DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

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27 lakh MGNREGS workers out of list amid e-KYC rollout

Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

Nearly 27 lakh workers' names were removed from the database of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), the Centre's rural jobs scheme, between October 10 and November 14, far exceeding the 10.5 lakh additions during the same period.

The spike in deletions coincides with the Centre's push to conduct e-KYC – an electronic know your customer process – for all workers, to weed out ineligible beneficiaries.

This "unusual" rate of deletions from the database was flagged by Lib Tech, a consortium of activists and academicians. Over the last six months, deletions added up to about 15 lakh. But in just one month, they shot up to 27 lakh – nearly double the earlier six-month total.

The 'unusual' rate of deletions from the MGNREGS database was flagged by Lib Tech.

In the first six months of the financial year 2025-26, according to the analysis, the scheme recorded net additions of 83.6 lakh workers, as 98.8 lakh workers were added, against 15.2 lakh deletions. By mid-November, however, net additions had fallen to 66.5 lakh, effectively wiping out 17 lakh workers in a single month.

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27 lakh MGNREGS workers deleted

The analysis also noted that six lakh of these beneficiaries were active workers, defined as those who have worked at least one day in the past three years.

States with high e-KYC completion rates are leading the trend in deletions. In Andhra Pradesh, where 78.4% of workers have completed e-KYC, there were 15.92 lakh deletions. Tamil Nadu (67.6%) saw 30,529 deletions, and Chhattisgarh (66.6%) reported 1.04 lakh.

Senior officials at the Union Ministry of Rural Development, however, ruled out any correlation between the e-KYC drive and the deletions. A senior official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that verification of the MGNREGS job card is a continuous process and the onus is on State governments and ultimately, the gram panchayats, to carry this out.

Additionally, every five years, job cards must be renewed. This exercise is currently under way.

e-KYC to prevent 'misuse'

The e-KYC process requires the mates, or MGNREGS supervisors, to click pictures of each of the workers and upload them on the MGNREGS's digital attendance application, the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS), to match these photographs with their Aadhaar data.

One of the reasons the government introduced e-KYC as an additional layer of verification was the discovery that the NMMS platform was being "misused".

The Ministry had also made the Aadhaar Based Payment System (ABPS) mandatory from the beginning of 2023. Using a worker's unique 12-digit Aadhaar number as her financial address, this system requires a worker's name and other demographic details to match exactly on her Aadhaar, job card, and bank account. This was also introduced to eliminate "ghost and duplicate job cards" but led to the exclusion of many genuine workers as well.

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Too little, much later

The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules undermine right to information

Over eight years have passed since the Supreme Court of India held privacy to be a fundamental right. In the interceding years, three separate drafts for a data protection law have been floated, with little visibility into how the final contours of the Act took shape. The 2023 law achieved simplification of the 2018 draft, with some important protections for user data baked into law. But this was at the cost of giving a wide berth for government organisations to handle the data of Indians, putting in place an anaemic Data Protection Board of India (DPBI), and cruelly amending the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, setting back major advances in transparency achieved over the last two decades. The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, notified on November 14, 2025, do little to repair the glaring gaps and damage from the parent Act. In fact, they delay the implementation of practically all key protections to 2027, while implementing the dilution of the RTI Act immediately; public information officers are now authorised to decline any personal information except what is already required to be published by other laws – an all-too-thin slice of the pie for citizens seeking accountability. This is after the government dragged out a three-month consultation period for draft rules which were already delayed, and launched the final form in the heat of the day the Bihar Assembly election results were announced.

