

Maldives sets target to woo 3,00,000 Indian tourists in 2025

MALE, Feb 4 (PTI)

THE Maldives Government has set a target of attracting 3,00,000 Indian tourists in 2025 after their number went from top place in 2023 to sixth in 2024 following the strained relations between Male and New Delhi.

Maldives' Ministry of Tourism's statistics shows that Maldives received 20,46,615 visitors in 2024 compared to 18,78,543 tourist arrivals in 2023. China occupied the top slot followed by Russia in 2024 as Indian tourists shunned away till about October last year with the number slowly rising after that.

Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC) chairman Abdulla Ghiyas told a local news portal Adhadhu on

Monday that monthly events will be held in India to achieve the goal to attract 3,00,000 tourists.

"We are conducting it as a very big campaign. For the first time, we are targeting to hire a brand ambassador to advertise in the Indian mass media. We are also trying to hold cricket summer camps in Maldives," he said.

The MMPRC is also working with airlines, both Indian and Maldivian, to bring tourists from more destinations in India, which Ghiyas said adding, they are targeting to fly from newer destination cities such as Kolkata, Pune, Chennai too.

Post Covid-19 pandemic, Indian tourists occupied the top slot of arrivals to Maldives continuously from 2020 till 2023. However, a full-blown backlash

was directed at the Maldives following derogatory remarks against India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on social media by three Maldivian Ministers after he posted photos and video of the pristine Lakshadweep Islands on India's west coast on January 6 on his X handle.

Indian tourists boycott Maldives, travel agencies black-listed the archipelagic nation and even after efforts by the tourism industry here, there were no improvements.

Following the diplomatic row between the 2 countries, the number of Indian tourists went down from 2,09,193 in 2023 to 1,30,805 in 2024 with the numbers per month rising very slowly only in the last two months.

India inks contract with Russia for procurement of anti-ship cruise missiles

NEW DELHI, Feb 4 (PTI)

INDIA on Tuesday inked a contract with Russia for procurement of anti-ship cruise missiles, a move that will significantly augment the combat capabilities of the Indian Navy's submarine fleet.

The Defence Ministry made the announcement in a post on X.

The contract was inked in the pres-

ence of Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh. "Ministry of Defence today inked a contract with Russia for the procurement of Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles in the presence of Defence Secretary Shri Rajesh Kumar Singh in New Delhi. These missiles will significantly augment the combat capabilities of the @indian-navy's submarine fleet," it wrote on the social media platform.

'Indian exporters likely to gain from US-China trade war'

NEW DELHI, Feb 4 (PTI)

THE trade war between the US and China is expected to benefit Indian exporters in increasing their shipments to the American market, sources said.

They said the country was the fourth-largest gainer when the US imposed higher duties on Chinese goods during US President Donald Trump's first tenure.

After coming to power again, Trump on Saturday signed an order to impose stiff tariffs on imports from China, fulfilling a campaign promise but raising the prospect of increased prices for American consumers.

"India is likely to gain out of this trade war. Significant rise in exports are expected from India," a source said.

Exporters have also stated that the imposition of customs duties by the US on imports from China provides huge export opportunities for India to America. The tariffs would affect exports from China to the US as they would push the prices of their goods in the American market, making them less competitive.

"The move can create opportunities for Indian exports due to the trade diversion effects as US buyers will seek alternative suppliers to avoid higher costs," Federation of Indian Export Organizations (FIEO) Director General Ajay Sahai said. He said the extent of benefits depends on India's production capacity and competitiveness.

Trump, Netanyahu hold talks

US President warns 'no guarantees' fragile peace in Gaza will hold

WASHINGTON, Feb 4 (AP)

PRESIDENT Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu are set to meet on Tuesday as the Israeli Prime Minister faces competing pressure from his right-wing coalition to end a temporary truce against Hamas militants in Gaza and from war-weary Israelis who want the remaining hostages home and the 15-month

conflict to end.

