

PM Modi holds talks with Bhutanese counterpart

Agency
New Delhi, Dec 28

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday held talks with his Bhutanese counterpart Lotay Tshering on a host of key issues to strengthen bilateral ties between the two neighbouring countries.

Tshering, who arrived here Thursday for his first foreign visit after

taking charge last month, met Modi at the Hyderabad House in the morning and the two leaders held delegation-level talks.

Earlier in the day, Tshering was accorded a ceremonial welcome at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj also called on the Bhutanese premier this morning. Swaraj congratulated

Tshering on the assumption of the high office of Bhutan's prime minister and the two leaders had a "warm exchange of views" on important aspects of the bilateral relationship. Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said. Tshering also laid a wreath at Mahatma Gandhi's 'samadhi' at Rajghat.

Arunachal touches record high revenue generation

Agency
Itanagar, Dec 28

The Arunachal Pradesh government has created a record of a total revenue generation of Rs 1,598.49 crore in 2017-18, reaching a new high in the last 30 years, a senior official said Friday.

The revenue generation had crossed the Rs 1,000 cr mark for two consecutive years since Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood in 1987, he said.

The revenue generation was Rs 1,253.57 crore in 2016-17, registering an increase of Rs 326.39 crore from its previous collection that stood at Rs 927.23 crore, the official said.

"There has been a visible improvement in the work culture in the last two years. The Team Arunachal mantra has

ignited minds of the employees to deliver goods to the people of the state. This has resulted in multiplying the state revenue collection," the official said.

The BJP government in the state is making an all out effort to reach the Rs 2,000 crore mark in 2018-19, he said.

The source of revenue generation by the state government includes share of central taxes, state taxes among others. "Due to the concerted effort and hard work of the state government and its dedicated officers the revenue generation has shot up," he said.

Chief Minister Pema Khandu had said at a recent meeting, "The state has witnessed faster change, greater transparency and unprecedented development in all sectors."

Air Force plane with 20 powerful pumps enroute Meghalaya for rescue mission

Agency
Bhubaneswar, Dec. 28

A 21-member team of Odisha Fire Services will reach Meghalaya on Friday with high-powered dewatering pumps to assist local authorities in a fresh attempt to rescue the 15 miners, trapped in a flooded illegal coal mine in Ksan village of East Jaintia Hills district for the last fortnight.

With chances of their rescue becoming bleaker by the day, the Indian ministry of home affairs on Thursday sought the help of Odisha Fire Services for sending its team of experienced professionals.

Director general of fire service and commandant general, home guards and director civil defence BK Sharma said the team led by chief fire officer Sukanta Sethi left on Friday morning in a special aircraft of the Indian Air Force with 20 high-power pumps.

"Each of the pumps can dewater 1,600 litres of water a minute and we hope the miners can be rescued. We are one of the few states that is experienced in handling such calamities. We could have gone much earlier, but the request from MHA came only yesterday (Thursday)," said Sharma.

With time running out for the miners, the Odisha team could have left on Thursday evening but could not as the Shillong airport does not have night landing facilities.

This is the first time that the fire services team would test their skills in a coal mine filled with water. The fire services department has taken part in rescue operations in others states in the past as well.

In August this year, a team of 240 fire service personnel from Odisha had helped in the rescue

operation of flood-affected people in Kerala. The team not just saved hundreds of people, including patients and disabled, they also rescued domestic animals like cows, goats and pets like dogs.

In 2014 too, the Odisha fire service personnel had earned praise for their commendable job in the relief and rescue operations in Andhra Pradesh during Cyclone Hudhud.

Efforts stepped up

The state government has been criticised for the tardy rescue operation in the Saipung area of the northeastern state due to the festive season. All that the rescue officials in Meghalaya have recovered so far are three helmets.

The efforts to pump out water from the mine stopped on Monday as the available machines were ineffective and stronger ones were needed.

A request for 10 pumps of 100 HP, survey teams to detect seepage and other assistance from state-owned Coal India was made by the district administration in a letter to the state government on December 20, but the corporation received the communication for assistance from Shillong only on December 26.

On Thursday, an assessment team from Kiroloskar Pumps (KBL) in Kolkata arrived at the remote site on Thursday evening after a request by Congress leader Shashi Tharoor, whose party is in the opposition in Meghalaya.

A Coal India team arrived in Shillong on Thursday and will visit the site on Friday for assessment. JK Borah, general manager, North Eastern Coalfields said "seven pumps have been mobilised by Coal India." Officials said moving the other equipment to the site of the accident will

take another three to four days.

