

OPINION 6
LOOKING BACK AT
TRADE WITH RUSSIA**WORLD 8**
UKRAINE FIGHTS INTO
2ND MONTH OF WAR**MONEY 9**
PLI SCHEME TO ACCOUNT FOR 13-15%
CAPEX IN KEY INDUSTRIAL SECTORS

NEW DELHI, THURSDAY MARCH 24, 2022; PAGES 12 ₹3



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CAPSULE

**4 KIDS DIE AFTER EATING
POISON-LACED TOFFEES****Lucknow/Kushinagar:** Four children, including three siblings, died after allegedly consuming poisonous toffees in Kasya area of Kushinagar district on Wednesday morning, officials said.**11 FROM BIHAR KILLED
IN SCRAP GODOWN FIRE****Hyderabad:** Eleven migrant workers were charred to death in a major fire accident at a scrap godown here in the early hours of Wednesday. The deceased workers, hailing from Bihar, were sleeping in a room constructed above the godown at Bhoiguda here when the incident happened.**HERO MOTORCORP CHIEF
RAIDED FOR TAX EVASION****New Delhi:** The Income Tax Department on Wednesday conducted raids at multiple premises of Hero Motorcorp as part of a tax evasion probe against the country's largest two-wheeler automobiles manufacturer, officials said. **P10****START MID-DAY MEAL
SCHEME AGAIN: SONIA****New Delhi:** Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday made a strong demand for restarting mid-day meals in schools as they open after the long closure due to Covid.**RUSSIAN OLYMPIANS
FACE BACKLASH****London:** Russian Olympic athletes who took part in a rally supporting President Vladimir Putin and the Ukraine invasion are facing a backlash, including facing a disciplinary probe.Survivors recount details of
ghastly Birbhum massacrePolice detain Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) activists during their protest against the alleged mass killing at Bagtui village in Birbhum district, outside West Bengal Legislative Assembly in Kolkata on Wednesday **PTI**'My grandsons cried
for mercy but they...'**SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■**
BAGTUI/BIRBHUM

It was well past 9 pm ... They came from nowhere, rained bombs ...frightened... the males like us took shelter in the paddy fields leaving back our women and children with hope that normally they are not touched...The women had shut themselves inside the houses... unable to catch them, the men of Anarul Sheikh cut open the grills... first hacked the inmates ... my two grandsons cried for mercy but they

would not listen ... I helplessly watched these from distance... then they poured diesel on them and set them afire... all in front of my eyes... 10 people screamed as they died bit by bit... we cried hiding in the darkness watching the mayhem."

That is how Mihilal and Manirul Sheikh describe the Tuesday night's horror of Bagtui village in Birbhum district where a retaliatory attack by rival Trinamool Congress gangs allegedly fighting over the control of coal, sand and stone racket left 10 people, including 6 women and two children dead.

*Continued on Page 2*HC asks Delhi CFSL to
collect evidence, orders
CCTV at crime spots**PNS ■ KOLKATA**

Taking suo motu cognizance of Birbhum carnage that saw 10 people burnt to death in an alleged intra-party feud, the Calcutta High Court on Wednesday asked the State Government to produce the case diary/report in the case before it by 2 pm on Thursday, when the matter will be taken up for hearing again.

The court also directed Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL) Delhi to immediately collect necessary materials for forensic examination at Bagtui village in Birbhum.

The HC asked the DGP to ensure safety of witnesses, including that of a minor boy injured in the arson, in consultation with the district judge, Purba Bardhaman.

The Division Bench of Chief Justice Prakash Srivastava and Justice Rajarshi Bhargava said, "Let no evidence be destroyed. The district court and the State DGP will have to

ensure the safety of every villager and witnesses. If any post-mortem is pending, it will have to be videographed."

The court also directed the administration to install CCTV in the area.

*Continued on Page 2*Don't spare thugs,
Modi tells people**PNS ■ NEW DELHI**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday urged the people of West Bengal not to forgive the perpetrators of such incidents and the those who encourage such criminals.

Virtually addressing an event on Shaheed Diwas in Kolkata's Victoria Memorial, he said, "I am pained by the violent incident in Birbhum, West Bengal. I express my condolences. I hope that the State Government will definitely punish those who commit such heinous sins."

No Covid zone,
but mask must
from March 31**PNS ■ NEW DELHI**

Citing the continuous dip in coronavirus cases for the past seven weeks, the Union Home Ministry on Wednesday decided to end all Covid-19 containment measures across the country from March 31.

However, as a precautionary measure in keeping with the WHO warning due to the consistent rise in cases in pockets of European and Asian nations, the Government has decided to continue with Covid appropriate behaviour such as wearing of masks and maintaining social distancing norms as earlier.

On Wednesday, though, the Covid cases were around 11 per cent higher (1,778) compared to Tuesday's figures.

The overall tally of Covid-19 cases stands at 4,30,12,749. According to the data, 62 deaths have been reported in the last 24 hours, taking the toll to 5,16,605. The active cases further declined to 23,087.

*Continued on Page 2*India crosses \$400 bn
milestone in exports**New Delhi:** The country's exports for the first time crossed the USD 400 billion mark in a fiscal on healthy performance by sectors such as petroleum products, engineering, gems and jewellery, and chemicals, according to the commerce ministry's data released on Wednesday.

The merchandise exports rose by 37 per cent to USD 400.8 billion in 2021-22 until March 21 against USD 292 billion in 2020-21. Previously, the outbound shipments had touched a record of USD 330.07 billion in 2018-19.

Imports during the period stood at USD 589 billion, leaving a trade deficit of about USD 189 billion. Hailing the country's success in achieving its goods export target, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that this is a key milestone in India's "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" journey.

The highest ever goods export target was achieved nine days ahead of the March 31 deadline. "India set an ambitious target of USD 400 billion of goods exports and achieves this target for the first time ever. I congratulate our farmers, weavers, MSMEs, manufacturers, exporters for this success. This is a key milestone in our Aatmanirbhar Bharat journey. #LocalGoesGlobal," Modi tweeted.

Detailed report on P10

Dhami takes oath as U'khand CM

Dehradun: Pushkar Singh Dhami took oath as the 12th Chief Minister of Uttarakhand in a ceremony organised at the historic Parade Ground in Dehradun on Wednesday afternoon. Along with him eight Cabinet Ministers took oath of office and secrecy.

The Governor of Uttarakhand, Lieutenant General (retd) Gurmit Singh, administered the oath to CM Dhami and his Cabinet Ministers.

Continued on Page 2Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets Uttarakhand CM-designate Pushkar Singh Dhami before the oath-taking ceremony in Dehradun on Wednesday **PTI**

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Delhi to enforce lane discipline for HMs

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Government will start an intensive enforcement drive for bus drivers and goods carriage vehicles to ensure their adherence to the lane discipline. The Transport Department, in consultation with Delhi Traffic Police and other stakeholders has already identified 46 major corridors for implementation of the drive.

As part of the drive, the Public Works Department (PWD) has been directed to mark and properly identify the selected corridors by placing warning signage and boards at suitable places, the Office of the Transport Minister said in a statement.

"The segregated and marked bus lanes will be exclusively reserved for buses and goods carriage from 08.00 AM to 10.00 PM and no other vehi-

cle will be permitted to ply in the said bus lanes during this period," it said.

Transport Minister of Delhi Kailash Gahlot further stated "Safety of citizens on Delhi roads is of paramount importance to us. Over the last couple of years with a vision to ensure safe, accessible, smart, and sustainable transport to citizens of Delhi, we have upgraded our technology and infrastructure in our buses such as installation of CCTV camera and panic buttons in buses, its two-way connection with integrated command-and-control center, live tracking, presence of bus marshals etc.

"By assigning dedicated lanes to buses and enforcement of the safety measures, we are further committed to make Delhi roads safe for our citizens, motorists, Non-motorized transport and pedestrians. It would also help with reducing the traffic congestion on the road," he said.

It further said that during the period from 10.00 PM to 08.00 AM, other vehicles may be allowed to ply in bus lanes, however the buses and goods carriage will confine and ply in the segregated and marked bus lanes for 24 hours. "Vehicles found plying on the other lanes, will be liable for prosecution under section 192-A of Motor Vehicle Act, 1988 which prescribes a fine of INR 10,000, with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to six months," it said.

Transport department will deploy two enforcement teams in two shifts to enforce traffic discipline in bus lanes. Each enforcement team will cover the entire road length or stretch of that road, allotted to such a team. In addition, cranes will also be deployed with the teams for impounding and removal of vehicles which are found parked/obstructing the bus lanes.

Demand for Ahir Regiment in Army: Protest leads to traffic jam on Delhi-Jaipur e-way

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

A protest called by the Ahir Community, from the Kherki Daula toll plaza to Hero Honda Chowk in support of the creation of an 'Ahir Regiment' in the Indian Army on Wednesday disrupted the traffic movement on the Delhi-Jaipur (NH-48) throughout the day.

The commuters on the Expressway faced huge traffic congestion on the National Highway as the Gurugram police had diverted the route to avoid traffic congestion.

But despite this, the commuters faced huge inconvenience due to the spreading of the protesters at Kherki Daula toll plaza till the Hero Honda Chowk on the carriageway.

The Gurugram Police had put up barricades at several entry points on the national highway at Shankar Chowk, Iffco Chowk, Signature Tower, Rajiv Chowk and Hero Honda Chowk on the expressway.

As a result, traffic going towards Jaipur was particularly slow and

Meanwhile, the Gurugram traffic police had also issued an advisory for the commuters to avoid any inconvenience on the national highway but it seems the commuters were unaware of the protest and faced huge traffic congestions on the national highway.

Moreover, the protest was joined by several party leaders including, Congress MP Deependar Singh Hooda, Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) Haryana in-charge and Rajya Sabha MP Sushil Gupta, Rewari MLA Chiranjeev Rao, Former Haryana cabinet minister Rao Narbir Singh, Former BJP MLA Umesh Aggarwal, TMC leader Ashok Tanwar and others.

While addressing the gathering, Gupta said, "We heard that 'Modi hai to Mumkin Hai' now where is the prime minister Narendra Modi. We are demanding the creation of an 'Ahir Regiment' in the Indian Army and AAP will provide all possible support to Ahir Community in this protest, he said.

Mamata links Birbhum carnage with Hathras

Aligarh: Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, in her statement, has linked the incident of burning of ten people alive after the murder of TMC leader in Rampurhat of Birbhum district of Bengal with Hathras of UP. Mamta Banerjee has said in a statement given in the media that she will go to Rampurhat on Thursday. Anyone can come to Rampurhat, but they were not allowed to enter Hathras in UP.

Various discussions are taking place after this statement. The special thing is that the leaders of political parties had gone to Bulgarhi and made rhetoric regarding the Hathras incident. Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi, Rashtriya Lok Dal's Jayant Choudhary and Bhim Army's Chandshekhar etc, had also visited the family members of the deceased girl in Bhulgarhi.

On September 14, 2020, a girl belonging to a Scheduled Caste was attacked in Buolgarhi of Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh.

The girl's brother had filed a case against Sandeep of the village itself. Later, on the basis of the girl's statements, the names and sections of the village's Ravi, Ramu and Lavkush were extended. The girl was treated at the Jawaharlal Nehru (JN) Medical College of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). On September 28, the girl was referred from Aligarh to Delhi. She died on 29 at Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi. The incident had brought the Buolgarhi village of the district into the limelight. For two weeks, Bulgarhi remained a political battleground.

The family of Hathras victim welcomed the statement and step taken by Mamta Banerjee and are happy. *PNS*

With no way to escape, 11 migrant workers lose life in scrap godown blaze in Hyderabad

Hyderabad: It was a tragedy waiting to happen at the ill-fated scrap godown in Hyderabad's Bhoiguda as 12 migrant workers from Bihar were staying in a single room above the godown that had a sole access point.

A spiral staircase in the godown was the only way to enter and exit from the room and a kitchen attached to it.

Making matters worse for the hapless workers, the shutters of the godown (on the ground floor) remained closed when the deadly fire mishap happened in the early hours of Wednesday.

Unsurprisingly, they could not come out and save their lives though one of the 12 people managed to escape by jumping out of the window. It was a heart-wrenching scene as bodies, charred beyond recognition, were found in a heap as they apparently collapsed upon inhaling the smoke, a fire official said. Eleven among the 12 workers perished in the fire the exact cause of it would be known after an investigation,

the officials said. Burnt scrap material, including old papers, empty liquor bottles and fiber cable wires, were found scattered at the scene. The godown owner has provided accommodation to them in the room upstairs, but no one was, actually, supposed to stay there, a police official said. The 12 workers, aged between 22 and 35 years, were sleeping in the room when the tragedy struck.

The fire appeared to have broken out in the godown and soon spread to the room above, the police official said.

The site of the fire tragedy was sealed and cordoned off as authorities removed the burnt scrap material from the godown.

The migrant workers, who came to the city to eke out a living, hailed from different villages of Bihar's Chhapra and Katihar districts.

Some of them were working at the scrap godown for the past two years, while others had joined recently. *PTI*

Ramapati Shastri picked as pro tem UP Speaker

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Governor Anandiben Patel appointed senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader Ramapati Shastri as the pro tem Speaker of Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly on Wednesday.

A BJP MLA from Manakpur in Gonda, Shastri will administer the oath to the newly-elected legislators.


The governor has also constituted five-member panels for administering oath of office to the newly-elected MLAs of the 18th UP Legislative Assembly. The panel members are Suresh Khanna, Fateh Bahadur, Jai Pratap Singh and Rampal (all BJP) and former assembly speaker Mata Prasad Pandey of Samajwadi Party.

Principal Secretary, UP Assembly, Pradeep Dubey, said that Ramapati Shastri had been appointed pro-tem speaker by the Governor and he would be administered oath of office by the governor at Raj Bhawan on Saturday. Shastri is an eight-time MLA.

The Governor has also constituted five-member panels for administering oath of office to the newly-elected MLAs of the 18th UP Legislative Assembly on Wednesday.

In the recently concluded UP assembly elections, Ramapati Shastri defeated Ramesh Gautam of Samajwadi Party by a margin of over 42,000 votes. Shastri had earlier served as social welfare minister in the Yogi Government and also the previous BJP-led regime headed by Rajnath Singh in 2000-2002.

Shastri was born in Vishnoharpur village of Nawabganj (Gonda) on October 15, 1952. He had his primary education at a state-run school in the village and later passed secondary and intermediate examinations from Gandhi Vidyalaya Inter College, Nawabganj. In 1984, he received Shastri degree from Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya, Varanasi and during his student days, he joined Jana Sangh before taking the plunge into politics in 1974.



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Due to unavoidable circumstances following changes have been made in respect of the Bid ID No. BRIDGE TENDER ONLINE RWCSP-51/2021-22


(i)

Availability of Tender on-line for bidding	Last desking time for seeking clarification	Date & Time of opening of tender	
		Technical Bid	Financial Bid
From 24.03.2022 at 11.00 AM to 07.04.2022 up to 5.00 PM	02/04/2022 Up to 1.00 P.M.	08/04/2022 At 10.00 A.M.	Will be intimated later
Instead of			
From 15.03.2022 at 11.00 AM to 30.03.2022 up to 5.00 PM	25.03.2022 Up to 1.00 P.M.	31.03.2022 At 11.00 A.M.	Will be intimated later

All other terms and condition remain unchanged.

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नवा रायपुर, अटल नगर, जिला-रायपुर (छ.ग.)

// सर्व संबंधित को सूचना //

भारत सरकार, पर्यावरण, वन एवं जलवायु परिवर्तन मंत्रालय की ई.आई.ए. अधिसूचना दिनांक 14/09/2006 (यथा संशोधित) के अर्गत सर्व संबंधित को सूचित किया जाता है कि मेसर्स श्री श्याम वेवर्स (गोंडपेण्ड्री) लाईम स्टोन माईन), ग्राम-गोंडपेण्ड्री, तहसील-पाटन, जिला-दुर्ग स्थित खसरा क्रमांक 383, 384, 393(पाट), 394/1, 394/2, 395/1, 395/2, 396, 397, 398, 399(पाट), 401, 402/1, 402/2, 403/3(पाट), 437 एवं 438(पाट), कुल क्षेत्रफल-4.98 हेक्टेयर में दूना पथर(शीण खनिज) उत्खनन क्षमता - 55,500 टन प्रतिवर्ष के पर्यावरणीय स्वीकृति हेतु लोक सुनवाई बाबत छत्तीसगढ़ पर्यावरण संरक्षण मंडल, नवा रायपुर में आवेदन प्रस्तुत किया गया है। (उक्त परियोजना के संबंध में आपत्ति / सुझाव / विचार / टीका टिप्पणी, इस सूचना के जारी होने के दिनांक से 30 दिवस के अंदर क्षेत्रीय अधिकारी, छत्तीसगढ़ पर्यावरण संरक्षण मंडल, 5/32 बंगला, भिलाई,जिला-दुर्ग के कार्यालय में मौखिक अथवा लिखित रूप से कार्यालयीन समय में प्रस्तुत की जा सकती है। इस परियोजना के लिए लोक सुनवाई दिनांक 28/04/2022 को समय दोपहर 12:00 बजे, स्थान-शासकीय उच्चतर माध्यमिक शाला, ग्राम-गोंडपेण्ड्री, तहसील-पाटन, जिला-दुर्ग (छ.ग.) में नियत की गई है। यह भी सूचित हो कि :-

(1) लोक सुनवाई के दौरान सम्मिलित होने वाले व्यक्तियों को फिजिकल / सोशल डिस्टेंसिंग का पालन करना अनिवार्य होगा।

(2) लोक सुनवाई में सम्मिलित होने वाले व्यक्तियों द्वारा मास्क का उपयोग किया जावेगा तथा समय-समय पर सेनेटाईजर का उपयोग किया जाना अनिवार्य होगा।

(3) लोक सुनवाई स्थल पर सम्मिलित होने वाले व्यक्तियों की बैठक व्यवस्था कम से कम 02 मीटर की दूरी रखना अनिवार्य होगा।

(4) कोरोना वायरस के नियंत्रण एवं रोकथाम हेतु शासन द्वारा जारी समस्त दिशा-निर्देशों का अक्षरशः पालन किया जाना अनिवार्य होगा।

ई.आई.ए. नोटिफिकेशन 14 सितम्बर 2006 (यथा-संशोधित) के अनुसार संबंधित व्यक्तियों के अवलोकन / पठन हेतु डाफ्ट ई.आई.ए. रिपोर्ट, कार्यालयिक सार हिन्दी एवं अंग्रेजी भाषा तथा सी.डी.(साफ्ट कोपी) डायरेक्टर, पर्यावरण, वन एवं जलवायु परिवर्तन मंत्रालय, भारत सरकार, इंदिरा पर्यावरण भवन, जोर बाग रोड, नई दिल्ली, क्षेत्रीय अधिकारी, एकीकृत क्षेत्रीय कार्यालय, पर्यावरण, वन एवं जलवायु परिवर्तन मंत्रालय, भारत सरकार, अरण्य भवन, नार्थ ब्लॉक, सेक्टर-19, नवा रायपुर, अटल नगर, रायपुर, छत्तीसगढ़, कलेक्टर, कार्यालय कलेक्टर, जिला-दुर्ग, मुख्य कार्यालयन अधिकारी, जिला पंचायत, जिला-दुर्ग, मुख्य महाप्रबंधक, जिला व्यापार एवं उद्योग केंद्र, जिला-दुर्ग, सरपंच / सचिव, ग्राम पंचायत गोंडपेण्ड्री, जिला-दुर्ग, क्षेत्रीय कार्यालय, छत्तीसगढ़ पर्यावरण संरक्षण मंडल, 5/32 बंगला, भिलाई, जिला-दुर्ग एवं मुख्यालय, छत्तीसगढ़ पर्यावरण संरक्षण मंडल, पर्यावास भवन, सेक्टर-19, नवा रायपुर, अटल नगर, जिला-रायपुर में रखी गई है।

रायपुर सचिव
छत्तीसगढ़ पर्यावरण संरक्षण मंडल,
नवा रायपुर, अटल नगर, जिला- रायपुर (छ.ग.)