The delays to reach this point were unfortunate, in January, when the draft Rules were put out, and are inexcusable now. Little has been changed in the Rules' final form, and the 12-18 months of a compliance timeline, even for giants of the technology industry that have known about this framework well in advance, does not stand the test of good faith. The lack of independence of the institutional framework underpinning these equivocations is particularly worrying: as an example of why, the DPBI will operate under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. A result of this is that the same government organisation courting big-ticket investments into India from the world's main data guzzlers, firms such as Google, Amazon and Meta, will supervise the body investigating their future mishandling of the data of Indians. Firms handling the data of Indians have few reasons to be upset with Friday's Rules, as they will have over a year to fully implement the document's limited aspirations. But for the citizen seeking the aim in the Act and Rules' title – privacy and accountability from public and private actors with whom sharing data has become an implicit and unavoidable condition of modern digital existence – they will now find that their status quo largely continues: of being open books to the state and Big Tech, on the reflective side of a mirror that hides what is behind it.

Swing, but do not miss

India's battle against tuberculosis will need renewed vigour and focus

The World Health Organization's Global Tuberculosis Report 2025 was a mixed bag for India. While the tuberculosis (TB) incidence had the highest decline rate, globally, by 21% from 237 per lakh population in 2015 to 187 per lakh population in 2024, India remains among the countries with the highest rates of TB, bearing 25% of the world's burden. This also means that India recorded the maximum number of cases of TB in 2024. Within the country, Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of cases, followed by Maharashtra, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Delhi has the highest TB infection prevalence rate, though its actual case numbers are not that high. As far as multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) is concerned, the scenario seems quite challenging. India, as per the report, also recorded the highest number of drug-resistant TB cases in 2024 – accounting for 32% of global MDR-TB- and rifampicin-resistant (RR-TB) cases. With a treatment success rate for new and treated cases hovering at 90%, and at 77% for MDR-/RR-TB cases started on second line treatment, the saga of the mixed bag continues. India's TB mortality rate dropped from 28 deaths per one lakh population in 2015 to 21 deaths per one lakh population in 2024. Despite this improvement, the figure is still over three times higher than the government's elimination target.

India has missed the target it set for itself, having advanced for itself the aim to eliminate TB – by 2025, five years before the global target of 2030. While incremental gains have not shored up to a dramatic result, this indeed has meant several million lives saved over the years. In this then, there is hope for a successful TB control programme in a country that has been battling TB for decades. Among the factors that have contributed to the gains include: harnessing advanced technologies, including AI and newer tools for molecular diagnosis and rapid detection of infection and resistance, facilitating better nutrition to prevent TB in susceptible populations, a scheme tailored to address drug-resistant forms of TB and the introduction of newer therapies (including BPaLM). The National TB Elimination Programme has set itself on a progressive path for the future, but unless crucial issues such as gaps in diagnosis (particularly in rural areas), taking care of stark socio-economic disparities and the high MDR-/RR-TB case burden, frequent drug shortages and looming malnutrition, are addressed with vigour, Indian efforts will continue to stay in the realm of swing and miss.

Delhi's air, a 'wicked problem' in need of bold solutions

Shashi Tharoor
is a fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha, Thiruvananthapuram) from the Indian National Congress, and the author of 27 books, mainly about modern India

Each winter, as Delhi wakes under a grey sky and the air thickens with smoke, the city relives a familiar crisis. Schools close, flights are delayed, and citizens scramble for masks as the Air Quality Index (AQI) routinely breaches 400 – the "severe" mark. Deepavali prompts a fresh round of breast-beating as the spate of firecrackers adds more smoke and pollutants to the already-unbreathable air. But this is not a seasonal inconvenience; it is a chronic public health emergency. And yet, year after year, we treat it as a passing nuisance rather than a structural failure.

Since 2015, I have personally convened and conducted an annual Round Table on Clean Air with different stakeholders – public health experts, environmentalists, science journalists, Members of Parliament, and even Ministers. Every year I seek different institutional partners and a wider circle of attendees in the hope of enlarging the number of those determined to do something about the air we breathe. Yet, little seems to move.

