

OPINION 6
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NEW DELHI, MONDAY MARCH 21, 2022; PAGES 12 ₹3



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Biren is Manipur CM again

**Suspense over
U'khand CM
may be over in
BJP meet today**

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Manipur's acting Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh was unanimously elected as the Chief Minister of the State, for the second-time in a row, in the BJP Legislature Party meeting in Imphal. However, the suspense over the name of the new Chief Minister of Uttarakhand that has been going on for the past 11 days would be cleared in the meeting of the Legislature Party of the BJP on Monday.

The BJP leadership is also engaged in finalising the Cabinet of Yogi Adityanath and deciding the Chief Minister of Goa.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a meeting to discuss the formation of the Government in Uttar Pradesh, Goa and Uttarakhand. Union Ministers Amit Shah and Rajnath Singh and party chief JP Nadra were present at the meeting. Shah will be flying to Lucknow on Monday and holding a discussion with Yogi to give the final shape to his Cabinet.

Earlier today, the BJP announced that N Biren Singh will continue as the Chief Minister of Manipur for a second straight term. The



Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents a bouquet to BJP leader N Biren Singh after his election as the leader of BJP Manipur Pradesh Legislative Party and Chief Minister of Manipur, in Imphal on Sunday

PTI

announcement came a day after Singh, along with the other contenders — Biswajit Singh and Yumnam Khemchand — met the top leadership of the party.

Soon after the Legislature Party approved Singh as the State Chief Minister, the BJP's central observer for Manipur, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said, "It is a good decision taken unanimously by everyone. It will ensure that Manipur has a stable and responsible Government which will build the State further because the Centre today, under the leadership of PM Modi gives special attention to the North-

Eastern States."

The Legislature Party's meeting and the announcement follow ten days of suspense since the Assembly poll results were announced with rival leaders Biren Singh and senior BJP MLA Biswajit Singh rushing to Delhi twice to meet central leaders.

A former football player, a BSF jawan, and a journalist, N Biren Singh was picked as the Chief Minister of Manipur for the second time after the BJP had won 32 seats in 60-member State Assembly. The BJP has the support of at least 11 more MLAs from two of its allies in the State.

Union Law and Justice

Minister Kiren Rijiju, Union Environment Minister Bhubendra Yadav were also present on the occasion as central observers along with Sitharaman. All central observers and Union Ministers felicitated Singh on his selection as the CM and presented him with bouquets. BJP spokesperson and State-in-charge Sambit Patra, too, was present on the occasion and greeted the new CM. Singh had this week met with Modi with an indication that he would retain the top post. The BJP's central observers for the State had landed in Imphal earlier in the day for the crucial meeting.

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'Reduce gap between Covid jabs'

As Omicron cases rise globally, NTAGI tells Centre to cut time to 8 to 16 weeks

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In what could be seen as a preventive measure amidst rising Omicron cases in many countries across the world, the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI), the highest technical body of the Union Health Ministry on immunisation has recommended reducing the gap between the first and second dose of Covid vaccine Covishield to eight to 16 weeks. At present, the second dose of Covishield is being administered 12-16 weeks after the first dose under the national vaccination drive. India's apex body on immunisation now recommends this be



curbed to ramp up the administration of the second dose of Covishield to the remaining population amid rising cases in European nations and some other countries.

The Government had on May 13, 2021, extended the gap between the first and second doses of the Covishield vaccine from 6-8 weeks to 12-16 weeks, based on the recommendations by NTAGI that provide guidance to the Union Health Ministry on the immunisation. Though India continues on a downward trend of new Covid

cases, in the last couple of days, discussions and worries have started to gather pace with a sudden rise in new cases of coronavirus globally, mainly in the South Asia region. The WHO has even warned countries to remain vigilant against the virus. China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Vietnam, South Korea are among the South East Asian countries witnessing a rise in Covid cases. Dr NK Arora, the head of Covid-19 Task Group in National Immunisation Technical Advisory Group (NTAGI), had recently said, "The fourth wave will be driven by a new variant since BA.2 is present in 75 per cent of the population. Can't say when India will witness the fourth wave. Vaccines available now do not cover Omicron to the extent that boosters will benefit."

In India, a total of 1,761 fresh Covid cases were recorded nationwide on Sunday which is the lowest in around 688 days. Following a continuous downward trend, India's active caseload has also declined to 26,240, constituting 0.06 percent of total positive cases.

Israeli PM to visit India from April 2

Bennett to meet Modi, discuss Defence ties, terror & Ukraine

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a big boost to ties between the two countries, Israel Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will visit India in the first week of April. It will mark 30 years of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between

India and Israel.

Sources said Bennett is likely to undertake a four-day tour starting April 2.

Bennett will hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on issues ranging from bilateral ties, the situation in Ukraine, terrorism and the security scenarios in the neighbourhood.

The two leaders will explore ways to further enhance cooperation in the field of defence



and strategic relations. Israel has emerged as one of the major weapon suppliers to India in the last 30 years besides co-

operating in the fight against terrorism.

"I am delighted to pay my first official visit to India at the invitation of my friend," Prime Minister Modi, and together we will continue leading the way for our countries' relations," Bennett said, as quoted by

Israel Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Sunday.

The two leaders first met on the sidelines of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow last October, where Modi invited Bennett to pay an official visit to India.

The Israeli PMO said in a release the purpose of the visit is to advance and strengthen the strategic alliance between the countries, and to expand bilateral ties.

"In addition, the leaders will discuss the strengthening of cooperation in a variety of areas Continued on Page 2

CAPSULE

DIESEL PRICE FOR BULK USERS HIKED ₹25/LTR

New Delhi: The price of diesel sold to bulk users has been hiked by about ₹25 per litre in line with a near 40 per cent rise in international oil prices, but retail rates at petrol pumps remain unchanged, sources said.

NEPAL APPOINTS NEW AMBASSADOR TO INDIA

Kathmandu: Nepal's President Bidya Devi Bhandari has appointed economist and former US envoy Dr Shankar Prasad Sharma as the country's new Ambassador to India, an official announcement said on Sunday.

'877 BABIES DIED DUE TO DELIVERY AT HOME'

Shillong: As many as 877 newborn babies and 81 mothers have died as pregnant women refused to get admitted to hospitals for institutional delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic due to fears of contracting the disease, the Meghalaya Government has informed the National Human Rights Commission of India recently.

'Russian forces have bombed art school sheltering 400 people'

2nd time public building hit in Mariupol: Ukraine

AP ■ LVIV

Ukrainian authorities said Sunday that Russia's military bombed an art school sheltering some 400 people in the embattled port city of Mariupol, where Ukraine's President said an unrelenting Russian siege would be remembered for centuries to come. It was the second time in less than a week that city officials reported a public building where residents had taken shelter coming under attack. A bomb hit a Mariupol theatre with more than 1,300 people believed to be inside on Wednesday, local officials said.

There was no immediate word on casualties from the reported strike on the art school, which *The Associated*

Press could not independently verify. Ukrainian officials have not given an update on the search of the theatre since Friday, when they said at least 130 had been rescued.

Mariupol, a strategic port on the Azov Sea, has been under bombardment for at least three weeks and has seen some of the worst horrors of the war in Ukraine. At least 2,300 people have died, some of whom had to be buried in mass graves, and food, water and electricity have run low.

"To do this to a peaceful city, what the occupiers did, is a terror that will be remembered for centuries to come," Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation. "The more Russia uses terror against Ukraine, the worse the consequences for it," he added.

In recent days, Russian forces have battled their way into the city, cutting it off from the Azov Sea and devastating a massive steel

plant. The fall of Mariupol would be an important but costly victory for the Russians, whose advance is largely stalled outside other major cities more than three weeks into the biggest land invasion in Europe since World War II.

In major cities across Ukraine, hundreds of men, women and children have been killed in Russian bombardments, while millions of civilians have raced to underground shelters or fled the country. In the capital, Kyiv, at least 20 babies carried by Ukrainian surrogate mothers are stuck in a makeshift bomb shelter, waiting for parents to travel into the war zone to pick them up. The infants - some just days old - are being cared for by nurses who cannot leave the shelter because of constant shelling by Russian troops who are trying to encircle the city. In the hard-hit north-eastern city of Sumy, authorities evacuated 71 orphaned babies through a humanitarian Continued on Page 2

All England final: Sen's impressive run ends in loss

PTI ■ BIRMINGHAM

Lakshya Sen's dream run at the All England Championships ended with a heartbreaking straight-game loss against world number one and Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen in the men's singles final, continuing India's 21-year-long agonising wait for the coveted trophy. After four days of sensational badminton, the 20-year-old Sen faltered on the cusp of history as he committed too many errors to go down 10-21 15-21 to former champion Axelsen in a lop-sided summit clash that lasted 53 minutes at the Barclaycard Arena.

On Saturday, Sen had become only the fifth Indian after Prakash Nath (1947), Prakash Padukone (1980, 1981), Pullela Gopichand (2001) and Saina Nehwal (2015) to reach the final of the prestigious tournament after outwitting defending champion Continued on Page 2

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Ailing Sharad, Lalu come together after decades



Loktantrik Janata Dal leader Sharad Yadav and Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav after announcing a merger of the two parties

RANJAN DIMRI/THE PIONEER

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former Union Minister Sharad Yadav on Sunday announced that he has merged his Loktantrik Janata Dal (LJD) with Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD,

calling it the "first step in Opposition unity". With this, the two ailing leaders — once seen as rivals — come back together after decades. Asserting that nationwide Opposition unity is imperative to defeat the BJP, the

Continued on Page 2

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Pak brainwashing youth to keep terrorism alive in J-K: Officials

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a change in its strategy in fomenting the three-decade-long cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan is again employing the tactics of brainwashing the local youth in the name of religion and exploiting the "religious fault lines", officials said here on Sunday.

The change in tactics should also be seen in the light of Pakistan's desperate attempt to get out of the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), they said.

The terror movement, initiated by Pakistan's spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) under the garb of calls of 'Azadi' (freedom) and right to self-determination, has slowly and steadily transformed into a low-intensity conflict that stands on the pillars of "religion and radicalisation" today, the officials said.

From 2016, to get itself out of the FATF grey list, the ISI started creating multiple pseu-

do terror groups like The Resistance Front (TRF), Kashmir Tigers (KT), The People's Anti-Fascist Force (PAFF) and Kashmir Janbaz Force (KJF), to name a few. These groups are nothing but shadow groups of banned terror outfits Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen set up with the primary aim of creating a smoke screen to shield Pakistan from FATF sanctions and the secondary aim of re-strategising and giving terrorism in Kashmir an indigenous face.

"Pakistan is definitely changing its subversion narrative, giving it a religious tone not only to manipulate the minds of the youth in the Valley but also to exploit the religious fault lines that exist within India," an official said.

Having seen its failure in mobilising locals, especially after the death of veteran separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani in September last year, the ISI believes that religion

holds the key to its next move in Kashmir. "The neighbour has been and still remains the biggest menacing factor that has pulled back Kashmir and its people. Having vitiated and radicalised the Sufi soul of the Valley for the last three decades to meet its nefarious design, the masters of destruction across the border now believe that the time is ripe to infuse religious schism into the mix, and champion itself (Pakistan) as the saviour of religion," the official said.

Analysis of the recent intercepts and questioning of arrested terrorists show that the ISI and others in Pakistan are desperate to polarise the local population in Jammu and Kashmir and generate dissent against the State in the name of religion, the officials said.

Carrying out a detailed analysis of last year's incidents of targeting of minorities in Kashmir, especially prominent chemist Makhan Lal Bindroo, the officials said that initially terror groups claimed respon-

sibility and labelled him as a government agent but the number of people who joined his funeral was an eye-opener as locals, despite the false claims, expressed their anger at his killing.

The officials said the changing contours of Pakistan's narrative in Kashmir are the outcome of the fact that its rhetoric of the right to self-determination has failed and the propaganda machinery being run from across the border has realised the futility of the call for "freedom movement and resistance against the so-called occupational forces". Once the vanguard of the indigenous face of terrorism in Kashmir, Hizbul Mujahideen has fallen in the hierarchy of terror groups with its cadres dwindling drastically.

As on January 1, the outfit only had 30-odd terrorists operating in the Valley, primarily in Anantnag district in south Kashmir, and negligible presence in north and central Kashmir.

Future Covid waves unlikely to have serious impact on India, say experts

Some call for easing of protocols

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Amid a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia and parts of Europe, experts in India feel that given the high vaccination coverage and immunity due to natural infection, any future waves are unlikely to have a major impact in the country. Some of them even said that the government should consider relaxing the mask mandate as the daily COVID-19 cases and deaths have remained low for a while.

India on Sunday recorded 1,761 fresh COVID-19 cases, the lowest in around 688 days, and 127 deaths. The active cases also declined further to 26,240, according to government data. Dr Sanjay Rai, senior epidemiologist at AIIMS and the principal investigator of Covaxin trials for both adults and children at the institute, said that SARS-CoV-2 is an RNA virus and mutations are

bound to occur. Already more than 1,000 mutations have occurred, although there are only five variants of concern. "India experienced a very devastating second wave last year, which was very unfortunate, but currently this is our main strength as natural infection provides better and longer duration of protection.

Also, there is high vaccination coverage. Hence, severe impact of any future wave is unlikely," Rai, professor at the Centre for Community Medicine at AIIMS, said. "It is also time that the Indian government may consider relaxing the mask mandate," he said, adding that senior citizens and those at a higher risk of contracting the infection should continue wearing masks as a precautionary measure.

Having said that, Rai emphasised, the government should continue with the SARS-CoV-2 surveillance, including genomic sequencing, to monitor the emergence of any future variant. According to Dr Chandrakant Lahariya, an epidemiologist and public

health specialist, the possibility of a fresh surge in India is low even with a new variant. "If we analyse data on seroprevalence, vaccination coverage and evidence on the spread of Omicron, it is logical to conclude that the COVID-19 epidemic in India is over. For India, the possibility of a fresh surge for many months and even with a new variant is low," he said.

The reason is that because of the hybrid immunity after three waves of natural infection and a large proportion of adults receiving both doses of COVID-19 vaccine, the susceptible pool has come down drastically, Lahariya said.

"We know that antibody level declines over a period of time but hybrid immunity continues to provide protection. Moreover, at this stage of the pandemic, infections and new COVID-19 cases are not a concern. The outcome of those infections should be the criteria to assess the situation," he said. Lahariya, however, stressed the need for the government to continue tracking

situations in other countries, experts to analyse the situation in India, continue genomic surveillance and citizens to get the recommended vaccine shots. "It is also a time that as a society, we prepare for living with Covid," he said. Lahariya further said the time is right to do away with the mask mandate for the majority of the population.

"It is also time that Indian government reviews and revises the face mask-related regulation. The time has come that mask requirement for majority of population can be done away with. It can be done in a graded manner," he stated.

Dr Jugal Kishore, head of Community Medicine at Safdarjung Hospital, said due to high prevalence of seropositivity, which indicates that more than 80-90 per cent of population has been infected by coronavirus, measures like wearing masks can be done away with. He also pointed out that due to high natural infection, people are unlikely to have severe symptoms if a new wave of coronavirus comes.

J&K LG's advisor Farooq Khan resigns, likely to get key role in BJP

PTI ■ JAMMU

Farooq Khan, an advisor to Jammu and Kashmir Lt Governor Manoj Sinha, submitted his resignation on Sunday evening and was set to be given an "important assignment" in the BJP ahead of the first assembly elections in the union territory, officials said here.

A retired IPS officer who was instrumental in breaking the backbone of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir in the early 1990s, Khan had earlier served as a national secretary of the BJP and held various posts in the party's minority cell. The 67-year-old is likely to be assigned the responsibility of preparing the party for the first assembly elections in the union territory. Though

the poll schedule has not been announced yet, the official-spect that the elections will be held after October following completion of the ongoing delimitation exercise by May. The erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir was bifurcated into union territories and its special status under Article 370 of the Constitution was abrogated in August 2019.

In July 2019, Khan was appointed as advisor to then Lieutenant Governor Satya Pal Malik. Prior to that he was the administrator of Lakshadweep.

Khan started his career in Jammu and Kashmir as a sub-inspector of police in 1984 and went on to become the inspector general of police. He was promoted to the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1994.

He came into the limelight when he volunteered to head a specialist force (STF) of the police in 1994 at a time when the morale of the force was low and security-related operations were being carried out by the Army and the BSF. The STF was set up with personnel from the Jammu and Kashmir Police and acted a crack team in anti-militancy operations.

Belonging to Poonch in Jammu, Khan was deputy inspector general of Jammu region and led crack teams to end a siege laid by militants at the famous Raghunath Temple in 2003. After his retirement in 2013 as an IGP and head of the Sher-e-Kashmir Police Academy in Udhampur, Khan joined the BJP in 2014 in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Delhi Court orders framing of charge against Yasin Malik, Hafiz Saeed, others

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi court has ordered framing of charges under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) against Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chief Mohammad Yasin Malik and others in a case related to alleged terrorism and secessionist activities that disturbed the Valley in 2017.

The court ordered framing of charges against Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) founder Hafiz Saeed, Hizbul Mujahideen chief Syed Salahuddin, Kashmiri separatist leaders, including Yasin Malik, Shabbir Shah, Masarat Alam and others, under various sections of the stringent UAPA and Indian Penal Code (IPC), including criminal conspiracy, waging war against country, and unlawful activities and terrorism, in a case pertaining to secessionist activities that disturbed Jammu and Kashmir.

The court also charged Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, Md Yusuf Shah, Aftab Ahmad Shah, Altaf Ahmad Shah, Nayeem Khan, Farooq Ahmad Dar, Md Akbar Khanday, Raja Mehrajuddin Kalwal, Bashir Ahmad Bhat, Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali, Shabir Ahmad Shah, Masarat Alam, Abdul Rashid Sheikh and Naval Kishore Kapoor. Special Judge

Praveen Singh, after discussion of evidence, said prima facie, it is established that Shabir Shah, Yasin Malik, Rashid Engineer, Altaf Fantoosh, Masrat and Hurriyat/Joint Resistance Leadership (JRL) were direct recipients of terror funds.

"So far from the statements of witnesses, a pattern is emerging - Pakistan or its agencies and accused share a common goal and there is an agreement on the means to be used for achieving that goal and terror funding is also being provided from Pakistan," he said.

The court said, in the conspiracy, "The baton was held by conductors sitting across the border in the form of Pakistani agencies such as ISI and each of conspirators, knowing every other conspirator, was playing his own role as per directions of conductor in order to create a symphony of bloodshed, violence, mayhem and destruction with ultimate object of secession of J&K." It said the money for terror funding was sent from and by Pakistan and its agencies and even diplomatic mission was used to fulfil evil design. Money for terror funding was also sent by proclaimed international terrorists and accused Hafiz Saeed, it said. It said a criminal conspiracy was hatched with a final object of

secession of J&K from Union of India and within that conspiracy, a conspiracy was hatched to commit certain acts to achieve object of original conspiracy and those acts, as discussed above, have been found to be terrorist acts.

After reading a joint press statement issued by Syed Ali Geelani and Mohammad Yasin Malik and others, the court noted that terrorist organisations and JRL/All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) not only share a common goal but from their own official words, it is apparent that they work in unison towards that goal.

The court also noted that prima facie there existed a criminal conspiracy pursuant to which large-scale protests, resulting in violence and arson at a massive scale, were orchestrated. The court said Malik had set up an elaborate structure and mechanism across the world to raise funds for carrying out terrorist and other unlawful activities in Jammu and Kashmir in name of "freedom struggle". It said accused Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali was one of main conduits for flow of this terror funding and accused Naval Kishore Kapoor had played an active part in facilitating it.

'Russian forces have bombed art school sheltering 400 people'

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corridor, regional governor Dmytro Zhvyvtskyi said Sunday. He said the orphans, most of whom need constant medical attention, would be taken to an unspecified foreign country, Russian shelling killed at least five civilians, including a 9-year-old boy, in Kharkiv, an eastern city that is Ukraine's second-largest.

The British Defense Ministry said Russia's failure to gain control of the skies over Ukraine "has significantly blunted their operational progress," forcing them to rely on stand-off weapons launched from the relative safety of Russian airspace.

A rocket attack on the Black Sea port city of Mykolaiv early Friday killed as many as 40 marines, a Ukrainian military official told The New York Times, making it one of the deadliest single attacks on Ukrainian forces.

In a separate strike, the Russian Defense Ministry said a Kinzhal hypersonic missile hit a Ukrainian fuel depot in Kostiantynivka, a city near Mykolaiv.

The Russian military said Saturday that it used a Kinzhal for the first time in combat to destroy an ammunition depot in the Carpathian Mountains in western Ukraine. Russia has said the Kinzhal, carried by MiG-31 fighter jets, has a range of up to 2,000 kilometers (about 1,250 miles) and flies at 10 times the speed of sound.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Saturday that the US couldn't confirm the use of a hypersonic missile in Ukraine. Konashenkov said Kalibr cruise missiles launched by Russian warships from the Caspian Sea were also involved in the strike on the fuel depot in Kostiantynivka and were used to destroy an armour repair plant in northern Ukraine.

Unexpectedly strong Ukrainian resistance has dashed Russian President Vladimir Putin's hopes for a fast victory after he ordered his troops to invade Ukraine on Feb. 24. While the Kremlin has said Russia is conducting a "special military operation" aimed at legitimate targets, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Saturday that "brutal, savage techniques" targeting civilians had allowed Moscow's troops to advance.

UN bodies have confirmed more than 847 civilian deaths since the war began, though they concede the actual toll is likely much higher. The UN says nearly 3.4 million people have fled Ukraine as refugees.

Estimates of Russian deaths vary widely, but even conservative figures are in the low thousands. The reported battlefield deaths of four Russian generals - out of an estimated

20 deployed in Ukraine, suggest an impaired command of the fighting, said Dmitry Gorenburg, a researcher on Russia's security at the Virginia-based CNA think tank. Gorenburg said. Russia would need 800,000 troops - almost equal to its entire active-duty military - to control Ukraine in the face of prolonged armed opposition, according to Michael Clarke, former head of the British-based Royal United Services Institute, a defense think tank.

"Unless the Russians intend to be completely genocidal - they could flatten all the major cities, and Ukrainians will rise up against Russian occupation - there will be just constant guerrilla war," Clarke said.

Ukraine and Russia have held several rounds of negotiations aimed at ending the conflict, but the neighbouring countries remain divided over several issues. Zelenskyy has said he is willing to drop Ukraine's bid to join NATO but wants certain security guarantees from Russia.

Moscow is pressing for Ukraine's complete demilitarization. Evacuations from Mariupol and other besieged cities proceeded along eight of 10 humanitarian corridors that Ukraine and Russia agreed to on Saturday. Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said, and officials said a total of 6,623 people left Kyiv and other cities. Vereshchuk said planned humanitarian aid for the southern city of Kherson, which Russia seized early in the war, could not be delivered because the trucks were stopped along the way by Russian troops. Mariupol authorities said Sunday that nearly 40,000 people had left the city in the last week, the vast majority in their own vehicles, despite ongoing air and artillery strikes.

The Mariupol city council claimed Saturday that Russian soldiers had forcibly relocated several thousand city residents, mostly women and children, to Russia. It didn't say where, and AP could not immediately confirm the claim. Some Russians also have fled their country amid a widespread crackdown on dissent. Since the invasion of Ukraine started, police have arrested thousands of antiwar protesters, while government agencies have silenced independent media and cut off access to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. In Ukraine, Zelenskyy on Sunday ordered the activities of 11 political parties with links to Russia to be suspended during the period of martial law. The largest of those parties has 44 out of 450 seats in the country's parliament. "Activities by politicians aimed at discord and collaboration will not succeed," he said in the address.



Goa CM Pramod Sawant along with state BJP leaders pays tribute at Smriti Sthal in memory of former Goa CM late Manohar Parrikar, at Miramar in North Goa district. PTI Photo

All England final: Sen's...

