

## IN BRIEF

P&W  
engine  
glitch

**MUMBAI:** A Pratt & Whitney engine-powered A320neo plane of GoAir returned to Mumbai because of "high engine vibrations" after an hour of its take-off for Delhi on Thursday, a source said, the latest in a series of glitches involving P&W engines. The plane, which had 168 passengers on board, made a safe emergency landing at Mumbai airport at 12.15pm, he said. A GoAir spokesperson said its flight G8319 returned to Mumbai because of a "technical glitch", which was later rectified. The aircraft is back in operation after being grounded for a brief period, he added. **PTI**

## Manmohan film

**NEW DELHI:** Fashion designer Pooja Mahajan has moved the Supreme Court seeking a stay on the release of the movie *The Accidental Prime Minister*, based on Manmohan Singh's tenure in office, on the ground that there were factual inaccuracies and "motivated" and false references denigrating his image and that of the Congress.

## FITNESS TEST



Aspirants undergo a physical test at an army recruitment rally in Muzaffarpur. (PTI)

## Crocodile funeral

**RAIPUR:** A village in Chhattisgarh's Bemetara district bid an emotional adieu to a crocodile, whom they used to worship as their protector, after the animal died on Tuesday. Residents of Bawa Mohtara village had named the 130-year-old crocodile Gangaram. Around 500 villagers took out its funeral and did not cook food that day, village head Mohan Sahu said. **PTI**

## Adoption nod

**NEW DELHI:** A Delhi court has allowed a 60-year-old woman guardian to adopt a child who was abandoned by her parents in 2004 at the age of two. It noted that since the duo have cultivated and nurtured a strong mother-daughter bond for about a decade, directing her now to move the adoption application before a society, would be a "meaningless". **PTI**

## HAIRDO



A Japanese hairdresser cuts patterns into a camel's hair in Bikaner. (AFP)

## Michel plea

**NEW DELHI:** Christian Michel, arrested in the AgustaWestland VVIP chopper case, moved a Delhi court on Thursday seeking permission to make calls to his family members and his lawyers abroad. **PTI**

## Fishing nets

**RAMESWARAM:** The Tamil Nadu fisheries department on Thursday seized 80 banned fishing nets from fishermen here, officials said. **PTI**

# CBI director axed without hearing

## PM didn't want skeletons out: Cong

### Verma removal shocking: Swamy

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

**New Delhi:** BJP parliamentarian Subramanian Swamy said on Thursday night it was shocking that CBI director Alok Verma was sacked without being heard by the three-member selection committee of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge and Justice A.K. Sikri.

"It is shocking that Verma has been removed as CBI director without being heard," Swamy told a television channel.

Earlier in the day, Swamy had gone to the CBI headquarters and met Verma, who had resumed his duties on Wednesday after being reinstated by the Supreme Court that overturned the government's decision to bench him. Sources said Swamy had congratulated Verma for returning as CBI director.

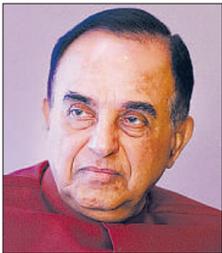
Swamy, however, said he was not at the probe agency's office regarding this issue.

Speaking to reporters outside the agency headquarters Swamy had urged Modi not to listen to "bogus legal brains" in the government.

"CBI director Verma cannot be sacked based on the CVC's report without being heard. PM Modi should not listen to bogus legal brains in the government who had given wrong advice and landed the government in such a situation. The Supreme Court has already taught us a lesson," Swamy had said.

He had said the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) report was based on the version of another officer who had given a "false report".

"It has to be investigated. I do not think it can be done (Verma can be removed). If Verma is removed the problem will get only worse, not better. I would like the PM to take steps to see that this episode becomes history," Swamy had said.



Subramanian Swamy

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

**New Delhi:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday overruled strong dissent from Opposition leader Mallikarjun Kharge to remove CBI director Alok Verma, two days after the Supreme Court had reinstated the benched official.