No Covid zone...

From Page 1

In a communication to Chief Secretaries of States, Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla said, "National Disaster Management Authority has taken a decision that there may not be any further need to invoke the provisions of the DM Act for Covid containment measures."

The Central Government had on March 24, 2020 issued for the first time orders and guidelines under the Disaster Management Act, (DM Act) 2005 for the containment of Covid-19 in the country and these were modified on various occasions.

The States and Union Territories have also developed their own capacities and systems and implemented their detailed specific plans for managing the pandemic, said the Home Secretary, adding over the last seven weeks or so there has been a steep decline in the number of cases.

Accordingly, Bhalla said, after the expiry of the existing order on March 31, no further order will be issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare advisories on Covid containment measures, including on the use of face mask and hand hygiene, will continue to guide the overall national response to the pandemic, he said.

The Home Secretary, however, said that in view of the nature of the disease, people still need to remain watchful of the situation.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

CHANGE OF NAME

I, R. Prakash S/o P. Rajenderan R/o Flat No. 433 IP colony, Faridabad, Haryana has changed my name from R. Prakash to Rajendiran Prakash for all purposes.

PD(9165)A

Dhami takes oath...

From Page 1

The ceremony was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, national president of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) JP Nadda, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari, Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi, Chief Ministers of various BJP ruled States, senior leaders of the BJP and former CMs of Uttarakhand and other States. In his Cabinet Dhami picked Satpal Maharaj, Prem Chand Agarwal, Ganesh Joshi, Dhan Singh Rawat, Subodh Uniyal, Rekha Arya, Chandan Ram Das and Saurabh Bahuguna as Ministers. Dhami dropped three senior Ministers Bishan Singh Chufal, Banshidhar Bhagat and Arvind Pandey from his last Cabinet. BJP State president Madan Kaushik was also included in the Cabinet. The Cabinet still has three vacancies left which can be filled later.

The ceremony started at 2.36 PM with the oath of office and secrecy by CM Dhami. The whole ceremony lasted for about thirty minutes. Thousands of BJP workers and the people from all parts of the State attended the ceremony braving the blazing afternoon sun.

Uttar Pradesh caretaker CM

Yogi Adityanath, Madhya Pradesh CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar, Gujarat CM Bhupendra Patel, Himachal Pradesh CM Jai Ram Thakur, Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, Arunachal Pradesh CM Pema Khandu and CM designate of Goa Pramod Sawant, former Rajasthan CM Vasundhara Raje, Central Ministers Sanjeev Baliyan, Meenakshi Lekhi, Ajay Bhatt, former CMs of Uttarakhand Trivendra Singh Rawat, Vijay Bahuguna and Tirath Singh Rawat, national general secretary and Uttarakhand in-charge Dushyant Gautam and co in charge Rekha Verma attended the ceremony.

One of the key features of the swearing-in ceremony was the presence of a large number of Hindu saints. A special stage was set up for them and their presence lent a saffron colour and religious fervour to the ceremony. Before taking oath of office Dhami went up to the saints, showered petals on them and took their blessings.

Earlier, the arrival of Prime Minister Modi on the stage electrified the crowd. However maximum applause was reserved for Uttar Pradesh caretaker Chief Minister Yogi who sent the crowd into raptures.

BJP promoting 'The Kashmir Files' to instigate people on religious lines: Mehbooba Mufti

Jammu: PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti alleged on Wednesday that the BJP is promoting "The Kashmir Files", a film on the plight of displaced Kashmiri Hindus, to incite people on religious lines and called for the setting up of a panel to probe the circumstances that led to the exodus of Pandits from the valley.

Her demand came a day after National Conference (NC) chief Farooq Abdullah also called for setting up a panel to investigate the killings and the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley.

Asking people to watch the film but not harbour hatred towards Muslims, Mufti said the circumstances that led to the 2020 Delhi riots and the communal violence in Gujarat in 2002 should also be probed.

"Of course, the government of India should take a decision in this regard (probing the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits)," she told reporters on the sidelines of her party's convention here.

The former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister said the Centre should set up a "truth and reconciliation commis-

Asking people to watch the film but not harbour hatred towards Muslims, Mehbooba said the circumstances that led to the 2020 Delhi riots and the communal violence in Gujarat in 2002 should also be probed

sion" to probe not only the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, but also the Gujarat and Delhi riots.

"I have not seen 'The Kashmir Files'. I have heard that the film shows a lot of violence and bloodshed and that it has painful scenes. What happened with the Kashmiri Pandits was horrible. We feel their pain. But you cannot hate every Kashmiri Muslim (for the exodus of Pandits)," she said.

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) chief recounted the massacres of Sikhs in Chittisinghpura, Hindus in Bajrara (Doda) and Kotdihara, and Muslims in Surankote and said, "Every community faced the worst oppression in Jammu and Kashmir. The people of Jammu and Kashmir were caught between the guns of Pakistan and India. The

Kashmiri Pandits were also victims of it." Maintaining that the makers of the "The Kashmir Files" have to make money, Mufti accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of promoting the film to incite people on religious lines.

"The prime minister and the BJP are promoting it by giving free tickets and making it tax-free. They are inciting people. They divide people on religious lines," she said.

Taking a dig at the saffron party for its "failure" to address the concerns of Kashmiri Pandits, Mufti said had it done anything for the Pandits in the last eight years, their situation could have improved.

"Whatever was done for them -- employment packages, rehabilitating them in flats after bringing them out of tents (refugee camps), transit accommodation facilities at Vessu, Sheikhpora, Mattan or Tulmulla -- all of it was done when Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was the chief minister during the rule of Atalji (former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee) in the country," she added. *PTI*

Survivors recount details of ghastly Birbhum massacre

From Page 1

Anarul Sheikh is the local TMC block president and was hand-in-glove with deputy anchayat pradhan Bhadu Sheikh who was bombed to death barely two hours before the retaliatory attack. Bhadu and Anarul's gang control the entire coal-sand-stone racket in the Bengal Jharkhand border, Manirul allege.

"Bhadu was a 'don' and very close to TMC district president and national working committee member Anubrata Mondal for whom he would 'manage' the elections in Rampurhat and other adjacent towns," complains Mihail, who has lost his mother, wife, a daughter and two grandchildren in the blood curdling attack.

More horrific is the fact that the posse of policemen posted as a precautionary measure outside the village would not rush to protect the victims.

"Anarul stopped the police from coming ... he even stopped the fire brigade personnel in the initial hours," says Manirul demanding CBI investigation and "phansi" (death sentence) for the accused.

"We have no faith in this police force ... when they could not save small children how can they conduct free and fare investigation ... we want CBI and we want Phanshi for the culprits," he says crying inconsolably.

The remaining members of the family have left the village and are hid-

ing in a distant locality (name not to be disclosed). "Even here they are calling us up and issuing death threats," he complains.

Not only the rival groups but almost half of the village has fled the area along with their poultry, cattle and what not.

"We are refugees in our own country dada ... please tell Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and whoever is there to help us ... we have been reduced to insects," he cries even as one hears about 20 km away the district SP silently leaves Bagtui as the sun touches the western rim. One wonders whether even the senior IPS officer is terrified of what might come after some down.

Meanwhile, a team of BJP led by

Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari and the Left leadership led by CPI(M) State secretary Md Salim on Wednesday visited the Bagtui village.

Complaining that the Government was ignoring the treatment of the burn victims "who can be prime witnesses," Adhikari said, "I visited the victims who are undergoing treatment and have offered help by way of getting them admitted to appropriate hospitals in Kolkata because there is no burn unit in Rampurhat hospital ... the doctors told me to see that the patients are removed from here ... but I am told that the Health Department has asked them to continue the treatment here in Rampurhat."

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Delhi’s GDP up 50% since 2016-17

This was even after fiscal disruption due to Covid-19 pandemic, says L-G

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) went up by 50 per cent in five years since 2016-17 even after facing economic disruption due to the Covid pandemic in 2020-21, Lieutenant-Governor Anil Bajjal said on Wednesday.

The economy of national Capital was adversely affected due to Covid in 2020-21, Bajjal said in his address to Delhi Assembly.

“In 2021-22, Delhi’s Gross State Domestic Product (calculated) on current prices was Rs 9,23,967 crore and in last five years it grew by 50 percent as compared to Rs 6,16,085 crore in 2016-17. This shows the strong position of Delhi’s economy,” he said in



Delhi Lt. Governor Anil Bajjal being received by Delhi Speaker Ram Niwas Goel and CM Arvind Kejriwal as he arrives for the Budget Session of the Assembly, in New Delhi on Wednesday.

his address. He also said that Delhi’s per capita income in 2021-22 was Rs 4,01,922 which is three times higher than that of the country. In his address, the L-G mentioned the Delhi Government’s achievements in various fields including electricity, educa-

tion, pollution remediation, in-situ slum development, green energy and so on. He also said Delhi has the cheapest electricity rates in the country and that 91.4 per cent households availed the benefit of power subsidy in 2020-21. On Delhi

Government’s achievement in the education sector, the L-G said that the pass percentage in class 10th and 12th has registered successive growth. “The pass percentage in class 10th and 12th was 97.52 per cent and 99.14 per cent respectively,” Bajjal said.

He also said that the Delhi Teachers University Bill, 2022, was also passed to provide professional training to teachers by establishing a dedicated university.

In his address, Bajjal said that the Delhi Government’s Public Works Department was constructing 784 multi-storey flats in Devanagar area for slum-dwellers under its in-situ rehabilitation policy.

He also said that the Delhi Government was supplying 945 million gallons per day of water across the city with a network of 15,000 km water pipelines.

“Water is also being supplied in 1,577 unauthorised colonies by the Government. Where there is no water pipeline, the Government is supplying water through tankers,” Bajjal said.

Delhi’s fight against pollution

Real-time data on source to be available from August 1

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Leaving no stone unturned to make Delhi pollution-free, the AAP Government has announced that real-time data on pollution sources would be available from August 1 in the national Capital. The real-time identification of pollutants will significantly help in taking mitigating measures and reducing pollution, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said.

Delhi will become the first city to identify the real-time source of air pollution through its apportionment system. The project will help in identifying the factors responsible for the rise in air pollution at any given location in the city.

It will help in understanding the impact of pollution sources like vehicles, dust, biomass burning and industrial emissions. Based on these results, the Delhi Government will be able to take necessary steps to curb the spe-

cific sources of pollution. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had reviewed the progress of Delhi’s ‘Real Time Source Apportionment System’ and directed officers to ensure that no loopholes are left in this system.

Notably, a supersite will be established in Delhi by the end of July to identify actual sources of pollution in real time. Along with the Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, Environment Minister Gopal Rai, Delhi Dialogue Commission vice-chairperson Jasmine Shah and other high-ranking officials were present in the meeting. Kejriwal chaired a review meeting with teams from IIT-Kanpur, IIT-Delhi, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) on the ambitious Real Time Source Apportionment System and Pollution Forecasting Project. During the review meeting, Professor Mukesh from IIT-Kanpur informed the CM that a suitable location had been iden-

tified for the establishment of the supersite apparatus. “They have proposed to set up a supersite at Pandara Road in Central Delhi. The work of setting up the supersite will begin by the end of July. It will be built in an area totaling up to 36 square metres,” the Chief Minister’s Office said in a statement.

“The supersite will be built about nine to 14 meters above the ground. As part of this system, a mobile app will also be developed. Under the whole apportionment system the exact sources of pollution at specific locations will be discovered,” it said.

The Chief Minister was also apprised about the progress of the procurement process of equipment required like the ‘Real Time Ambient Air Analyser’ and ‘Online Particulate Matter and Ion Analysis System’. A global procurement process for acquiring state-of-the-art equipment is being ensured under the project.

The team also informed the Chief Minister of the developments that have taken place in the Air Pollution Forecasting System project. This system will provide accurate hourly, daily and weekly forecast data on air pollution.

Kejriwal said, ‘In Delhi pollution remains in the ‘Moderate Category’ around October 9 every year. After that, the pollution level starts increasing suddenly. Looking at NASA’s photos, it has been noticed that a large amount of stubble was burnt during that period, whereas the figures every time say that only five per cent of Delhi’s pollution is due to stubble burning.’ “In such a situation it is important to ascertain the actual contribution of stubble in Delhi’s pollution and how much other factors contribute to it.

This would enable real-time detection of factors causing pollution in the State and help in controlling that source of pollution,” he added.

Kejriwal: Will quit politics if BJP holds MCD polls on time and wins

BJP first coerced State Election Commission to defer municipal polls and is now trying to delay them: CM

SAURAV GUPTA ■ NEW DELHI

Attacking the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for allegedly delaying municipal elections, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said on Wednesday that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) will quit politics if the BJP gets these polls conducted in a timely manner and wins them.

Kejriwal said that the BJP claims to be the largest political party globally but runs away from a small municipal election fearing defeat at the hands of the AAP. “I challenge the BJP to hold the MCD elections immediately if it has the courage. We (AAP) will leave politics if you (BJP) win,” he said. The Chief

Minister alleged that the BJP first coerced the State Election Commission (SEC) to defer the municipal polls and is now on track to delay them for months through an amendment.

“The BJP’s shameless act of deferring elections is downright disrespectful of the sacrifice our martyrs made for this country and its constitution.

Is the Election Commission so fickle that the BJP can make it defer elections in the name of unification of corporations? Today the BJP is getting MCD elections cancelled; tomorrow it’ll do the same for State and national elections too,” he said.

Addressing the media at Delhi Vidhan Sabha premises, Kejriwal said, “It was on this very day that Bhagat Singh Ji, Sukhdev Ji and Rajguru Ji were hanged to death by the British. These martyrs made the supreme sacrifice to bring freedom to this nation. India won independence and made one of

the strongest Constitutions in the world. The Constitution gave the public the power to elect governments of its choice, who run as the people say. But for the last few days, what has transpired because of the BJP is nothing short of a travesty.”

The Delhi CM further said, “The way the BJP is coercing institutions like the EC for political gains is a direct attack on this democracy.

I appeal to the Prime Minister with folded hands — in the future there may not be a BJP or an AAP, there may be no Modi or Kejriwal for the public to see. Our parties don’t matter, we don’t matter. This country is all what matters. Our social fabric is what matters. Our democracy is what matters.” Replying to Kejriwal, Delhi BJP spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said that the statements of Chief Minister and other AAP leaders in context of municipal elections reflect their political frustration and lust for power

in civic bodies. “The level of the statements of the Chief Minister and other AAP leaders shows that they have no concern for improving municipal services or betterment of service conditions of civic employees. The AAP

leaders are just hungry for power at civic bodies,” he added. Kapoor further said that the Centre is trying to improve the financial health and working of the civic body by unifying the three Municipal Corporations.

Let MCD elections take place if they have courage: Sisodia

NEW DELHI: The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) senior leader and Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Wednesday challenged Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to let municipal elections take place if they have courage. The Minister said that BJP leaders are trying to run away to avoid defeat.

Sisodia said “Delhi residents as well as civic body’s employees are now determined to throw BJP out of power. The people of Delhi are least bothered about unification or trifurcation of MCD; they just want a corporation that will

work in their interests. Corruption has been sole focus of BJP for past 17 years.” The BJP-ruled corporations has not once focused on important issues like development, sanitation, health, education and paying timely salaries to their employees,” Sisodia said. “The BJP has been highly incompetent in managing sanitation system, running its own schools as well as health institutions. It has not paid salaries to doctors, sweepers, and teachers for months. The Delhites need a corporation that is free of corruption,” he said. **SF**

Make ‘The Kashmir Files’ tax-free, demands BJP



Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta, with other senior leaders and supporters, protests against the Kejriwal Government outside the Delhi Assembly in New Delhi on Wednesday.

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Bharatiya Janata Party MLAs on Wednesday interrupted Lieutenant-Governor Anil Bajjal’s address in Delhi Assembly as soon as he began his address, demanding that ‘The Kashmir Files’ movie be made tax-free. The BJP MLAs started raising slogans with demand to make movie tax-free

soon after beginning of Budget Session on Tuesday. Assembly Speaker Ram Niwas Goel asked BJP MLAs to stop sloganeering, saying that it is happening for first time in his tenure as a Speaker in last seven years that LG’s address has been interrupted by legislators.

“It was an indecent behaviour by BJP legislators to create noise and trying to interrupt LG’s address,” Goel said later in House. He warned opposition legislators not to repeat such behaviour in future. Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia also reacted to development and asked BJP MLAs to approach Centre for waiver of central GST on movie. “If you want film to be tax-free, why are you fighting for SGST? Go to Centre for waiver of CGST,” Sisodia said in assembly. After this, the LG’s address began after BJP legislators calmed down.

Govt installs Urodynamics lab in LNJP Hosp

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a significant overhaul of the health infrastructure in Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Government has installed a state-of-the-art Urodynamics lab for diagnosing and treating urological conditions in children up to 12 years of age.

Health Minister Satyendar Jain while inaugurating this system at Delhi’s Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital (LNJP) stated: “We have installed a urodynamic video system at the hospital which is an essential machine used for diagnosing and treating urological conditions in children up to 12 years of age.”

“This will help the doctors in detecting the conditions at an early stage in children which can prevent serious complications later in life. The system can be used to diagnose and treat other gastrointestinal diseases as well,” he said.