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Lee Zii Jia in a gruelling semifinals. A week back, Sen had recorded his first win over former world champion Axelsen en route to his final appearance at German Open but he couldn't sustain his craft on Sunday as his highly-fancied rival returned favours, claiming his fifth overall win against the Indian.

Ailing Sharad, Lalu...

From Page 1

The movie setting agenda, which seeks to highlight the violent trauma Kashmiri Pandits underwent leading to their exodus from the Valley over three decades back, has been accused by critics, including leaders of Opposition parties, of fomenting "hate and division" with its alleged negative portrayal of Kashmiri Muslims.

"Politics of hate is taking place, and the Constitution and democracy are in danger," Tejashwi Yadav told reporters, thanking Sharad Yadav for showing his faith in him.

The move by Sharad Yadav (74), who had been keeping low after battling health issues for months, is seen as an effort to rehabilitate his colleagues and other associates as his LJD could never become a serious force after its launch following his separation with JD(U) leader and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. He had contested the 2019 Lok Sabha election on the RJD ticket while his daughter had fought the 2020 Bihar Assembly poll as a nominee of the Congress, then an RJD ally.

Unity of Opposition parties is his priority, Sharad Yadav told reporters here, while lauding Tejashwi Yadav for leading the fight against the BJP-led NDA in Bihar. Opposition parties should join hands nationwide to take on the BJP, he said, adding that no party can singlehandedly defeat it. He

hailed Tejashwi Yadav as Bihar's future and played down reporters' queries about the possible leader of the opposition parties if they were to unite. Citing past instances, he said parties have first joined forces and a leader was picked later. A broader unity of opposition parties should be the first step considering the situation in the country, he said.

"This step (merger) has been necessitated as an initiative of my regular efforts for bringing together scattered Janata parivar in view of the current political situation in the country," he had earlier said in a statement, claiming the BJP government has been a failure and people are looking for a strong opposition.

The merger marks his coming together with Lalu Prasad Yadav after more than three decades with both leaders battling health issues and seen to be at a fag end of their political career. Lalu Prasad had quit Janata Dal in 1997 to form his party over differences with its leadership as the probe against fodder scam, in which he was a main accused, gathered pace. Sharad Yadav was then seen as his rival within the Janata Dal, and he later joined hands with Nitish Kumar to end the RJD's 15-year reign in Bihar in 2005. Sharad Yadav was, however, also seen as a key votary for JD(U)-RJD alliance in 2015 assembly polls in Bihar against the BJP, and he later parted ways with Kumar over his decision to ally with BJP again.

Israeli PM to visit India from April 2

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Including innovation, economy, research and development, agriculture and more," Bennett's office informed. The visit will mark the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of full-fledged diplomatic relations between the two countries as India opened an Embassy in Tel Aviv in 1992. For years, the bilateral engagement revolved around defence and agriculture, but, in recent years, the relations have seen rapid growth across a broad spectrum of areas. The Israeli Prime Minister appreciated Modi and gave him credit for "restarting relations between India and Israel." He said the "relations between our two unique cultures...are deep, and they rely on deep appreciation and

meaningful collaborations." "There are many things we can learn from the Indians, and this is what we strive to do. Together we will expand our cooperation to other areas, from innovation and technology, security and cyber, to agriculture and climate change," Bennett added.

He also said ties are based on mutual "appreciation and meaningful collaboration." The visit also aims to expand the cooperation between the two countries in the areas of innovation and technology, security and cyber, and agriculture and climate change.

Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel since diplomatic ties were established. The visit in 2017 saw him holding wide-ranging talks with then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Biren is Manipur CM again

From Page 1

In the 2022 election BJP has won 32 seats, one more than the simple majority mark, reducing the main rival Congress to a few seats. While the Congress had bagged 42 in 2012, this time around, ended up with five seats, two less than the National People's Party (NPP) headed by Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma.

NPP which was an alliance partner of the BJP in the last government is no more a BJP alliance partner in the state. The Naga People's Front (NPF), an ally of the BJP, has won five seats in the state assembly around the Naga inhabited hills in Manipur. NPF was an alliance partner of the BJP in the last Singh-headed government in Manipur. The Janata Dal (United), which fielded

many nominees rejected by the BJP has surprisingly won six assembly seats in Manipur and is also supporting the BJP. The newly-floated Kuki People's Alliance has won two hill constituencies it contested in the state. Meanwhile, the suspense on the names of Chief Minister of Uttarakhand where BJP returned to power is also likely to end soon with the meeting of state legislative party meeting early next week BJP has been holding back-to-back meetings since Saturday over the government formation in Uttarakhand and Goa.

Uttarakhand's acting CM Pushkar Dhami and state BJP head Madan Kaushik met Amit Shah on Sunday. Ahead of the meeting, Dhami was quoted as saying "The procedure for government formation is underway...the BJP central leadership will take a decision."

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Prez gives Jama Masjid area a ‘heritage park’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Endowed with a Mughal-style 'baradari' and rich stocks of flowers, a new heritage-themed park near Jama Masjid in old Delhi was inaugurated by President Ram Nath Kovind on Sunday.

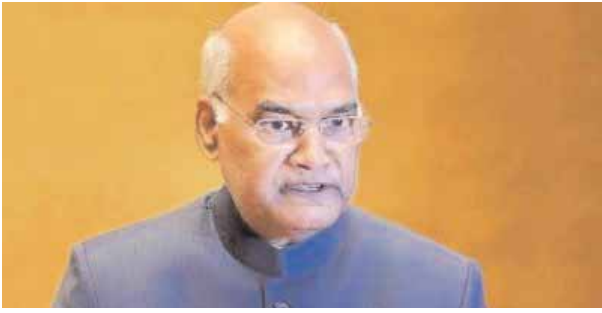
The park was opened amid colourful cultural performances, strains of classical music and traditional dance by a troupe of artists in the 'baradari' which was decked up with flowers and a chandelier. President Kovind inaugurated the park by unveiling a plaque. He was also given a tour of the garden during his brief visit. In the first phase, an area of about 1.75 acres has been developed at an estimated cost of Rs 7.65 crore, civic officials said.

After months of hard labour and meticulous planning, the plot, which was earlier covered in filth and encroached from multiple sides and often used by anti-social

elements, has been transformed into a beautiful park, they said. Conceived in 2017, the park has been built with North Delhi Municipal Corporation's funds and contributions from various MPs cutting across party lines and former Union minister Vijay Goel, officials had earlier said. It has been developed using rich stocks of flowers and has structures built with traditional craftsmanship.

A white marble-made 'baradari' (pavilion) with cusped arches is the centrepiece of this garden while red sandstone, white marble, Dholpur stone, and Delhi quartzite stones have been used in the construction. In the second phase of this urban renewal project, the remaining 2.25 acres is to be developed at an estimated cost of Rs 10.03 crore. For the first phase, the NDMC had arranged Rs 4.70 crore from its resources, officials said.

The second phase also



envisages reviving the old water stream (referred to as 'nahar' by locals) that existed on a stretch located adjacent to the current boundary wall of the park, they said. The park is also endowed with Mughal-style 'chattris', stone railings and lamp posts, borrowing design elements from the Red Fort's ramparts, ornate gates, a sunken open-air theatre, and also has toilet facilities. Delhi Lt Governor Anil Bajjal, Chief Secretary Vijay Dev, mayors of three BJP-led municipal corporations — Raja Iqbal Singh

(NDMC), Mukesh Suryan (SDMC) and Shyam Sunder Aggarwal (EDMC), senior BJP leader Baijayant Panda, and Rajya Sabha member Roopa Ganguly, who also has contributed funds for the park, were among those present on the occasion.

"I am very happy to have contributed funds for this project through MPLADS, and delighted to see this beautiful park finally being inaugurated today. Heritage plays a very important role in any society and this is a great addition to

the recreational spaces in Delhi," Ganguly told PTI.

A food court area has also been developed, said architect Kapil Aggarwal, who designed the park. The park sits in close proximity to the 17th century Jama Masjid and faces Red Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage site, on the other side.

"We wanted visitors to feel the park was part of both the sites and therefore, we chose heritage elements after careful research, so that new structures would complement the existing heritage fabric of the region," he added. The part, which is to be developed under the second phase, is now slowly being barricaded, and civic officials said work has begun to reclaim the neighbouring plot fully for the park project. A senior NDMC official had earlier said the park has "rich stocks" of flowers and shrubberies, including petunia, dog flowers, marigold, carnation, poinsettia, ornamental cabbage, croton

and furcaria.

"Once we open it to public, there will be a nominal ticket fee," he said. Visitors will also get to enjoy delicious cuisine of Chandni Chowk and handicrafts of Old Delhi at the park, officials said. The park, located opposite the Parade Ground parking facility, was originally named 'Heritage Park'. The name of Charti Lal Goel, former deputy mayor of the erstwhile unified Municipal Corporation of Delhi and first Speaker of the Delhi Legislative Assembly, was later prefixed to it, officials said.

A white marble bust of Charti Lal Goel, father of Vijay Goel, has also been installed near the ornately-carved 'baradari'.

President Kovind garlanded the statue and also posed for some pictures. An amount of Rs 17.68 crore was required towards the completion of the project which has been planned in two phases, officials said.

AAP Govt has won trust of people: Kejriwal

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The AAP Government has won the trust of the people by taking back the security of ex-Ministers, giving compensation for ruined crops, launching an anti-corruption helpline and announcing 25,000 Government jobs, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) National Convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said on Sunday.

During the virtual meeting with all AAP MLAs in Punjab, Kejriwal applauded the new MLAs for their wonderful work in this short span. "People hope in us is turning into firm confidence and trust. On one hand, we have administered the oath, formed the new cabinet, and have started working for the people of Punjab, and on the other hand, BJP is still unable to form its government in four states," he said.

Addressing newly elected MLAs, he said "I can bear with anything, but I can never tolerate dishonesty, corruption, and theft of public money. We have to work with the teachers, doctors, police, and tehsildars to change the system in Punjab."

Congratulating Punjab AAP MLAs for the victory, Kejriwal said, "I am both elated and emotional because of two reasons. First, the people of Punjab have elected us with a huge margin, eradicating all the old leaders from Punjab. Second, the way in which Bhagwant Mann ji has worked in Punjab is tremendous, he was sworn in on 16th March, and the whole world is talking about the wonderful work done by Mann Saab in just three days."

The AAP convener further said, "An anti-corruption action line was launched in Punjab two days back. I am getting messages and calls from Punjab. Somebody told me how because of the action line,

they got their registry done without having to give any bribe."

In his message to party MLAs, he said each minister has to work very hard. "I have heard that those MLAs who could not be elected as ministers are disappointed. We have got 92 seats, only 17 out of you could have been appointed as cabinet ministers. I know each and every one of you. 90-95 per cent of you have fought in the elections for the first time. Many of you come from a very simple background and many popular leaders have lost in front of you. I am certain that Mann Saab and his cabinet will appoint only good and honest officials. If an official does not fulfill their duties or indulges in corruption, the cabinet will take strict action against the official. You have to work with sheer honesty," said the CM.

Kejriwal also warned MLAs of strict action who are found indulging in corruption. "Many MLAs are doing on-ground inspections, visiting local schools, local hospitals, and local offices. But please do not misbehave and threaten the officials," he said.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said, "If my signature can help light the stove in somebody's house then there will be no greater virtue than this. If you work on recommendations, then you are killing someone else's rights, AAP does not work on recommendations. We should not get into caste and any discrimination."

Mann said that there are many such people who have won by 60-75 thousand votes. "Survey of every MLA and minister will also be done. If you want to secure your seat, then you have to maintain a strong friendship with people. There should be only one goal that Punjab should be made 'Rangla Punjab'," he said.

AAP Govt has failed to keep promises: Lekhi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The AAP Government has failed to keep any of the promises the party made in past seven years, said Union Minister of State Meenakshi Lekhi while addressing a large number of farmers sitting on dharna near Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's residence here on Sunday.

BJP State president Adesh Gupta said the working model of Kejriwal can be gauged from the fact that by taking farmers land in the name of schools or community centres, haj house is being made there. "There is a Government in Delhi which doesn't have time to hear the farmers sitting on dharna for over 40 days now. Some of the farmers' land in Delhi is under dirty water for years and nothing has been done to make it usable again," he said.

Gupta said under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi over 11 crore farmers are now getting Kisan Samman Nidhi and several



works are being done in Delhi as well. Also the land pooling policy is being amended so that it becomes even easier, he said.

The Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri said the farmers have been tirelessly protesting in support of their demands for 42 days now their voice will also echo in the state assembly session beginning March 23. He said "we

asked for Rs 50000 per acre compensation for crops destroyed by farmers in 128 villages here due to untimely rains but he didn't even bother to visit these villages forget the compensation. In the past seven years, Kejriwal didn't fulfil even a single promise whether it is doing away with 81 A section or free power to the state, he said.

Senior BJP leader and MP

Manoj Tiwari said that several BJP ruled states give free power for irrigation purpose but in Delhi farmers have to pay bills on commercial rate. "Nothing can be more shameful than the fact that even after a farmer's death his land is not getting transferred to his heir. You must go to every household to tell the reality of this deaf and dumb government, he said

Woman arrested in abduction-cum murder case from Ghaziabad

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Special Cell of the Delhi Police has arrested a 27-year-old woman from Ghaziabad who was declared proclaimed offender in an abduction cum murder case.

The accused has been identified as Nidhi, a resident of Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Police said that Nidhi had gone underground after getting bail in 2017 in this case and she was declared a proclaimed offender in 2018 in this case.

According to Jasmeet Singh, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Special Cell, on Saturday, police received specific inputs about Nidhi near a café in Govindpuram, Ghaziabad, following which a trap was laid and Nidhi was nabbed.

According to police, nine people, including Nidhi and her husband Rahul Jaat, had conspired and abducted one

Sagar on April 1, 2015 from GTB Enclave area. They beat him and took to Baghpat. They pushed him in front of a truck where he was crushed to death.

"Nidhi and Rahul had objected to deceased Sagar's approach to Nidhi's sister Aarti even after her marriage. They had asked Sagar to stay away from Aarti, but he did not listen and kept on meeting Aarti. Due to this reason, Nidhi with others had planned and executed the abduction-cum-killing of Sagar. The reason for getting him crushed under the truck was to make the murder look like a case of simple road accident," said the DCP.

Nidhi's husband Rahul was also out on bail in this case. He is an associate gangster of notorious Rohit Chaudhary and Ankit Gurjar. Rahul was also involved in three cases of murder, attempt to murder, abduction for murder and Arms Act in Delhi, police added.

BJP slams city Govt for 'poor' PWD maintained roads

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi BJP slammed the AAP Government for the "poor" condition of roads maintained by the 'Public Works Department' (PWD). Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor has written a letter to Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia saying that despite repeated announcements by CM Arvind Kejriwal and his predecessor Satyendra Jain, there is no improvement in the pathetic condition of roads in the national capital.

"The poorly maintained roads cause a rise in road mishaps and contribute to pol-

lution apart from increasing travelling time for commuters," he said.

Major roads like Ring Road, Outer Ring Road, S.P. Mukherji Marg, Netaji Subash Marg, Vikas Marg, G.T. Road Shahdara, Vikas Marg, Swarn Cinema Road, Seelampur Road, Najafgarh Road, Patel Road, Lala Lapat Rai Marg, Tito Road, Khelgaon Marg, Model Town Road, Keshavpuram Road, Pitampura to Rohini Rithala Road, Punjabi Bagh Peeragarhi Road etc. to name a few across the city are full of potholes and totally withered due to lack of upkeep by PWD officials, he said.

53-yr-old held for assaulting elderly mother in Dwarka

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has arrested a 53-year-old man for allegedly assaulting his elderly mother over property dispute in Delhi's Dwarka area.

Police said that the woman, identified as Angoori Devi, later died in the hospital.

According to a senior police official, on Thursday, information was received from Deen Dayal Upadhyay (DDU) hospital regarding quarrel and injury following which a police team was dispatched.

"Police team found that one Angoori Devi (76), a resident of Uttam Nagar, was admitted to the hospital by her son-in-law Manoj Kumar. She received injuries on her head and arm and was found unfit

for the statement," said the senior police official.

"Thereafter, a case was registered under section 308 (attempt to commit culpable homicide) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Alleged



Bhagwan Dass, a resident of Mohan Garden, son of the deceased has been arrested and is under judicial custody," said the official.

The reason behind the scuffle was property dispute among the children of the deceased out of her two weddings, police said.

On Friday evening, police

M3M, MD, brass booked in ₹450 cr land fraud case

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Delhi Police has registered an First Information Report (FIR) against M3M India Private Limited, its Managing Director Basant Bansal and other directors for allegedly misappropriating land of value of approximately Rs 450 crores.

According to a senior police official, the FIR has been registered upon a complaint made by MGF Developments Limited for misappropriating land of admeasuring 31.06 acres of approximately Rs 450 crores situated in sector 112 and 113, Gurugram by illegally getting the land transferred in their name. "MGF has alleged that M3M and other accused persons made false representations

to them and induced them into a deal promising substantive monetary consideration. They handed over post dated cheques (which were never paid) to MGF," said the police official. "The land was transferred to M3M group companies on the condition that the land would vest in M3M Group companies only on honour of all the post-dated cheques tendered towards consideration amount otherwise the transfer would be rendered null and void ab-initio," stated the FIR. "The M3M Group companies did not pay the considera-

tion amount and on the other hand even though they were not having physical possession of the land they went ahead and got the mutation of the land done in their name and some portions of the land partitioned," stated the FIR. "They further went ahead and applied for licence to the DTCP, Haryana for construction of a residential project under 'New Integrated Licensing Policy (NILP)' on part of the land. M3M intended to make a project and sell it to many customers," as per the FIR.

20-yr-old illegal weapons dealer held; arms, ammunition seized

PTI ■ GURUGRAM

The police here nabbed a 20-year-old on charges of supplying illegal weapons and seized arms and ammunition from his possession, officials said on Sunday. Abhishek alias Gabbar alias Kalu, a resident of Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh, was arrested by the crime unit, Sector 17, at Panchgaon Chowk here on the Delhi-Jaipur highway late on Saturday night, they said. He was in Gurugram to supply weapons. The police have secured his remand for a couple of days, the officials said.

Abhishek has studied up to Class X and he began dealing with illegal weapons after his father's death, they said. "Twenty five country-made pistols and two live cartridges, which he carried in a bag, have been seized. We are questioning the accused and it will be clear during the investigation as to how many times he has supplied the weapons, and who his suppliers and buyers are... our teams are conducting raids to nab his other associates", Rajiv Deshwal, DCP (crime), said.

Over 5 narco tests conducted at FSL since Aug last year

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Over five narco tests has been conducted at the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) here since the facility was started in August last year, officials said on Sunday.

The FSL started the narco analysis facility, the first in north India, in collaboration with Ambedkar Hospital here, they said.

FSL Director Deepa Verma said efforts were being made for the past two years to start the facility. However, the first session was conducted on August 9, 2021, she said.

Narco analysis involves injecting a drug which induces a hypnotic or sedated state in which the person's imagination is neutralised and he or she is expected to divulge true information.

"The narco analysis is being conducted after administering drug to the suspect. So, the direction of the court is also needed.

"The laboratory also plays an important role. We also

needed a support system from the hospital because this test is conducted in the operation theatre so that the suspect remains under medical supervision," Verma said.

The FSL director said a team should be present during the test to monitor the suspect's parameters.

This process requires both psychologists and doctors, she said.

"It took two years to start. This is the first such facility in north India. A lot of effort was needed to be put like how the facility will be set up, what would be the requirements, how will we prepare, how would the medical team be prepared among others.

"Also, the training was not available easily due to the Covid pandemic because of which it took a longer time for all these preparations. Otherwise, we would have started it a year ago," Verma said.

The teams have conducted sessions on six to seven suspects and all were from Delhi, she said.

Emergency services to treat burn injuries now operational at AIIMS

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Emergency services for patients with burn injuries have been made operational at the Burns and Plastic Surgery Block of AIIMS, recently.

The facility, located next to the Trauma Centre, was so far being used as an ad hoc facility to treat COVID-19 patients.

"Emergency services for the burns patients has been made operational at Burns and Plastic Surgery Block wef (with effect from) March 15," according to a circular issued by the AIIMS medical superintendent.

The emergency services are made available on the ground floor of the Burns and Plastic Surgery Block with dedicated areas, and one can enter from Chaudhary Jhandu Singh Road in JPNATC Campus, the circular read.

Eight observation beds have been facilitated for the emergency services, it said. The block, according to the officials, is equipped to handle approximately 15,000 burn emergencies and 5,000 burn admissions a year.

Audit of plantations shows animals, stray cattle damaged plants at many sites

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

An audit of annual sapling plantations conducted in Delhi between 2016 and 2019 has shown wild animals and stray cattle damaged the plants at many sites, and soil and water conservation measures were not adopted at a majority of the places.

The Dehradun-based Forest Research Institute (FRI), which had last year conducted an audit of annual sapling plantations, also said "records of plantation sites were not presented or shown to survey teams".

"This is a serious problem with respect to monitoring and future implementation of the activities. Only the number of plants, names of the sites and GIS maps were shown," the FRI said in a report submitted to the Delhi forest department.

"At many sites, the plants were found damaged due to wild animals and stray cattle. Measures need to be enhanced to provide protection to the newly planted saplings," the

report accessed by PTI read.

It was also found that soil and water conservation measures were "feeble considering the fact that such measures were not adopted at majority of the sites", the FRI stated.

Soil and water conservation measures are important to enhance the productivity of the land, recharge the water table and improve the water regime at the plantation sites.

In the long run, such measures play a significant role in improving the survival rate of plantations by improving productivity and increasing soil moisture content.

"It would be prudent if the soil and water conservation component is compulsorily included in the plantation programmes and annual work plans," the report said.

Although the findings of the plantation audit presented an "encouraging" picture, it was also observed that GIS-based planning was not adopted for taking up plantation and soil and water conservation activities at the sites selected for the plantation.

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Please ensure to see these websites for any changes/amendments/corrigendum etc.