At a meeting of the three-member selection committee, Modi received support from Justice A.K. Sikri — Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi's representative on the panel — against Kharge, leader of the largest Opposition party.

Verma's ouster triggered cries of protest from various quarters on Thursday.

Lawyer Prashant Bhusan accused the Prime Minister of ignoring a conflict of interest — as he is the main Rafale accused — and the principles of natural justice by denying Verma a chance to answer the corruption charges against him.

BJP Rajya Sabha member Subramanian Swamy expressed shock at the unilateral decision.

Congress spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi was blunt: "The Prime Minister didn't want skeletons to come out and was desperate to throw Verma out even before the ink had dried on the Supreme

Court judgment.

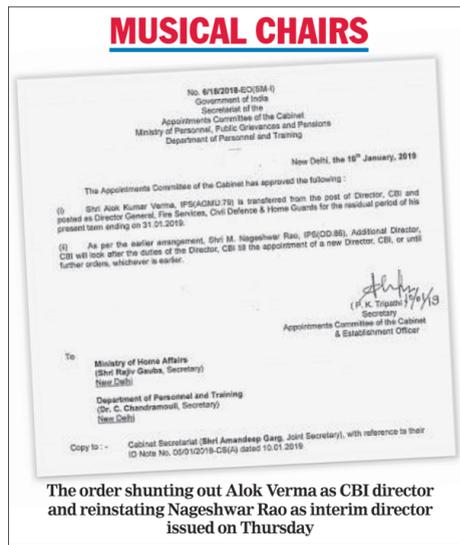
"How can you remove a person of statutory authority only on allegation, without giving him a chance to explain? The report by the CVC (Central Vigilance Commission) is nothing; it has no value without the backing of an independent investigation."

Congress president Rahul Gandhi tweeted on Thursday night: "Fear is now rampaging through Mr Modi's mind. He can't sleep.... Sacking the CBI Chief #AlokVerma twice in a row, clearly shows that he is now a prisoner of his own lies. Satyamev Jayate"

Verma has been appointed director-general of fire services, civil defence and home guards while M. Nageshwar Rao has been given interim charge of the CBI. Rao had filled in for Verma during his benching too.

Sources said the Prime Minister felt that the vigilance report, which indicted Verma on several counts, made the official's continuation untenable and Justice Sikri concurred with him.

They said that Kharge disagreed fiercely. He said in his dissent note: "Having examined the contents of the CVC report, it is my considered opinion that Alok Verma be allowed to explain himself before this committee, along with the charges made against him, prior to any de-



The order shunting out Alok Verma as CBI director and reinstating Nageshwar Rao as interim director issued on Thursday

cision being taken."

Kharge listed four key issues for the committee to work on: "1. Restoring unto Alok Verma the full extent and authority of powers under his office. 2. Restoring unto Verma the complete tenure that he had been wrongfully deprived of. 3. Lack of substantial findings against Verma in the CVC report submitted to the Supreme Court. 4. The high-powered com-

mittee must order an investigation into the events of the early hours" of October 24.

Kharge's dissent note highlighted that of the 11 charges against Verma, the corruption watchdog had found some sort of substance in only four.

"It can even be inferred from the judgment that the charges against Verma were not of sufficient significance to even affect the reasoning

and scope of the inquiry of the Supreme Court. The court first asked for the CVC to submit its report on the charges against Verma in a sealed envelope. After having reviewed the same, the court decided to confine itself to the legal validity of the orders of the CVC and DoPT dated October 23, 2018," Kharge wrote.

"It would be grossly unfair to not restore Verma to the full extent of the authority enjoyed by the office of the director, CBI, and compensate him by extending his term appropriately to accommodate for the loss of 77 days caused by the illegal orders of the CVC and DoPT dated October 23, 2018. The investigations against him with regard to the recommendations of the CVC must of course be allowed to continue in parallel."

While quashing the October divestment of Verma's powers, the apex court had on Tuesday asked the selection committee to decide in a week on the vigilance probe report against the official, who is scheduled to retire on January 31.