Trump is guarded about the long-term prospects for the truce, even as he takes credit for pressuring Hamas and Israel into the hostage and ceasefire agreement that went into effect the day before he returned to office last month. "I have no guarantees that the peace is going to hold," Trump told reporters on Monday.

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Army conducts major drill in Sikkim, Siliguri

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The Army has conducted a major firepower exercise of its 33 Corps, which defends the frontier with China in Sikkim and the strategically-vulnerable Siliguri Corridor in the eastern sector.

"The Trishakti (33) Corps successfully conducted the live fire exercise validating its battle readiness, rapid de-

ployment, and precision strike capabilities," an Army officer said on Tuesday.

Units under the 33 Corps, which has its headquarters at Sukna in West Bengal, have been specifically preparing for battle in the high-altitude mountains of Sikkim, showcasing their adaptability and readiness for diverse operational environments.

Through the coordinated

firepower and precision engagement exercise, the units demonstrated their preparedness for a variety of challenges, including those posed by high-altitude warfare, the officer said. Weapons used in the exercise ranged from the indigenous Pinaka multi-launch artillery rocket systems to the Israeli-origin medium range surface-to-air missile systems.

Wever is Belgium's new Prime Minister

BRUSSELS, Feb 4 (AP)

BELGIUM has a new Prime Minister whose political purpose was long to break up the nation, gut the state structures and give ever more autonomy to his northern Flanders at the cost of everyone else.

Bart De Wever took the oath early on Monday, looking straight at King Philippe, the latest monarch of a royal house he so long had little but disdain for because it symbolised the old concept of Belgian unity.

"I swear allegiance to the King," he said.

It was another indication how times change, and bold demands for Flemish independence have

made room for the hope of gradual change and finding a renewed balance between Dutch-speaking Flanders, with 8.2 million people, francophone Wallonia, with 3.7 million, and multi-lingual Brussels, with 1.2 million.

The Prime Minister and leading Ministers took the oath in Dutch and French while several others on the 15-member team from both sides of the linguistic divide stuck to their own language during a short ceremony at the Royal Palace.

"You can ... Not take part in a



Government and wait until the system can be taken as a whole. I never believed in that," he told 'De Standaard' newspaper. "The other option is to take part when you can, and obtain things for your community, and that is what we

did." "When you don't take part, you are certainly left empty handed," he added.

Language issues are woven throughout the past century, as the French-dominated nation gradually made way for a balanced political scene while

Wallonia's industrial prowess waned and Flanders' economic power rose.

De Wever of the Flemish nationalist N-VA party succeeds Alexander De Croo, who has remained in office as a caretaker since the June elections last year. De Wever will join his fellow European Union leaders at a summit in Brussels later on Monday.

"We will have a Government that will clean up the budget, implement a fair social policy, reward work, implement the strictest migration policy ever, abolish the nuclear phase-out, and invest in safety," N-VA said in a statement.

One issue immediately stood

out - gender balance. When De Croo had achieved quasi parity between men and women on his team, De Wever only has three women on his team of 15, and none among the four vice premiers. He has said he regrets it, but never made it a key point in the coalition talks.

De Wever brought an eclectic mix of five parties together to break a 7-month deadlock in coalition talks. The Flemish nationalist was only given a shot at successfully brokering a coalition because the PS socialists, De Wever's political nemesis, lost their generations-long grip on Wallonia. It allowed him to get a deal with a free-market MR party.

