

Late Night Fire at Two Luxury Hotels Sends Mumbai Into Frenzy; Probe Ordered

Agency
Mumbai, Dec. 20

Fire incidents were reported in two city-based hotels, including the luxury hotel Trident, late Wednesday night, officials said. No casualties have been reported in the incidents, they said. A fire broke out at a high-end shopping centre on the ground floor of the Trident Hotel in south Mumbai at 11.04 pm, a fire brigade official said Thursday. The blaze was confined to a shop in the shopping

centre, spread in an area of 2,000 sq ft, and it was doused by 1 am, he said. In another incident, a blaze erupted at the Afzal Hotel located near Mazgaon Circle in south Mumbai, another official said. The fire brigade got a call about the blaze around 11.37 pm. Fire tenders were rushed to the spot and the flames were extinguished by 1.15 am, he said. Some electric wiring, chimney and items in the hotel's kitchen were damaged in the fire, he said, adding that the

cause of the blaze will be ascertained after an inquiry. The two incidents come days after a fire at the government-run ESIC Kamgar Hospital at Marol in suburban Andheri on Monday in which nine people were killed and nearly 175 others injured. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis had on Tuesday ordered a probe in the hospital fire and the Union Labour Ministry announced compensation for its victims.

BJP's Tally in Hindi Heartland Could Plummet by 70% in 2019

Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 20

There is unanimity that the keen contest resulting in a photo finish in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has thrown open the race for 2019. It makes sense therefore, to examine electoral statistics from the past and visualise emerging trends.

Needless to say that in addition to the two states, Chhattisgarh – in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost too – is part of the Hindi heartland of north India. It is one of the two regions that propelled Narendra Modi to power in 2014. When we talk about the Hindi heartland, it refers to ten states – Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and the Union Territory of Chandigarh.

Although not really a separate region, the two other states in northern India – Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir – have to be treated separately while discussing politics in a general framework. But within the context of the BJP's performance in 2014, these can also be clubbed with the heartland region for calculations in the run up to 2019 polls.

These dozen states and the lone UT account for a total of 245 Lok Sabha seats, of which the BJP won 196 in 2014. In addition, if you add the seats won by its allies in Bihar and UP, the total is a difficult to repeat 211. Essentially, in this block of states – which elects almost 45% of Lok Sabha members – the BJP's opponents won just 34 seats at the height of the "Narendra Modi wave". On the basis of seats won, the vote shares of the BJP and the Congress in the recent assembly polls and most importantly, the swing away from the BJP from the levels of the 2013 assembly elections (7%-9%) and 2014 Lok Sabha elections (14%-17%), it is certain that there would be significant fall in the BJP's tally in these states.

In 2014, the BJP won 62 of the 65 Lok Sabha seats in the three heartland states that elected new state governments recently. Based on its current performance, the fall will be dramatic. Media analysis shows the number of BJP seats would come down to 18 (10 from Madhya Pradesh, eight from Rajasthan and none from Chhattisgarh). It has been argued, especially by BJP supporters or those who believe that Modi still has the capacity to personally bolster his party to previous levels, that these elections were fought on local issues. A campaign rooted in the argument of 'Modi and prime minister' versus 'someone at helm of a *kichdi*' would gain acceptability among voters and swing the verdict in BJP's favour, they say.

Yet, these states thrice voted in the same direction in the Lok Sabha elections following assembly polls in 2003-04, 2008-09 and 2013-14. On the basis of the current political narrative, the BJP appears unlikely to alter the narrative that resulted in major losses for the party in rural and urban areas.

It is unlikely that voter sentiment will remain unaltered in the other Hindi speaking states. It's possible that the BJP will witness nearly a 70% erosion in its seats held. If these calculations turn out to be true in 2019, the BJP's tally in these states will fall from 196 to 59 – a loss of 137 seats. These seats would be mainly picked up by the Congress, BSP-SP-RLD combine in UP, RJD in Bihar and a few by AAP in Delhi.

Because the bulk of seats that the BJP may lose is likely to be picked up by the Congress, it would dramatically alter its leveraging capacity among opposition parties. DMK president M.K. Stalin perhaps recognised this and floated the idea of Rahul Gandhi as prime minister. The BJP's performance in western India was also

superlative in 2014. On its own, the BJP secured 53 seats. If the alliance with Shiv Sena is taken into account, the party held 72 of the 78 seats. Even if the two parties eventually bury the hatchet, the alliance is expected to suffer losses, further reducing the BJP tally. The party expects to gain seats in eastern India, but it is unlikely to compensate for losses elsewhere. This brings another set of engaging figures: since 1996, when the coalition era set in, the combined seats of the BJP and Congress has ranged between 283 (2004) and 326 (2014). The gap between the two was narrowest in 2004. The BJP won 138 seats, while the Congress bagged 145 and went on to form the government.

