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EXTRAVAGANZA OR
AN EMBARRASSMENT

WORLD 9

US FACES PIVOTAL YEARS IN
COUNTERING CHINA: PENTAGON

MONEY 10

RBI LIKELY TO MODERATE
INTEREST HIKE: EXPERTS

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BRAZIL TO
FACE SOUTH
KOREA IN WC
11 SPORTHigh-pitch MCD campaign
a dud as turnout just 50%Zero vote at 3 booths
as locals boycott polls,
Andrews Ganj sees
lowest voting at 34%RAJESH KUMAR/SAURAV GUPTA
■ NEW DELHI

The national Capital on Sunday witnessed a poor turnout of voters in the elections for the 250 wards of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) despite a high-voltage campaign by all three major political parties in the fray.

Till going to the press, the turnout was calculated at 50.47 per cent in the three-way contest among the AAP, the BJP, and the Congress. The voting percentage is less than the Delhi Assembly polls in 2020 which witnessed a 62.59 per cent turnout.

In a statement, the State Election Commission (SEC) said that 51.02 per cent male, 49.82 per cent female and 214 others voted in the MCD polls. With 65.74 per cent, Bhaktawar ward 5 recorded highest polling, while Andrews Ganj recorded lowest voting at 33.74 per cent.

"Barring a few stray incidents of MCC violations and a couple of other scattered incidents of impersonation, the polling remained peaceful," said the Commission in a statement. Three polling stations witnessed no voting as locals boycotted the elections.

The polling stations in Bawana's Katewara village wore a deserted look as its residents boycotted the elections alleging negligence from the civic body.

The voting began on a dull note as only 9 per cent voter

turnout was recorded at 10.30 am. The count went up marginally to 18 per cent at 12 pm, 30 per cent at 2 pm, and 45 per cent at 4 pm. In 2017, voter turnout was recorded at 53.5 per cent.

The BJP is looking to retain its clout over MCD in the polls, whereas the AAP is looking forward to repeating the success of the Delhi Assembly elections in the MCD. The Congress, which has not aggressively fought these polls, could only hope for a miracle to improve its fortune in any significant way.

No major glitches in electronic voting machines were reported and the voting passed off peacefully with high security observed at the 3,360 critical booths in 493 locations where more than 25,000 police personnel, nearly 13,000 Home Guards, and 100 companies of paramilitary forces were deployed.

Delhi Chief Minister and AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal and his family members cast their votes at a polling station in the Civil Lines area. BJP MP and cricketer Gautam Gambhir and his wife Natasha Jain cast their votes at a polling station in Old Rajinder Nagar area; Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi cast her vote at a polling station in South Extension Part 2 area; Union Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri exercised his franchise at a polling station in Anand Niketan area; former Union Health Minister Harshvardhan exercised his franchise at a polling station in Rajouri Garden; Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta cast his vote along with his wife at West Patel Nagar.

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People show their voter ID cards as they stand in queue to cast their vote for the MCD polls at a polling station in New Delhi on Sunday
Ranjan Dimri | PioneerNames missing from voter
list, many return dejected

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As voters lined up to cast their votes on Sunday for the MCD polls, many of them had to go back disappointed because their names did not figure on the voter list.

Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia and BJP MP Manoj Tiwari flagged the issue and blamed each other's party for the deletion of the names. Delhi Congress president Anil Kumar's name was also missing from the voters' list.

Most of these "deprived" voters had valid voter identity

cards issued by the Election Commission (EC) of India and other relevant identity proof like Aadhaar cards.

The State Election Commission has clarified that its has no jurisdiction to make deletion or addition in the voters list. "They have merely adopted the electors list provided by the Election Commission of India for the conduct of the MCD polls," said officials.

Sisodia alleged conspiracy claiming people outside the polling booth have complained about their names not being on the voter list. "People are angry

about their names not being on the voter list. I am going to complain to the EC against conspiracy," he said.

AAP MLA from Karol Bagh Vishesh Ravi alleged that polling booth number 118 is missing from ward 82 due to negligence of the State Election Commission.

There were 668 voters of ward 82, polling booth number 118, who could not cast their vote. The matter was raised with the election authorities but nothing has happened. Ravi demanded reelection in this booth.

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Iran blinks, does away
with morality police

AGENCIES ■ LONDON/CAIRO

Iran's morality police, which is tasked with enforcing the country's Islamic dress code, is being disbanded, the country's Attorney General has said, according to a media report.

Iran's Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri's comments, yet to be confirmed by other agencies, were made at an event on Sunday, BBC reported.

Iran has seen months of protests over the death of a young woman in custody, the report said. Mahsa Amini had been detained by the morality police for allegedly breaking strict rules on hijab (head covering). Iran's Government insists Amini was not mistreated, but her family says her body showed bruises and other signs of beating after she was detained.

Montazeri was at a religious conference when he was asked if the morality police was being disbanded. "The morality police had nothing to do with the judiciary and have been shut down from where they were set up," he said.

Control of the force lies with the Interior Ministry and not with the judiciary.

On Saturday, Montazeri also told the Iranian parliament the law that requires women to wear hijab would be looked at, BBC reported.

Even if the morality police is shut down, this does not mean the decades-old law will be changed.

Women-led protests, labelled "riots" by the authorities, have swept Iran since 22-year-old Amini died in custody on September 16, three days after her arrest by the morality police in Tehran.

Her death was the catalyst for the unrest but it also fuels discontent over poverty, unem-

Women protest against the death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of Iran's morality police
AP file photo

ployment, inequality, injustice and corruption," BBC reported.

If confirmed, the scrapping of the morality police would be a concession but there are no guarantees it would be enough to halt the protests, which have seen demonstrators burn their head coverings.

Iran has had various forms of morality police since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but the latest version — known formally as the Gasht-e-Ershad — is currently the main agency tasked enforcing Iran's Islamic code of conduct.

They began their patrols in 2006 to enforce the dress code which also requires women to wear long clothes and forbids shorts, ripped jeans and other clothes deemed immodest, BBC reported.

Since September, Iran has been roiled by nationwide protests that have come to mark one of the greatest challenges to its theocracy since the chaotic years after its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In a statement issued by the state-run IRNA news agency on Saturday, the country's

national security council announced that some 200 people have been killed during the protests, the body's first official word on the casualties. Last week, Iranian Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh tallied the death toll at more than 300. The contradictory tolls are lower than the toll reported by human rights activists in Iran.

Earlier soccer fans in Iran's Kurdish region set off fireworks and honked car horns to celebrate the US win over the Iranian national team in a politically charged World Cup match that divided the protest-riven country.

Cheering fans hit the streets in Iran's Kurdish-majority province of Kurdistan and fireworks lit the skies over the Bukan area of West Azerbaijan province to celebrate the Iranian team's 1-0 loss.

Some shouted "Death to the dictator," a popular protest slogan referring to the Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Kurdish areas of Iran have been hot spots of ongoing anti-government demonstrations.

CAPSULE

SAFDARJUNG HOSPITAL
FACES HACKING ATTACK

New Delhi: After Delhi AIIMS became the victim of hacking attack where Chinese involvement was suspected, another top hospital in the National Capital, the Safdarjung Hospital has been hit. However, the hacking attack on the Safdarjung Hospital was not as severe as AIIMS faced and the chances of data leak were less as major part of hospital work runs on manual mode. P2

GUJ POLLS: MODI, SHAH
TO CAST VOTE TODAY

Ahmedabad: Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Ahmedabad on Sunday evening for exercising his franchise in the second and final phase of the Gujarat Assembly elections on December 5. Modi met his mother and took blessings. Union Home Minister Amit Shah too will cast his vote at a municipal sub-zonal office in Naranpura locality of the city.

Perform or make way: Kharage to Cong
leaders; 3-day plenary session in FebHaath se Haath Jodo
Abhiyaan to follow
Bharat Jodo Yatra
from January 26PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday announced to hold a plenary session in Raipur in February 2023 to chalk out the party's future strategy and ratify the appointment of Mallikarjun Kharge as the party president.

The party also announced that as a follow-up to the Bharat Jodo Yatra, it will run a massive two-month campaign "Haath se Haath Jodo Abhiyaan" from January 26.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge with senior party leader Sonia Gandhi, during the party's Steering Committee meeting, at AICC HQ in New Delhi on Sunday
PTI

In the steering committee meeting which took place a day after it's Parliamentary committee meeting, Kharge also sent out a stern message to leaders to perform or make way for others, and strongly pitched

for accountability of office-bearers "from top to bottom".

Congress president Kharage, former party chief Sonia Gandhi, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, his Chhattisgarh counterpart Bhupesh Baghel, general secretary in-charge organisation Venugopal, senior leaders P Chidambaram, Anand Sharma, Meira Kumar and Ambika Soni were among those who attended the meeting.

Rahul Gandhi did not attend the meeting due to the Bharat Jodo Yatra which is set to enter Rajasthan on Sunday evening. A day earlier on Saturday, the party leaders met to chalk out the Parliament strategy for the Winter Session from this week.

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Targeted after I raised
issues of tribals' rights,
poor's exploitation: RahulPIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi on Sunday said attempts were made to destroy his image after he raised the two issues of land rights of tribals and exploitations of the poor.

"When I joined politics, all media of the country used to do 'wah, wah' for me 24 hours until 2008-09. Do you remember? Then I raised two issues and everything changed," Rahul said in the video which is a collection of his Bharat Jodo speeches and also clips of his initial days in politics.

"I raised two issues — one was Niyamgiri and the second was Bhatta Parsaul. The

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi pays tribute to the portrait of freedom fighter Tanya Mama on his death anniversary during Bharat Jodo Yatra, in Agar Malwa on Sunday
PTI

moment I raised the question of land and the moment I started to defend the right of the poor people on the land is when the whole media tamasha started. We brought PESA Act for tribals and other laws for their land rights.

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Argentina in World Cup
quarterfinals as Messi
shines in 1000th gamePlayers of Argentina celebrate after their team's 2-1 victory over Australia during the World Cup round of 16 soccer match between Argentina and Australia at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Doha, Qatar on Saturday
AP | PTI

AP ■ AL RAYYAN

Lionel Messi was pushed into the middle of a joyous post-match huddle as Argentina's players jumped up and down to celebrate reaching the World Cup quarterfinals.

Messi delivered again for his country, marking the 1,000th game of his era-defining career with his first goal in the knockout stage of a World Cup to lead Argentina to a 2-1 win over Australia on Saturday. This was not the walkover most were expecting against the unheralded Australians, though. At the final whistle, Argentina was just as grateful for its goalkeeper as the No. 10 with magic in his boots.

Emi Martinez came up with a sprawling save in the last seconds of an increasingly anxious match to prevent the need

for extra time and the potential of another shock in a World Cup full of them.

"That is the World Cup for you," Messi said.

"All the matches are difficult and what's important is that you win."

With a flourish of his famous left foot in the 35th minute, Messi put Argentina ahead with his third goal at this year's tournament and ninth in total at the World Cup — one more than Diego Maradona.

"Wow, he's just remarkable," Australia coach Graham Arnold said.

Julian Alvarez pounced on a heavy touch by Australia goalkeeper Mathew Ryan to tap into an empty net for the second goal, but this was no cruise to a quarterfinal meeting with the Netherlands.

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Sherpa meet begins in Udaipur to set G20 agenda

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The first Sherpa meeting under India's G20 Presidency commenced in Udaipur in Rajasthan on Sunday to set the agenda for the leaders' summit in New Delhi next September and provide the country an opportunity to outline its broad priorities.

Chaired by India's Sherpa Amitabh Kant, the four-day meeting will see delegates from G20 members, invited countries and international organisations discuss pressing issues, including technological transformation, green development, spotlighting women-led development and facilitating inclusive and resilient growth.

"The first Sherpa meeting sets the tone and agenda for future meetings to come, by providing the Chair, i.e. India, an opportunity to outline its

broad priorities, and give an overview on its G20 Presidency," an official statement said.

The Sherpa meetings will work towards building consensus on key cross-cutting issues, which will be discussed in the various G20 work streams for inclusion in the Leaders' Declaration, which will be tabled at the G20 Summit in New Delhi next year, it said.

India, as the G20 President, has invited Bangladesh, Egypt, Mauritius, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Singapore, Spain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as guest countries for the summit. The International Solar Alliance, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and the Asian Development Bank are guest international organisations for the summit.

India's G-20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant speaks at the first G20 Sherpa meeting, in Udaipur on Sunday
PTI

The Sherpas, personal emissaries of the G20 leaders, oversee the negotiations to

arrive at a consensus on key issues facing the world. There are 13 different working groups

identified as Sherpa Tracks, including the one on Disaster Risk Resilience and Reduction introduced by India for its presidency.

The working group on Disaster Risk Resilience and Reduction is important as G20 countries have a high level of exposure to disaster risk. The working group is expected to encourage collective work by the G20, undertake multi-disciplinary research and exchange best practices on disaster risk reduction.

The meeting of Sherpas will kick start with a panel discussion on accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

During the meeting, India will introduce broad priorities of all Working Groups and hear views from G20 countries, guests, and international organ-

isations, the statement said.

Discussions during the meet will focus on five overarching thematic areas of technological transformation, green development and LiFE, accelerated, inclusive and resilient growth, multilateralism and food, fuel and fertilizers, women-led development, tourism and culture.

A "Chai pe Charcha" will also be held to foster deeper conversations and strengthen ties among G20 member countries and their Sherpas.

The first Sherpa meeting under India's presidency plans to offer delegates a unique "Indian experience" through cultural performances, art exhibitions, and excursions to various destinations, including locations such as the Kumbhalgarh Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the Ranakpur Temple Complex.

Bills to remove Guv as chancellor, hike in tax on foreign liquor in Kerala Assembly session

PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The seventh session of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, set to begin from Monday, is expected to see heated discussions on various Bills.

The Bills include the one which aims to take away the powers of the Chancellor from the Governor, the issue of Vizhinjam port protests, and the controversy over appointments in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation.

The session was convened in the wake of the ongoing tussle between Governor Arif Mohammed Khan and the ruling LDF over functioning of universities in the State and appointments therein.

However, the Bill to replace the Governor with eminent academicians at the helm of universities in the State is just one among over 20 other Bills

which are expected to be taken up in the House during the session which concludes on December 15.

Another important Bill that is likely to witness heated discussions is the Kerala General Sales Tax (Amendment) Bill which aims to increase by four per cent the Kerala GST on foreign liquor to make up for the loss of revenue due to exemption of the five per cent turnover tax levied on distilleries making and selling foreign liquor in the State.

Both Bills have been sharply criticised by the opposition UDF which is likely to oppose them in the House.

The opposition is also expected to raise in the Assembly the recent violent protests in connection with the Vizhinjam sea port construction and the actions of the State government on it as well as the controversial letter purportedly written by

Thiruvananthapuram Corporation Mayor to the district leadership of CPI(M) seeking names of party cadres to be appointed on contract in the civic body.

The draft Bill to replace the Governor with eminent academicians as Chancellor of the universities in the State was approved in a Cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on November 30.

The draft Bill also provides that the government would have the power to remove the appointed Chancellor from office on the basis of an inquiry conducted by a former judge of the Supreme Court or High Court in case of serious allegations of misconduct against him or her, according to a statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office recently.

A day after that Khan questioned the legal sanctity of the Bill by claiming that any pro-



vision repugnant to UGC regulations cannot become law.

The Governor said the Supreme Court has clearly laid down that if the State law is repugnant to UGC regulations, the UGC regulation shall prevail. Even if the Bill is passed by the House, which is likely as the Left enjoys majority in the Assembly, it requires the Governor's assent to become a law. Khan is yet to sign the Kerala Lok Ayukta Amendment Bill and the

University Laws Amendment Bill which were passed by the Assembly during its last session which concluded on September 2.

The Governor has claimed that he required certain explanations regarding these two Bills and had asked the State government to clarify his doubts, but there was no response from their side.

Hence, no decision has been taken regarding those Bills, he had said.

MP: Six killed, 10 injured as truck rams into people standing roadside

PTI ■ RATLAM

At least six persons were killed and 10 others injured, eight of them critically, when a speeding truck rammed into a group of people standing at a roadside bus stop in Madhya Pradesh's Ratlam district on Sunday evening, police said.

The incident occurred at a traffic intersection near Satrunda village on Ratlam-Lebad Road, about 30 km away from the Ratlam district headquarters.

District Collector Narendra Kumar Suryavanshi said six persons were killed and ten others were injured. The condition of eight of them is critical.

Superintendent of Police (SP) Abhishek Tiwari said the truck has been impounded.

Vishal, one of the injured, said the speeding truck crushed at least 20 people.

Winter Session of UP Assembly from today

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

The Winter Session of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly will begin on Monday during which the state government will present its supplementary budget for 2022-23, officials said.

This is the third session of the year and is likely to have three sittings, they said.

Ahead of the session, an all-party meeting was held here on Sunday. UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav were, however, not present in the meeting.

SP MLA Manoj Pandey, who attended the meeting, told PTI in the presence of Speaker Satish Mahana that his party's demand to pay condolence to SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav during the session has been accepted.

"There will be no question hour tomorrow and a resolution will be passed to condole Yadav's death," Pandey said.

According to government officials, the state government



proposes to present its first supplementary budget for 2022-2023 during the Winter Session.

The state government may carry out some legislative business and is also likely to table the ordinances promulgated after the monsoon session of the state legislature.

A statement issued by the UP Legislative Assembly, Speaker Satish Mahana urged the leaders of political parties to co-operate for the smooth functioning of the House.

Mahana said in a parliamentary system, democracy is strengthened by communication and positive discussion.

The Speaker also asked party leaders to put up their views in the House in a decent manner, and discussions should take place in a harmonious way.

Ban on non-essential construction as air in Delhi-NCR 'severe'

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With pollution in the national capital turning severe on Sunday, the Centre's air quality panel directed authorities in the Delhi-NCR to ban non-essential construction work in the region under stage III of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP).

Delhi's 24-hour average air quality index (AQI) stood at 407 at 4 pm.

The sub-committee for implementation of GRAP held a meeting on Sunday to review the air quality scenario in the region as well as the forecasts for meteorological

conditions and the air quality index of Delhi.

It observed that the air quality witnessed further deterioration over the last 24 hours. In an effort to prevent more deterioration, the sub-committee decided that all actions as envisaged under stage III of GRAP be implemented with immediate effect in the NCR, in addition to all actions under stages I and II, it said in an order.

The pollution level in Delhi entered the 'severe' category after November 4, when the AQI was 447.

An AQI between 201 and 300 is considered 'poor', 301 and 400 'very poor', and 401 and 500 'severe'.

City's rural areas with poor facilities vote in large numbers in MCD polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Given the apathy of civic authorities in providing basic amenities in the national Capital and root out corruption, citizens of the national Capital on Sunday turned out to vote in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to give a warning signal to the all the political parties that enough is enough and they should get their act together to meet the aspirations of the citizens.

Facing perennial problems of waterlogging, poor connectivity and lack of education facilities besides harassment by Government servants at municipal offices, people in the rural areas of Alipur, Ghitorni, Badli and Burari turned up in large numbers to exercise their votes

for the MCD polls.

Issuing a caution note to the aspiring netas of the MCD, 86-year-old Gulabo Devi said while waiting in a queue in Alipur complained better drainage facilities and roads are needed in her locality. She said "No body works whether it is kamal (BJP) or Jhadu (AAP)."

"The main point is corruption should be rooted from the MCD. We need better facilities here. There are problems pertaining to potable water, broken roads and clogged drains. MCD officials often come and dig up the roads around without even thinking about the issues faced by residents because of this," she claimed.

Parvesh Sharma, who also lives in the same area, said residents have to face knee-deep



water on the roads every monsoon. He also claimed that water supplied to the households is often unfit for consumption.

Residents cannot step out of their houses during the monsoon because of water-logged roads. The drains remain clogged throughout the year and the sewage water spills onto the roads during the rainy season. The water that we get in our household is contaminated and

unfit for consumption," the 60-year-old said.

Slum dwellers in Delhi are a major segment of voters and can decide the fate of candidates in many wards. While the BJP has promised to provide them proper houses with help from the Centre if voted to power again, the AAP has been able to create a strong support base in these areas, as evidenced by its back-to-back victories in the assembly polls.

Targeted after I raised issues of...

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And then the media started writing against me 24 hours," Rahul said.

"The assets of India which originally belonged to the Maharajas were given to the public through the Constitution. But BJP is doing the opposite of it. They are giving those assets back to 'maharajas' taking them from you," Rahul added.

Rahul had protested Niyamgiri land acquisition for Vedanta's mining operation in Odisha calling it illegal. The permission was finally denied. Bhatta, Parsaul in Uttar Pradesh witnessed a massive farmers' protest in 2011 over land acquisition.