Trump admn sends 200+ illegal Indian migrants in def aircraft

Flight To Land In Amritsar Today; Govt Tightlipped

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New Delhi: In the first such operation of its kind involving India since Trump's return to the White House, the US despatched a C-17 military air-

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craft carrying an unspecified number of illegal Indian migrants to India. Anonymous US officials were quoted as saying dozens had been deported, and unconfirmed reports put the number of deportees north of 200, but there was no confirma-

NO INFO ABOUT RETURNEES ON BOARD

- US military C-17 aircraft departs from San Antonio, Texas, with Indian migrants
- US reports quote officials as saying flight is on its way to Amritsar after stop in Guam
- Punjab gears up to receive immigrants. Authorities say no info on passengers
- In Oct last year, US had sent back illegal Indian immigrants on a charter aircraft. This time, its a military plane



Guatemalan migrants return on a US military plane on Jan 24

- Colombia and Mexico have refused to receive their citizens in US military planes. Brazil has flagged 'flagrant disregard' of human rights on such deportation flights

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tion by either country.

There was no official acknowledgement at all of the flight by Indian authorities. The American embassy here, without sharing details about the flight, said the US was vigorously enforcing its border, tigh-

tening immigration laws and removing illegal migrants. "These actions send a clear message: illegal migration is not worth the risk," the spokesperson said.

Official sources here said India's position on illegal

migration had not changed and it will continue to accept those who illegally entered the US, after verifying their Indian origin. Those returning, all verified Indians, are among thousands of Indians identified for deportation under the Biden administration.

Tuesday's development comes days ahead of PM Modi's visit to the US for his first bilateral meeting with Trump since the latter's inauguration on Jan 20. Trump had raised the issue of illegal migration with Modi and later said the Indian PM would do what's right.

While India has been accepting illegal migrants from the US for years, including under the first Trump administration, the US has rarely, if ever, used a military aircraft to deport Indian nationals.

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LeT, Jaish ultras' gathering in POK puts J&K on alert

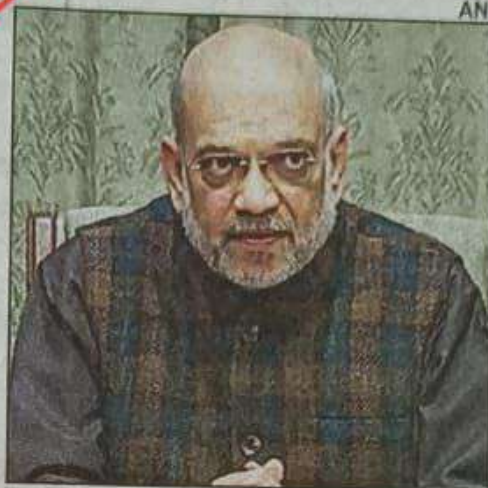
Rajshankar Jha
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New Delhi: Intelligence agencies are poring over inputs that the top leadership of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed will congregate in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) on Wednesday for a speech by a senior Hamas functionary, known for his radical and provocative rhetoric, at an event to mark Kashmir Solidarity Day.

The gathering, organised under the banner of Al Aqsa Floods, a reference to the mosque in Jerusalem which is claimed by both Jews and Muslims and has been an inflammable point of discord, will be addressed by Hamas spokesperson Khalid Qaddoumi, something that the agencies here are viewing as an effort to link their jihadi campaign in J&K with the Palestinians' fight against Israel.

Sources said the agencies here would be looking for any spillover effect of the gathering due to be held at Sabir Stadium in Rawlakot.

Intelligence agencies termed the congregation a "narrative-building" exercise by the jihadi factions to draw a false equivalence between Kashmir and Gaza. The inputs said there was a possibility of



Union home minister Amit Shah during a meeting to review J&K security in New Delhi Tuesday

terrorists, including Mazood Azhar's brother Talha Saif, besides Ashgar Khan and Iliyas Masood, attending the event.

Meanwhile, home minister Amit Shah on Tuesday chaired a high-level meeting on J&K to review the security situation and the status of counter-terrorism operations. Senior officers from the armed forces, besides J&K Police, were present. Shah is learnt to have emphasised on strengthening intelligence networks, countering cross-border infiltration, and accelerating development initiatives in the region. Security forces have been asked to remain on enhanced alert on Wednesday. Police personnel have been asked to conduct random checking of vehicles and frisking of people.