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Trump sentenced in hush money case, not punished

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: A judge sentenced Donald Trump to an unconditional discharge on Friday for covering up hush money payments to a porn star despite the U.S. President-elect's efforts to avoid becoming the first felon in the White House.

The judge decided against imposing either prison time or a fine on Mr. Trump, despite his conviction in May 2024 on 34 counts of falsifying business records, which carried the possibility of incarceration. Instead, the judge handed down the least severe criminal penalty available: an unconditional discharge. This form of sentence, which is relatively rare, involves no sanctions or restrictions, yet it still affirms the jury's guilty verdict.

Mr. Trump attended the sentencing virtually, while the judge, legal teams, and media gathered in the Manhattan courtroom, which had been the scene of intense legal proceedings, contentious debates, and harsh personal attacks from the polarizing former president. Throughout the trial, Mr. Trump was forced to listen to testimony from various witnesses who claimed that he had concealed illicit payments made before the 2016 presidential election, a race that he ultimately won.

Although Mr. Trump had requested a delay in the criminal proceedings, a New York State appeals court rejected his request to postpone the hearing. The Supreme Court, however, ruled that sentencing could proceed. Prosecutors were opposed to further postponement, especially with just 10 days left before Mr. Trump was scheduled to be sworn in for a second term. They argued that it was inappropriate for the nation's highest court to intervene in the case when the former president still had potential avenues for appeal in New York.

An unconditional discharge, the sentence ultimately imposed, does not include any penalties but does maintain Mr. Trump's conviction as the first former president in U.S. history to be found guilty of a felony. Had the judge chosen to impose a more severe sentence, Mr. Trump, now 78 years old, could have faced up to four years in prison.

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Indian diaspora's bond with homeland is eternal: Murmu

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



CONTEXT: President Droupadi Murmu described the bond between the Indian diaspora and India as eternal, emphasising their contributions in entrepreneurship, philanthropy, and knowledge-sharing as pivotal in shaping the vision of a developed India. This bond is grounded in shared heritage, culture, and values.

President Murmu addressing the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention urged the diaspora to look towards the future with optimism and resolve to build a Viksit Bharat, a nation that stands proudly on the global stage and continues to serve as a beacon of hope for the world.

She further outlined that India's vision for a Viksit Bharat aligns with the nation's growing prominence on the global stage, particularly as a leading voice for the Global South guided by our

timeless philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, or The World is One Family".

The President emphasized upon the vision to create an ecosystem that not only fulfil India's needs but also contributes to the well-being of the world. Acknowledging the vital role of the diaspora in nation-building, Ms. Murmu highlighted the Indian government's various initiatives, such as the simplification of consular services for Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and the digitization of services for Overseas Citizens of India (OCI). Programs like the "Know India Programme" were specifically designed to help younger members of the Indian diaspora reconnect with their Indian roots.

The President highlighted the proactive role played in safeguarding the interests of Indians living abroad. In recent years, we launched several missions, including Operation Kaveri, Operation Ganga, and Operation Vande Bharat, to support distressed Indians. The President also honoured outstanding members of the diaspora by presenting the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards to Trinidad and Tobago President Christine Carla Kangaloo and 26 others.

Like-minded nations must strive for peace, prosperity: Rajnath

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: India advocates for a multi-aligned policy approach that engages multiple stakeholders, which ensures that diverse views are considered in our collective pursuit of prosperity, emerging as a leading voice for the Global South.

Mr. Singh, addressing an Ambassadors round-table ahead of the upcoming Aero India 2025 expo noted India having one of the largest defence industrial ecosystems in Asia and the country is committed to further enhancing existing capabilities. Singh stressed of paramount importance of the like-minded countries to strive together for collective actions for peace and prosperity. Without these, our future generations will not be able to take advantage of economic growth or technological innovations that we are experiencing in today's era".



In today's geopolitical landscape, fostering unity among like-minded nations is essential for ensuring mutual prosperity and peace, while addressing contemporary challenges.

Mr Singh highlighted India as an attractive destination for investment, presenting opportunity for friendly nations to jointly explore strengths and capabilities in the defence sector, addressing both strategic needs and tactical requirements. Aero India 2025 will serve as a vital forum for exploring partnerships that will form the base for future challenges. Together, we can create pathways for growth that are inclusive and sustainable.