(A) 1.	34/PGM/AO/SM(JAL-OA)21-22-O/M of sewer line and MSPS/IPS at Expressway (Cleaning and removal of existing Desilting/Debris/Silt rubbish/Bio mass/Grit & Sediment Material from Open inlet Chamber and well upto Bottom Invert Level IPS-7, Sec-129 & IPS-8, Sec-127 at Noida Gr. Noida Expressway), NoidaExpressway/Noida. Cost. 34.93 Lac
2.	36/PGM/AO/SM(JAL-OA)21-22-O/M of sewer line and MSPS/IPS at Expressway (Cleaning and removal of existing Desilting/Debris/Silt rubbish/Bio mass/Grit & Sediment Material from Open inlet Chamber including Cleaning of all wall/floor by Super Suker Machine/ Mechanical Cleaning Machine/Chemical Cleaner in Mechanical Sewage Vibrator upto Bottom Invert Level MSPS-2 at Sector-168, R.H.S. of Noida Gr. Noida Expressway) Noida. Cost. 58.10 Lac
3.	37/PGM/AO/SM(JAL-OA)21-22-M/O Sewer Line and MSPS/SPS at Expressway (Two year Repairing and Rewinding of 75 HP Submersible Pump at IPS-3, Sector-93A) Noida. Cost. 37.67 Lac
4.	38/PGM/AO/SM(JAL-OA)21-22-O/M of Sewer line and MSPS/IPS at Expressway (Cleaning of sewer line and Sewer Manhole between IPS/MSPS from Ch. 0.00 Km. to 10.00 Km. RHS along Noida-Gr. Noida Expressway Green belt) Noida. Cost. 34.73 Lac
5.	39/PGM/AO/SM(JAL-OA)21-22-O/M of Sewer line and MSPS/IPS at Expressway (Cleaning of sewer line and Sewer Manhole between IPS/MSPS from Ch. 0.00 Km. to 10.00 Km. LHS along Noida- Gr. Noida Expressway Green belt) Noida. Cost. 34.70 Lac
6.	40/PGM/AO/SM(JAL-OA)21-22-M/O Sewer Line and MSPS/SPS at Expressway (Two year Repairing and Rewinding of 75 HP Submersible Pump at IPS-8, Sector-128) Noida. Cost. 37.93 Lac

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Wang for Russia-China-India gas pipeline



RAKESH K SINGH ■ NEW DELHI

In the shifting geopolitical landscape post the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi is likely to propose a Russia-China-India (RCI) oil/gas pipeline project during his upcoming New Delhi visit later this month. The move is said to have been formulated in response to the US sanctions against Moscow not only hitting the economic interests and businesses of Russia but also hitting India and China hard, top

sources privy to the development said. The possible proposition of the RCI Pipeline project comes in the backdrop of the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline not taking off due to security risks posed by a destabilised Kabul and the perennial anti-India stance of Islamabad. The TAPI has been under discussion for nearly three decades. However, India is unlikely to go ahead with any such proposal without gauging the possible impact on domes-

tic audiences as well securing national interests, according to officials. Taking advantage of its sanctions against the Kremlin, the US has been seeking to leverage with New Delhi to further enlarge its defence procurement from Washington which has even threatened India with sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for the acquisition of S-400 missile defence systems from Russia, the sources said. However, New Delhi is in no mood to budge and spoil its decades-long strategic relations with Moscow, especially with a firm realisation here that not only American defence assets are costly but investments in technology transfers in India by the US in the sector are low as compared to Russia, they said. During the likely visit of Yi, a proposal of Alternative Payments System (APS) between Russia, China and India to offset the impact of the sanctions against the Kremlin, including the removal of

Moscow from the SWIFT payment system, is also likely to come up. Initially, Russia, China and India could be the part of the proposed APS and subsequently more countries can join the grouping, shifting the global order in the process by shaking off the dominance of the American Mastercard and Visa. The three countries have a combined population of nearly three billion out of the global population of 7.9 billion and a corresponding captive market with a sizable consumer base. Counter-terrorism and defence analyst Dr Rituraj Mate said, "China's proposal of RCI Pipeline Project is based on a double game with Beijing gaining the contract for installation of the pipeline on the one hand and getting royalty from India on the other hand." "Once the pipeline comes to fruition, oil and gas prices will decrease in India and also improve New Delhi's bargaining leverage with other energy supplying countries. This will help Beijing in improving its

image in India. The pipeline will also increase China's goodwill in India," he said. At the geopolitical level, China will get another lever to arm twist New Delhi into submission to fulfil its larger dominance in the region and push global strategic ambitions. Beijing will just have turn the knob of the supply line, squeezing India's energy needs instantly, he added.

Prepare list of 5K Indians spoiling relations: CCP

The Chinese Communist Party is said to have tasked a team of information technology experts to prepare a list of 5,000 Indians who are spoiling Indo-China relations for political, monetary or career considerations, by scouring the Internet. It was not immediately clear as to what CCP intends to do with the monitoring list. **PNS**

Rahul working on formula to bridge gap between dissidents, leadership

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

Pressured by the Group of 23 senior Congress members, also known as G23, for an immediate revamp of the grand old party, former party chief Rahul Gandhi is said to be working on a formula with his close aides like Sachin Pilot, Mukul Wasnik, Bhupesh Baghel, Ashok Gehlot and Mallikarjun Kharge to bridge the gap between the dissidents and the leadership. Engaging with the leaders for regular communication will also be part of the exercise to put the house in order. Rahul has been often blamed for remaining incommunicado to the leaders and party workers. Sources said Rahul has even sought suggestions from them about others who can play a greater and a trustworthy role for the future of the party without compromising the Congress' ideologies. Among others, the party is also seriously considering pro-

jecting "Chhattisgarh Model" of governance in the next state elections including that in Gujarat before the 2024 general elections. Sources said that Rahul has been frequent in seeking suggestions, advices from Wasnik, Gehlot, Baghel, Kharge and Pilot, who have also been tasked to get in touch the dissidents like Ghulam Nabi Azad, Kapil Sibal and others to carry forward the "inclusive and collective leadership" growth of the party as propounded by the G23 during the three regular meetings in the last one week held post the poll debacle. A senior party member said that Congress president Sonia Gandhi too has sought names and suggestions from Azad for party's revival. Azad had met Sonia on Friday and reiterated his suggestion to rejig Madhusudan Mistry-led central election committee, the top body to decide party tickets, and revive the parliamentary board that once oversaw the Congress' parliamentary

activities. The high command has also received a suggestion to appoint at least four working presidents to take care of northern, southern, eastern and western India, another party leader said. Party sources said Sonia has been in regular touch with some rebel leaders but is quite annoyed by senior party leader Sibal who has been vocal against party leadership since last one and a half years questioning the high command for successive defeats in elections. Azad has already sought to settle dust on debate on Sonia's leadership by pointing out that she had offered to resign but entire working committee unanimously rejected her proposal and asked her to continue. AICC sources said that each of CWC members has been asked to prepare a road map which should be in interest of party's revival and also in national interest. The next CWC is scheduled by first week of April followed by Chintan Shivir by mid-May.

Corn export reaches \$816 mn in first 10 months of FY2022

Maize known as 'Queen of Cereals' around world

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's export of maize, also known as 'corn', has reached \$816.31 million in the first 10 months of financial year 2022 (April to January) - rising from \$634.85 million recorded in the corresponding period of the previous year. Bangladesh, Vietnam and Nepal are the major importers of maize from India. Maize dubbed the "Queen of Cereals" around the world, has emerged as a prominent foreign export cereal among the commodities covered by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA). As per the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, from an exports realization of \$142.8 million in 2019-20, the export of maize increased nearly sixfold, taking the total value of shipment to \$ 1593.73 million in the last three years despite logistical challenges posed by the COVID19 pandemic outbreak. Bangladesh has imported maize worth \$ 345.5 million in the current fiscal (April-January), while Nepal has imported maize worth \$ 132.16 million during this

period. India exported maize worth USD 244.24 million to Vietnam this year. Other prominent importing countries are Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Taiwan and Oman. Dr M. Angamuthu, Chairperson, APEDA said, "The significant rise in agri-exports is seen as a testimony of the government's commitment to increase farmers' income through creating requisite infrastructure and improving value chains on boosting exports of agricultural and processed food products." Maize is farmed all year in India, but it is primarily a Kharif crop, with 85 per cent of the land under cultivation during the season. After rice and wheat, maize is India's third most important cereal crop. Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh are the states where the cereal crop is largely grown. Maize is one of the most flexible developing crops, with greater adaptation to a variety of agro-climatic situations. It has the largest genetic output potential among cereals. Maize is a basic raw material/ingredient in many industrial goods, including starch, oil, protein, alcoholic beverages, food sweeteners, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, film, textile, gum, package, and paper sectors, among others.



Athletes and citizens participate in a half-marathon to create awareness on cancer prevention, in Thane, on Sunday

PTI Photo

BJP MLAs in U'khand, Goa expected to meet today to elect new CMs

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP's legislature party in Uttarakhand and Goa is expected to meet on Monday to elect new Chief Ministers of two States. The BJP on Sunday decided that Biren Singh will lead its government for the second time in Manipur. The marathon meetings to decide Chief Ministers of Uttarakhand and Goa continued here as Prime Minister Narendra Modi huddled with top party leaders Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and J P Nadda to discuss candidatures of different chief ministerial contenders. The meeting also deliberated on likely composition of Yogi Adityanath dispensation in Uttar Pradesh. According to sources, Shah, who is also an observer for the UP, will be reaching Lucknow to work out composition of UP council of Ministers. Eleven UP Ministers have lost their elections besides former Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya and leadership seeks to finalise list of cabinet with several 'new and young faces' while retaining old ones including those losing their assembly seats, sources said. Uttarakhand seems to be most difficult state eluding a consensus on Chief Ministership with

several claimants to post including ex-state ministers Satpal Maharaj, (also a former Congressman) and Dhan Singh Rawat. The caretaker CM Pushker Dhami, who lost his assembly election, is also reportedly in the reckoning. Dhami along with State chief Madan Kaushik on Sunday met Shah. Uttarakhand legislature party is expected to meet on Monday where a decision regarding new State Chief Minister may be taken. There were reports of walkouts and discontent in the BJP meets. In Goa, the BJP state leaders will meet Governor on Monday and stake a claim to form next government, according to state unit president Sadanand Shet Tanavade. The much-delayed Goa BJP legislature party meeting will also be held on Monday to select leader of House, who will be next chief minister. "Our national President J P Nadda has said that legislature party meeting has to be taken tomorrow. The central party observers Narendra Singh Tomar and L Murugan are coming to Goa and along with them our Goa election incharge Devendra Fadnis along with All India General Secretary CT Ravi are coming tomorrow," said Tanavade.

SC to hear plea over appointment of Hindu temple trustees

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a petition challenging the Madras High Court order which had dismissed a plea seeking appointment of a trustee committee, headed by a retired judge, in all Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu. A bench of justices Indira Banerjee and J K Maheshwari issued notice to the State of Tamil Nadu and others seeking their responses on the plea against the December 9 last year order of the high court. "Issue notice," the bench said in its March 16 order. The high court's Madurai bench had passed its order on a plea filed by the 'Hindu Dharma Parishad' seeking a direction to the state and the commissioner of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department to appoint an 'aragavalar' committee (trustee committee) headed by a retired judge in all Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu. While also seeking a direction to appoint a social activist, a devotee, a scheduled caste person and a woman as members of the committee to manage temples, the petitioner

before the high court had claimed that several Hindu temples in the state were not maintained well and were destroyed. While dismissing the plea, the high court had noted in its order that the advocate general had pointed out that according to section 47 (1)(c) of the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, 1959, every board of trustees constituted under clause (a) or (b) shall consist of not less than three and not more than five persons, of whom one shall be a member of the scheduled castes or scheduled tribes and another one shall be a woman. In its plea filed in the apex court challenging the high court order, the petitioner has claimed that the high court had "failed to see that for the past some years, 'aragavalar' were not appointed in Hindu temples" and many temples were not renovated. The petitioner, represented by advocate C R Jaya Sukin in the top court, has also alleged that many temples were not maintained and particularly, some ancient Hindu temples were destroyed.

Cyclone Asani to intensify within 24 hours, says IMD



NDRF personnel airlifted to Andaman Nicobar Islands in view of Cyclone Asani, in Arakkonam, on Sunday

PTI Photo

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Normal life in parts of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was affected on Sunday due to rain and strong winds due to Cyclone Asani, which is likely to intensify within 24 hours. Inter-island shipping services have been stopped and fishermen warned not to venture into the sea, and around 150-200 personnel of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) have been deployed and six relief camps opened in various parts of the islands as a precautionary measure. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), no heatwave conditions have been reported from any parts of the country on Sunday. Besides, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) swung into action and is taking pre-emptive measures. ICG ships and aircraft on the southeast Bay of Bengal and adjoining south of the Andaman Sea are relaying weather warnings to all mariners and fishermen at sea. Directorate of Shipping Services ordered the cancellation of all inter-island services till March 22. MV Campbell ship from Visakhapatnam and Chennai-bound MV Sindhu were also canceled. According to officials of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, north and middle Andamans experienced rain and strong winds but life

in Port Blair remained normal. Schools and colleges have been shut because of the cyclone As per the advisory, unsafe and loose structures were also removed to prevent any hazard owing to randomly flying sharp objects such as tin sheets. "Depression over the southeast Bay of Bengal and adjoining south Andaman Sea lay centered at 0830 hrs IST on Sunday, about 110 km north-northwest of Car Nicobar (Nicobar Islands). To intensify into a DD by 0530 hrs IST of 21st and into a cyclonic storm by 0530 hrs IST of 21st," the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said in a Twitter post on Sunday. The IMD has listed its predictions and warnings on Twitter. As per the prediction, the Andaman islands on March 20 are expected to witness light to moderate rainfall or thunder-shower at most places with heavy to very heavy rainfall at a few places and isolated extremely heavy rainfall, while isolated heavy rainfall is expected in Nicobar islands. "It will move along and off the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and reach the Bangladesh-north Myanmar coasts on March 22," the IMD said advising fishermen to not venture into the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea during this period. The system is expected to move towards the Bangladesh-Myanmar coasts.

65 UP MLAs' names start with R

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Of the 403 Assembly seats in Uttar Pradesh, 254 winning candidates are those whose names start with English alphabets R, S, A, M and P. Of them, 184 are from the BJP and 70 from the Samajwadi Party. Of the 26 letters of the English alphabet, there is no MLA in the UP assembly whose names start with alphabets -Q, W and X. The scrutiny of the list of winning candidates of UP assembly polls showed that there are 65 MLAs whose name starts with the English alphabet R. Of these, 38 MLAs are from BJP, 23 MLAs belong to Samajwadi Party, three MLAs belong to the SP ally Rashtriya Lok Dal, and one MLA, Raghuvar Prasad Singh alias Raja Bhैया, belongs to Jansatta Party. The list includes Ram Achal Rajbhar, Rajeev Singh



"Parichha", Ramesh Chandra Mishra, Rani Pakshalika Singh, Rampal Verma, and Ram Naresh Agnihotri. According to astrologer Dr Shesh Narayan Vajpayee, Ketu-Jupiter-Mercury Mahadasha, two Shadashak Yoga were formed—Jupiter-Mercury and Jupiter-Ketu, which acted favorably for those candidates having names starting with RSAM and P letter. Besides, Dasha during this electoral period was Ketu Mahadasha with Guru Antardasha also helped them. There are 62 such MLAs who have reached the assembly whose first letter is S. Of

them, 48 are from the BJP and 14 from the SP. Yogi government ministers Suresh Khanna, Sidharth Nath Singh, Sushil Kumar Shukla, Satyapal Singh Rathore, Suresh Pasi, Surya Pratap Shahi are few names whose names start with S. There are 62 MLAs whose names start with A. Of these, BJP has 49 MLAs. There are only 13 MLAs of SP whose name starts with A. These include the names of SP chief Akhilesh Yadav, Azam Khan, Abbas Ansari. There are 37 MLAs whose names start with English letter M. Of them, 11 MLAs are from the SP and 26 MLAs from the BJP. Out of the 11 names of SP included, 5 names are from the minority community, whose name starts with the first word Mohammad. The scrutiny of winning candidates list of UP assembly polls showed that

there are 30 such MLAs who have won whose names start with P. Of them, 22 are from the BJP and eight are associated with the SP. The name of the lone BSP MLA Umashankar Singh starts with the rest of the letter U. The names of SP MLAs Zahid, Ziauddin Rizvi and Ziaur Rehman start with the letter Z. After the high-voltage Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, parties, especially the ruling BJP and SP are heading for the political battle of the legislative council elections. The biennial elections for the 36 out of 37 vacant seats for the Upper House (Vidhan Parishad) of Uttar Pradesh will be held on April 9, the counting for which would be declared on April 12. It would be interesting to see whether candidates having names starting with RSAM and P repeat this time or not.

mRNA vaccines protect against Omicron BA.2, but not for long

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The mRNA vaccines provide protection against Omicron BA.2 but the protection against coronavirus infection and symptomatic disease wanes within months of a third dose, a study has said. This comes at a time when the Omicron subvariant is fueling a massive COVID surge in parts of Asia and Europe and scientists are trying to understand how severe the infections caused by it can be. It is already known that BA.2 spreads faster than BA.1, but it wasn't immediately clear whether the subvariant is more adept at evading vaccines. "BA.2 could be even worse than BA.1 — this was the fear," says Laith Abu-Raddad, an infectious-diseases epidemiologist at Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar in Doha and a

co-author of the study, as quoted by the scientific journal Nature. The study, published on the preprint server medRxiv, has not yet been peer reviewed. The study showed that people who received two doses of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna mRNA-based vaccine enjoyed several months of substantial protection against symptomatic disease caused by either BA.1 or BA.2. But protection waned to around 10per cent after only 4-6 months, meaning that the vaccines prevented only 10per cent of the cases that would have occurred if all of the individuals had been unvaccinated, the article by Nature said. It further added, protection against BA.2 did not seem to wane any faster than protection against BA.1, and a booster shot brought the pro-



tection against symptomatic infection by either subvariant back to 30-60per cent. Surveillance data collected in the United Kingdom reveal a similar trend: vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic COVID-19 is less than 20per cent for both subvariants 25 weeks or more after a second

dose, but rises to roughly 70per cent 2-4 weeks after a third dose. Abu-Raddad says the results give him hope because vaccines prevent many of the worst COVID-19 cases, even in response to BA.2. "The vaccines are actually working remarkably well, given challenges of evolution," he said.

‘Like Article 370 abrogation, BJP will liberate PoJK’

PTI ■ JAMMU

Like the abrogation of Article 370, which was "beyond the imagination" of people, the BJP Government led by Narendra Modi will keep its pledge to "liberate" Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK), Union Minister Jitendra Singh said on Sunday.

He also took a dig at the National Conference over its criticism of "the Kashmir Files", a recently released movie based on the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley in the 1990s, and claimed the "rigged" assembly elections of 1987 worked as a trigger for the eruption of terrorism in J-K.

"Parliament passed a resolution unanimously in 1994, emphasising that Pakistan must vacate parts of Jammu and Kashmir under its illegal occupation. It is our promise to liberate the PoJK," the Union minister told reporters after unveiling a 20-ft statue of Maharaja Gulab Singh – the founder of erstwhile J&K state – in Kathua district.

"Article 370 was removed and it was done in accordance with the BJP's promise even

though it was beyond the imagination of many people. Likewise, former prime minister A B Vajpayee had predicted a landslide victory for the party in 1980, which was again beyond the thinking of the people.

"The Modi Government took over and under his leadership, all the pledges and promises made to the people, including liberation of PoJK, will be fulfilled," Singh, who is the minister of state for Prime Minister's Office (PMO), said.

The bronze statue of the Maharaja, astride a horse, has been made by Padma Shri Ravinder Jamwal, a renowned sculptor of J&K who worked for the last three years on it.

"It is a day of great satisfaction for us to pay our greatest tribute to the great ruler and warrior of J-K...

"Our last king Maharaja Hari Singh had said his religion is justice but the region faced discrimination after his forced exile. The sacrifices and services of the Dogra rulers were totally neglected by the successive rulers in the last six decades," Singh said.

However, he said the situ-



ation changed after Modi became the prime minister and the projects which were pending for decades were cleared to ensure fast-paced development.

"We have full support and patronage of the prime minister who himself is monitoring the developmental activities in all parts of Jammu and Kashmir," the minister said.

On the criticism of former chief minister and National Conference vice president Omar Abdullah about "The

Kashmir Files" movie, he said "they are terming it a one-sided story because they had buried the truth in the grave under a strategy".

"A couple of families of Abdullahs and Muftis had an understanding with (the then prime minister Jawahar Lal) Nehru. The friendship which started between Sheikh Abdullah and Nehru was taken forward by Nehru's grandson Rajiv Gandhi and Abdullah's son Farooq Abdullah," he said.

thing in detail in the second edition of his book "My Frozen Turbulence".

"We have not forgotten anything," the minister said.

Singh said JKLF chief Yaseen Malik openly attacked Air Force personnel but instead of facing any action, he was given "VIP treatment".

"It was only this government which has taken action against him - the action which should have taken 30 years ago. It was possible because of Home Minister Amit Shah," Singh, who is an MP from Udhampur constituency, said.

The minister said when Abdullah returned from London in 1996 and the elections were held, the polling percentage was negligible.

"The party won seats on merely a few percent voting because of the fear psychosis. They want terrorism to continue and enjoy power by becoming chief minister by exploiting the vacuum," he and said reiterated his demand for passage of a bill in parliament to make a certain percentage of polling in an election compulsory for the successful candidate.

UP Govt to provide ₹5L aid to female athletes

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Yogi Adityanath-led Bharatiya Janata Party Government, in the span of the last five years, has made significant efforts to foster sports culture, which has enabled players of the state to perform and shine internationally.

The Government has not only worked to support athletes but also has worked to develop sports infrastructure in the state.

Taking inspiration from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's resolve of encouraging athletes and sports activities, the Yogi Government 2.0 has ensured encouragement and inclusiveness of women in sports.

An official communiqué released here on Sunday evening confirmed that one of the major highlights of the Yogi Government 2.0 is the State Talent Search and Development Scheme for women athletes at a cost of Rs 500 crore.

Under this scheme, a financial assistance of up to Rs 5 lakh will be provided to the selected female athletes.

It is noteworthy that during its last tenure, the Yogi government majorly contributed towards encouraging women players.

For imparting training in 16 sports in 19 districts of the state, 44 hostel facilities were arranged for around 890 players.

For 18 players who won medals in the 21st Commonwealth Games, a financial reward of nearly Rs 2.60 crore was given.

Besides, nearly 46 players who won medals in the 18th Asian Games were awarded Rs 3.90 crore.

Kashmir Files: BJP promoting film with eye on Guj, Raj polls: Raut

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut on Sunday accused the BJP of promoting 'The Kashmir Files' movie with an eye on the forthcoming Assembly polls in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and also alleged that an attempt has been made in the film to suppress several "harsh truths".

In his weekly column 'Rokhthok' in Shiv Sena mouthpiece 'Saamana', Raut said it was the BJP's promise to ensure the return of displaced Kashmiri Pandits to Kashmir, but the same has not happened despite the abrogation of Article 370, and sought to know whose failure it was.

Raut also labelled Prime Minister Narendra Modi of being the main promoter of the film. Attacking the BJP further, the Rajya Sabha member asked for the NDA constituent what happened to its promise of integrating Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) with India.

Writing and directed by Vivek Agnihotri and produced by Zee Studios, the film 'The Kashmir Files' depicts the exodus of Kashmiri Hindus from Kashmir following systematic killings of people from the community by Pakistan-backed terrorists. Since its release on March 11, the film has sparked a debate among political parties. Several BJP-ruled states, including Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, have exempted the film from entertainment tax.

"The story based on the fleeing of Hindu Pandits in

Kashmir, their killings, atrocities inflicted on them and their anger disturbs one's mind. But what disturbs even more is (the attempt) to divide Hindu-Muslims out of it (the story) again and win the upcoming elections," Raut said.

"The Kashmir file has been opened to win the (forthcoming) elections in states like Gujarat and Rajasthan," he alleged.

Raut said that films like 'The Kashmir Files' should be created, but - he alleged - the agenda of such movies has now been to spread hatred and confusion about (political) opponents. The Shiv Sena leader said the makers of 'The Kashmir Files' had earlier produced 'The Tashkent Files', through which, he alleged, it was implied that only the Gandhi family was responsible for the death of former prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri.

"In 'The Kashmir Files', an attempt has been made to suppress several other harsh truths while showing true news. Thirty-two years ago, the atmosphere in Kashmir was bad not only for Kashmiri Pandits, but for all, and the Kashmiri Pandits were the most-affected," Raut said.

The Rajya Sabha member noted that Kashmiri Sikhs and Muslims, too, were among those killed in Kashmir at that time, besides Kashmir Pandits.

Raut said that the first political murder in Kashmir was of National Conference leader Mohammed Yousuf



Halwai in August 1989.

Before that, an attack was made on the inspector general of police, in which the officer's bodyguard was killed, he added. "Several such truths are hidden through 'The Kashmir Files'," he alleged.

Raut said that Kashmiri Pandits were not impelled to flee Kashmir for 43 years after the Independence. He further added there was a BJP-supported V P Singh government at the Centre when the Kashmiri Pandits and Sikhs had to leave Kashmir in 1990.

"BJP leader Jagmohan was the Governor of Kashmir (then). The Kashmir file was in cold storage when the Hindus were dying in the Valley and fleeing it," Raut said, adding only late Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray was voicing support for the Kashmiri Pandits at that time.

Raut further also asked the BJP how it formed a government with the PDP (in March 2015) "which had shaken hands with militants". "These people (BJP) did not even condemn the displacement and killings of

Kashmiri Pandits at that time," Raut said.

He asked why were the BJP ministers in that government were silent when the PDP had termed 2001 Parliament attack convict Afzal Guru as "freedom fighter" and questioned the killing of terrorist Burhan Wani by security personnel. Raut also asked the BJP what happened to its announcement of integrating PoK with India.