Jain visited LNJP Hospital

on Wednesday to inaugurate the video-urodynamic system, machinery required for doctors to perform urodynamic testing with precision. “This system has advanced equipment for studying urinary bladder dynamics and is essential for managing children with urological anomalies and diseases,” the Government said in a statement. Jain said, “Diagnosis and treatment of such diseases at an early stage not only saves a patient’s money but also increases the chances of saving their life. On the other hand, if diagnosed late, it leads to many serious health conditions and the treatment becomes even more expensive.”

A senior Government official said that the urological anomalies take up a major share of the volume of pediatric surgical cases. Hence, this system helps in the early detection of any such diseases, and in doing so can even prevent the need for renal transplants, he

said. “This modern lab is also capable of taking real-time images of the abnormal physiology related to these conditions which are otherwise not possible with ordinary urodynamic machines and will improve diagnostic accuracy immensely,” he added.

Apart from urological conditions, this versatile, multifaceted system can also be used to treat and diagnose gastrointestinal diseases such as measuring pressures of anal canal and the oesophagus. It is also useful for therapy and performing biofeedback crucial for improving urinary and faecal control in affected children.

Since there are only a few centres in the country which have such equipment, common people will greatly benefit from this addition. This advanced equipment will prove to be a boon for people and the urology department as well, by enabling detection of urological

cal diseases at an early stage and using the same for research henceforth.

AAP Govt to soon operationalise 7 new hospitals

NEW DELHI: The Delhi Government will soon operationalise seven new hospitals with a combined bed capacity of 6,834, Health Minister Satyendar Jain said on Wednesday. At present, the Delhi Government has 37 hospitals.

“The Delhi Govt is all set to make a new record in the field of healthcare by opening up seven new hospitals with a total capacity of 6,834 new beds in the next few months,” he tweeted.

The new hospitals will be Shalimar Bagh Hospital, Kirari Hospital, Sarita Vihar Hospital, Chacha Nehru Bal Chikitsalya, GTB Hospital, Raghuraj Nagar Hospital and Sultanpuri Hospital.

Formulate national policy on unemployment, stresses Rai

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Minister Gopal Rai on Wednesday said that there is a high rate of joblessness among country’s youngsters, while lakhs of Government posts are lying vacant at same time due to non-recruitment. The Minister stressed need to formulate a national policy in order to tackle issue of unemployment.

Addressing a two-day national-level conference on employment, Rai said, “The need of hour is to formulate a national employment policy to solve problem of unemployment.

Our country is facing a dreadful crisis of unemployment as young people are knocking on doors for work, despite having advanced degrees.” The governments, instead of generating employment opportunities, are not fill-



ing up vacant posts, leading to resentment and anger among the youngsters, he said, citing incidents of lathicharge on people demanding that recruitment exams be held on time. Rai said absence of a national policy on employment for seven decades since independence has led to a high rate of unemployment and exacerbated economic challenges for the country.

Retired J’khand HC judge sworn-in as Lokayukta of Delhi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Retired Jharkhand High Court judge Harish Chandra Mishra was on Wednesday sworn in as the Lokayukta of Delhi.

The oath of office was administered by Delhi Lieutenant-Governor Anil Bajjal at a solemn ceremony held at the Raj Niwas. The post of Lokayukta in Delhi has been lying vacant since the retirement of Rewa Khetrpal in December 2020.

According to the notification dated March 15, Bajjal appointed justice (retired) Mishra as the Lokayukta. Mishra will hold office for a term of five years from the date of his joining. Mishra was also the Acting Chief Justice of Jharkhand High Court.

City to develop 3K acres as world-class facilities

KEY AREAS
Public conveniences including adequate lighting, CCTVs, toilets, etc.
Dedicated play area for toddlers, children and adolescents with child-friendly play equipment, open air gyms, gazebos and covered seating-area
Walking, jogging and cycling tracks, open air gyms, water bodies
Composting, rainwater harvesting, irrigation supply, power backup
Native trees, flowers and shrubs

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a move to transform Delhi into a city of world-class parks, the Delhi Government will develop about 3,000 acres of area as state-of-the-art facilities across 17 city forests of the national Capital. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Wednesday reviewed the status of parks of

Delhi and directed officials to submit a detailed project report within 15 days.

Currently, 1,500 parks are being redeveloped in collaboration with 450 RWAs under the Mukhyamantri Park Saundaryakaran Yojana. The Kejriwal Government will also fund the development of 5,000 parks in Delhi. A high-level



review meeting on the parks and gardens of Delhi was held on Wednesday at the Delhi Secretariat under the chairmanship of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. In this meeting, discussions were held regarding development of parks of international standards in Delhi.

Kejriwal directed officers to transform 17 city forests to world class levels in the first phase. These world class city forests will be developed in an

area of about 3000 acres across 17 locations of Delhi. Along with Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, Environment Minister Gopal Rai, DDC Vice Chairperson Jasmine Shah and other high-ranking officials were present in the meeting.

As part of the Mukhyamantri Park Saundaryakaran Yojana, 1,500 parks are being transformed in collaboration with 450 RWAs under a unique community parks initiative. Under the scheme, 16,828 parks will be surveyed in Delhi.

So far, 6,396 parks have been surveyed. Of these, 3,565 parks have been identified as those not being maintained upto standards. After surveying all locations, appropriate steps will be taken with the help of RWAs/NGOs to transform them into world-class parks.

DTCP notice to 17 projects for not obtaining Occupation Certificate

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

The Department of Town and Country Planning (DTCP) has issued show-cause notices to 17 projects for not obtaining an Occupation Certificate (OC) and still being partially occupied.

In the notices, District Town Planner (Enforcement) RS Bath said, “The builders have offered the possession of the flat/plot and units and even towers at the projects which have been occupied without obtaining OC, which is clearly in violation of the condition of approved building plans. The builders had also violated the Haryana Development and Regulation of Urban Areas Act, 1975.” The developers have been

directed to appear before the DTP’s office by March 30 to reply why action may not be initiated against them.

According to a list provided by the department, these projects include Uniworld City in Sector-30, 41, World Spa in Sector-30, 41, Uniworld Garden Sector 47, Fresco Sector 50, Escape Sector 50, Harmony Sector 50, The Close-South, The Close-North Sectors 49,50 and 57, The Residences Sector 33, 48, BSF Housing Sector 2, Gwal Pahari, Ansal Housing Sector 92, Ansal Heights Sector 92, Aloha Sector 57, Gurugram 21 Sector 83, Lifestyle Homes Sector 81, 82, 82A, 83, 84 and 85, Vatika City Sector 49, Exotica Sector 53, 54, 57, Gopal Dass Estate and Housing Pvt Ltd Sector 51, 52, 53, 57 and Vipul Lavanya

Sector-81.

The notice further said Section 3B of the Haryana Development and Regulation of Urban Area Act, 1975, provides that “no person shall erect or re-erect a building in a colony save in accordance with the approved plans and subject to such restrictions and condition as are contained in licence or as may be specified by Government or Director.”

“The building has been occupied without obtaining OC, the department is also not aware of Fire Safety NOC regarding functionality of fire fighting system, Structural Stability Certificate i.e. about strength and safety of the structure, fulfilment of environment guidelines etc, which are a prerequisite for grant of OC for any building,” Bath said.

66 airports added to aid regional links: Minister

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Stating that regional air connectivity is rapidly increasing in the country and the aviation sector is registering an 11 per cent growth vis-à-vis 5.6 per cent of the railways, Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on Wednesday informed the Lok Sabha that till 2014, there were 74 airports in the country while in the last seven years 66 new airports were added taking the total number to 140.

"Our resolve is to take this number of airports to 220 by 2025," said Scindia replying to the Demands for Grants, 2022-23, for the Ministry of Civil Aviation in the lower house.

Scindia said the Indian civil aviation sector is the third largest in the world and 15 per cent of its pilots are women.

As many as 3.82 lakh passengers undertook air travel daily in the last seven days, giving hopes of revival of the sector scarred by Covid-19, Scindia said as he set a target of nearly tripling the total passenger traffic by 2023-24 to 40 crore.

Scindia further said that at a time when the airline industry world over is facing turbulence, two new airlines, Jet and Akasa, will soon launch their services.

He said the government has brought about a paradigm



shift, a structural change in the sector in the last two years and it will focus on inclusion, access and affordability to increase the demand among common man.

The total number of passengers travelled increased from 6.70 crore in 2013-14 to 14.50 crore in 2018-19. The number of planes too increased from 400 from 2013-14 to 710 by 2018-19.

As per DGCA data, 8.38 crore people travelled on domestic flights in 2021, as compared to 6.3 crore in 2020 - the year which saw the outbreak of Covid-19.

Detailing the decline and loss in the aviation sector during the UPA's time, the minister said 111 aircrafts were purchased in 2005 and Rs 55 crore debt earned.

Scindia said the aviation sector started to look up post

the second Covid wave and the number of air travellers in the country increased to 3.90 lakh per day in November 2021, compared to 4.15 lakh per day in pre-Covid times.

"But, due to Omicron it came down to 1.60 lakh per day. I am happy to report that in last seven days we are again back to 3.82 lakh per day. There is a hope of revival and based on that we expect that by 2023-24 we will take the number of 40 crore," he said.

Scindia said the aviation sector's competitiveness can be compared to AC-1 and AC-2 services of Indian Railways. Last year, 18.5 crore people travelled AC-1 and 2.

He said 14.5 crore people travelled in the aviation sector which registered 11 per cent growth vis-à-vis 5.6 per cent growth in the railways.

'IAF conducting court of inquiry into accidental Brahmos firing'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The IAF is conducting the mandatory court of inquiry into the accidental firing of a Brahmos missile which crashed into Pakistan and a few officers including a Group Captain may be held responsible. An Air Vice Marshal is heading the investigation.

Giving this information here on Wednesday, sources, however, said these are the initial pointers and the final result of the court of inquiry will take some more days. The accident took place on March 9 when the supersonic cruise missile fired from a base near Sirsa crashed into Mian Channu in Pakistan after travelling a distance of nearly 140 kms. However, there were no casualties on the ground and the Indian government said it had viewed it seriously "deeply regretted it".

In fact, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh gave a statement in Parliament on March 15 narrating the sequence of events. In this backdrop, the Air Vice Marshal was appointed to conduct the inquiry, sources said adding he is very experienced and highly qualified.

In his statement in Parliament, Rajnath had said "A missile was unfortunately accidentally launched on March 9. The incident occurred during a routine inspection. We later came to know that it had landed in Pakistan."

Informing Parliament that a high level probe was initiated,

the defence minister assured the members the missile system is trustworthy and the armed forces are fully competent to handle such systems.

He said during inspection. During routine maintenance and inspection, a missile was accidentally released at around 7 p.m.

It was later learnt that the missile had landed inside the territory of Pakistan.

"While this incident is regretted, we are relieved that nobody was hurt due to the accident. I would like to inform the august House that Government has taken serious note of the incident.

A formal high level inquiry has been ordered. The inquiry would determine the exact cause of the said accident. I would also like to state that a review of the Standard Operating Procedures for operations, maintenance and inspections is being conducted in the wake of this incident. We attach highest priority to safety and security of our weapon systems. If any shortcoming is found, the same would be immediately rectified.

I can assure the House that the missile system is very reliable & safe. Moreover, our safety procedures and protocols are of the highest order and are reviewed from time to time. Our Armed Forces are well-trained and disciplined and are well experienced in handling such systems," he said.

Pakistan had lodged a strong protest against the



reported accidental firing of the missile and summoned the Indian Charge d'Affaires in Islamabad.

It also called for a joint probe and China backed it. However, the US said it was accident and the Indian defence ministry had given the details. "We have no indication, as you also heard from our Indian partners, that this incident was anything other than an accident," State Department spokesperson Ned Price had said.

China's Foreign Ministry, responding to a question from

Pakistani media about the incident, said it "called on relevant countries to have dialogue and communication as soon as possible and launch a thorough investigation into this incident, strengthen information-sharing and establish a notification mechanism in time to ensure the non-recurrence of such incidents and prevent miscalculation."

Pakistan termed the Indian defence ministry statement regretting the accident as a "simplistic explanation" while calling for a joint probe.

Major General Babar

Iftikhar, the Director-General of the Inter-Service

Public Relations (ISPR) of Pakistan, had claimed that an unarmed projectile launched from India entered the Pakistani airspace travelling 124 km and fell near Mian Channu. No loss of life was reported.

Noting that the missile that landed in Pakistan was fired "accidentally" due to a technical malfunction, the Indian defence ministry had said it had also ordered a Court of Enquiry into the incident.

Both Houses disrupted over fuel price hike

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

For the second-day in a row both the houses of the Parliament on Wednesday witnessed disruption in the proceedings on account of steep hike in fuel prices and were adjourned for sometime during the early hours of business.

In the Rajya Saba the agitated members displayed placards and shouted slogans demanding suspension of other business to discuss hike. The Lok Sabha proceedings too were adjourned for about 20 minutes as opposition members protested the spiraling-up of oil and cooking gas prices and staged a brief walk-out from the house.

Rajya Sabha Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu disallowed the demand for suspension and said the members can raise the matter during other discussion on demand for grants. He also did not allow the suspension

under rule 267 when Leader of Opposition M Mallikarajun Kharge tried to raise the issue.

Sensing the mood of the house, Naidu then adjourned the proceedings for nearly an hour shortly after 11.00am when the house met for the day. The Question Hour later functioned smoothly.

Congress, Left and Samajwadi Party leaders wanted their notices admitted under rule 267, requiring setting aside of the listed business of the day to take up the issue of rise in prices of petrol, diesel, cooking gas LPG, kerosene and other essential commodities like pulses and edible oils.

Ramgopal Yadav (SP), Mallikarjun Kharge, Shaktisinh Gohil, Syed Naseer Hussain and K C Venugopal (all Congress) and Binoy Viswam (CPI) had given notices under rule 267.

In the Lok Sabha as the Question Hour began, members from the Congress, DMK,

TMC and other parties stormed the Well of the House, raised placards "janata ki roji roti par prahr" and showed cooking gas price rising to Rs 1000. They kept shouting "we want justice" and sought to block ministers' sight by placing placards in front of them.

The opposition members began the protest soon after the House assembled for the day. Members from the TRS, BSP and SP also joined the protest but remained on their seats.

The Congress members, who were most vocal were seen at the forefront of the protest and staying put in the well of the house. Amid the bedlam, Speaker Om Birla repeatedly urged the members to go back to their seats and allow the House to function.

With opposition refusing to relent, he adjourned the proceedings till 12 noon.

Intervening from the treasury benches, Union Commerce Minister Piyush

Goyal alleged that the opposition has no commitment for the development of Jammu and Kashmir and their "discrimination" against the Union Territory continues as before.

Goyal made the allegations in Lok Sabha after an MP from Jammu and Kashmir, Hasnain Masoodi, could not ask a supplementary question during the Question Hour due to the protests and sloganeering by the opposition over the fuel price hike.

This shows their (opposition) commitment towards Jammu and Kashmir. The Congress and its allies have been discriminating against Jammu and Kashmir for years and they are doing the same even now. They are not allowing an MP from Jammu and Kashmir to ask a question," Goyal said.

However, the unrelenting opposition continued their protests in the Well of the House.

Parl panel suggests SOP for evacuation of Indians

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In view of the recent political crisis in Afghanistan and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for evacuation of Indian nationals stranded in exigencies must be chalked out and it may be made available to all Indian Missions/Posts abroad, a Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs in its report "Demands for Grants-2022-23" suggested on Wednesday.

The Committee has also suggested that India should set up resident missions in the remaining 48 of the 193 UN member-nations in a time-bound manner in line with its aspiration to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

The Committee has suggested that a database of Indian nationals abroad may be prepared and updated on a regular basis for emergency situations. "In view of the number

and spread of overseas Indians, there is a high possibility of them getting stranded in a crisis situation. The recent political crisis in Afghanistan and conflict in Ukraine is a gross reminder about the implications on safety and security of Indian nationals in such a volatile situation. The role played by the Ministry in Afghanistan and Ukraine in the recent past has been commendable," the report said.

The report further stated that the Committee are aware that during outbreak of conflict or any other exigencies, the evacuation of Indian citizens is planned on a case-to-case basis and evacuation is dependent on a number of factors. The report was tabled in Parliament on Wednesday. Under the Operation Ganga mission, over 22000 Indian nationals have returned from Ukraine till date. The evacuation exercise involved a whole of the Government approach with Prime Minister himself taking



regular coordination meetings and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) taking the lead role. Prime Minister spoke to Presidents of Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Romania and Slovakia to ensure safe return of Indian nationals from Ukraine.

Under the Operation Devi Shakti, a total of 669 people were evacuated from Afghanistan including 448 Indians, 206 Afghans (including Hindu Sikh minority members) and 15 people of foreign nationalities (Nepal, Lebanon and Uganda). These people were evacuated in seven flights; 6 flights operated between

August 16 to 25, 2021 and the last flight on December 10, 2021. During the Operation Devi Shakti, both Indian Air Force and commercial flights were used which included six IAF flights (C-17 and C-130), two Air India flights and 1 Kam Air flight.

Evacuation from Afghanistan under these circumstances was a difficult and challenging exercise mainly due to fast deteriorating security situation in the country which prevented people from reaching airport and led to extreme chaos at airport premises.

Sonia demands restart of Mid-day meals when schools open post Covid

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday made a demand for restarting the mid-day meals in schools when they open in the post-pandemic phase.

Sonia said that the mid-day meal scheme was stopped when schools were shut down due to the Covid pandemic.

Raising the issue during Zero Hour, the Congress leader also said better nutrition should be provided to children as they start returning to schools.

Stating that children were given dry rations during the pandemic and food grains were

also provided under the National Food Security Act, she said dry ration is not a substitute for a proper meal.

"But for children, dry ration is no substitute for hot cooked meals," she said.

The Congress leader said children have been the worst affected due to the pandemic as schools were the first to be shut down and the last to open.

This is the second-time in the ongoing session that Sonia has raised an issue in the Zero Hour. Earlier, she had raised the issue of social media favouring the ruling party and urged the government to prevent its alleged misuse.

DCGI gives its nod for phase-3 trial of Covovax

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The country's top drug regulator, Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI), has granted permission for conducting the phase-3 clinical trial of Covid-19 vaccine Covovax as a booster dose in adults, according to official sources in the Union Health Ministry.

The Subject Expert Committee (SEC) on Covid-19 of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) had, on March 5, recommended permission for conducting the phase-3 clinical trial for Covovax as a booster dose in adults who have been



fully vaccinated with either Covaxin or Covishield at least three months ago.

The DCGI approved Covovax for restricted use in emergency situations in adults on December 28 last year and for inoculating the beneficiaries in the 12-17 years age group, subject to certain conditions,

on March 9.

The vaccine has not been included in the country's inoculation programme against Covid-19.

