

Cong suspends 3 MLAs for cross-voting in RS polls

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BHUBANESWAR

THE Opposition Congress in Odisha on Tuesday suspended three of its MLAs for voting for BJP-backed Independent candidate Dilip Ray, helping him win the Rajya Sabha polls, according to a party statement. These MLAs are Ramesh Chandra Jena of Sanakhemundi, Dasarathi Gomango of Mohana and Sofia Firdous of Barabati-Cuttack. They voted for Ray during the Rajya Sabha elections on Monday, according to the party.

Announcing their suspension, the State Congress, in a social media post, said, "Those who betray Congress are betraying the nation." State Congress media cell chairperson Arabinda Das said the decision was taken after careful review of their actions, which were deemed detrimental to the party's interests. He said the party's action will be intimidated to



the Speaker for their disqualification from the Assembly.

State Congress president Bhakta Charan Das said, "This act of betrayal was unexpected from these MLAs. We will ensure that they are disqualified from the Assembly under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution." He said the party's national leadership has been apprised of the decision.

Congress Legislature Party leader Rama Chandra Kadam, in a letter to Assembly Speaker Surama Padhy,



sought the disqualification of the three MLAs. Stating that they had cross-voted in the Rajya Sabha polls, he said it was a clear violation of the party whip and amounted to defection.

"Their conduct has not only undermined party discipline but also goes against the democratic mandate under which they were elected," he said in the letter. "I hereby petition before the Speaker to kindly take cognisance of the matter and initiate appropriate proceedings for disqualification..." he added.



In another letter, Kadam also urged the Speaker to change the seating arrangement of the three MLAs. "In view of their suspension from the party, the trio no longer remains part of the CLP (Congress Legislature Party) in the House. Therefore, it is requested that necessary steps may kindly be taken to change their seating arrangement in the Assembly, in accordance with established rules, conventions, and the present status of the said members," he said.

Apart from the three

Congress MLAs, eight BJD MLAs had also voted in favour of Ray, leading to the defeat of the Opposition "common candidate" Datteswar Hota. The Congress had decided to back BJD candidate Hota in a strategic understanding.

The Congress media cell chairperson said Gomango was the party's Gajapati district president twice. "The party did not expect this from him. Jena was a strong leader, but he destroyed himself. Sofia Firdous had a very bright future. She has ended her chances of winning in Cuttack. We will go ahead with the disqualification process," he said.

Ahead of the polling, the Congress had moved eight of its MLAs to Karnataka to "shield them from inducements." Elections were held for four Rajya Sabha seats in the State. The BJD secured two of them, the BJD secured one, besides Dilip Ray's victory.

HOSPITAL FIRE DEATHS

Naveen calls for Health Minister's resignation



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ODISHA'S Leader of the Opposition Naveen Patnaik on Tuesday demanded the resignation of Health Minister Mukesh Mahaling over the death of 12 persons in the fire at the State-run SCB Medical College and Hospital in Cuttack, in which 12 persons died and 11 others suffered burn injuries. The panel is required to submit its report within 60 days, according to a notification issued by the Home department.

The commission's mandate includes a thorough examination of the sequence of events leading to the fire incident at the Trauma Care ICU, the roles and accountability of individuals and authorities involved in the tragedy. The hospital's readiness to handle such emergencies, the effectiveness of response measures taken before and after the incident, and recommen-

Patnaik said the deceased were patients who came to the hospital with the hope of recovery, only to meet a horrific end due to "administrative negligence." "The Health department cannot hide behind inquiries while families mourn. A judicial enquiry is welcome, but it does not absolve the political leadership of its responsibility," he said.

Claiming that the ex gratia of Rs 25 lakh announced by the State government is inadequate, he said, "I demand Rs 50 lakh for the families of each deceased victim." Later, speaking to reporters outside the Assembly, Patnaik said, "During our tenure, the then health minister had to resign due to an accident at a private hospital. The current Health Minister should also resign."

Retired judge to head probe team

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THE Odisha government on Monday appointed retired district judge Laxmidhar Biswal to lead the judicial inquiry into the devastating fire at SCB Medical College Hospital in Cuttack, in which 12 persons died and 11 others suffered burn injuries. The panel is required to submit its report within 60 days, according to a notification issued by the Home department.

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ations to prevent future occurrences will also be investigated.

"The State government is deeply concerned about this matter of serious public importance," the notification stated while emphasising the need for a judicial probe to ensure transparency and accountability. The headquarters of the commission will be based in Cuttack, with flexibility to conduct proceedings elsewhere if necessary.