Rescue teams at the site said that a foul smell emanating from the water on Wednesday reported by one of the divers was in all likelihood because of stagnation when the operation was suspended on Christmas Day.

"It has been fourteen days now. The chances of the trapped miners surviving are very slim," acting additional district magistrate SS Syiemlieh said on Thursday.

The miners have been missing after the illegal coal mine they were digging collapsed on them in the coal-rich East Jaintia Hills, an area where illegal mining is rife and a National Green Tribunal ban on such activities has been in place for four years.

Meghalaya has nearly 640 million tonnes of coal reserves. Mining of coal by hand has been going on in Meghalaya for over 150 years, mostly for local use. Large-scale illegal and indiscriminate mining of the coal by private landowners and the local community started nearly three decades ago.

Most of these mines employ minors, some from neighbouring states and Nepal as well; the miners work many metres underground in unsafe conditions, mining coal with their bare hands.

This isn't the first accident involving an illegal mine in the state. In February 2014, four miners were killed when the walls of an illegal mine collapsed in Garo Hills. In December 2013, five miners died when the cable of the contraption which was carrying them down to an illegal mine in Jaintia Hills broke. In July 2012, 15 miners drowned in an illegal mine in Garo Hills when an underground stream flowing near the mine flooded it.

Lok Sabha proceedings disrupted as Oppn protests continue

Agency
New Delhi, Dec 28

Proceedings of the Lok Sabha were disrupted on Friday due to unrelenting protests and sloganeering by opposition on various issues, including a probe into the Rafale aircraft deal. As soon as the House met at 11 AM, MPs belonging to the Congress, AIADMK, TDP and Left parties came to the Well

and shouted slogans in support of their demands. While the Congress has been demanding a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) probe into the Rafale aircraft deal, those from the AIADMK protested against the construction of a dam across Cauvery River.

TDP members sought special status for Andhra Pradesh while Left MPs raised the demand for

bringing a Bill to ensure reservation for women in legislature.

As more than 30 members from various parties continued to shout slogans and displayed placards while standing in the Well, Mahajan adjourned the House till noon.

Two questions were taken up during the Question Hour, which went on for about 20 minutes.

US government shutdown set to drag on to 2019 as Trump, Democrats stick to their stands

Agency
Washington, Dec 28

The partial US government shutdown is all set to drag on to the new year as opposition Democrats and Republicans refused to show any sign of compromise Thursday to end the impasse over President Donald Trump's demand for border wall funding.

Trump has refused to sign any stopgap spending bill that does not have provisions to fund a wall along the US-Mexico border which he says is essential to stop the flow of illegal immigrants.

The Democrats, who will hold majority in the US House of Representatives in 2019 and carries the crucial numbers in the Senate despite being in minority, has argued that such a move is waste of taxpayers' money. Statements issued by both the camps on Thursday indicated that the impasse is all set to continue in the new year. The partial government shutdown that started last Saturday has affected 800,000 federal employees, who have either been furloughed or are working without pay.

President Trump continued to blame Democrats for the shutdown. In a tweet, Trump said the government shutdown is not about the wall. "Everybody knows that a Wall will work perfectly (In Israel the Wall works 99.9%). This is only about the Dems not letting Donald Trump and the Republicans have a win. They may have the 10 Senate votes, but we have the issue, Border Security. 2020! he said.

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders also criticised Democrats on

Thursday, saying in a statement that they had "decided to go home" over the Christmas holiday rather than stay in Washington to negotiate. The President has made clear that any bill to fund the government must adequately fund border security to stop the flow of illegal drugs, criminals, MS-13 gang members, child smugglers and human traffickers into our communities - and protect the American people, the White House said.

"The administration understands this crisis and made a reasonable, common-sense solution to Democrats five days ago - we've not received a single response, it said in a statement.

The President and his team stayed in Washington over Christmas hoping to negotiate a deal that would stop the dangerous crisis on the border, protect American communities, and re-open the government, it said.

The Democrats decided to go home, it alleged. The only rational conclusion is that the Democrat party is openly choosing to keep our government closed to protect illegal immigrants rather than the American people. The President does not want the government to remain shut down, but he will not sign a proposal that does not first prioritize our country's safety and security, the White House said.

