

Education is strongest foundation for development: Sitharaman

NARASAPURAM, Dec 28 (PTI)

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday emphasised that education remains the most enduring foundation for development and called on students to focus on learning, self-improvement and creative thinking.

Addressing students at a programme held at the Zilla Parishad High School in Peda Mainavani (PM) Lanka village here in West Godavari district, she said education alone empowers individuals and societies.

The Union Minister inaugurated computers, a science laboratory and other infrastructure facilities worth Rs 18 lakh provided with the support of Union Bank.

Sitharaman encouraged youth from the coastal region to pur-



sue higher education with confidence, assuring them of Government support for education and regional development. Advising students to study with dedication, she urged them to prepare themselves to serve the nation and the State.

Referring to the Prime Minister's vision for adopted village development, Sitharaman said employment opportunities were being created through the

PM Vishwakarma Yojana training centre operating in the village.

Recalling her long association with Peda Mainavani Lanka and other villages, she said development activities progressed steadily with the strong support of local women.

She noted that reverse osmosis plants were installed to supply clean drinking water after salinity affected local sources despite the villages' proximity to the Godavari river.

On coastal protection, Sitharaman said modern measures are being implemented to prevent coastal erosion without harming the beach, with work scheduled for completion by Sankranti (mid-January 2026), ensuring safety and preserving natural beauty of the shoreline.

'ISRO aims to commission third launch pad at Shriharikota in 4 years'

CHENNAI, Dec 28 (PTI)

INDIAN Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is in the process of developing a third launch pad at the Shriharikota spaceport and is currently identifying the right vendors for it, a top scientist said. Shriharikota complex, which covers an area of 175 sq km, is located about 135 km east of Chennai. It has been serving the Bengaluru-headquartered space agency for the launch of various satellites using different launch vehicles.

To move ahead with its plan of placing bigger satellites weighing over 12,000 - 14,000 kg in various orbits in space, ISRO requires bigger launch vehicles, Padmakumar ES, the Director and Distinguished Scientist of Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Shriharikota, said.

To serve this purpose, ISRO is planning a third launch pad, he said. "We plan to develop, install and commission a third launch pad in four years. Activities are going on for that," he told PTI.

'Bluebird Block-2 satellite likely to commence ops soon'

CHENNAI, Dec 28 (PTI)

THE Bluebird Block-2, a US-based satellite, which was successfully deployed by ISRO Bikaner, Dec 28 (ANI): Deer feed at the Bikaner Rescue Center during the winter season, in Bikaner on Saturday. (ANI Photo)'s Bahubali rocket LVM3-M6 recently, is set to commence operations in the coming weeks.

The next-generation communication satellite, developed by AST SpaceMobile, became the first spacecraft to be launched from Indian soil on December 24 into the intended Low Earth orbit by ISRO.

Thai, Cambodian top diplomats meet in China to solidify ceasefire

BEIJING, Dec 28 (AP)

TOP diplomats from Thailand and Cambodia kicked off two days of talks in China on Sunday as Beijing seeks to strengthen its role in mediating the two countries' border dispute, a day after they signed a new ceasefire.

The ceasefire agreement calls for a halt to weeks of fighting along their contested border that has killed more than 100 people and displaced over half a million people in both countries.

Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuanketkeow and Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn were set to meet in China's southwestern Yunnan province for talks mediated by their Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi.

China has sought to position itself as a mediator in the crisis, along with the United States and Malaysia.

U.S. President Donald Trump, who threatened to withhold trade

privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed to a July ceasefire, suggested Sunday that the fighting between Thailand and Cambodia "will stop momentarily" and boasted that the U.S. "has become the REAL United Nations."

In a post on his social media site from his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, where he's been spending the winter holidays, Trump wrote that both sides "will go back to living in PEACE" and referenced his past comments about helping to broker a ceasefire that largely hasn't held.

"I want to congratulate both great leaders on their brilliance in coming to this rapid and very fair conclusion. It was FAST & DECISIVE, as all of these situations should be!" Trump wrote.

The talks in China aim to ensure a sustained ceasefire and promote lasting peace between the countries, according to a statement by Sihasak's office.