Immediately after visiting the fire incident site in SCB Medical College Hospital, Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi had announced a judicial probe into the incident. Majhi also directed the Fire Service DG to personally visit the hospital and ensure fire compliance. "If anyone is found guilty in the incident after the judicial probe, strong action will be taken," the Chief Minister said.



344 elephants died in last 4 years

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ODISHA Forest, Environment and Climate Change Minister Ganesh Ram Singkhantia on Tuesday informed the Assembly that 344 wild elephants have died in the State due to various reasons, including poaching and accidents, from April 2022 till March 10 of 2026.

In a written reply to a query from MLA Pradipt Kumar Dishiari, the minister said 23 elephants were killed by poachers and 15 died due to accidents during the period. A maximum of 53 elephant deaths were reported in Dhenkanal district, followed by Keonjhar (42), Mayurbhanj (39), Angul (39), Cuttack (37), Sambalpur (25) and Sundargarh (21), he said. While 93 pachyderms were killed during the financial year 2022-23, a total of 66 elephant deaths were reported in 2023-24 and another 105

were killed in 2024-25, he added. Besides, 80 elephants died in various parts of Odisha during the current financial year (till March 10).

Informing the Assembly about the measures taken for protecting the wild animal, the minister said the government has set up anti-poaching camps, patrolling on foot is being conducted and the movement of wild animals and poachers is being monitored through the use of artificial intelligence in different forest divisions.

Other measures such as deployment of anti-depredation/anti-poaching squads, provision of incentive for informers, formation of joint task force and coordination meetings with the Railways, Energy, and Fisheries and Animal Resources departments, online distribution of compensation and widespread public awareness have been taken, he added.

'Forest Fire Awareness' cricket tourney held

JEEBAN MOHANTY
BELPAHAR

THE Belpahar Forest Range (Jharsuguda Division) hosted a one-day "Forest Fire Awareness" cricket tournament at Ratan Tata stadium on Sunday. Led by Range Officer Pradeep Nayak, the event featured the participation of four teams.

In the final match, Vana Suraksha Samiti (VSS) XI claimed the championship after defeating OFSDP XI. Despite losing the toss and being sent in

to bat, VSS XI posted a solid 73 for 5 wickets in 6 overs. In response, OFSDP XI struggled to find momentum, finishing as runners-up after being restricted to just 25 for 7.

The match was officiated by umpires Prajwal Patel and Ganesh Chandra Marai. Prahlad Nayak, District Wildlife Warden, Jharsuguda, inaugurated the tournament as chief guest. At the closing ceremony, Jharsuguda DFO Manu Ashok Bhatt attended as chief guest and distributed prizes in the presence of Awadh

Kishore Pandey, GM MCL Lakhanpur; Susanta Das, Vice-President of TRL Krosaki and Surendra Kumar Bhoi, Principal, Belpahar Junior College.

On the occasion, Hamid Kumar Mahapatra and Narottam Pradhan were felicitated for their contribution to forest and environmental protection. The programme was coordinated with support from Belpahar forester Sunil Kumar Bhoi, forest staff and Odisha Forestry Sector Development Project (OFSDP) members.



High-speed corridor to boost economic growth

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THE proposed 522-km Khurda-Puri-Tangi-Visakhapatnam-Vijayawada High Speed Corridor will enhance connectivity across Odisha, serving as a massive boost for the State's mining and economic sectors. A high-level meeting, chaired by Works department Principal Secretary Sanjay Kumar Singh, was held on Monday to review the project.

Key discussions included the corridor's layout, district coverage, integration with existing economic zones, city connections and land acquisition processes for the six-lane greenfield highway that will stretch across Odisha. This ambitious project will cover 522 km and link 27 cities in nine districts, including Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Dhenka-

nal, Cuttack, Nayagarh, Ganjam, Gajapati, Rayagada and Koraput.

The new route will be a vital segment of a larger 1,102 km highway network connecting Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. The largest portion of the corridor, spanning 97 km, will be developed in Ganjam district. Additional sections will cover 88 km in Dhenkanal, 86 km in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar and 53 km in Rayagada.

The meeting was attended by senior officials, including chief engineers from various sectors and representatives from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. They deliberated on the project's technical and logistical aspects. This strategic infrastructure development is expected to pave the way for enhanced regional growth and better connectivity for Odisha's key economic zones.

