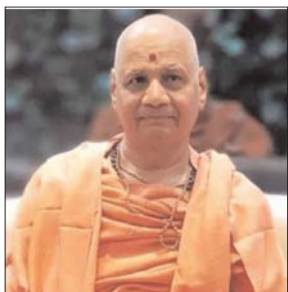


NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

Had no role in daily donation collection at Ram Mandir: Temple trust treasurer Govind Giri



LUCKNOW, JUL 6 : Facing the heat over serious lapses in the donation management system at the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the treasurer of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, Govind Dev Giri, has said that all audit reports were "safe" and that he had no role in the daily donation collection process at the temple.

Breaking his silence on the donations row a day ahead of a key Trust meeting, the first after the row erupted, Giri said in a signed letter, "The local trustees oversee the donation counting process."

On June 27, Giri issued a letter confirming that Champat Rai, the general secretary of the Trust, and senior trustee Anil Mishra had resigned, taking moral responsibility for the donations theft row that snowballed into a major political controversy.

then, Giri has been under the scanner, as many believe

that as treasurer of the Trust, he too cannot be absolved of accountability for the donations embezzlement row.

"We are neither for nor against anyone. We stand with the truth and urge the investigators to bring the culprits to justice," Giri said in the letter dated July 4.

"The theft incidents have shattered the hearts of the devotees of Lord Ram. While counting cash offered by millions of devotees, some individuals committed the heinous crime of stealing it," Giri said.

"We all are deeply hurt, saddened and ashamed. This has been going on for a long time," he added, hoping that the truth would come out with the blessings of Lord Ram.

The treasurer also claimed that he neither lobbied for any post nor took a single rupee from the Trust to meet his frequent travel expenses.

The controversy erupted on June 7 after Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav alleged embezzlement of donations at the Ram temple, a charge then rejected by Champat Rai, who said, "Nothing noteworthy came to light during the ongoing internal audit."

Based on the preliminary findings of a report submitted by an SIT constituted by

the Uttar Pradesh government, eight people associated with counting cash and valuables received as donations at the Ram temple were arrested.

Champat Rai later resigned as the general secretary of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust.

"The extent of the unfortunate theft, when and how it occurred, is part of the investigation. The probe should be impartial," he said.

"The court will do its job. We have faith in the SIT and the police. No culprit should be spared. Everyone should have full faith in the investigation and the judiciary. We are all with the truth," Giri added.

Making an appeal to the members of the Trust, Giri said in the letter, "I request them to ensure that foolproof arrangements are made to ensure utmost vigilance and caution in future."

"A system should be established after consulting experts to ensure foolproof inspection and complete transparency in the counting process. Every penny donated by devotees must be accounted for," Giri said.

Distancing himself from the counting of offerings, Giri claimed he had no connection with the area where the

offerings made in 'hundis' are counted.

"I live in Pune and travel regularly for different rituals. The local trustees have been overseeing donation counting at the Ram temple since the beginning. The trustees, along with the State Bank of India, developed the SOPs that were shown to me only last month."

"Full audit reports of the Trust's income and expenses since the beginning are all safe. Authorised persons can examine them anytime," Giri said.

"As the treasurer, it is my duty to keep accounts of income and expenditures. Since I am constantly on tour, chartered accountants from Pune visit Ayodhya on the last four-five days of each month to review the transactions and provide necessary guidance to the Trust officials," Giri said, adding that he relied on the CAs for maintaining the accounts of the Trust.

He also said that expenditures on behalf of the Ram temple are made directly through the bank.

"I am not an authorised signatory, so my signature is not valid. We don't have a chequebook. However, payments are not made in cash, but directly through bank transfer," Giri said.

Husband arrested in dowry death case after woman found dead in Delhi

NEW DELHI, JULY 06: The husband of a newlywed woman found dead in South Delhi has been arrested in connection with a dowry death case, police said, as investigations continue into the circumstances surrounding her alleged fall from a residential building.

The deceased, identified as Akriti Sutar, was found critically injured after reportedly falling from a building in the Lodhi Colony area on Saturday evening. She was rushed to AIIMS Trauma Centre, where doctors declared her dead on arrival.

Following allegations raised by the victim's family, police registered a case of dowry death and arrested her husband, Arastu Sikka, for questioning. The family has accused him and his relatives of dowry harassment and physical abuse, claiming that Akriti was subjected to



ongoing torture after her marriage just a few months ago. According to officials, the case is being investigated from all possible angles, including alleged dowry harassment, domestic violence,

and whether the fall was accidental or otherwise. The post-mortem report and forensic examination are expected to play a key role in determining the exact cause of death.

The incident has once again highlighted concerns over dowry-related violence and the safety of newly married women in urban households. Police have assured a thorough probe and said additional statements from family members and witnesses are being recorded.

Further investigation is underway, and officials said more details will emerge once technical and medical reports are examined.