IMF ignores its own report to okay \$1.29 bn loan for Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Dec 28 (IANS)

THE International Monetary Fund's Executive Board has paradoxically approved another \$1.29 billion as financial support for Pakistan despite the multilateral institution's own report highlighting the corruption in the debt-ridden country, which is coming in the way of repaying these loans. The IMF has just released a 186-page "Governance

and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment" that paints a grim portrait of Pakistan's institutional decay.

"The timing is striking: the diagnostic was published just before the Board meeting that approved the latest disbursement. In effect, the IMF has acknowledged that Pakistan's governance vulnerabilities are systemic, yet continues to lend without dismantling the ecosys-

tem of capture that perpetuates the crisis," according to an article by Dr Sakariya Kareem in 'Asian Lite' newspaper.

Corruption, the IMF concludes, is "macro-critical", embedded in the very structure of the state and economy.

It determines who prospers, why growth remains anaemic, and why Pakistan returns to the Fund every few years with its hand out.

Myanmar goes to 1st poll since military takeover

YANGON (Myanmar), Dec 28 (AP)

VOTERS went to the polls on Sunday for the initial phase of Myanmar's first general election in five years, held under the supervision of its military government while a civil war rages throughout much of the country.

Final results won't be known until after two more rounds of voting are completed later in January. It's widely expected that Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, who has governed Myanmar since an army takeover in 2021, will then assume the presidency.

The military government has presented the vote as a return to democracy, but its bid for legitimacy is marred by the absence of formerly popular opposition parties and reports that soldiers used threats to force voters' participation.

While more than 4,800 candidates from 57 parties are com-



Voters line up to cast their ballots at a polling station in Naypyitaw, Myanmar on Sunday. (AP/PTI)

peting for seats in national and regional legislatures, only six are competing nation-wide with the possibility of gaining political clout in parliament. The military-backed Union Solidarity and

Development Party is by far the strongest contender.

Voting is taking place in three phases, with Sunday's first round being held in 102 of Myanmar's 330 townships. Subsequent phas-

es will take place on Jan. 11 and Jan. 25, but 65 townships won't participate in the election because of ongoing armed conflicts.

Final results are expected to be announced by February. It wasn't clear if or when the authorities would release aggregate figures of Sunday's voting, although counts were publicly announced at local polling stations.

Critics of the current system say that the election is designed to add a facade of legitimacy to the status quo. Military rule began when soldiers ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021. It blocked her National League for Democracy party from serving a second term despite winning a landslide victory in the 2020 election. They argue that the results will lack legitimacy because of the exclusion of major parties and government repression.

Lockheed Martin plans production hub in India



Pitches C-130Js as 'best' choice for IAF's tactical airlift requirement

MARIETTA (US), Dec 28 (PTI)

AS INDIA prepares to procure up to 80 military transport planes, US aerospace major Lockheed Martin has pitched its C-130J Super Hercules as the best choice and said an additional fleet of the aircraft will provide it a "stronger" heft for tactical airlift among the Quad nations.

If Lockheed Martin gets the opportunity, then it will set up a mega hub in India to produce the "iconic" aircraft and it will be the first such global facility outside of the US, top officials of the company told PTI. To date, Lockheed Martin has delivered more than 560 aircraft from the C-130J Super Hercules family, which have accumulated more than three million flight hours. The leading tactical airlift has been serving 28 operators in 23 nations.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) currently operates 12 C-130Js.

Alongside the standard transport variant, Lockheed Martin offers multiple specialised configurations of the C-130J which enable the aircraft to perform intelligence, electronic warfare, special forces support, search and rescue and command roles.

Besides India, the three other Quad member nations -- the US, Australia and Japan -- have been operating C-130Js.

"The C-130J Super Hercules offers superior performance and capabilities for every theatre of operations. This aircraft will be the best option for India," Patricia Trish Pagan, Vice President, Air Mobility and Maritime Missions at Lockheed Martin, said.

In 2022, the IAF issued a Request for Information (RFI) to purchase medium transport aircraft (MTA) to replace its ageing fleet of Soviet-era AN-32 and IL-76 planes.