

Maharashtra Contractors' SOS To Shinde Govt Against 'Threats, Extortion'



NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): Two organisations of state government-approved contractors and engineers have written a joint letter to Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde demanding a law to protect them from threats and ex-

ortion calls at work sites. The contractors have threatened to stop work from February-end if measures were not taken for their protection. "Every district in Maharashtra state is facing the similar pattern where political opponents of the ruling side and also local-level politicians are forcefully stopping the on-going works, using physical violence against and extorting money from the contractor," the Maharashtra State Contractors Association (MSCA) and State Engineers Association (SEA) said in the letter sent to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The letter have also been addressed to Deputy

Chief Ministers Devendra Fadnis and Ajit Pawar, according to Indian Express. here have been increased instances of threatening with physical violence; beating up the contractor if they registered an opposition and dictating their own orders are growing across the state, the letter said, adding that these groups cannot be controlled by government officials. "These groups are working in an identical manner all over, where they file written complaints against the contractor and later demand money," the letter dated February 3 said, the Indian Express reported. It said that the contractors were suffering si-

lently because of the work they had taken and were bound to complete it. "The ruling MLAs, MPs and other elected representatives have managed to get sanction for huge amounts of developmental works in the state. While executing it, political groups who are in the Opposition are ensuring that the works are stopped. To do this, these groups are ganging up against the contractors and the labourers, and abusing as well as beating them to stop the work," it said. The Chief Minister's Office has promised to look into the matter after going into the complaint and taking feedback from the field.

PM Modi meets Padma awardees in Odisha, acknowledges their 'rich contributions'

New Delhi [India]: Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Padma awardees from Odisha during his visit to the state on Saturday. "During my visit to Odisha yesterday, I had the opportunity to meet some of the distinguished Padma awardees from the state who have made rich contributions to our nation at the grassroots level," PM Modi posted on X on Sunday. The Prime Minister said that he was glad to have met Haladhar Nag, who was conferred the Padma Shri in 2016. "Glad to have met Shri Haladhar Nag Ji, who was conferred the Padma Shri in 2016. His unwavering perseverance and profound dedication to preserving and promoting Sambalpur and Odia literature are very inspiring. His passion for literature ignites a sense of pride for our linguistic traditions," he said in a post on X. Another Padma awardee the PM met was Jitendra Haripal, who was conferred the Padma Shri in 2017. Shri Jitendra Haripal was con-

ferred the Padma Shri in 2017 for his exemplary contribution to music. His rendition of Rangabati is widely admired. Glad to have met him in Odisha," PM Modi said on X. PM Modi also met Binod Kumar Pasayat, who has been conferred the Padma Shri this year. "Shri Binod Kumar Pasayat Ji of Sambalpur is a distinguished lyricist, playwright and poet. His contribution to the Sambalpur language is invaluable. He stands as an eminent litterateur of Odisha, having been writing for seven decades. He has been conferred the Padma Shri this year," the Prime Minister said in a post on X. PM Modi said that Bhagabat Pradhan's dedication to preserving and popularising Sabda Nrutya over five decades is truly inspiring. "Happy to have met Shri Bhagabat Pradhan Ji in Odisha. His dedication to preserving and popularising Sabda Nrutya over five decades is truly inspiring. People like him have made us culturally richer

and also ensured that the youth remain connected with their roots. Congratulated him on being conferred the Padma Shri this year," PM Modi posted on X. The Prime Minister said that it was a privilege to meet Krishna Patel, a celebrated Sambalpur folk singer, whom the Government of India had conferred the Padma Shri in 2023. "Privileged to meet Dr. Krishna Patel Ji, a celebrated Sambalpur folk singer, whose mesmerising voice has resonated for over four decades. Her contribution to our cultural heritage is immense. The Government of India had conferred the Padma Shri on her in 2023," he said on X. On meeting Mitrabhanu Gountia, who got Padma Shri in 2020, PM said that it was an enriching experience. "Meeting Shri Mitrabhanu Gountia Ji was an enriching experience. His versatility as a dramatist, poet, lyricist, and novelist has left an indelible mark, enriching our cultural tapestry. He was honoured with the Padma Shri



in 2020," he posted on X. PM Modi during his visit to Odisha on Saturday also unveiled development projects worth more than Rs 68,000 crore here aimed at boosting the energy sector involving natural gas, coal and power generation apart from important projects of road, railway and higher education sector in Odisha. He also took a walkthrough of the IIM Sambalpur model and a photo exhibition showcased on the occasion.