Rahul visited the farmers' protest against the then Mayawati Government and it remained one of the most remarkable moments of Rahul's journey in politics.

"The beauty of it is that it does not work. Truth has this nasty habit of poking its head from here and there. The more they spend to besmirch my image, they will be giving more strength to me because the truth can't be suppressed. When you fight a major force, you will be attacked personally.

So I know when I am attacked personally that I am on the right track," he said.

"This is my guru. This teaches me which side to

choose. And I am going forward in my fight. As long as I am going forward, everything is fine," Rahul said in a video message.

Alleging that it was the BJP which spent thousands of crores to damage his image over the years, Rahul claimed the attempt would backfire since he was supported by the "truth".

In the video message shared on various social media platforms by the Congress, Rahul said that even though his opponents spent huge amounts of money to destroy his image the beauty of it is that it does not work.

"BJP spent thousands of crores of rupees to spoil my

image. They created a certain image of me. People think it is harmful... but it is beneficial for me because the truth is with me. Personal attacks on me tell me that I'm going in the right direction," Rahul said.

"Truth has this nasty habit of poking its head from here and there.

The more they spend to besmirch my image, they will be giving more strength to me because the truth can't be suppressed. When you fight a major force, you will be attacked personally. So I know when I am attacked personally that I am on the right track," Rahul said who is on his Bharat Jodo Yatra.

Argentina in World Cup quarterfinals as...

From Page 1

Australia's fightback in the final 20 minutes was as stirring as it was unexpected. Craig Goodwin's shot deflected into the net off Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez in the 77th.

Then, amid a late aerial bombardment from the Australians, Garang Kuol had a dramatic chance when he was left free at the far post. Shooting on the turn, his effort was smothered by Martinez and two Argentina players fell on top of their goalkeeper in relief as much as happiness.

"Before we came here, people were saying we were the worst team at the World

Cup and the worst Soccerroos team ever," Arnold said. "That's gone now."

On the other occasion Australia reached the last 16 — in 2006 — the team lost to eventual champion Italy.

Maybe it's an omen for Argentina, which has fully recovered from its shocking loss to Saudi Arabia in its opening group match and won three straight games.

As for Messi, he now has 789 goals in a career that might yet reach a crescendo on Dec. 18 by winning soccer's biggest trophy in his fifth and likely last World Cup.

The dream is still alive for the seven-time world player of the year and the tens of thou-

sands of Argentina fans who dominated the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, massively outnumbering the small pockets of green-and-gold-clad Australia supporters to make it feel like a match in Buenos Aires or Rosario.

Argentina's players linked arms and formed a long line to celebrate in front of their scarf-waving fans at one of end of the stadium after the game.

"The whole of Argentina would like to be here, but it's not possible," Messi said. "This bond, this union we have, it's beautiful."

Messi had been quiet before his goal, crowded out by a compact and defensively solid Australia team. He's

never quiet for long, though.

He sent a pass inside to the edge of the area and kept running, eventually receiving a lay-off from Nicolas Otamendi to take one touch and stroke his finish through the long legs of Australia defender Harry Souttar — the tallest outfield player at the World Cup.

When Alvarez added the second to score in successive games, Australia looked out of it and Messi began to put on a show.

One 40-meter (yard) dribble wowed the crowd as he slalomed past three defenders and was tackled just as he was about to shoot.

"MESSII! MESSII!" came the chant.

High-pitch MCD...

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There were 13,638 polling stations set up across Delhi. There are 1,349 candidates in the fray and over 1.45 crore electors are eligible to exercise their franchise in the elections to the 250 wards of the MCD.

Garbage collection and landfills emerged as one of the biggest issues in the fight between the Kejriwal-led AAP and the BJP, which has been controlling municipal bodies for 15 years.

The MCD polls assume greater significance for the ruling AAP and its Chief Minister Kejriwal as they seek expansion of the party ahead of the 2024

general elections in the country. A victory in the MCD polls will not only cement AAP's place in Delhi but will fuel its aspiration to emerge as a serious contender to the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the national scene.

The AAP's "Kejriwal ki Sarkar, Kejriwal ka Paarshad" campaign outlined 10 guarantees to the Delhi residents ahead of the MCD elections, focused on cleanliness, tackling corruption within the MCD, improving infrastructure and public amenities, and making changes within the municipal workforce and ensuring regular wages for the employees.

The AAP set a five-year timeline to solve the city's problem of garbage, and also delineated measures it would take to improve the waste management system, including consultations with scientists and experts.

Despite facing successive defeats in the elections to the Delhi Legislative Assembly, the BJP remained virtually unbeatable in the MCD elections.

Neither Congress' Chief Minister Sheila Dixit nor Kejriwal could defeat the BJP despite reaching the peak of their popularity. The BJP has a stronghold in the Municipal Corporation since 2007.

The MCD polls is a prestige battle for the. This is reflected in its high-decibel campaign involving 19 Union Ministers including Hardeep Singh Puri, Piyush Goyal, Anurag Thakur, Chief Ministers of four States—Manohar Lal Khattar, Jai Ram Thakur, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, and Pushkar Singh Dhami—and two deputy Chief Ministers and 31 MPs took part in the campaign. The BJP's campaign outlines "Vachan Patra" and "Sankalp Patra" focusing on waste management and structurally improving the management of MCD.

In the 2017 municipal polls, the BJP trounced the AAP and the Congress, winning 181 of the 270 wards in which polls were held. The AAP in its debut civic body polls won 48 wards while the Congress bagged 30.

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During the meeting, the leaders also discussed the party's prospects in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, with in-charges in these States giving their reports.

In his introductory remarks at the Sunday meeting, Kharge batted for organisational accountability in the party and said those unable to fulfill their responsibilities will have to make way for their colleagues.

He also asked whether the party in-charges have visited their respective areas for even 10 days in a month. He

also asked State in-charges to submit a roadmap for holding mass movements for raising people's issues over a period of 30 to 90 days and sought a schedule of planned programmes in States where elections are due before 2024.

"I believe that the biggest part of our responsibility towards the party and the country is -- organisational accountability from top to bottom. If the Congress organisation is strong, accountable and lives up to the expectations of the people, only then will we be able to win elections and serve the people of the country," the Congress

chief said.

"The Committee unanimously resolved that the 85th Plenary Session of the Congress will be held at Raipur in the second half of February 2023," Congress general secretary KC Venugopal said at a press conference reading out a party statement.

"We will have a discussion on various subjects at this three-day plenary session. There will also be a big public meeting," Venugopal said.

He said the steering committee meeting also held a review of the Bharat Jodo Yatra and a future course

of action was decided upon.

"It has been decided that a massive campaign 'Haath se haath jodo abhiyaan' will be carried out from January 26 for two months. As per this campaign, block-level padyatra covering all gram panchayats and booths will be carried out," he said.

The campaign "Haath se haath jodo abhiyaan" will be part of padyatras will be taken out and a letter from Rahul talking about the core message of the yatra will be distributed among the people along with a "chargesheet" against the Modi Government.

Names missing from voter list, many...

From Page 1

Manoj Tiwari alleged that the names of several hundred voters were deleted in Mauj Pur and Yamuna Vihar areas in his North East Delhi constituency at the behest of the ruling AAP.

"I have talked to the State Election Commissioner and lodged a complaint with him. We will seek cancellation of the polls here if needed," the BJP MP said at a Maujpur ward, adding that he will also explore legal options.

Flipping through the list of voters at a polling station in Khajoori Khas for the MCD election, 19-year-old Puneet Kumar was excited to vote for the first time on Sunday but was left disappointed when he found his name missing.

"I came here to cast my vote. I found that my name is not mentioned in the list. Officials don't have a clue. I am standing for the past few hours but nobody is helping me," a dejected Kumar said. People in North-East Delhi and several

other areas complained that their names were not mentioned in the voters' lists.

Nusra Jahan (62) reached the polling booth in Bhajanpura to cast her vote but was told her name was not on the list. She requested the officials to check again but in vain. An upset Jahan vented her anger at the officials, accusing them of shoddy work.

"I have voted in several elections and now this is the first time I have been told that my vote is not here. I don't

know why this has been done. I asked them for an explanation, but they couldn't explain. Now I have to travel back without casting my vote. This is a mistake on their part," said Jahan.

In Krishna Nagar (East Delhi), Rayan came to cast his vote with his wife. But the 30-year-old was unable to do so as his name was not mentioned on the list. "I searched for my name and even asked officials but my name is not mentioned on the list. Now I am going

back without casting my vote," Rayan said.

Bundu (61) faced a similar situation. He is from Block E of Kajhuri. "I have voted in the past but this time my name is not mentioned. I will go back home now," he said. Bundu claimed a few others in his locality faced the same issue.

Mohammad Salim, 57, from Jahangirpuri said that he spoke to officials when he found his name missing but was told to go to Samaypur Badli to fix the problem.

Capital's political bigwigs cast votes



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, along with his family members, Gautam Gambhir and BJP Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramveer Singh Bidhuri, show ink marked finger after casting their votes for MCD election in New Delhi on Sunday



Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

All parties woo Delhiites

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Not willing to take any chances even at the last moment, all the three main contenders for the high-profile Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) on the voting day on Sunday made fervent appeal to the citizens to vote for them. The three parties including the ruling AAP, BJP and Congress leaders also took pot shots at each other to woo the voters.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta, BJP MPs Gautam Gambhir, Meenakshi Lekhi, Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma, Harshvardhan, Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, AAP leaders Saurabh Bharadwaj, Atishi, Durgesh Pathak, Leader of Opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuri, Congress leader Ajay Maken, Raj Kumar Chouhan Arvinder Singh Lovely, Harun Yusuf and Jai Kishan were among the leaders who voted in the morning for the MCD polls. Delhi Congress president Anil Chaudhary could not vote this year as his name was not in the voter's list.

Leading the charge against the ruling BJP in the MCD,



People showing their voter ID cards as they stand in queue to cast their vote for the MCD polls at a polling station in New Delhi on Sunday

Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

Kejriwal tweeted an appeal with an apparent jibe at rivals. In a tweet, the Delhi Chief Minister wrote: "Vote for an honest party. Vote for people who are sincere and nice."

Further, in a veiled dig at rivals, without mentioning any names, he added: "Don't vote for those who indulge into hooliganism. Don't vote for those who spread garbage in Delhi. Vote for those who will clean the city. Vote for those

who will do the work, not stop it." Kejriwal visited the polling booth in Civil Lines here along with his parents, wife and children. He exited the booth holding the hands of his parents. "People should vote for the party that's honest and works. For those who focus on cleanliness of the city and not those who keep creating hurdles," he told reporters after casting his vote. Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia

appealed to Delhiites to vote in record numbers and to make the city clean and beautiful together, while heading to vote for the polls. Talking to the media on voting day, Sisodia urged the public to choose their Government wisely if they want a clean Delhi.

Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly, Ramvir Singh Bidhuri, cast his vote in Tugalaqabad's Sarvodya Kanya Vidhyalaya.

Minority-dominated areas see impressive turnout

SAURAV GUPTA ■ NEW DELHI

Minority dominated areas including Jahangirpuri, New Seelampur, Mustafabad, Shahdara and Karawal Nagar witnessed a smooth and peaceful voting for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) elections, reporting an impressive turnout.

Special arrangements such as heavy deployment of Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) personnel, 493 micro observers at different sensitive and hyper sensitive areas across the national capital were also stationed by the State Election Commission (SEC) to keep a close watch on the proceedings at the booths, aiming to avoid any untoward incidents and ensuring free and fair polls.

From young voters to senior citizens, everyone was seen standing in extensive queues outside the polling booths waiting for their turn to cast their votes by participating in the biggest festival of democracy. "Sanitation, repairing of streets, education facilities remained dominant poll issues for which we have voted today. From the past several years, no one from the corporation came to pick up the garbage from the houses situated in the area," said Shalu Gupta, a resident of

Jahangirpuri, after casting her vote. "Another issue is that the sewage system in the area is choked and after several complaints no action has been taken by the municipal corporation officials.

During rains, the sewage water overflows due to which the area becomes a mess, leading to breeding of mosquitoes and diseases, Gupta asserted.

Another resident of the locality, Kupal Devi rued that councilors visit the area only at the time of elections and once they get nominated, they forget about the place till the next round of polls. "The streets of

the area were not repaired for the last many years despite numerous requests to the authorities. They just don't bother to get the work done. Uncountable potholes are there on every street," she claimed.

The market area in Jahangirpuri which had come to a standstill in April due to clashes between two communities during a Hanuman Jayanti procession was bustling on Sunday as people went out in large numbers to exercise their franchise.

A person who did not wish to be named complained about the problem of encroachments

in the area which is a top concern.

"Even in case of emergency, an individual is not able to reach on time due to the encroachments which leads to traffic jams often on the streets. This issue should be addressed by the civic body as soon as possible," he said.

Shrafat Pradhan, a resident of New Seelampur, said they are satisfied with the work done by the MCD in the past five years in their locality but still there are some issues that have been left out by the corporation like repairing of minor potholes etc.



Women cast their vote during the MCD elections on Sunday

Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

Delhi Cong chief unable to vote as name missing from electoral rolls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Congress president Anil Chaudhary on Sunday claimed that he was unable to exercise his franchise in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) polls as his name was missing from the voters' list. Chaudhary claimed that his name was neither on the voters' list nor in the deleted list.

A delegation of Delhi Congress leaders filed a complaint with the State Election Commission alleging foul play.

Meanwhile, responding to a complaint of Delhi Congress leader, the State Election Commission has clarified that the commission has merely adopted the voters' list prepared by the Election Commission of India for the MCD polls and it has no jurisdiction to make addition or deletion in the voters list.

The Commission has advised the Congress leader to take up the issue with the chief



electoral officer of Delhi. The commission has also forwarded the Chaudhary's complaint to the CEO, Delhi for appropriate action.

Chaudhary, a former MLA, went to cast his vote at Ward No 193-Kondli. He found his name missing from the list when he reached the polling booth to exercise his franchise in the Dallupara area.

"My name is neither in the voter list nor in the deleted list. My wife has voted. Officials are checking it," said the Delhi Congress president who arrived at a polling booth to cast his vote.

Centenarians cast vote with enthusiasm

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Accompanied by her daughter, 106-year-old Shanti Bala Vaidya reached a polling station in Bara Hindu Rao area in north Delhi was the first centenarian voter to cast her vote in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) poll on Sunday morning.

"She has not missed a single election since she started voting," her 40-year-old daughter Kamla said. Vaidya only understands Bengali but cannot talk.

"The only word she utters is 'Maa'. She calls me Maa," Kamla, who is a dry fruit vendor, said. Police personnel deployed at Deputy Ganj polling station also helped Vaidya in casting her vote. Deputy Commissioner of Police (North) Sagar Singh Kalsi said police also have a responsibility towards voters,



especially senior citizens.

"Our personnel at polling booths have been briefed and sensitised to assist anyone who needs help," he said.

Amina Bibi, 105, said she casts her vote in every election in the morning.

The polling booth this time was around 300 metres away from her home and she pre-

ferred walking alone, though many neighbours asked her if they could accompany her. She cannot speak properly due to old age but made her intent to vote clear. Gurdas Jeet Singh will be celebrating his 100th birthday next month, but his excitement for voting is still the same, his grandson Bimal Jeet said.

BJP, AAP accuse each other of violating model code of conduct

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP and the AAP accused each other of violating model code of conduct during voting in municipal polls in Delhi on Sunday.

Delhi BJP spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor alleged that recorded messages of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal appealing people to vote for the AAP were received by lakhs of people on the day of polling.

He said it was a violation of model code of conduct and lodged a complaint with the State Election Commission. The party also lodged a complaint against AAP MLA Durgesh Pathak and another party leader Vijendra Garg.

In his complaint, Delhi BJP's Legal cell co-convenor sanket Gupta alleged that both

Pathak and Garg violated model code of conduct by campaigning on the night of December 3 which was "silence period" before voting. The complaint also cited a viral social media video of the two AAP leaders allegedly campaigning. The party demanded the Election Commission to direct police to register an FIR against Pathak and Garg.

AAP candidate from Pushp Vihar in South Delhi, Arun Nawariya alleged BJP workers distributed money to influence voters.

"The SHO of Ambedkar Nagar police station checked the complaint by visiting the place referred by the AAP candidate. One person was found there but he was not worker of any party. The enquiry revealed that the complaint was bogus," said a police officer.

Bawana's Katewara village boycotts civic body elections

New Delhi: The polling stations in Bawana's Katewara village wore a deserted look as its residents boycotted the MCD elections on Sunday, alleging negligence from the civic body. There are 1200 voters in the village. A purported video also surfaced from Katewara village's ward 30, showing the residents in the area stepping out of their houses, however no one turned up at the polling booths.

"The whole village unanimously decided to boycott the elections. The civic body as well as the Delhi government always neglected people here, so why should we cast our votes?" said Krishna Vats, a resident of village. As a result, no one turned up at polling booths in Nangal Thakran ward of Bawana assembly constituency, he said. "Main roads are broken, drains are clogged and MCD schools are in pathetic conditions here," Vats said.

First-time voters bat for better civic amenities

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

First-time voters batted for a spick and span Delhi with better civic amenities as they queued up for the MCD elections on Sunday. Of the 1.45 crore voters in Delhi, 95,000 are first-time voters. Development of education and health infrastructure, cleanliness and better civic amenities — are among the issues that first time voters voted for on Sunday.

Coming out of a polling station set up at ITI Malviya Nagar, 18-year-old Namita said her vote was for cleanliness, better education, better parking facilities and against encroachment. "I was excited as well as nervous because I had been reading about voting rights and its importance. 'MCD elections are important because it is fought based on local issues



First time voters show their ink marked fingers after casting votes at a polling station on Sunday in Delhi

Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

and for me cleanliness is the most important factor. If our areas are not clean, it could lead to diseases like Malaria and dengue and also leads to other issues. Today was the first time I cast my vote which was for

cleanliness, better education, better parking facilities and against encroachment," she said. Kanishka Dagar (19) a political science student at Kirori Mal College, said he was inspired by his parents who

diligently cast their votes in every election. "I was waiting to turn 18 so that I could exercise my vote. I want a party that should work through its five-year tenure rather than scrambling to fulfil their promises at the fag end of their term just to gain votes," he said. Maseera Fatima, a 19-year-old BTech student, said garbage is a huge issue in her Mata Sundari Road locality.

"Of course, there is the excitement of casting vote for the first time. We want that our area to remain clean through year." Naman Kumar (19) expected political parties to do more for youth. "It's been a while since government has done anything substantial for youths, especially when it comes to education and employment. 'Unless youth are satisfied, no political party will be able to have their support.

Pink booths, selfie kiosks for voters

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Several facilities such as Childcare facilities, selfie kiosks, lounges at pink booths and model polling stations were made by the State Election Commission to provide a relaxed voting experience in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) polls on Sunday.

The Delhi State Election Commission (SEC) has set up 68 pink booths and as many model polling stations. At an all-female staff managed pink booth at Khajuri Khas in northeast Delhi decked with balloons, voter Momina Rashid said, "This looks pleasing. Also, voting has become easy." "We require exercising our rights. The issues that are in our mind are the pathetic condition of roads and drainage.

We want our area to be cleaned," she said. Security arrangements inside and outside the pink booth premises were tight with police and paramilitary personnel ensuring hassle-free voting. Selfie points also attracted voters many of whom were

seen clicking pictures after casting their votes. "At the pink booths managed by all-female staff have feeding room for nursing mothers, a creche facility for little children accompanying voters, swings for kids and decorated selfie kiosks," a senior official of SEC told.

"The facilities and cleanliness encourage people to come forward to vote. There are ramps for disabled people who are escorted to cast their votes," a polling official at Khajuri Khas pink booth said.

The model polling stations have waiting area, lounge and selfie kiosks while candies are distributed to voters. Civil defence volunteers help people with disability and senior citizens, the SEC official said.

Chandini Singh, a resident of Dilshad Garden said that the pink booth was all praise for the poll panel's initiative.

Another resident of the Jahangirpuri, Shweta Gupta said that these booths made the voting so easy. The staff is helpful and guided me every step of the way. They also took care of my 8 year old son



till I caste my vote. "It is really nice with neat and clean premises and helping polling officials. They are also creating awareness specially among the first-time voters," she said.

Cong to conclude ‘Bharat Jodo Yatra’ by Jan 26

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress is to finish Bharat Jodo Yatra by January 26. In a statement issued after the Congress steering committee meeting on Sunday, the party said the committee noted the "overwhelming success" of the Bharat Jodo Yatra from Kanyakumari to Srinagar and the wide participation of lakhs of people.