The consequences of breathing the national capital's foul air are devastating. Long-term exposure to Delhi's toxic air can reduce life expectancy by up to 10 years, especially in areas with consistently high $PM_{2.5}$ levels. There is a sharp rise in asthma, bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and lung infections, particularly during winter months. Fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) penetrates the bloodstream, increasing the risk of heart attacks, strokes and hypertension in Delhi residents, and prolonged exposure to airborne toxins is linked to lung damage due to oxidative stress and DNA damage. Air pollution has even been associated with cognitive decline, depression and anxiety, especially in children and the elderly, as well as to rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and multiple sclerosis, due to systemic inflammation and auto-immune disruptions. People are relocating from Delhi, even at the cost of their careers, in order to avoid exposing their families and themselves to such risks.

The complexity of Delhi's problem

Air pollution costs India an estimated 1.36% of its GDP annually – roughly $36.8 billion – due to health-care expenses, lost productivity and premature deaths. Delhi's reputation as one of the world's most polluted cities deters international tourists and investors. And yet, resources are being diverted to emergency responses (such as cloud-seeding to precipitate rain, and domestic air purifiers, including for government offices), rather than investing in long-term sustainable solutions.

Delhi's air pollution is not born of a single source. It is the sum of many small catastrophes – geographical, meteorological, and man-made – that together create a toxic haze. To solve it, we must first understand its complexity. Delhi's geography itself is a liability. The city lies in a basin-like formation, flanked by the Aravalli hills, which restrict air flow and prevent pollutants from dispersing easily. During October to January, high-pressure systems settle over northern India, leading to temperature inversion – a phenomenon where cooler air near the surface is trapped beneath warmer air above. This inversion, coupled with low wind speeds, locks pollutants close to the ground, turning Delhi into a bowl of poison. This meteorological trap is not unique to Delhi. Cities such as Los Angeles, surrounded by mountains, have faced similar challenges. But they responded with aggressive policy, technological innovation and public engagement. Delhi must do the same.

In Delhi's case, the natural disadvantages are compounded by human negligence. Delhi NCR has over 3.3 crore registered vehicles. Diesel trucks, two-wheelers, and ageing buses spew nitrogen oxides and $PM_{2.5}$ particles into the air. Despite BS-VI (Bharat Stage 6) norms, enforcement remains patchy. Rapid urbanisation has also led to unregulated construction, with debris and dust contributing nearly 27% of $PM_{2.5}$ levels. Covering sites and enforcing dust-control norms are routinely ignored. Factories and power plants in neighbouring States release sulphur dioxide and other toxins. Many still use outdated technologies and lack emission filters.

And then there are the well-known villains everyone likes to blame. Stubble-burning is a hardy perennial: each autumn, farmers in Punjab and Haryana burn crop residue, sending plumes of smoke into Delhi's skies. Despite court orders and subsidies for alternatives, the practice persists due to economic constraints and a lack of viable machinery. Deepavali celebrations and open waste burning add short-term but severe spikes in pollution. Even "green crackers" have proven ineffective when used en masse.

Delhi's air crisis is a textbook example of a "wicked problem" – a challenge too complex, cross-cutting, and politically fraught for any single solution. The causes are interlinked, the stakeholders are fragmented, and the consequences are unevenly distributed.

Global measures to emulate

But this year presents a unique opportunity. For the first time, Delhi and its neighbouring NCR States – Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan – are governed by the same political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. This alignment can end years of intergovernmental friction and enable a joint Clean Air Mission, backed by scientific expertise and empowered implementation and driven by the central government – which is from the same party. For an actionable plan, the three States need look no farther than those places that have resolved very similar problems successfully in the not-too-distant past. London, once known for its notorious "pea-souper" smog, introduced an Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ), charging polluting vehicles and incentivising electric mobility. It also invested in green public transport and retrofitted buildings for energy efficiency. Los Angeles overcame its smog crisis through strict vehicle emission standards, clean fuel technologies, and regional coordination across counties. The worst was Beijing, once infamous for its "airpocalypse;", where on a visit, two decades ago, I literally could not see out of my hotel window, so thick was the smog. It implemented a multi-year action plan: relocating polluting industries, banning coal in urban areas, and deploying real-time air monitoring. The result: a 35% drop in $PM_{2.5}$ levels over five years.

