednesday owing to tepid demand from local jewellers even as the precious metal firmed up overseas. Silver too weakened by Rs 435 to Rs 37,880 per kg due to reduced offtake by consuming industrial units. Marketmen attributed the slide in gold prices to easing demand from local jewellers and retailers in the domestic spot market, but a firm trend overseas capped the fall. Globally, gold edged up by 0.06 per cent to USD 1,250.80 an ounce and silver

rose 0.45 per cent to USD 14.77 an ounce in New York. In the national capital, gold of 99.9 per cent and 99.5 per cent purities declined by Rs 210 each to Rs 31,850 and Rs 31,700 per 10 gram, respectively. The precious metal had gained Rs 60 Tuesday. Sovereign, however, held steady at Rs 25,000 per piece of 8 gram on little doing. In sync with gold, silver ready traded lower by Rs 435 to Rs 37,880 per kg, while weekly-based delivery was down by Rs 448 to Rs 37,433 per kg. Silver coins, however, were unchanged at Rs 74,000 for buying and Rs 75,000 for selling of 100 pieces.

Not a Silent Prime Minister, Regularly Interacted With the Press: Manmohan Singh

Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 19

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Tuesday took a dig at his critics for calling him a silent prime minister, saying he was never afraid of talking to the media and rather interacted with the press very regularly. This is being seen as a comment on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has not held a single press conference since he took office. He also revealed that he was not only an "accidental prime minister" but also an "accidental finance minister" of the country, as the post was rejected by I.G. Patel, the former RBI Governor and his immediate predecessor in the RBI. Singh was made the finance minister in 1991 by the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, who is credited for changing the course of the Indian economy and bringing in market liberalisation. The former prime minister said that no government could change the course of the economy and broadly followed the path set by him as a finance minister in the Narasimha Rao-led government. Speaking at the launch of his six-volume book series called 'Changing India', Singh said "despite all the hiccups and hurdles, I have no doubt that India will get its action right. Despite the difficulty that may be on the horizon, this country is destined to be a major powerhouse of the global economy." Singh remembered his first budget speech, when he quoted Victor Hugo and said, "No power on

earth can stop an idea whose time has come." "I suggest to this august house that the emergence of India as a major economic power in the world happens to be one such idea. Let the whole world hear it loud and clear. India is now wide awake. We shall prevail. We shall overcome," he quoted from his budget speech of 1991. "Therefore, I have always believed at a time when India was at a very serious crisis, that we will overcome and we will prevail and with determination we converted the crisis of 1991 into a great opportunity to reform the economy. The results of that [are] for everyone to see," he said, referring to India's journey since. There have been several changes of government, but the broad thrust of the economic policy has not changed in the last 25 years, he said. As a result, India is one of the few countries witnessing an average growth rate of 6.7% to 7% for the past 25 years. "We could do more. We shall do more. I sincerely hope and believe that India is destined to achieve its destiny... It was a belief which sustained me as a bureaucrat, as a finance minister and as the prime minister. I stand by that," he said. "Held regular press conferences" About criticism of being a "silent prime minister", Singh said, "I think these volumes speak for themselves and I don't want to boast about achievements as prime minister, but the events that took place are well described in these volumes, particularly in

the volume that deal with 'Prime Minister Speaks'." He narrated an incidence from 2005, when he was advised by officials not to address a press conference organised by the National Press Club in Washington and said officials were nervous, but it turned out to be successful and the verbatim record is published in these volumes. "I certainly would like to say that I was not the prime minister who was afraid of talking to the press. I met the press regularly and on every foreign trip that I undertook, I had a press conference in the plane or immediately after the landing. There are large number of press conferences whose results are also described," he said. "Accidental finance minister" He said his appointment as India's finance minister in 1991 also surprised him. Singh said he did not believe P.C. Alexander when the latter told him that the then Prime Minister Rao wanted him to take over as the finance minister in 1991 to steer the crisis-ridden Indian economy. "I was then chairman of the University Grant Commission, and as usual went to office next day. Somehow Narasimha found me and asked if I received any communication from Alexander," Singh recalled. Manmohan Singh told Rao, "I did not take him seriously." Rao asked him to get dressed and appear for the swearing-in as a cabinet minister, he said, while narrating the episode of his journey to the finance ministry.