The Centre had benched Verma citing a directive from the Central Vigilance Commission but the lightning operation had fuelled suspicion the government wanted him out before he could initiate action on the Rafale deal.

## Cong seeks vigilance chief exit

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

**New Delhi:** The Congress has demanded the removal of central vigilance commissioner K.V. Chowdary in the light of the Supreme Court verdict quashing the midnight benching of CBI director Alok Verma in October.

The Centre says the benching had come on a recommendation from the Central Vigilance Commission, the corruption watchdog that oversees the CBI.

Congress spokesperson Anand Sharma on Thursday described the commission as the fulcrum of the "illegal midnight operation".

"The CVC (Chowdary) should have resigned on his own after the verdict. The CVC Act clearly says it has no authority to appoint or dismiss the CBI (chief) but it acted as a government instrument," Sharma said.

"The CVC makes the panel for appointment of the CBI chief in consultation with the home minister. The panel prepared by this CVC will have no

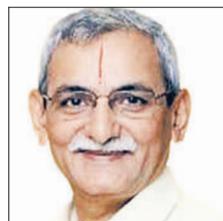
sanctity — the entire process will be vitiated."

By questioning the commission's competence and impartiality, the Congress has sought to drag the process for the impending appointment of Verma's successor into dispute.

"Many aspects of the illegal midnight operation are still shrouded in mystery. What business did the CVC have to reach the CBI headquarters along with the secretary to the DoPT (department of personnel and training) in the middle of the night (October 23-24)?" Sharma said.

"What was done there, which files were removed? Why was the CISF, which guards central government installations, removed and Delhi police deployed? A thorough investigation by an independent body monitored by the Supreme Court is called for."

Sharma said the court should take note of the "haste" shown by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in what the Congress spokesperson described as an attempt to remove the



KV Chowdary

reinstated Verma, who is to retire on January 19 anyway.

The Supreme Court had said the high-powered selection committee should decide on the vigilance probe against Verma in a week. The government rejected an Opposition plea for time and convened a meeting on Wednesday night to try and decide Verma's fate, the hurry reinforcing suspicions that the Centre wanted to prevent Verma from taking certain actions.

Sharma said: "The Prime Minister does not have time to participate in important debates. He doesn't answer questions. But the PMO became ac-

tive early in the morning for the selection committee meeting even before Verma stepped into the office after the court ruled his transfer illegal. What is the Prime Minister scared of?"

Congress president Rahul Gandhi made the same point, tweeting: "Why is the PM in such a tearing hurry to sack the CBI chief? Why will he not allow the CBI chief to present his case in front of the selection committee? Answer: RAFALE."

To try and thwart the government, the Congress has demanded compensation for Verma for the 77 days lost to the legal tangle and adequate opportunity for him to answer the CVC's questions before the selection committee.

Verma "has legal rights — he should be asked to present his case to the selection committee", Sharma said.

Congress sources said in private that further legal battles could not be ruled out as the CVC's role was under suspicion.

Sharma targeted Modi over the Rafale controversy.

"Why did the government not allow a debate on Rafale in the Rajya Sabha? How can finance minister Arun Jaitley and defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman reply to specific queries when they were not privy to the developments? The Prime Minister has himself so far not contradicted former French President Francois Hollande on the question of offset partner. Why?" Sharma asked.

Hollande has been quoted as saying the Indian government suggested the offset partner, which the Centre denies. The Congress has accused Modi of nudging the French to hand the offset contract to Anil Ambani's Reliance, bypassing the public-sector HAL.

Sharma said: "The Prime Minister can't contradict Hollande because it was an official meeting and the minutes were recorded. We dare the Modi government to make the minutes of the meeting public. Otherwise, the version of one person — of a meeting between two leaders — will be taken as the truth."

## GST relief for small firms

FROM PAGE 1

"Kerala and Chhattisgarh have also insisted on a Rs 20 lakh exemption limit," said Bihar deputy chief minister Sushil Modi who heads the group of ministers formed by the GST Council.