The steering committee was formed in place of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the highest decision-making body of the party after Kharage took charge in October. All members of the CWC were made part of the steering committee soon after Kharage assumed charge as the



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with supporters during the party's 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', in Ujjain district on Friday PTI Photo

Congress president. "The Yatra listens to and speaks with people from all sections of society every day, especially youth, women, farmers and the working class, directly communicating its message of equality, fraternity and harmony."

It is the same message which India's spiritual leaders and social reformers preached, the leaders of our freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi fought for, and our Constitution upholds," the party said.

"The Committee particularly appreciated the leadership of former president Rahul Gandhi, whose 'tapasya', unflinching determination, and love for India and her people

have been critical to the success of the Yatra," the party said. The party said that while India faces challenges, the prime minister continues to "deny, distract and divide".

"His inflammatory rhetoric during the recent election campaigns in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh has further polarised the polity and society at a time when serious discussion and debate are needed," he said.

During the meeting of the steering committee, which replaced the party's top decision-making body Congress Working Committee (CWC) till the plenary, the party stressed on unity and urged members to work with a sense of collective purpose to ensure

Covid-19 pandemic not over yet: WHO

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

If you thought that Covid-19 pandemic is over, better be vigilant! The World Health Organization (WHO) on Sunday said although the world is "much closer" to end the emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, it warned that Omicron was still circulating

rampantly and continues to cause significant mortality. "We are much closer to being able to say that the emergency phase of the pandemic is over — but we're not there yet," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The reason behind is that "Omicron has proved to be significantly more transmissible than its predecessor, Delta,



and continues to cause significant mortality due to the intensity of transmission".

Meanwhile, "gaps in surveillance, testing, sequencing and vaccination are continuing to create the perfect conditions for a new variant of concern to emerge that could cause significant mortality", Tedros added.

WHO's statistics has shown that the number of weekly deaths reported to it has declined slightly over the past five weeks, but more than 8,500 people lost their lives last week.

It's "not acceptable three years into the pandemic, when we have so many tools to prevent infections and save lives", he said.

The WHO chief, however, admitted that Omicron, of

which over 500 sublineages are circulating, tends to cause less severe disease than previous variants of concern.

WHO estimates that at least 90 per cent of the world's population now has some level of immunity to SARS-CoV-2, due to prior infection or vaccination.

According to Maria Van Kerkhove, technical lead of the WHO's Health Emergencies Program, at least 2.5 million cases worldwide were reported to WHO in the last week alone, but that number was a gross under-estimate of the circulation of the virus around the world.

Some estimates from wastewater data has suggested that the number of new cases could be as much as five times higher in some countries, meaning the virus is still circulating rampantly around the globe. "So people over the age of 60, people with underlying conditions, immunocompromised and our frontline workers..."

We have not yet reached that target of a hundred percent of (vaccinating) at-risk people around the world in every country. And this is what we want governments to focus on," said Van Kerkhove.



Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri shows his finger marked with indelible ink after casting his vote for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) elections, at a polling station in Anand Niketan area, in New Delhi on Sunday PTI Photo

Centre to hold all parties meeting for chalking out strategies for G20 summit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre will convene an all-parties meeting on Monday to solicit suggestions, discuss and finalise strategies for the G-20 summit which India will host in September next year.

Presidents of nearly 40 parties have been invited to the meeting by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi where Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be present. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar is also likely to attend the meeting at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

India officially assumed the G20 Presidency on December 1. New Delhi is expected to host over 200 preparatory meetings across the country, including at Hyderabad, beginning this month.

The next G20 Leaders' Summit at the level of heads of State or government is scheduled to be held on September 9 and 10 next year in New



Delhi. West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress president Mamata Banerjee, who will arrive in Delhi on Monday, will be part of the all-party meeting. Banerjee, however, said she would be participating in the meeting in the capacity of Trinamool Congress chairperson, and not as West Bengal chief minister.

Indonesia had earlier this month handed over the G20 presidency to India for the coming year at the Bali summit with Prime Minister Modi terming it a matter of pride for every Indian citizen. G20 or Group of 20 is an intergovernmental forum of the world's major developed and developing economies.

It comprises Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India,

ISIS opens allegiance movement for new chief

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The global terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State) has launched the bayat (allegiance) movements what is called Wilayats or provinces

Following the takeover of the outfit by Mujahid Abi Al Hussain Al Hashmi Al Qureish Hafizullah after its incumbent chief was killed recently, the allegiance movement is aimed at sanctifying the new ISIS chief and strengthening the outfit. While the Africa Wilayat (unit) of ISIS has expressed

allegiance, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the modules under it are on the verge of expressing solidarity with the change of guard at the top.

The expression of allegiance by all the modules of ISKP has been made mandatory by outfit. India has been included by outfit under ISKP for its nefarious designs.

As part of expression of allegiance, the various modules/units have been asked to send photographs of such events.



Nation will become viswaguru in 25 years: Prez

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday exuded confidence that the country would become the 'viswaguru' by the time it celebrated the centenary of its Independence (in 2047) with its pride restored.

Addressing the Navy Day celebrations at the Ramakrishna Beach here, the President said India was called great because it was such a country with people full of energy.

"People of India have such energy be it in music, sports, culture, soldiers...everyone is marching ahead to take India forward. I am confident by the time India celebrates the centenary of its Independence, it will become the viswaguru and restore its pride," Murmu observed.

She, however, noted that there was a need to bridge certain gaps "so that every Indian can march forward with pride and step into the new and developed India".

The President said the Navy Day reminded one of the need to "rededicate ourselves to taking India forward, transiting



through Amrit Kaal, towards a great future". Noting that India was an inherently maritime nation with sea on three sides and high mountains on the fourth, the President said it was but natural that the oceans would play a vital role in the country's growth and prosperity.

"The Navy has a responsibility of ensuring an umbrella of security for India's national maritime interest. It remains firm in its perseverance, resolute in its commitment, futuristic in capability development and outcome-oriented in action, as was evident from this year's Navy Day theme 'Combat-ready, Credible, Cohesive and Future-Proof'," she observed.

"Indian Navy is driven by Atmanirbhar, has a sustained reach and presence across the oceans and is propelled by innovation."

As the Supreme Commander, I am confident that Indian Navy will continue to grow from strength to strength, aligned with a vision for new and developed India," the President added.

Calling Visakhapatnam "the jewel of the east coast", Murmu said it emerged as an important hub, paving way for India's secure future.

The President, who launched several developmental projects of the Union Ministries of Road Transport and Highways, Defence and Tribal Affairs, said they would

69% of soil in Jharkhand's forest areas unfit for plant growth, discloses report

PTI ■ RANCHI

About 69 per cent of the soil in Jharkhand's forest areas has turned unfit for plant growth due to acute deficiency of nitrogen, as per a latest report.

The findings were revealed in the Forest Soil Health Card (FSHC) report prepared by the Ranchi-based Institute of Forest Productivity (IFP) upon the direction of the Union Ministry of Forest and Environment, a senior official said.

"There is a major deficiency of nitrogen, which is vital for plant growth, in the forest soil of the state. The presence of nitrogen in non-degraded forest should be around 258 kg per hectare, but we find it at an average of 140 kg per hectare in Jharkhand's forest soil," IFP Chief Technical Officer Shambhu Nath Mishra told PTI. "Most of the forest divisions are having presence of nitrogen between 160 kg and

180 kg per hectare. In quite a few areas, the figure is near 100 kg per hectare," Mishra, who is also the principal investigator of the project, said.

Jharkhand on Friday became the "first state" in the country to release a FSHC report, he said.

As many as 16,670 soil samples were collected from 1,311 places in 31 regional forest divisions of the state, the report said.

Jharkhand is losing its dense and well as moderate forest cover due to the deficiency of nitrogen, the official said.

Mishra said the loss of 90 kg of nitrogen could be replenished by using around 225 kg of urea per hectare. "But, we do not promote inorganic products like urea," he lamented.

Alternatively, the deficiency of 90 kg of nitrogen could be restored by using 17 tonnes of farm yard manure (FYM) per hectare or 5.6 tonnes of vermicompost per hectare, Mishra explained.

MoU delay holds up translocation of South Africa cheetahs to India

12 big cats in quarantine since July

PTI ■ BHOPAL

A dozen cheetahs quarantined in South Africa for more than four months have lost fitness in their wait to be flown to Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park (KNP) as a formal signing of an agreement is holding up their intercontinental translocation, wildlife experts have said.

They said prolonged quarantine is taking a toll on the health of these big cats, who are slated to join the eight cheetahs imported from Namibia and released in KNP in Sheopur district in mid-

September. In fact, the 12 South African cheetahs — seven males and five females — have not hunted for themselves even once after being kept in bomas (small enclosures), said wildlife experts in know of India's cheetah reintroduction plan.

Though there has been some forward movement in implementation of Project Cheetah with South Africa in recent days, Pretoria is yet to ink a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Indian government for transfer of the spotted cats to KNP.

Three of them have been kept in Phinda quarantine boma in KwaZulu-Natal Province and nine in Rooiberg Quarantine boma in Limpopo

Province since July 15, said the experts. "They have lost considerable fitness as they have not hunted even once since July 15," one of the experts told PTI.

They might have put on weight like humans sitting idle, he said, adding a running animal has toned up muscles and fitness.

Asked about the delay in inking an MoU, the expert said South African Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries Barbara Creecy last week cleared the Indian proposal on translocation of cheetahs. Now, the South African president will clear the proposal for a formal agreement to be signed between the two countries, he added.

Urine test can detect early-stage Alzheimer's: Study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A simple urine test can reveal if someone has early-stage Alzheimer's disease, a progressive neurodegenerative condition. The study which is the first of its kind to identify formic acid as a sensitive urinary biomarker that can reveal early-stage Alzheimer's disease can pave the way for an inexpensive and convenient disease screening.

The study is published in Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience. The researchers had tested a large group of patients with Alzheimer's disease of different levels of severity and healthy controls with normal cognition to identify differences in urinary biomarkers. A total of 574 people participated in the study, and



participants were either healthy volunteers with normal cognition, or had differing degrees of disease progression, ranging from subjective cognitive decline to fully-fledged disease. The researchers analyzed the participants' urine and blood samples and performed psychological evaluations.

The study found that urinary formic acid levels were significantly increased in all the Alzheimer's groups compared with the healthy controls, including the early-stage sub-

jective cognitive decline group, and correlated with a cognitive decline. This suggests that formic acid could act as a sensitive biomarker for early-stage Alzheimer's disease.

Current methods to diagnose Alzheimer's are expensive, inconvenient, and unsuitable for routine screening. This means that most patients only receive a diagnosis when it is too late for effective treatment.

However, a non-invasive, inexpensive, and convenient urine test for formic acid could

be just what the doctor ordered for early screening. "Alzheimer's disease is a continuous and concealed chronic disease, meaning that it can develop and last for many years before obvious cognitive impairment emerges," said the authors.

"The early stages of the disease occur before the irreversible dementia stage, and this is the golden window for intervention and treatment. Therefore, large-scale screening for early-stage Alzheimer's disease is necessary for the elderly." While researchers have identified urinary biomarkers for Alzheimer's disease previously, none have been suitable to reveal the early stages of the disease, meaning that the golden window for early treatment remains elusive.

The researchers behind

this new study have previously investigated an organic compound called formaldehyde as a urinary biomarker for Alzheimer's.

However, there was room for improvement in detecting early-stage disease. In this latest study they primarily focused on formic acid, a metabolic product of formaldehyde, to see if that performed better as a biomarker.

Interestingly, when the researchers analyzed urinary formic levels in combination with blood-based Alzheimer's biomarkers, they found that they could more accurately predict what stage of the disease that a patient was experiencing. However, further research is needed to understand the link between Alzheimer's and formic acid, they said.

UP gears up for bypolls in Mainpuri, Khatauli, Rampur

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

A direct contest between the BJP and Samajwadi Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) alliance is on the cards in the bypolls to one Lok Sabha and two Assembly constituencies in Uttar Pradesh on Monday.

The BSP and the Congress are not contesting from the seats. Polling will be held from 7 am to 6 pm and the results will be declared on December 8.

According to a statement issued by the office of Uttar Pradesh's Chief Electoral Officer 24.43 lakh people will exercise their voting rights in the bypolls.

This includes 13.14 lakh male voters, 11.29 lakh female voters, and 132 third category voters, it said.

Voting will take place at 3,062 polling booths located in 1,945 polling centres. While the bypoll to the Mainpuri parliamentary seat is taking place due to the death of Samajwadi Party (SP) founder Mulayam Singh Yadav, in Rampur Sadar and in Khatauli, the polls were neces-

sitated after SP MLA Azam Khan and BJP MLA Vikram Singh Saini were disqualified following their conviction in different cases.

While Khan was disqualified after a court awarded him three-year imprisonment in a 2019 hate speech case, Saini lost his membership of the assembly after his conviction in a 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots case.

The outcomes of the bypolls will not have any impact on the central or the state governments as the BJP enjoys a comfortable majority at both levels.

However, wins would provide a psychological advantage ahead of the 2024 general elections.

While in Mainpuri, there are six candidates in the fray, 14 candidates are contesting from Khatauli and 10 from Rampur Sadar, according to the Election Commission.

In Mainpuri, Mulayam Singh Yadav's elder daughter-in-law and SP president Akhilesh Yadav's wife Dimple Yadav is pitted against BJP's Raghuraj Singh Shakya.



Six arrested for distributing money, liquor to voters ahead of Khatauli bypoll

PTI ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR

Police on Sunday arrested six people here for allegedly distributing money and liquor to voters with an aim of wooing them to vote in favour of a particular candidate in the December 5 Khatauli bypoll, an official said.

Police have also seized Rs 51,000 from their possession.

Deputy Superintendent of Police Rakesh Kumar Singh said that acting on a tip-off that some people were distributing

money and liquor in favour of a particular candidate, a checking drive was undertaken.

Six persons identified as Karmvir Singh, Sukhbir Singh, Deepchand, Punit Kasana, Arun Kumar and Gautam were arrested from two places for distributing money and liquor in favour of the candidate, Singh said.

Police added that Rs 51,000 and a mobile phone carrying the details of alleged distribution of cash have been recovered from them.

Bharat Jodo Yatra enters Rajasthan after completing MP leg in 12 days

PTI ■ DONGARGAON

The Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Yatra entered Rajasthan on Sunday evening after completing its 12-day passage in Madhya Pradesh, during which it covered a distance of 380 km.

The yatra, which had arrived in Madhya Pradesh on November 23, entered the neighbouring desert State by crossing a bridge over Chanvali river around 6.40 pm with Gandhi sitting in a vehicle.

Congress's MP unit chief Kamal Nath and other party leaders accompanied Gandhi as he entered Rajasthan, a state where the party-led government is in turmoil due to the acrimony between Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and his former deputy Sachin Pilot.

The final leg of the yatra in MP began at 3.30 pm on Sunday from Soyatkal and ended after it reached Dongargaon in Agar Malwa district.

People lined the roads and fireworks went off to welcome Gandhi, who reciprocated by waving at them.

Addressing people at Dongargaon, Gandhi said walking was the best way to

understand the problems of youth, farmers and labourers, and that is why he had embarked on the nationwide march (on September 7) from Kanyakumari (in Tamil Nadu).

Asserting that he did not feel any fatigue from the march, the former Congress president said, "When I went to Delhi for Diwali and was sleeping in my room, I was missing my container and told people around I wanted to go back to the container."

"Even Nath was suffering from high fever in the morning and I told him to take rest, but he refused, took medicines to take part in the march and he is smiling now," Gandhi said.

Accusing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of spreading hatred and lies, Gandhi said they had decided to hit the roads as the government was not allowing them to raise their voice.

Earlier in the day, the yatra had resumed near Annapurna Dhaba in Lala Khedi village at 6 am. This is the 88th day of the yatra since it started from Kanyakumari and the 12th day in MP.

Flanked by folk singer Prahlad Tippaniyaa and his



group, who sang Kabir songs, and Congress MLA Jitu Patwari among others, Gandhi was seen walking briskly in the morning hours.

Lone Congress Lok Sabha MP from Chhindwara, Nakul Nath, former union minister Arun Yadav and Congress MLA and former minister Priyavrat Singh also accompanied Gandhi during the march.

Earlier, talking to reporters at Soyatkal camp, Kamal Nath said the main aim of Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra is to save the Constitution and culture in the country.

The yatra had entered the Hindi-speaking belt for the first time and gained massive response from the people, Nath

said, adding that it helped improve Gandhi's image among people, which had been distorted by the BJP through social media in the last eight years.

"The BJP used to say the march would end in Kerala, but the response and love has silenced those who keep chanting Modi-Modi," Nath claimed.

"Gandhi himself said his yatra got huge response in Madhya Pradesh, especially in Indore," Nath said, adding that the Congress leader interacted with farmers, small industrialists, shop owners, women, divyangjan (people with disabilities), weavers, tribals, Dalits and sanitation workers, among others.

Modi, Shah to cast votes today in Ahmedabad in 2nd phase Guj polls

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Ahmedabad on Sunday evening for exercising his franchise in the second and final phase of the Gujarat Assembly elections on December 5.

The prime minister will cast his vote at a polling station set up at a high school in Ranip locality in Ahmedabad city on Monday morning, an official said.

Union Home Minister and BJP MP Amit Shah will cast his vote at a municipal sub-zonal office in Naranpura locality of the city. After landing at the Ahmedabad airport in the evening the Prime Minister proceeded to meet his centenarian mother Hiraba at her residence in Raisan area of Gandhinagar and sought her blessings.

He spent around 45 minutes with her before leaving for the state Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) headquarters "Kamalam"



in Gandhinagar where he was received by Amit Shah, state BJP president CR Paatil, and other senior leaders.

"PM Modi will exercise his franchise at a polling station set up at Nishan high school in Ranip locality in Ahmedabad city on Monday morning," said collector Dhaval Patel.

Modi is a registered voter from Ranip area and had cast his vote in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and previous polls.

The polling station falls under the Sabarmati Assembly constituency in Ahmedabad

city.

Voting for 93 seats spread across central and north Gujarat districts in the second and final phase of polls will be held on Monday. 833 candidates are in the fray.

Polling for the first phase for 89 constituencies in Saurashtra, Kutch and south Gujarat regions was held on December 1 with an average voter turnout of 63.31 per cent.

The counting of votes for all 182 constituencies in Gujarat will be taken up on December 8.

Bihar bypoll: BJP, JD(U) slug it out in Kurhani

PTI ■ PATNA

The stage is set for bypoll to the Kurhani Assembly seat in Bihar, which marks the first electoral battle between Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U) and the BJP since the two old allies parted ways four months ago.

Altogether 13 candidates are in the fray, and their fates will be decided by 3,11,728 voters though the contest is being seen, primarily, between JD(U)'s Manoj Singh Kushwaha and BJP's Kedar Gupta, both of whom have won the seat for their respective parties in the not so distant past.

The bypoll, to be held on Monday, was necessitated by the disqualification of RJD MLA Anil Kumar Sahani and the party, which has come to share power after the upheaval in August, has decided to back the chief minister's party.

Among the many things the bypoll outcome will be indicative of, is the ability of the RJD, the state's mightiest in terms of numbers in the assembly, to transfer its votes to an ally which it had bitterly fought

till recently.

Deputy CM Tejashwi Yadav, now in Singapore, by the side of his father and RJD president Lalu Prasad who will undergo a kidney transplant on Monday, appeared all too mindful of the challenge when he ran a spirited campaign earlier this week.

From coining a catchy slogan "chup chaap teer chhap", to reminding the numerically powerful Yadavs that there was now no difference between the lantern (RJD symbol) and the arrow (JDU), the Deputy CM left no stone unturned in sending across the message that though his party was not fighting the battle, its skin was very much in the game.

Another impediment that may be faced by the "Mahagathbandhan", which appears formidable on paper, is a possible split in votes of Muslims by Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM which appeared to have helped the BJP in retaining Gopalganj when bypoll was held in that assembly segment about a month ago.

The BJP, though, has its



own share of woes as the pro-upper caste party has always heavily relied on Kumar to get a sizeable slice of the large OBC pie.

The Centre's refusal to a caste census that counted the OBCs is being vigorously portrayed by the "Mahagathbandhan" as its indifference, even hostility, towards the Other Backward Classes who have dominated the state's politics since Mandal.

The issue of caste census was, notably, raised prominently during the campaign by leaders like JD(U) parliamentary board chief Upendra Kushwaha.

Moreover, the BJP fears that a chunk of votes of the Bhumihar community, a pow-

erful upper caste, may go to Vikassheel Insaan Party of Mukesh Sahani, a former minister who was propped up but later dumped by the BJP.