Criminal justice bill passes Senate; House approval expected

Agency
Washington, Dec 19

The Senate passed a sweeping criminal justice bill Tuesday that addresses concerns that the nation's war on drugs had led to the imprisonment of too many Americans for non-violent crimes without adequately preparing them for their return to society. Senate passage of the bill by a vote of 87-12 culminates years of negotiations and gives President Donald Trump a signature policy victory, with the outcome hailed by scores of conservative and liberal advocacy groups. The House is expected to pass the bill this week, sending it to the president's desk for his signature. The bill gives judges more discretion when sentencing some drug offenders and boosts prisoner rehabilitation efforts. It also reduces the life sentence for some drug offenders with three convictions, or "three strikes," to 25 years. Another provision would allow about 2,600 federal prisoners sentenced for crack cocaine offenses before August 2010 the opportunity to petition for a reduced penalty. "America is the greatest Country in the world and my job is to fight for ALL citizens, even those who have made mistakes," Trump tweeted moments after the vote. "This will keep our communities safer, and provide hope and a

second chance, to those who earn it. In addition to everything else, billions of dollars will be saved. I look forward to signing this into law!" Trump added. The vote also thrilled Democrats. Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., said the nation's prisons are full of Americans who are struggling with mental illness and addiction, and who are overwhelmingly poor. He said the nation's criminal justice system "feeds on certain communities and not on others," and said the bill represents a step toward "healing" for those communities. "Let's make no mistake, this legislation, which is one small step, will affect thousands and thousands of lives," Booker said. When the bill appeared to have stalled in recent weeks, Sen. Charles Grassley, the Republican chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, pleaded with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to bring it up for a vote. With Trump's urging, McConnell eventually agreed, and voted for the bill as well. "The First Step Act takes lessons from history and from states our laboratories of democracy to reduce crime, save taxpayer dollars and strengthen faith and fairness in our criminal justice system," Grassley said. The Senate turned back three amendments Tuesday from Republican senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and John

Kennedy of Louisiana, who said the bill endangered public safety. Supporters voiced concerns that passing any of the amendments would have sunk the bill. One amendment would have excluded more prisoners from participating in educational and training programs that allow them to earn credits. Those credits can then be used to gain an earlier release to a halfway house or home confinement to finish out their sentence. Another amendment would have required that victims be notified before a prisoner gets that earlier release. The third would have required the Federal Bureau of Prisons to track and report the re-arrest rate for each prisoner who gets early release. "While the bill has marginally improved from earlier versions, I'm disappointed my amendments to exclude child molesters from early release and to protect victims' rights were not adopted," Cotton said. "I also remain concerned that reducing sentences for drug traffickers and violent felons is a threat to public safety." Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said the bill already carves out some 60 different crimes that make prisoners ineligible for early release to a halfway house or home confinement. He said Cotton's amendment was too expansive and would prevent at least 30,000 prisoners from participating.

Trump panel recommends guns in schools to keep US students safe

Agency
Washington, Dec 19

A safety panel set up by US President Donald Trump in the wake of numerous school shootings recommended Tuesday that schools consider arming staff, using veterans as guards and reversing Obama-era guidelines. The Federal Commission on School Safety panel, led by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, was set up after the February massacre in Parkland, Florida, when a former student shot dead 17 people, sparking mass gun control protests. The commission rejected calls to increase the minimum age required for gun purchases, arguing in its 180-page report that most school shooters obtain their weapons from family members or friends. Instead, it suggested arming staff — even teachers in some circumstances — "for the

sake of effectively and immediately responding to violence." School districts where police responses could be slower, such as rural districts, may benefit in particular, the commission said. It also recommended education authorities hiring military veterans and former police officers who "can also serve as highly effective educators." The report pushes for a review of disciplinary guidelines introduced in 2014 under former president Barack Obama, which suggested alternatives to suspension and expulsion to tackle discrimination against black and Latino students. The commission's report said the measure has had "a strong negative impact on school discipline and safety." The American Civil Liberties Union condemned that proposition. "The Trump

administration is exploiting tragedies to justify rolling back school children's civil rights protections, despite the lack of any evidence linking school discipline reform to school shootings," it said in a statement. Democratic Representative Nancy Pelosi, who will be US House speaker when her party take over the chamber in January, criticized the report saying Trump and DeVos "have reached a new low." "Their report on school safety puts special interests and the NRA ahead of protecting America's school children. Students & parents have had #Enough," Pelosi wrote on Twitter. She drew a backlash from Ryan Petty, a gun enthusiast and school safety advocate whose 14 year old daughter was killed in the Parkland massacre.