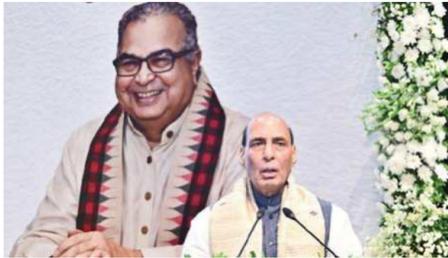
Debendra skilfully guided BJP, says Rajnath

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PAYING tribute to former Union minister Debendra Pradhan on his first death anniversary, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday said he was the 'Bhishma Pitamah' of BJP in Odisha. Addressing a large gathering of leaders of various fields of society here, Singh said, Pradhan was called the 'Bhishma Pitamah' of Odisha BJP because he was not only a skilled strategist but also fully committed to the party's ideology.

He (Pradhan) skilfully guided the party amidst the complexities of regional politics, the Defence Minister said. "Today, the Bharatiya Janata Party is continuously expanding in Odisha and moving forward on the strong foundation laid by Pradhan," he said.

Debendra Pradhan was president of the State BJP three times, during which he worked to strengthen the party at the grassroots level,



Singh said, adding that "It was a part of his passion to establish a direct relation with party workers."

With dedication along with organisational ability and foresight, he strengthened the party's roots in Odisha and today, the BJP is ruling the State, he said. He (Pradhan) had also led the brick collection campaign in Odisha about 30 years ago for the construction of Shri Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Singh said.

Pradhan had connected various sections of society to this movement and strengthened the sentiment of faith, participation, and cultural

unity among the people, Singh said. He further noted that Pradhan has served in several important roles in the Central government and played an active role in the formulation of national policies. He has contributed to the implementation of numerous schemes in sectors such as energy, petroleum, and natural gas.

"One of the most memorable moments in Pradhan ji's political life was the day he took his oath as a Union minister in Odia language. It was not merely a formality but a powerful message. He ensured that Odia language received its due respect," Singh stated.

Majhi slams Naveen over 'criminal past' remark on cross-voting by MLAs

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ODISHA Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Monday hit back at his predecessor and BJD president Naveen Patnaik over the latter's remarks on cross-voting in the Rajya Sabha elections, saying his comments describing some MLAs as having a "criminal past" were an affront to democracy. Patnaik had earlier alleged that 11 Opposition MLAs who cross-voted in favour of BJP candidates had questionable backgrounds.

"I had spoken to many of you in the last few days about the BJP and their allies and the kind of horse-trading they may attempt. They have gathered a number of people who voted for them. Most of those who cross-voted have criminal pasts. You can check how many of their parents went to jail," Patnaik said.

Reacting sharply, Majhi said the remarks were "unfor-



fortunate" and undermined the dignity of elected representatives. "The recent remarks made by Patnaik, in which he called the MLAs who voted on their conscience as having 'criminal backgrounds', are not only unfortunate but also an affront to the dignity of democracy," the Chief Minister said.

While describing Pat-

naik's remarks as "immature and insulting", Majhi said, "Such words are never expected from a person who has served as a chief minister for a long time. To call MLAs who have proved their worth in their constituencies by prioritising the interests of the people and the development of the State as criminals is an insult to the thousands of

voters who elected them." The Chief Minister noted that the elected representatives are not bound by any individual, they are only accountable to the Constitution and their own people. "When there is a lack of internal democracy within the regional party (BJD) and the leadership is confined to a few specific groups, it is only natural for self-respecting representatives to speak up," Majhi said.

Intensifying his attack on the BJD president, Majhi further said, "Naveen Babu is probably forgetting that the people he is calling criminals today were his party's assets a few days ago, and he himself campaigned for them. Did their family background seem clean to him then?" He said that it was unfortunate to make such comments in the context of Rajya Sabha poll defeat.

"Whoever does not remain on the path of development of Odisha, people have

the power to change them. The BJP is working with determination to take forward the prosperity and development of Odisha as a people's government. Its reflection was seen today in the Rajya Sabha elections," the Chief Minister said.

"This landslide victory of the BJP and its supported Independent candidate in the Rajya Sabha elections is not just a party success, but it is a reflection of the strong leadership and visionary guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi," he said.

Reacting to Majhi's outburst, BJD spokesperson Lenin Mohanty, in a statement said, "Majhi criticised the Leader of Opposition because he was unable to understand what Patnaik told in his statement."

"It is indeed a historic day because horse-trading, as alleged by the Leader of Opposition, is true. Odisha is shamed because of horse-trading today," he added.