Prince Harry's UK trip sparks media buzz over whether Meghan and kids will join him

LONDON, JULY 6: The drama that seems to surround Prince Harry returns to the UK this week, and the previews already have the British press buzzing with anticipation.

King Charles III's wayward son is traveling to the land of his birth for a series of charity engagements that begin Tuesday. But for most royal watchers that's just background noise.

For the past 10 days, British tabloids and news broadcasts have been filled with speculation about whether Harry's wife, Meghan, will accompany him and, more importantly, whether they will bring their two children, Prince Archie and Princess Lilibet, so they can finally get to know Grandpa Charles. But everything is up in the air as Harry seeks to arrange protection for his family after a government committee refused to authorize taxpayer funded

suit against the publisher of the Daily Mail. Newspaper Subscriptions

The decision about whether to bring the children, according to reports based on off-the-record briefings and unidentified people close to the royals, hinges on whether the UK government agrees to provide security for Harry and his family. It is an issue that has hung over every trip the prince has made to Britain since he and Meghan departed to North America six years ago.

British authorities say Harry isn't entitled to blanket protection because he is no longer a working member of the royal family and they will assess his security on a case-by-case basis, just like any other celebrity. Harry says it is unsafe for his children to travel to Britain without protection because his family remains a target simply by virtue of their royal status.

The decision rests with a government committee known as Ravec, that rules on who should get state-funded protection.

The outcome could be problematic for the royal family, which is trying to show that it provides value for money after months of embarrassing headlines about the links between the late financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein



and the former Prince Andrew, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

"In the paranoid atmosphere of waiting for more Andrew shoes to drop, Ravec and the royals themselves are terrified of public blowback if taxpayers are asked to fund protection for the House of Sussex," royal commentator Tina Brown wrote on X. "The issue is not a hill that either the king or the government wants to die on, and who can blame them?"

Harry wants his children to get to know their grandfather

After initial reports that Archie, 7, and Lilibet, 5, would visit the UK, plans began to wobble after the Daily Telegraph reported that Ravec had again rejected Harry's request for protection.

The Times of London reported that Harry was "distracted" after the decision and told friends he wouldn't let his children be "chased by paparazzi" through the streets of London.

By Sunday, it was clear that the family wouldn't accompany Harry when he arrives in the capital on Monday, though there was still a chance they would join him later in the trip.

Nonetheless, Harry has said that he wants to reconcile with his 77-year-old father, who is being treated for an undisclosed form of can-

cer. And he really wants his children, who first met the monarch during celebrations for the late Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, to spend time with their grandfather now that they are old enough to remember the experience.

Harry's relations with the palace have been tense

Tension within the House of Windsor has been strained ever since Harry and Meghan gave up royal duties and moved to California to pursue lucrative media deals free from the pressures of royal life in London.

They reached a new low after Harry published an explosive memoir that included unflattering depictions of the royal family and damning allegations of a toxic relationship between the monarchy and the press.

Harry's description of royals leaking information about other members of the family in exchange for positive coverage of themselves is just one of the tawdry allegations in his book, "Spare."

The prince was especially scathing about Queen Camilla, accusing her of feeding private conversations to the media as she sought to rehabilitate her image, after her longtime affair with Charles when he was heir to the throne.

After losing a court battle over the security issue last year, Harry said he hoped to rebuild relations with his family, even as he suggested that the royals had sought to prevent him from receiving police protection to punish him for walking away from royal duties.

"I would love reconciliation with my family. There's no point in continuing to fight anymore," Harry told the BBC. "I don't know how much longer my father has." (AP)

Australia, Fiji seal a new mutual defence pact in a push to counter China in the Pacific

MELBOURNE, JULY 6: Australia and Fiji on Monday signed a new bilateral defence alliance in a second major diplomatic win within a year for Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese against Chinese influence in the South Pacific.

Albanese and his Fijian counterpart Sitiveni Rabuka signed the Ocean of Peace Alliance in Fiji's capital Suva. They also signed an economic treaty, the Vuvale Union, under which Australia will invest more than 1 billion Australian dollars (\$693 million) in its island neighbour over a decade.

The alliance is Fiji's first mutual defence treaty. It is Australia's fourth, following a treaty with the United States and New Zealand signed in 1951 and the bilateral treaty signed with Papua New Guinea last year.

"The Ocean of Peace Alliance introduces a mutual defence obligation and there's no higher obligation than to come to each other's aid at a time of need," Albanese told reporters.

Rabuka did not expect a negative reaction from Bei-



jing to the new treaties.

"I do not expect China to have any severe pushback on either government. And I believe that they will welcome the understanding that is between Australia and Fiji," Rabuka told reporters.

"It does not threaten Fiji's relationship with China nor Australia's relationship with China," he added.