Unless the political narrative is significantly altered – leading to reconfiguration of the electoral equation – the BJP and the Congress are collectively expected to reach a tally in the range of 280 to 330, leaving the rest to the regional parties. In the coming months, while weighing possible outcomes and the nature of the next government, it would be important to keep these figures in mind.

Ex-Cong leader Sajjan Kumar appears before Delhi court in 1984 anti-Sikh riots case

Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 20

Former Congress leader Sajjan Kumar appeared before a Delhi court Thursday in a 1984 anti-Sikh riots case, three days after he was convicted in another riots case by the high court here.

Kumar surrendered his mobile phone before the court following the directions of the high

court in its order convicting him on December 17.

The court adjourned the matter for January 22 after he said his main counsel was unavailable.

In the case before the trial court, three persons – Kumar, Brahmaanand Gupta and Ved Prakash – are facing trial on charges of murder and rioting pertaining to the killing of Surjit Singh in Sultanpuri.

Delhi Can Feel The Chill. Temperature Dips To 4 Degree Celsius

Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 20

The people of Delhi woke up to a chilly morning on Thursday with the minimum temperature dipping to 4 degree Celsius, the lowest so far in the city. In the next two days, the temperature is likely to drop to four degree Celsius, according to India Meteorological Department forecast.

"The minimum temperature was recorded at 4 degrees Celsius, four notches below the season's average. It is the lowest temperature recorded so far in this month," the official of the department said. While the mornings bring the chill and fog, the days are expected to be warmer with the maximum temperature likely to hover around 22 degree Celsius.

"The skies will remain clear and the maximum temperature is expected to hover around 22 degrees Celsius," the weatherman said. The humidity level recorded at 8.30 am was 94 per cent, he said.

On Wednesday, the minimum temperature settled at 5.2 degrees Celsius, while the maximum temperature was recorded at 22.3 degrees Celsius.

According to the government-run System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting And Research (SAFAR), the overall air quality index of Delhi continues to be "very poor"

at 319. If the air quality index is in the range of 51 to 100, it is considered satisfactory; 101-200 is moderate and 201-300 falls under the category of poor. 300-400 is considered 'very poor' and 401-500 falls under the category 'hazardous'.

With the minimum temperature falling, there will be additional moisture in Delhi's air, mainly because of a cold wave and ground frost conditions over some parts of northwest India.

"Winds are again becoming partially favourable for the dispersion. Moist air from IGP-region is continuously passing over Delhi's cool surface by advection and will lead to moderate advection fog," says SAFAR.

Delhi must avoid prolonged or heavy exertion, says the research body in an advisory.

"Go for a short walk instead of a jog and take more breaks. Stop any activity level if you experience any unusual coughing, chest discomfort, wheezing, breathing difficulty, or fatigue. If the room has windows, close them," the advisory reads.

It also advises people to avoid burning wood, candles or incense. "If the air conditioner provides fresh air intake option, keep that closed. Keep the room clean - don't vacuum. Do wet mopping to reduce dust," says the advisory.

Arvind Kejriwal, Vijay Goel Clash On Twitter Over "Deletion" Of Voters

Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 20

AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal and Union minister Vijay Goel crossed swords on Wednesday over alleged mass deletion of voters from the city's electoral list, with Delhi chief minister alleging that votes of Purvanchalis and traders were deleted at the behest of the BJP. Mr Goel fired the first salvo, tweeting that the "lie" of the Arvind Kejriwal government on deletion of votes in Delhi was "exposed". "The lie of Arvind Kejriwal government is exposed. Stop

misguiding Delhi people. Chief Electoral Officer report- names deleted due to death or change in address. The voter list does not maintain caste data," Mr Goel tweeted in Hindi.

The AAP chief hit back with a tweet: "Vijay ji we got list of deleted names by forcing the Election Commission. We are speaking on the basis of that list. The list is already with you because you people have got the names deleted. Count the surnames of Puravanchalis and Banias in the list." The Aam Aadmi Party

leadership has been accusing the BJP of getting deleted over 30 lakh votes since Assembly elections in Delhi in 2015.

The party leaders also alleged that most of the deleted names belonged to Purvanchali and Bania community in Delhi.

Earlier this month, the two parties had locked horns over the issue with Kejriwal saying the traders community would not vote for the BJP because they were angry with the party. Mr Goel had hit back charging that the AAP was "fooling" the Bania community in Delhi.

AMU students march to mourn civilian killings in Kashmir

Agency
Aligarh, Dec 20

Students of the Aligarh Muslim University held a candle light peace march to protest against the recent killing of seven civilians in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district.