Director, Government and Regulatory Affairs at the Serum Institute of India (SII), Prakash Kumar Singh, submitted an application to the DCGI in February, seeking permission to conduct a phase-3, observer-blind, randomised, controlled study to evaluate the safety and immunogenicity of Covovax for booster doses in adults who had received primary vaccination either with Covishield or Covaxin at least three months ago, according to the official sources.

CTUs call for nationwide strike on Mar 28, 29 against Govt policies

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A joint forum of central trade unions has given a call for a nationwide strike on March 28 and 29, to protest against Government policies affecting workers, farmers, and people. The joint platform of central trade unions held a meeting in Delhi on March 22, 2022, to take stock of the preparations in various states and sectors for the proposed two-day all India strike on 28-29 March 2022 against "the anti-worker, anti-farmer, anti-people and anti-national policies" of the central government, a statement said.

The statement said that roadways, transport workers and electricity workers have



decided to join the strike in spite of the impending threat of ESMA (Haryana and Chandigarh, respectively). Financial sectors, including banking and insurance, are joining the strike, it stated.

The strike notices have been given by unions in the

sectors such as coal, steel, oil, telecom, postal, income tax, copper, banks, insurance among others, it also stated. The unions in railways and defence sector would be making mass mobilization in support of strike at several hundreds of spots, it stated.

BJP MPs urge Centre to use Constitutional provisions in WB

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Following the death of at least eight people after their houses were set ablaze, BJP MPs from West Bengal on Wednesday sought the Centre to use the constitutional provisions in the State. They alleged in the Lok Sabha that law and order has collapsed in the State under the Trinamool Congress dispensation.

As soon as the Zero Hour began, several BJP MPs showed placards and raised slogans against the West Bengal government.

Rejecting the allegations, the TMC leader Sudip Bandyopadhyay said whatever happened in West Bengal's Birbhum district had nothing to do with any political fight and noted that around 20 people have been arrested by the state police in connection with

the incident.

He asked the BJP not to do politics over the incident and said his party has sought an appointment with Union Home Minister Amit Shah regarding the matter. Shad met a delegation of BJP MPs from the state on Tuesday.

Sukanta Majumdar, the state unit chief of the BJP, said the deaths of so many people as an act of revenge following the killing of a panchayat leader of the TMC have "ashamed" humanity and cited locals to allege that the houses of the victims were set ablaze in the presence of police personnel.

Twenty-six people have been killed in a week in West Bengal as law and order has collapsed in the state, he said.

Political violence had also exploded in the state following the TMC's victory in the May,



2021 Assembly polls, the BJP leader alleged, urging the Centre to intervene.

He noted that all the victims in the fire tragedy were members of a minority (Muslim) community.

"We want the central government's intervention in the state of West Bengal to stop the state-sponsored terrorism," a

placard raised by one of the BJP MPs in the House read.

BJP MP Dilip Ghosh also lashed out at the West Bengal government. He told reporters that even Muslims, who are seen as dependable supporters of the TMC, are not safe in the state as the goons allegedly affiliated to the ruling party target people indiscriminately.

ED attaches properties worth ₹1.58 crore of Bihar PHED ex-engineer under PMLA

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached immovable and movable properties worth Rs 1.58 crore belonging to Sanjay Kumar Singh, the then Executive Engineer, Public Health Engineering Department (PHED), Samastipur, Bihar Government, his wife Pushpa Singh, and his sons Abhishek Ashish and Anunay Ashish under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) in a disproportionate asset case.

The ED had initiated money laundering investigation on the basis of an FIR registered under Prevention of Corruption Act against Singh by Bihar Police.



During the period July 15, 1987 to September 4, 2013, it was alleged that Singh had acquired huge assets, both movable and immovable, either in his name or in the name of his family members, which were disproportionate to his all known and legitimate sources

of income, the ED said in a statement.

"Investigation under PMLA revealed that Sanjay Kumar Singh had made huge cash deposits in his bank account and in the bank accounts of his family members from unexplained sources.

Sanjay Kumar Singh deposited the proceeds of crime into his bank accounts in order to conceal the actual nature with intent to launder money and projected it as untainted," it said.

Meanwhile, in a separate case, the ED has arrested absconding accused Gudem Madhav Reddy on the basis of a Non-bailable Warrant (NBW) issued by the PMLA Special Court Hyderabad, the agency said.

Reddy is wanted in the ongoing trial in 2018 cases based on the prosecution complaint (chargesheet) filed by the ED.

Reddy was produced before the court which has remanded him to 14-day judicial custody.

BJP MLAs to elect Yogi as leader today

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A day before the swearing in of the new Government in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP Legislature Party meeting of newly-elected lawmakers will be held in Lucknow on Thursday wherein they will formally elect Chief Minister-designate Yogi Adityanath as its leader.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah and former Jharkhand Chief Minister Raghubar Das have been appointed as observers for this important meeting. In-charge of UP and Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan will also be present in the meeting.

"Letters have been sent to all the 250 newly-elected BJP legislators asking them to attend the meeting on Thursday at 4 pm. In the meeting Yogi Adityanath would be formally elected as leader of the BJP Legislature Party.

Later in the evening, a BJP delegation led by Yogi will call on Governor Anandiben Patel and put its claim to form Government," state BJP vice-president Vijay Bahadur Pathak said.

"As per the statutory provision, the governor will invite the leader of the BJP Legislature Party to form the Government and announce the time of

swearing-in ceremony," he said.

It is almost after three decades that a chief minister will get a second consecutive term after completing the first term of five years.

In fact, Yogi will be the first chief minister from BJP to have completed five years in office.

Sources claimed that around 50 ministers are also likely to take oath of office and secrecy with the chief minister on March 25. After attending the swearing-in ceremony of Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Dhami in Dehradun on Wednesday, Yogi flew to Delhi to finalise the list of ministers.

"The formation of the cabinet would be a tight rope walk for Yogi Adityanath as he has to strike a balance among different castes and regions before finalizing the list. Seniority of members will also be under consideration for ministerial post," a BJP leader said.

"Besides Yogi, some leaders from the alliance are also likely to be accommodated in the Cabinet. A meeting with alliance partners will be held after the BJP Legislature Party meeting. Sanjay Nishad has also been invited for that meeting," the leader said.

Lucknow decked up for oath ceremony

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The State capital Lucknow has been painted saffron as it prepares for the mega oath-taking ceremony of second time Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ekana Stadium on March 25.

The function will be attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Bharatiya Janata Party president JP Nadda and other VVIPs. Among the dignitaries, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Chief Ministers and deputy Chief Ministers of BJP-ruled States, governors, industrialists, opposition leaders and over 50,000 BJP workers and commoners are expected in the programme. Newly-elected legislators of the BJP will elect Yogi Adityanath as their new leader in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah and other senior leaders. The BJP has managed to win 255 seats in the 403-member UP Legislative Assembly.

Yogi will take oath as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for the second consecutive term and 50 Ministers will be administered the oath of office and secrecy by Governor Anandiben Patel at the function at 4 pm on Friday.

Mahants of various maths and temples will also be present in the swearing-in ceremony along with Yoga Guru Baba Ramdev. Besides, all leading industrialists, who set up industries and operate industries in UP, have also been invited for the function. A senior BJP leader said that Chief Ministers of Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Manipur and Goa have been invited. Chief Ministers of States ruled with the support of the BJP in Bihar, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Pondicherry have also been invited. Apart from BJP ruled States, Chief Ministers of all States are being invited by the Government.

BJP using goons to attack democracy: Akhilesh Yadav

Lucknow: Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Wednesday accused the ruling BJP of misusing power and alleged that it is using its "goons" to attack democracy.



"The BJP has done no work for the welfare of the common man. The entire country is watching the hooliganism the BJP is doing to get majority," Yadav said referring to the election to the upper house of the state legislature.

"The party is using goons to attack democracy. The BJP is enchanted by power and misusing it to attack the democratic process in the MLC elections," Yadav said at an event held to pay tributes to socialist leader Dr Ram Manohar Lohia on his 112th birth anniversary. The leader's statement came a day after nomination papers of the party's two candidates for the state Legislative Council polls were rejected. On Wednesday, a party candidate from Budaun withdrew his papers. The SP had on Tuesday demanded that the nomination process for the elections to the state Legislative Council be started again, with Yadav alleging "either the nomination forms will not be allowed to be filed or the election or its results will be influenced".

According to a press statement issued on Wednesday by the Samajwadi Party here, Yadav visited Lohia Park and offered flowers to the leader's statue.

LS bypoll: SP may field Dimple from Azamgarh

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Samajwadi Party is likely to field former Kannauj MP Dimple Yadav as its candidate from Azamgarh Lok Sabha seat which fell vacant after her husband and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav resigned from the Lok Sabha on Tuesday. Akhilesh has been elected to the UP Assembly from Karhal Assembly seat in Mainpuri.

Samajwadi Party sources said that the by-poll to Azamgarh Lok Sabha seat was likely to be held in the next six months. They said that the party will also have to take a call for deciding the candidate for Rampur Lok Sabha seat which has fallen vacant due to the resignation by MP Azam Khan, who was elected to UP assembly from Rampur during the recently concluded state elections.

Akhilesh had visited Azamgarh on March 21 and consulted party MLAs and district leaders before resigning from Lok Sabha. Though the Samajwadi Party won all 10 Assembly seats in Azamgarh, it faced a tough challenge from the BJP, which finished second in all these seats.

Meanwhile, SP ally Suheldev

Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) has demanded that SP leader Dimple Yadav be fielded from Azamgarh Lok Sabha seat vacated after the SP chief's resignation.

"Akhilesh Yadav's resignation as Azamgarh MP is a welcome move. His presence in the UP assembly is necessary for a strong role of the opposition to counter the BJP in the state. In the assembly, SP-SBSP alliance MLAs will raise all important issues related to people," commented SBSP president, Om Prakash Rajbhar on Wednesday.

Rajbhar further said that Azamgarh has been known as a stronghold of SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav, who was elected from this Lok Sabha seat in 2014. In 2019, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav was elected MP and worked for the development of Azamgarh. As a result, the Samajwadi Party won all 10 Assembly seats in the recently concluded state elections.

"As an ally of the SP, we (the SBSP) demand that SP leader Dimple Yadav be fielded from the Azamgarh Parliamentary seat whenever by-elections are held there. It would help strengthen the SP and its allies in the entire Purvanchal region," he added.

4 kids die after eating toffees laced with poison

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Tragedy struck Kushinagar when four children, including three siblings, died after consuming poisonous toffees they picked up outside their homes at Latur Tola village in Kasya police circle on Wednesday morning.

The victims' parents belong to the Scheduled Tribe and are daily-wage labourers.

Additional Superintendent of Police of Kushinagar, Ritesh Kumar Singh, said the police were informed that the children died after eating the toffees at Latur Tola village and an investigation had been initiated.

The police have seized toffee wrappers for examination and locals are being questioned. The police suspect that someone had thrown the poison-laced toffees on the road.

The police are now awaiting the autopsy reports to know about the poison used to lace the toffees.

Quoting the villagers, Sub-Divisional Magistrate Varun Kumar Pandey said that Devi, the head of Latur Tola, was sweeping the house in the morning when she stumbled upon five toffees and nine rupees in a polythene bag. She gave three toffees to her grand-children and a toffee to a neighbour's child. But soon after consuming the toffee, the four children fainted on the ground.

"The sick children were taken to the district hospital by the locals where doctors pronounced all four dead. The deceased include three siblings Manjana (5), Sweety (3) and two-year-old Samar. The other victim was five-year-old Arun, the only son of Balesar,

who lives in the neighborhood," Pandey said.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath expressed grief over the incident and ordered a probe and directed officials to provide relief to the bereaved families and take necessary action.

The locals alleged that the delay in the arrival of an ambulance was one of the reasons for the deaths of the children. Meanwhile in Ghaziabad, three labourers were killed and two others seriously injured when the boundary wall of an under construction building of a school collapsed at Pratap Vihar locality on Tuesday.

Officials and workers of Ghaziabad Municipal Corporation were getting sewer lines laid late in the night when the boundary wall of the adjacent school collapsed on

the five labourers working there. Soon, local police and fire brigade teams rushed to the spot and took the labourers to MMG hospital where doctors pronounced three of them dead.

The deceased were identified as Munkesh, Ahjaz and Tauquer of Bihar. Two other labourers were injured and are undergoing treatment at the hospital. In Bulandshahr, a man and his two sons were killed in a road accident in Secunderabad Kotwali area on Wednesday.

As per reports, Shakir was heading to Bulandshahr from Meerut with his two sons, Sanib and Uzair, when their speeding car rammed into a tree near Gulavathi. All three died on the spot. Later police personnel reached the spot and shifted their bodies to the mortuary.

Congmen want Priyanka to settle in Lucknow

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The decision of Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav to resign from the Lok Sabha and retain his Assembly seat to take the party forward by staying put in Uttar Pradesh has now raised demands within UP Congress that Priyanka Gandhi adopt a similar stand and not just make occasional presence.

"Akhilesh had taken a right decision and now Priyanka Gandhi Vadra should also immediately take a similar stand as UP politics cannot be done by staying in Delhi. One has to join the day to day struggle with the people of the State by staying amongst them," opined a former UP Congress president.

"During the last two years, Priyanka has been active as far as other Opposition party leaders are concerned. But she chose to work from New Delhi and only made occasional presence during protests in the state which sent the wrong message amongst the masses that she preferred doing politics from the national capital," the Congress leader said.



"We fought the assembly poll showcasing Priyanka's face but when questions crop up of her leading the party as a chief ministerial candidate, she outrightly denied it which spoiled all the hard work made by her to strengthen the party organization in Uttar Pradesh," the former UP Congress chief said.

"The Congress desperately needs a 'face' which the people could look forward to as an alternative. Take the example of four-time chief minister and BSP chief Mayawati. During the last five years and even during the pandemic, the BSP chief was seen nowhere and as a result her party performed worse than the Congress getting just one assembly seat," he said.

Kerala launches WhatsApp chatbot for tourists

Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Tourism on Wednesday launched 24x7 WhatsApp chatbot 'Maya' to enable tourists get information and updates on tourism eco system in the State by sending a 'Hi' to the WhatsApp no: 7510512345 or by scanning the QR code.

Launching the service here, Tourism Minister P A Mohamed Riyas said Maya would act as a virtual travel assistant of tourists to ask and get complete information for hassle-free travel experience.

"The chatbot service, which leverages the potential of technology for tourism development, will help attract more tourists to Kerala. The tourists can easily access a whole lot of information regarding the prime attractions in each place, our cultural diversity, culinary traditions of different regions and the routes and means for transport to reach various places," said the Minister. Maya would assist tourists to also know about experience-oriented locations, never-miss spots, historical places, etc, said a press release from Kerala Tourism.

Defamation suit: Interim relief refused to Salman

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A Mumbai court on Wednesday refused to grant interim relief to Bollywood actor Salman Khan in his defamation suit filed against his neighbour Ketan Kakkad, a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) from the US, and others seeking to restrain them posting any objectionable content on social media against him and his family members over a land parcel adjacent to his farm house at Panvel.

Additional Sessions Judge Anil H Laddhad of the Mumbai City Civil Court passed a brief order on Salman's plea, seeking interim relief for blocking/suspending/withdrawing the social media accounts of Kakkad and other defendants on the ground that the latter (Kakkad) allegedly shared derogatory content against the actor and his family.

While pronouncing the order, the Judge noted that he would give the reasons for rejection of the plea in a detailed order to be published soon.

In notice of motion, the actor had sought injunction against one Kakkad, YouTuber Sandeep Phogat, Paras Bhat, Ujjwal Narain, Facebook Inc,

Facebook India Online Services Private Ltd, Twitter Inc, Twitter Communications India Private, Twitter International Company, YouTube LLC, Google LLC and Google India Pvt Ltd from uploading anything against him and his family members in matters relating to a land parcel located adjacent to the actor's 100-acre farmhouse at Panvel in the neighbouring Raigad district.

Opposing the actor's pleas, Kakkad's lawyers Abha Singh and Aditya Pratap told the court that there was 'substantial truth' in the allegations made by their client that the actor had carried out substantial "illegal" constructions on his Panvel farmhouse which falls within the Matheran Eco-Sensitive Zone Notification.

On his part, Salman's lawyer Pradeep Gandhi argued that the defendants had made "false, disparaging and defamatory allegations" in videos, posts and tweets causing harm and loss to the actor, his family members and his business ventures.

Gandhy told the court that Kakkad had attempted to purchase a plot of land adjacent to the actor's farmhouse Arpita Farms' at Panvel, but the local

authorities cancelled the land transaction on the grounds that it was illegal.

Gandhi went on to tell the court that Kakkad subsequently made "false and baseless" allegations that the transaction had been cancelled at the behest of the actor and his family members. Opposing interim relief to the actor, Kakkad's Advocate Abha Singh argued that her client's statements "revolved around" the actor's property and did in no way amount to defamation.

On their part, Kakkad's lawyers told the court that their client had purchased a plot of land measuring 2.5 acres adjoining the actor's palatial farmhouse from the actor himself in 1996. They told the court that he had been denied access to the land owned by him by the actor since 2014.

Kakkad's lawyers told the court that they client had made various statements on social media in public interest as environmental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India and further, under Article 51(A)(g) it was the fundamental duty of every citizen to protect the environment. further it was the duty of every Indian and

the state to protect Wildlife.

Kakkad lawyers also told the court that the actor's counsel had approached Kakkad offering him money to give up the Panvel land and the actor filed the defamation after her client refused the offer.

The lawyers appearing for the various social media platforms opposed the interim relief to the actor saying that they had no control over what was posted by users on their social media platforms. They contended that scanning all posts and contents on their websites to remove the defamatory content against Khan was "unreasonable and meaningless".

It may be recalled that in mid-January this year, the actor had joined issues with his neighbour Kakkad over the latter's social media comments.

An aggrieved Salman subsequently filed a civil defamation suit against Kakkad and also made Google YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social platform content creators as parties in the case and also sought an order restraining Kakkad from posting objectionable statements pending the outcome of the defamation suit filed by the actor against his neighbour.



A huge crowd of people shopping at Narwal wholesale vegetable and fruit market on the outskirts of Jammu on Wednesday

PTI

Rajasthan offers helpline service for counselling of Ukraine-returned students

Jaipur: In a first, the Rajasthan Government has started a special helpline service to provide mental and emotional counseling to Indian students returning from Ukraine and other war-torn countries.

Health Minister Parsadi Lal Meena said the 'Mansamvad' toll-free helpline will prove to be very effective in the development of the emotional and mental health of these students.