The VIP's Neelabh Kumar is a Bhumihar and the fledgling party, which has no member in either House of the state legislature, is claiming to be a front-runner, banking on the support of the upper caste as also fishermen's caste groups, whose leader Sahani aspires to become as evident from the "Son of Mallah" nickname he uses for himself.

BJP hopes to more than make up whatever damage the antics of Sahani, a former Bollywood set designer, can cause, thanks to the solid support of Dalits it is looking forward.

Adhikari writes to Shah for NIA probe into blast

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Bengal BJP leadership has demanded an NIA investigation into the Friday's explosion at Bhupatinagar in East Midnapore.

Bengal Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari has written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah seeking an NIA investigation in the Bhupatinagar blast that claimed at least three lives.

The blast occurred late on Friday night.

Alleging that the blasts occurred while TMC men were manufacturing bombs Adhikari also wrote Shah how the charred bodies of the victims were found about one-and-half km from the blast site --- showing how the ruling party men were trying to hide the bodies.

Adhikari also wrote to Shah how the police were trying to cover up the incident. The injured had been admitted to private nursing homes so that things could be hushed up.

Mamata to visit Ajmer, Pushkar after Sherpa meet



SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata is likely to attend the all-party meeting on G20 Summit Trinamool Congress sources said.

From the meeting Banerjee will go to Ajmer on Tuesday. There she will pray at the Dargah Sharif of Khwajah Moinuddin Chisti. Thereafter she will also go to Pushkar a Hindu pilgrimage that houses the world's only temple of Lord Bramha.

Banerjee will return to Delhi from Ajmer and meet the TMC MPs at the house of senior party leader Saugato Roy.

Banerjee and her nephew and party general secretary Abhishek Banerjee is likely to discuss the TMC's strategy in the coming Winter Session of Parliament.

The Chief Minister is also likely to visit Parliament, unconfirmed sources said.

During her visit for the all-party meet Banerjee may seek a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the meeting she is likely to request the Prime Minister to clear the State's dues that go beyond Rs 1.05 lakh crore.

The Chief Minister has of late raised her voice demanding MNREGA funds to the tune of Rs 4,000 crore held back by the BJP Government allegedly to settle political scores.

TRF issues threat to Kashmiri Pandits employed under PM package in Valley

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ SRINAGAR

After issuing a threat to several Kashmir based journalists, The Resistance Front — an offshoot of Pakistan based terrorist outfit Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) — has now warned Kashmiri Pandit employees, accommodated under Prime Ministers' development package in different parts of the Kashmir valley, against becoming pawns of Delhi.

In an open threat letter, posted online the lesser known terroist front claimed, "The Resistance Fighters have got all the details of each and every migrant employee assigned to play their vital role in spreading Delhi's narrative and Hindutva agenda". The outfit said that the Hindus are taking

over the jobs and lands in Kashmir. The non-locals and migrant Kashmiri pandits are spreading their vicious tentacles while the fascist regime is seizing and attaching properties of locals. "We once again warn such elements not to become pawns of Delhi regime and don't become the carriers of their filthy and fascist agenda".

Taking serious note of the recent threat the representatives of the PM Package employees, who are already sitting on a protest dharna in Jammu demanding relocation to a safer place outside Kashmir valley, have urged the UT administration to inquire into this matter and take corrective measures to ensure safety of PM package employees.

A senior employee leader spearheading the protest demonstrations since May 12,



the day a Kashmiri pandit employee Rahul Bhat was killed inside his office in Chadoora area of Budgam, said the UT administration is turning a blind eye towards their genuine demand of relocation to a safer zone outside the Kashmir valley.

"We have been demonstrating since May 12 and making passionate appeals to the UT administration to attach us in the office of Relief and Rehabilitation commissioner

till the time the security situation becomes normal. The targeted killings were still going on and the UT administration has failed to ensure safety of employees at their work place.

"So far no headway has been achieved. The leaders belonging to different political parties including local BJP unit have also supported our demand but the UT administration is not paying heed to their feedback", an employee leader told *The Pioneer*.

Army's MRC Wellington at Nilgiris turns 264

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ WELLINGTON, THE NILGIRIS

The Madras Regimental Centre, Wellington, the elite unit of the Indian Army turned 264 on Sunday and this was observed with gaiety and splendour. The army unit situated atop the picturesque Nilgiris mountains is full of stories of valour and gallantry, having scene action in the two World Wars as well as all the battles fought by India in the north, north east and western frontiers of the country.

Hundreds of soldiers, serving as well as retired,

had thronged the Shree Nagesh Barracks Square, a historical venue at the Regiment as Brigadier Sunil Kumar Yadav, the young and athletic commandant of the MRC laid a wreath at the War Memorial. The regimental band played military music as the soldiers paid their obeisance by giving a guard of honour to the martyrs who laid their lives in action for their supreme sacrifice made for the mother land.

A Special Sainik Sammelan was organised at Shri Nagesh Square to felicitate outstanding performers of the Regiment. The war cry

of the MRC "Veer Madrasi, Adi Kollu, Adi Kollu, Adi Kollu." (O Brave Madrasi, Hit and Kill, Hit and Kill.) ricocheted from the mountains guarding the regiment as the soldiers marched on in memory of the departed Veer Madrasis.

The local population too has turned in big numbers to be part of the Rising Day as MRC Wellington has stood with them through thick and thin.

This was visible during the Covid-19 induced total lock down when the brave jawans of the regiment ensured that not a single



civilian had to face starvation. The district saw the heavy trucks of the regiment ferry-

ing food and provision to all corners in the Nilgiris to feed the local population.

CAPF officer quits job to take up sandalwood, black turmeric farming

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Quitting his dream job, a Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) officer has entered into the farming of white sandalwood and black turmeric with a view to promote cultivation of these products in the north India and create jobs for rural youth.

Utkrish Pandey, a resident of Uttar Pradesh, quit his job as an Assistant Commandant in the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) in 2016 and started his company Marcelone Agrofarm at

Bhadauna village in Pratapgarh, about 200 km from Lucknow.

"It was a dream job for me to join CAPF I worked in different states, including Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam, for about five and a half years. During the job, it was always there in my mind that I should have to do something for my village to help them and improve their living standards and I was of the view that plantation of crops will help me in that. I also want the youth to help the country in becoming self-reliant," Pandey said.

Injustice bulldozed

Justice Sandeep Kumar of Patna HC slams a bunch of Patna cops for “illegally” bulldozing a house

Justice Sandeep Kumar of the Patna High Court has become a celebrity overnight by castigating the officers of a Patna police station in Patna for “illegally” bulldozing the house of a petitioner. Angrily reprimanding them, he said, “*Yahan bhi bulldozer chalne laga... tamasha bana diya ki kisi ka ghar bulldozer se tod denge* (Now, bulldozer is being run here too... this has been turned into a spectacle that you will demolish anyone’s house with a bulldozer).” Notice Yahan bhi. The allusion is clear: the neighbouring Uttar Pradesh where, under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, bulldozer seems to have become an integral part of law enforcement. Being tough on offenders is admirable, but the administration deciding who the offenders are and then acting against them using bulldozers is something not everyone approves of. Justice Kumar certainly doesn’t. “Has the police station also been given power to sort out matters of land dispute? If someone has an issue, he will go to the police station, pay a bribe and get someone’s house demolished. Why don’t you close the court, civil court?” he said. He was highlighting the limits on the authority of police; its job is to apprehend wrongdoers (according to police) and bring them to the court; it is the right of courts to adjudicate whether or not they have broken the law and then, if found guilty, the quantum of punishment. Cops cannot arrogate to themselves the powers of the judiciary.

But, unfortunately, that has been happening, not just in UP but in other states too, especially those under the Bharatiya Janata Party. The rationale offered is that this is the most expeditious and efficient way of dispensing justice; otherwise, it takes years to punish the guilty; often the victim parties lose interest or patience, witnesses turn hostile, etc., and the culprit walks free. At any rate, justice delayed is justice denied. Ergo, bulldozers are good. The truth, however, is that these are all specious arguments. Consider the phenomenon of encounter killings. Encounters are also an easy answer to check the depredations of criminals who benefit from the lacunae and sluggish processes of the legal system. But there are also consequences; it is well documented that many encounter specialists themselves indulged in shady deals; there have been reports of some of them becoming hitmen for gangsters by eliminating rivals. Besides, there has been collateral damage, since encounter specialists believe in the Elli Wallach dictum from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*: “When you’re going to shoot, shoot, don’t talk.” The infamous killing in Connaught Place in Delhi (1997) was an example. The guilty cops paid a heavy price for that. Justice Kumar seems determined that the bulldozing cops of Patna too suffer the consequences of their misadventure. Judges like him help restore our confidence in justice and fairness in the times we live in — the times whose defining feature is cynicism.



The logo of G20 India summit displayed on the Sujata Stupa, in Bodhi Gaya

PTI

Judiciary vs Executive

Kiran Rijiju’s remark on the Collegium drives the wedge between the judiciary and the executive

It was writing on the wall. The day justice DY Chandrachud took the oath of office as Chief Justice of India, the Modi government’s cordial relations with the judiciary were over, and unease set in which is now turning into a cold war. The first indications came when the apex court showed displeasure at the government’s haste to appoint the chief election commissioner. Now it is the collegium system that is under fire from the government. In fact, the law minister Kiren Rijiju has been rather vocal and irreverent in criticizing the collegium system and seeking its constitutional validity on public platforms. The Supreme Court however has not made public its displeasure with the law minister’s remarks. Perhaps it knows that it is not just the law minister who is speaking his mind but lip-synching Modi administration which has subverted most constitutional bodies, bending them with its brute political majority. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court is different. After CJI Chandrachud took over the Supreme Court has not been very supportive of the government’s actions and has asked many difficult questions which are embracing for the government to say the least.

So the law minister’s jibe is understandable though it is far off the mark and does not augur well for his stature. Indeed not everything is written in the constitution and the Supreme Court has all the powers to make rules to defend its autonomy and neutrality which the government doesn’t like. And by the way, this power comes from the constitution. The Supreme Court in the 1990s had put the collegium system in place which continues to date and the government wants to remove it and take the appointment of judges into its own hands. If that happens the judges will owe their allegiance to the government like the heads of other constitutional bodies (like the election commission). It is no secret that any government would not like to be challenged for its actions and laws it passes in a court of law which means delay and embarrassment. But there are issues that are so controversial that they need to go to court for scrutiny if not for a rollback. The Modi government has made several such decisions that deserve close legal scrutiny, demonetization is surely one of them and so are many other rules it bends as it feels a popular government is omnipotent. It is not. It must learn to live with the judiciary which interprets its actions in the light of the constitution.

Extravaganza or an embarrassment

The way International Film Festival of India (IFFI) is organized, is not only embarrassing but also defeats its purpose.

Let’s start with the opening ceremony of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI). The extra-large extravagant opening ceremony or even the closing ceremony should not be there in any international standard film festival. The opening ceremony this time runs for almost over 5 hours. Well, it is fine that the Entertainment Society of Goa (ESG), under the Goa government has decided to sell the rights of the gala opening and closing ceremony to some television channels to recover some expenditures of the mega event. But we need to understand that the international film fraternity is not used to this kind of torture of five long hours. And ideally, the opening or closing ceremony should not be an affair of more than an hour. In the first hour, the international jury members and the other important dignitaries need to be introduced with due respect so that the audience should know about their importance. After the main segment the extravagant dance-drama from every corner of India, with the presence of the dumb film stars can go on for the so-called entertainment for the common audiences.

Varun Dhawan felt that international films first came to India at the IFFI this time. His father David Dhawan and his uncle veteran actor Anil Dhawan both are the products of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), I am sure he had never consulted with them before attending the IFFI. The star and starlets of the Hindi film industry were interviewing the Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Singh Thakur and the Chief Minister of Goa in between, the most irritating part of the event.

Even after 18 years, the IFFI shifted to Goa because of the lack of coordination between Delhi’s Ministry of Information & Broadcasting including the now defunct Directorate of Film Festival (DFF), and the active National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) and Goa’s ESG. In fact, the lack of intra-departmental coordination is



clearly visible in their regular functioning. When some foreign delegates enquire about something from the Press Information Bureau (PIB) the officer carelessly told them to go to NFDC. The sensitization of government employees is very much important. Make them understand that they are not representing themselves or only their department, boss, or the government but they are representing the country – India.

NFDC has its own bunch of people to be invited as a guest in the Film Bazar, unfortunately most of them are quite mediocre. All year government officials used to stay in the Taj Vivanta hotel but now everyone is enjoying ultra-luxury at the Marriott hotel, at the expenditure of public money. Ideally, all government officials should stay in the government guest houses only. There was always a very special arrangement for Ravinder Bhakkar the Festival Director, during the lunch or dinner at the hotel, so that in a luxury cabin he can enjoy his meal with his family and friends without any disturbance, where a contingent of hotel staff used to be present on their toes. Prithul Kumar, Joint Secretary Films was quite busy enquiring about the IFFI merchandising sales



CHOOSING CAPABLE, UNBIASED, EFFICIENT AND CREDIBLE JURY MEMBERS IS VERY MUCH IMPORTANT FOR THE INDIAN PANORAMA AS WELL AS THE MAIN IFFI JURY

from the sales counter. While during the opening ceremony the Additional Secretary Neerja Shekhar was busy running behind Sara Ali Khan, just like a star-stacked fan.

Prithul Kumar and Ravinder Bhakkar both are experienced officers from the Railway Ministry, newly shifted to the I&B ministry, but both of them lectured from the stage of Film Bazar, which is actually meant for the film experts. Government recruitment agencies should find efficient Information Service officers instead of inexperienced officers from other departments. It was a national shame that this time the Indian Panorama of IFFI doesn’t have a single film from the northeastern region of India. Where the purpose of the Indian Panorama is to showcase the diversity and plurality of the country; there, unfortunately, the southern India heavy jury members can’t even find a single eligible person from North East of India is utterly sad.

Choosing capable, unbiased, efficient, and credible jury members is very much important for the Indian Panorama as well as the main IFFI jury. In Indian Panorama except for 2/3 members, no one knows the other jury members or their credentials.

The same is applicable to international jury members also. In my 20 years of experience, I have never seen a jury member being so aggressive against a film, even they are not considering it for the award. Choosing Vivek Agnihotri’s The Kashmir Files for an award or not is the jury’s prerogative, but when they have not chosen the film and on top, the jury president has gone out of his way to demean the film it just shows the infiltration of the anti-India lobby inside the system and spoiling India’s image in an international platform. Usually, the jury member reads the citation of the award-winning film only, and sometimes if they or any one jury likes a particular film, they talk about it. But never seen this kind of situation before, when the jury hasn’t selected the film and after that, they are questioning that the film should not even exist. This clearly shows somebody’s personal vendetta against Vivek Agnihotri’s The Kashmir Files, and they used the spoon-feeding selective narrative against the Hindu victims of Jammu Kashmir, which indeed was a sad part of IFFI this time.

(Santanu Ganguly is a Delhi based Film Festival curator. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE MOBILE BAN IN TEMPLES

Sir — An Indian state, Tamil Nadu has prohibited the use of mobile phones inside the temple premises. The Madurai bench of the Madras High Court has directed the Commissioner of Hindu Religious & Charities Endowments Department to ban cell phones inside the temple premises to maintain the purity and sanctity of temples in Tamil Nadu.

The court issued the order after hearing a public interest case filed by one Seetharaman, seeking a ban on the use of cell phones inside the Arulmigu Subramaniya Swamy Temple in the state’s Tiruchendur. The court’s verdict reads, “To ensure the safety of the devotees and protect the sanctity of the temple, the authorities should take steps to prevent the use of cell phones inside the temple premises. The use of cell phones and cameras distracts the devotees. It is a right step in the right direction and is required to be followed in other places of worship as well.”

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Coimbatore

WELL PLAYED SREEJA AKULA

Sir — Congratulations to Sreeja Akula, Table Tennis (TT) golden bank / Midas of India, for receiving the Arjuna award from Hon. President of India (Droupadi Murmu). Her golden bank account includes 15 international gold medals and 13 national gold medals. She has scripted history by winning the gold medal in TT mixed doubles Commonwealth games, in Birmingham-in 2022. She with a total of 80 medals, proved that I can, U can, All of us CAN. Anything is possible, and nothing is impossible, based on strength, stamina, and suitability.

She was also the winner of silver in singles and doubles events and bronze in the team event, at the (April) 2022 Senior National Championships. Currently, she is No. 1 in women’s national ranking. Her 80-medals tally speaks for her talent, dedication, and devotion:- international (15 gold, 3 silver, 12 bronze) and national (13 gold, 14 silver, 23 bronze). Yes! Akula Sreeja is Indian TT lady Midas.

Vasudeva Rao Sreelekha | Secunderabad

Low turnout in Gujarat



It is a very rare incident that due to low voter turnout in the first phase of the Gujarat Assembly elections held on December 1, the Election Commission is requesting the voters to come out

in large numbers to vote in the second phase on December 5 and compensate for the earlier phase instead of concentrating on a peaceful poll. The average voter turnout figure is dampened by urban apathy in the important districts just as during the recently concluded general election to the legislative assembly of Himachal Pradesh. In the 2017 Gujarat election, of the same 89 seats which went to polls in the first phase, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had won 48, Congress 40, while one seat was bagged by an independent. With this, all is not well for BJP due to low turnout which may affect its chances of winning the elections.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

ANTI-BRAHMIN SLOGANS

Sir — Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is often in the news more for wrong reasons than for right ones. A lady professor had called Lord Shiva “a scheduled caste”. It is the evil eye and evil mind that sees God in the caste label. Hindus worship Rama and Krishna. It is not that Hindus do not know that Ram belongs to Kshatriya and Krishna to Golla. The holy epic of Hinduism loudly says that it is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu taking birth in different castes. God is always above caste. The Brahmins and others do not worship God with the caste of God in mind.

The anti-Brahmin slogans have been reportedly painted on the walls of the building JNU. “Brahmon-baniyas, we are coming for you”, and “go back to Shakra” are what has been written on the walls. The sloganeers have expressed “there’s nobody to fight for Brahmins”. The Brahmins have been asked to leave the JNU campus. The sloganeers have not only indulged in the hatred but also disfigured the walls of the building which has housed the University. Casteless society is a mirage. There is a school of thought that advocates for the establishment of a casteless society. But in all the applications, it is obligatory on the part of the applicants to fill in the name of the caste and community.

The argument for the dichotomy is that there is a need for mention of caste and communities in the application as long as there exists a caste system. This is like not learning to swim until a plunge is taken into the water and not plunging into the water until swimming is learned. Brahmins are soft targets and are taken for granted by the people hostile to the sustenance of a healthy society. Lyricist Manoj Muntashir slams anti-Brahmin graffiti.

Brahmins are a docile class of people. They have never demanded reservation also even though their representation in government jobs has been fast shrinking. They are not provocateurs also. With all this, targeting Brahmins or Baniyas or for that matter, any caste including Dalits vitiates the atmosphere in the society. The teeth of the laws must not only be sharpened to punish those who promote enmity using the caste, but the courts should inflict stringent punishment on them for keeping the embers of caste hatred alive. Respect for each other irrespective of one’s caste is the only remedy to keep the society and nation healthy.

KV. Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

SOUND BITE

India is keeping close watch on Chinese vessels in Indian Ocean.

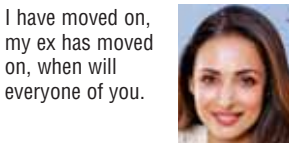


Navy Chief Admiral — R Hari Kumar

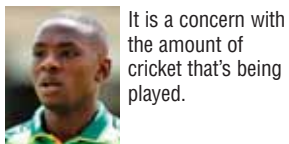


Russia has already caused huge losses to all countries of the world by deliberately destabilising the energy market...It is “only a matter of time when stronger tools will have to be used.”

Ukraine President — Volodymyr Zelensky



Actor — Malaika Arora



Cricketer — Kagiso Rabada

The idea is to include the people directly in governance so they don’t remain mute spectators or mute consumers of government decisions.



Delhi CM — Arvind Kejriwal

FIRST COLUMN

BETTER TIES WITH STUDENTS IS THE KEY

Teachers must invest in students to make them go the extra mile



RAJ RANI GOEL

Relationship building with students is instrumental in students' success, and it may be one of the most underrated skills for educators today. Here are a few reasons why this relationship is very important. Setting clear goals, being fair while enforcing rules and regulations, showing compassion, providing each student with fair and objective feedback, and fostering a feeling of school pride are the methods that a teacher may connect with every student in the classroom.