Relief from old tax demands: Read the fine print here

NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): While the Interim Budget presented by the Union Finance Minister (FM), Nirmala Sitharaman, left the income tax (I-T) slabs untouched, a relief offered on outstanding tax demands caught many by surprise. She was quick to point out that 1 crore taxpayers will benefit from it. Given that the waiver is not a blanket one, let's try to understand its nuances, the government's compulsion and what is yet to be unravelled.

What is the proposed relief?

The FM said that small outstanding disputed tax amounting to Rs 25,000 (per fiscal year) would be waived up to the year 2009-10, pursuant to that disputed tax demands to the tune of Rs 10,000 (per fiscal year) will be withdrawn for the years between 2010-11 and 2014-15. As per Sanjay Malhotra, Revenue Secretary, Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance, there are over 2.68 crore disputed demands for I-T, wealth tax and gift tax amounting to Rs 35 lakh crore pending before various legal forums. Out of these, 2.1 crores have a demand of up to Rs 25,000. While these include demands dating back to 1962, Malhotra shared that about 58 lakh demands were eligible for the relief up to the financial year 2009-10. The waiver proposed for



the period 2010-11 to 2014-15 involves another 53 lakh demands.

Some clarifications

So what happens to people fighting tax demands for multiple financial years? Is there a cap on the relief they can access? The Revenue Secretary stated that the cap has been set at Rs 1 lakh per individual. That said, what happens to the interest applied on these demands? That law levies a monthly 1% interest on such outstanding tax demands. Will the relief extend to the interest due, as well? Yes, it will be. In a post-budget interaction, Nitin Gupta, Chairman, Central Board of Direct Taxation (CBDT) said that only the base figure of Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 10,000 would be the deciding factor and not the interest amount riding on the basic demand over the years. Further, he also stated that a 'Speaking Order' explain-

ing the practical details of the relief will be issued.

How will the waiver process be initiated?

In the post-budget interaction, the CBDT chairman has stated that the I-T department will extinguish those demands from its records. The taxpayer does not have to do anything. The department will not get in touch with the taxpayers at all. However, the action will be put on the e-filing portal, which can be verified by the taxpayer on logging in. If there are any issues like rectification, where an appeal effect has not been given, pending refund, then the department will resolve it. Since there is no specific amendment proposed in the Finance Bill, 2024, a detailed circular or instructions are being expected.

What propelled the move?

On the face of it, three compulsions come to mind. For one, the last Comptroller and Auditor General's report on direct taxes, for the year ended March 31, 2021, tabled in the Parliament in December 2022, highlights certain issues such as taxpayers not being traceable, demand being stayed by courts, tribunals or I-T authorities, mismatch of advance tax/ tax deducted at source/ tax collected at source, no assets or inadequate assets - all of which are mak-

ing it difficult to recover the demands. Secondly, taxpayers have been spooked by demand notices to settle very old tax demands or proposed to adjust current tax refunds against old dues that go back to 2003. Thirdly, general elections-related restrictions and recent direct tax buoyancy may have prompted it to explore this route and extend relief to more than one crore small and mid-level income taxpayers. The expected revenue forgone will be Rs. 3,500 crore. The relief will be largely helpful to those taxpayers who have mismatches in taxes paid but the department or taxpayer himself does not have the records to prove it. It will speed up their pending tax refunds clogged by old tax demands. Nevertheless, the latest proposal is easier compared to the department's earlier direct tax dispute resolution schemes, where the taxpayers were subject to the cumbersome process of filing a detailed application and follow-ups, with the reliefs delayed on several occasions. The latest relief also helps the department in many ways, to clean its books, reduce tax disputes, save from follow-up/harassing the small, mid-level and senior citizen taxpayers and improve taxpayers' service.