The Shiv Sena leader said Thackeray had ensured five per cent reservation for children of displaced Kashmiri Pandits in medical and engineering education in Maharashtra and asked why BJP-ruled states never took such a decision.

Referring to the deaths of 40 CRPF jawans in the 2019 Pulwama attack, Raut said the security personnel may not have been "pandits" and asked whose fault was it that they lost their lives in the incident.

"Isn't the file of Kashmir incidents smeared with our blood due to attacks like Uri, Pathankot to Pulwama?" he asked.

Yogi meets Kashmir Files team

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Kashmir Files team, including director Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri, actors Anupam Kher, Pallavi Joshi, and the film's producer Abhishek Agarwal on Sunday met Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Governor Anandiben Patel in Lucknow.

Yogi Adityanath said that the film "boldly" revealed the inhuman horror of religious bigotry and terrorism.

"The film #TheKashmirFiles boldly reveals the inhuman horror of religious bigotry and terrorism. Undoubtedly, this film will work to make society and the country aware. Congratulations to the entire team for producing such a thought-provoking film. @AnupamPKher @vivek-agnihotri," Yogi Adityanath said in a tweet.

Uttar Pradesh is one of the states that has made 'The Kashmir Files' tax-free in the state. The movie, which was released in theatres on March

11, stars Anupam Kher, Mithun Chakraborty, Pallavi Joshi, Darshan Kumar, and others. It revolves around the genocide of Kashmiri Pandits

in 1990 and has been directed by Vivek Agnihotri, known for films like 'Tashkent Files', 'Hate Story' and 'Buddha in a Traffic Jam'.

SP MP demands ban of film

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Syed Tufail Hasan, the Samajwadi Party MP from Moradabad, has demanded a ban on the film 'The Kashmir Files'.

He said this film was creating hatred between two religions, which could have an adverse impact on the social harmony in the country.

The Samajwadi Party MP also said that the film did not depict anything close to the ground reality and there were incidents of fist fights among

the people in the theatres after watching the film.

He said there was ample ground for banning the film.

Hasan said that if 'The Kashmir Files' was not banned, then films should be made which showed all the incidents of major communal riots in the country. He said films like 'Gujarat Files', 'Moradabad Files', and 'Bhagalpur Files' would start being made and they would also have to be allowed by the Censor Board.

The Samajwadi Party MP said everyone shared the pain

and anguish suffered by the Kashmiri Hindus and it was indeed painful to be a refugee in one's homeland.

The MP from Moradabad asked if the cycle of hatred between the two big communities started, where would India go? He said such films would add to widening the trust deficit between the two communities.

He demanded that the government ensure the rehabilitation of the Kashmiri Hindus at the earliest in the Kashmir valley.

Summoned by ED, Abhishek attacks BJP

Says agency tools of vendetta against opponents

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Summoned by the Enforcement Directorate to appear in its office in Delhi, Trinamool Congress national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Sunday attacked the BJP Government for using the ED and Central Bureau of Investigation as tools of political vendetta against the political opponents who they failed to defeat in elections.

Moments before boarding the flight to Delhi, Banerjee said in an apparent reference to BJP leader Suvenud Adhikari, "it is an irony that those who were seen in camera accepting money rapped in towels and newspapers are not called by the ED or CBI ... the leaders whose names were mentioned by Sudipto Sen (Sharada chit fund kingly) in his letters to Chief Minister (Mamata Banerjee) and Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) are today ruling as the Chief Minister of

a neighbouring State or the Leader of Opposition in Bengal ... instead they (ED) are harassing the TMC leaders because here the BJP was given a shameful defeat in the elections."

The TMC MP — who is also the nephew of the Bengal Chief Minister — and his wife Rujira have been summoned by the ED to Delhi in connection with a money laundering case related to cow and coal smuggling.

A fuming junior Banerjee who had on an earlier occasion been grilled by the ED in Delhi said that neither he nor his party would be bow down before the BJP.

"We will hold our heads high ... we will never bow down before the BJP ... let them use ED or CBI ... the people are watching everything," he said questioning even the decision of the Delhi High Court let the central Agency summon him to the national Capital.

"It is quite strange that the decision was held pending before the Delhi Court --- where I had appealed against

me being summoned to Delhi --- for four months and suddenly this order letting the ED summon me there ... I have no problem appearing in Kolkata ... but now I have to go to Delhi despite the fact that I have an eye surgery conducted on me ... Still I will obey the orders and cooperate with the ED because I am a law abiding citizen," he said. Referring to an

earlier speech he said that if the ED could prove that he had "embezzled even 10 paise ... then I will get myself hanged publicly... there is no need to put ED and CBI after me."

The BJP had won elections in four States but it failed to defeat the TMC in Bengal which was why it was taking out its anger on the TMC leaders Banerjee said.

Kolkata police summon ED sleuths in audio tape case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

In what is being seen as a counter measure taken by the Bengal Government against the summons issued to TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee in a money laundering case, the Kolkata Police on Sunday issued summons to three Enforcement Directorate officials asking them to appear at the Kalighat Police Station between 12 and 1 pm on Monday.

Three officials including an investigating officer and a supervisor of the central investigation agency have been summoned by the Kolkata Police in relation to an audio tape case that went viral in 2021, sources said. The ED officials have been summoned under section 160 of the CrPC, sources said.

The ED officials were summoned last year too but they failed to turn up showing occupational preoccupations.

World Puppetry Day: Puppet fest to be held today

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture, is organising Putul Utsav, a puppet festival to mark World Puppetry Day on 21st March. With India celebrating 75 years of independence, the theme of the festival

is Azadi ke Rang. Putul Ke Sang in keeping with the spirit of Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav. In this gala event, tales of India's struggle for freedom will be retold through the medium of puppets. The festival commencing on the 21st of March, 2022 will be celebrated by various events in five different cities - Varanasi

(Uttar Pradesh), Hyderabad (Telangana), Angul district (Odisha), New Delhi and Agartala (Tripura).

An interesting line-up of acts includes performances by famous puppeteers, both traditional and contemporary, a seminar, demonstrations and workshops where participants can

create their own puppets and carry them back home. In Hyderabad and Varanasi, Putul Utsav is marked by three-day long festivities from March 21 to March 23, 2022 while in Angul district, it will be held on March 21 - 22. Delhi and Agartala have a one-day event on March 21, 2022.

Uddhav rejects AIMIM's offer to join MVA

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday rejected vehemently a proposal mooted by the All India Majlis-E-Itehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) that it was willing to join the Shiv Sena-led ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in Maharashtra, by dubbing the AIMIM's proposal was a "conspiracy" hatched by the Opposition BJP to "defame" the Shiv Sena.

A day after the AIMIM MP Imtiaz Jaleel crested a sensation that his party was willing to join the Shiv Sena-led MVA to prevent the BJP coming from coming to power in the forthcoming elections, Uddhav said: "The BJP does not lose any opportunity to term the Shiv Sena as anti-Hindu party. Without rhyme or reason, the

politics of machinations", Uddhav exhorted his party workers to create awareness among the people about the Shiv Sena's brand of Hindutva and "expose" the "conspiracy" behind AIMIM's offer to join the MVA. "These (BJP) are the same people who slept with Mehbooba Mufti for power. Mehbooba's was the party that opposed the execution of Afzal Guru. They are now talking about us. Being in the MVA, we know how to practise alliance dharma. They need not teach us".

Coming down heavily on the BJP for its efforts to "defame" the Shiv Sena and "misguide" the people about its staunch Hindutva ideology, Uddhav – who is the Shiv Sena president – said: "Like I had said during my visit to Ayodhya, we have severed our links with the Shiv Sena and not Hindutva. They (BJP) use

Hindutva for the sake of politics, whereas we (Shiv Sena) indulge in politics for the sake of Hindutva. That is the difference between the two parties". Taking a potshot at RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, Uddhav said: "Moihan Bhagwat says that RSS runs on Hindutva ideology and asks people to prac-



tise Hindutva. As far as we are concerned, Hindu dharma shastra is Manav Dharma shastra and that's we are Hindu Rashtra. There is unity in diversity. That is what Hindutva is known for across the world. That being the case, how can we exclude Muslims from the Hindutva?"

Kerala's pro-market initiatives hit roadblock due to trade unions

PNS ■ KOCHI

Caveat Emptorium, the Latin maxim for "Customers Beware!" is what Rajmohan Pillai, chairman, Beta Group, Kerala's lead industrialist tells prospective entrepreneurs who want to make investment in the State. This is the first time the soft spoken Pillai is using critical comments about his own State. What made him come out in the open is the ill-fated venture by 41-year old Rajesh Babu of Kollam whose Tauraan Metals became yet another victim of 'trade union terrorism'.

A West Asian returnee, Babu spent his entire life's earning of Rs one crore and availed loan worth Rs 1.5 crore to set up Tauraan Metal in the hope that his zodiac sign Taurus would not let him down. By last week, it became

clear to him that Taurus has not brought any good luck to him and the enterprises that cost him Rs three crore had to be shut down. The unit, the first fully automated iron and steel super market offered customers quality products at reasonable prices. Babu even installed giant crane for safe loading and unloading of raw materials and finished products which did away with the service of head load workers, a law unto themselves in the State.

"The crane was installed at a cost of Rs 28 lakh.

But the trade union bosses wanted me to pay the head load workers the sum determined by them whether I hire their services or not. The unloading and loading of goods is a skilled job because it could be executed only with expertise," Babu told The Pioneer.

Makeshift gallery of school football ground collapses in Kerala, 225 injured

PTI ■ MALAPPURAM

A makeshift gallery at a school football ground near Wandoor in this district, collapsed, injuring 225 people, police said on Sunday.

However, no injuries were life threatening, they said.

The incident occurred at Poongodu, a soccer crazy village near Wandoor and Kalikavu, just minutes before a sevens football match was about to commence on Saturday night.

A probe has been launched into the incident and a case has been registered under sections 337 (causing hurt), 338 (causing grievous hurt) and 308 (attempt to commit culpable homicide) of the IPC against the organisers of the match held at the football ground of a local school.

Hardly labour

Trade union members in Kerala use strongarm tactics to extract wages without working

The CPI(Marxist) in Kerala wants to woo private investment. What stops Kerala from attracting investment, among other things, is a labour practice that the Marxists initially turned a blind eye to as an ode to a socialist approach for just wages and which now festers the economy as an incurable wound. The practice of hawker charges — ‘*nokku kooli*’ — means you have to hire only labour affiliated to trade unions for loading, unloading or supervision work. It has also come to mean, thanks to the brazen attitude of these workers, that you have to pay the charges they demand whether or not they are hired to do the work. In practical terms, it means that you can load or unload personal or commercial stuff by yourself, or by hiring your own labourers unattached to unions, but only after paying the union workers their fee. As soon as a truck lands at your home or company, the union workers come over to claim their exorbitant unloading fee and leave you to your means to unload the stuff. If you refuse to pay, they will threaten you. This is rank extortion. The Kerala Government knows it. With businessmen and the middle-class population angry with the organised blackmail, the State police issued an order against the practice in 2012. Six years later, the Government banned it. In 2021, the Kerala High Court noted that nothing had changed on the ground.

For a practice that is spread all over the State, only 11 cases were registered against union workers between 2018 and 2021. People generally try to settle the disputes locally for fear of reprisal. CPI(M) State secretary Kodyeri Balakrishnan unveiled a vision document, *Nava Keralam*, at the recent party conference in Kochi. He said militant trade unionism goes against the party’s policy to woo investment. He asked the trade union leaders

to reject wrongful practices in the labour sector. Balakrishnan knows well that it is an impossible task for the simple reason that the practitioners of the extortionist ‘*nokku kooli*’ are mostly CPI(M) cadres. The union leaders are accustomed to easy money coming their way for decades now. The party leadership cannot afford to tick them off. It can at best convince them to be not so brazen about it. But that hardly works because the workers know the leaders are at their mercy for votes. The illegal practice has roots in the skewed manner of wealth accumulation in Kerala. The cash crop economy and Gulf employment made people rich but it also widened the rich-poor gap. The labourers began to charge more as a way out of their misery. That soon turned into an organised business as the trade unions got involved. The parties never discouraged the practice because it suited their ideology and it got them votes. Now it has become a millstone around their necks. Last heard, Kerala was 28th in the ease of doing business index.



A sparrow feeds its chick inside a homemade nest, in Mirzapur district. Sunday was the World Sparrow Day

Open knowledge

Our civilisation is the result of many influences. Is there really a need to saffronise education?

Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu has stirred up a hornet’s nest by saying that there is nothing wrong with saffronising education. Speaking at an inauguration function at the Dev Sanskriti Vishwa Vidyalaya in Uttarakhand’s Haridwar, the Vice-President said that the BJP was often criticised for saffronising education but there was nothing wrong with it and that “we need to come out of the colonial mindset and make the education truly Indian or Bharatiya”. This is not the first time that Venkaiah Naidu has advocated the overhaul of the education system. It has been one of the cherished goals of the RSS, which wants to rewrite the history books as well as the entire education system of the country. But when such utterances come from a person holding a constitutional post, it is indeed a cause of concern as it might go against the Preamble of the Constitution which clearly states that secularism is one of the cornerstones of the Indian Constitution. Of course, one could say that there indeed are problems with Macaulay’s education system that we follow and that it must be phased out to make more room for Indian content taught in Indian languages.

But the problem starts when you replace it with the saffron education system. Perhaps Naidu doesn’t make a distinction between Indianisation and saffronisation of education but there is as vast a difference as between chalk and cheese. Indeed, India has had great traditions in science, astronomy, maths, medicine, philosophy and many other disciplines and there is nothing wrong with teaching these. But all hell breaks loose when you start writing history books with Hindu perspective, demonising Muslims, obliterating other cultures and religions, discrediting the freedom struggle, painting freedom fighters in dark shades and creating new heroes based on a false narrative. The current Indian civilisation is the result of many influences. In fact, for instance, the word ‘Hindu’ itself comes from the Arabs, words like *meiz* and *kursi* from Portuguese, *rangroot* from the English ‘recruit’ and so on. If you want to teach Sanskrit, please do so; but also teach Pali and Persian as they also are part of the Indian civilisation. If the Bhakti cult is Indian, so is Sufism and Zoroastrianism. If you want to teach about Hindu culture, do so but also teach about Muslim, Christian, Parsi, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist cultures and traditions. They are no less Indian. Green is no less a colour than saffron!

Secularism and its constraints

There should be not only the neutrality of political authority but also the freedom of conscience and belief as well as equality before law

Without there being consensus or a clarification on what comprises secularism, India as a society and nation will continue to be adrift. The hijab controversy in Karnataka has also brought to the fore as to what is secularism and how far it should let minorities do what they like. Whether the wearing of hijab extended to ignoring a school uniform and whether it could be extended to all girl classrooms, were the questions thrown up.

References to secularism appear often enough in the media. But seldom is a mention made of the Bernard Stasi report which is the latest thesis on what is a secular State. It was submitted in 2003 and was treated as the back-grounder for the secular law passed by the French National Assembly in 2004. It defines three essential principles as freedom of conscience, equality in law for spiritual and religious beliefs, and neutrality of political power.

The report has ordained that students attending Government schools or employees working in Government offices must not display religious symbols of a conspicuous nature which would include even a large cross. There is no restriction on wearing any form of dress or display of any religious symbols in the country at large. The State, however, has to maintain absolute neutrality between one religion and another. The French insistence on secularism or the absolute separation of the Church from the State goes back to 1905, guaranteeing the free exercise of religious beliefs.

The only restrictions were decreed in the interest of public order. The Stasi Report has stated that Islam is believed to be incompatible with secularism. This was the provocation to the investigation carried out of Bernard Stasi and the subsequent passing of the legislation. As far as private employers of schools are concerned, the law is that the will of the institution would prevail and not any idiosyncrasy of the employee. The intention behind the stipulation is to ensure that there is no discrimination against members of any religion,



so that an employer does not avoid the appointment of a scarf-wearing woman or a skullcap-wearing man.

These provisions ensure not only the neutrality of political authority but also the freedom of conscience and belief as well as equality before the law. The Stasi Report has emphasised secularism as a cornerstone of a democracy. Every State is sovereign and has the right to frame its Constitution as well as other laws according to the needs of its society. How else has Malaysia declared itself an Islamic Republic, completely overlooking the presence of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians who comprise nearly half of the population? Why should Bangladesh and Pakistan have the privilege to call themselves Islamic? Bangladesh had reduced its Hindu population to 10 per cent by 1991. The figure for 2001 is awaited. In 1947, Hindus comprised 30 per cent of East Bengal. Pakistan has today, according to its own census figures, only 1.5 per cent Hindus. The rest have suffered ethnic cleansing. The fact that India has never challenged the rights of Bangladesh or Pakistan to do what they have

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THE STASI REPORT HAS EMPHASISED SECULARISM AS A CORNERSTONE OF DEMOCRACY. EVERY STATE IS SOVEREIGN AND HAS THE RIGHT TO FRAME ITS CONSTITUTION AS WELL AS OTHER LAWS ACCORDING TO THE NEEDS OF ITS SOCIETY

done means that we have respected their sovereignty.

Going further, would the Emirates in West Asia be justified in not allowing a temple to be built on their territory? Should Saudi Arabia have the right to disallow even the entry of a non-Muslim on the soil of Mecca and Medina? Does any universal declaration of human rights apply to these respected members of the international community in general and the UN in particular? The Stasi Report has clarified that Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom does not create an absolute right to religious licence.

‘*Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*’ does not add up to secularism. The spirit behind these words was universal tolerance. Secularism is essentially the separation of the Church from the State. India never had a big enough Church nor did it ever interfere in the running of the State. Islam, on the other hand, does not separate the temporal from the spiritual. The ultimate evidence of this was that the Caliph, or the representative of Prophet Mohammed, was the spiritual head and the temporal chief rolled into one. There was no

dividing line between Caesar and God.

In India, the practice during the British Raj was non-interference by the Government in affairs of the religion. This was especially so after the so-called Sepoy Mutiny. It was only after Independence and the advent of vote bank politics that ‘*Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*’ began to be twisted in order to play one community against the other. Articles 25 to 30 were first introduced in 1946 with the intent of dissuading the Muslim League from insisting on Partition. Mysteriously, however, they survived in the draft Constitution even after the country was torn asunder by Partition. The Marxists also call themselves secular. Their idea, however, is the abolition of religion. Karl Marx had considered religion to be the opium of the masses. In pursuance of his philosophy, the Stalinists converted many a church, mosque and synagogue into a shop, museum or an office across the Soviet Union.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal.)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE KASHMIR FILES UNRAVELS FACTS

Sir — No movie has moved me the way this movie has. For 32 years, this country had absolutely no idea what happened to our brethren in Kashmir — the Hindu Pandits. In fact, we have a very close Kashmiri Pandit friend and even his family didn’t talk to us about the cataclysmic event in their lives. It just goes to prove what a wonderful, stoic and law-abiding community they are. They went through the genocide, they went through the deprivations, the sufferings and other untold humiliations but not once did they come out and talk about what happened to them. They did not seek sympathy, they did not seek financial aid, they did not seek succour.

Vivek Agnihotri, Pallavi Joshi, Anupam Kher, Mithun Chakraborty and Darshan Kumar have battled all odds, their commendable acting has brought to us the real-life story. The second and most important action is from the Central Government. And lastly, we Indians need to be ever vigilant that no such incident ever recurs in our country. If we even see the signs of a potential pogrom, we need to raise our collective voices and pre-empt it. After all, today we are in the era of instant news, instant communication and instant action. Hearty congratulations to the entire team of *The Kashmir Files*.

CK Subramaniam | Navi Mumbai

WE CAN’T AFFORD TO TAKE SIDES

Sir — It is hard for India to stay aloof from the issue of Russian invasion of Ukraine even while dealing with partnerships with other nations like Japan. In the latest partnership with Japan on a \$42 billion investment target, the Ukraine-Russia conflict found some wiggle room for discussion. PM Narendra Modi made no direct reference to the situation when his Japanese counterpart commented on the ongoing conflict. It’s best not to stir the pot again after our recent oil shopping spree from Moscow. The world’s politicians want us to get involved in the Russia-Ukraine conflict but we can’t afford to

Why aren’t we happy?



The UN released its 10th annual World Happiness Report ahead of the International Day of Happiness on March 20. The World Happiness Report is based on *aamadm*’s own assessment of her/his happiness as well as economic and social data. While Finland has been named the happiest country for the fifth year running, Afghanistan is ranked last (146). But I’m shocked as to why our motherland, India, is ranked at a lowly 136, even below Pakistan, which is at 121? Agreed, the country’s chronic unhappiness is

the result of many factors: Rapid urbanisation and congestion, concerns about food security and water safety, cost of health care, women’s safety and environmental pollution.

Whatsoever, happiness is the state of being happy. It is difficult to say what actually makes someone happy. Gautam Buddha said “happiness” is the ultimate freedom from suffering (*dukkh*). The pandemic did record a widening economic gap between the rich and the poor in India. In the last two years, India added 40 new billionaires to a global rich list, while 57 per cent of the country’s working population was worried they’ll lose jobs within a year due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis. After all this, how could have India been named the world’s happiest country? Vivekananda rightly said: “Both happiness and misery are chains, one golden, the other iron; but both are equally strong to hold us back from realising our true nature.”

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

take such drastic steps.

We don’t enjoy certain privileges like the United States, Japan, Canada and Germany do to impose sanctions of any kind when we depend on Russia for our crude oil supply. India has the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as its shield for not getting involved in the conflict; however, our recent dialogue with Russia on buying two million oil barrels by HPCL & IOC has raised some eyebrows. From time to time, we are being repeatedly asked to “take a clear position” in the bipolar world.

Anjna Kumari | Kangra

THE GITA LESSONS IN CLASSROOMS

Sir — After the Gujarat Government gave its nod to teaching the *Bhagwad Gita* as a religious lesson in school classrooms, Karnataka also supported the move. The teaching of *Gita* has been made mandatory in all Government schools in both these BJP-ruled States. So far, we had seen the controversial tussle between different sections of stu-

dents, parents and school authorities over the type of religious education to be included. A few days back, the same State of Karnataka was dealing with growing tensions over the hijab issue. And now with the *Gita* lessons, communities may again enter into a conflict.

We Indians, after all, belong to a secular State. The introduction of *Gita* today may propel others to introduce teachings of *Quran* in Muslim-run schools. We must not let religion enter school campuses for imparting values to our children. This job must be left to the parents and family of the child. They can do this job better. If we fight over *Gita*’s teachings and *Quran*’s teaching, we can’t give a free learning environment to our kids. Religious affairs must not be mixed with education on the campus. Home is the best place to teach religious values to our younger generation.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

SOUND BITE

In this Amrit Kaal, we have to take Reform, Perform, Transform to the next level.



Prime Minister — Narendra Modi

The world is united in our support for Ukraine. America is leading this effort.



US President — Joe Biden

Not only is she (Vidya Balan) an amazing actor, but also a beautiful human being.



Actor — Shefali Shah

I don’t think we ever wanted any player (KL Rahul) to restrain himself.



Punjab Kings coach — Anil Kumble

The *Gita* will be part of Class 6-12 syllabus in Gujarat from academic year 2022-23.