Relationships between students and teachers are also crucial for building great relationships with students, which can lead to better academic achievements. Positive student-teacher connections offer significant academic benefits for our most vulnerable students. This means that concentrating on connections increases equity in the classrooms. Students who have learning difficulties benefit the most from the quality of interactions they build with teachers.

Children who feel isolated from their environment are more prone to behave out in school. Although it is common for young children to despise schools, it is undesirable when this attitude begins to impair their grades and disrupts the learning environment for other children.

We need to avoid this by creating a personal relationship with each child and discovering why there is a problem with children's behavior.

It creates a healthy and thriving classroom atmosphere. Students have more fun in a classroom where they have a personal connection with the teacher. It turns out the same with the teacher. It creates the atmosphere for increased joy and lower feelings of anxiety.

If we provide a nice environment where children may develop their emotional and social intelligence, students can progress healthily over time. Keeping in mind that if we are kind to these students, they will respect and trust the teacher. They will aspire to emulate and develop the same sense of accountability and compassion.

When students and instructors engage positively, it helps students to create good mental strength, especially for less interactive kids and those who have any form of difficulty. Children who have learning issues, on the other hand, frequently have poor self-esteem. The affection and care will aid in the development of a sense of self-worth and pride in the students. That is beneficial to their mental health.

It helps the teacher to interact with parents with much more ease. Nobody wants to show up to a parent's teacher conference and have nothing to say about somebody's child. By being genuinely interested in your students and planning activities to create a good relationship, phone calls to parents will be much easier. More importantly, parents appreciate these kinds of things.

It produces an environment that incorporates mutual respect. The most important aspect of this relationship is that it creates good mutual respect between the teacher and students. As there will be good respect between them it automatically helps in wellbeing of both and helps them to understand each other.

There is a lot to be gained through strong relationships between students and teachers. Students are motivated to work hard when they have positive relationships with their teachers, because they feel that someone is paying attention to them. Since it will provide the foundation for not just their exceptional academic accomplishment but also for their passion for learning and for cultivating a positive mindset, developing good relationships with the students should be the teachers' top focus.

(The author is Managing director, Satluj Public School, Ellenabad)

Rajendra Prasad is inspiration for Biharis



PRASHANT TIWARI

Independent India's first President stood for values and ideals which for our politicians have little regard

The illiterate and casteist political leadership has ruined the future of over 11 crore Biharis. The Bihar pride is severely dented by the few family-centric, feudal political parties claiming to be the champions of social justice. The state produced the legendary Dr Rajendra Prasad, a role model for the political class and common people alike, but alas, few received inspiration from him. Instead we have seen the most pathetic leadership in the state.

Prasad was born in a village in Bihar, but his hard work and brilliance overcame the boundaries of his village. He was a brilliant student, getting his legal degree and later a Doctorate in Law from the Calcutta University. He was very successful and had a lucrative legal practice at the Calcutta and Patna High Courts. In his own words "I had a very rich background and belonged to a scholarly family."

Prasad was drawn early into the non-cooperation movement, became a comrade of Mahatma Gandhi, and was imprisoned for a number of years during the freedom movement. He was President of the Indian National Congress in 1934, 1935, and 1939. A devout person, he had great respect for the ethos and traditions of Hinduism.

Rajendra Babu was a fiercely independent and strong-willed leader. It led to clashes with Pt Nehru on several occasions. The differences started even before the birth of the Indian Republic, with the Hindu Code Bill. Bhimrao Ambedkar presented the draft in October 1947 in the Constituent Assembly and Nehru strongly supported the Bill. They wanted this Bill to be part of the Constitution. Under this, a code for all Hindus was to be created. As the President of the Constituent Assembly, Prasad intervened. He believed religion in society is equally important as anything else and wanted to have a Uniform Civil Code for all Indians.

For the first Presidential election, Patel and the Congress party wanted Rajendra Prasad to be the President. Nehru, at that time, favoured the then Governor General Chakravarti Rajagopalachari to be the first President of the nation. Rajagopalachari had not participated in the Quit India Movement and hence was not popular with the Congress Party cadre. Patel and Prasad had a strong hold on the organisation, even more than Nehru. The Congress chose Rajendra Prasad as the President of India. The Constituent Assembly elected him as the first President of India unanimously.

In yet another disagreement over the then President of India, Prasad, being invited to inaugurate the Somnath temple, Nehru advised the President "against participating in a significant function which unfortunately has a number of implications." Prasad ignored Nehru's advice and added, "I would do the same with a mosque or a church if I were invited."

The first President's contributions to the

freedom movement and the stabilisation of Indian Democracy were immense. He steered the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly sagaciously and helped the unanimous adoption of the Indian Constitution. Prasad established good democratic traditions during the twelve long years he occupied the Rashtrapati Bhavan. He was a simple, elegant, unostentatious person and conducted himself with humility and dignity. Dr. Rajendra Prasad turned out to be perhaps India's Great President.

The rise of OBC politics caused the decay of Prasad's vision of a prosperous Bihar. Lalu Yadav, Nitish Kumar, and a host of caste-based leaders have systematically destroyed Prasad's state. The false promise of development supplemented with social justice fueled the aspirations of backward classes, and merit was sacrificed which led to the total collapse of the system in the state.

Caste politics created several Robin Hoods of different castes in several districts of Bihar leading to the largest migration seen in recent times from Bihar to other states.

The golden age of Bihar was led by Shri Krishna Sinha, also known as Shri Babu, the first chief minister of Bihar (1946-61). Along with Prasad, Sinha is also among the Architects of Modern Bihar. He

was known as Bihar Kesari for his lion-like roars when he rose to address the masses.

However, in the Hindi heartland, people do not cast their vote but vote their caste. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is no stranger to this brand of politics. Coming from the lineage of Ram Manohar Lohia, he too has once been a flag-bearer of Mandal. A Kurmi by caste, he stands on the second rung of the OBC ladder. During his previous tenure, he worked strenuously towards empowering the lower classes and appealing to socially privileged voters through his Vikas Purush persona.

The Mandal Commission polarised OBCs; they united politically to achieve their rights. It was in this era that Lalu Prasad Yadav turned into a political hero in Bihar. This became the watershed moment for Bihar.

According to Lohia, in India, the basic unit of stratification is caste and not class. This perverted philosophy crippled Bihar society, with caste trumping merit and a comprehensive institutional collapse of the state's politics, bureaucracy, judiciary and media. The institutions were poisoned by the caste opium.

On top of that, the JP Movement destroyed the education system of Bihar. JP targeted universities and colleges; youngsters disregarded education and indulged in reckless, hoodlum politics.

From an empirical perspective, the condition of backward groups, except for a few political families, has not improved. The bureaucracy opened up for those who were not socially privileged or came

from humble backgrounds due to their position in the caste hierarchy. However, according to the bureaucratic representation report released in November 2014; the SCs, STs and OBCs account for less than 10 percent of the Central higher bureaucracy.

But things have improved from a psychological perspective in the political sphere. In the first four to five decades after Independence, the backward classes had little say in the system; the Mandal movement changed that at every level—from the local bodies to state Assemblies and Parliament. However, caste-based policies have had an adverse effect on the quality of governance.

With someone from their own community safeguarding their interests, psychological empowerment was achieved to an extent. But the merit in governance became the causality, an epidemic that ruined the state of Bihar permanently. Here it is important to mention that everyone must get the right to prosper in a flourishing democracy, the poorest of the poor must be given an equal platform by the state to compete in a dignified life.

In Prasad's words, "In attaining our ideals, our means should be as pure as the end." So the current generation of native Biharis must have to take a tough call—to imbibe the ideals preached by Prasad. The alternatives are non-meritorious, casteist, corrupt, mafia, and selfish leadership. Now is the time for the people living in Bihar to do serious soul searching whether they want to endure the status quo or opt for change. Rajendra Babu's legacy can be of great help.

POINT COUNTERPOINT

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF ROHINGYA MIGRANTS AND BANGLADESHIS START LIVING AROUND YOU, LIKE IN DELHI? WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH GAS CYLINDERS? COOK FISH FOR THE BENGALIS? — ACTOR/POLITICIAN PARESH RAWAL



IT IS SHAMEFUL THAT HE SAYS THAT WHAT WILL ONE DO WITH THE PRICE DEDUCTION OF GAS, COOK FISH FOR BENGALIS? SO HE IS EQUATING BENGALIS WITH ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS NOW. — TMC IT HEAD DEBANGSHU BHATTACHARJEE

Xi Jinping is caught in a trap but he built it himself

There is a way out: Xi has to eat humble pie and import several billion doses of the highly effective mRNA vaccines

Our COVID-19 policy is the most scientifically effective, the most economical, and yields the best result," insisted the People's Daily newspaper in China after mass public protests against the Government's 'zero Covid' policy last weekend. If President Xi Jinping believes that, he is in for a lot more trouble.

The protests were unprecedented in their scale and daring. They broke out spontaneously in twelve cities all across China after ten lockdown-related deaths in the remote province of Xinjiang. All sorts of people took part, from students to workers to pensioners. A few even called for the dethroning of Xi and the Communist Party.

That doesn't mean the

regime is on the brink of collapse. Public anger at the endless lockdowns and resulting loss of income is strong, but the regime's surveillance technology is excellent. There was relatively little official violence last weekend.

Xi's problem is that the protests will probably recur and may well escalate, because over-long mass quarantines and lockdowns are a non-political issue that can unite almost everybody against the government's policy. Or rather, against Xi's personal policy, for he has deliberately chosen to portray zero-Covid as the greatest achievement of his time in office.

That made sense in the first year of the pandemic, for China's relentless lockdowns and mass testing campaigns

saved a great many lives then. Total Covid-related deaths in China have been around 5,000 out of a population of 1.4 billion.

Xi and his propagandists naturally used this contrast as evidence that both Chinese medicine and the Chinese political system were superior to their Western equivalents. Was he even aware that the zero-Covid policy could only be a stopgap measure until effective vaccines were developed, never a lasting solution?

His scientists must have tried to tell him that, but somehow he didn't take the message on board. There was a vaccination programme, but not a very rigorous one—and Xi kept chasing the fantasy of completely eliminating the Covid virus. He is caught in a

trap, but he built it himself.

"Lockdowns should always be a temporary phenomenon, not a long-term strategy," explained Dr Anthony Fauci, now President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser. Continuing them for almost three years "without any seeming purpose or endgame" is sheer folly. Moreover, Xi seemed unaware that the Covid virus was growing more infectious with time.

The latest versions of the omicron variant, which first appeared a year ago, are estimated to be up to ten times more infectious than the original virus that appeared in Wuhan in late 2020.

Those versions haven't reached China yet, due to drastic curbs on travel into and out of the country, but the

Chinese population is so poorly protected that the only alternatives if they arrive would be semi-permanent nationwide lockdowns or nationwide carnage.

Chinese-made vaccines are only 70 per cent effective against earlier variants of the virus, and may be wholly ineffective against the later omicron versions. The elderly are particularly vulnerable: only 40 per cent of the over-80s have had even a single booster shot.

An article published in Nature Medicine last March estimated that ending the Covid-zero lockdowns and quarantines in current circumstances could overwhelm hospitals, with 15 times more people needing hospital beds than those currently available. It predicted around 1.5 million

deaths.

That would still be a far better outcome than the US record, but arriving all at once so late in the game, when the rest of the world is long past lockdowns and mass deaths, it could spell political disaster for Xi Jinping. Perhaps even for the Communist regime.

There is a way out. First, Xi has to eat humble pie and import several billion doses of the highly effective mRNA vaccines. Let's say six months for that.

Then he has to control the rising infections with the hated lockdowns and quarantines as best he can, containing popular anger as much as possible, until a high enough portion of the population is properly vaccinated – say another six to twelve months.

Then, sometime in 2024, he can relax the restrictions and let the Chinese rejoin the rest of the world. That strategy worked for the Australians and New Zealanders, who ended similar mass lockdowns as soon as most people got their (imported) mRNA vaccines.

If Xi can't bear the humiliation of doing that, he could gamble that an effective Chinese-made mRNA vaccine will become available soon. Several are under development, and one is allegedly about to enter Phase 3 clinical trials.

But if he bets on that and it's not ready soon, his newly acquired status of de facto president-for-life will become a nightmare. Covid infections are rising fast.

US intelligence chief thinking ‘optimistically’ for Ukraine forces

AP ■ KYIV

The head of U.S. Intelligence says fighting in Russia's war in Ukraine is running at a "reduced tempo" and suggests Ukrainian forces could have brighter prospects in coming months.

Avril Haines alluded to past allegations by some that Russian President Vladimir Putin's advisers could be shielding him from bad news — for Russia — about war developments, and said he "is becoming more informed of the challenges that the military faces in Russia."

"But it's still not clear to us that he has a full picture of at this stage of just how challenged they are," the U.S. Director of national intelligence said late Saturday at the Reagan National Defense Forum in Simi Valley, California.

Looking ahead, Haines said, "honestly we're seeing a kind of a reduced tempo already of the conflict" and her team expects that both sides will look to refit, resupply, and reconstitute for a possible Ukrainian counter-offensive in the spring.

"But we actually have a fair amount of skepticism as to whether or not the Russians will be in fact prepared to do that," she said. "And I think more optimistically for the Ukrainians in that timeframe."

In recent weeks, Russia's military focus has been on striking Ukrainian infrastructure and pressing an offensive



in the east, near the town of Bakhmut, while shelling sites in the city of Kherson, which Ukrainian forces liberated last month after an 8-month Russian occupation.

In his nightly address on Saturday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy lashed out at Western efforts to crimp Russia's crucial oil industry, a key source of funds for Putin's war machine, saying their \$60-per-barrel

price cap on imports of Russian oil was insufficient.

"It is not a serious decision to set such a limit for Russian prices, which is quite comfortable for the budget of the terrorist state," Zelenskyy said, referring to Russia. He said the \$60-per-barrel level would still allow Russia to bring in \$100 billion in revenues per year.

"This money will go not only to the

war and not only to further sponsorship by Russia of other terrorist regimes and organisations. This money will be used for further destabilisation of those countries that are now trying to avoid serious decisions," Zelenskyy said.

Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, the United States and the 27-nation European Union agreed Friday to cap what they would pay for Russian oil at \$60 per barrel. The limit is set to take effect Monday, along with an EU embargo on Russian oil shipped by sea.

Russian authorities have rejected the price cap and threatened Saturday to stop supplying the nations that endorsed it.

In yet another show of Western support for Ukraine's efforts to battle back Russian forces and cope with fall-out from the war, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland on Saturday visited the operations of a Ukrainian aid group that provides support for internally displaced people in Ukraine, among her other visits with top Ukrainian officials.

Nuland assembled dolls out of yarn in the blue-and-yellow colors of Ukraine's flag with youngsters from regions including northeastern Kharkiv, southern Kherson, and eastern Donetsk.

"This is psychological support for them at an absolutely crucial time," Nuland said.

"As President Putin knows best, this war could stop today, if he chose to stop it and withdrew his forces — and then negotiations can begin," she added.

1,700 dead seals found on Russia's Caspian coast



AP ■ MOSCOW

About 1,700 seals have been found dead on the Caspian Sea coast in southern Russia, officials said Sunday.

The authorities in the Russian province of Dagestan said that it's still unclear what caused the animals' deaths, but they likely died of natural reasons.

Regional officials initially said Saturday that 700 dead seals were found on the coast,

but on Sunday Zaur Gapizov, head of the Caspian Environmental Protection Center, said according to the state RIA Novosti news agency that after a broader inspection of the coast the number of dead animals was 1,700.

Gapizov said the seals likely died a couple of weeks ago. He added that there was no sign that they were killed by poachers.

Experts of the Federal Fisheries Agency and prosecu-

tors inspected the coastline and collected data for laboratory research, which didn't immediately spot any pollutants.

Several previous incidents of mass deaths of seals were attributed to natural causes.

The data about the number of seals in the Caspian varies widely. The fisheries agency has said the overall number of Caspian seals is 270,000-300,000, while Gapizov's center put the number at 70,000.

EXPLAINER: Can Ukraine pay for war without wrecking economy?

AP ■ FRANKFURT, GERMANY

Even as Ukraine celebrates recent battlefield victories, its government faces a looming challenge on the financial front: how to pay the enormous cost of the war effort without triggering out-of-control price spikes for ordinary people or piling up debt that could hamper postwar reconstruction.

The struggle is finding loans or donations to cover a massive budget deficit for next year — and do it without using central bank bailouts that risk wrecking Ukraine's currency, the hryvnia.

Economists working with the government say that if Ukraine can shore up its finances through the end of next year, it is Russia that could find itself in financial trouble if a proposed oil price cap by the U.S., European Union and allies saps Moscow's earnings.

Here are key facts about Ukraine's economic battle against Russia: **HOW HAS UKRAINE BEEN PAYING FOR ITS DEFENSE SO FAR?**

In the first days of Russia's invasion, the Ukrainian government turned to foreign help that came at irregular intervals. When it didn't have enough, the central bank bought

government bonds using newly printed money. The alternative would have been to stop paying people's pensions and state salaries.

Economists say printing money — while a badly needed stop-gap measure at the time — risks letting inflation get out of control and collapsing the value of the country's currency if it continues.

Ukraine has painful memories of hyperinflation from the early 1990s, economist Natalia Shapoval said. As a child, she watched her parents use large bundles of bills for everyday purchases as the currency lost value day by day, before being replaced by today's hryvnia.

"Ukraine has been through this, so we know what inflation that is out of control looks like, and we don't want this again," said Shapoval, vice president for policy research at the Kyiv School of Economics. "The government and the central bank are already on the slippery slope by printing so much."

Price stability and the ability to pay pensions have enormous impact on ordinary people and society at a time when Russia is trying to demoralize the population by knocking out power and water heading into winter.

With inflation already high at

27%, price hikes have made it hard for lower-income people to afford food.

Bread that used to cost the equivalent of 50 U.S. cents has doubled, said Halyna Morozova, a resident of Kherson, a recently liberated southern city.

"It is very depressing, and we are nervous. We were living on old stocks (of food), but now the light is turned off, the refrigerator doesn't work and we have to throw away the food," the 80-year-old said recently.

She said the Russians kept paying her Ukrainian pension in rubles but since they started to withdraw in October, she has received nothing. She's counting on the government to return any pension money that was lost, she said.

Tetiana Vainshtein, also in Kherson, says natural gas is too expensive to keep her home heated. "I am cold. I like warmth, and I'm terribly cold," the 68-year-old said.

Bank closures during the Russian occupation kept her from getting her pension cash, forcing her to carefully ration every hryvnia for food, she said.

HOW MUCH SUPPORT DOES UKRAINE NEED?

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says Ukraine needs \$38 billion in out-



right aid from Western allies like the U.S. and 27-nation EU, plus \$17 billion for a reconstruction fund for war damage.

Economists associated with the Kyiv School of Economics say a lower overall total of \$50 billion from donors would be enough to get Ukraine through the year.

Defense spending is six times higher in the 2023 budget recently passed by the Ukrainian parliament compared to last year. Military and security spending will total 43% of the budget, or an enormous 18.2% of

annual economic output.

The 2.6 trillion hryvnia budget has a yawning 1.3 trillion hryvnia deficit, meaning the government needs to find \$3 billion to \$5 billion a month to cover the gap. Recent attacks on energy infrastructure since the budget passed will only increase the financing need because repairs can't wait for postwar reconstruction and will hit this year's budget.

HOW COULD FINANCES AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR?

Despite Western sanctions,

Russia's economy has fared better than Ukraine's because high oil and natural gas prices have bolstered the Kremlin's budget.

Plans by the EU and allies in the Group of Seven democracies to place a price cap on Russian oil sales aim to change that.

The Kyiv school economists say "by the middle of next year, we believe that the economic situation will shift strongly in Ukraine's favor, making strong partner support particularly important over the period until that point."

HOW MUCH FINANCING DOES UKRAINE HAVE ALREADY?

The U.S. has been the leading donor, giving \$15.2 billion in financial assistance and \$52 billion in overall aid, including humanitarian and military assistance, through Oct. 3, according to the latest available data compiled by the Ukraine Support Tracker at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

EU institutions and member countries have committed \$29.2 billion, though "many of their pledges are arriving in Ukraine with long delays," said Christoph Trebesch, who heads the tracker team.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, has proposed 18

billion euros in no-interest, long-term loans for next year, which still need approval from member governments. The U.S. will likely contribute more as well.

Ukraine, however, is appealing for grants over loans. If all the financing comes as loans, debt would rise to over 100% of annual economic output from around 83% now and 69% before the war. That burden could hold back spending on the war recovery.

The \$85 billion in total global assistance to Ukraine, according to the Ukraine Support Tracker, is less than 15% of the support European governments have pledged to shield consumers from high energy costs resulting from Russia's natural gas cutbacks.