"Most of the Indian students studying there (Ukraine) are returning home due to the

Russia-Ukraine crisis. These students have seen the war very closely and it has had an adverse effect on their mind. To save them from any more trouble, the state government has started 'Mansamvad' toll free helpline service," he said in a statement.

Elaborating further, Meena said subject experts will provide counseling and other information on mental and emotional issues, to the callers. The helpline service will operate from 9 am to 5 pm on all working days.

PTI

Asia's largest tulip garden opens for visitors in Srinagar

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

With over 1.5 million tulips of 68 varieties in its lap, Asia's largest Tulip garden overlooking the world famous Dal Lake was on Wednesday thrown open to visitors, marking the beginning of new tourism season in the Valley.

Lt-Governor Manoj Sinha personally invited tourists from all over the world to make a plan to witness the sublime beauty of nature. "J&K is calling. Welcome to Asia's largest Tulip Garden, with over one million blooms, opened to the public today. Make a plan to witness the sublime beauty of nature and enjoy the warm hospitality of the people of J&K UT", office of LG Manoj Sinha tweeted.

A large rush of visitors thronged the garden soon after it was thrown open by the Chief Secretary, Dr Arun Kumar Mehta, in the presence of senior officers from Floriculture department, Tourism department and J&K Bank.

The Chief Secretary, while speaking on the occasion, stated that the Government is expecting a heavy tourist influx this year as compared to last year. "The later part of 2021 had broken past records of tourist arrival to the region and we are optimistic of an incredible tourism boom this year also.

Director Tourism Kashmir GN Itoo said "it is the main attraction for tourists who visit Kashmir. Without visiting the



tulip garden they think their tour is incomplete. Besides, it has preponed the tourist season of Kashmir by about one month."

Garden In-Charge Inaam Ahmad said "we work hard round the year to give our best to tourists and other visitors who come when it's in bloom. This time we have 1.5 million tulips here with 68 varieties, we have added some other flowers here to make it more attractive."

Besides, extra plants like daffodils, hyacinths, narcissus and other ornamental plants are being planted here to decorate the area making the tulip garden one of the main attractions for tourists from different parts of the country and world.

Referring to major initiatives aimed at boosting tourist

traffic in the Union territory Dr Mehta said the Government under a comprehensive policy has explored and developed hidden and virgin tourist destinations and tourists will have more places to visit beyond Gulmarg, Pahalgam and other places.

He said that the government has added 75 new virgin destinations, 75 new adventure treks, 75 heritage sites, and 75 religious sites.

Later, the Chief Secretary also inaugurated J&K Bank enabled e-ticketing facility for the visitors becoming the first visitor to generate E-ticket. He said that queuing up for a long time was cumbersome for the visitors, so E-ticketing was introduced to make the visit of tourists hassle free.

FIRST COLUMN

IRAN, NUKES,
ISRAEL, OIL, RUSSIA

It's a complex deal involving a very large, very old UK debt



GWYNNE DYER

The news that the obscurely named Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is back in force may reach you even before this article does, but the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe on Wednesday was a clear signal that the Iran nuclear accord is back in effect. Zaghari-Ratcliffe, an Iranian-born British citizen, was arrested in Tehran in 2016 while visiting her mother and jailed as a spy. She was actually being taken hostage in an attempt to make the United Kingdom to pay the Islamic Republic a very large, very old debt. Then suddenly, on Wednesday, she was on her way home, and another British hostage of Iranian descent was on the same plane. The news leaked out that Britain had finally paid its \$540 million debt after 45 years of stalling. (The Shah had ordered British tanks before he was overthrown. Britain cancelled the order, but kept the money.) So, the



JCPOA is back on. In the 2015 deal, Iran agreed to do no work that would get it closer to building nuclear weapons for fifteen years in return for the lifting of international trade sanctions. It was Barack Obama's great foreign policy success - which may be why Donald Trump, seeking to erase every achievement of America's first black president, cancelled the deal in 2018.

The other signatories of the JCPOA - China, France, Germany, Russia and the UK - promised to try to bring the Americans back, but effectively most obeyed the trade sanctions that Trump had unilaterally slapped on Iran. Iran waited for a year, and then started ratcheting up its nuclear research every three months, getting closer and closer to a weapons capability. The JCPOA treaty said that Iran would not enrich uranium higher than 3.67%. By last month it was up to 60%. Trump and Netanyahu were both gone, and both Israeli and US senior military officers had concluded the old deal was better than nothing. President Joe Biden was of the same mind, and he was also worried about a looming confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, so last autumn he instructed his diplomatic people to stop trying to screw extra concessions out of the Iranians. Just get on with it! Things moved quickly after that, and by late last month Josep Borrell, the European Union's foreign affairs chief, was saying that "a final text is essentially ready and on the table." However, he added, "a pause in the Vienna talks is needed due to external factors." The external factors were the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Western sanctions on Russia that followed. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov demanded that Washington pledge not to impose sanctions on any bilateral trade deal between Russia and Iran after the JCPOA comes back into effect. At the moment Iran exports less than a million barrels per day of crude oil, almost all of it to China. It could sell at least another million and a half bpd internationally if sanctions are finally lifted, and that extra supply would certainly drop the oil price sharply. Oil and gas sales are about the last remaining major source of foreign currency for Russia. The benchmark Brent oil price today is \$95 a barrel, already down by more than \$40 from last month's panic-stricken peak. The extra Iranian oil could knock it down another \$20 or \$30 bpd, cutting Russia's income further and letting Europe buy more of its oil from Iran, not Russia. There are so many moving parts to this deal that it could still fall apart at the last second, of course. But for now it looks good, and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is already home with her family.

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

Popularising planned ecotourism in India



VK BAHUGUNA

Ecotourism is responsible tourism and in tune with the ethos of living in harmony with nature

The Indian landscape is endowed with diversified scenic beauty having unmatched natural features ranging from hot desert to cold deserts to verdant tropical and temperate forests to sea beaches and glaciers, all with rich in flora and fauna. In the modern life style, relaxation in the midst of scenic landscape is every global citizen's dream.

Many European countries with historical monuments and features have exploited the business potentials of their landscape and making tourism as their major source of revenue. More than 10 per cent of the world's GDP and seven per cent of the world's total exports come from tourism. The industry is worth over \$1.1 trillion. The money earned from expenditures by foreigners is a key driver of economic development and important source of earning foreign exchange. In 2018 France led the world with 89.4 million tourists' footfalls followed by Spain and the USA.

Among Asian countries Thailand had 38.2 million footfalls. India had in 2018 received a little more than 17 million tourists with an annual growth rate of about 5 per cent and is poised to leapfrog. However, tourism has a negative streak of damaging the environment and polluting land and water resources and due to climatic vagaries being notices all over the world there is more emphasis on promoting ecotourism all over the world.

Ecotourism is responsible tourism and in tune with the ethos of living in harmony with nature. It is therefore, based on learning and enjoying the varied components of ecosystem and promoting the pristine environmental attributes of an area. Ecotourism is deeply entrenched with local culture and a great source of community livelihood. It is a win-win situation for the tourists as well as the local people and the environment. The global ecotourism market is valued at \$181 billion in 2019 and is likely to grow to \$350 billion in 2027. The question resource managers are asking whether India is prepared to give a big lift to ecotourism not merely on policy front but concrete results in terms of revenue generated, conservation of forests and livelihood created. It creates employment and jobs but not at the cost of environment. With India's rising middle class the potential of earning from ecotourism is huge provided well thought out planning is done for creating the infrastructure.

Around 24 percent of our landmass is under forests and tree cover out of which around 4.8 million hectares is covered by 103 National parks and 544 wild life sanctuaries. We have innumerable scenic spots integrated in the overall landscape of the country. In order to exploit the multifaceted potentials of

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FOR ACHIEVING SUCCESS, THE LOCAL PEOPLE ESPECIALLY WOMEN SHOULD BE TRAINED IN HANDLING TOURISTS, PREPARING HYGIENIC FOOD & MAINTAINING SANITATION ALL AROUND BECAUSE CLEAN DRINKING WATER, TOILETS AND BEDS ARE THE BASIC FEATURES WHICH ATTRACT PEOPLE TO A DESTINATION. WELL-PLANNED ECOTOURISM SHALL ALSO GARNER REVENUE FOR GOVERNMENT

(The writer is Chairman of Centre for Resource Management and Environment. The views expressed are personal.)



ecotourism it is essential to make ecotourism a key feature of forest conservation strategy. Let us examine some of these aspects in relations to some of the States who had great potential to set an example.

In terms of ecotourism Madhya Pradesh and some other Tiger states are noticed by people quite often in national media but some of the best features in North Eastern states like Tripura had remained neglected and under exploited. Indian landscape has to offer much more than tigers and elephants. In Tripura the Clouded Leopard National Park, Bison National Park, Rubber estates, Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary, Elephant Reserve, Hornbill Conservation Reserve combined with scenic undulating geography and other cultural features like Ujjayanta Palace (an Indo-Saracenic structure made in 1901), Unakoti rock temple and Chabimura rock carvings are an ideal place to enjoy the serenity of the environment.

Chabimura is famous for its panels of rock carvings on the steep mountain wall on the bank of Gomati. These are 15 to 16 centuries carvings. Home to the largest bas relief sculptures in India, Unakoti is famous for its massive stone and rock-cut sculptures dedicated to Lord Shiva that

have been carved out from the hillside during 11th century. The Heritage Park in Agartala is of recent making and it depicts the geographic features of Tripura. There are several beautiful parks with water bodies all over Tripura which can be developed as ecotourism destinations. The bamboo and wooden handicrafts of Tripura are very popular outside. The tourist flow in Tripura has been picking up slowly. During 2018-19, total 5, 29,879 tourists visited Tripura including 1, 12,955 foreign tourists. However, though the footfall is increasing steadily during the last three years it is nowhere near its vast untapped economic and ecological potential.

The state is one of the first in the country to have announced the Ecotourism policy in the year 2004 but nothing substantial was done thereafter to promote the ecotourism in terms of infrastructure. Excellent physical infrastructure in place, like an International swanky airport, good rail connections and better roads have given the state's tourism potential a big boost. In the last few years as Agartala has emerged as one of the fastest developing state capitals in the North Eastern part of the country. Now the time is ripe for the State Government to issue detailed guidelines for the ecotourism activities inside and outside the forest areas and also to create an independent body to manage the ecotourism in the state integrating the concept with local livelihoods, conservation and culture. The Joint Forest Management (JFM) has been quite successful in Tripura and elsewhere in the country in promoting forest-based livelihoods; the government must empower these JFM committees to oversee the ecotourism and make the people real stakeholders. There are 18 tribes in the state, their food items and culture should be part of any tourist resorts and destination. For achieving success, the local people especially women should be trained in handling the tourist, preparing hygienic food and maintaining sanitation all around because it is the clean drinking water, clean toilets and beds are the basic features which attracts the people to a destination. A well-planned ecotourism shall also garner revenue for the Government and it is necessary that business sense is enthused in our national forest conservation programmes and policies for which the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change must act in a proactive manner to encash the scenic beauty of our landscapes.

AAP should not fritter away Punjab people's trust

What was the need to stage the (swearing-in) drama for a party that came to power because of genuine love and affection of the masses?

The resounding victory of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) defeating the two mainstream parties, Congress and Shrimani Akali Dal (SAD), in the recent Assembly elections in Punjab has created a history and kindled a new hope amongst the people of the state. Bhagwant Mann was sworn in as the 28th Chief Minister at an impressive ceremony attended by thousands of his followers at Bhagat Singh's village Khatar Kalan. Addressing his supporters, the new Chief Minister promised to fight widespread unemployment and corruption in the state and usher in reforms in agriculture, improve health infrastructure, transform the educational system by introducing quality education to suit innovations in the job sector and provide job security to the



BRIJENDER SINGH PANWAR

(The writer is a senior journalist and Chairman, Panwar Group of Institutions, Solan, Himachal Pradesh. The views expressed are personal.)

youth. After the oath-taking ceremony, Bhagwat Mann was greeted by hundreds of employees gathered on the balconies of Punjab Civil Secretariat with claps and cries of joy as soon as he reached the secretariat.

The people of Punjab have extended whole-hearted support to AAP which is an offshoot of the social movement launched by Anna Hazare against corruption in 2014. Fed up with the misrule of Congress and Akali Dal, the masses of Punjab "voted for change". Carried away by the Delhi Model of governance, hoping for better days, the people felt that they were investing in their own future by voting for AAP. Now, the pertinent question is: "Will the AAP party be able to come up to the expectation of the people of Punjab?" It will take a while to get an



answer to this question. But the murmur of discontent has already started about the manner in which the swearing-in ceremony was held. The 17-minute ceremony which included the signing of papers and 10-minute speech of Chief Minister Bhagat Mann cost the state exchequer more than Rs 3 crore

which far exceeds the Rs 2 crore earmarked for the ceremony. Standing crops on acres of land was destroyed for the event. The fleet of Punjab Roadways buses were used to transport people to Amritsar for the victory march causing inconvenience to the general public as public transport services were hampered.

Spending crores from the state exchequer for the victory rally, swearing -in-ceremony and print and TV advertisements is criminal misuse of taxpayer's money for personal and political purposes. What was the need to stage all this drama for a party which has come to power because of genuine love and affection of the masses and with a thumping majority?

The vigilant public and the opposition parties are already up in arms asking questions: "Is this the sign of change?" "In what way the AAP party is different from other political parties?" The leadership of AAP should realise that the issues of accountability in public life, good governance and appointment of Lok Pal to end corruption were the hallmark of the Anna Hazare movement out of which AAP

was born. So, it has to prove itself as a party with a difference. The new government in Punjab should take positive steps to win the hearts of the taxpayers who are already hard-pressed due to years of mis-governance by changing the style of working in sharp contrast to the previous governments functioning in the State. The focus of the government should be in setting an example by providing good, transparent governance, focussing on job creation by establishing industries, setting up agro-food processing units which will engage rural youth, eliminating the drug and mining mafia, controlling pollution of rivers, resolving the problem of the water table going down, and dwindling forest cover. The new incumbent should not forget that he has to take care of the

debt-ridden farmers and depleted treasury.

AAP has attracted the common man because its composition is different from other cadre-based parties. The party has a people-centric character. It provides equal opportunities to one and all to organize and evolve in a spontaneous manner. The biggest regret of AAP which has been in power in Delhi has been that they have not been provided full autonomy to rule the state. In Punjab, they are getting this opportunity. The people of Punjab have brought them to power with high hopes by providing an absolute majority and the electorate of other states are also looking up to them as an alternative to the mainstream parties. Now, is their chance to prove their worth.

Biden to attend emergency NATO Summit, hold G7 meet

US President to address EU leaders in Europe tour

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden would attend an emergency NATO Summit, address European Union leaders and hold meetings with G-7 leaders, his national security advisor has said on the eve of his departure for Brussels and Poland.

Biden is scheduled to leave for Europe to show a united front and take stock of the situation in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"He will attend an emergency NATO Summit, joined by the leaders of the other 29 NATO Allies. He will join the G7 leaders. And he will address the 27 leaders of the European Union at a session of the European Council. He will have



the opportunity to coordinate on the next phase of military assistance to Ukraine," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters at a White House news conference on Tuesday.

"He will join our partners in imposing further sanctions on Russia and tightening the existing sanctions to crack down on

evasion and to ensure robust enforcement," Sullivan said, adding that Biden will work with Allies on longer-term adjustments to NATO force posture on the eastern flank.

"He will announce joint action on enhancing European energy security and reducing Europe's dependence on

Russian gas at long last. He will announce further American contributions to a coordinated humanitarian response to ease the suffering of civilians inside Ukraine and to respond to the growing flow of refugees," he said.

From Brussels, Biden will travel to Poland, where he will engage with US troops who are now helping to defend NATO territory, and he will meet with experts involved in the humanitarian response. He will also hold a bilateral meeting with President Andrzej Duda of Poland.

"For the past few months, the West has been united. The President is travelling to Europe to ensure we stay united, to cement our collective resolve, to send a powerful message that we

are prepared and committed to this for as long as it takes...Helping the Ukrainian people defend themselves, imposing and increasing costs on Russia, and reinforcing the Western alliance," Sullivan said. Sullivan said Biden will announce new sanctions, but on ensuring that there is joint effort to crack down on invasion.

"We have applied an enormous amount of economic pressure. In order to sustain and escalate that pressure over time, part of that is about new designations, new targets, but a big part of it is about effective enforcement and applying the lessons that we've learned from other circumstances where we have, in fact, imposed sanctions on countries," he said.

WHO: Covid cases rise for 2nd week, deaths fall

AP ■ GENEVA

Geneva, Mar 23 (AP) The number of new coronavirus cases globally increased by 7per cent in the last week, driven by rising infections in the Western Pacific, even as reported deaths from COVID-19 fell, the World Health Organization said.

There were more than 12 million new weekly cases and just under 33,000 deaths, a 23per cent decline in mortality, according to the U.N. Health agency's report on the pandemic issued late Tuesday.

Confirmed cases of the virus had been falling steadily worldwide since January but rose again last week, due to the more infectious omicron variant and the suspension of COVID-19 protocols in numerous countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

Health officials have said repeatedly that omicron causes milder disease than previous versions of the coronavirus and that vaccination, including

a booster, appears highly protective.

The Western Pacific remained the only region in the world where coronavirus cases are rising, reporting a 21per cent jump last week, continuing weeks of increase. According to figures from last week, the number of new infections in Europe remained stable and fell everywhere else.

WHO cautioned that with many countries dropping widespread testing programs, many infections are likely being missed and new case numbers should be interpreted cautiously.

In recent weeks, COVID-19 cases inched upward across Europe, prompted by the more infectious BA.2 subvariant of omicron and the relaxation of nearly all public health measures.

WHO Europe chief Dr. Hans Kluge said restrictions in numerous countries across the continent had been lifted "brutally - from too much to too

few," noting that in recent days, cases were rising significantly in the U.K., France, Italy and Germany. Last week, British health minister Sajid Javid said U.K. Residents should brace for a jump in COVID-19 infections but that the country was still "in a very good position" due to its high vaccination levels.

Meanwhile, China's health authorities this week reported the first coronavirus deaths in more than a year as the country battles its worst outbreak since the coronavirus was detected in Wuhan. The semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong is also entrenched in a deadly wave of COVID-19, and the city of 7 million has recorded more deaths than mainland China during the pandemic.

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam said this week that authorities would consider relaxing some of its strict pandemic measures as cases begin to fall after weeks of rising cases overloaded hospitals and cemeteries.

Need to resume credible Israel-Palestine talks: India

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

India said an early return to the political course by launching credible direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine on all final status issues is an immediate requirement and stressed that the absence of direct talks between the sides is not conducive to securing long-term peace.