The students, led by leaders of the AMU Students Union, Wednesday evening wore black bands and carried

placards which said 'Kashmir is Bleeding', 'No More Hate' and 'Respect Human Rights'.

The seven civilians died in south Kashmir's Pulwama district on December 15 when security forces allegedly opened fire at an unruly crowd that tried to storm the site of an encounter in which three militants and an Army man were killed, police had said.

The students began their

march from the Maulana Azad Library which culminated at the Baab-e-Syed gate.

Later, president of the AMU Students Union Salman Imtiaz handed over a memorandum to the district authorities, addressed to the President of India, stating that it is now imperative that the situation in the Kashmir Valley should be urgently prevented from deteriorating further.

Genpact Senior Executive Commits Suicide in Noida After Colleagues Accuse Him of Sexual Harassment

Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 20

A 35-year-old assistant vice-president at Genpact, who was facing allegations of sexual harassment at his workplace, committed suicide at his Noida residence on Thursday. Police said victim Swaroop Raj was found hanging by his wife of two years and she informed them about the incident. They said Swaroop was temporarily suspended from the company pending investigation into the allegations levelled against him by two employees. "The company had asked him to

submit his identity card and laptop till the inquiry against him was complete," an officer said. Swaroop was with Genpact since 2007. He started working there as a process developer and became a senior manager in 2015. He was gradually promoted to the post of assistant vice-president. The police also found a suicide note, which Swaroop had reportedly written for his wife where he said he would not be able to face the world as "everyone will look at me with that eye even if I come clean".

"I want to let you know how much I love you. I have an allegation by two

of the employees on sexual harassment and trust me I didn't do anything. I know the world will understand it but you and our families should trust me. The allegations are baseless. But the entire Genpact will know about it. Hence, I don't have the courage to face everyone. I want you to be strong and live your life with whole respect as your husband has not done anything. I am going as everyone will look at me with that eye even if I come clean," the letter read. Police said Swaroop's body was sent for postmortem and the family had not yet blamed anyone for the suicide.

Indian Students, Workers To Benefit From UK's Post-Brexit Visa Strategy

Agency
London, Dec. 20

The UK government has released a White Paper on its post-Brexit visas and immigration strategy, which is expected to benefit Indian students and professionals as it focuses on skills rather than country of origin.

The UK's future skills-based immigration system, tabled in the House of Commons on Wednesday by UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid, removes any cap on highly-skilled migrants from anywhere in the world and improves the post-study work offering for international students.

The proposals, set to be phased in from December 2021 after the proposed transition period for Britain's exit from the European Union (EU), claim to level the country's immigration playing field with the end of free movement for people from within the 28-member economic bloc.

"As we leave the European Union, free movement will end... This will be a system where it is workers' skills that matter, not which country they come from," British Prime Minister Theresa May said in her foreword to the strategy. "We are taking a skills-based approach to ensure we can attract the brightest and best migrants to the UK," added Mr Javid, who made a reference to his own Pakistani origins as "son of immigrant parents".

Under the new proposals, an annual cap of 20,700 on the number of skilled work visas issued will be removed, likely to benefit doctors and IT professionals from India, among others. There will also be a new 12-month visa route for workers at any skill level for a temporary period to allow businesses to hire the staff they need on a time-bound basis.

"People arriving on this route will not be able to bring family members with them, won't accrue rights to settle in the UK and will have a 12-month cooling off period once their visa expires," the UK Home Office said. The onerous requirement for labour market tests by employers wanting to sponsor an overseas skilled worker are also to be done away with.

The plans were broadly welcomed by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), which said the White Paper recognises the value offered by skilled workers from countries like India. "Indian Industry has long called for a fair, transparent and skills-based immigration system, and today's proposals go some way to achieving these goals," said Jim Bligh, of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Chair of CII's UK India Business Forum. "Tackling the UK's skills gaps, particularly in digital and technology, must remain a key focus for

government and it is welcome that this paper recognises the value that skilled workers from overseas can bring to helping improve the UK's skills base," he said. Under changes proposed to attract international students to the UK, the government said it would "improve the current offer" to those who have completed a degree who want to stay on in the UK to work after they have completed their studies by offering six months' post-study leave to all Master's students and Bachelor's students studying at an institution with degree-awarding powers. This is aimed at giving them more time to find permanent skilled work and to work temporarily during that period.

"We will also allow for students studying at Bachelor's level or above to be able to apply to switch into the skilled workers route up to three months before the end of their course in the UK, and from outside of the UK for two years after their graduation," the White Paper notes. Universities UK International, the representative group for the country's higher education institutions which has been campaigning for a better post-study offer, said the proposals recognise the important contributions made by international students to the UK.