To get loans, the commission proposed requiring Ukraine to improve its record on corruption. Since 2014, Ukraine has raised its score on Transparency International's corruption perceptions index from 26 to 32 out of 100 — not great, but improving.

U.S. officials have praised Ukraine's online procurement platform for introducing transparency in government contracts — one big source of corrupt dealings and collusion — and saving \$6 billion.

Russia rejects \$60-a-barrel cap on its oil, warns of cutoffs

AP ■ KYIV, UKRAINE

Russian authorities rejected a price cap on the country's oil set by Ukraine's Western supporters and threatened Saturday to stop supplying the nations that endorsed it.

Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, the United States and the 27-nation European Union agreed Friday to cap what they would pay for Russian oil at \$60-per-barrel. The limit is set to take effect Monday, along with an EU embargo on Russian oil shipped by sea.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia needed to analyze the situation before deciding on a specific response but that it would not accept the price ceiling. Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, warned that the cap's European backers would come to rue their decision.

"From this year, Europe will live without Russian oil," Ulyanov tweeted. "Moscow has already made it clear that it will not supply oil to those countries that support anti-market price caps. Wait, very soon the EU will accuse Russia of using oil as a weapon."

The office of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, meanwhile, called Saturday for a lower price cap, saying the one adopted by the EU and the Group of Seven leading economies didn't go far enough.

"It would be necessary to lower it to \$30 in order to destroy the enemy's economy faster," Andriy Yermak, the head



of Zelenskyy's office, wrote on Telegram, staking out a position also favored by Poland — a leading critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

Under Friday's agreements, insurance companies and other firms needed to ship oil would only be able to deal with Russian crude if the oil is priced at or below the cap. Most insurers are located in the EU and the United Kingdom and could be required to observe the ceiling.

Russia's crude has already been selling for around \$60 a barrel, a deep discount from international benchmark Brent, which closed Friday at \$85.42 per barrel.

The Russian Embassy in Washington insisted that Russian oil "will continue to be in demand" and criticized the price limit as "reshaping the basic principles of the functioning of free markets." A post on the embassy's Telegram channel predicted the per-barrel cap would lead to "a widespread

increase in uncertainty and higher costs for consumers of raw materials."

"What happens in China will help shape whether the price cap has any teeth," said Jim Burkhard, an oil markets analyst with IHS Markit. He said dampened demand from China means most Russian crude exports are already selling below \$60.

The price cap aims to put an economic squeeze on Russia and further crimp its ability to finance a war that has killed an untold number of civilians and fighters, driven millions of Ukrainians from their homes and weighed on the world economy for more than nine months.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that since Friday Russia's forces had fired five missiles, carried out 27 airstrikes and launched 44 shelling attacks against Ukraine's military positions and civilian infrastructure.

2 killed, 7 hurt in rare Syria anti-Govt stir

AP ■ BEIRUT

Protests in Syria's Druze-majority Sweida province turned violent on Sunday leading to the deaths of a protester and a police officer, and wounding seven others.

Anti-government demonstrations are rare in Syria where President Bashar Assad stamped out a pro-democracy uprising over a decade ago. Assad survived the resulting civil war but the conflict has plunged Syria into poverty, coupled with a food security and energy crisis.

Though Sweida has generally been spared from the civil war, anti-corruption protests have occurred in the Druze-majority province over the past few years, with tensions simmering between residents and the Syrian government led by President Assad.

Dozens of residents gathered by the Sweida governorate building, decrying the dire economic situation and chanting anti-government slogans before some broke into the building.

The Syrian Interior Minister in a statement said that the people who raided the building were armed, and destroyed furniture, smashed windows, and looted files. The statement added that a police officer was killed after protesters attacked a police station.

Activist media collective Suwayda 24 and UK-based opposition group the Syrian



Observatory for Human Rights said security forces fired live ammunition at protesters. One video from the activist collective shows protesters carrying a wounded man bleeding from his thigh.

"There is a large deployment of security forces in the area, and you can still hear gunshots," Rayan Maalouf, who heads the Suwayda 24 collective told The Associated Press.

Nashaat al-Atrash, a Druze legislator in Syria's Parliament condemned protesters for raiding the governorate building and called for calm. "All of Syria is going through an economic crisis," he said on Syria's Al-Ikhbaria television, claiming that outside forces could be trying to stoke tensions through the angry demonstrations.

After an Islamic State militant group attack on Sweida in 2018, more residents took arms to protect their neighborhoods. Local activists have reported clashes last summer between armed residents and armed groups aligned with the Syrian government and security agencies.

Three Chinese astronauts return safely after 6 mnths

PTI ■ BEIJING

China's spaceship, the Shenzhou-14, carrying three astronauts who lived in its orbiting space station for six months touched down at the Dongfeng landing site in north Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region safely on Sunday, official media here reported.

Minutes after the capsule landed, grounded crews pulled out the three astronauts — Chen Dong, Liu Yang and Cai Xuzhe — one after another from the capsule in a nationally televised operation.

The three astronauts who were in good physical condition briefly spoke to the state-run television reporters before they were escorted to the headquarters for the health checks.

Earlier, the Shenzhou-14 carrying the three detached from the space station.

The three astronauts have lived and worked in the space station complex for 183 days.

They were replaced by another three astronauts flown to the under-construction space station by the Shenzhou-15 spaceship on November 29.

The astronauts had completed various work, such as completing the in-orbit rotation with the Shenzhou-15 crew, setting the status of the space station complex, sorting and downloading experiment data, and clearing and transferring supplies kept in orbit, with support from sci-tech staff on the ground, the China Manned



Space Agency (CMSA) said.

The three Shenzhou-14 astronauts were sent to the space station on June 5. They have completed multiple tasks over the past few months, including overseeing five rendezvous-and-dockings, performing three extravehicular activities, giving one live science lecture, and conducting a number of sci-tech experiments, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

China plans to complete the Space station by the end of this year, amid intensifying competition with the United States.

The Shenzhou-15 spaceship carried three astronauts — Fei Junlong, Deng Qingming, and Zhang Lu.

During their six-month mission, the Shenzhou-15 crew will carry out tests related to

long-term residence in China's space station at its three-module configuration, Ji Qiming, assistant to the director of the CMSA, said.

This will be the last flight mission in the construction phase of China's Space Station, official media reported. The launch was carried out with a Long March-2F carrier rocket.

Once ready, China will be the only country to own a space station.

The International Space Station (ISS) of Russia is a collaborative project of several countries.

China Space Station (CSS) is also expected to be a competitor to the ISS built by Russia.

Observers say the CSS may become the sole space station to remain in orbit once the ISS retires in the coming years.

US faces pivotal years in countering China: Pentagon

AP ■ SIMI VALLEY (US)

The US is at a pivotal point with China and will need military strength to ensure that American values, not Beijing's, set global norms in the 21st century, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said Saturday.

Austin's speech at the Reagan National Defence Forum capped a week in which the Pentagon was squarely focused on China's rise and what that might mean for America's position in the world.

On Monday it released an annual China security report that warned Beijing would likely have 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035, with no clarity on how China would seek to use them.

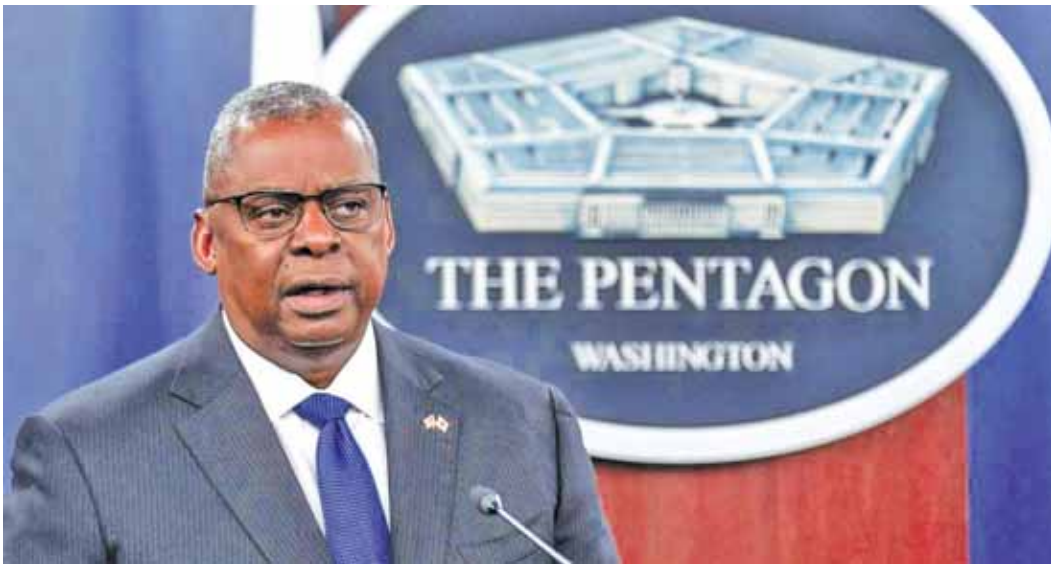
On Friday in a dramatic night-time rollout, Austin was on hand as

the public got its first glimpse of the military's newest, highly classified nuclear stealth bomber, the B-21 Raider, which is being designed to best the quickly growing cyber, space and nuclear capabilities of Beijing.

China "is the only country with both the will and, increasingly, the power to reshape its region and the international order to suit its authoritarian preferences," Austin said Saturday. "So let me be clear: We will not let that happen."

The Pentagon is also concerned about Russia and remains committed to arming Ukraine while avoiding escalating that conflict into a US war with Moscow, he said at the forum, held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

"We will not be dragged into Putin's war," Austin said.



"These next few years will set the terms of our competition with the People's Republic of China. They will shape the future of security in Europe," Austin said. "And they will determine whether our children and grandchildren inherit an open world of rules and rights — or whether they face emboldened autocrats who seek to dominate by force and fear."

Still, between the two nuclear power threats, China remains the greater risk, Austin said.

To meet that rise, "we're aligning our budget as never before to the China challenge," Austin said. "In our imperfect world, deterrence does come through strength."

The bomber is part of a major nuclear triad overhaul underway that the Congressional Budget Office has estimated will cost \$1.2 trillion through 2046.

It includes the Raider serving as the backbone of the future air leg of the triad, but it also requires modernizing the nation's silo-launched nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles and its nuclear submarine fleet.

The Defense Department has the largest discretionary budget of all the federal agencies, and it may receive up to \$847 billion in the 2023 budget if Congress passes the current funding bill before this legislative session ends.

However, defense advocates argue it is still not enough to modernize and keep up with China because much of that spending goes to military personnel. The CBO estimates that about one-quarter of the defense budget is spent on personnel costs such as salaries, health care and retirement accounts.



Nepali Congress maintains lead in parliamentary polls

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepali Congress-led ruling coalition on Sunday maintained its lead in Nepal's parliamentary election after its candidate from Syangja constituency No 2 Dhanraj Gurung won the election from the seat, sources said.

Gurung secured 31,466 votes against his nearest rival Padma Kumari Aryal of the CPN (UML) who bagged 25,839 votes, the Election Commission sources said.

With this the Nepali Congress (NC) tally has risen to 57 in the House of Representatives (HoR) under direct election followed by CPN-UML, which has won 44 seats so far.

CPN-Maoist Centre has bagged 17 seats while CPN-Unified Socialist has won 10 seats under direct election.

So far counting of 163 constituencies have been completed with the counting remaining for just two seats.

Counting for three constituencies, Syangja-2, Bajura and Dolakha began late as elections were postponed in these

constituencies due dispute between different groups.

In the 275-member House of Representatives, 165 will be elected through direct voting, while the remaining 110 will be elected through a proportional electoral system.

A party needs at least 138 seats to form a majority government.

The five-party ruling alliance, which includes the NC, CPN-Maoist Centre, CPN-Unified Socialist, Loktantrik Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janamorchha has a combined strength of 85 seats in the HoR under direct election, followed by the Opposition CPN-UML alliance with 57 seats.

Meanwhile, Nepali Congress leader Ram Chandra Poudel said on Sunday that the government to be formed now will provide political stability, good governance, development and employment in the village.

Addressing an event at Pulimarang, Byas Municipality-8 of Tanahu, he argued that the goal of the present ruling coalition is also establishing peace, good governance and a stable government.

"The country is in need of good governance. The nation will prosper if we can stop corruption and commission-mongering. We should become self-sufficient in food by revolutionizing agriculture, tourism should be expanded to the rural hinterland and industries should be opened in the villages which will create jobs, leading the country towards prosperity," he was quoted as saying by the Rising Nepal daily. Poudel reminded that the newly-elected people's representatives should not betray the people.

Under the proportionate voting method, CPN-UML has secured the highest number of votes, 27,73,999 followed by Nepali Congress with 26,44,241.

CPN-MC has secured 11,61,256 and RSP has secured 11,19,996 votes. Similarly, RPP, JSP and Janamat Party have secured 5,85,921 votes, 4,20,931 votes and 3,94,345 votes respectively. Elections to the House of Representatives (HoR) and seven provincial assemblies were held on November 20 to end the prolonged political instability that has plagued the Himalayan nation.

ISIS-K claims attack at Pakistan embassy in Kabul

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The Islamic State on Sunday claimed responsibility for an attack on Pakistan's embassy in the Afghan capital in which the Charge d'Affaires escaped unharmed but a guard was critically injured. In a brief statement in Arabic on social media, the terror group's Khorasan chapter (ISIS-K) claimed that its two members armed with "medium weapons and snipers" targeted the ambassador and his guards who were present in the courtyard of the embassy on Friday.

The Foreign Office (FO) said that it was "verifying" the claim made by ISIS-K about the attack on its mission in Kabul.

"Independently and in consultation with the Afghan

authorities, we are verifying the veracity of these reports," the Foreign Office said. "This notwithstanding, the terrorist attack is yet another reminder of the threat that terrorism poses to peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region," it said. "We must act resolutely with all our collective might to defeat this menace," it added.

On its part, Pakistan remains steadfast in its commitment to combat terrorism, FO said. Charge d'Affaires Ubaid-ur-Rehman Nizamani was targeted by unidentified gunmen while taking a walk in the Pakistan embassy compound. His guard was critically injured in the attack. Pakistan repatriated the wounded guard by helicopter and he was being treated at a



hospital. On Friday, Pakistan summoned Afghanistan's Charge d'Affaires in Islamabad and conveyed to him its deep concern over the attack on the country's Head of Mission in Kabul.

Pakistan demanded that perpetrators of the attack must be apprehended and brought to justice urgently, an investigation be launched into the serious

breach of security of the embassy premises, and that all necessary steps be taken to ensure the security of the diplomatic premises, officers and staff working in Pakistan's Mission in Kabul and Consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif.

Acting Foreign Minister of Interim Government of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi

strongly condemned the attack on Nizamani. The attack came days after Pakistan's deputy Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar flew to Kabul to hold talks with Muttaqi on a range of issues, including the latest threat from Pakistani Taliban who recently ended a months-long ceasefire with Pakistan and asked fighters to resume attacks across the country.

Nizamani has been in Kabul for less than a month since he took over the charge as head of mission, replacing former ambassador Mansoor Ahmed Khan on November 4. The US has also condemned Friday's attack on the Pakistani embassy in Afghanistan's capital and called for a full and transparent investigation.

China reports 2 new Covid deaths as some restrictions eased

AP ■ HONG KONG

China on Sunday reported two additional deaths from COVID-19 as some cities move cautiously to ease anti-pandemic restrictions following increasingly vocal public frustrations.

The National Health Commission said one death was reported each in the provinces of Shandong and Sichuan. No information was given about the ages of the victims or whether they had been fully vaccinated.

China, where the virus first was detected in late 2019 in the central city of Wuhan, is the last major country trying to stop transmission completely through quarantines, lockdowns and mass testing.

Concerns over vaccination rates are believed to figure prominently in the ruling Communist Party's determination to stick to its hard-line strategy.

While nine in 10 Chinese



have been vaccinated, only 66 per cent of people over 80 have gotten one shot while 40 per cent have received a booster, according to the commission. It said 86 per cent of people over 60 are vaccinated.

Given those figures and the fact that relatively few Chinese have been built up antibodies by being exposed to the virus, some fear millions could die if restrictions were lifted entirely.

Yet, an outpouring of public anger appears to have prompted authorities to lift some of the more onerous restrictions, even as they say the

"zero-COVID" strategy — which aims to isolate every infected person — is still in place.

The demonstrations, the largest and most widely spread in decades, erupted Nov. 25 after a fire in an apartment building in the northwestern city of Urumqi killed at least 10 people.

That set off angry questions online about whether firefighters or victims trying to escape were blocked by locked doors or other anti-virus controls. Authorities denied that, but the deaths became a focus of public frustration. The country saw several days of protests across cities including Shanghai and Beijing, with protesters demanding an easing of COVID-19 curbs.

Some demanded Chinese President Xi Jinping step down, an extraordinary show of public dissent in a society over which the ruling Communist Party exercises near total control.

Israeli aircraft hit Gaza after rocket fire

AP ■ GAZA CITY

Israeli aircraft struck several military sites in the Gaza Strip early Sunday, hours after Palestinian militants fired a missile into southern Israel in a move apparently linked to rising tension in the occupied West Bank, Israel said.

The Israeli military said the airstrikes targeted a weapons manufacturing facility and an underground tunnel belonging to Hamas, the militant group that has controlled Gaza since 2007. The military said more projectiles were fired over the border while warplanes were hitting the Gaza sites.

No Palestinian group

claimed responsibility for the Saturday evening rocket, which landed in an open area near the Gaza-Israel fence. The border has been quiet since August's three-day blitz between Israel and the Pales-

tinian Islamic Jihad, a powerful Gaza group that is smaller than the dominant Hamas.

Hamas and other factions have largely honored the unofficial understandings that have kept the situation in the impoverished territory calm in exchange for thousands of Israeli work permits. Israel and Egypt maintain a blockade on Gaza to prevent Hamas from stocking up weapons



Survivors of Brussels suicide attacks seek closure at trial

AP ■ BRUSSELS

Jaana Mettala was six months pregnant and on her way to work when the bomb exploded in the heart of Brussels' European Union quarter. She suffered severe burns, but Mettala and her baby survived — 32 other people did not.

It's now more than six years since the deadliest peacetime attacks on Belgian soil. And Mettala yearns for closure as the trial of 10 men accused over the suicide bombings at Brussels airport and an underground metro station starts in earnest Monday.

"I hope that the trial ends with a fair result and we can put this behind us," Mettala said. "Even if there are after-effects that we will keep forever."

She is going to testify at the trial — which will be the biggest in Belgium's judicial history with hundreds of plaintiffs. It is expected to last between six and nine months.

The 10 defendants face charges including murder, attempted murder and membership, or participation in the acts of a terrorist group, over the morning rush hour attacks at Belgium's main airport and on the central commuter line on March, 22, 2016.



If convicted, some of them could face up to 30 years in prison.

Among the accused is Salah Abdeslam — the only survivor among the Islamic State extremists who in 2015 struck the Bataclan theater in Paris, city cafes and France's national stadium. He was sentenced to life in prison without parole over the atrocities in the French capital.

He will be joined in the dock by his childhood friend, Mohamed Abrini, who walked away from Brussels' Zaventem airport after his explosives failed to detonate.

Abrini has been sentenced

to life in prison with no possibility of parole for 22 years for charges including complicity to terrorist murder in the Paris attacks trial.

Oussama Atar, who has been identified as a possible organizer of the deadly attacks on both Paris and Brussels, will be tried in absentia. He is believed to have died in the Islamic State's final months of fighting in Iraq and Syria.

Mettala hopes that facing

most of the accused will help her leave behind the anguish.

"It's a step on the path toward another kind of serenity," she said. "It will be very, very

hard. But I'm not someone trying to avoid difficulty. Because you need confrontation to get stronger."

In addition to the 32 people who died in Brussels, some 900 were hurt or suffered mental trauma.

Frederic — who asked to be identified only by his first name — was in the metro when the bomb went off. He said he was only slightly injured in the leg. But what he saw that day in the carriage where the device exploded keeps haunting him.

"I'll skip the macabre details," he said. "These are the details that remain and that are hard to get rid of. This trial will be for me the possibility to heal, to go through the grief process."

When the bomb went off at the Maelbeek station at 9:11 a.m., Mettala was on the platform. She was badly hurt but did not lose consciousness. She sustained serious burn injuries to her face, legs and hands and was taken to the emergency room of a Brussels hospital where she was prepared for urgent surgery.

She only woke up a couple of days later. Mettala was then transferred to a intensive care unit in another hospital in the nearby town of Louvain.