The GST Council allowed Kerala to levy a 1 per cent calamity cess on intra-state sales of goods and services for a period of up to two years to mobilise revenues to meet the cost of rehabilitation of the flood-ravaged state. This had been a contentious issue since the GST regime did not provide for the imposition of a calamity cess that would be confined to a single state.

Finance ministry sources said the annual revenue loss arising from the decision to double the exemption limit to Rs 40 lakh had been estimated at Rs 5,200 crore.

The twin relaxations in the composition scheme will have an annual revenue impact of Rs 3,000 crore.

"The government is trying to correct the mistakes it made when GST was introduced, especially with respect to small businesses which have been hit hard by demonetisation and GST," said Sumit Dutt Majumdar, former chairman of the Central Board of Excise &

Customs and author of *GST: Explained for Common Man*.

Dealers who opt for the composition scheme will have to pay taxes quarterly and file one annual return along with a simple declaration, which will smoothen compliance procedures for small businesses.

The big expectation of a reduction in the GST levy from 12 per cent to 5 per cent for under-construction real estate properties did not come through.

A seven-member group of ministers has been formed to examine the proposal to create a composition scheme for the real estate sector.

Another panel will examine a proposal to ensure uniformity of taxation on lotteries and other issues relating to the subject since states had divergent views.

Since its launch 18 months ago, the GST regime has undergone several rounds of drastic change. Last month, the government had slashed taxes on 34 goods.

Analysts said the Centre was likely to face a shortfall of Rs 1 lakh crore on account of GST by the year-end.

Punjab, Bihar, Gujarat, Odisha, Puducherry, Delhi and Chhattisgarh are among states that are facing a revenue shortfall.

## Ayodhya

FROM PAGE 1

"But I have no objection to Justice Lalit's continuing to hear the matter. It is entirely up to Justice Lalit to decide," Dhavan added, without directly seeking Justice Lalit's recusal.

Senior advocate Harish Salve, appearing for some of the Hindu claimants, intervened to say he felt Justice Lalit's past defence of Kalyan would have no bearing on the present case.

But Justice Lalit spoke to his fellow judges and informed Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, who headed the bench, that he wanted to recuse himself.

Apart from the Chief Justice, the bench had been formed with four future Chief Justices — Justices Lalit, S.A. Bobde, N.V. Ramana and D.Y. Chandrachud — considering the sensitivity of the matter. The case will now be heard on January 29 after Justice Lalit is replaced.

Dhavan later raised another "technical" point, citing how a three-judge bench headed by then Chief Justice Dipak Misra had by a 2:1 verdict last September rejected the Wakf Board's plea for a constitution-bench hearing of the Ayodhya case.

He argued that the formation of the current five-judge bench through an administrative order by the Chief Justice was, therefore, improper and that the bench needed to be formed through a judicial order.

## HAL staff rebut govt claims

K.M. RAKESH

**Bangalore:** A group of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited employees has chastised defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman and the Centre for making the "fake claim" that the public-sector unit is incapable of building Rafale jets.

An employees' group named Vajra, whose members are part of the Hindustan Aeronautics Employees Association, released a four-page statement on Thursday under the banner of the unofficial body, HAL Welfare Forum.

S. Renuka, former general secretary of the employee association, told *The Telegraph* that a delegation that included him had met Rahul Gandhi in Delhi on Thursday and requested the Congress president to help the company and its workers.

The statement said that HAL and Rafale maker Dassault had signed a work-share agreement on March 13, 2014, under which the Indian company was to make 108 of the agreed 126 Rafale jets.

It said that just 17 days before Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the deal to buy 36 Rafales in flyaway condition, Dassault CEO Eric Trappier had said a "contract finalisation and signature would come very soon".

Vajra also cited a media statement by then foreign secretary S. Jaishankar on April 8, 2015 — just two days before



Nirmala Sitharaman

Modi's announcement of the deal.

"In terms of Rafale, my understanding is, discussions were under way between the French company, our ministry of defence, the HAL which is involved in this," the statement quoted Jaishankar as saying.

"There are ongoing discussions. These are very technical, detailed discussions. We won't mix up leadership even in the security field."