"We call upon parties to refrain from any unilateral action that unduly alters the status-quo on the ground and undercuts the viability of the two-State solution. We need to urgently build on the recent positive developments and not slide back," India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador TS Tirumurti said.

Speaking at the UN Security Council monthly meeting on the Question of Palestine on Tuesday, he said the focus must be on addressing the urgent security and economic challenges, including the precarious financial situa-

tion of the Palestinian Authority, and charting a concrete path for discussing key political issues.

"An early return to the political course by launching credible direct negotiations on all final status issues is an immediate requirement. The absence of direct talks between the sides on these issues is not conducive to securing long-term peace," he said.

He noted that resolution 2334 was adopted by the Council to reaffirm the international community's firm commitment to preventing the erosion of the two-State solution. It calls upon parties to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, to refrain from provocative acts of incitement and inflammatory rhetoric and stresses that all settlement activities must cease.

India has been supporting Palestinian nation-building and capacity-building efforts under the India-Palestine developmental partnership for over three decades now.

ASEAN special envoy sees minor progress in Myanmar mission

AP ■ PHNOM PENH

Cambodia's Foreign Minister on Wednesday claimed minor initial progress in his mission as a special regional envoy seeking to facilitate peacemaking in strife-torn Myanmar.

Prak Sokhonn, representing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, spoke after his return from a visit to military-ruled Myanmar, which was plunged into an extended violent political crisis after the army seized power last year.

He said he was encouraged by the military government allowing him to meet with various parties to the conflict, but pessimistic about immediate chances for a ceasefire to end the violence.

Popular discontent with the military's ouster of the country's elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has turned into what some UN experts have characterised as a civil war, leading as well to a humanitarian crisis with hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

Prak Sokhonn said he was encouraged by the military Government allowing him to meet with various parties to the conflict

Prak Sokhonn held discussions Monday and Tuesday with Myanmar's leader, Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing, and members of his cabinet about ASEAN's five-point consensus on Myanmar, issued in April last year. He also met with diplomats from other ASEAN countries and the UN, as well as Ko Ko Gyi, a Myanmar politician best known as an activist in the failed 1988 uprising against military rule.

Myanmar, although a member of ASEAN, has done little to implement the plan, which calls for the immediate cessation of violence, a dialogue among all concerned parties, mediation by an ASEAN special envoy, provision of humanitarian aid through ASEAN channels, and a visit to Myanmar by the special envoy to meet all concerned parties.

A major sticking point had been Myanmar's refusal to let a previous ASEAN special envoy meet with Suu Kyi, who has been in detention since the army seized power in February 2021.

ASEAN in response ostracised Myanmar by blocking its leaders from attending major meetings of the regional grouping.

Pak polls body slaps ₹50,000 fine on PM Imran

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's top election body has imposed a fine of Rs 50,000 on Prime Minister Imran Khan for violating election code of conduct by addressing a rally in Swat ahead of the local government election in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had on March 15 barred him from visiting Swat to address a public rally, but the premier ignored the directives and addressed a rally a day later, the Express Tribune reported.

According to the new ECP code of conduct, no public office holder can visit the districts where elections are being held. The second phase of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa local government elections is scheduled for March 31.

The ECP had twice issued notices to Khan for violating the code of conduct. The last notice was sent on March 21 for addressing a political rally in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa's Malakand area. The Prime Minister and Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar had filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court against the notices. According to the petition, "The notices have been issued despite new legislation regarding the election campaign."

However, the IHC had refused to restrain the ECP from proceeding against the Prime Minister, saying the commission had a mandate to devise a code of conduct for transparent elections. The ECP has banned PM Khan from attending meetings during the second phase of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa local government elections.

Man held for killing Hindu girl resisting kidnap bid in Pak

PTI ■ KARACHI

A man has been arrested for murdering an 18-year-old Hindu girl when she resisted a bid to abduct her in Pakistan's southern Sindh province, according to a media report on Wednesday.

Pooja Kumari Oad was said to have been shot after she put up resistance to the attackers in Rohi, Sukkur in Sindh on Monday.

The Sukkur police arrested the suspect, identified as Wahid Bakhsh Lashari, and registered an FIR against him under the relevant sections of Pakistan Penal Code, The News reported on Wednesday.

Lashari, along with his two accomplices, reportedly broke into the house of Sahib Oad

with a gun on the day of the murder. Lashari allegedly shot Oad's daughter, Pooja Kumari, dead when the family resisted as he tried to abduct her, the paper said.

The alleged murderers escaped after the killing.

The incident sparked an uproar on social media with activists strongly condemning the brutal murder and demanding protection of religious minorities, mainly Hindus and Christians.

SSP Sukkur Sanghaar Malik ordered the arrest of the suspected killer and his aides. Lashari was arrested from the limits of Rohri, with what is suspected to be the murder weapon. On Tuesday, a local court sent the suspect to 10-day police remand.

Low-dose Covid shots work for kids under 6: Moderna

AP ■ NEW YORK

Moderna's Covid vaccine works in babies, toddlers and preschoolers the company announced Wednesday — and if regulators agree it could mean a chance to finally start vaccinating the littlest kids by summer. Moderna said in the coming weeks it would ask regulators in the U.S. and Europe to authorize two small-dose shots for youngsters under 6. The company also is seeking to have larger-dose shots cleared for older children and teens in the U.S.

The nation's 18 million children under 5 are the only age group not yet eligible for vaccination. Competitor Pfizer currently offers kid-sized doses for school-age children and full-strength shots for those 12 and older. But parents have anxiously awaited protection for younger tots, disappointed by setbacks and confusion over which shots might work and when.

Pfizer is testing even smaller doses for children under 5 but had to add a third shot to its study when two didn't prove strong enough. Those results are expected by early April.

Indentured labourers' links should be used to boost S African tourism in Bihar: SA diplomat

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

The State of Bihar should use the links created by several indentured labourers, who came to South Africa from 1860 as sugar-cane farm labourers, to boost tourism, a top diplomat of the African country has said.

Dr Anil Sooklal, Deputy Director-General for Asia in the South African Department of International Cooperation and Relations, who is of Bihari origin, said that projects need to be started to get the 1.4 million South Africans of Indian origin to rediscover their roots.

Sooklal made the remarks at a Bihar Diwas event in Johannesburg hosted by Consul General Anju Ranjan, who arranged a linkup with the event which was hosted by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in Patna on Tuesday.

"Between 1860 and 1911, over 152,000 Indians came to South Africa under the indentured scheme. Very often, when we speak of our relations with India, we forget that a sizeable number of Indian South Africans have their roots



in Bihar," Sooklal said.

He added that the state of Bihar should use the links created by indentured labourers, who came to South Africa as sugar-cane farm labourers, to boost tourism.

"This conclave is a good first attempt to demonstrate the strong historical bonds that we have between South Africa and especially the state of Bihar. Cultural connectivity is a very important part of the connectivity between India and South Africa," Sooklal said as he highlighted that prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, there were over 100,000 visitors from India to South Africa annually, while over 80,000 South Africans visited India.

Singapore court fines jewellery firm director for conspiring with Indian tourists to cheat on GST

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

A jewellery firm director was fined SGD104,400 on Wednesday for conspiring with five Indian tourists to unlawfully obtain goods and services tax (GST) refunds that they were not entitled to.

The cases involving Woo Sin Chai from Arthesdam Jewellery and his colleagues were linked to large amounts of GST tourist refunds which were claimed from 2015 to 2016, The Straits Times reported. The five Indian nationals were Kothandaram Gnanam, Karunanidhi Rajesh, Karunanidhi Saravanan, Ramaiyan Kartikeyan and Waithiyalingam Karunanidhi, who were then between 29 and 61 years old and were jailed in 2017 for their part in the offences.

Woo, now 61, had pleaded guilty to multiple charges under the Goods and Services Tax (General) Regulations. The court heard that Arthesdam Jewellery has shops in Serangoon Road within the Little Indian precinct, one of the most popular shopping precincts for South Asians.

Onetime top aide testifies against Netanyahu in graft trial

AP ■ JERUSALEM

A Benjamin Netanyahu took the stand for the first time Wednesday against the former Israeli prime minister engulfed in corruption charges over a scheme to generate positive news coverage.

Shlomo Filber, the director of the Communications Ministry under Netanyahu and one of two former aides to testify for the prosecution, said Netanyahu wanted him to "mitigate" competition for Israel's Bezeq telecom company, a move worth hundreds of millions of dol-

lars. In return, Bezeq's popular news site, Walla, allegedly provided favorable coverage of Netanyahu and his family.

Netanyahu, now opposition leader in Israel's parliament, denies any wrongdoing and says the charges of fraud, breach of trust and bribery amount to a witch hunt. But the case has cast a deep shadow over his family and his legacy as Israel's longest-serving prime minister.

Like the previous aide-turned-state's witness, Nir Hefetz, Filber described the former Israeli premier as being image-obsessed.

PUBLIC NOTICE

This is to inform to all concerned that my father Vasu Deo Singh Alias Besuday Singh S/o Late Shri R.C. Singh Earlier Resident of 253/6-B, Railway Colony, P.K. Road, Connaught Place, New Delhi had executed a Will deed on 02-05-2013 in respect of Plot No. 202 Block A, Sector-47 Noida (U.P.) in favour of his son Pramod Kumar Singh S/o Shri Vasu Deo Singh Earlier R/o 253/6-B, Railway Colony, P.K. Road, Connaught Place, New Delhi and his wife Rajni Singh S/o S.R.N. Noida in Book No. 3, Volume No. 393 on pages 81 to 90 at No. 1453 dated 02-05-2013 and my father has died on 10-02-2022. So it is publicly notified that the said Property is going to transfer in favour of Pramod Kumar Singh in the residential plot Department Noida Authority as per will deed. If someone has any objection he/she should move her/his/their objection with sufficient proof within 30 days from this notice in the Residential plot department of Noida Authority.

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH

PUBLIC NOTICE

NOTICE is hereby given that Swaran Mohini Malhotra (Successor to Late Sarla Malhotra and Late Sarla Malhotra) through Saneesh Kumar and Swarn Mohini Malhotra in respect of the entire Property, Doc. No. 1313 (All Legal Heirs of Late Jagu Kishore Malhotra and Late Sarla Malhotra), Sarla Malhotra was the owner of the entire property by virtue of Sale Deed Dated 12.08.1973 and thereafter the death of Sarla Malhotra and the entire property was mutated in favour of J.K. Malhotra and said Swarn Mohini Malhotra has agreed to sell the said property to Subhash Mittal and Subhash Mittal has agreed to create mortgage of the said Property in favour of my client, IDFC First Bank Limited, having its office at ITO. All person's/Institution's having any claim against or in respect of the said Property, or any part thereof, by way of sale, exchange, mortgage (equitable/registered or otherwise), gift, inheritance, loan or otherwise, however, are hereby requested to notify the same in writing to us with supporting documentary evidence at the address mentioned below within 14 days from the date hereof, failing which the claim or claims, if any, of such person or persons will be considered to have been waived and/or abandoned and our client shall proceed with the disbursement of loan against the said property and subsequent creation of mortgage in respect thereof.

For Diwan and Company, Vishal Dwivedi (Advocate)
House No. 2 (LGF), NRI Complex, N. Delhi-19 Ms. HSIDC Ltd. 581839999

PUBLIC NOTICE

Reg. Plot # 451-52 Sector-8 Phase-IV, MT Mansarovar
Plot # 451-52 Sector-8 Phase-IV, MT Mansarovar-122050, Distt. Gurugram, (Haryana) measuring 2,225 sq. mtrs. was re-allotted by the Corporation vide its Re-Assignment Letter dated 17.7.2020 in favour of M/s. SGM Paper Products, a partnership firm of Mrs. Shubila Sachdeva, Mr. Gagan Sachdeva and Mr. Manish Sachdeva with profit sharing ratio of 20 : 40 : 40 respectively as per Partnership Deed dated 14.2.2012 and having its present office at 183 Sector-4, MT Mansarovar-122050 Distt. Gurugram (Haryana). The Corporation has been informed by the firm that one of its partner namely Mrs. Shubila Sachdeva W/o Shri Vishveshwar Kumar Sachdeva R/o House # 34 Block A, Mount, Kalasah, New Delhi-110065 has expired on 19.4.2021. Subsequently after her death, the firm has reconstituted the Partnership Deed and the legal heirs of the deceased partner, Mr. Vishveshwar Kumar Sachdeva, Mr. Gagan Sachdeva and Mr. Manish Sachdeva, are hereby requested to transfer their 20% shares in M/s. SGM Paper Products in favour of Mr. Gagan Sachdeva and Mr. Manish Sachdeva in the ratio of 10 : 10 : 10 as per Agreement Modifying the Partnership Deed dated 19.4.2021, becomes the legal heirs of her 20% shares in M/s. SGM Paper Products in the records of the Corporation.

The Corporation is in process of considering firm's request and transferring the said 20% her shares in M/s. SGM Paper Products to and in favour of Mr. Gagan Sachdeva and Mr. Manish Sachdeva in the ratio of 10 : 10 : 10 on the basis of Agreement Modifying the Partnership firm namely M/s. SGM Paper Products and NOC from present legal heirs. Through this public notice, it is hereby informed that in case, any of the legal heirs of late Mrs. Shubila Sachdeva any other person having reservation / objection to the said transfer may file his / her / its objection, if any, in writing to the Corporation, Addl. General Manager (Estate), M/s. HSIDC Ltd., C-13, 14 Sector-6, Panchkula, Haryana along with an affidavit within a period of 30 days from the date of publication of this notice. In case, no response is received within the above period, it will be assumed that no objection is being objected to Agreement Modifying the Partnership Deed dated 19.4.2021 and the Corporation shall go ahead with amendment in shareholding of M/s. SGM Paper Products in the records of the Corporation.

The Estate Manager
M/s. HSIDC Ltd.
MT Mansarovar-122050, Distt. Gurugram

PUBLIC NOTICE

This is to inform public in general that Kotak Mahindra bank Ltd has organized an auction in below mention respect of Vehicles. VEHICLES FOR SALE

- 1) FORCETTFBP
DL1VB9239-YOM-2016
MINIMUM RESERVE PRICE 418187
- 2) CB_FORCE TEMPO
TRAVELLER FULLY BUILT PASSENGER
DL1VC2802-YOM-2015
MINIMUM RESERVE PRICE 472306
- 3) PRO 2110 EICHR VECV
HR38AB3917-YOM-2021
MINIMUM RESERVE PRICE 1245394
- 4) SM_SAMRAT
UP14JT0863-YOM-2019
MINIMUM RESERVE PRICE 77563

UNDER HYPOTHECATION WITH M/S KOTAK MAHINDRA BANK IS UNDER SALE IN ITS "AS IS WHERE IS CONDITION" INTERESTED PARTIES CAN GIVE THEIR QUOTATIONS (ONLINE/OFFLINE) WITHIN 15 DAYS FROM THIS PAPER PUBLICATION I.E. ON OR BEFORE 08.04.2022 (PLEASE NOTE THAT CLOSING AUCTION DATE WOULD NOT BE A WEEKLY OFF / HOLIDAY).

BRANCH ADDRESS:
KOTAK MAHINDRA BANK LTD., PLOT NO. 7 INSTITUTIONAL AREA, SECTOR-125 NOIDA NEAR DELHI CAMPUS NOIDA (U.P.) UP-201313 OR CONTACT : RAJESH ANTIL KOTAK MAHINDRA BANK LTD. CONTACT / 09711173320 EMAIL. rajesh.antil@kotak.com

India crosses \$ 400 bn milestone in exports

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country's exports for the first time crossed the USD 400 billion mark in a fiscal on healthy performance by sectors such as petroleum products, engineering, gems and jewellery, and chemicals, according to the commerce ministry's data released on Wednesday.

The merchandise exports rose by 37 per cent to USD 400.8 billion in 2021-22 until March 21 against USD 292 billion in 2020-21. Previously, the outbound shipments had touched a record of USD 330.07 billion in 2018-19.

Imports during the period stood at USD 589 billion, leaving a trade deficit of about USD 189 billion. Hailing the country's success in achieving its goods export target, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that this is a key milestone in India's 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' journey.

The highest ever goods export target was achieved nine days ahead of the March 31 deadline.

"India set an ambitious target of USD 400 billion of goods exports and achieves this target for the first time ever. I congratulate our farmers, weavers, MSMEs, manufacturers, exporters for this success.

This is a key milestone in our Aatmanirbhar Bharat journey," LocalGoesGlobal," Modi tweeted.

Briefing media, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said that despite all adversities including Covid-19 pandemic, and Russia-Ukraine war, India has achieved this milestone.

"First time in history, India has crossed USD 400 billion in merchandise exports...If this was a movie like The Kashmir Files, it would be called a Make in India blockbuster," Goyal told reporters here.

He added that closer interaction with states and districts; engagement with exporters; faster resolution of their issues; actively engaging with different export promotion councils, industry associations and other stakeholders have helped in reaching this milestone.

On average, goods worth about USD 33 billion were shipped every month and about USD 1 billion every day.

The key export sectors, which contributed to record healthy growth include petroleum products, engineering, gems and jewellery, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. The top five export destinations are the US, the UAE, China, Bangladesh, and the Netherlands.

Director General of

Foreign Trade (DGFT) Santosh Kumar Sarangi said that going by the trend, "we would be adding USD 10-12 billion in the remaining nine days", taking the exports by end of 2021-22 to over USD 410 billion.

Commenting on the data, Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) Director General Ajay Sahai said crossing USD 400 billion is a remarkable achievement as exporters have added over USD 110 billion in one year to reach here despite huge logistics challenges, including container shortage, skyrocketing freight and liquidity constraints.

"What is more important is to build on it, as we will have benefits of new free trade agreements and the PLI scheme (production linked incentive) backing us," he said.

FIEO Vice-President Khalid Khan termed the achievement as a "landmark" and said that despite the COVID-19 pandemic exports have "done so well".

Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPCC) Chairman Narendra Goenka said that India crossing USD 400 billion merchandise exports marks the beginning of an era of exponential growth and dominance in world trade.

"From here, the growth rates are going to be exponential," Goenka added.

PLI scheme to account for 13-15 % capex in key industrial sectors over next 3-4 years: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme will account for 13-15 per cent of the average annual investment spending in key industrial sectors over the next three-four years, according to a report by Crisil.

Since its introduction in March 2020, PLI has been announced for 15 sectors, involving government incentives to the tune of Rs 1.93 lakh crore. Of this, 50-60 per cent is to be spent on sectors with domestic manufacturing and export focus, and the rest on import localization.

"Implementation of the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme will lead to a potential capital expenditure (capex) of Rs 2.5-3 lakh crore over the scheme period and will account for 13-15 per cent of average annual investment spending in key industrial sectors over the next 3-4 years," the rating agency said in a report released on Wednesday.