The Democrats have described it as a "Trump shutdown". Federal workers should not be held hostage by the President's demand for a useless and offensive border wall that he promised Mexico would pay for, said Democratic

leader Congressmen McGovern. Republicans hold the House, the Senate, and the White House until January 3. They closed this government down and they have an obligation to open it back up. If they continue refusing to do so, the Democratic Majority will move to responsibly end the Trump Shutdown on Day One of the new Congress, he said. Senator Richard Blumenthal said Trump's positioning for a very long shutdown disregards the struggle and sacrifice many families are currently making.

Sanjay Sethi appointed JNPT chairman

Agency
New Delhi, Dec 28

Senior bureaucrat Sanjay Sethi has been appointed as the chairman of the Navi Mumbai-based Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT), according to a government order. The 1992-batch IAS officer of the Maharashtra cadre has been appointed to the post for a period of five years, the order issued by the Personnel Ministry said.

In another order, the ministry said senior police officer Baljit Singh has been appointed as the security head of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC). Singh is a 1996-batch IPS officer of the Jharkhand cadre. He has been appointed as the Executive Director (Security), ONGC, for five years.

Militant killed in encounter in J-K's Pulwama district

Agency
Srinagar, Dec 28

A militant was killed in an encounter with security forces in Awantipora area in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district on Friday, police said.

Security forces launched a cordon and search operation in the Banderpora-Rinzipora area of Awantipora on Friday morning following information about the presence of militants there, a police official

said.

He said the search operation turned into an encounter after the militants fired on the search party of the forces, who retaliated.

In the ensuing gunfight, one militant was killed, the official said.

He said the slain militant has been identified as Ishfaq Yousuf Wani, a resident of Qoil area of Pulwama in south Kashmir.

Further details are awaited, the official said.

Siddaramaiah Gets His Way as Loyalist MB Patil Takes Home Ministry From Karnataka Dy CM Parameshwara

Agency
Bengaluru, Dec. 28

The new ministers inducted in the Karnataka cabinet after its second round of expansion cum reshuffle have now been allocated portfolios and former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has had the last laugh.

Deputy chief minister G Parameshwara has had to part with the much coveted Home portfolio and it has gone to Siddaramaiah loyalist MB Patil. According to sources, Parameshwara was very reluctant to give up the Home department and only did so after a nudge from Congress chief Rahul Gandhi.

In return, he will continue being in charge of the cash rich Bengaluru development authority and will add IT-BT and law and parliamentary affairs to his kitty.

The list of portfolios was cleared by Gandhi and

sent to Chief Minister HD Kumaraswamy by KC Venugopal, AICC general secretary and Karnataka in charge. Eight Congress ministers were inducted into the Kumaraswamy cabinet last week.

Venugopal, who was in Bengaluru this week to discuss and finalise portfolios, is said to have faced resistance from G Parameshwara for being asked to part with Home and siding with Siddaramaiah.

The deputy CM had reportedly left the meeting midway and asked CLP leader Siddaramaiah and others to "take a call", after expressing reluctance to give up any of his portfolios. He contended he had worked to get the deputy CM's post and the portfolios to suit the stature.

Even during the cabinet expansion, Siddaramaiah is said to have had his way as several of his loyalists made their way into the cabinet this time.

India announces Rs 4,500 crore assistance to Bhutan

Agency
New Delhi, Dec 28

Prime Minister Narendra Modi Friday announced a Rs 4,500 crore financial assistance to Bhutan for its 12th five-year plan after holding wide-ranging talks with his Bhutanese counterpart Lotay Tshering.

In his media statement, Modi said hydro power cooperation with Bhutan is a key aspect of bilateral ties and that work on the Mangdechhu project will soon be completed. Tshering arrived here on Thursday on his first foreign visit after taking charge as PM of the Himalayan nation last

month following his party's victory in the general elections.

Modi said he has assured the Bhutanese prime minister that India, as a trusted friend, will continue to play an important role in Bhutan's development. India will contribute Rs 4,500 crore in Bhutan's 12th five-year plan, Modi said.

Tshering on his part noted that Prime Minister Modi was the first head of state to congratulate him on his electoral victory. He also thanked India for its continued support to his country's developmental needs.

The new five-year plan of Bhutan began this year

and will continue till 2022. Earlier in the day, Tshering was accorded a ceremonial welcome at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj also called on the Bhutanese premier this morning. Swaraj congratulated

Tshering on the assumption of the high office of Bhutan's prime minister and the two leaders had a "warm exchange of views" on important aspects of the bilateral relationship, Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said. Tshering also laid a wreath at Mahatma Gandhi's 'samadhi' at Rajghat.