Vajra's point is that HAL was part of the negotiations and that the Prime Minister was not supposed to be involved in such technical matters.

"Despite this public admission by the foreign secretary, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi unilaterally announced 'off-the-shelf' purchase of 36 Rafale aircraft in Paris on 10th April, 2015, and bypassed PSU HAL in favour of Reliance Defence," the release said.

Surya Devara Chandrashekar, general secretary

of the employees' association, disapproved of the way a "small section" of employees had released the statement but said he had no objections to its contents.

"We are a non-political trade union which is pro-HAL. But I want to say that nobody can undermine HAL's capability. And if someone does so, he does not know the capability and capacity of this great company," Chandrashekar said.

Vajra queried Sitharaman's recent claim about the government arranging Rs 1 lakh crore worth of orders for the company.

Sitharaman had told Parliament on January 7 that HAL had received orders running to Rs 26,570 crore between 2014 and 2018, and that another Rs 73,000 crore worth of orders were at the "request for proposal" stage.

Vajra's statement claimed the orders worth Rs 26,570 crore pertained to continual improvements of the fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters the company had been making for decades.

"These orders are not the ones which (were) specifically provided as an initiative by this government, but a continuous replenishment of hardware needed by IAF. In other words, (they were) a running programme of sorts and nothing new," the release said.

It alleged a "systematic conspiracy" to bleed and shut

## CBI officer opts out of Asthana probe

**New Delhi:** CBI deputy inspector-general M.K. Sinha, who had been supervising a probe against now-benched special director Rakesh Asthana before being transferred following a midnight purge, has been recused from taking charge of the investigation again, officials said on Thursday.

In a fresh shuffle ordered by Alok Verma, who had resumed duty as CBI director on Wednesday on the Supreme Court's order 77 days after being benched by the government, Sinha has been brought back from Nagpur and given charge of the banking, securities and frauds cell (BSFC) and the AC-III unit, which is probing a corruption case against Asthana, the officials said, requesting anonymity.

Sinha, who had approached the Supreme Court following his transfer accusing some top government officials of interfering in the CBI investigation against Asthana, has taken charge of the BSFC but had offered to re-assign himself from the AC-III unit in the light of the recent developments in the ongoing feud between Verma and Asthana, an officer considered close to the ruling establishment, the officials said.

SP-ranked IPS officer Mohit Gupta has now been assigned the probe.

DIG Sinha, who had deciphered a purported money trail in connection with the bribery allegations involving Asthana, was transferred to Nagpur a day after M. Nageshwar Rao took interim charge of the CBI on October 23, 2018, after the government sent Verma and Asthana on forced leave through a controversial order.

After being transferred, Sinha had approached the Supreme Court claiming that top officials of the government, including national security officer Ajit Doval, were interfering in the CBI probe against Asthana.

Sinha is a 2000-batch IPS officer from the Andhra Pradesh cadre. **PTI**



Rakesh Asthana

HAL down. It highlighted that while the government had paid Rs 20,000 crore to Dassault in advance, it had not footed HAL's bill of Rs 14,000 crore for aircraft and helicopters already delivered — a backlog expected to reach Rs 20,000 crore by March.

It said that only Rs 6,415 crore had been paid this year against the annual budget requirement of Rs 19,334. On the other hand, it added, HAL had paid the Centre Rs 11,024 crore by way of Rs 6,393 crore towards the equity buyback scheme and Rs 4,631 crore as dividends and taxes.

While the UPA government used to pay 40 per cent of the cost of all projects in advance, the NDA government has discontinued this, the group alleged.

**Chhattisgarh on CBI**

The Congress-led Chhattisgarh government has withdrawn the general consent accorded to the CBI to probe cases in the state, officials said on Thursday, after Bengal and Andhra Pradesh had done so last year.

The move came on a day a panel, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, removed Alok Verma as the CBI chief and posted him as director-general of fire services, civil defence and home guards after an enquiry report by the Central Vigilance Commission accused him of corruption. **PTI**