PLI is now poised for a rapid on-the-ground execution, with almost 60 per cent of the capex already approved and major spending set to occur over FY23-FY26. The capex has been approved for 10 sectors, it said.

While the capex in mobile, pharma and telecom has already kicked off, that in capital-intensive sectors such as automobile and solar photovoltaics - which form 70 per cent of the committed investment - will kick off from April 2022, the agency said.

The scheme has received interest from over 900 players across sectors, of which around 350 have got approval so far.

The Crisil Director Hetal Gandhi said PLI will spur green investments in India, with around 55 per cent of the scheme expected to be green, in sectors such as electric vehicles/fuel cell electric vehicles, and solar photovoltaics.

The report said that along with supply-chain integration, PLI will aid exports too.

Of the 15 sectors, nine have an export potential, ranging from 20-80 per cent of the incremental revenue generated, the agency said, adding that this, in turn, can create an annual export potential of Rs 2 lakh crore or 6 per cent of the total exports of calendar year 2021.

Sectors that could benefit from exports include mobiles, pharma, food processing, IT hardware, white goods and specialty steel, the agency said.

I-T dept raids Hero Motorcorp chairman Pawan Munjal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



The Income Tax Department on Wednesday conducted raids at multiple premises of Hero Motorcorp as part of a tax evasion investigation against the country's largest two-wheeler automobiles manufacturer, officials said.

The company called it a "routine inquiry, which is not uncommon before the end of the financial year".

Offices and residential premises of the company including that of chairman and CEO of the group Pawan Munjal located in Gurugram (Haryana), Delhi and few other locations were being covered, they said.

A team of officials of the department are looking at financial documents and other business transactions of the company and its promoters, they said.

"Officials from the Income Tax Department visited two of our offices in Delhi and Gurugram and the residence of our Chairman & CEO Dr. Pawan Munjal on Wednesday. We have been informed that this is a routine inquiry, which is not uncommon before the end of the financial year," the company said in a statement.

It said Hero MotoCorp is an ethical and law-abiding cor-

porate, and maintains the highest standards of impeccable corporate governance.

"In keeping with this philosophy, we are extending our full cooperation to the authorities. We reassure all our stakeholders that it continues to be business as usual," the statement said.

Hero MotoCorp became the world's largest two-wheeler manufacturer in 2001, in terms of unit volume sales in a calendar year, and has maintained the title for the past 20 consecutive years.

Till date, it has sold over 100 million units across domestic and international markets.

Led by Pawan Munjal, the company has presence across 40 countries spanning Asia, Africa, and South and Central America.

270 notices sent to e-tailers for breaching country-of-origin norm: Choubey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has issued 270 notices since January 2021 to e-commerce players for violation of provisions related to country of origin, and over Rs 56 lakh have been collected as compounding fees from such online companies, Parliament was informed on Wednesday.

In a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Food and Consumer Affairs Ashwini Kumar Choubey said the Legal Metrology (Packaged Commodities) Rules, 2011 under the Legal Metrology Act, 2009 provides, in the case of imported products, for mandatory declaration of country of origin on the digital and electronic networks used for e-commerce transactions.

The Act also provides for penalty in case of violations and authorises the state governments to take action thereon."The Legal Metrology Office of the Department of Consumer Affairs has issued 270 notices since January 1, 2021 to e-commerce entities for violation of provisions pertaining to country of origin and an amount of approximately Rs 56,40,500 in the form of compounding fees has been realised from such e-commerce companies," Choubey said.

INBRIEF

MIZORAM HAS POTENTIAL OF GENERATING 4,000 MW HYDROELECTRICITY: MINISTER

Aizawl: Mizoram has the potential of generating 4,000 mw of hydroelectricity, state power minister R Lalzirlana said on Wednesday. Lalzirlana called on Governor Hari Babu Kambohampati and they discussed initiatives to raise power generation in the state, said an official statement.

CONTACT MANAGEMENT, NETWORKING APP TO AID BUSINESSES

New Delhi: With an aim to disrupt disrupting businesses and elevate the number game for individuals and organizations, CardByte has introduced contact management and card-based business networking app platform driven and regulated with proprietary AI-integrated management systems. I see people understanding the perks of organising their contact book digitally and regulating their connections to network better even in this low touch economy, said CardByte co-founder and director Navinn Kapur.

VIRAT KOHLI INVESTS IN STARTUP RAGE COFFEE

New Delhi: Packaged coffee products maker Rage Coffee on Wednesday said it has secured funding from former Indian cricket team captain Virat Kohli, who has also been roped in as its brand ambassador. The city-based startup, however, did not disclose the amount of investment made by Kohli.

SIGNATURE GLOBAL TO INVEST RS 310 CR ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECT IN GURUGRAM

New Delhi: Realty firm Signature Global will invest ₹310 crore to develop an affordable housing project in Gurugram. The company on Wednesday announced a new project Signature Global Imperial, spread nearly 9 acres of land parcel and comprising 1,141 units.

Sensex declines by 304 pts as HDFC twins, Infosys succumb to profit taking

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark BSE Sensex reversed its early gains to close lower by 304 points on Wednesday due to profit-taking in banking, financials and select IT stocks after a recent surge.

The 30-share BSE barometer opened higher and rose further to 58,416.56 in line with gains in Asian shares.

However, profit-taking by investors in recent winners and lackadaisical buying at higher levels dragged down the index which tanked over 420 points to hit the day's low of 57,568.59 points in the second half.

The Sensex finally closed lower by 304.48 points or 0.53 per cent to settle at 57,684.82. During the day, it tanked 420.71 points or 0.72 per cent to 57,568.59.

The broader NSE Nifty dipped 69.85 points or 0.4 per cent to finish at 17,245.65 with 29 of its stocks ending in red. The key indices had gained over 1 per cent in the previous trade.

Among Sensex stocks, HDFC fell the most by 2.36 per cent.

Kotak Mahindra Bank lost 2.25 per cent, HDFC Bank fell by 1.26 per cent, Bharti Airtel by 1.97 per cent, Sun Pharma by 1.46 per cent, Maruti Suzuki India by 1.54 per cent, Mahindra & Mahindra by 1.33 per cent, Asian Paints by 1.16 per cent and Infosys by 0.86 per cent.

"Domestic equity market is

stuck in a range for the last couple of days amid increasing volatility. Despite opening in the green, follow up buying was missing at higher levels. This led to downward pressure in the second half of the day," said Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

Among major gainers, Dr Reddy's Laboratories rose by 2.31 per cent, Tata Steel by 2.15 per cent, and ITC by 0.86 per cent.

"After the recent rally, market is getting cautious. Volatility is back due to inflationary pressures triggered by supply constraints. While consistently rising input cost & fall in demand due to surge in Covid cases in parts of the world, war & high commodity prices are impacting earnings growth which can lead to downgrade in outlook," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap index gained 0.39 per cent, while smallcap gauge dipped marginally by 0.02 per cent. Among BSE sectoral indices, banking (down 0.81 per cent), finance (0.74 per cent), auto (0.72 per cent) and industrials (0.56 per cent) were the biggest laggards.

"The move in the index so far shows consolidation after two weeks of rebound and it's healthy. However, the prevailing uncertainty on the global front combined with lack of any domestic trigger is keeping the participants on their toes," according to Ajit Mishra, VP - Research, Religare Broking Ltd.

Rupee falls 24 paise to 76.42 against USD amid surging crude

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee pared initial gains to settle 24 paise lower at 76.42 against the US dollar on Wednesday, pressured by sell-offs in domestic equities and surging global crude prices amid geopolitical uncertainties.

Dollar demand from oil importers and prevailing risk aversion globally added to the woes, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened strong at 76.08 against the American currency but could not hold the momentum and entered negative territory. During the session, it witnessed a low of 76.42 and a high of 75.99.

The domestic unit finally settled at 76.42 against the greenback, down 24 paise from the previous close.

On Tuesday, the rupee had settled flat at 76.18 against the American currency.

"Indian rupee depreciated for the third day in a row following dollar demands from importers ahead of the month and financial year-end and rebound in crude oil prices," said Dilip Parmar, Research

Analyst, HDFC Securities.

Parmar further added that global financial markets have been searching for clear direction on the back of ongoing geopolitical uncertainties. The US Fed's hawkish bet has been supporting gain in the dollar.

"Rupee traded in a narrow range but fell in the second half after global crude oil prices started to rally sharply. In the last few sessions rupee has been reacting to how crude and the dollar have been moving and volatility has been influenced by these factors," said Gaurang Somaiya, Forex & Bullion Analyst, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

According to Sriram Iyer, Senior Research Analyst at Reliance Securities the rupee came off session highs to end the day weaker against the dollar amid dollar demand from crude refiners.

While domestic equities declined on concerns about FPI selling domestic assets and this weighed on the local unit.

Anindya Banerjee, VP, Currency Derivatives & Interest Rate Derivatives at Kotak Securities Ltd said the USD/INR spot closed at 76.32,

due to demand for US dollars from oil marketing companies. Weakness in stocks and higher oil prices also were responsible for the Rupee's weakness.

"Over the near-term, we expect a range in USD/INR between 75.80 and 76.50 on spot, due to higher oil supporting USD and year-end exporter selling, capping the advance in the pair," Banerjee added.

The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.14 per cent higher at 98.63.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude futures jumped 2.16 per cent to USD 117.97 per barrel.

On the domestic equity market front, the 30-share Sensex ended 304.48 points or 0.53 per cent lower at 57,684.82, while the broader NSE Nifty fell 69.85 points or 0.4 per cent to 17,245.65.

Foreign institutional investors emerged as net buyers in the capital market on Tuesday, as they purchased shares worth Rs 384.48 crore, according to stock exchange data.

Over 10 lakh EVs registered, 1,742 public charging stations operational: Gadkari

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



A total of 10,60,707 electric vehicles were registered in India till last week, while 1,742 public charging stations (PCS) were operational in the country, Parliament was informed on Wednesday.

In a written reply in the Rajya Sabha, Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said electric charging stations are to be provided by the developer on national highways as part of the wayside amenities (WSAs).

"The number of electric vehicles in the country, as per Vahan 4 data as on March 19, is 10,60,707, and a total of 1,742 Public Charging Stations (PCS), as per Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), are operational in the country as on March 21, 2022," Gadkari said.

He said the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has already awarded 39 such facilities for development.

Replying to a separate question, Gadkari said 816 fee toll plazas are operational on national highways across the country as on March 21, 2022.

On the policy regarding winding up of a toll plaza, he explained that as per National Highways Fee (Determination

of Rates and Collection) Rules, 2008, incase of Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects, after completion of the concession period, the user fee is to be collected by the central government at reduced rates of 40 per cent.

In case of public-funded projects, the user fee rates are to be reduced to 40 per cent after recovery of capital cost of the project, the minister said.

According to Gadkari, Rajasthan (122), Uttar Pradesh (90) and Madhya Pradesh (77) have maximum number of fee plazas.

Replying to another question, he said about Rs. 20,268.45 crore and an amount of Rs. 1,189.94 crore has been released/spent on projects sanctioned under the Central Road & Infrastructure Fund (CRIF) and Economic

Importance & Interstate Connectivity (EI&ISC) scheme respectively during the last three years.

Europe limited in curbing high energy prices amid protest

AP ■ MADRID

Governments across Europe

have been slashing fuel taxes and doling out tens of billions to help consumers, truckers, farmers and others cope with spiking energy prices made worse by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The move was, however, not enough for some whose livelihoods hinged on fuel.

Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, one of the 200 concrete truck drivers who held a slow-driving protest around Madrid this week, said filling up used to cost 1,600 euros (USD1,760) a month, but he had been forking out an extra 500 euros since the start of the year because of the rising price of diesel.

"We will continue striking because, at the end of the day, it's pretty much the same for us to go out to work or to stay at home," Rodríguez said.

He warned that his rising costs were part of 'a domino effect that is only going to drive us all to our ruin unless the government takes some definitive action'.

He's among those in industries like trucking or fishing who are staging protests to push politicians to ease their financial pain.

The war has exacerbated a

month-long energy crunch in Europe, which is dependent on Russian oil and natural gas.

Governments have limited options to provide lasting relief as households and businesses face crippling energy bills, high prices at the pump and other effects.

Volatile energy markets control natural gas and oil prices that have soared and fuelled record inflation.

Countries like Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden and Cyprus are passing temporary efforts to provide immediate help: slashing fuel taxes, rolling out heating and power subsidies or rebates, and capping energy bills for households and small businesses.

Such measures 'are sensible, and some of them, such as energy tax cuts, could be sustained indefinitely - even if prices continue to increase,' said Elisabetta Cornago, a senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank who specialises in EU energy policy.

But she called them partial solutions that 'only make a small difference'.

"The main problem is that these measures to keep energy prices low will also suppress incentives for energy efficiency, for investment in green energy generation, and for elec-

trifying sectors that currently rely on fossil fuels - so they could make the long-term pain of adjustment harder," Cornago said.

Raising interest rates, the tool wielded by central banks to tame inflation, also would do little to rein in energy prices - which European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde noted last month.

That's because 'rising energy prices are due to fundamental shifts in energy markets', Cornago said.

The energy crisis will be a hot topic at a European Council summit starting Thursday in Brussels, where leaders from Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece will call for an urgent, coordinated bloc-wide response.

EU officials on Tuesday said they were moving towards the joint purchase of natural gas and ensuring the bloc's storage facilities were topped up.

In the meantime, workers are taking to the streets.

Truckers around France, dissatisfied with aid they consider 'insufficient', held a day of action on Monday, with a group of independent drivers in Normandy and the English Channel region staging a blockade that prevented hundreds of trucks from moving.

trade-related purposes.

The benefit of this arrangement is that the additional Chinese loan will not reflect on the books of the federal government and will not be treated as part of Pakistan's external public debt.

Pakistan had paid Rs 26.1 billion interest on the outstanding balance at agreed rates.

Last month, the IMF said that Pakistan owes USD 18.4 billion or one-fifth of its external public debt to China, which is not only USD 4 billion higher than the officially reported figures but is also the highest lending by any single country or financial institution.

The IMF has made the USD 4 billion loan given by China to stabilise the foreign exchange reserves part of the external public debt as of June 2021. Out of this, USD 2 billion has matured but was extended further due to Pakistan's thin financial position.

The amount of USD 18.4 billion is equal to 20 per cent of the external public debt reported by the IMF. It is also the highest amount given by any country or an institution.

Air India pushed into losses, disinvestment to protect public money: Scindia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Under attack from the opposition over the sale of Air India to Tata Group, Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on Wednesday hit back and accused the UPA regime for saddling the then profit-making national carrier with a huge debt burden. Responding to the debate on the Demands for Grants of the Civil Aviation Ministry in Lok Sabha, Scindia listed out the merger of Air India and Indian Airlines, purchase of 111 new aircraft and liberalisation of bilateral rights as the reasons for the downfall of the national carrier. Earlier, opposition members had slammed Scindia for not referring to the sale of Air India in his nearly hour-long reply to the eight-hour debate on the budgetary allocation to the civil aviation ministry.

"Before 2005, Air India was making a profit of Rs 15 crore per annum and Indian Airlines was making profit of Rs 50 crore. These airlines were made to purchase 111 aircraft at a cost of Rs 50-55,000 crore which pushed the national carrier into deep debts," Scindia said.

As opposition members stood up in protest, Scindia said he had not referred to Air India at all, but was forced to speak after Trinamooly leader Sudeep Bandyopadhyay and Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury raised the issue.

World No 1 Ash Barty retires from tennis

AP ■ SYDNEY

World number one Ashleigh Barty stunned tennis on Wednesday by announcing her retirement from the sport aged just 25, saying she had fulfilled her dreams and was "spent physically". Barty dropped the bombshell weeks after becoming the first home Australian Open champion in 44 years and so winning a Grand Slam crown on three different surfaces. In a tearful social media video message with her close friend and former doubles partner Casey Dellacqua, Barty said she was "so ready" to call it quits after achieving her life-time ambition to win Wimbledon last year. "Success for me is knowing that I've given absolutely everything, everything I can. I'm fulfilled, I'm happy and I know how much work it takes to bring the best out of yourself," said the three-time Grand Slam winner. "It's just I don't have that in me anymore. I don't have the physical drive, the emotional want and kind of everything it takes to challenge yourself at the very top level anymore. "I think I just know that I'm absolutely, I am spent. I just know physically I had nothing more to give and that for me is success." One of the most respected and loved players on tour, Barty also became the best -- with her dizzying array of slices, pinpoint serving and

Congrats on an incredible career Ash. It was a privilege to share a court with you. Wishing you all the best in your next chapter, @ashbarty. You will be missed
—KAROLINA PLISKOVA

Happy for @ashbarty gutted for tennis what a player
—ANDY MURRAY

Ash, what can I say, you know I have tears right? My friend, I will miss you on tour. You were different, and special, and we shared some amazing moments. What's next for you? Grand Slam champion in golf?! Be happy and enjoy your life to the max xo Simo @ashbarty
—SIMONA HALEP

What a legend @ashbarty.. tennis will miss you .. unbelievable role model on and off the court .. good luck mate for this next phase #inspiration.
—SANIA MIRZA

seamless forehand typifying her all-round game. Few athletes can boast such a varied sporting resume as the down-to-earth Australian. She began playing tennis as a child in the Queensland state capital Brisbane and went on to win the junior Wimbledon title as a 15-year-old in 2011. But the expectations that came with success took their toll and she made a shock decision three years later to ditch tennis for cricket, signing for Brisbane Heat in the inaugural Women's Big Bash League. **DREAM COME TRUE** But the lure of tennis was never far away and she returned after a season out, breaking through for her maiden Grand Slam triumph at the French Open in 2019 and becoming Australia's first women's world number one since Evonne Goolagong-Cawley 50 years ago. Barty finally won a cherished Wimbledon crown last year before her Australian Open triumph at Melbourne Park in January, storming back from 5-1 down in the second set against American Danielle Collins to triumph 6-3, 7-6 (7/2). "It's something I've been thinking about for a long time," she said of retirement. "To be able to win Wimbledon, which was my dream, the one true dream that I wanted in tennis, that really changed my perspective. And I just had that gut feeling after Wimbledon and had spoken to my



Key moments in Ash Barty's brilliant career

AP ■ SYDNEY

Reigning Wimbledon and Australian Open champion Ashleigh Barty announced her shock retirement from tennis on Wednesday aged 25. Here are a few highlights from her short but illustrious career:

'DREAM' WIMBLEDON TRIUMPH



The Australian wins Wimbledon on the 50th anniversary of fellow indigenous Australian Evonne Goolagong Cawley's triumph there. Barty's victory in 2021 fulfils a dream that leaves her wondering how long she wants to carry on. In her retirement message Barty — who won the French Open in 2019 — described her Wimbledon crown as her "one true dream".