Education Minister — Jitu Vaghani

FIRST COLUMN


UKRAINE'S NUCLEAR MISTAKE

N-arms would have protected them from invasion



GWYNNE DYER

Would Vladimir Putin's Russia have invaded Ukraine three weeks ago if it had 1,900 nuclear warheads on 176 ICBMs and 2,600 tactical nuclear weapons? Of course not. He wouldn't have invaded if Ukraine had even one nuclear missile capable of reaching Moscow. When the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, Ukraine got custody of all those nuclear weapons because they had been based on its territory at the time of the break-up. Suddenly, Ukraine was the world's third biggest nuclear power, with more warheads than Britain, France and China combined. I was in Kiev several times in that period. I don't recall a single one who mentioned those nuclear weapons. It didn't seem very relevant at the time. But it certainly feels relevant to a lot of Ukrainians now. They gave away the one thing that could have kept them from being invaded. The Russians and the Americans



were very unhappy about Ukraine's nukes in the early 1990s, as they both saw them as a kind of 'proliferation'. So the two 'superpowers', as they were still known, used political pressure and judicious bribes to persuade the new Ukrainian government to hand all its nuclear weapons over to Russia for destruction. It is, in fact, the third stake to be pounded into that rather crowded heart, but the first two were less convincing. Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, had a nuclear weapons programme during his war with Iran in the 1980s, but it was comprehensively dismantled by UN inspectors after he invaded Kuwait and was defeated in the first Gulf war in 1990-91. He never restarted that nuclear weapons programme, but the United States invaded Iraq anyway in 2003 and the puppet government it installed in Baghdad handed him. North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006. The Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, was so frightened by the American display of lawlessness in the 2003 invasion of Iraq that he let himself be bullied into closing down his own decade-old nuclear weapons programme. Big mistake.

Eight years later, in 2011, Gaddafi himself was driven from power by NATO air strikes, and then murdered by NATO-backed rebels. His own fault: he had jumped the wrong way. But once again, it was a cruel dictator who paid the price, so who cares? In 1994, Ukraine let itself be sweet-talked into giving up all its nuclear weapons. In return it received solemn 'assurances' in the Budapest Memorandum that Russia, the UK and the US would "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine." That worked well, didn't it? A week ago, Sky News asked Svitlana Zalishchuk, foreign policy adviser to the Ukrainian deputy prime minister, if giving up the country's nuclear weapons had been a mistake. "Yes, without a doubt," Zalishchuk replied. Countries that own nuclear weapons are "untouchable", and it is "because we voluntarily gave up on our nuclear weapons and the Budapest Memorandum has been ignored (that) we find ourselves in the situation that we are in." It turns out that not only evil dictators need nuclear weapons. Any country that has a nuclear-armed neighbour with a grievance urgently needs them too. If you doubt me, just ask the Iranians, or the Taiwanese, or the South Koreans, who are all watching closely. Or even the Japanese and the Vietnamese, come to that. If you get into a confrontation with a nuclear power, and you don't belong to a nuclear-armed alliance like NATO, then you cannot trust any other country to risk a nuclear war on your behalf. 'Guarantees' and 'assurances' are useless. You need to have your own nukes.

(The writer's new book is 'The Shortest History of War'. The views expressed are personal.)

Dhara: An ode to our knowledge systems

The objective of the movement is to ensure that our collective history of achievements does not stay forgotten in the folds of neglected manuscripts



GOVIND MOHAN

The great physicist, Albert Einstein, once said, "We owe a lot to the Indians, who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made." While many of us may know about zero and its origins in India, it remains a rueful fact that India's contributions to global knowledge creation remains unattributed and uncelebrated.

Our history as an independent modern nation is 75 years young but our civilization is more than 5,000+ years old. Needless to say, the contribution of India to human knowledge is plenty, and what better a time, than the occasion of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, commemorating seventy-five years of independence, to initiate a concentrated and focused effort in this direction.

'Dh:r?: An Ode to Indian Knowledge Systems' is the Ministry of Culture's flagship initiative in this direction. It is conceptualized as a series of lectures and discussions dedicated to specific areas of inquiry highlighting India's civilizational achievements. Dh:r? embodies that idea of 'continuous flow' of knowledge and wisdom from one age to another, being adopted, questioned and modified over time so that we not only move ahead to the next level of insights across various fields but do so on the back of the work that is already available to us from our past.

It is my observation that outings and endeavors with connection to ancient past related topics often find polarizing responses due to lack of credible and rigorous evidence. Our attempt at program curation is mindful of the same and systemic efforts are being made to bring in academic scholars of the highest calibre to add the layer of rigorous reasoning and scientific credibility to these discussions.

Our first event under the aegis of Dh:r? was held recently and it was dedicated to "India's Contribution to Mathematics Through Ages". This unique conference saw lectures from Field's medal winner Prof. Manjul Bhargava as the keynote speaker and other renowned scholars Prof. K Ramasubramanian, Prof. Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay, Prof. Amartya Dutta, Prof. M. D. Srinivas, Prof. M. S. Sriram and Prof. SG Dani, as also international scholars Prof. Jean Michel Delire, Prof. Avinash Sathaye, and Prof. Clemency Montelle. The wisdom of India in mathematics captured during this conference was an eye-opener and a tribute to our system which promoted open inquiry, imagination, and synthesis. In what follows, we highlight some of the important topics that were discussed by scholars during the conference.

Binary Numbers: The Pingala's Chandas-sastra is the first known description of a binary number system that dates back to 300 BCE. Listing of all the possible sequential arrangement of laghu (light or short) and guru (heavy or long) syllables — technically referred to by the term

prastara — described by Pingala can be thought of as a binary sequence of 1s and 0s. Certain other techniques (nashta and uddisht) described by Pingala along with prastara form an important part of the study of modern-day combinatorics - in the name of ranking and unranking!

Indian Number System: The Bakshaali Manuscript is the first surviving reference of the Indian Number System. The algebraic properties of the number zero were first formalized in Brahmagupta's Brahmasphutasiddhanta in 628 CE. The Hindu Number System was transmitted to the Arab world by around 800 CE and was popularized by the great Persian mathematician Al-Khwarizmi and by the great philosopher Al-Kindi. From the Arab world, it was transmitted to Europe by around 1100 CE. The Europeans thus mistakenly called it the 'Arabic Number System'. To this date, most of us read this as the 'Arabic Number System' in our textbooks.

Negative Numbers in Mathematics: In the 7th century, among many other remarkable discoveries in mathematics, Brahmagupta also conceived of negative numbers and wrote down rules for working with them. He referred to positive numbers as fortunes (dhana) and negative numbers as debts (rina). His rule states: "A fortune subtracted from zero is a debt," and "a debt subtracted from zero is a fortune". Brahmagupta also knew that "The product of a debt and a fortune is a debt" which correlates to the idea that a positive number multiplied by a negative is a negative.

Binomial Coefficients: It is a well-known that Sanskrit verses are classified as syllabic metres (akshara-chandas) or moric metres (maatra-chandas) based on whether the rhythm gets generated by the repetitive pattern of a certain count of syllables employed or the number of beats employed in the metrical composition. The patterns are recognised, by assigning the value 1 to laghu syllable and 2 to a guru. The answer to the question- "How many metres can one construct for a given number of syllables", is given by Pingala's Meruprastara, which is an infinite mountain of numbers consisting of binomial coefficients. This Meruprastara also provides answer to the question 'How many metres are there of n syllables having k laghus and (n - k) gurus?'. Today, we study this Pingala Meruprastara by the name of Pascal's Triangle named after the French mathematician Blaise Pascal (c. 1650).

Virahanka Numbers: The Indian prosodist, Virahanka (c. 700CE) came up with an ingenious answer to this question - "How many kinds of patterns can be generated with a given number of beats? He asserted that we should write down the numbers 1 and 2. And then each subsequent number is obtained by adding up the two previous numbers. The nth number in the sequence 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, gives the number of different patterns that can be generated with n beats. One may recall that today, we know these numbers as Fibonacci Numbers after Italian mathematician Leonardo Bonacci, also known as Fibonacci. Unfortunately, Virahanka's name is almost never associated with this important series of numbers used in multiple fields, including business, biology and computer science.

The Infinite Series for Pi: Madhava (c. 1400), the founder of Kerala School of mathematics and astronomy, for the first time in the history of mathematics discovered an infinite series for π - one of the most mysterious numbers. This series which gives the exact value of π , is generally referred to as 'Gregory-Leibniz' series in the textbooks of mathematics. Madhava also cleverly made use of this series by inventing certain ingenious mathematical techniques — to obtain very good approximations of π that was correct to almost 11 decimal places. This was indeed a landmark discovery which laid the foundations of the discovery of calculus in India.

Some of this may be news, while other bits may be partially known, but not celebrated. Our younger generation remains unaware and at times indifferent to this rich legacy. It is of course understood that topics like these require ongoing research, debate and cross pollination of ideas. Our efforts through the lens of 'Dh:r?: An Ode to Indian Knowledge System' is aimed at starting these conversations and debates and in ensuring that our collective history of achievements do not stay forgotten in the folds of some neglected manuscripts. We at the Ministry of Culture remain committed to spotlighting the myriad contributions of Indians across fields and to celebrate them as part of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav and beyond. Come join us in celebrating India with pride.

SOME OF THIS MAY BE NEWS, WHILE OTHER BITS MAY BE PARTIALLY KNOWN, BUT NOT CELEBRATED. OUR YOUNGER GENERATION REMAINS UNAWARE AND AT TIMES INDIFFERENT TO THIS RICH LEGACY. IT IS, OF COURSE, UNDERSTOOD THAT TOPICS LIKE THESE REQUIRE ONGOING RESEARCH, DEBATE AND CROSS-POLLINATION OF IDEAS

(The writer is Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Government of India. The views expressed are personal.)

POINT COUNTERPOINT

IT'S TIME FOR THE GANDHIS TO STEP ASIDE FROM THE LEADERSHIP ROLE AND GIVE OTHERS A CHANCE. — CONGRESS LEADER KAPIL SIBAL



AMONG THE TOUGH DECISIONS BEING TAKEN IN THIS COURSE CORRECTION, MR SIBAL MUST BE EXPELLED FROM THE PARTY. — CONGRESS LEADER TS SINGH DEO




The Kashmir Files uncovers a suppressed truth

The civil society must introspect and have the courage to confront what is unequivocally the ultimate moral lapse of post-independent India

Vivek Agnihotri's The Kashmir Files has been a raging success at the box-office with its collections topping ₹27 crore over the first weekend.


But more important than the financial success is its altruistic mission: to uncover the truth of a horrendous past, intentionally kept buried for over 30 years, to let Indians know what their brethren suffered; and to jolt the comatose conscience of an indifferent nation. The Kashmir Files brings to the fore the long suppressed and heart wrenching tragedy of the Kashmiri Pandits- namely the heinous ethnic cleansing of over a quarter million Kashmiri Pandits who became refugees in their own country, overnight.

This was an ethnic cleans-



VIVEK GUMASTE

(The author, a US-based academic and political commentator, frequently writes on current affairs in India. The views expressed are personal.)



ing that was deliberately marginalized by the international community especially the Hindu phobic Western media in deference to what it termed as Muslim self-determination. Domestically too this atrocity was downplayed by influential sections of our media who callously popularized the abominable canard that the KPs left voluntarily at the behest of the then Governor Jagmohan- in effect blaming the victim for the crime.

More than 30 years have elapsed since that fateful exodus and a whole generation of Indians have come of age. It is ethically crucial that they know the truth including our own failing as a nation that facilitated this barbaric crime.

The targeting of Hindus began in late 1989. The first to

KPs were the new Jews.

Then on January 19, 1990 dubbed as the Kristallnacht of the Kashmiri Hindu Pandit community, the pressure reached its zenith. As dusk approached, Hindu families- women and children - cowered inside their homes, behind the false security of their doors, while outside the spine-chilling exhortations blared out from mosque tops; the following three taped slogans repeatedly resonated throughout the cold January night:

"Kashmir mei agar rehna-hai, *Allah-O-Akbar kehna-hai* (If you want to stay in Kashmir, you have to say *Allah-O-Akbar*)."

"Yahan kyachalega, Nizam-e-Mustafa (What do we want here? Rule of Shariat)."

"Asi gachchi Pakistan, Bataoroaste Batanevsan (We

our responsibility. There was a total failure, at every level of the defence mechanisms that define a civilised nation: society, government and the press-all abrogated their responsibility and failed the Kashmiri Hindu.

What happened in Kashmir could not have occurred without the tacit compliance of civil society, namely Kashmir's majority Muslim community and so, despite their protestations, they must bear the brunt of this charge.

And large sections of the media were content to be mute spectators. There was no screaming, frontpage headlines, no hard-hitting editorials or incisive op-eds. There was a conspiracy of silence to maintain the charade of a false secularism. When we can crowd the streets for a supposed act of

potential (not actual) discrimination like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), why were there were no street protests, no candle light vigils, and no sit ins like Shaheen Bagh for a palpable and visible act of brutal ethnic cleansing?

Is it because Indian secularism rests on a shaky premise- the victimhood of the Hindu?

The ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits is an Indelible stain on an otherwise pristine fabric of our democracy and secularism. Only when this wrong is righted can we hold up our heads with pride.

Indian civil society must introspect and have the courage to confront what is unequivocally the ultimate moral lapse of post-independent India. The Kashmir Files compels us to do that.

Govt plans to merge BBNL with BSNL this month, says BSNL CMD

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Government is planning to merge Bharat Broadband Nigam Limited (BBNL) with the loss-making state-run telecom operator Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) this month, a senior official has said.

BSNL chairman and managing director PK Purwar at a recent event organised by the All India Graduate Engineers and Telecom officers Association (AIGETOA) said that the government is giving the telecom firm an opportunity for a turnaround.

"The government has taken a policy decision that BBNL is going to be merged into BSNL. This means all work of BBNL at the pan-India level is going to come to BSNL," Purwar said at the All India Conference of AIGETOA on March 13.

Referring to his meeting with the union telecom minister, Purwar said he had an hour-long meeting to this effect.

BSNL already has a network of over 6.8 lakh kilometer of optical fibre cable (OFC) network.

With the proposed merger, BSNL will get 5.67 lakh kilometer of optical fibre which has been laid across 1.85 lakh village panchayats in the country using Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF).

Special purpose vehicle (SPV) BBNL was formed in February 2012, to lay out optical fibre network across 2.5 lakh village panchayats across the country using USOF and provide its access to all telecom operators on a non-discriminatory basis.

Telecom operators are required to pay an 8 per cent licence fee on their revenue from sale of telecom services which includes a 5 per cent levy for USOF.

The state governments do not levy right of way (RoW) charge on laying of OFC by the BBNL, which helps it in saving a significant amount compared to the fees that telecom operators are required to pay.

A query sent to the Department of Telecom and BBNL elicited no reply in the matter.

However, few BBNL officials said that employees in the department are not in favour of the proposed merger due to

non-performance of BSNL on Bharatnet project in the past and pending dues of vendors despite payment already made to the state-run telecom firm by the SPV.

The officials shared a common view that private telecom operators also contribute to USOF and transferring BBNL assets under one player will be against idea and objective of creating the SPV, which was to provide access to rural broadband network on non-discriminatory basis to all players.

When contacted, Purwar said "no such views are in notice of BSNL.

The delivery of BBNL to meet the objectives of Bharat Net is much below the desired level. BSNL, as a custodian of USOF assets, will ensure that all such assets are made available to all TSP/ISP and other agencies on arm length principles."

In his speech at the conference, BSNL CMD asked employees to tighten their belt and put their best foot forward for the growth of BSNL, as the political leadership has given a free hand for the turnaround and there is going to be no

capex crunch for the next two years at least.

Purwar said, "in the budget, provision of around Rs 45,000 crore has been made for BSNL. It was earlier Rs 24,000 crore. Earlier provision was only for spectrum. Now, it is spectrum, capex and others. So the government wants to give you a free hand. Can you perform?"

He said that the company is in the last stage of testing for 4G and may approach the board for placing a small order in the month of March, so that supply can start in the month of May and June and ground-level network testing and experience can be done.

"Then it should be taken further after a commercial discussion. The government's expectation is very clear from us. The Prime Minister wants it to be (done) by August 15," Purwar said.

He said that the next phase of telecom growth will come from fibre-to-the-home service and in the coming days, 1 lakh mobile base stations will serve as a point of presence for the distribution of fibre-based broadband connections to the subscribers.

"If we lose this opportunity then there is no way that we will have an alternate option. The government is going against its stated policy for BSNL. If you see what is the policy for CPSE.

"The government's policy is to either perform or perish. The government wants to give BSNL a chance so that BSNL becomes a strategic asset. We have a responsibility to prove ourselves, Purwar said.

BSNL's service revenue seen at ₹17,000 cr in FY22

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Bharat Sanchar Nigam expects over Rs 17,000 crore revenue from services in FY22, a tad lower than the previous fiscal, mainly due to the removal of call connect charges that used to bring in additional inflows, according to its Chairman and Managing Director PK Purwar.

Purwar asserted that the state-owned telecom corporation is confident of retaining its customer base and defending its turf with quality 4G services to be launched in the coming months, even as competition intensifies with private telcos gearing up for 5G services.

The start of 5G offerings by private operators will not place BSNL at an immediate disadvantage, as the device ecosystem for the new-age services is still evolving, he said, adding that preparation for BSNL's 4G services launch is well on track.

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) is targeting a 4G rollout in 2022.

"Despite the challenges, we have been able to maintain stable revenue (from services, excluding other income) in FY22. Against Rs 17,452 crore income from services in FY21, this year we will close at over Rs 17,000 crore of revenue," Purwar told PTI.

Working to improve tax literacy for widening taxpayer net: CBDT

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Income Tax department is working to improve the "abysmally poor" tax literacy in the country so that the number of tax paying people and entities can be increased leading to enhanced collections, CBDT Chairman J B Mohapatra has said.

He said the direct tax establishment -- the government authority that primarily collects personal income tax and corporation tax among others -- will do "everything possible" to see that the effective number of taxpayers who can add to the revenue kitty are enhanced.

"There are a few things to be done here. One is expanding the tax literacy which is abysmally poor across the country," he told PTI.

"Banking literacy has gathered steam and people know what is a bank and how to open an account. Banks have invested in expanding the banking knowledge of the people. That thing has not happened in (income) tax and that is on top of our mind," he said.

The CBDT chief was asked about the steps being taken by the taxman to widen and deepen the tax base in the country given that the department recorded its highest-ever direct

tax collections at over Rs 13.63 lakh crore (as on March 16) during the current financial year.

He said the I-T department recently, on the intervention of Union Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, concluded a fortnightly 'mulaqa' event in the far off and remote areas of Jammu and Kashmir where the department met locals and told them about the department and its work.

"This kind of interaction with people in tier-II and tier-III cities, in 'panchayats' and blocks has to happen over a sustained period. It can't happen in a year or so but we have to do it over a period of time," Mohapatra said.

"People's knowledge about the tax department, what it stands for, how does a taxpayer and a potential taxpayer help in national development and subsequently the taxpayer adds his share to the growth of the economy, all that has to be culturally percolated to the taxpayers or the potential taxpayers and then things will dramatically change in the department," Mohapatra said.

He added that the department will undertake outreach programmes and take help of various modes of mass communication and multimedia to take the work and idea of the department among the people.

SBI lines up 12 NPA accounts for sale to ARCs to recover dues of over ₹820 cr

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Country's largest lender SBI has lined-up a dozen non-performing assets (NPAs) on sale to recover loan dues of over Rs 820 crore, as per the bank's notifications.

In terms of the bank's policy on sale of financial assets, in line with the regulatory guidelines, SBI said it has placed these accounts for sale to asset reconstruction companies (ARCs)/banks/Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs)/financial institutions (FIs), on the terms and conditions indicated there against.

In various notices on its website, State Bank of India (SBI) has put up a total of 12 bad assets for sale during this month to April 13.

NPA account Topworth Urja & Metals Ltd, with a loan outstanding of Rs 396.74 crore is to be sold in an e-auction to be held on March 29, 2022. With reserve price fixed at Rs 85 crore, SBI said the NPA

account will be sold on a cash/cash-cum-SR ratio of 50:50.

"Bid with highest cash component shall be considered as successful bid," it said in a notice.

Another account, Balasore Alloys with dues of Rs 186.10 crore (reserve price Rs 178.22 crore) will also be e-auctioned on March 29.

"In case the bid is higher than the total dues as on date of assignment, plus outstanding non-fund based facilities, the bank reserves its right to retain such higher amount as a premium in its books and is not under any obligation to refund to any of the parties concerned including the borrower," it added on Balasore Alloys.

On March 30, the bank will conduct e-auction of as many as six accounts with a total outstanding of Rs 112.05 crore. These accounts are : Anupam Industries with outstanding of Rs 46.38 crore; Clutch Auto (Rs 26.14 crore); Kingston Paptech

Pvt Ltd (Rs 17.15 crore); Sambhav EXIM (Rs 11.39 crore); Vraj Cotspin Pvt Ltd (Rs 8.06 crore) and Ghantakarna Enterprise (Rs 2.93 crore).

The loan dues on Anupam Industries is excluding BG (bank guarantee) outstanding of Rs 4.74 crore, SBI said.

The country's largest lender will auction the rest of four NPA accounts on April 13, with total dues of Rs 125.32 crore.

These NPA accounts are : Anamika Conductors having an outstanding of Rs 102.30 crore loan; Madhav Cotton Ginning & Pressing Factory (Rs 16.80 crore) ; Om Kailash Cotton (Rs 5.23 crore) and Ajanta Ellora Estates (Rs 0.99 crore).

"The interested ARCs/banks/NBFCs/FIs can conduct due diligence of these assets with immediate effect, after submitting expressions of interest and executing a non-disclosure agreement with the bank," SBI said.

Startups get up to 10 yrs for converting debt investment into equity

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has extended the timeline up to ten years for startups to convert debt investments made in the company into equity shares, a decision which is likely to give a relief to budding entrepreneurs to deal with the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, according to a press note of the DPIIT.

Earlier the option of changing convertible notes into equity shares was allowed for up to five years from the day when initial convertible note was issued. Now that timeline has been extended to ten years.

An investor can invest in a startup through convertible notes, which is a kind of debt/loan instrument. But in this investment, the investor is given the option that if the startup performs well or achieves some performance

milestones in future, the investor can ask the startup to issue equity shares of the company against the money that they had initially invested as loan/debt.

"Convertible note means an instrument issued by a startup company acknowledging receipt of money initially as debt, which is repayable at the option of the holder, or which is convertible into such number of equity shares of such startup company, within a period not exceeding ten years from the date of issue of the convertible note, upon occurrence of specified events as per the other terms and conditions agreed to and indicated in the instrument," the note has said.

According to experts, convertible notes have increasingly emerged as attractive financing instruments for early stage funding of startups since its inception in 2017.

Govt working on classification of cryptocurrency under GST law

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government is working on classification of cryptocurrency as goods or services under the GST law, so that tax can be levied on the entire value of transactions.

Currently, 18 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) is levied only on service provided by crypto exchanges and is categorised as financial services.

GST officers are of the view that cryptos, by nature, are similar to lottery, casinos, betting, gambling, horse racing, which have 28 per cent of GST on the entire value. Besides, GST at 3 per cent is levied on the entire transaction value in case of gold.

"There is a clarity needed in regard to levy of GST on cryptocurrencies and whether it has to be levied on the entire value. We are seeing whether cryptocurrencies can be classified as goods or services and also removing any doubt on whether it can be called an actionable

claim," an official said.

Another official said that if the GST is levied on the entire transaction of cryptocurrencies then the rate could be in the range of 0.1 to 1 per cent.

"Discussions are in a nascent stage on the rate of tax, whether it would be 0.1 per cent or 1 per cent. First a decision on classification will have to be finalised and then rate will be discussed," the official told PTI.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) law does not clearly state about classification of cryptocurrency and in the absence of a law on regulating such virtual digital currencies, the classification has to take into account whether the legal framework classifies it as actionable claim.

An actionable claim is a claim which can be made by a creditor, for any type of debt other than a debt secured by mortgage of immovable property.

The 2022-23 Budget has brought in clarity with regard to

levy of income tax on crypto assets. From April 1, a 30 per cent I-T plus cess and surcharges, will be levied on such transactions in the same manner as it treats winnings from horse races or other speculative transactions.

The Budget 2022-23 also proposed a 1 per cent TDS on payments towards virtual currencies beyond Rs 10,000 in a year and taxation of such gifts in the hands of the recipient. The threshold limit for TDS would be Rs 50,000 a year for specified persons, which include individuals/HUFs who are required to get their accounts audited under the I-T Act.

The provisions related to 1 per cent TDS will come into effect from July 1, 2022, while the gains will be taxed effective April 1.

Separately, the government is working on legislation to regulate cryptocurrencies, but no draft has yet been released publicly.