Delhi must adopt similar measures – not as isolated experiments, but as part of a sustained, science-led strategy. Delhi urgently needs a Unified Airshed Management Plan that treats Delhi NCR as a single pollution zone. The three States must pool resources, align regulations, and coordinate enforcement across their borders. This must be accompanied by real-time monitoring and public "dashboards" announcing figures and achievements. Transparency builds trust. Citizens must know what they are breathing – and what is being done about it. We must also incentivise EV adoption, electrify public transport, expand metro networks, and deploy electric buses, to reduce reliance on private fuel-burning vehicles. With political will, it should not be impossible to regulate construction and waste: enforce dust-control norms, ban open waste burning, and penalise violators. True, farmers will need to be supported with alternatives: governments must scale up access to Happy Seeders and bio-decomposers, to make stubble management economically viable.

A behavioural issue

Citizen engagement is key. Pollution is not just a governance issue – it is a behavioural one. Campaigns, school programmes, and community initiatives must make clean air a shared responsibility. The persistence of Delhi's air pollution is not an act of nature. It is a consequence of choices – and a reflection of priorities. If we continue to treat it as a seasonal inconvenience, with headlines every Deepavali and inaction thereafter, we will condemn millions to chronic illness, economic loss, and environmental degradation.

But if we act, with urgency, coordination and courage, we can rewrite the narrative. Delhi can breathe again. The question is not whether we know what to do. It is whether we will do it.

Delhi can breathe cleaner air again if its citizens act with urgency, coordination and courage, and follow a sustained and science-led strategy

The POCSO Act is gender-neutral by design

Shraddha Chaudhary
is Assistant Professor, School of Law, BML Munjal University, Gurgaon

The Supreme Court of India recently issued notice on a petition arising from a case in which a woman stands accused of 'penetrative sexual assault' against a minor boy, an offence defined in Section 3 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.

The petitioner has claimed that this provision is gender-specific, i.e., it applies only to male perpetrators and, hence, cannot apply to her. Its final outcome notwithstanding, the petition raises a question that is foundational to the scope of India's child sexual abuse law: can women be prosecuted for an offence under this provision?

The text supports gender neutrality

Going by available evidence, the answer seems to be in the affirmative. The POCSO Act is gender-neutral, qua both perpetrators and victims, for three reasons. First, if interpreted properly, the text of the Act does not restrict its application to male offenders.

The petitioner has argued that Section 3 is gender-neutral because it uses the pronoun 'he' for the perpetrator.

However, Section 13(1) of the General Clauses (GC) Act, 1897, states, 'words importing the masculine gender shall be taken to include females'. Since the GC Act lays down rules and definitions to aid statutory interpretation, Section 13(1) implies that unless the contrary is explicitly stated in, or appears from the context of the POCSO Act, 'he' includes 'she'.

This interpretation is reinforced by the definition of penetrative sexual assault in Section 3 of the POCSO Act. It encompasses acts beyond penile penetration, such as digital or object penetration, or oral penetration, which can be committed by female perpetrators as well.

The provision also covers situations where a person makes a child perform any of the listed penetrative acts with themselves or even with a third person, further underscoring its gender-neutral scope.

A deliberate legislative choice

Second, reliable official sources confirm the legislative intent of keeping the POCSO Act gender-neutral. For instance, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India in a written response to a question in the Lok Sabha, dated December 20, 2024, stated unambiguously that POCSO 'is a gender neutral Act'. Similarly, when the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill, 2019 was tabled in the Lok Sabha, its 'Statement of Objects and Reasons' also specified that the POCSO Act was 'gender neutral'.

Nevertheless, it may be possible to argue that gender-neutrality here is only meant to apply to the minor victims of sexual offences (i.e., boys and girls under the age of 18 years), but not to the perpetrator. This is especially because one of the written answers of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, dated February 7, 2019, to a question raised in the Rajya Sabha, was that the POCSO Act 'covers sexual abuse of boys also as it is a gender-neutral Act'.