Rabuka said the new bilateral agreements were anchored on three central pillars: deeper security cooperation, enhanced economic integration and strengthened people-to-people connection.

"This is a clear affirmation of Australia's sustained commitment to the stability, resilience and prosperity of the

Blue Pacific region at a time of global uncertainty," Rabuka said.

"These treaties reflect our shared understanding of the evolving and interconnected challenges that are facing our region," he added.

Australia has been attempting to shore up its role as the security partner of choice in the region since 2022 when China struck a secretive security treaty with the Solomon Islands. That deal raised fears of a Chinese naval base being built in the South Pacific.

Albanese will fly to the Solomons on Tuesday to meet with his counterpart Matthew Wale after the two nations agreed to further discussions on a security pact.

Wale said while visiting Australia last month that his new government would review the deal with Beijing.

On Wednesday, Albanese will host Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape and Tongan Prime Minister Fatafehi Fakafanua in the Australian city of Brisbane.

The Australian defence treaty with Papua New Guinea, the country's nearest neighbor, takes effect Wednesday.

Australia and Vanuatu last week signed a long-awaited bilateral security and economic treaty that prevents China creating a military base on that island nation.

Albanese signed the so-called Nakamal Agreement with his Vanuatu counterpart, Jotham Napat, in the Australian capital nine months after the Vanuatu government rejected an earlier draft. Vanuatu had feared the deal would limit its ability to attract infrastructure investment.

China expressed concern last week that the Nakamal Agreement may be targeted at Beijing. (AP)

Iran begins a procession through Tehran for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's funeral

TEHRAN, JULY 6: Iran began a procession Monday through its capital, Tehran, for the funeral of the late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Khamenei's flag-draped coffin, and those of his family killed Feb. 28 in an airstrike at the start of the war launched by Israel and the United States, sat on board a truck. Authorities decorated the truck's side to resemble the ornamental grating that surrounds the shrine of an imam.

The coffins will be taken through the streets of Tehran on their way to Mehrabad International Airport over a 12-hour journey, said Revolutionary Guard Gen. Hasan Hasanzadeh, who is overseeing the procession.

Iran's theocracy plans to see large crowds attend the ceremony across the city to show popular support for the government. Already, thou-



sands have gathered at squares in Tehran, waving flags and banners in Khamenei's honor.

Authorities have shut down streets, airspace and daily life for the mourning, which began Saturday and will end Thursday as the 86-year-old Khamenei is buried at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, his birthplace.

The US is meanwhile pressing ahead with negotiations with Iran aimed at

fully reopening the Strait of Hormuz, rolling back its disputed nuclear program and reaching a permanent end to the war.

Talks appear to be on hold until after the burial.

As the funeral has gone on, however, there's increasingly been threats from mourners to avenge Khamenei's death. Mourners and the signs they carry have called for the killing of both US President Donald Trump and Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Such signs were seen again Monday along the procession's route.

US federal authorities have been tracking Iranian threats against Trump and other administration officials for years, stemming from Trump's ordering the 2020 killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who had led the elite Quds Force. Iran has repeatedly denied plotting to kill Trump, though hard-line propaganda footage long has suggested Trump was in Tehran's crosshairs.

Trump meanwhile promised to destroy Iran's civilization during the war, among other threats.

"Today that we are here for the funeral for our leader, it's a very tough day," mourner Fatima Hassan said Monday morning. "We are not here to say goodbye to him, we are here for revenge. And we will take revenge." (AP)

Gold rings around 2,000 years old found during dig at Thailand archaeological site

BANGKOK, JULY 6: Two gold rings aged around 2,000 years old were discovered during an excavation at a new archaeological site in western Thailand, officials said.

The rings were found with human bones during an ongoing dig at the Don Yai Thong archaeological site in Phetchaburi province last week, the Thai government's Fine Arts Department said in a statement.

One ring found Thursday was engraved with characters believed to be Bhrami script, an ancient Indian writing system. An initial assessment by experts identified the script reading as "pusarakhitasa," meaning "the one protected by Pushya," said to be one of the



most auspicious zodiac signs in Indian astronomy, the department said.

The other ring found with the same skeletal remains is a plain gold ring without any pattern. Experts believe the

rings' owner may have been a merchant of the Indian caste system Vaishyas, the department said.

The Don Yai Thong archaeological site, about 130 kilometres southwest of the

capital Bangkok, was discovered early this year after residents found pieces of ancient bronze drums in a rice field, leading to further excavation. The site was dated to a late prehistoric era in Thailand, a period of human settlement also known as the Iron Age, established to be around 1,500 to 2,500 years ago. Since February, archaeologists have discovered eight human skeletons, bronze and gold jewelry, pottery and other artifacts indicating a ceremonial burial of wealthy people or members of the society's upper classes.

The excavation is expected to be complete in another month, with plans to showcase the archaeological finds to the public, the Fine Arts Department said. (AP)