‘Stamp duty, registration fee mop-up crosses ₹1 lakh crore in 8 months’

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Led by Maharashtra, the cumulative revenue collection from stamp duty and registration fee of all the states jumped to Rs 1,00,100 crore for the first eight months of the current fiscal year, which for the entire FY21 was Rs 1,27,700 crore, according to a report.

An analysis of state-wise data by Motilal Oswal Financial Services showed that the average monthly collection by 28 states stood at Rs 12,500 crore during the reporting period of April-November 2021, which is slightly lower than Rs 12,800 crore in the pre-pandemic days. But, the monthly average is higher than Rs 10,600 crore recorded in FY21.

The report did not offer a

An analysis of State-wise data by Motilal Oswal Financial Services showed that the average monthly collection by 28 States stood at Rs 12,500 crore during the reporting period of April-November 2021

comparative number for the same eight months period of FY21 when the country was hit with the pandemic.

Thanks to Mumbai and Pune, Maharashtra recorded the highest collection of Rs 17,097 crore, contributing 17.1 per cent of the total collection during the period, followed by Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka with Rs 12,800 crore, Rs 8,700 crore and Rs 8,400 core, respectively, as per the analysis.

In FY21, Maharashtra's

collection stood at Rs 25,427 crore or 19.9 per cent of the national total, followed by Uttar Pradesh at Rs 16,475 crore or 12.9 per cent of the total, Tamil Nadu Rs 11,675 crore or 9.1 per cent, Karnataka 10,576 crore or 8.3 per cent, Telangana Rs 5,243 crore or 4.1 per cent, Gujarat 7,390 crore or 5.8 per cent, Haryana 5,157 or 4 per cent.

Madhya Pradesh collected 6,760 crore or 5.3 per cent of the national mop-up in FY21, Bengal Rs 5,527.6 crore or 4.3

per cent, Andhra Pradesh at 5,603.3 crore or 4.4 per cent, Rajasthan Rs 5,297.3 crore or 4.1 per cent, Bihar Rs 4,206.3 crore or 3.3 per cent, and Kerala Rs 3,489.6 crore or 2.7 per cent.

Other states had under Rs 3,000 crore collection or less than 3 per cent of the national share. According to Nikhil Gupta, the chief economist at the brokerage, the residential real estate sector has bounced back strongly since the second half of FY21, and it continues to perform well in FY22.

In fact, it is doing better than anticipated. Considering its massive forward and backward linkages to the real economy, it has the potential to boost GDP growth substantially.

Diesel price for bulk users hiked ₹25/ltr

Retailers stare at closure

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The price of diesel sold to bulk users has been hiked by about Rs 25 per litre in line with a near 40 per cent rise in international oil prices, but retail rates at petrol pumps remain unchanged, sources said.

Petrol pump sales have jumped by a fifth this month after bulk users like bus fleet operators and malls queued up at petrol bunks to buy fuel rather than the usual practice of ordering directly from oil

companies, widening the losses of retailers.

Worst hit are private retailers like Nayara Energy, Jio-bp and Shell, who have so far refused to curtail any volume despite a surge in sales. But now closure of pumps is a more viable solution than continuing to sell more fuel at rates that have been on freeze for a record 136 days, three sources with direct knowledge of the development said.

In 2008, Reliance Industries had shut all of its 1,432 petrol pumps in the country after sales dropped to almost nil as it could not match the subsidized price offered by the public sector competition.

A similar scenario may unfold again as retailers' losses widen from bulk users being diverted to petrol pumps, they said.

Price of diesel sold to bulk users has been hiked to Rs 122.05 per litre in Mumbai. This compares to Rs 94.14 a litre price of the same fuel sold at petrol pumps. In Delhi, diesel costs Rs 86.67 a litre at the petrol pump, but for bulk or industrial users it is priced at about Rs 115.

PSU oil companies have not raised retail prices of petrol and diesel since November 4, 2021 despite a surge in global oil and fuel prices, a move seen as aiding the Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP) in crucial state assembly elections.

Prices were supposed to start aligning with cost after counting of votes on March 10, but the ensuing start of the second half of the Budget Session meant that the price increases didn't happen.

Private fuel retailers like Nayara Energy, Jio-bp and Shell were forced to hold petrol and diesel prices as they would have lost customers, if rates at their petrol pumps were higher than those of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL).

FMCG makers to go for around 10% price hike to mitigate inflationary pressures

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Consumers may have to pay more for their daily essential items with FMCG companies mulling another round of price hike to offset the impact of an unprecedented level of inflation in commodity prices such as wheat, palm oil and packaging materials.

Besides, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has also added another blow to FMCG makers as they expect a rise in the prices of wheat, edible oil and crude.

Companies such as Dabur and Parle are watching the situation and will undertake calibrated price increases to mitigate the inflationary pressures. According to some media reports, makers such as HUL and Nestle have increased the prices of food products last week.

"We are expecting a 10-15 per cent hike by the industry," Parle Products Senior Category Head Mayank Shah told PTI. Shah further noted that the prices are witnessing high fluctuation and hence it would be difficult to tell about the exact increase due to volatility of price.

The price of palm oil had increased to Rs 180 per litre and now has come down to Rs 150 per litre. Similarly, crude oil prices had risen to nearly USD 140 a barrel and has now slipped below USD 100 per barrel, he added.

"However, it is still higher than what it was earlier," Shah said, adding that the companies are also hesitant in taking price increases significantly because demand was reviving after

"Everybody is currently talking about a price hike of 10-15 per cent, although the input cost has gone much more than that"

COVID and they do not want to tinker with that.

Last time, the makers did not take the price hike to completely mitigate the impact and had absorbed some part of that.

"Everybody is currently talking about a price hike of 10-15 per cent, although the input cost has gone much more than that," he said.

When asked as to whether Parle would also go for a hike, Shah said right now it has enough stock of packaging materials and other stocks and would take a decision after a month or two on this.

Expressing similar thoughts, Dabur India Chief Financial Officer Ankush Jain said inflation remains unabated and is a cause of concern for the second year in a row. "The inflationary pressures and resultant price increases have led to consumers tightening their purse-strings and relooking at discretionary purchases, while also downgrading to smaller packs.

We are closely watching the situation and will undertake calibrated price increases to mitigate the inflationary pressures," he said.

Commenting on the current situation, Edelweiss Financial Services Executive Vice President Abneesh Roy, said FMCG makers are passing high inflation to consumers.

"FMCG companies like HUL, Nestle have high pricing power. They are passing on inflation in Coffee and packaging materials. We expect all FMCG companies to take a further hike of 3 to 5 per cent in Q1FY23," he added.

According to some news reports, FMCG major HUL and Nestle have already increased the prices of food items such as tea, coffee and noodles, passing off some burden to the consumers to maintain margins.

The reports had claimed that HUL had hiked prices of Bru coffee, Brooke Bond tea etc as the company was facing inflationary pressure.

While Nestle India has increased the price of its popular Maggi noodles by 9 to 16 per cent, it has also taken a price hike for milk and coffee powder, the reports added.

An HUL spokesperson had said: "We are witnessing consumer volume titration due to the impact of high inflation. In this environment, our priority is to provide value to consumers, invest behind our brands and protect our financial business model."

"We mitigate cost inflation first by driving our savings agenda harder, looking at all cost lines with a laser-sharp focus and removing any non-value-adding cost.

"Considering the inherent strength of our brands and our execution prowess, we have been able to provide the right price-value equation to the consumer, thus helping protect our business model in a highly inflationary scenario," he added.

Suzuki to invest ₹10,445cr for local manufacturing of electric vehicles

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Japanese automaker Suzuki Motor Corporation on Sunday said it will invest around 150 billion yen (about Rs 10,445 crore) by 2026, for local manufacturing of Battery Electric Vehicles (BEV) and BEV batteries in Gujarat.

The company has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to this effect with the Gujarat government.

It was signed "on March 19, 2022 at the India-Japan Economic Forum held in New Delhi, India, in the presence of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi," Suzuki Motor Corporation said in a statement.

Speaking at the forum, Suzuki Motor Corporation (SMC) Representative Director and President Toshihiro Suzuki said, "Suzuki's future mission is to achieve carbon neutrality with small cars. We will continue active investment in India to realise Self-reliant India (Atma-nirbhar Bharat)." Under the MoU, the company's wholly-owned arm Suzuki Motor Gujarat Pvt Ltd (SMG) will invest Rs 7,300 crore for the construction of a plant for BEV batteries at a land neighboring to SMC's existing plant by 2026.

Also, SMG will invest another Rs 3,100 crore for increasing the production capacity for BEV manufacturing by 2025, the statement said.

Russians push deeper into Mariupol as locals plead for help

AP ■ LVIV

Russian forces pushed deeper into Ukraine's besieged and battered port city of Mariupol on Saturday, where heavy fighting shut down a major steel plant and local authorities pleaded for more Western help.

The fall of Mariupol, the scene of some of the war's worst suffering, would mark a major battlefield advance for the Russians, who are largely bogged down outside major cities more than three weeks into the biggest land invasion in Europe since World War II.

"Children, elderly people are dying. The city is destroyed and it is wiped off the face of the earth," Mariupol police officer Michail Vershnin said from a rubble-strewn street in a video addressed to Western leaders that was authenticated by The Associated Press.

Details also began to emerge Saturday about a rocket attack that killed as many as 40 marines in the southern city of Mykolaiv the previous day, according to a Ukrainian military official who spoke to The New York Times.

Russian forces have already cut Mariupol off from the Sea of Azov, and its fall would link

Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, to eastern territories controlled by Moscow-backed separatists. It would mark a rare advance in the face of fierce Ukrainian resistance that has dashed Russia's hopes for a quick victory and galvanized the West.

Ukrainian and Russian forces battled over the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, Volodymyr Denysenko, adviser to Ukraine's interior minister, said. "One of the largest metallurgical plants in Europe is actually being destroyed," Denysenko said in televised remarks.

The Mariupol city council claimed hours later that Russian soldiers had forcibly relocated several thousand city residents, mostly women and children, to Russia. It didn't say where, and AP could not immediately confirm the claim.

Oleksii Arestovych, an



adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, said the nearest forces that could assist Mariupol were already struggling against "the overwhelming force of the enemy" and that "there is currently no military solution to Mariupol."

Zelenskyy said early Sunday that the siege of Mariupol would go down in history for what he said were war crimes committed by Russian troops.

"To do this to a peaceful city, what the occupiers did, is a terror that will be remembered for centuries to come," he said in a video address to the nation.

Despite the siege in Mariupol, many remained struck by Ukraine's ability to hold back its much bigger, better-armed foe. The United Kingdom's Defense Ministry said Ukraine's airspace continued to be effectively defended.

"Gaining control of the air was one of Russia's principal objectives for the opening days of the conflict and their continued failure to do so has significantly blunted their operational progress," the ministry said on Twitter.

In Mykolaiv, rescuers searched the rubble of the marine barracks that was destroyed in an apparent missile attack Friday. The region's governor said the marines were asleep when the attack happened.

It wasn't clear how many marines were inside at the time, and rescuers were still searching the rubble for survivors the following day. But a senior Ukrainian military official, who spoke to The New York Times on condition of anonymity to reveal sensitive information, estimated that as many as 40 marines were killed, which would make it one of the deadliest known attacks on Ukrainian forces during the war.

Estimates of Russian deaths vary widely, but even conservative figures are in the low thousands. Russia had 64 deaths in five days of fighting during its 2008 war with Georgia. It lost about 15,000 in Afghanistan over 10 years, and

more than 11,000 in years of fighting in Chechnya.

The Russian military said Saturday that it used its latest hypersonic missile for the first time in combat. Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Kinzhal missiles destroyed an underground warehouse storing Ukrainian missiles and aviation ammunition in the western region of Ivano-Frankivsk.

Russia has said the Kinzhal, carried by MiG-31 fighter jets, has a range of up to 2,000 kilometers (about 1,250 miles) and flies at 10 times the speed of sound.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said the U.S.

Couldn't confirm the use of a hypersonic missile.

U.N. Bodies have confirmed more than 847 civilian deaths since the war began, though they concede the actual toll is likely much higher. The U.N. Says more than 3.3 million people have fled Ukraine as refugees.

The northwestern Kyiv suburbs of Bucha, Hostomel, Irpin and Moshchun were under fire Saturday, the Kyiv regional administration reported, and Slavutich, 165 kilometers (103 miles) north of the capital, was "completely isolated."

Evacuations from Mariupol and other besieged

cities proceeded along eight of 10 humanitarian corridors, Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said, and a total of 6,623 people left.

Waiting to board a bus at a triage center near the Moldova-Ukraine border, a woman named Irina said she decided to leave home in Mykolaiv this week after a loud explosion shook the walls, waking her young daughter.

"Can you imagine the fear I had, not for me but for my child?" said Irina, who didn't provide her last name. "So we made decision to arrive here, but I don't know where we are going, where we'll stay."

Zelenskyy suspends parties with Russian links

AP ■ KYIV

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has ordered to suspend activities of 11 political parties with links to Russia.

The largest of them is the Opposition Platform for Life, which has 44 out of 450 seats in the country's parliament.

The party is led by Viktor Medvedchuk, who has friendly ties with Russian President

Vladimir Putin, who is the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter. Also on the list is the Nashi (Ours) party led by Yevheniy Murayev.

Before the Russian invasion. The British authorities had warned that Russia wanted to install Murayev as the leader of Ukraine.

Speaking in a video address early Sunday, Zelenskyy said that "given a large-scale war unleashed by the Russian

Federation and links between it and some political structures, the activities of a number of political parties is suspended for the period of the martial law."

He added that "activities by politicians aimed at discord and collaboration will not succeed." Zelenskyy's announcement follows the introduction of the martial law that envisages a ban on parties associated with Russia.

Pope slams war as 'sacrilege,' 'repugnant'

AP ■ VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis has denounced Russia's "repugnant war" against Ukraine as "cruel and sacrilegious inhumanity."

In some of his strongest words yet since Russia's invasion on February 24, Francis on Sunday told thousands of people in St. Peter's Square that every day brings more atrocities in what is a "senseless massacre."

"There is no justification for this," Francis said, in an apparent reference to Russia, which sought to justify its invasion as vital for its own defense. But Francis again stopped short of naming Russia as the aggressor.

UK PM issues stark message to China over Russia-Ukraine conflict

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has issued a stark message to China to choose the right side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict as he claimed that there are some signs of "second thoughts" in Beijing.

In an interview with "The Sunday Times" on his way back from a tour of the Middle East, the UK Prime Minister accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of trying to establish a new authoritarian world order and said China risked being on the wrong side of history by not condemning his actions. "I think that in Beijing you are starting to see some second thoughts," he told the newspaper. "I don't think I have ever seen such a clear case of right and wrong. I've never seen such a stark division between good and evil as there is in this invasion. And it is clear that right is overwhelmingly on the side of the Ukrainians. That's why their plight is obvi-

ous to the world and why I think that in the last three weeks people's understanding of what is happening is changing," he said.

With a reference to China, Johnson added: "I think that some countries began by thinking Putin's war machine will go through like a knife through butter. That Kyiv will fall soon and it will be tragic, but it will be speedily accomplished.

"They have now been disabused of that idea. I think for a lot of people this has been a psychological shock. This has been a terrible realisation for people who may be living in a fool's paradise. There's going to have to be a new way of looking at nations like Russia." Back in the UK, Boris Johnson came under fire for referencing Brexit in the context of the conflict in Ukraine in his speech to the Conservative Party Spring Conference in Blackpool on Saturday. "This is a turning point for the world. And it's a moment of choice. It's a choice

between freedom and oppression," Johnson said in his speech.

"And I know that it's the instinct of the people of this country, like the people of Ukraine, to choose freedom, every time, I can give you a couple of famous recent examples. When the British people voted for Brexit, in such large, large numbers, I don't believe it was because they were remotely hostile to foreigners. It's because they wanted to be free to do things differently and for this country to be able to run itself," he said.

The Opposition Labour Party objected to the remarks and Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey said it was an "insult" to Ukrainians.

Tory peer Lord Barwell from Johnson's own party said voting in a referendum was not "in any way comparable with risking your life" in a war. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, distanced himself from the comments when asked about them during a television show on Sunday.

US lawmakers visit Poland, urge help for Ukraine military

AP ■ WARSAW

A bipartisan delegation of U.S. Lawmakers visiting Poland said Saturday that the most urgent need in Ukraine's fight against a Russian invasion is to equip and support the country in every way that will help it defend its independence.

The seven-member delegation led by Rep. Stephen Lynch, a Democrat from Massachusetts, has visited reception centers for refugees from Ukraine in eastern Poland. They noted Poland's openness in accepting refugees from Ukraine, including in private homes. More than 2 million people fleeing war have come to Poland since Feb. 24, when Russia's troops invaded Ukraine.

"We are here to reassure and support the people of Ukraine. We are here to thank the people of Poland for the

unbelievable generosity they have shown to the refugees," said Lynch, who is chairman of the subcommittee on National Security in the Committee on Oversight and Reform.

During an online meeting with the media Saturday, the American lawmakers stressed the need to urgently assist Ukraine's military in their fight against Russian forces. They said there is no room for peace talks as long as there is a "hot war."

"The most urgent action that we can take is to make sure that the Ukrainian fighters — those valiant patriots who are fighting for their freedom — have every bit of equipment, every bit of supply, every bit of support that we



can possibly deliver to them," Lynch said.

Answering a question about a potential peace mission in Ukraine, he said "there will be time for discussion, hopefully there will be time for diplomacy, but right now I think that the Ukrainian military is stepping up in a very heroic fashion against a much larger enemy."

U.S. President Joe Biden will attend an extraordinary NATO summit in Brussels on Thursday that is focused on the war in Ukraine and European security.

Nearly 40,000 have fled Mariupol in past week

AP ■ KYIV

The authorities in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol say that nearly 40,000 people have fled over the past week. That's nearly 10 per cent of its 430,000 population.

The city council in the Azov Sea port city said Sunday that 39,426 residents have safely evacuated from Mariupol in their own vehicles.

It said the evacuees used more than 8,000 vehicles to leave via a humanitarian corridor via Berdyansk to Zaporizhzhia.

The strategic city has been

encircled by the Russian troops and faced a relentless Russian bombardment for three weeks, coming to symbolize the horror of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Local authorities have said the siege has cut off food, water and energy supplies, and killed at least 2,300 people, some of whom had to be buried in mass graves.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday that the siege of Mariupol would go down in history for what he said were war crimes committed by Russian troops.

US' Indo-Pacific strategy 'dangerous' as NATO expansion resulting in Ukraine crisis: China

PTI ■ BEIJING

The US' Indo-Pacific strategy is as "dangerous" as NATO's eastward expansion in Europe resulting in Russia's military offensive against Ukraine, a senior Chinese diplomat has said.

"With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) should have been consigned to history alongside the Warsaw Pact," China's Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said while addressing the International Forum on Security and Strategy hosted by the Centre for International Security and Strategy of Tsinghua University on Saturday.

"However, rather than breaking up, NATO has kept strengthening and expand-

ing. One could well anticipate the consequences going down this path. The crisis in Ukraine is a stern warning," he said.

Chinese officials say NATO's plans to admit Kyiv heightened Russia's insecurity resulting in Russian President Vladimir Putin's military action against Ukraine. Ever since Russia began military operations in Ukraine last month, China, a close ally of Moscow, has been treading a fine line, declining to condemn it as an invasion.

"All sides need to jointly support Russia and Ukraine in having dialogue and negotiation that will produce results and lead to peace," Le said.

"One should not seek its own absolute security," said Le, the former Chinese Ambassador to India and

widely tipped to succeed the present Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in this year's leadership reshuffle.

"Since NATO made a promise back then, it should not renege on its word and keep pushing its boundary eastward. The pursuit of absolute security actually leads to absolute insecurity," he said.

"Going against the trend to pursue the Indo-Pacific strategy, provoke trouble, put together closed and exclusive small circles or groups, and get the region off course toward fragmentation and bloc-based division is as dangerous as the NATO strategy of eastward expansion in Europe," Le said.

"If allowed to go on unchecked, it would bring unimaginable consequences, and ultimately push the Asia-Pacific over the edge of an abyss," he said.

"We in Asia must keep the future firmly in our own hands, pursue independent, balanced and prudent foreign policies, and seek strength through unity in the process of Asia-Pacific regional integration," Le said, according to the excerpts of his address posted on the website of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

As the US' Indo-Pacific strategy gained traction, China has stepped up its attacks especially on the formation of Quad comprising the US, India, Japan, Australia, saying the grouping is akin to Asian NATO.

Early this month, Wang Yi in his annual press conference said Washington is seeking to

create an Asian NATO to "suppress" Beijing.

"The real goal for the Indo-Pacific strategy is to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO," Wang said.

Earlier, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had dismissed the notion that the Quad is an Asian NATO and said that there are "interested parties" who advance such analogies and one should not slip into it.

"Quad is a grouping of four countries who have common interests, common values, a great deal of comfort, who happen to be located at four corners of the Indo-Pacific, who found out that in this world no country, not even the US, has the ability to address global challenges all on their own," Jaishankar told a panel discussion at the

Munich Security Conference (MSC) 2022 at Munich last month.

"I would urge you not to slip into that lazy analogy of an Asian-NATO. It isn't because there are three countries who are treaty allies. We are not a treaty ally. It doesn't have a treaty, a structure, a secretariat, it's a kind of 21st century way of responding to a more diversified, dispersed world," he said on the Quad grouping.

In November 2017, India, Japan, the US and Australia gave shape to the long-pending proposal of setting up the Quad to develop a new strategy to keep the critical sea routes in the Indo-Pacific free of any influence, amidst China's growing military presence in the region.

Pakistan PM Imran Khan praises India's 'independent foreign policy'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Sunday lauded India for following an "independent foreign policy", saying New Delhi imported crude oil from Russia despite American sanctions on Moscow for its 'special military operation' in Ukraine.

Khan, a fierce critic of the ruling NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, spoke highly of India's foreign policy.

Addressing a public rally in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, he told his supporters that he would like to praise the neighbouring country India as it was having an "independent foreign policy".

Khan said that India, which is a part of the Quad grouping, has imported crude oil from Russia despite American sanctions on Moscow. The Quad grouping has the US, India, Japan and

Australia as its members.

The US-led Western countries have imposed crippling economic sanctions on Russia for its military offensive in Ukraine which was ordered by President Vladimir Putin on February 24.

Prime Minister Khan said that his foreign policy would also favour the people of Pakistan.

"I haven't bowed before anyone and will not let my nation bow either," said Khan, who is rallying public support ahead of a no-confidence vote against him in Parliament.

Breaking from the tradition of not openly discussing complicated matters relating to foreign relations in public rallies, Khan mentioned that he had said "absolutely no" to the European Union (EU) envoys seeking Pakistan's support against Russia in the Russia-Ukraine conflict because "they broke protocol by making the request".

There will be consequences for China if it decides to provide military aid to Russia: US Ambassador to UN

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

There will be consequences for China if it decides to provide substantial military or financial support to the Russians that allow them to escape sanctions, a top American diplomat warned on Sunday. In a call with China's President Xi Jinping on Saturday, US President Joe Biden "detailed the implications and consequences" if Beijing were to provide "material support to Russia" in its attacks against Ukraine, the White House has said.

Biden spoke at length with China's leader to dissuade Beijing from providing aid to Moscow.

US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told CNN in an interview that Biden was clear about his discussion with Xi, in which he

made "our position very well-known that there will be consequences if China decides to provide substantial military or financial support to the Russians that allow them to avoid the sanctions."

"The conversation was two hours long, but it was extraordinarily frank, it was detailed and substantive. And we made our position clear to the Chinese," she said.

"They're in an uncomfortable position. They have been put in a position of defending Russia against our principles of sovereignty and integrity of borders. So, they have to decide where they will go from this point, and not sit on the fence, and call out the Russian aggression for what it is, and not put themselves in the position of defending what is indefensible," Thomas-Greenfield said about Beijing.