Mr. Singh will host the Defence Ministers' Conclave on the theme "BRIDGE — Building Resilience through International Defence and Global Engagement". Several bilateral meetings are also planned at various levels. The focus will be on bolstering the defence and aerospace ties with friendly countries by exploring newer avenues to take the partnership to the next level.

2024 was the first year to breach global warming limit, show data

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT: In 2024, global temperatures reached 1.50 C above pre-industrial levels for the first time in history, according to data from the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S). This marks a significant milestone in the climate crisis that scientists have long warned about. The annual UN climate conferences, known as the Conference of Parties, aim to secure global agreements to reduce emissions and limit global warming to below 20 C above pre-industrial levels, with an aspiration to keep it as close to 1.50 C as possible.

Consistent rise

The year 2024 was the warmest on record, with an average global temperature of 15.10 C, surpassing the previous record set in 2023 by 0.120 C. This marked a 0.720 C increase over the 1991-2020 average and was 1.60 C above pre-industrial levels (1850-1900). The past decade (2015–2024) saw the 10 warmest years in recorded history. In 2024, monthly global temperatures exceeded 1.50 C above pre-industrial levels for 11 months. Additionally, the annual sea surface temperature in extra-polar regions reached a record high of 20.870 C. Experts, including climate scientist Roxy Mathew Koll, warn that with the current carbon emissions, this marks a point of no return, with projections indicating a rise of over 20 C by 2050. The El Niño phenomenon, which started in mid-2023, also contributed to these record temperatures.

'Serious implications'

Professor Joeri Rogelj, Director of Research at the Grantham Institute, warned that while a single year of temperatures 1.50 C above pre-industrial levels doesn't mean global warming has reached 1.50 C, it signals we're dangerously close. Every fraction of a degree increase worsens the impact on people and ecosystems, highlighting the need for aggressive emissions cuts. Other experts criticized the failed talks at COP29 in Baku, where countries couldn't agree on a financial package to address the costs of

mitigating carbon emissions. Vaibhav Chaturvedi of CEEW emphasized that the year-on-year rise in global temperatures is particularly damaging to developing economies, which are already struggling with climate disasters. He warned that without meaningful action on carbon markets, these countries will face increased financial burdens for climate adaptation and mitigation.

Rupee sinks 18 paise to close at a record low of 86.04/\$

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXT: The Indian rupee fell 18 paise to close at a record low of 86.04 against the U.S. dollar on Friday.

The rupee opened at 85.88, briefly reached 85.85, and then breached the 86-mark driven by a stronger dollar, rising crude oil prices, and significant foreign fund outflows. The decline was also fuelled by negative sentiment in domestic equity markets and expectations of restrictive trade measures under the new U.S. administration after Donald Trump's inauguration. Analysts warned that continued foreign institutional investor (FII) outflows, a strong U.S. dollar, and rising crude oil prices could further pressure the rupee.

Industrial output grew 5.2% in Nov.

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXT: India's industrial output expanded 5.2 % year-on-year in November 2024, marking the highest uptick in six months, although this headline growth was aided by base effects from the previous year and actual production levels were 1.2 % lower than October, suggesting industrial activity remains muted in the second half of 2024-25.

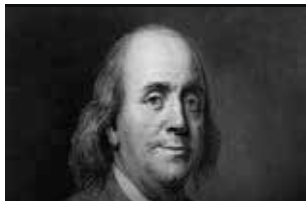
In November 2024, industrial growth showed notable improvements, with manufacturing leading the way with a 5.8 % growth, the highest since April 2024. The mining and electricity sectors also saw positive growth, rising by 1.9 % and 4.4 %, respectively. The manufacturing sector's growth was driven by consumer durables (up 13.1 %), infrastructure and construction goods (up 10 %), and capital goods (up 9 %).

However, consumer non-durables showed minimal growth, with output rising by just 0.6 %, despite a weak base from the previous year. The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew by 2.5 % in November 2023. Economists expect the IIP growth to slow to about 3 % in December 2024 due to a high base effect. In energy consumption, electricity demand grew at a six-month high of 5.3 %, while petroleum consumption and crude steel output remained subdued, each rising by around 2 %.



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—Benjamin Franklin

Grateful for India's humanitarian aid, say Afghanistan's Taliban

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



CONTEXT: Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met with the Foreign Minister of the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

India has not recognised the Taliban regime in Kabul where the outfit took charge in August 2021. The Taliban administration expressed gratitude for Indian humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. The Iranian port of Chabahar was discussed between the two sides.

