

# NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

## Rahul Gandhi 'Disagreed' On Govt's CIC Candidate: RTI Response Reveals

**NEW DELHI, APR 24:** Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi had "disagreed" with the appointment of Raj Kumar Goyal as chief information commissioner, suggesting the names of IAS Sumita Dawra, Justice S Muralidhar, and Professor Faizan Mustafa, according to minutes released under the Right to Information Act.

In an RTI response to activist Commodore Lokesh Batra (ret), the Department of Personnel and Training gave the minutes of meeting which was held on December 10, 2025, in the Parliament building to select the chief information commissioner (CIC) and eight other information commissioners.

The meeting was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, and Rahul Gandhi.

The three-member committee to select the CIC and



information commissioners comprises the prime minister, a Union cabinet minister, and the leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, according to the RTI Act.

The minutes show that name of Goyal, a former IAS officer, was proposed by Shah.

"Home Minister suggested the name of Shri Raj Kumar Goyal, IAS ((Retd.) (AG-

MUT: 1990) for appointment as Chief Information Commissioner in the Central Information Commission. However, the Leader of Opposition disagreed and suggested three other names," the minutes of the meeting provided to Batra under the RTI revealed. According to the minutes, Gandhi instead suggested the name of former labour ministry secretary and 1991-batch IAS, Sumita Dawra (ret), underlining that "she has over three decades of experience in public policy and development across diverse sectors."

"Her breadth of expertise and administrative acumen make her well-suited to shoulder the responsibilities of the CIC," Gandhi said in his written submission.

He also suggested names of former Odisha High Court chief justice S Muralidhar, and former NALSAR vice-chancellor Faizan Mustafa, in the order of preference, calling them "distinguished professionals with exemplary records in law, justice, and public service." The government, however, went ahead with Goyal as the CIC.

In the selection of information commissioners, all three members agreed on all but one of the eight proposed names. Gandhi disagreed on one of the names suggested by the government.

## Activist Gurjeet Khalsa Brought Down From BSNL Tower In Patiala After 18 Months; Says 'We Have Won'

**SAMANA (PATIALA), Apr 24:** Activist Gurjeet Singh Khalsa, who had been sitting atop a 400-foot BSNL tower for about 560 days demanding stricter laws against sacrilege incidents in Punjab, was finally brought down on Friday morning, officials said.

The development brought to an end a dramatic protest that began when Khalsa (43) climbed atop the tower in Samana near Patiala on October 12, 2024, demanding stringent punishment for the sacrilege of the Guru Granth Sahib.

He was brought down by a team comprising firemen, police and civil officials with the help of a specialised crane-lift, a fire official from Patiala said.

After he descended amid 'Sikh Jaikara' and 'Jo Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal' chants, Khalsa was taken to a hospital in an ambulance for a medical checkup, with his supporters showering flower petals on him.

"We have won," the activist from Kheri Nagaian village in Patiala district said as he stepped onto the ground.

"By the Guru's grace, I have come down safely after 18 months and 12 days. I thank the Punjab government," Khalsa said, expressing his gratitude to Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and Assembly Speaker Kultar Singh Sandhwan for enacting an anti-sacrilege law.

Khalsa also thanked the local administration for



bringing him down safely. The activist decided to end his protest after the Punjab government recently notified the anti-sacrilege law – the Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Act, 2026 – which proposes stricter punishment, including life imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs 25 lakh, for any act of sacrilege against the Guru Granth Sahib.

The protest drew attention across Punjab due to its unique nature and the extreme conditions endured by Khalsa, who remained atop the tower through harsh winter and scorching summer months.

He was sent essential supplies via ropes.

He stayed in a makeshift tarpaulin shelter atop the tower, using a polythene bag

to relieve himself. Harinderpal Singh, an assistant fire officer in Patiala, said, "We conducted the operation with the help of the district administration and police. Firemen, a sub-officer and two station officers were involved in it.

"As we had to reach a considerable height to bring him down, we used chains and links, a safety belt and a turntable ladder." As Khalsa was brought down using a safety belt, a fireman was stationed below to ensure his safety. First, he was brought down to a platform built above the ground level, after which we used the turntable ladder to get him down," the fire officer said.

A farmer by profession, Khalsa's core demand was the introduction of stricter legal provisions against the

sacrilege of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Act, 2026, proposes stricter punishments to deter incidents of 'beadbi' (sacrilege) and uphold the sanctity of the Guru Granth Sahib.

According to the law, any person who commits sacrilege shall get a minimum of seven years' imprisonment, extendable to up to 20 years, along with a fine of Rs 2 lakh to Rs 10 lakh. Any person who, in a criminal conspiracy, commits sacrilege with the intention of disrupting peace or communal harmony shall get a minimum 10-year sentence, extendable to up to life imprisonment, along with a fine of Rs 5 lakh, which may go up to Rs 25 lakh, the law says.