FIR lodged against 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' for route deviation in Assam



Jorhat, Assam: An FIR was registered against the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' and its chief organiser KB Byju for allegedly deviating from its permitted route inside Jorhat town in Assam on Thursday, police said. According to an official, the march took a different turn in the town instead of going towards KB Road as permitted, and it led to a 'chaotic situation' in the area. "Some people fell due to the sudden rush of people and a stampede-like situation was created. A suo motu FIR has been registered at Jorhat Sadar Police Station against the Yatra and its chief organiser," he added. According to the official, the FIR mentioned that the Yatra did not follow the district administration's norms and it violated road safety norms. When contacted, Leader of the Opposition Debabrata Saikia told PTI that the FIR was a ploy to create unnecessary obstacles before the Yatra. "There was no police manning the traffic diversion at the PWD point. The assigned route was too small and we had a huge gathering. So, we took a detour for just a few metres. Himanta Biswa Sarma is scared of the Yatra's success on the first day (in Assam) and now wants to derail it," he added. The Assam leg of the march will continue till January 25. It will travel 833 km in 17 districts. The Yatra, led by the Congress MP, commenced from Manipur on January 14 and will culminate on March 20 in Mumbai. It has been planned that the Yatra will cover 6,713 km in 67 days while passing through 110 districts in 15 states.

Saudi Arabia unveils plan to build a massive adventure tourism destination 'The Rig'

NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): Saudi Arabia unveiled a masterplan for an extraordinary venture in adventure tourism by the Oil Park Development Company (OPDC). Prepare to be enthralled, called THE RIG. The Kingdom aims to redefine the global tourism landscape, with its latest gem. THE RIG will stand as a pioneering adventure tourism destination on an offshore platform, drawing inspiration from Saudi Arabia's abundant oil and gas legacy, AP reported. Comprising three interconnected offshore platforms and a fully repurposed jack-up rig, the tourism hub will seamlessly blend design and experience for an unparalleled adventure experience. On the occasion OPDC, said that the hospitality and adventure venture would be spread across 300,000 square meters, in close proximity to Al Juraid Island and the Berri Oil Field in the Arabian Gulf. Within this expanse, three hotels will be established, offering a combined total of 800 rooms. Additionally, there are plans for the inclusion of 11 restaurants. The company has outlined the incorporation

of key features such as extreme sports hubs, an adventure park, a marina, and helipads to enhance the overall allure of the destination. The oil rig-themed destination will have over 70 attractions, a 6,000-person multi-purpose arena, an amusement park, a splash park and more to cater to visitors of all ages and adventure levels. Committed to sustainable tourism practices, edutainment, and exploration, THE RIG would adhere to local and international codes and standards for safety and functionality, visitors will get to immerse themselves in Saudi Arabia's oil and gas heritage through the world's first immersive theatre on a repurposed jack-up rig. It's a place where extreme fun, new adventures, and learning would converge. According to the masterplan, the world's best engineers and designers have been engaged to bring the project to life. It will be located 40 kilometers from the Arabian Gulf coastline, near Juraid Island and visitors will have access to the THE RIG via air and cruise liners would be able to anchor nearby.

Gruha Jyothi: It's now 10 extra units, not 10% extra of avg use

In a move expected to benefit poor families, the Cabinet on Thursday decided to tweak the Gruha Jyoti scheme by giving households 10 extra units beyond their average consumption, while calculating the quantum of free power. Now, a household whose average consumption is below 90 units will get 10 units extra upfront. Earlier, this household got a buffer of just 10% over its average consumption of 90 units. However, the new formula may prove disadvantageous to households whose average consumption is above 100 units. The Cabinet also approved the Bill to constitute a Karnataka Motor Transport and other Allied Workers' Social Security and Welfare Board to fund accident-related expenditure for employees in the private transport sector. Karnataka govt to waive Rs 389 crore arrears of beneficiaries of 3 power schemes in wake of 'Gruha Jyothi'. After the Cabinet meeting, Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H K Patil said that about 1.95 crore consumers in the state utilise only 53 units of power.

'Deeply Concerned Over Security Situation': India on Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea



NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): India on Thursday said it is "deeply concerned" over the unfolding security situation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, noting that it is closely monitoring the developments in the critical sea lanes. The comments by external affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal came hours after an Indian warship intercepted a cargo vessel with 22 crew members, including nine Indians, as it came under a drone strike in the Gulf of Aden late on Wednesday (January 17). "We are deeply concerned about the whole situation. It is an important shipping lane not just for India but for the world," Jaiswal said at his weekly media briefing, replying to a question on the situation in the Red Sea, a region with strategic significance as around 15

percent of global trade passes through it via the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthi militants have been attacking merchant vessels in the Red Sea since November, apparently in response to Israel's military offensive in Gaza. "We are concerned over what is happening, the deterioration in the security situation," Jaiswal said, adding the Indian Navy has been carrying out patrolling in key sea lanes. He said the navy is trying to do its best to secure the Indian shipping lanes and also giving support to others, reaffirming India's emphasis on freedom of navigation and commerce in the maritime domain. The US and UK have already launched air strikes targeting the Houthi positions in Yemen. "It is a matter of concern to us. We give a lot of importance to freedom of navigation and freedom of commerce in that region. Whatever is happening there not just impacts us, but it also impacts economic interests and several other interests of so many people across the world," Jaiswal said on the situation in the Red Sea.