The Taliban also informed that the discussion between Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi

and Mr. Misri was attended by its Deputy Ministers of Commerce and Transport. Mr. Muttaqi expressed hope for liberalising the visa regime between Afghanistan and India.

India will provide further material support in the first instance to the health sector and for the rehabilitation of refugees. India and Afghanistan also discussed strengthening of sports (cricket) cooperation.

India's previous stand

It was also agreed to promote the use of Chabahar port for supporting trade and commercial activities, including for the purpose of humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan. Significantly, the meeting between Mr. Misri and Mr. Muttaqi came days after India "unequivocally condemned" the bombing of Afghan territories on December 24-25 by Pakistan.

SC stays GST notices to online gaming companies

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court on Friday stayed the operation of showcase notices of ₹1.12 lakh crore issued under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) proceedings against online gaming companies.

A Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan passed the order on petitions filed by 49 online gaming companies. Advocate Abhishek A. Rastogi, who represented the companies in court, said a freeze on further action protected his clients from any coercive action and ensured that demands made in the showcase notices were not time-barred. The core dispute in the case concerned the interpretation of GST applicability on online gaming.



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President's invite for 'At Home' to honour crafts from South

ART AND CULTURE

Art in a box

President Droupadi Murmu's guests are set to receive a gift box containing the best of south India's GI-tagged crafts. **Here are some products featured in the hamper:**



Pochampally Ikat on a pencil pouch: This Telangana staple is known for its distinct geometric patterns and bold colours



Etikoppaka toys: The soft wood and lacquer toys from the eponymous village in Andhra Pradesh are valued for the use of natural dyes and themes depicting everyday life



Kalamkari on bamboo: These goodies will arrive in a bamboo box decorated with Kalamkari motifs, pen-drawn with natural dyes



Kanchipuram silk as a pouch: The handloom silk, world renown for its richness and elegance, makes its way from Tamil Nadu

CONTEXT: A stiff white card embossed with the Lion Capital of Ashoka is the usual format of the invitation card sent out for the customary 'At Home' reception held at Rashtrapati Bhavan on Republic and Independence Day to mark 75 years since the formation of the Republic of India.

Special invite

Invitees for the 'At Home' will receive a specially curated box of craftwork from the five southern States — Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh — along with the card. The idea of this special box, packed with symbolic meaning, was floated by President Droupadi Murmu herself, and executed by Rashtrapati Bhavan, with the support of the National Institute of Design (NID), which has campuses in Ahmedabad and Bengaluru (where President Murmu is a Visitor).

The craft products in the invitation box are all made in the southern States, have GI (geographical indicator) tags, and are drawn from the "One District One Product" scheme.

Bamboo box

The craft elements will be packed in a box made of bamboo weave with Kalamkari paintings on it done by Nimmalakunta artisans. The elements of the box include an Ikat-Pochampalli cover that can be used even after the box has been dismantled, a fridge magnet depicting Mysore's Ganjifa art, usually seen in the famous Ganjifa playing cards, and a handmade pouch of Kanjeevaram silk from Tamil Nadu. Etikoppaka dolls from Andhra Pradesh, a male and female doll, are included, along with a bookmark made of screwpine leaves woven by artistes from Kerala.

Chasing truce

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

President Joe Biden expressed optimism about progress in talks between Israel and Hamas regarding a ceasefire and hostage deal, but challenges remain. While Biden believes his administration can secure a deal, there are conflicting views on the obstacles. Biden sees Hamas as the main hurdle, while officials from Qatar and Egypt point to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's reluctance to agree to anything more than a temporary ceasefire. Hamas demands a permanent ceasefire, fearing Israel will resume fighting once hostages are released.

As talks continue, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza worsens, with over 46,000 Palestinians killed by Israeli strikes, and most of Gaza's population living in dire conditions. Israel's objectives at the war's outset—destroying Hamas, securing hostages, and ensuring long-term security—remain largely unmet. Hamas has adapted into an insurgency, few hostages have been released, and Israel faces growing

international isolation, including legal challenges from the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

Despite these challenges, Netanyahu remains steadfast, bolstered by support from the Biden administration. Critics argue that Israel's actions violate international law and lead to needless suffering. The passage concludes that Israel should end the war, leave Gaza, and secure the release of all hostages.