## Hindu Kush Himalaya snowpack crashes to record low for fourth straight year: ICIMOD

**KATHAMADU, APR 24:** Ganga basin is among the 12 showing above-normal snow persistence in 2026 when overall snow cover across the Hindu Kush Himalaya was below-normal for the fourth consecutive year and even broke last year's record-low deficit, a report said Friday.

The Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) Snow Update by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is an annual report that monitors seasonal snow anomalies in the HKH region and offers an assessment of snow persistence between the winter months of November and March.

Between 2003 and 2026, the HKH region experienced 14 winters with below-normal snow persistence, emerging as a recurrent pattern, particularly with increasing frequency and intensity in the recent years.

"This year, 2026, is the fourth consecutive year of below-normal snow persistence, with snow persistence declining further to 27.8 per cent below average and even breaking last year's record low deficit of 23.6 per cent," the HKH Snow Update 2026 said. "The persistent decline signals a systemic collapse of seasonal snow reserves across the world's highest mountain range, posing an immediate and escalating threat to water security for nearly two billion people who depend on the 12 major river basins originating in the HKH," it said.

ICIMOD defines snow persistence as the fraction of time snow remains on the



ground after snowfall.

Ten of those basins now have below-normal snow persistence. The Mekong, Tarim, and Tibetan Plateau have recorded their lowest levels in 24 years of monitoring, the ICIMOD report said.

Only two basins recorded above-normal snow persistence: the Ganges at plus 16.3 per cent and the Irrawaddy at plus 21.8 per cent, offering limited local relief but insufficient to offset the regional crisis.

"In contrast, extreme deficits persist in the Mekong at minus 59.5 per cent, the Tibetan Plateau at minus 47.4 per cent, and the Salween at minus 41.8 per cent," the Snow Update 2026 said. "What we are seeing is a persistent trend where the seasonal snow reservoir is shrinking, year after year," said Sher Muhammad, author of the HKH Snow Update 2026. "The 2026 numbers confirm a breaking point: ten out of twelve basins are below normal, and several have hit their lowest recorded persistence in two decades."

Almost 240 million people depend on the glaciers and 10 major rivers, such as Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra, originating in the Himalayas. Another billion

people living downstream of these rivers across eight countries, including India, too are dependent on the glacier-fed rivers.

In the Ganges basin, the snow persistence this year was 16.3 per cent above normal, making the number of below-normal and above-normal snow years equal over the past 24 years.

"This above-normal snow persistence may support improved early-season water availability in the basin this year. Besides the current year, the highest snow anomaly of 30.2 per cent above normal was observed in 2015," it said.

In the Brahmaputra basin, snow persistence was at the highest level of 27.7 per cent above normal in 2019 vis-a-vis the lowest level of minus 27.9 per cent below normal recorded in 2025.

"The below-normal trend in snow persistence continues even in 2026, although the level of decline is less steep in the current year, recorded at 6.1 per cent below normal.

"This continued trend of negative snow anomaly has an adverse impact on hydropower generation and agriculture, especially in early summers, and emphasises the need for integrated

water resource management and drought risk planning," the report pointed out.

The Indus basin experienced a steep drop in snow persistence from a highest of 19.5 per cent in 2020 to 24.5 per cent below the normal level in 2024. It is also the lowest that the basin has faced in the past 24 years.

"The below-normal anomaly continues in 2026, too, recorded at the level of 18.1 per cent below normal. This decline is likely to exacerbate early summer water scarcity in a basin where nearly half of the runoff contributions come from meltwater. This threatens almost 300 million people and highlights the need for stronger water management strategies," the report added.

Snowmelt contributes about one-fourth of the annual runoff on an average in the 12 basins, meaning reduced snow this year will directly impact water availability for drinking, irrigation, hydropower, and ecosystem.

"This situation is particularly concerning for water supply and flood management. Reduced snowmelt will lower spring runoff and intensify water scarcity in downstream areas, especially in the western river basins," pointed out the report.

Farmers in the Indus, Helmand, and Amu Darya basins face irrigation shortfalls during early growing seasons. Hydropower operators in the Mekong, Yangtze – where the Three Gorges Dam operates – and Brahmaputra should anticipate below-normal generation in the early summer.

## SC refers to another bench plea of AgustaWestland middleman James' plea for release from jail

**NEW DELHI, APR 24:** The Supreme Court on Friday referred to another bench a plea of alleged middleman Christian Michel James in the Rs 3,600-crore AgustaWestland VVIP chopper scam case seeking his release from jail.

The Delhi High Court had on April 8 dismissed the petition of the British national in the case, saying there was no merit in the plea of James who was extradited from Dubai in December 2018.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Pancholi took note of the fact that the earlier pleas of the accused were heard by another bench headed by Justice Vikram Nath.

"Let this matter be referred to a bench headed by Justice Vikram Nath," the CJI said.