However, such a reading would misrepresent the legislative intent. Consider the provision on 'rape', found in Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023 (the erstwhile Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860). It specifies that 'a man' commits rape if he commits certain forms of penetrative sexual acts against 'a woman'.

This is clearly a gender-specific provision which envisages that only women may be victims of rape and only men may be perpetrators of rape. If Parliament intended to make the POCSO Act gender-specific, the wording of Section 3 of the POCSO Act, which covers substantially the same sexual acts as Section 63 of the BNS, would also contain the same gender-specific language.

That the POCSO Act does not make any such specification should be seen as a deliberate legislative choice, reflecting the intent to make the POCSO Act more broadly applicable.

It serves the law's purpose

Finally, there are strong normative reasons for interpreting the POCSO Act as gender-neutral for both victims and perpetrators. The Supreme Court, in *Sakshi vs Union of India* (2004), highlighted the diversity of abuse that any law aimed at protecting children must encompass when it observed that child sexual abuse often involves a wide range of sexual conduct beyond penile-vaginal intercourse.

Although patterns of child sexual abuse can differ depending on the genders of the victim and perpetrator, such abuse is fundamentally embedded in imbalances of power, trust and vulnerability. Thus, the majority of cases reported under the POCSO Act still involve male perpetrators and female victims, but research and survivor accounts reveal that women can and do commit sexual offences against children. A gender-specific reading of the POCSO Act would render these experiences invisible and deny justice to certain victims.

The law's objective should be to safeguard children from sexual abuse, irrespective of the sex or gender identity of the person inflicting it.

To read the POCSO Act as gender-neutral, when it concerns both victims and perpetrators, is thus to remain faithful to its text and to its purpose.

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act must be read as it was legislatively intended

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The legal hoodwinking of Adivasis

Gautam Aredath
Policy analyst at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. Views are personal

Sharachchandra Lele
Distinguished fellow at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. Views are personal

Last month, when the Chhattisgarh High Court upheld the cancellation of community forest rights (CFR) of Ghatbarra village in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo Arand forests, it did not just close a legal case; it also closed the door on justice. For the residents of Ghatbarra, mostly Adivasis, whose forests were taken over and felled for the Parsa East and Kanta Basan coal mine, the ruling added insult to injury. In the nine years since they approached the court seeking restoration of their rights, the damage was already done: while the matter remained sub judice, mining on their community forest lands was fast-tracked and lakhs of trees were felled. Now, rather than restoring their rights, the court dismissed the original recognition of rights as a "mistake" and suggested that any rights claims could be compensated in money.

To the Adivasis, however, the forest is not a property claim but a living relationship. The judgment is not only a legal setback but also a moral one, revealing how the architecture of forest governance continues to serve capitalist developmental logics that the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, was meant to challenge.

A long history of legal tussles

The proposal to divert the forest land for mining was originally rejected by the Environment Ministry's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) in 2011, noting the area's ecological richness. An FAC subcommittee also reported that forest rights were not settled and that the affected villagers lacked basic awareness of the law. Since 2009, following the FRA's enactment, settlement of forest rights and informed prior consent of affected Gram Sabhas have been a legal precondition for forest diversion that is done under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Despite this, the then Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, allowed the project to proceed, arguing that developmental imperatives outweighed ecological considerations, which could be managed. The forest clearance was granted in 2012, despite villagers' pleas and protests.

In 2014, the National Green Tribunal set aside this clearance, directing the Ministry to reconsider the proposal and to halt mining. But on appeal by the mine leaseholder, shortly afterwards, the Supreme Court allowed the mine to resume, without interfering with the direction to reconsider the clearance. Despite the apparent oddity, this position continued until the appeal was withdrawn in 2023. The FAC reconsidered the matter in 2018. By then, the mine was already operational and the FAC merely noted it as a fait accompli.

Meanwhile, in 2013, the Ghatbarra Gram Sabha's CFRs were formally (albeit partially) recognised under the FRA. But once the community began asserting those rights against mining, the District Level Committee (DLC) headed by the District Collector unilaterally revoked their title in 2016, prompting the villagers to approach the High Court.