Jewel-encrusted crown moved from Tower of London for King Charles

PTI ■ LONDON

A jewel-encrusted crown kept in the Jewel House of the Tower of London has been removed to be re-sized ahead of King Charles III's coronation next year. The St. Edward's Crown, described as the "historic centrepiece" of the country's Crown Jewels, has been removed from the world-famous tower to allow for "modification work" to begin in time for the crowning ceremony on May 6, 2023, the Buckingham Palace said on Saturday.

As per tradition, the King will be crowned with St. Edward's Crown during the Coronation Service at Westminster Abbey in London. Charles, who succeeded his late mother Queen Elizabeth II in September, will also wear the Imperial State Crown during the formal service to mark his reign. "St. Edward's Crown is the crown historically used at the moment of Coronation, and worn by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth at her Coronation in 1953," the palace said.

"It was made for Charles II in 1661, as a replacement for the medieval crown which had been melted down in 1649," it said.

El Salvador sends 10K police, soldiers to seal off town

AP ■ SAN SALVADOR (EL SALVADOR)

The government of El Salvador sent 10,000 soldiers and police to seal off a town on the outskirts of the nation's capital Saturday to search for gang members.

The operation was one of the largest mobilisations yet in President Nayib Bukele's nine-month-old crackdown on street gangs that long extorted money from businesses and ruled many neighbourhoods of the capital, San Salvador.

The troops blocked roads going in and out of the township of Soyapango, checking people's documents. Special teams went into the town looking for gang suspects.

"Starting now, the township of Soyapango is completely surrounded," Bukele wrote in his Twitter account. He posted videos showing ranks of rifle-toting soldiers.

More than 58,000 people have been jailed since a state of emergency was declared following a wave of homicides in late March. Rights groups have criticized the mass roundups, saying they often sweep up young men based on their appearance or where they live.

It was part of what Bukele had called in late November "Phase Five" of the crackdown. Bukele said such tactics worked in the town of Comasagua in October.

In October, more than 2,000 soldiers and police surrounded and closed off Comasagua in order to search for street gang members accused in a killing. Drones flew over the town, and everyone entering or leaving the town was questioned or searched. About 50 suspects were detained in two days.

"It worked," Bukele said. The government estimates that homicides dropped 38% in the first 10 months of the year compared to the same peri-



od of 2021.

Bukele requested Congress grant him extraordinary powers after gangs were blamed for 62 killings on March 26, and that emergency decree has been renewed every month since then. It suspends some Constitutional rights and gives police more powers to arrest and hold suspects.

Under the decree, the right of association, the right to be informed of the reason for an arrest and access to a lawyer are suspended. The government also can intervene in the calls and mail of anyone they consider a suspect. The time someone can be held without charges is extended from three days to 15 days.

Rights activists say young men are frequently arrested just based on their age, on their appearance or whether they live in a gang-dominated slum.

El Salvador's gangs, which have been estimated to count some 70,000 members in their ranks, have long controlled swaths of territory and extorted and killed with impunity.

But Bukele's crackdown reached another level earlier this month when the government sent inmates into cemeteries to destroy the tombs of gang members at a time of year when families typically visit their loved ones' graves.

RBI likely to moderate interest hike: Experts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After three back-to-back 50 basis points hike in interest rates, the Reserve Bank may opt for a lower rate increase of 25-35 bps in lending rates at its coming monetary policy review on Wednesday amid retail inflation showing signs of moderation and the need to push growth, according to experts.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will come out with its next bi-monthly policy review on December 7 at the end of the three-day meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) beginning Monday.

In addition to the domestic factors, the RBI committee may also take some cues from the US Federal Reserve which hinted at a lower rate hike of 50 basis later in the month. In order to combat inflation, the Federal Reserve had earlier hiked the key interest rates four times by 75 basis points (bps) each.

The Reserve Bank since May has increased the repo or benchmark lending rates by 190 basis points, to calm down inflation which has remained above its comfort level of 6 per cent since January.

Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda, said the RBI will be presenting the monetary policy against the backdrop of GDP growth slowing down as well as inflation



being high above 6 per cent.

“We do believe that the MPC will continue with rate hikes this time though the magnitude will be lower — probably 25-35 bps. More specifically we do believe that the terminal repo rate for the financial year will be 6.5 per cent, which means there will be one more rate hike in February,” he said.

Sabnavis further said there will not be any surprise for the market just as is the case for global markets too, which are now expecting more moderate increases in interest rates by the Fed. The GDP growth in the second quarter of the fiscal slowed to 6.3 per cent as against a growth of 13.5 per cent in the preceding three months.

Consumer price index (CPI) based retail inflation, which the RBI mainly factors in

while arriving at its monetary policy, is showing signs of moderation but still remains above the central bank's upper tolerance level.

D K Pant, Chief Economist, India Ratings & Research, said the second quarter inflation and GDP numbers are in line with RBI's forecast.

“Inflation is likely to decline further. However, it is expected to remain higher than 6 per cent in this quarter. We believe RBI may go for a 25 bps hike in repo rate in December 2022 monetary policy,” he said.

Shanti Ekambaram, whole-time director, Kotak Mahindra Bank, said the RBI has been keeping a close tab on growth and inflationary trends, and future action will be based on data points on both growth and inflation.

Tax dept reduces time for taxmen to decide on refund adjustment

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The income tax department has reduced the time for tax officers to decide on adjustment of refunds against outstanding tax dues to 21 days, a move which will help avoid litigation.

The time limit of 30 days made available to the assessing officers stands reduced to 21 days, the Directorate of Income Tax (Systems) said.

“If the assessee either does not agree or partially agrees for adjustment, the matter shall be referred by CPC immediately to the assessing officer, who shall, within 21 days from the date of such reference, shall provide feedback to CPC as to whether the adjustment should be made or not,” it added

AMRG & Associates Senior Partner Rajat Mohan said in many cases involving the adjustment of refunds, the Centralised Processing Centre (CPC) noticed that wrong categorisation of demand or lack of feedback from the AO (Assessing Officer) on the assessee's response led to incorrect adjustment of refunds, resulting in needless complaints and litigations. Another concern was that the AO did not promptly respond to the assessee's complaints.

“This instruction clarified that the AO now has only 21 days to respond to a taxpayer's



complaints, as opposed to the 30 days previously allowed. It restricts the CPC from holding refunds beyond the allotted period. This approach will lead to a swift resolution of difficulties faced by the taxpayers,” Mohan added.

In an instruction to field formations, the DIT (Systems) said, in certain cases, consequent to the issue of intimation under section 245, the assessee had responded on the demand portal that the demands are incorrect, in as much as that the demands are stayed by assessing officer/TAT/high court.

It has been reported that incorrect categorisation of such demand as “correct and collectible” or not providing feedback by the assessing officers on the assessee's response has resulted in incorrect adjustment of refunds by CPC against such demands, leading to avoidable grievances and litigations, it said.

Under Section 245 of the Income Tax Act, the AO can adjust the refund (or a part of the refund) against any tax demand that is outstanding from the taxpayer.

States capital spends inch up just 2.2% in first half despite massive spike in revenues

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Capital expenditure (capex) of 18 States has risen just 2.2 per cent in the first half of the current fiscal even as their combined revenue deficit has narrowed to more than one-fourth from the year-ago period, according to a report.

This means that there has to be a massive 57 per cent increase in their capital outlays to meet their FY23 budgeted target, Icra Ratings said in an analysis on the available numbers from 18 of the largest states, which have budgeted for a combined capital outlay of ₹6.2 lakh crore.

But these states have collectively spent only ₹1.59 lakh crore so far this fiscal, which is just about a growth of 2.2 per cent annualised.

Revenue deficits of these 18 states have narrowed to a



low ₹30,000 crore in the first half of the current fiscal from ₹1.3 lakh crore in the corresponding period in FY22.

This revenue tailwind comes in spite of these states budgeting for a combined revenue deficit to ₹1.4 lakh crore in FY23 from ₹1.1 lakh crore in FY22.

Despite this, their combined capital outlay rose by a muted 2.2 per cent in H1, sharply lower than the high 37.8 per cent growth indicated

in their budgets, necessitating a sharp 57 per cent increase in H2 to achieve the target, the agency said in a weekend note.

The 18 states covered in this note are Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Bengal.

These states have budgeted a combined capital outlay of ₹6.2 lakh crore for this fiscal. This means that to use the budgeted outlay their spending will have to jump by 57 per cent (or by 4.6 lakh crore) in the second half of the fiscal to meet the 37.8 per cent increased capex, which looks ambitious and thus the states are going to miss the capital outlay target by a sizeable extent, it said.

Mcap of eight of top-10 most valued firms climb ₹1.15L cr; Reliance biggest winner

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Eight of the top-10 most valued firms together added ₹1,15,837 crore in market valuation last week, with Reliance Industries emerging as the biggest gainer.

From the top-10 pack, HDFC twins were the only laggards.

Last week, the BSE benchmark jumped 574.86 points or 0.92 per cent. The benchmark had settled above 63,000-level for the first time ever on Wednesday. The market valuation of Reliance Industries jumped ₹71,462.28 crore to ₹18,41,994.48 crore.

Hindustan Unilever's market capitalisation (mcap) gained ₹18,491.28 crore to ₹6,14,488.60 crore.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) added ₹18,441.62 crore taking its valuation to ₹12,58,439.24 crore.

The valuation of Infosys climbed ₹3,303.5 crore to ₹6,89,515.09 crore and that of Adani Enterprises rallied ₹2,063.4 crore to ₹4,47,045.74 crore.

Bharti Airtel's mcap grew by ₹1,140.46 crore to ₹4,72,234.92 crore and that of ICICI Bank jumped ₹845.21 crore to ₹6,49,207.46 crore.

State Bank of India added ₹89.25 crore to take its mcap to ₹5,42,214.79 crore.

However, HDFC Bank's valuation declined by ₹5,417.55 crore to ₹8,96,106.38 crore and that of HDFC dipped by ₹2,282.41 crore to ₹4,85,626.22 crore.

Reliance Industries ruled the chart of the top-10 most valued firms followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, Infosys, ICICI Bank, Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India, HDFC, Bharti Airtel and Adani Enterprises.

FM to address revenue intelligence officers today

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will on Monday address Revenue Intelligence officers at the DRI foundation day event in the national capital. The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) is celebrating its 65th Founding Day on December 5-6 this year, a finance ministry statement said on Sunday.

A meeting of the 'Regional Customs Enforcement Meeting (RCEM)' for effectively engaging with partner Customs organisations and international agencies like World Customs Organisation (WCO), Interpol for enforcement related issues would also be organised during the event.

RBI's rate decision, state poll results major factors to drive equity market: Analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

RBI's interest rate decision is a major factor that will drive the trends in the equity market this week, while global cues and foreign fund trading activity would also be watched, analysts said. Market investors would also track the state election results later this week, they added.

“Global cues continue to cause volatility, but this week the market's focus will shift to domestic cues like RBI policy and state election results. The outcome of the RBI policy is scheduled for 7 December, while the results of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh assembly elections will come on 8 December,” said Santosh Meena, Head of Research, Swastika Investmart Ltd.

On the global front, the US bond yields and the dollar index have fallen sharply, and markets will continue to watch their move from here, Meena added.

From macroeconomic data front, Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) data for the services sector is scheduled to be announced on Monday.

Investors would keenly watch for the outcome of Gujarat state election that is due this week, said Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

The equity market depicted a positive trend last week as the BSE benchmark jumped 574.86 points or 0.92 per cent.

According to Apurva Sheth, Head of Market Perspectives, Samco Securities, the focus would be on the RBI's interest rate decision.

“The two immediate triggers — RBI's credit policy this week and the US Fed meeting in mid-December on the rate front — would determine investors' mood in the near term,” Amol Athawale, Deputy Vice President - Technical Research, Kotak Securities Ltd, said.

Given directions to Coal India to conclude wage pact of non-executive workforce at the earliest: Pralhad Joshi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Coal minister Pralhad Joshi has given directions to Coal India to conclude the wage pact of its non-executive workforce at the earliest.

The minister has said that all pending issues should be sorted out and emphasised that he would not allow the trade unions to go on strike on the issue.

Wages of non-executive workers, who account for over 90 per cent of Coal India's (CIL) workforce, are revised every five years. Workers are seeking a 28 per cent increase in wages, while Coal India has offered a 10.5 per cent raise, according to a union leader.

“Normally the agreement takes place between Coal India and labour unions... I have told management (of Coal India) to have a cordial relation with them and have a cordial meeting with them and sort out the issue. I want that whatever the issues are pending should be



sorted out,” Joshi told PTI.

Stating that from the past five-six months the negotiations between Coal India management and trade unions on wage revision are underway, the minister said that he has given directions to arrive at the solution at the earliest.

“According to me, the agreement will happen very soon... I have told the CMD (Coal India) and other directors (of the PSU) to be liberal and work it out and they are working it out,” the minister explained.

The latest wage revision, which would benefit around 2.39 lakh non-executive staffers of CIL, has been due since July 1, 2021.

Govt mulls exempting early stage startups from data protection bill provisions

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government is mulling exempting early stage startups from complying with norms under proposed Digital Personal Data Protection bill, an official source said.

The exemption may be for a limited period to assist startups in developing their business models and to ensure that innovation is not stifled due to compliance burden.

Meity (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology) is mulling to improve upon the bill to exempt early stage startups from the provisions of DPDP (Digital Personal Data Protection) bill.



OPEC+ oil producers face uncertainty over Russian sanctions

AP ■ FRANKFURT

The Saudi-led OPEC oil cartel and allied producing countries, including Russia, are expected to decide how much oil to supply to the global economy amid weakening demand in China and uncertainty about the impact of new Western sanctions against Russia that could take significant amounts of oil off the market.

The 23-country OPEC+ alliance are scheduled to meet Sunday, a day ahead of the planned start of two measures aimed at hitting Moscow's oil earnings in response to its war in Ukraine.

Those are a European Union boycott of most Russian oil and a \$60-per-barrel price cap on Russian exports imposed by the EU and Group of Seven democracies.

Russia rejected the price cap approved Friday and threatened to stop supplying the nations that endorsed it.

Oil has been trading lower on fears that coronavirus outbreaks and China's strict zero-Covid restrictions would reduce demand for fuel in one of the world's major economies.

Concerns about recessions in the U.S. and Europe also raise the prospect of lower demand for gasoline and other fuel made from crude.

Godrej Properties adds 8 new projects worth ₹16,500 crore so far in FY23: Pirojsha Godrej

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Enthusied by strong housing demand, Godrej Properties is aggressively acquiring land for future development and has added eight new projects so far this fiscal with an estimated revenue potential of ₹16,500 crore.

With four months still left in 2022-23 financial year, Godrej Properties Executive Chairman Pirojsha Godrej is hopeful that the company will add many more land parcels in its portfolio by March.

The company is in discussions with multiple landowners for acquisition of land, either outrightly or by entering into joint development



agreements (JDAs).

“We have added projects worth ₹16,500 crore so far this financial year and have already crossed our full year guidance of ₹15,000 crore. Given strong further visibility, we will end the 2022-23 fiscal much ahead of the target,” Pirojsha Godrej told PTI.

He did not share the revised target for the new business development for the current fiscal.

Pvt security industry demands hike in FDI limit to 74%

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

An association of private security services providers on Sunday demanded an increase in the foreign direct investment (FDI) limit in the sector to 74 per cent from the existing 49 per cent.

Raising the demand on the occasion of the Private Security Day, which was celebrated across the country on Sunday, CAPSI chairman Kunwar Vikram Singh, said in a statement that raising the FDI limit to 74 per cent will help modernise, digitise and propel the growth of the crucial sector which currently employs over one crore personnel.

‘Maruti Suzuki may fall short of 20L units production target’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Maruti Suzuki India's challenge to produce 20 lakh units this fiscal may fall slightly short, according to company Senior Executive Officer, Marketing & Sales Shashank Srivastava.

He, however said, the company is still counting on an outside chance to meet the challenge through execution of its pending orders that stands at around 3.75 lakh units.

Earlier in August this year, Maruti Suzuki India Chairman RC Bhargava, in his address to



shareholders in the company's annual report for 2021-22 had stated that the company will increase its production and will challenge to produce 20 lakh units in the ongoing fiscal

with semiconductor availability improving.

He has said that the new midsize SUV, Grand Vitara, was expected to play a key role in the challenge to touch 20 lakh units.

“By our current calculation, I think it should be slightly short of that number,” Srivastava told PTI when asked if the company was on track to challenge the target.

He, however, said a lot would depend on how the company is able to execute pending bookings, which now stands at 3.75 lakh units.

FPIs turn net buyers in Nov; invest ₹36,329 cr in equities

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After pulling out money from Indian equities market in the past two months, FPIs made a strong come back in November with a net investment of ₹36,329 crore on weakening of the US dollar index and positivity about overall macroeconomic trends.

This was the third month (July, August and November) in this year when FPIs witnessed net inflows. Moreover, they started the month of December on a positive note.

Going forward, flow trajectory is expected to remain positive in December. However, some shift could be seen from expensive stocks to value stocks, Anita Gandhi, Whole Time Director and

Head – Institutional Business at Arianth Capital, said.

India will get its fair share of Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) money, however, the high valuation will be a deterrent, VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at Geojit Financial Services, said.

According to data with the depositories, FPIs invested a net sum of ₹36,329 crore in equities in November.

“The cooling US inflation, sluggish crude oil prices, decline in metals and freight rates and expectations of slower pace of rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve have contributed to the positive sentiment,” Kaizad Hozdar – Investment Advisor, TrustPlutus Wealth (India) Pvt Ltd, said.

FMCG makers keeping close watch on softening commodity prices

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Leading FMCG companies say they are keeping a close watch on prices of major commodities, which have fallen in case of some items like palm oil, but the decline has not been “secular and broad-based”.

While prices of palm oil have eased and sugar is stable, FMCG firms pointed out that rates of some other major items including wheat are still firm and hence they would wait and watch before taking any call on reducing the price.

Softening of commodities prices will help the FMCG firms in improving their profit margins and also some elbow room to pass on the benefits to consumers by lowering the MRP (maximum retail price) of their products.

Nestlé India Chairman and Managing Director Suresh Narayanan said the company is watching the situation. However, he said softening in commodity prices is not secular and broad-based.

“We will watch the situation and evaluate our next



step. The price decline in commodities is not secular and broad-based,” Narayanan told PTI on the sidelines of an event here.

When asked about launches of new products this fiscal, he said: “There will be some new initiatives.”

Besides palm oil, in recent

months there has been also a drop in the prices of edible oil. Recently some of the FMCG makers have slashed prices or increased grammage for soaps and some large packs of packaged food extending the benefit to consumers.

Last week, leading bakery maker Britannia Industries Vice-Chairman and Managing Director Varun Berry had said overall commodity prices are not softening right now but expressed hope that they should come in control going forward.

HISTORYMAKERS

Giroud, Mbappe create new records in France's 3-1 win over Poland

AP ■ DOHA

Kylian Mbappe set up a history-making goal for Olivier Giroud and then scored two himself as holders France eased into the quarter-finals of the World Cup with a 3-1 win over Poland on Sunday.

Giroud's opening goal a minute before half-time was his 52nd for his country, allowing him to pass Thierry Henry and become France's all-time record marksman.

Mbappe's lethal strike in the 74th minute killed off any prospect of a Poland comeback and he netted again at the death to move to nine goals in just 11 World Cup appearances, the second-most for a French player at the tournament.

At the other end the threat of Robert Lewandowski was snuffed out by the French defence although the 34-year-old Poland captain did get the consolation of scoring a stoppage-time penalty.

France, though, march on to the quarter-finals and remain on course to become the first team to successfully defend the World Cup since Brazil 60 years ago.

France were overwhelming favourites against a Poland side who had limped through the group stage, but the memory of their exit from Euro 2020 served as a warning.

France had been 3-1 up and cruising in that last-16 tie against Switzerland only to concede two late goals and end up losing on penalties, with Mbappe missing the crucial spot-kick.

Mbappe returned on Sunday as one of nine changes following their inconsequential defeat by Tunisia, with goalkeeper and captain Hugo Lloris also returning to win his 142nd cap.

That saw him equal the record for most France appearances held by Lilian Thuram, whose son Marcus came off the bench here.

It was a history-making occasion for France but what coach Didier Deschamps wanted above all was a routine victory and progression to the quarter-finals.

The sky should be the limit for a French side led by Mbappe, but it is not just him.

Ousmane Dembele and Antoine Griezmann were lively in a strong start amid a hushed atmosphere at Al Thumama Stadium.

The fans were happy to sit back and be thrilled as the big screen at one point showed that Mbappe had reached a top speed of 35 kilometres per hour.