He added: "We are closely monitoring the situation and looking at the unfolding situation with a constant

watch." During his recent visit to Tehran, external affairs minister S Jaishankar discussed the situation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Asked about Pakistan carrying out a retaliatory missile attack on alleged Baloch separatist camps inside Iran, Jaiswal chose not to comment on it. On Wednesday, India backed Iran's deadly missile attack targeting terror bases in western Pakistan, saying it understands actions that countries take in self-defence. India also stressed that it has "an uncompromising" position of "zero tolerance" towards terrorism. Asked about South Africa accusing Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians following the Hamas's October 7 attack on Israeli cities, Jaiswal did not give a direct reply but said India's position on Israel-Hamas conflict has been consistent. "Our position has been consistent and steadfast. We have condemned terrorism; we have called for release of hostages and have sought protection of civilians. We also called for humanitarian assistance and we stand for a long-term two-state solution," he said.

Akasa Air places order for 150 Boeing MAX

NEW DELHI (ROYAL JOURNALISM): The four day of Asia's largest aviation event "Wings India 2024" kick started on Thursday with the newest entrant into India's aviation market, Akasa Air announcing order placement of 150 fuel-efficient Boeing 737 MAX aircraft. Besides, Airbus signed contracts with Indian firms Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL) and Mahindra Aerospace Structures Private Limited (MASPL) to procure commercial aircraft components from India. In 2021, Akasa Air had placed its initial order of 72 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft, which was followed up with an order of 4 Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft in June 2023. This new deal in January 2024, takes the airline's order book to an impressive total of 226 aircraft. Akasa Air currently operates a fleet of 22 aircraft and will receive deliveries of a total of 204 aircraft over the course of eight years. The purchase of 737-10 airplanes and additional 737-8-200 jets by India's all-737 operator was revealed at the Wings India 2024 air show that was launched by civil aviation minister, Jyotiraditya Scindia at

Begumpet airport in Hyderabad. Akasa Air, IndiGo, Air India ordered 1,120 planes in less than one year. This marks the first major aircraft order announcement at an airshow in India. Akasa Air becomes the only Indian airline to amass an order book exceeding 200 aircraft within just 17 months of starting operations. "We are excited to announce this historic order for 150 new Boeing airplanes, increasing our total orders from Boeing to 226 jets. Economics of these new airplanes position Akasa to launch international routes in the coming months," said Akasa Air founder and CEO, Vinay Dube. "This milestone demonstrates the strength of our partnership with Akasa Air and is a testament to the capabilities of the 737 MAX family to further the airline's operational priorities," said Boeing COO Stephanie Pope.

Airbus to procure components from India

Under the contract that was signed on the sidelines of Wings India 2024, TASL and Mahindra Aerostructures will manufacture metallic detail parts, components



and assemblies for Airbus' A320neo, A330neo and A350 programmes. The two companies are already among more than 100 India-based suppliers that provide components and engineering and digital services for various Airbus programmes.

India poised to grow 300 million domestic passengers

Jyotiraditya Scindia observed that India is poised to grow to 300 million domestic air passengers by 2030. Kick starting Asia's largest event on civil aviation, the four-day 'Wings India 2024', at Begumpet Airport in Hyderabad on Thursday, Scindia said

India would still be one of the most unpenetrated markets in the top 20 world markets. He stated that India is on the path of becoming the drone hub of the world and 10,000 women drone pilots would be covered under the government-sponsored scheme. Wings India 2024 is being organised by the Ministry of Civil Aviation along with the Airports Authority of India and FICCI.

India's & Air India's first Airbus A350 inaugurated

In what can be touted as a landmark moment for Indian aviation, Jyotiraditya Scindia on Thursday also officially inaugurated India's and Air India's first Airbus A350 aircraft on the first day of Wings India 2024. Equipped with powerful and fuel-efficient Rolls-Royce Trent XWB engines, the Airbus A350 delivers optimal performance. Its impressive range of up to 9,700nm (18,000 km) enables non-stop flights from India to destinations in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