Local power

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Tamil Nadu government has appointed special officers to oversee rural local bodies (RLBs) instead of conducting elections, which were due for 9,624 village panchayats, 314 panchayat unions, and 28 district panchayats after their terms ended on January 5. The government has cited the ongoing reorganization of rural and urban local bodies, including the delimitation of wards, as a reason for delaying elections. It had assured the Madras High Court in December 2024 that no election notification would be issued until this process, along with the implementation of a quota for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, is completed. The government also plans to expand municipal corporations and merge at least 140 village panchayats with them, aiming to address the rapid urbanization of villages near larger cities like Chennai and Coimbatore.

The Supreme Court in *Suresh Mahajan vs State of Madhya Pradesh* ruled that delimitation or ward formation cannot be used as an excuse to delay elections and emphasized the importance of notifying elections on time, ensuring that elected bodies are in place before the term of the outgoing body expires. The Court also stated that delimitation should be an ongoing process, initiated well in advance. In Tamil Nadu, some residents oppose the proposed reorganization of local bodies, fearing the loss of rural development schemes like MGNREGA if merged with urban bodies. Tamil Nadu is not alone in delaying local elections, as cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru have also faced delays.

India's journey so far on the AI military bandwagon

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

As the world has begun utilising and developing artificial intelligence (AI) for military purposes amidst debates of ethical concerns, India also appears to have hopped on the bandwagon. Last year saw a defence Budget of ₹6.21 lakh crore (\$75 billion), with an emphasis on modernising and upgrading India's military. India has begun to make strides towards integrating AI systems with their military and using them across various systems. Products such as the Indrajala autonomous drone security system have been developed. India has also attracted investments from numerous foreign tech giants for its AI ecosystem — Microsoft, for example, has committed approximately \$3 billion to building data centres in Telangana. On track but there are hurdles

India is increasingly focusing on artificial intelligence (AI) for military applications, with officials recognizing its potential to revolutionize operations through predictive analytics and autonomous decision-making. The country is also involved in international AI initiatives. However, there are challenges to fully harnessing AI's potential, including a lack of digitized data, insufficient funding, and the high cost of data centers needed to support AI systems. Additionally, India is heavily investing in upgrading its legacy military hardware, which further strains resources.

Moreover, India's AI policies remain fragmented, with limited guidance on implementation. While the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence and the Responsible AI for All paper provide some direction, they lack specific recommendations for military AI use. Although the Defence Artificial Intelligence Council

(DAIC) and Defence AI Project Agency (DAIPA) have been established to address these gaps, there have been no recent public updates on their progress.

The international picture

Other countries, notably Israel and China, have rapidly advanced in integrating AI into their military systems, leaving India at risk of falling behind. India needs a clear vision and a consistent approach to AI to catch up with global developments. However, there is some internal inconsistency within the Indian government regarding military AI. For instance, the Minister of External Affairs compared AI to nuclear weapons, highlighting concerns about its potential dangers. Similarly, the Prime Minister emphasized the need for caution and warned about the darker aspects of AI during the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) in 2023. While there is recognition of AI's importance, especially in the military, there is still uncertainty about its deployment strategy.

The specific problems in India

A major challenge for India in adopting AI for defense is the historically siloed structure of its armed forces, where the Army, Navy, and Air Force have separate doctrines and communication systems, hindering interoperability and joint operations. Additionally, India's reliance on public sector units (PSUs) for defense procurement limits access to advanced systems, despite many private entities and startups producing high-quality technologies. To equip the military effectively, India will need public-private partnerships (PPPs) or introduce private sector competition, similar to the changes seen in the space sector. While India is making strides in leveraging AI for defense, overcoming these obstacles—such as inter-service coordination and overreliance on PSUs—is crucial. A cohesive strategy, along with international collaboration and innovation through PPPs, will help India maximize AI's potential.

India has to raise number of operational satellites: ISRO chief-designate

PERSONALITY IN NEWS

V. Narayanan, who will become the ISRO Chairperson on January 14, stated that India may need to significantly increase its operational satellites over the next three to four years, envisioning a rise from 54 to over 100 satellites. V. Narayanan shared this vision in a recorded video message at the inauguration of the National Aerospace Manufacturing Seminar 2025, which focused on "Indian Space Vision 2047-Industry Perspective."



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