France's pace and pressing was too much for Poland as Przemyslaw Frankowski gave possession away, leading to Dembele crossing to the back post for Giroud to somehow put the ball wide.

Poland, who have not won a World Cup knockout match since 1982, recovered from a tentative start to almost go ahead in the 38th minute as Lloris blocked a shot by Piotr Zielinski and Jakub Kaminski's follow-up was stopped on the line by Raphael Varane.

Those misses proved crucial as France seized the lead a minute before half-time.

Patient build-up play ended with Mbappe having a glance as he received the ball just outside the box before playing in Giroud who took a touch and finished into the far corner.



JAPAN PRIMED TO SHOW 'SAMURAI SPIRIT'

Japan will fight like samurai in Monday's World Cup last-16 clash with Croatia as they battle to reach the quarter-finals for the first time, defender Yuto Nagatomo said

AP ■ DOHA

Japan reached the knockout round after stunning Germany and Spain to top Group E but they are not satisfied with what they have achieved so far in Qatar.

Veteran Nagatomo is appearing at his fourth World Cup and he urged his teammates to "show the samurai spirit to the world" against Croatia.

"Before battle, the samurai would polish their weapons and refine their technique, but if they were scared in battle, all that would count for nothing," the former Inter Milan left-back said Sunday.

"It's the same as football. Of course tactics and technique are important, but if we're scared, it doesn't matter how much we've trained over the past four years because our technique will be no use.

"The most important thing is to have courage," the 36-year-old added. Japan have reached the last 16 at three previous World Cups but they have yet to make it as far as the quarter-finals.

They were eliminated at the first knock-out round four years ago in Russia when they threw away a two-goal lead to lose 3-2 to Belgium with the last kick of the game.

Nagatomo said the defeat had been on his mind for the past four years and he is ready to wipe away the memory against Croatia.

"The past four years have been tough for me but I think we have all overcome that and improved as players," he said.

"I have been playing for Japan for almost 15 years and as far as I can see, this is the strongest team we've ever had at the World Cup."

Japan had to come from behind to beat both Germany and Spain, and were forced to defend for long periods against opponents who dominated possession.

Coach Hajime Moriyasu wants his players to have more of the ball against Croatia but urged them to show "resilience" whatever the situation.

"The players showed their ability against Germany and Spain, they were united as a team and dug in and fought until the end," he said.

"They have proved that when they play like that, it brings results.

"Of course it's important to think about our opponents but first of all I want our players to show what they can do."

Brazil sweat on Neymar return ahead of Korea clash

AP ■ DOHA

Brazil head into Monday's World Cup last-16 tie against South Korea preoccupied by the health of the great Pele and with coach Tite wondering whether to recall the Selecao's current number 10 Neymar after an ankle injury.

Tite used his press conference prior to Friday's final group game against Cameroon to wish Pele a speedy recovery after the all-time great was admitted to hospital in Sao Paulo during the week.

There would be no better way for Brazil to pay tribute to their greatest ever player than by going on to win a record-extending sixth World Cup on December 18, and the draw appears to have opened up favourably for them.

They topped their section despite scoring just three goals in three games in Qatar, their worst showing in front of goal in the group stage of a World Cup since 1978.

Brazil have a fearsome range of attacking options, even with Gabriel Jesus having gone home injured, but they have scored just once since Neymar came off with a sprained ankle in their opening 2-0 win over Serbia on November 24.

He watched the Cameroon game from just behind the Brazilian bench at the Lusail Stadium and on Saturday he was back training with his teammates, raising hopes he would be on the field against the Koreans.

"I feel good, I knew that I would now," he wrote on Instagram on Saturday with a reference to James Brown.

"With his return the whole team will improve," said Richarlison, scorer of both goals against Serbia, on Friday.

"I hope he comes back. Everyone saw how much we missed him in the last two games. I think him coming back will make me better."

On paper Brazil could surely not have asked for a kinder draw at this stage than South Korea, who qualified for the last 16 thanks to a last-gasp winner by Hwang Hee-chan against Portugal.

If they win at Doha's Stadium 974 they will advance to a quarter-final against Japan or Croatia, with a last-four showdown against great rivals Argentina still on the cards.

Korea were the second lowest-ranked side to make the knockout stage and Paulo Bento's side have recent experience of how chastening an experience it can be to take on Brazil.

The teams met in a friendly in Seoul in June and Brazil romped to a 5-1 victory with

Modric leading by example at WC

AP ■ DOHA

Croatia's squad features only a few of the players which led them to the World Cup final in 2018, runners-up to France, but Luka Modric is defying time to be one of those few constants.

The 37-year-old Real Madrid midfielder worked tirelessly across the full 90 minutes of the 0-0 draw with Belgium on Thursday to book Croatia's place in the last 16, where they face Japan on Monday.

The captain leads by example, showing the younger players what is possible and how much effort achieving it takes.

If the 2018 Ballon d'Or winner, with five Champions League titles to his name, still toils selflessly in midfield, there can be no excuses for anyone else not to follow suit.

Croatia defender Josip Juranovic believes Modric is setting an example to the squad's younger players to fend off World Cup fatigue.

"In my tank, my reservoir (of gas) is full," the Celtic defender told a press conference Saturday.

"It is a World Cup -- we may only get (to be part of) this once in our lifetime.

"I can't wait for the game to start. When you see people like Luka Modric running and dying on the pitch, it gives us younger players extra energy to run. We have a great combination of experience and younger players in the team."

Croatia finished second in Group F and Juranovic, 27, played 90 minutes in all three games, while Modric also played 90 minutes against Morocco in the goalless opener, and 86 against Canada, in the team's thumping 4-1 win.

In the Belgium and Morocco games, Modric was awarded man of the match.



Don't write off Ronaldo, warns Shaqiri

AP ■ DOHA

Cristiano Ronaldo may be 37 and without a club but Switzerland's Xherdan Shaqiri, whose team face Portugal in the World Cup last 16 on Tuesday, says it would be a mistake to consider him a fading force.

"You cannot write off Cristiano, he is one of the best players in the world together with (Lionel) Messi," Shaqiri told reporters after training on Sunday.

"This guy can score any second, any minute, he has experience and everyone knows how important he is for Portugal and for his team," added the former Liverpool and Bayern Munich attacker, who scored in Switzerland's 3-2 win over Serbia on Friday which secured them a place in the knockout stage.

Ronaldo, who has been released by Manchester United after his controversial television interview, has scored once so far in this tournament, with a penalty in the opening group stage 3-2 win over Ghana.

But Shaqiri, who now plays in Major League Soccer with Chicago Fire, knows that regardless of Ronaldo's threat there are also plenty of other sources of danger from Portugal.

"We have to know also the other players because it is not only Ronaldo, they have very good players, young players who can make a big difference and we need to give really a very good performance because its knockout and anything can happen in the 95-100 minutes and we are looking forward to it," he said.

While Shaqiri is established as the main creative force in the Swiss side, he says the key to their chances of success is found in their ability as a collective.

"The key is to have a special performance from the whole team. There are no Cristianos in our team, we need to have the whole team to be successful. If everyone sticks together, everyone goes to their highest level of performance, I am sure we have a chance to go through," he said.

The two teams faced each other twice in the Nations League in June with Portugal enjoying a 4-0 win in Lisbon with Ronaldo scoring twice but then a week later, the Swiss gained revenge with a 1-0 win in Geneva.

But Shaqiri says the increased pressure of a World Cup knockout game makes past performances irrelevant.

"We know Portugal, we have played them many times in friendlies, in the Nations League, we lost some, we won some, for me everything is open, it is a knockout game but we know they are going to be a good team.

"We need a big, big performance, a special performance if we are going to go through," he said.

Spain warned over 'collapse' ahead of Morocco clash: Rodri

AP ■ DOHA

Spain's Rodri says his country have been warned about suffering another "collapse" when they face Morocco in the World Cup last 16 on Tuesday.

La Roja fell to a shock 2-1 defeat by Japan on Thursday and finished second in Group E as a result, with the Samurai Blue netting two goals in a dramatic period at the start of the second half.

Manchester City midfielder Rodri, playing at centre-back for Spain, said his team would not renounce their style of football but had to avoid unnecessary risks.

"There were 10 minutes of collapse, and we've been warned now that a goal can put you out," Rodri told a press conference Sunday. "We know it, the coach was clear, and now we're training with happiness and determination."

For a short period during their last group game Spain face elimination, when Costa Rica were ahead against Germany, but Hansi Flick's side recovered to win to save La Roja.

Spain trained on Sunday with defender Cesar Azpilicueta working on an exercise bike apart from the main group, after suffering a knock against Japan, but he should be fit to face Morocco. Rodri believes Spain have recovered from their Japan defeat after reflecting on the game and are now ready to move on.

"We have totally recovered, it's true that it was an intense moment in all senses," he added. "The team went out to win, with ambition. We had a good first half, it's a game which got away from us in 10 minutes."



"We had a day of reflection, which suited us well, now the team is recovered and training with maximum joy and maximum hope."

Spain, in search of a second World Cup trophy after their triumph in 2010, have a clearly defined way of playing.

It is marked by a high press, a thirst for possession and a near-refusal to clear their lines in desperation, preferring to seek out a pass.

"We have a philosophy which never changes, whatever team we are playing against," said Rodri.

"We analysed and corrected our errors, but changing our way of playing does not suit Spain.

"Details will make the difference. Playing without taking risks, but keeping a cool head, that's always been our game."

B'DESH BEAT INDIA BY 1-WICKET IN 1st ODI

AP ■ MIRPUR

Bangladesh's last wicket pair of Mehidy Hasan Miraz and Mustafizur Rahaman pulled off an absolute heist with a thrilling 51-run stand as India choked during final half an hour to lose a low-scoring opening ODI by one wicket here on Sunday.

While India produced yet another poor batting show which saw them get all-out for 186 in 41.2 overs, the bowlers did a splendid job to reduce Bangladesh to 136 for 9 in the 40th over. However KL Rahul, who was entrusted with keeping duties to fit him and another veteran Shikhar Dhawan in the same XI, dropped an aerial sitter when Bangladesh still needed 32 runs.

Washington Sundar also didn't go for an easy catch at third man earning the wrath of skipper Rohit Sharma as Miraj (38 not out off 39 balls) along with Mustafizur (10 not out) got the team past the finishing line in exactly 46 overs.

The 51-run stand between Miraj and Mustafizur was Bangladesh's highest 10th wicket partnership and the fourth-highest 10th wicket partnership in a successful ODI chase.

On a track that assisted both seamers and spinners, Indian top-order barring KL Rahul (73 off 70 balls) flopped badly to be bowled out for a score below 200.

But the total that looked eminently gettable at the break turned into a sizeable one due to lion-hearted efforts from Mohammed Siraj (3/32), Shardul Thakur (1/21) and Washington Sundar (2/17).

Debutant Kuldeep Sen's (2/37) pace was used to hit him for three sixes -- two of them during the slog overs while Deepak Chahar (1/32) despite providing a first-ball breakthrough looked pedestrian towards



Pant released from ODI squad



PTI ■ MIRPUR

Flamboyant wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant has been released abruptly from the Indian ODI squad for the three-match series against Bangladesh, the BCCI said on Sunday. Pant was released following consultation with the BCCI medical team and no replacement has been sought.

"In consultation with the BCCI Medical Team, Rishabh Pant has been released from the ODI squad. He will join the team ahead of the Test series. No replacement has been sought," the BCCI said in a media release.

Left-arm spinning all-rounder Axar Patel was not available for selection for the first ODI. According to sources, Axar is nursing a bruised rib after taking a hit while batting at the nets.

Though no specific reason was stated for the 25-year-old Pant's release, he has been the only first team all-format player to have not got a break after the T20 World Cup in Australia last month.

While the likes of Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma were rested after India's semifinal defeat to England in the T20 showpiece, Pant flew with the team to New Zealand for a composite six-match limited overs series. In Bangladesh, India are slated to play two Tests after the three ODIs.



Lyon spins Oz to 164-run victory

AP ■ PERTH

Off-spinner Nathan Lyon bowled Australia to a 164-run win in the opening cricket Test against the West Indies to retain the Frank Worrell Trophy at the Perth Stadium on Sunday.

Lyon claimed 6-128 as the West Indies were all out for 333 before tea on the final day. It was Lyon's 21st five-wicket haul in his 111th Test.

Lyon's 446 Test wickets tally has moved him to eighth amongst all-time wicket-takers and behind fellow Australians Shane Warne (708 wickets in 145 tests) and Glenn McGrath (563 in 124) who are second and sixth respectively.

"Lyon loves bowling here and it was a fantastic all-round performance," captain Pat Cummins said.

"(He) was fantastic. There was not a lot on offer, but he still found a way."

Skipper Kraigg Brathwaite top scored for the visitors with

an obdurate 110, and a late order rally by Roston Chase and Alzarri Joseph prevented a capitulation that had looked likely after the visitors slumped to 233-7 in the space of 17 overs in the morning.

A stubborn 82-run stand for the eighth wicket between Chase (55) and Joseph (43) delayed the inevitable for 1 ½ hrs on both sides of the lunch break. Part-time offspinner Travis Head provided the breakthrough when he bowled Joseph.

Resuming on 257-7 after the lunch break the West Indies battled for another 85 minutes before Lyon had Chase caught by Mitchell Starc in the outfield, and bowled No.11 Kemar Roach (0) with his next ball.

Chase hit a six and three fours off 72 balls in occupying the crease in two frustrating hours for the Australians, who were without Pat Cummins in its bowling attack due to the skipper's thigh complaint preventing him from taking the ball.

"I'll be fit for Adelaide. I had a tight quad," Cummins said. "Obviously, I have to go through a fitness test, and a bowling session, but I am good to go."

West Indies, once the powerhouse of world cricket, has not beaten Australia in 12 Tests since beating Steve Waugh's side in the fourth Test of a dead-rubber under the captaincy of Brian Lara in Antigua in May 2003. Man-of-the match Marnus Labuschagne scored 204 in Australia's first innings of 598-4 declared and then an unbeaten 104 not out in the second innings, the first Australian to score a double-hundred and a century in the same match since Greg Chappell in 1974.

West Indies made 283 in its first innings. Australia's dominance over the West Indies dates back to May 1995 and remains undefeated over 11 series. The second Test will be a day/night game, and will start from December 8.

Pakistan need 263 runs to beat England

AP ■ RAWALPINDI

Rampant England pushed its first Test in Pakistan in 17 years to an exciting last-day finish after setting a brave target of 343 runs for the home team on Sunday.

Pakistan ended the fourth day at 80-2, needing a further 263 runs in a maximum of 90 overs left in the first Test of the three-match series.

First innings centurion Imam-ul-Haq was not out on 43 off 60 balls while one of four Pakistan debutants, Saud Shakeel, was lucky to be there on 24 after Keaton Jennings couldn't hold on to a two-handed catch close to the wicket in the penultimate over of the day.

Ben Stokes' plan to start with a barrage of short-pitched balls paid dividends for England in the final session after the tourists declared their second innings at 264-7 at tea for an overall lead of 342.

Abdullah Shafique (6), one of the three Pakistan first innings century-makers, fell into England's trap and pulled to Ollie Robinson in the deep before Azhar Ali was struck on his right index finger



in the same over and left the field in pain.

Stokes, who shared the new ball with Robinson, got the faint inside edge of Babar Azam off another short pitch ball to reduce Pakistan to 25-2 before the two left-handers — Imam and Shakeel — batted confidently to produce a 55-run stand

until Jennings' missed opportunity.

In its first innings, Pakistan's lower order dug in to reduce England's lead before getting dismissed for 579.

But England didn't sit back on a wicket still conducive to batting and pushed its bid for victory with yet another

er electrifying display with the bat from the top order in the second session.

Joe Root smashed 73 and Harry Brook followed his belligerent century in the first innings with 87 off 65 balls before getting bowled by fast bowler Naseem Shah (2-66).

England added a brisk 218 runs in the second session to finish the innings with a rapid run rate of 7.4 an over, which matched its first-innings aggression that saw the visitors rack up an electrifying total of 657. Pakistan's inexperienced bowling resources were further reduced when debutant fast bowler Haris Rauf couldn't recover from his strained right quad and was unable to bowl in the second innings.

Earlier, offspinner Will Jacks, who was given his test debut at the last minute after Ben Foakes had to sit out due to a viral infection, picked up 6-161 on a wicket doing the bowlers few favors before Pakistan was eventually bowled out.

Pakistan's tailenders frustrated England for nearly 1.5 hours with Agha Salman scoring 53 off 67 balls after the home team resumed on 499-7.

India go down 4-5 to Australia in fifth hockey Test

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

Skipper Harmanpreet Singh's brace went in vain as India lost 4-5 to Australia in the final game to hand the five-Test hockey series 1-4 to the world No.1 side here on Sunday.

Tom Wickham (2nd, 17th) scored two goals for Australia while Aran Zalewski (30th), Jacob Anderson (40th) and Jake Whetton (54th) were the other goal getters for the home team.

Harmanpreet (24th, 60th) converted two penalty corners for India while Amit Rohidas



(34th) and Sukhjeet Singh (55th) also found the opposition net. India had lost 4-5 and 4-7 in

the first two Tests before winning the next match 4-3. They lost the fourth game 1-5.

Mirabai, Indian lifters begin quest for Olympic qualification

PTI ■ BOGOTA

Indian weightlifters, led by Mirabai Chanu, will look to find their rhythm as they kick off their preparations for the 2024 Paris Olympics with the first qualifying event — the World Championships, starting here on Monday.

Olympic silver medalist Chanu, Commonwealth Games medalists S Bindiyanari Devi (59kg), Achinta Sheuli (73kg) and Gurdeep Singh (+109kg) will all be in action for the first time since the Birmingham Games in August as they aim to collect the required ranking points to qualify for the Paris Games.

While Chanu, a former world champion, is not expected to test her limits in this event, head coach Vijay Sharma wants the other lifters to rise to the occasion and outdo themselves in at least one category.

"My expectation for this tournament is that apart from Mira, everyone should try and get a personal best in one of the three categories. That will show

improvement and will help them in their qualification."

"For Mira, we will try to get 200+ total in every qualifying event so that we qualify for the Olympics," Sharma said.

Chanu has a personal best of 207kg (88kg+119kg). She has been trying to breach the 90kg mark in the snatch category since 2020.

However, with the Olympics still a long way to go and the Asian Games scheduled in September, the Manipuri, who struggles with a back issue that affects her snatch, might not risk lifting 90kg at the marquee event.

"To regularly overload is not prudent. A 200kg + total weight will comfortably lead to qualification so we are not going to take much pressure in this event," a confident Sharma added.

Currently, Chanu is the top-ranked lifter in the 49kg category. However, all 11 lifters in the category have logged in with starting weights of 200 or above, the highest (205kg) belonging to the two Chinese lifters - Tokyo Olympic



champion Hou Zhihui and Jiang Huihua.

Meanwhile, Bindiyanari, who won a silver at the CWG in the 55kg event, will be moving up to 59kg. And while she has the strength, the team is working on improving her technique for bet-

ter results.

"Her technique is not that great, we have to work on that first. She has the strength but the technique is poor," Sharma said.

Bindiyanari has been put in the D category based on her entry weight.



PELE SAYS HE'S 'STRONG, WITH A LOT OF HOPE'

AP ■ SAO PAULO

Brazilian football legend Pele said on Saturday that he feels "strong, with a lot of hope" despite medical problems that have kept the 82-year-old sports icon in the hospital with a respiratory infection.

Pele, widely regarded as the greatest footballer of all time, was hospitalized earlier this week amid ongoing colon cancer treatments.

"My friends, I want to keep everyone calm and positive," Pele said in an Instagram post. "I'm strong, with a lot of hope and I follow my treatment as usual."

Doctors treating Pele said earlier Saturday that the Brazilian legend remained "stable," with his condition not having deteriorated over the last day.

Pele "has had a good response to care without any worsening in the clinical picture in the last 24 hours," doctors at Sao Paulo's Albert

Einstein Hospital said in a statement. Doctors made no reference to media reports earlier on Saturday that the three-time World Cup winner was receiving end-of-life care.

Pele was admitted to hospital earlier this week for what doctors said was a "re-evaluation" of the chemotherapy he has been undergoing since surgery to remove a colon tumor in September last year.

At the ongoing World Cup in Qatar, players expressed their support for Pele.

France striker Kylian Mbappe on Saturday tweeted: "Pray for the King."

England captain Harry Kane offered his support for Pele at a press conference ahead of his team's last-16 tie against Senegal.

"We send our best wishes to him and obviously all his family as well," said Kane.

"He is an inspiration amongst our game and an incredible footballer and incredible person. We wish him well."