Finding and its failings

After nine years, the High Court has held that Ghatbarra's CFRs were void ab initio because the land had already been diverted for mining. This reasoning ignored Section 4(7) of the FRA, which states that forest rights are recognised "free of all encumbrances." If a mining lease is an encumbrance on a community's customary forest, it is the government's duty to remove it before recognising or restoring rights – not the other way around.

Recognising CFRs does not mean mines will always be blocked, because Gram Sabhas can still give their consent. The difference is that recognition empowers a Gram Sabha to make its own decision and, if necessary, determine the appropriate compensation. By contrast, the court's suggestion that any claims could be compensated, while refusing to uphold recognised rights, is a judicial shrug rather than a binding direction.

The judgment also relied on technicalities to sidestep a central question: whether the forest clearance complied with the legal requirements to settle forest rights and obtain Gram Sabha consent. Ghatbarra Gram Sabha's recorded opposition preceding the clearance and the subsequent CFR recognition suggest otherwise. Under Rule 12(B) of the FRA rules, it is the DLC's obligation to ensure that CFRs are recognised and to record reasons if they are not. Yet the court faulted the petitioners for failing to prove that the clearance violated the FRA. Without the DLC's reasons to explain the non-existence of CFRs, it is likely that any evidence of FRA compliance used to grant clearance was flawed. This is not pure conjecture, because Gram Sabha consents were found to be forged in the neighbouring Parsa coal block.

The court's rejection of the petitioners' locus standi is also problematic. CFRs are rights of the entire village community in the name of its Gram Sabha, and the petitioner villagers were clearly aggrieved by the cancellation. The court also faulted them for not challenging the original diversion order, ignoring that the NGT had already set it aside and that the Supreme Court's pending proceedings had effectively frozen their legal options.

The Supreme Court's Niyamgiri verdict (2013) was a beacon for the constitutional promise of Adivasi self-determination over their customary forests. What has unfolded in Hasdeo contradicts that principle. The verdict is less an act of justice and more an act of administrative legitimisation. It shows how the language of legality can be turned against justice and how institutions, even the courts, can ritualise procedure while perpetuating dispossession. Unless the FRA is enforced, justice will remain as empty as the mine pits in Hasdeo.

The Supreme Court's Niyamgiri verdict was a beacon for the constitutional promise of Adivasi self-determination. What has unfolded in Hasdeo contradicts that principle

Best Practice

Change is brewing in Bastar: a new cafe to employ surrendered Maoists

Shubhomoy Sikdar
RAIPUR

Former Maoists who used to handle weapons will soon showcase their skills as baristas in a cafe in Jagdalpur, the headquarter of Chhattisgarh's conflict-ridden Bastar region.

Called Pandum Café, the coffee shop in Poona Margham Complex will be inaugurated by Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai on Monday. The word Pandum is associated with festival in Bastar.

On the eve of the inauguration, the Bastar police issued a concept note of new cafes for the rehabilitation of victims of Naxal violence as well as surrendered Maoist cadres. It described it as a significant initiative under the government's surrender and rehabilitation policy, designed to provide dignified and sustainable livelihoods to surrendered Maoist cadres.

Pandum Café will be opened by CM Vishnu Deo Sai in Jagdalpur of Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Role for victims too

"Victims of Naxal violence will also be active partners, contributing towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of surrendered cadres into the social mainstream," the statement noted.

Inspector General of Police (Bastar Range) P. Sundarraj said the young men and women employed at Pandum Café were victims of Naxal violence and former Maoist cadres who had shunned violence and embraced the path of peace, and have been trained with an array of hospitality and allied skills. "With the support of the district administration and police, they have been trained in hospitality services, cafe management, customer handling, hygiene standards, food safety, and entrepreneurship skills. The objective of this cafe is not merely livelihood generation, but also to demonstrate that transformation is possible when opportunities and guidance are provided – showing that hands once engaged in conflict can now contribute to community building," he said.