Surrogate babies born in Ukraine wait out war in basement

AP ■ KYIV

At a makeshift basement bomb shelter in Ukraine's capital, at least 20 babies born to surrogate mothers are waiting for their foreign parents to be able to travel to the war-torn country and take them home.

Some just a few days old, the infants are well cared for, but even below ground the blasts of occasional shelling can be heard clearly.

Many of the surrogacy center's nurses are also stranded in the shelter because it's too dangerous to travel to and from their homes. Ukrainian troops have been resisting Russian forces in Kyiv's suburbs as they attempt to encircle the city.

"Now we are staying here to preserve our and the babies'

lives," said Lyudmila Yashchenko, a 51-year-old nurse. "We are hiding here from the bombing and this horrible misery."

Yashchenko said they leave briefly during the day to get some fresh air but don't dare stay out too long. She worries about her own children, too — both her sons, ages 22 and 30, are fighting to defend their country.

Exhaustion is constant. "We are almost not sleeping at all," Yashchenko said. "We are working round the clock."

Ukraine has a thriving surrogate industry and is one of the few countries that allow the service for foreigners. These babies' parents live in Europe, Latin America and China.

Russia says it used another hypersonic missile

AP ■ MOSCOW

The Russian military says it has carried out a new series of strikes on Ukrainian military facilities with long-range hypersonic and cruise missiles. Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Sunday that the Kinzhal hypersonic missile hit a Ukrainian fuel depot in Kostiantynivka near the Black Sea port of Mykolaiv.

The strike marked the second day in a row that Russia used the Kinzhal, a weapon capable of striking targets 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles) away at a speed 10 times the speed of sound.

The previous day, the Russian military said the

Kinzhal was used for the first time in combat to destroy an ammunition depot in Diliatyn in the Carpathian Mountains in western Ukraine. Konashenkov noted that the Kalibr cruise missiles launched by Russian warships from the Caspian Sea were also involved in the strike on the fuel depot in Kostiantynivka. He said Kalibr missiles launched from the Black Sea were used to destroy an armor repair plant in Nizhyn in the Chernihiv region in northern Ukraine.

Konashenkov added that another strike by air-launched missiles hit a Ukrainian facility in Ovrukh in the northern Zhytomyr region where foreign fighters and Ukrainian special forces were based.

4 killed after ferry struck by freight ship sinks in Bangladesh



PTI ■ DHAKA

At least four persons died and dozens remain missing as a boat with over 50 passengers onboard capsized on Sunday after it was hit by a cargo vessel in Shitalakshya River on the outskirts of Bangladesh capital.

MV Afsar Uddin with at least 50 passengers on board, on the way to Munshiganj, sank after being hit by MV Ruposhi-9 at the Syedpur Al Amin Nagar area around 2:20pm on Sunday, officials said.

The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) along with the river police, navy and the coast guard have started rescue operations in the area following the accident. "Four bodies have been retrieved so far, three of them women..." The rescue campaign is underway for the missing ones," a fire service official was quoted as saying by the private Independent TV channel.

Another official said several

more passengers were feared drowned and some of them could be trapped inside the ferry.

Video footage, which went viral on social media and was carried by the TV channels, showed the small ferry appear in front of an advancing huge cargo ship that carried it

forward a few yards before it sank quickly.

Nearly 20 passengers were seen jumping off the ferry, known as launch, and some managed to swim ashore or rescued by nearby boats.

Narayanganj district administration officials said fire service

divers launched the search campaign with volunteers in the neighbourhood immediately and they were subsequently joined by coast guard personnel.

A ferry sank in Dhaka in June last year after a collision with another vessel, killing at least 32 people.

6 killed as car runs into carnival revellers in Belgium

AP ■ BRUSSELS

A car slammed at high speed into carnival revellers in a small town in southern Belgium early Sunday, killing six people and leaving 10 more with life-threatening injuries. Several dozen were more lightly injured.

"What should have been a great party turned into a tragedy," said Belgian Interior Minister Annelies Verlinden.

The prosecutor's office said that in the early stages of the investigation there were no elements to suspect a terror motive, and two locals in their thirties were arrested at the scene in Strépy-Bracquegnies, some 50 kilometers south of Brussels.

In an age-old tradition, carnival revellers had gathered at dawn, intending to pick up others at their homes along the way, to finally hold their famous festivity again after it was banned for the past two years to counter the spread of COVID-19.

Some dressed in colourful garb with bells attached, walking behind the beat of drums. It was supposed to be a day of deliverance.

Instead, said mayor Jacques Gobert, "what happened turned it into a national catastrophe."

More than 150 people of all ages had

gathered around 5 am and were standing in a thick crowd along a long, straight road.

Suddenly, "a car drove from the back at high speed. And we have a few dozen injured and unfortunately several people who are killed," Gobert said.

The driver and a second person were arrested when their car came to a halt a few hundred meters further on.

Since Belgium was hit with twin terror attacks in Brussels and Zaventem that killed 32 civilians six years ago, thoughts of a terror motive are never far away.

But prosecutor Damien Verheyen said "there is no element in the investigation at this time that allows me to consider that the motivations of the two could have been terror related."

The prosecutor's office also denied media reports that the crash may have been caused by a car that was being chased by police.

King Philippe and Prime Minister Alexander De Croo were expected in Strépy-Bracquegnies later Sunday to express support for the families and victims.

Carnival is extremely popular in the area and the nearby version in Binche has even been declared UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Shooting wounds 4 at South by Southwest festival in Austin

AP ■ AUSTIN

Four people were shot and wounded in downtown Austin, Texas, early Sunday as the city hosts the annual South by Southwest festival, police said.

The Austin Police Department told people to avoid the area at around 2:50 am, warning via Twitter that the gunman was still at large.

However, police tweeted that a suspect was in custody shortly before 5 am.

Police and the Austin-Travis County EMS said the victims' injuries were not life-threatening, and all four had been taken to the hospital.

The coronavirus pandemic forced the SXSW festival to go virtual the last two years.

In 2019, multiple shootings took place as the festival drew to a close, prompting Austin's police chief to pledge more security for the city's entertainment district.

Nepal appoints ex-US envoy Shankar Prasad Sharma as new Ambassador to India

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal's President Bidya Devi Bhandari has appointed economist and former US envoy Dr Shankar Prasad Sharma as the country's new Ambassador to India, an official announcement said on Sunday.

The post of Nepal's envoy in New Delhi was vacant after Ambassador Nilambar Acharya, who was appointed by the previous government, was recalled some six months ago.

Dr Sharma has been appointed as Nepal's Ambassador to India by President Bhandari on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers in accordance with Article 282 of the Constitution of Nepal, the President's office said in a statement.

Sharma had earlier served as Nepal's Ambassador to the United States. He also worked as Vice Chairman of National Planning Commission between 2002 and 2006.



Senior economist Sharma had also served as the chief advisor at the Ministry of Finance.

Sharma holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Hawaii.

He has participated in the UN General Assemblies, annual meetings of the World Bank and the IMF SAARC Summits, UNESCAP annual meetings and many other international meetings.

Before joining the National

Planning Commission as a member in 1997, he worked as a Senior Economist in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore and as a Fellow in the East-West Center, Hawaii.

Sharma also served as a Professor of Economics at the Centre for Economic Development and Administration, Tribhuvan University.

He worked as a lead consultant to the Constitution Committee on "Distribution of Natural Resources, Economic Rights and Public Revenue" in helping draft the new Constitution of Nepal.

He has published eight books on economy, energy and the environment of the Asia-Pacific region including Nepal. He also worked as a consultant expert in a number of national and international agencies including the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and UNDP.

Shooting at Arkansas car show kills at least 1, wounds 24



AP ■ LITTLE ROCK (US)

At least one person was killed and 24 others wounded, including children, in a shooting outside a car show in southeast Arkansas, police said.

Arkansas State Police said in a news release Sunday that one person was in custody and authorities were searching for others who may have fired into the crowd Saturday evening.

Additional information, including conditions of the wounded, wasn't immediately available.

State troopers were dispatched at around 7:25 pm to Dumas, located about 90 miles south of Little Rock, following a report of gunfire outside a

business where the car show was underway, Arkansas State Police spokesperson Bill Sadler said.

The car show is part of a community event held each spring to raise funds for scholarships and school supplies, according to the website of the Delta Neighbourhood Empowerment Youth Organisation.

Wallace McGehee, the car show's organiser, expressed condolences to the victims' families and the community.

"For something like this to happen, it's a tragedy," McGehee told KATV at the scene. "We did this here for 16 years without a problem."

Chris Jones, a Democrat running for Arkansas governor, tweeted that he'd attended the event earlier Saturday, registering voters and enjoying "a positive family atmosphere."

"I am deeply saddened (and honestly angered) by this tragedy," Jones said in a statement.

Japan's PM visits Cambodia, also one of China's key partners

AP ■ PHNOM PENH

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was in Cambodia for talks with his counterpart, Hun Sen, on Sunday to deepen relations with one of the Southeast Asia's closest partners of both China and Japan.

Kishida and Hun Sen were discussing cooperation covering trade and investment, education, infrastructure, defence and security, and the post-pandemic recovery, Cambodian officials said.

After China, Japan is Cambodia's largest donor and has funded the construction of bridges across the Mekong River, main roads linking Phnom Penh with provinces, the country's principal Sihanoukville port as well as upgrading clean water and sewage systems in the capital.

But Japan and the US also share concerns over China's growing military assertiveness



in the region. In Cambodia, Washington has been recently focused on China's construction of new facilities at Ream Naval Base and the potential for its military to have future basing rights there.

Ream faces the Gulf of Thailand that lies adjacent to the South China Sea, where China has been engulfed in territorial disputes with its smaller Southeast Asian neighbours.

Cambodia generally supports Beijing's geopolitical positions, and in return, Beijing's backing for Hun Sen allows the country to disregard

Western concerns about its poor record in human and political rights.

Kishida's visit came three days after the departure of two Japanese naval ships from Ream Naval Base, where the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force conducted demining training with Cambodian counterparts.

Japan has poured several million dollars for mine clearing operations in Cambodia in the aftermath of the 1975-1979 genocide that left an estimated 1.7 million people dead and the subsequent civil war.

Japan also provided money to the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal. In recent months, Japan has donated 1.3 millions doses of coronavirus vaccines to Cambodia.

Upon arrival, Kishida and his delegation laid a wreath at the Independence Monument and paid tribute at the Royal Memorial Statue to King Norodom Sihanouk.

Canadian mosque worshippers attacked with bear spray

AP ■ MISSISSAUGA (ONTARIO)

Worshippers at dawn prayer in a suburb of Toronto tackled and subdued a 24-year-old man who allegedly entered their mosque and attacked people with bear spray on Saturday, according to local police.

Peel Regional Police said the man walked into the Dar Al-Tawheed Islamic Centre in Mississauga, Ontario, and allegedly "discharged bear spray towards people in the mosque while brandishing a hatchet? just before 7 a.M.

Speaking on behalf of the mosque, Nadia Hasan of the National Council of Canadian Muslims said a group of about 20 men were praying when the man sprayed them.

"Some of the men turned around and they very bravely decided that they were not going to let him attack them," she said. "They tackled him to the ground and apprehended him until the police showed up." Mohammad Moiz Oama of Mississauga has been arrested. Police say they're considering "all possible motivations" for the incident, and charges are pending. Police said the congregants received minor



injuries as a result of the bear spray. "People are obviously quite shaken up and are recovering," Hasan said. "For the most part, folks are still processing what's happened and are trying to kind of see how they can ensure that their communities remain secure."

Canadian Prime Minister Justice Trudeau condemned the attack, calling it "incredibly disturbing" in a tweet. "I strongly condemn this violence - which has no place in Canada - and I'm keeping the community in my thoughts today.

"I also want to applaud the courage of those who were there this morning," Premier Doug Ford, meanwhile, said, "There is NO place in our province for such evil and hateful acts. We must ensure those responsible are brought to justice."

Pakistan Interior Minister warns Opposition against disrupting OIC conference

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid on Sunday warned the opposition leaders not to disrupt the OIC meeting here as he termed it a matter of national security, amid opposition threat to block the high-profile conference.

"I declare here that no one can dare to create any sort of hurdle in the holding of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference because it is an issue of security of Pakistan," Rashid said at a press conference.

The minister asserted that up to 15,000

security personnel of police and the paramilitary forces would be deployed to provide security to the delegates of Muslim countries coming to participate in the conference.

The two-day event at the Parliament will have representatives of more than 50 countries in attendance.

"Those due to attend the conference are our guests and the Pakistan Army has taken up the task of providing security to them," he said earlier, adding that the government would "take care" of the opposition with ease and no one could dare create an obstacle in the way of the meeting.

Initially, the opposition had threatened to stage a sit-in if the national assembly session was not called on time to take up a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan. However, the joint opposition toned down its stance on Sunday stressing that Pakistan's political turmoil will not be allowed to affect the event in any way.

"The opposition pledges to do its utmost to create an atmosphere in which the distinguished guests will be able to carry out their activities with full attention, dedication and determination," said a joint statement issued by opposition parties.

People rally in Berlin to support Ukraine

AP ■ BERLIN

More than 8,000 people are attending an open-air concert in the German capital to express their support for Ukraine.

The "Sound of Peace" concert at the city's landmark Brandenburg Gate on Sunday features

German music stars such as Marius Mueller-Westernhagen, who was to perform his iconic song Freiheit, or freedom in German, violinist David Garrett, singer Peter Maffay, and the bands Revolverheld and Silbermond.

Up to 20,000 people were expected at the concert which startegy

in the early afternoon and was supposed to last into the night.

On Sunday afternoon, police called on visitors that the main streets leading to the venue where so crowded that newcomers should look for others ways to get to the concert, German news agency dpa reported.

Accidental fire triggers explosions at military depot in Pakistan's Sialkot

PTI ■ LAHORE

An accidental fire caused by shot-circuit triggered a series of powerful explosions at a military depot in Pakistan's Punjab province on Sunday morning, sparking rumours that the key army installation was targeted by terrorists.

The accidental fire broke out in ammunition shed near Sialkot

garrison, some 100 kms from Lahore.

Pakistan Army's media wing - the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) - issued a statement, saying "due to short circuiting, accidental fire broke out in an ammunition shed near Sialkot Garrison. No loss of life.

Effective and timely response contained damages and fire has been extinguished."

Yemen rebels launch wide strikes on Saudi sites; no one hurt

AP ■ DUBAI

Yemen's Houthi rebels unleashed a barrage of drone and missile strikes on Saudi Arabia that targeted key facilities including natural gas and desalination plants early Sunday, Saudi state-run media reported, temporarily cutting oil production at one site.

The pre-dawn salvo marked the latest escalation in the rebels' attacks on the kingdom as the war in Yemen rages into its eighth year and peace talks stall.

The attacks did not cause casualties, the Saudi-led military coalition fighting in Yemen said, but damaged nearby civilian vehicles and homes.

Hours after oil giant Aramco's CEO told reporters the attacks had no

impact on oil supplies, the energy ministry acknowledged that a drone strike targeting the Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refining Company caused "a temporary reduction in the refinery's production."

The disruption, coming as oil prices spike in an already-tight energy market, "will be compensated for from the inventory," the ministry said in a statement, without elaborating.

The assaults came as Saudi Arabia's state-backed Aramco, the world's largest oil company, announced its profits surged 124% in 2021 to \$110 billion, a jump fuelled by renewed anxieties about global supply shortages and soaring oil prices.

Aramco, also known as the Saudi



Arabian Oil Co., released its annual earnings after weeks of intense volatility in energy markets triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Punitive sanctions on Russia, among the world's largest exporters of crude and petroleum products, have added tur-

moil to the market.

The international oil benchmark Brent crude spiked over \$107 on Sunday after nearly hitting a peak of \$140 earlier this month. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have so far resisted Western appeals to increase oil production to offset the loss of Russian oil as gasoline prices skyrocket.

Brig. Yehia Sarie, a spokesman for Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis, said the rebels had launched "a wide and large military operation," firing ballistic missiles and bomb-laden drones at Aramco facilities and other "sensitive targets."

He described the assault as retaliation for the Saudi-led "aggression and blockade" that has turned much of Yemen into a wasteland.

The Saudi-led military coalition said aerial strikes targeted a range of facilities: an Aramco liquified gas plant and petrochemicals complex in the Red Sea port of Yanbu, a power station in the country's southwest, a desalination facility in Al-Shaqeeq on the Red Sea coast, an Aramco oil facility in the southern border town of Jizan and a gas station in the southern city of Khamis Mushait.

The extent of damage on Saudi infrastructure and energy facilities remained unclear, and the ministry said only the Yanbu refinery saw a temporary drop in output.

A joint venture between Aramco and China, the \$10 billion Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refining Company on the Red Sea pumps 400,000 barrels of oil a day.

No trust motion against Pak PM Imran called on Mar 25



PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser on Sunday announced to convene the assembly session on March 25 to take up a no-trust motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Around 100 lawmakers from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) submitted the no-confidence motion before the National Assembly Secretariat on March 8, alleging that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government led by Khan was responsible for the economic crisis and the spiralling inflation in the country.

On Sunday, the NA Secretariat issued a notification, clearing the dust regarding the key session which the opposition had demanded to be convened by March 21 as per the legal requirements.

"The session will convene at 11 am on Friday and will be the 41st session of the current National Assembly," according to the notification.

The speaker summoned the session under the power given to him by Article 54 (3) and 254 of the Constitution of Pakistan.

The opposition has been saying that the session should be summoned within 14 days but Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid said at a press conference it can be delayed due to extraordinary circumstances.

The delay in this case is due to the high-profile 48th summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) starting from March 22 at the Parliament

House.

Initially, the opposition had threatened to stage a sit-in if the session was not called on time. However, the joint opposition toned down its stance by stressing that Pakistan's political turmoil will not be allowed to affect the event in any way.

The lower house will deliberate on the opposition's no-confidence resolution against Prime Minister Imran Khan on March 25.

Once the motion is formally taken up by the house, the voting should be done between three to seven days.

Both government and opposition politicians have been working overtime to tilt the balance in their favour. The PPP held the meeting of its core committee, followed by the meeting of its leaders with PML-N and JUI-F leaders at a lunch hosted by PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif.

Khan also consulted his core group about the latest situation. He also addressed the groundbreaking ceremony of Rawalpindi Ring Road and told his supporters that the no-trust move would fail.

Khan, 69, is heading a coalition government and he can be removed if some of the partners decide to switch sides.

In the 342-member National Assembly, the Opposition needs 172 votes to remove Khan, the cricket-turned-politician.

The PTI has 155 members in the House and needs at least 172 lawmakers on its side to remain in the government. The party has the support of 23 members belonging to at least

Crystal Palace thrash Everton to reach FA Cup semi-finals

AP ■ LONDON

Crystal Palace stormed into the FA Cup semi-finals for the first time in six years with a 4-0 thrashing of struggling Everton on Sunday.

Marc Guehi, Jean-Philippe Mateta, Wilfried Zaha and Will Hughes got the goals as the Eagles continued their impressive first season under Patrick Vieira.

Everton's focus now turns to just staying in the Premier League as they sit perilously just above the relegation zone.

Frank Lampard's men managed just a second league win in 12 games against Newcastle on Thursday and started like they could build on that confidence boost.

Michael Keane wasted a glorious early chance, while Richarlison saw two appeals for a penalty waived away.

However, there was no way back once their frailty from set-pieces was exposed for the opening goal.

Guehi was called into the England squad for the first time this week and celebrated with his fourth goal since joining from Chelsea as he headed in Michael Olise's corner.

The combination of Olise, Zaha and Eberechi Eze then began to cut Everton apart, no more so than in a flowing move for the second goal.

Eze's quick feet freed Zaha down the left and his low cross was swept in by Mateta.



Everton laboured as they tried to get back in the tie with Demarai Gray's long-range effort that flew wide the closest came to a response.

But two more goals in the final 11 minutes set the seal on a resounding Palace win.

Zaha was alert after Olise's shot looped up onto the crossbar to slot home his 10th goal of the season.

And Hughes rounded off

the scoring with his first goal since 2019 on the rebound after Jordan Pickford produced a stunning save to deny Connor Gallagher.

Palace join Chelsea in the draw for the last four with Southampton hosting Manchester City and Liverpool travelling to Nottingham Forest in Sunday's two other quarter-final ties.



Nadal reaches Indian Wells final

AP ■ INDIAN WELLS

Spanish superstar Rafael Nadal turned back the fierce challenge of young compatriot Carlos Alcaraz 6-4, 4-6, 6-3 on Saturday to book an ATP Indian Wells Masters title clash with American Taylor Fritz.

Nadal, who claimed a record-setting 21st Grand Slam title at the Australian Open in January, improved to 20-0 in 2022, pushed all the way through three hours and 12 minutes by the 18-year-old aiming to follow in the footsteps of his childhood idol.

NADAL, WHO CLAIMED A RECORD-SETTING 21ST GRAND SLAM TITLE AT THE AUSTRALIAN OPEN IN JANUARY, IMPROVED TO 20-0 IN 2022, PUSHED ALL THE WAY THROUGH THREE HOURS AND 12 MINUTES BY THE 18-YEAR-OLD

Fritz advanced with a 7-5, 6-4 victory over world number seven Andrey Rublev. Nadal won his only prior meeting with the 24-year-old American in the final at Acapulco in 2020.

Nadal's experience was key in a see-saw battle in tricky winds that strengthened in the second set, sending debris skittering across the court and at one point forcing a readjustment of the billowing net late in the second set.

The array of shots and athleticism that have already stamped Alcaraz a

star were on full display, but a tendency to go for too much in the key moments may have contributed to some damaging errors.

Even so, Nadal needed five set points to emerge with a hard-fought first set that opened with Alcaraz winning the first two games.

The second game was a titanic battle to hold serve in which the young player fought off five of the astonishing 17 break points he would face in the set.

Nadal won the next four games before surrendering his serve again, but he pocketed the set with another break in the 10th game.

Down 0-40, Alcaraz delivered a drop shot winner, a backhand volley winner and a service winner.

A forehand into the net gave Nadal another opportunity, which the former world number one squandered with an easy forehand miss. He'd make no mistake two points later, pocketing the set on his fifth opportunity.

The second set was a tight affair, Alcaraz again seizing the initiative with a break for a 3-2 lead.

That launched a run of five straight breaks of serve, the last another marathon lasting almost 20 minutes in which Nadal saved five break points and missed two game points before Alcaraz finally put him away with a lob that dropped just inside the baseline as Nadal scrambled in vain to get back to it.

Alcaraz, who had won just three games in his only prior career meeting with Nadal in Madrid 10 months ago, then served out the set with an unreturnable serve on his first set point.

As the wind died down again, the third set saw both players hitting winners from every quarter of the court.

Nadal, faced with Alcaraz's speed around the court, stepped up his attack, coming to the net more in a bid to end the rallies.

It was his forehand volley in the eighth game that gave Nadal a break and a 5-3 lead and he served it out with a love game.

Monaco beat PSG in Ligue 1

AP ■ PARIS

Paris St Germain produced a woeful performance as they lost 3-0 at Monaco in Ligue 1 on Sunday, a result that will put coach Mauricio Pochettino under more pressure less than two weeks after their Champions League exit.

PSG, on 65 points from 29 games, still lead Olympique de Marseille and Nice by 15 points before those sides meet later on Sunday, following third straight away league defeat.

With Lionel Messi ruled out by a bout of flu, the capital side showed close to nothing at the Louis II stadium 11 days after being knocked in the Champions League last 16 by Real Madrid who scored three goals in 17 minutes.

Monaco climbed to seventh on 44 points.

"They played well, congratulations to them. They're a good



team, a great club," PSG striker Kylian Mbappe said.

"The goal is to get the 10th French title. We can win 8-0, 9-0, people will talk about the Champions League. Whatever happens we must respect ourselves, if we have a little bit of self esteem. We also need to respect the fans." PSG were overwhelmed in midfield and it was

not long before they were punished. Ben Yedder put the hosts ahead on 25 minutes after beating Presnel Kimpembe at the near post to deflect Youssouf Fofana's cross into the top corner. The opener came shortly after PSG's first attempt of the game, a curled shot from Neymar that went just wide. They improved slightly

before the interval, with Mbappe and Achraf Hakimi creating chances, but their performance was still well below their best.