In his petition, James assailed a provision of the India-UAE extradition treaty. He also challenged a trial court order of August 7, 2025 by which his application under Section 436A of the Code of Criminal Procedure



(CrPC) for his release from jail was rejected.

James challenged Article 17 of the treaty, signed in 1999, which allows the requesting state (in this case India) to prosecute extradited persons not only for the specific offence for which extradition was done, but also for connected offences.

It was argued before the high court that an extradited person can be prosecuted only for the offences for which extradition took place, and not for connected offences.

James, in its petition, also submitted that he completed seven years in jail on Decem-

ber 4, 2025 and has, therefore, already undergone the maximum sentence possible for the offences for which he was extradited, rendering his continued detention in India illegal.

The high court, in his order, stated that it was not permissible for James to reargue issues pertaining to the treaty which, at least on a prima facie basis, have already been considered by the Supreme Court.

It nonetheless considered provisions of the treaty and ruled that James was extradited for facing trial for offences which directly arises from the factual background

in the present case, and therefore, his prosecution fell within the scope of the treaty.

After his extradition, James was arrested by the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

James is among the three alleged middlemen being probed in the case, and the other two are Guido Haschke and Carlo Gerosa.

He was granted bail by the Supreme Court in the CBI case in February 2025. The high court granted him bail in the ED case in March that year.

James, however, continues to be in jail as he was unable to fulfil the bail conditions. A trial court directed James to furnish a personal bond of Rs 5 lakh and a cash surety of the same amount to secure his release in the CBI case. In the ED case, the high court asked him to furnish a personal bond of Rs 5 lakh and a cash surety of Rs 10 lakh.

The high court also clarified that James could be released without depositing the passport, which has expired immediately.

## Mechanical load of constantly pumping blood could be reason why heart cancer is rare: Study

**NEW DELHI, APR 24:** The mechanical load from the constant beating of the heart could be helping in consistently suppressing the growth of cancer cells, according to a new study, which offers an explanation as to why cancer of the blood-pumping organ is rare.

Cellular pathways in tissues of the heart alter gene regulation in cancer cells to keep them from proliferating, researchers said.

Findings published in the journal Science shed light on how mechanical forces could be important in protecting the heart from cancer and may pave the way to new cancer therapies based on mechanical stimulation.

Researchers, including those from the International



Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in Italy, said cancer rarely forms in or metastasises to the heart, suggesting "there is something" in the cardiac microenvironment that inhibits cancer growth.

They proposed an explanation, pointing to the in-

tense mechanical demands placed on heart tissues, which must continuously pump blood against significant resistance – the persistent strain could suppress the heart cells' ability to proliferate.

The pressures may also inhibit cancer cells in the heart

from proliferation, the team said and added that however, the mechanisms underlying the resistance remain unclear.

For the study, the authors developed a transplantation model in which the heart's mechanical workload could be reduced.

They grafted a donor heart into the neck of a compatible mouse to create a "mechanically unloaded" organ, one that remained perfused with blood but did not bear a physiological strain.

The team injected human cancer cells directly into the heart muscle and compared tumour behaviour in the unloaded transplanted heart with that in the animal's native, mechanically active heart. (Agencies)

## Salman Khan, Nayanthara's untitled action film to release on Eid 2027

**MUMBAI, APR 24:** Superstar Salman Khan on Friday announced that his upcoming action film with filmmaker Vamshi Paidipally will be released on Eid 2027.

The untitled film, produced by Dil Raju under his banner Sri Venkateswara Creations and featuring Tamil star Nayanthara as the female lead, went on floors in Mumbai earlier this week.

Salman shared the news while posting a behind the scenes video from the sets on his Instagram.

"Thoda durr ki sochna chahiye. That's why announced Eid.... Don't worry iss wali ka bhi bataenge, when the time is right... Patience, thoda sa sabar... Mere Jitna he intezaar karna



padega, Baharhaal Jo apka haal hai wo hi mera bhi haal hai.... haha (You need to think a bit ahead—that's why Eid was announced.

Don't worry, we'll reveal the other one too when the

time is right. Have some patience, just a little. You'll have to wait as much as I am. Honestly, whatever you're feeling right now, I'm feeling the same... haha," he wrote in the caption.

The announcement continues Salman's long-standing tradition of Eid releases, a run that has included blockbusters such as "Wanted" (2009), "Dabangg" (2010), "Bodyguard" (2011), "Bajrangi Bhaijaan" (2015), "Sultan" (2016), "Kick" (2014) and "Bharat" (2019).

The movie will be produced Shirish and Kuldeep Rathore are producers on the project, with Rafi Kazi as co-producer.

The project brings together two of Indian cinema's biggest names in what the makers are billing as a large-scale theatrical entertainer.

Paidipally is known for blockbuster hits such as "Yevadu", "Oopiri", "Maharshi" and "Varisu".