PSG were not much better after the break, although Mbappe wasted a couple of good opportunities before Monaco doubled their advantage in the 68th minute.

An unchallenged Fofana found Ben Yedder on the right and the France striker's pass reached Ruben Aguilar who deflected the ball for Kevin Volland to score from six metres.

Pochettino replaced Leandro Paredes with Mauro Icardi and Neymar with Julian Draxler, but the changes had zero effect as PSG conceded another goal six minutes from time. Volland was tripped in the box by Kimpembe and Ben Yedder converted the resulting penalty to confirm PSG's fourth consecutive away defeat in all competitions.

Shot putter Toor fails to produce valid throw in three attempts in World Indoor Athletics C'ships

PTI ■ BELGRADE

Asian record holder shot putter Tajinderpal Singh Toor failed to produce any valid throw in all his three attempts as Indian athletes ended their campaign without any impact at the World Indoor Athletics Championships here.

Toor, a Tokyo Olympian, fouled all his three attempts to end with 'No Mark (NM)' against his name.

Darlan Romani of Brazil won the gold with a best throw of 22.53m, while American Ryan Crouser (22.44m) and Tomas Walsh (22.31m) of New Zealand took the silver and bronze respectively late Saturday night.

The 27-year-old Toor, who won gold in the 2018 Asian Games, holds the Asian record of 21.49m which he had produced last year in Patiala.



Earlier, national record holder long jumper M Sreeshankar had finished seventh with a best jump of 7.92m, while Dutee Chand failed to enter the semifinals of women's 60m sprint after finishing sixth in her heats and 30th overall with a timing of 7.35 seconds.

Rojas nails third world indoor title

AP ■ BELGRADE

Untouchable Yulimar Rojas set a new outright world record in the triple jump at the World Indoor Championships in Belgrade on Sunday en route to winning an unprecedented third title.

The Venezuelan, who previously won indoor Golds in Birmingham in 2018 and Portland in 2016, smashed her own previous best of 15.43 metres when she soared out to 15.74m on her sixth and final attempt at the Stark Arena.

It capped yet another dominant display of triple jumping by the Venezuelan -- not since the 2016 Rio Olympics has she been defeated at a global championships, and on that occasion she still secured Silver.

The two-time world outdoor champion also holds the



outdoor world record, 15.67m, which she set when winning Gold in Tokyo last summer.

"I achieved my third indoor title here which is crowned with the world record, I cannot be more thankful," said Rojas.

"Coming here, I knew it was the right time to achieve this and I took the chance. I did not want to miss this opportunity today.

Bayern Munich thrash Union Berlin 4-0

AP ■ MUNICH

Bayern Munich thrashed Union Berlin 4-0 on Saturday to open a seven-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga as Robert Lewandowski netted twice to pass the milestone of 30 league goals this season.

Second-placed Borussia Dortmund are away to Cologne on Sunday.

"We played very well and created many chances. We wanted to win to widen the gap" to Dortmund, admitted goalscorer Kingsley Coman.

Bayern went ahead at the Allianz Arena when Coman hit a superb shot into the top corner from outside the area on 16 minutes.

Teenage French defender Tanguy Nianzou then headed in his first Bayern goal before Lewandowski converted a penalty to make it 3-0 at the break.



After drawing their previous two league games, Bayern were all business by dominating possession and never allowing Union to settle.

Lewandowski has chalked up 43 goals for Bayern this sea-

son in all competitions.

He is one of four players out of contract in 2023, yet Bayern are reportedly yet to offer him an extension.

The second half had barely begun when Lewandowski,

who showed no signs of a midweek knee-injury scare, made it 4-0 by sweeping in a Jamal Musiala pass.

At the other end, Bayern defender Lucas Hernandez cleared a shot from a tight angle by Union striker Taiwo Awoniyi off the line.

The tempo dropped early in the second half, but Bayern were rarely tested thereafter as they cruised to the win.

Even Joshua Kimmich, who is notoriously hard on his team's performances, was happy with Bayern's win.

"We allowed them two or three chances in the first half that were unnecessary, but it was still a deserved victory," said Kimmich.

"The attitude and approach were right."

The victory was Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer's 311th in the Bundesliga, breaking the record he previously shared with Oliver Kahn.

Atletico edge past struggling Rayo

AP ■ MADRID

Joa Felix's superb pass set up Koke's winner as Atletico Madrid jumped to third in La Liga on Saturday with a 1-0 win over Rayo Vallecano.

With Barcelona playing Real Madrid in the Clasico on Sunday, Atletico took advantage at Vallecas, their fifth consecutive victory giving them some breathing space in the fight for the top four.

They had to see out the last nine minutes with 10 men after Angel Correa, on as a substitute, was sent off. But just as they did against Manchester United on Tuesday in the Champions League, Atletico dug in and held on.

They now have a five-point lead over Real Betis in fifth and sit three ahead of Barcelona in fourth, even if Betis have one game in hand and Barca two.

Diego Simeone's side certainly head into the international break with momentum for the run-in, after rounding off an excellent seven days that began with victory against Cadiz before knocking out United.

The draw on Friday ensured the reward for that result will be a meeting with Manchester City in the last eight and while Atletico will be clear underdogs against the reigning Premier League champions, they are also building form and confidence at just the right time. "I think we have found the key, we have increased the intensity, the team is playing better and that's reflected in

the results," said Koke.

"We have grown together," added Simeone.

Felix has been key, this his seventh goal or assist in his last seven matches, the 22-year-old repaying Simeone's faith while Luis Suarez again started on the bench.

This was the sixth consecutive game Suarez has been named as a substitute and, with the quicker, more agile pairing of Felix and Antoine Griezmann up front, Atletico have hit their stride.

Rayo stay 12th, after making it 10 league games without a victory. They were in contention for the European spots only a few weeks ago but now sit just eight points above the relegation places.

Felix was at the heart of the decisive moment in the 49th minute as Koke collected on the edge of the area and played inside to the Portuguese.

As Rayo's defence turned to Felix, nobody spotted Koke continuing his run, except the forward, who slid the ball through first time for Koke to curl in the finish.

Griezmann should have made it two but was denied by a close-range save from Stole Dimitrievski and Atletico were almost undone when Oscar Valentin's driven cross found

Randy Nteka free five yards out. Somehow Nteka skewed over.

Correa was sent off in the 85th minute for what appeared to be an altercation with Rayo's Alejandro Catena

and Rayo went close in injury-time, after

Dimitrievski was sent up for a corner. The ball

dropped loose for Ivan Balliu and he shot low, but straight at Jan Oblak.

AP ■ MILAN

AC Milan kept hold of their three-point lead at the top of Serie A on Saturday with a 1-0 win at Cagliari, while Inter Milan fell further behind their local rivals after being held 1-1 by Fiorentina.

Ismael Bennacer struck the only goal in the 59th minute of a hard-fought match in Sardinia to keep Napoli at arm's length after they briefly drew level on points thanks to Victor Osimhen's double in a 2-1 win over Udinese.

A third win on the bounce for Stefano Pioli's side stretched their unbeaten league run to eight games and increased hopes of a first Scudetto since 2011, but it was a match marred by racist abuse directed at Mike Maignan and Fikayo Tomori from a section of home fans at the final whistle which sparked a

on-pitch shoving match.

"Maignan said to me 'It's not possible that we're hearing these sorts of insults,'" Pioli told DAZN.

"It's the first time that he's reacted and that means something bad happened that shouldn't have happened. Tomori said the same thing."

It was beautiful goal which won the game, Algeria international Bennacer meeting Olivier Giroud's inviting lay-off with a sumptuous first-time finish from the edge of the box with his left foot.

However Milan would have had a less stressful final few minutes had Davide Calabria not ended a blistering counter-attack with a tame finish straight at Alessio

Cragno when one-on-one only a few yards out.

Leonardo Pavoletti thumped the crossbar with a powerful header as the match crept into stoppage time, but Milan just about held on for the win.

With eight games to go Milan also have the gap between them and Inter at six points as Simone Inzaghi's side continue their struggles.

The champions looked set for a grandstand finish at the San Siro after Denzel Dumfries headed their level in the 55th minute, but the game ended in an unhelpful stalemate.

Simone Inzaghi's side sit third -- albeit with a game in hand -- after



having won just one of their last seven league matches and what was a four-point lead at the start of 2022 has slowly slipped through their fingers.

"I would be more worried if the team wasn't creating chances... in the second half we created a lot of opportunities," said Inzaghi.

"We might not have got the results but the team have been creating."

They face Juventus next weekend in the 'Derby of Italy' and have their old rivals, who host bottom team Salernitana on Sunday, four points behind them in fourth and breathing down their neck after a 15-match unbeaten run in the league. Fiorentina, who silenced the

home fans when Lucas Torreira smashed home the opener four minutes after half-time, are eighth and a point away from the European places.

Loanee Torreira carried on playing despite losing a tooth after being hit in the face, staying on the field with a cotton swab in his mouth and then posting a image on Twitter of himself with a gap in his teeth.

They were saved by VAR 10 minutes after Dumfries' leveller, when referee Daniele Chiffi overruled his own decision to give Inter a penalty for a foul by Lorenzo Venuti on Lautaro Martinez after an on-field review.

Osimhen was the hero of the hour for Napoli with both goals in a 2-1 win over Udinese, his brace keeping Luciano Spalletti's side right in the hunt.



'Permanent saliva ban not big deal'

PTI ■ LAHORE

Australia Test skipper Pat Cummins says since the impact of precautionary prohibition on use of saliva for shining the ball was not as huge as anticipated, a permanent ban on its usage will not be a "big deal" for the seam bowlers.

Saliva application was barred by the ICC in view of the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020.

Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), the custodian of cricket laws, recently imposed a complete

ban on the use of saliva while announcing its amended 2022 code, which will come into effect in October this year.

The MCC reasoned that applying saliva had no impact on the ball's movement, according to its research.

"I don't think so (permanent saliva ban will hamper the performance of the swing bowlers)," Cummins, himself a pacer, told reporters ahead of Australia's third Test against Pakistan. "I don't think it has made a huge effect, as big as we might have thought it

would. We can still use sweat so it's not too big a deal," he added. The MCC said that using saliva to shine the ball would be treated as an unfair practice.

GREAT THAT KKR HAVE RETAINED MOST OF THE SQUAD

Cummins, who had become the most expensive foreign buy in the Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2019 when Kolkata Knight Riders bought him for a whopping Rs 15.50 crore, will turn out for the Kolkata-based outfit once again. "Really excited. It's

been great that most of the squad has been able to kept together. So, most of the players and staff know really really well," he said. KKR have named Indian batter Shreyas Iyer as skipper and having shared the dressing room with him in the 2017 edition of the IPL, Cummins is looked forward to joining forces with him once again.

"Shreyas, I played with at Delhi(Daredevils), we got on really well. He's seem like a very calm guy and, seems in form at the moment."

"I'm so excited to go over there, I have some close friends I will be playing alongside, can't wait," he added.

KOHLI, BABAR BOTH REALLY COMPLETE BATTERS

Pakistan skipper Babar Azam, who played a sensational 196-run knock against Australia in the second Test earlier this week, has often been compared to India batting veteran Virat Kohli, who has already established himself as one of the greats of the game.

Asked to compare the two, Cummins said, "They are both really complete batters no matter what format you play, they present their challenges." "They are both really high quality (players), both have scored centuries against Australia over the years." Talking about the similarities of the current top batters of the world including Kohli, New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson, England Test captain Joe Root and Azam, Cummins said all of them are not easily flustered.

"All know their game incredibly well, They are never flustered, happy to bat long periods of time. If there is an opportunity, they get off the mark pretty quickly, start accumulating the runs really quickly.

Babar, Cummins eye last chance for Pak-Aus series win

AP ■ LAHORE

After two batting-dominated draws, rival skippers Babar Azam and Pat Cummins are both targeting a series-winning victory when the third and final Pakistan-Australia Test starts in Lahore Monday.

The series -- Australia's first in Pakistan for 24 years -- opened with a high scoring stalemate on a featherbed pitch in Rawalpindi before the hosts salvaged a fighting draw in Karachi on the back of an epic 196 from Azam.

Lahore's Gaddafi stadium is Azam's home ground and will be staging a Test for the first time since a fatal terror attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in 2009 caused international cricket to be suspended in Pakistan.

"I can't explain the feelings," said Azam on Sunday.

"You have a different feeling when you play on your home ground and before your home crowd.

"I see a result here and if we win, against a major team, it will mean a lot and a proud moment for us."

Both the pitches in Rawalpindi and Karachi did not give enough assistance to the spinners, but Azam hopes Lahore pitch will be more receptive.

"I feel it will definitely give turn. It has small cracks from where spinners get help and



patches are formed," said Azam, who may opt to include uncapped leg-spinner Zahid Mahmood to support slow-bowling pair Nauman Ali and Sajid Khan.

Cummins felt the pitch might turn out to be similar to the flat tracks encountered in the first two Tests.

"It seems hard, but I can't see it being too much different from the other ones," said Cummins who announced Australia will field an unchanged side from the second Test.

"We feel like we've got all bases covered if needed, whether it's reverse swing or swing later in the game.

"Everyone has pulled up really well. We gave them an extra couple of days to make sure everyone has come up good. But there's no injury worries, everyone is freshened up, so we're confident in the eleven."

Cummins urged Australia, who dropped four crucial catches in the second innings in Karachi, to take their chances.

"Wickets are at a premium in this series so you can't afford to drop too many chances," he said. "So that's going to be the challenge this week."

Australia have not won a Test series on Asian soil since their 1-0 win in Sri Lanka in 2011.

Retained players have a responsibility to guide youngsters, says Ponting

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Having bought a lot of new faces at the IPL mega auction this year, Delhi Capitals head coach Ricky Ponting stressed that the players who have been retained by the franchise now have a responsibility to guide the youngsters in the team.

The Capitals had retained four players -- skipper Rishabh Pant, opener Prithiv Shaw, spin all-rounder Axar Patel and South Africa pacer Anrich Nortje -- ahead of the auction and the coach is trying his best to get to know the rest of the squad ahead of the league which begins on March 26.

"I have told the boys to keep their doors open when they are in their rooms and get to know each other. I am going to have breakfast, lunch and dinner with all the younger guys that I don't know," Ponting was quoted as saying in a media release.

"When you show love



towards the younger guys as a coach or a senior player, you know that they are going to give it back."

"The guys who have been in the Delhi Capitals camp for a while definitely have the responsibility of guiding the youngsters in the team.

"Rishabh's captain, so he's going to do that anyway, but guys like Prithvi, Axar and Nortje will also have their roles and responsibilities within the team," he added.

Ponting was impressed with the energetic vibe around the group of players when he attended his first training session with the team.

"At the moment, we need to really focus on what we need to do to get ready for game one. I had a great first session with the players. There's an energetic vibe around the team, which is what we always strive for," Ponting said.

Delhi Capitals' new foreign recruits include David Warner, Mitchell Marsh, Tim Seifert and Rovman Powell.

Vicky Ostwal, Chetan Sakaria, Yash Dhull, Sarfaraz Khan and Kamlesh Nagarkoti are the youngsters in the side.

Delhi Capitals will open their campaign against Mumbai Indians on March 27.

Rajasthan Royals pacer Saini eager to connect with Boult

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Indian quick Navdeep Saini is eager to observe Trent Boult "go about his business" and pick the New Zealand pace spearhead's brain in a bid to improve his game during his stint with the Rajasthan Royals in the IPL this season.

One of the fastest bowlers in the country currently, Saini will be an important cog in the Royals' newly forged fast bowling line-up alongside Boult.

"I am most looking forward to connecting with Trent Boult during the IPL. He is someone who has achieved so much in both international and IPL cricket, and it'll be a great experience to just speak to him about various aspects of fast bowling," Saini was quoted as saying in a release.

"I'll be most focused on observing him go about his business, and hopefully that should also help in improving my own game," added Saini, who has 17 wickets in the IPL at an economy of 8.47.

Having recently been a

part of the Delhi squad during the league stage of the Ranji Trophy, where he picked up five wickets in two matches, the Karnal Express hopes to get better as he shifts his focus to the white-ball game, aiming to contribute and help the Royals.

"I'm looking forward to working with the very experienced coaching group and a talented group of players. The Royals are known for fostering a fantastic atmosphere around the group, and I'm simply looking to experience that and connect with everyone and get going this season."

"I'm also really excited to work with Kumar Sangakkara and Lasith Malinga, and pick their brains on various aspects of the game. I think this will be a great opportunity for me to learn and groom myself, further evolving my skills and contributing to the team's performances," Saini added.

Having missed majority of IPL 2021 due to injury concerns, Saini said he's been putting in the hard yards.



"I wasn't able to play a lot of matches last season, but I think I'm coming into this season on the back of a lot of hard work that I've put into myself, both on and off the field. "I'm feeling good about my bowling again, and can't wait to get back into the IPL and perform for the team." The speedster signed off by touching upon his ambitions for the season with the Royals.

"I feel we've got a good squad with a mix of exciting and experienced players, all of whom have done well for their respective nations and state sides in the build-up to the IPL. There's been a nice feeling around the camp even at training, and some really intense sessions."

"On a more personal note, the goal is to help the team with my abilities and performances, be it bowling with the new ball, in the middle overs, or at the death. "It is important to plan smartly and then execute them properly, especially, given the nature of modern-day T20" he said.

Bengaluru pitch rated as 'below average'

PTI ■ DUBAI

The Chinnaswamy Stadium pitch in Bengaluru, which was used for the second Test between India and Sri Lanka earlier this month, was on Sunday rated "below average" by the ICC.

The venue thus received one demerit point under the ICC Pitch and Outfield Monitoring Process.

According to the revised ICC Pitch and Outfield Monitoring Process, which was introduced on January 4, 2018, "if a pitch or outfield is rated as being substandard, that venue will be allocated a number of demerit points."

"One demerit point will be

awarded to venues whose pitches are rated by the match referees as below average, while three and five demerit points will be awarded to venues whose pitches are marked as poor and unfit, respectively.

"No demerit point will be awarded when the outfield is rated as below average, but two and five demerit points will be awarded to venues whose outfields are marked as poor and unfit, respectively."

Demerit points will remain active for a rolling five-year period. When a venue accumulates five demerit points (or crosses that threshold), it will be suspended from hosting any international cricket for a period of 12 months, the ICC said.

SA beat B'desh by 7 wickets



AP ■ JOHANNESBURG

Fast bowler Kagiso Rabada took 5-39 as South Africa cruised to a seven-wicket victory over Bangladesh in the second ODI at

The Wanderers on Sunday to square the three-match series. Bangladesh chose to bat, but after a poor start could only manage 194 for nine in their 50 overs. The home side had no trouble chasing

down the target, which they reached with 76 balls to spare.

Bangladesh collapsed to 34 for five as the home seamers got exaggerated bounce out of the surface and caught the edge with regularity. Rabada was particularly destructive, but when South Africa lost their third seamer, Wayne Parnell, to a hamstring injury early in his spell, it opened an end for the visitors. Afif Hossain (72 from 107 balls) and Mehidy Hasan Miraz (38 from 49 balls) put on 86 for the seventh wicket to bring respectability to the score, but it was well below par at a venue famous for high-scoring games.

That was proven by opener Quinton de Kock as he smashed 62 from 41 balls in the home side's reply and Kyle Verreynne (58 not out from 77 balls) led South Africa to an easy win.

Hurley's 'heart aches' as Warne honoured at pvt funeral

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Australian cricket superstar Shane Warne was farewelled at a private funeral on Sunday by family and friends, as former fiancée Elizabeth Hurley said her "heart aches" that she was not able to attend.

The legendary leg spinner's body was found at a luxury resort in Thailand on March 4, with his death from a suspected heart attack aged just 52 provoking shock and grief around the world from prime ministers, rock stars and fellow players.

An autopsy revealed Warne died of natural causes, with a private jet last week flying him home to his native Melbourne.

He was remembered Sunday in an invitation-only funeral at St Kilda Football Club, an



Australian Rules team he supported all his life.

Among the mourners were Warne's three children Brooke, Jackson, and Summer along with fellow cricketers, local media personalities and his close-knit poker group. The service ended with his

coffin given a lap of honour at St Kilda's home ground as family members walked behind and the song "The Time of My Life" from the movie "Dirty Dancing" boomed through loudspeakers.

Tina Turner's "Simply The Best" played as the hearse left the

ground.

"He brought together so many things," his close friend and television presenter Eddie McGuire, who delivered a eulogy, told the Herald Sun newspaper outside the venue.

"The reason why he was so loved is because he was fallible, he was Superman.

"The magic part about Shane Warne was that he sprinkled his gold dust everywhere he went. He didn't become a hermit, he brought his friends into everything in life," McGuire added.

Australia teammates at the service included Mark Taylor, Ian Healy, Mark Waugh, Michael Clarke and Glenn McGrath while ex-England captain Michael Vaughan was also seen arriving.

But Warne's former partner, the British actress Hurley, said she

was unable to make the celebration of a larger-than-life character who transcended his sport.

"My heart aches that I can't be in Australia tomorrow for Shane's funeral," Hurley wrote on Instagram late Saturday. "I was filming last night and, with the time jump, physically can't get there." She accompanied her message with pictures of the couple celebrating their engagement in Sri Lanka.

They became a couple after Warne split with the mother of his children, Simone Callahan, but they parted ways in late 2013.

"It still hasn't really sunk in that he's gone," Hurley added.

"It seems too cruel that all the people who loved him will never have another Lion hug, but our memories will live forever. RIP Lionheart, with love, your Luna."

Sciver keeps England alive in nail-biter against NZ

AP ■ AUCKLAND

England kept their semi-final hopes alive at the Women's World Cup Sunday as Nat Sciver set up a dramatic one-wicket victory over hosts New Zealand in Auckland.

Chasing New Zealand's below par 203, Sciver's 61 had England cruising to victory at 187 for five before they lost four wickets for nine runs.

The last pair Charlie Dean and Anya Shrubsole took a nervous two overs to pick off the remaining eight runs and seal the win with 16 balls remaining.

"It's crazy, we just got over the line. We probably shouldn't have," a delighted Sciver said after being named player of the match.

It made the tournament a lot brighter for defending champions England who have bounced back from early losses to Australia, West Indies and South Africa.

"I'm just relieved to get over the line," England captain Heather Knight said.

"The main thing today was getting the win and luckily we did.

"There's a bit of relief there and I think we'll take being on the right side of this win and obviously reflect on what we could have done better."

Unbeaten Australia have already qualified for the final four while England, South Africa, West Indies and India are all in contention for the remaining three slots.

Aiding England's cause is that their remaining matches are against the two bottom-of-the-table sides — Bangladesh and Pakistan. New Zealand still have a remote chance of advancing to the semi-finals but need several unlikely results to go their way.

After New Zealand failed to bat out their 50 overs, England took a relatively risk-free approach to their run chase.

There was a slight wobble when they reached 98 for two when Heather Knight, for 42, and Amy Jones, for one, fell in quick succession.

But Sciver restored order with her well compiled 61 which included a 70-run stand with Sophia Dunkley, who made 33, as they



moved to within 17 of their target with 40 balls remaining.

But when she was bowled with the score at 187 it started a nerve-racking period for England until Shrubsole clipped a four and a single off Brooke Halliday to get England home.

New Zealand's hopes of firming up a top-four placing hit a roadbump when Sophie Devine retired with a back injury and they lost four wickets for 11 runs in the space of 17 deliveries to go from 150-4 to 161-8.

Devine returned but only added four more before being dismissed for 41 while Maddy Green ensured New Zealand passed the 200 mark and was unbeaten on 52 when the innings ended in the 49th over.

Kate Cross accounted for New Zealand's recognised batters with three for 35 while Sophie Ecclestone mopped up the lower order with three for 41.

Frankie Mackay was New Zealand's most successful bowler with four for 34.