AUSTRALIAN OPEN AT LAST



In January 2022, Barty became the first Australian to

win her home Grand Slam in 44 years. The world number one was 5-1 down in the second set against fearless American Danielle Collins but came storming back to win on a tiebreak and sweep past the 27th seed in straight sets.

LEAVING TENNIS, ACT I



Barty decides out of the blue aged 18 to take a break from tennis — she had won the junior Wimbledon title in 2011 and reached three Grand Slam doubles finals. After putting down her tennis racket, Barty tries her hand at cricket and turned out for the Brisbane Heat in the inaugural Women's Big Bash League. After one season, Barty decides to return to her first sporting love, tennis.

GOLF TALENT, TOO



After skipping the French Open over Covid-19 fears, Barty picks up her golf clubs in September 2020 and claims the Brookwater Golf Club women's title near Brisbane.

Srikanth makes winning start at Swiss Open



PTI ■ BASEL

Seventh seed Kidambi Srikanth defeated Mads Christophersen in straight games in the men's singles opening round of Swiss Open badminton here on Wednesday. The Indian beat the Danish

player 21-16, 21-17 in a match lasting 32 minutes. Third seeds Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy got past Indonesia's Muhammad Shohibul Fikri and Bagas Mauland after losing the first game. The final scoreline read 17-21, 21-11, 21-18. Other Indians in fray, P V

Saumya, Janani reach semifinals

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Top-seed Saumya Vig of Gujarat sailed into the semifinals of the CTC-AITA women's tennis tournament 2022 being organised here by Chennai Tennis Centre with an easy 6-0, 6-1 win over Sirsi Manjunath Patil (Karnataka). She was joined in the last four by the second, third and fourth seeds respectively after they had to work harder for their wins. While second-seeded Janani Ramesh (TN) had to quell the challenge of a fighting state-mate Joell Nichole 7-5, 7-6(5), the third-seed Vidula Reddy of Karnataka defeated Tamil Nadu's M Harivarshine 6-2, 7-5.

Sindhu, Saina Nehwal and Parupalli Kashyap play their opening matches later on Wednesday.

Sharath Kamal sails into semis at WTT Contender Doha

PTI ■ DOHA

Veteran Sharath Kamal finally made the men's singles medal round in a major championship when he entered the semifinals of the WTT Contender Doha here on Wednesday. He was the lone Indian, ranked No. 41, in the fray after beating Tomislav Pucar of Croatia 11-8, 11-7, 11-4, following the exit of G Sathiyam, in the first round. However, Sathiyam and Manika Batra combined well to reach the final of the mixed doubles. The pair, ranked No. 7 in the world, accounted for Hong Kong's Wong Chun Ting and Doo Hoi Ken 3-2. The Croat, just a place ahead of Sharath in the world rankings, failed to contend with the Indian onslaught in the quarterfinals and was error-prone on the day. The closest he came to Sharath was in the first game in which he managed eight points, and one less in the second. However, in the third, Sharath ran into a sizable lead and maintained it throughout to win it in style. In the semifinals, Sharath



will take on Chinese Yuan Lichen, who is ranked 264. But it was the same Chinese who accounted for Sathiyam on Monday when he decimated the Indian 11-5, 11-6, 14-12. Other men's paddlers that could not make it to the main draw of the men's singles included Manav Thakkar, Harmeet Desai, SFR Snehit and Mudit Dani. The win in the semifinals by the mixed duo against the world No. 4 pair was indeed creditable, particularly after the way the Indians kept their hopes alive when the Hong Kong pair levelled the score 2-2, taking the

issue to the decider. In the crucial fifth game, they stopped their opponents well short to win the match 13-11, 9-11, 11-9, 8-11, 11-8. In the final on Thursday, they will meet the top seeded pair from Taipei — Cheng I-Ching and Lin Yun-Ju.

Crunch time for Portugal and Italy in World Cup playoffs

AP ■ LISBON

The World Cup hopes of the last two European champions are on a knife edge with Portugal and Italy on a collision course in decisive qualifying play-offs over the next week. A potential clash in Porto between the Euro 2016 winners, captained by Cristiano Ronaldo, and an Italy team who succeeded them as continental champions last year is a mouth-watering prospect. However, both must first come through semi-finals on Thursday that are far from foregone conclusions, with Portugal hosting Turkey and Italy facing North Macedonia. Failure to reach this year's World Cup would be a catastrophe for the Azzurri, who had gone to every finals since 1958 until missing out in 2018 when they lost a play-off to Sweden. It would be all the more remarkable given that they bounced back from that under Roberto Mancini to win Euro 2020 while on a world record 37-game unbeaten run. Yet four draws in their last five World Cup qualifiers last autumn saw them finish second in their group to Switzerland, and now they must come through these two one-off ties to secure a place in the April 1 draw in Doha. "Our goal is to win the World Cup, and to win the World Cup we have to win

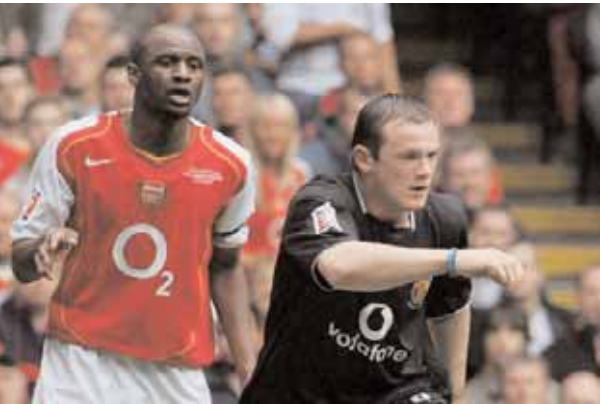


these two matches. There's nothing else to say," Mancini said on Monday.

NORTH MACEDONIA PLOT SHOCK

Italy host North Macedonia in Palermo, and they will know not to take the Balkan nation of two million people lightly. After all, they beat Germany away in qualifying last year before appearing at their first major tournament at Euro 2020, and they also held Italy to a damaging draw in Turin in qualifying for the last World Cup. "We are not going to Italy as tourists, but to outplay (them) and to win," said coach Bobi Milevski, who is aiming to take North Macedonia — born in 1991 out of the break-up of Yugoslavia — to their first World Cup. Portugal skipper Ronaldo will be 41 come 2026,

so Qatar surely represents his last chance to win the World Cup. Missing out altogether is unthinkable for the all-time top scorer in international football with 115 goals. "We know the road will not be easy and we have full respect for our opponents, who share the same objective as us. But together we will fight to take Portugal where we belong," Ronaldo posted on Instagram this week. Portugal, who are ranked eighth in the world, two places behind Italy, must beat Turkey in Porto to reach the play-off final, in which they would have home advantage. However, their two first-choice centre-backs have been ruled out — Manchester City's Ruben Dias succumbed to injury before 39-year-old veteran Pepe tested positive for coronavirus.



Rooney & Vieira join PL Hall of Fame

AP ■ LONDON

Manchester United great Wayne Rooney and former Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira on Wednesday inducted into the Premier League Hall of Fame. The pair are the ninth and 10th players named in the select group, joining David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Dennis Bergkamp, Frank Lampard, Roy Keane, Eric Cantona, Thierry Henry and Alan Shearer. Rooney, currently manager of Championship side Derby, is second on the list of all-time Premier League goalscorers, with 208 goals for Manchester United and Everton. "It's a huge honour for me to be named in the Premier League Hall of Fame, alongside an incredible group of players who have already been inducted," said the 36-year-old former

forward. "Growing up, I watched the Premier League as far back as I can remember. My dream was always to become a professional footballer, score goals, and win trophies and I was lucky enough to win the Premier League five times. "I have so many brilliant memories from my years playing for Everton and Manchester United and I'm really proud of what we achieved." Vieira, now manager of Crystal Palace, played 307 times in the Premier League, winning the competition three times including as captain of the Arsenal "Invincibles" team, who remain the only club to have won the title without losing a game. "Being inducted into the Premier League Hall of Fame is a fantastic achievement," said the French World Cup winner, who finished his playing career at Manchester City.

UK and Ireland submit Euro 2028 bid

AP ■ LONDON

The football associations of England, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales on Wednesday formally submitted their joint bid to host Euro 2028 to European governing body UEFA. The "Expression of Interest" comes on deadline day, with The Times in London reporting earlier this week that the UK and Ireland bid was set to be unopposed. A joint statement from the five associations read: "We believe Euro 2028 would be one of the greatest sporting events ever held in the UK and Ireland.



"This unprecedented partnership of five associations offers something special to

European football, including the potential for an expanded tournament, and we are passionate about maximising the sustainability and legacy benefits for communities across the UK and Ireland." There had been reported interest from Russia -- before the country's invasion of Ukraine -- and Turkey but so far no other national association has confirmed an intention to bid. The UK and Ireland abandoned plans to bid for the 2030 World Cup last month in favour of going for Euro 2028. UEFA, which could expand the tournament to 32 teams, is expected to make a formal decision on April 7.

Man Utd hold talks with Ajax coach Erik ten Hag over manager's job

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Manchester United have held "positive" talks with Ajax coach Erik ten Hag about the vacant manager's job at Old Trafford, it was reported on Wednesday. Ralf Rangnick has been in charge of the misfiring Premier League giants on an interim basis since Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was sacked in November after nearly three years in charge. Sky Sports said the talks with Ten Hag had been "positive", reporting that club chiefs were believed to be impressed by his vision. But it is understood to be too early to talk about

ERIK TEN HAG, WHO TOOK OVER AT AJAX IN 2017, WON THE DUTCH LEAGUE TITLE IN 2019 AND 2021 AND HIS TEAM ARE CURRENTLY TWO POINTS CLEAR OF PSV EINDHOVEN AT THE TOP OF THE TABLE



favourites for the job. Other names in the frame include Paris Saint-Germain boss Mauricio Pochettino, Sevilla manager Julien Lopetegui and Spain coach Luis Enrique. Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel was mentioned as a possible candidate due to the turmoil at the London club following sanctions imposed on Russian owner Roman Abramovich but he has reaffirmed his commitment to the Blues. Ten Hag, who took over at Ajax in 2017, won the Dutch league title in 2019 and 2021 and his team are currently two points clear of PSV

Eindhoven at the top of the table. The 52-year-old's contract at Ajax runs until 2023 but United have good links with the Dutch club, where former goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar is chief executive. Whoever takes over at Old Trafford will have a major rebuilding job, with a clutch of senior players including Paul Pogba, Jesse Lingard and Edinson Cavani all out of contract at the end of the season. The future of 37-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo, who rejoined United in August, has also been the subject of widespread speculation after the club's disappointing season.

No 'added advantage' of playing in Mumbai for MI, says Rohit

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Mumbai Indians skipper Rohit Sharma on Wednesday said they will have no "added advantage" of playing their IPL matches in the city's three grounds as many in the "relatively new team" have not played a single game here in last two years.

The IPL-15 begins at the Wankhede Stadium with a clash between Chennai Super Kings and Kolkata Knight Riders on Saturday.

"I hope you saw the auction, relatively new team, lot of new guys have come into the team, so I don't believe in added advantage because these guys, like lot of the guys 70 (or) 80 percent of the squad has not played in Bombay before," Rohit said at a virtual press conference.

"So there is no such thing as added advantage," the five-time IPL winning captain added.

The league phase of the IPL will be held in Mumbai and Pune. Mumbai have been playing their home games at the

Wankhede Stadium since the start of the tournament in 2008.

"Only myself, Surya (Suryakumar Yadav), (Kieron) Pollard, Ishan (Kishan), (Jasprit) Bumrah have played in Bombay a lot. Others have not played, so there is no such thing as added advantage," he reiterated.

"We all are playing in Bombay after two years, we have not played a single game in Mumbai, in fact the other franchises have played in Bombay last year, we didn't get to play, so no advantage," Rohit maintained.

SKY TO JOIN AFTER GETTING CLEARANCE

Rohit also said that batter Suryakumar is still undergoing rehab at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru and would join the team after getting clearance from there.

"Surya is at NCA at the moment, he is recovering well, he will be here soon and I can't give you his availability now, whether he will be available for first game or not, but we are trying to get him as soon as possible, once we have the



25% crowd allowed inside stadiums

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The 15th edition of the Indian Premier League, which is set to begin in Mumbai on Saturday, will witness 25 per cent crowd attendance in stadiums, the organisers said on Wednesday.

The lucrative league gets underway at the Wankhede Stadium on Saturday with defending champions Chennai Super Kings taking on Kolkata Knight Riders.

"This match will be a momentous occasion as the 15th edition of the IPL will welcome fans back to the stadiums after a brief hiatus owing to the pandemic," an IPL release stated.

"The matches will be played across stadiums in Mumbai, Navi Mumbai & Pune with an audience occupancy rate of 25% as per COVID-19 protocols," the release added.

clearance from the NCA," said Rohit. Rohit also made it clear that he and Ishan Kishan would open the batting for the five-time champions.

"I will open the batting. (I have) been doing that in the past, so I am looking forward to open (the batting) with Ishan (Kishan)," he said.

RR aim is to reclaim IPL title after 13 years: Buttler

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Rajasthan Royals wicket-keeper batter Jos Buttler on Wednesday asserted they have the requisite wherewithal and firepower to end a 13-year-long title drought in the Indian Premier League, beginning here on Saturday.

Buttler, who has been retained by inaugural IPL champions alongside skipper Sanju Samson and Yashasvi Jaiswal, said he is fresh, re-energised after the injury-forced break and is desperate to contribute to the team's goal this year. "It's a really exciting time for the team you know, to start a new cycle and build a new team. The aim here is to win the IPL, and I can't wait to contribute to that," Buttler said.

"We are delighted to have so many great players in the squad.

Obviously, (Ravichandran) Ashwin and (Yuzvendra) Chahal are two of the best spinners in the world, and with a great pace attack, I think it's really exciting.

"Then we've got ourselves a strong batting line-up, along with great all-round options, so I think it's going to be a really exciting IPL for us," added the 31-year-old.

Buttler said he was "quite flattered" after he was retained by RR. "There were only a cer-



tain number of players that could stay with the franchise so it was quite flattering to have been offered to be retained. I've always enjoyed playing for this franchise and have had some really enjoyable memories.

"Obviously I knew the franchise had placed their trust in me, along with Sanju and Yash (Yashasvi Jaiswal). There were a lot of conversations that happened before the auction, and we were just focused on trying to create a strong team, cover-

ing all bases that you need to win the tournament," he said.

With a lot of new faces in the RR squad this year, Buttler is expecting to connect with some special cricketers in the upcoming season.

"I'm also looking forward to connecting with a lot of people, especially Chahal. I've played against him a few times, and he seems to be that fun character in the team. So, I'm looking forward to having him on my team.

Jadeja back to No 1 in ICC Test all-rounders



PTI ■ DUBAI

India's Ravindra Jadeja reclaimed the top spot from West Indies' Jason Holder in the latest ICC Test rankings for all-rounders released on Wednesday.

Jadeja had risen to No 1 after his 175 not out and nine wickets in the first Test against Sri Lanka in Mohali earlier this month.

However, he had lost the place to Holder last week. But the two players have once again interchanged places with Jadeja back on top with 385 rating points.

Jadeja's compatriot Ravichandran Ashwin held on to his third place among all-rounders and continued to be second in the bowlers' chart.

Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, who had jumped six spots last week, remained static on fourth in the bowling list.

India skipper Rohit, the country's top-ranked batter, fell a spot down to seventh in the latest Test rankings for batters.

While former India skipper Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant remained static on the ninth and 10th place respectively.

Pakistan skipper Babar Azam, who was at his glorious best against Australia during the second Test of the series in Karachi, gained three spots to move up to No 5 in the rankings chart.

Other star performers with the bat from the same match - Mohammad Rizwan and Usman Khawaja - have also taken a massive leap.

Rizwan has moved up six spots, to be joint No 11 alongside David Warner after his unbeaten knock of 104 in the second innings. Khawaja, who scored 160 and 44 in Karachi, moved up eleven spots to No 13.

In the ODI chart, Kohli retained his second spot even as Rohit moved down a rung to be fourth among batters.

Mandhana, Bhatia rise in rankings, Mithali slips

PTI ■ DUBAI

India's Smriti Mandhana and Yastika Bhatia moved up to the 10th and 39th spots respectively in the recently-released ICC Women's ODI Player Rankings, but skipper Mithali Raj's descent in the batters' chart continued as she dropped to eighth position.

Star opener Mandhana, who played modest knocks of 35, 10 and 30 in India's previous three matches in the ongoing ICC Women's World Cup, climbed up one place to enter the top 10 with a rating of 663.

Bhatia's impressive run was also reflected in the

rankings issued on Tuesday as she moved up eight places to the 39th spot. The left-hander had scored back-to-back half centuries against Australia and Bangladesh in India's previous two games.

Mithali, who has slipped five places in the past two weeks, has dropped one more spot to be joint eighth alongside New Zealand's Amy Satterthwaite.

In the bowlers' chart, India pacer Pooja Vastrakar has risen 13 spots and is currently placed 56th while veteran Jhulan Goswami dropped a rung to be seventh.



Shreyas Iyer is a born leader: David Hussey

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Kolkata Knight Riders mentor David Hussey feels new skipper Shreyas Iyer has a good cricketing brain and has proved his skills as a leader during his stint as Delhi Capitals captain.

Iyer, who led Delhi Capitals to the final in 2020, was bought by KKR for ₹12.25 crore at the mega auction last month.

He was named captain by KKR team management ahead of pacer Pat Cummins, who leads the Australian Test side.

"Shreyas is a born leader, just the way he walks around, he commands respect. Knowing Pat (Cummins) really well, he would be a good deputy and would also lead from the front," Hussey said during a virtual press conference on Wednesday.

"But the way Shreyas has captained in the past for Delhi, he has a very good cricket brain and a nice vision of how to play the game and I think he will express himself really well. I think it's a smart move from Brendon (McCullum) and KKR manage-



ment." Iyer has been in sensational form recently for India.

Asked Hussey how he would go about coaching the 27-year-old, he replied: "The best coaching is to just leave the good players alone, let them go where they work.

"He is in rare form at the moment. I don't know him, I'm getting to know him but he comes across as true leader and a person who knows his game really really well."

KKR were dealt a blow after T20 specialist Alex Hales withdrew from the tournament citing bubble fatigue.

Adding to KKR's misery is that the Australian duo of Cummins and Aaron Finch, who was roped in as Hales' replacement, are expected to miss the team's first few games as they are touring Pakistan.

"It is a concern to not have your best players available but saying that international cricket is paramount. They miss the first five games but they'll hit the ground running, match fit. Both are quality players. Hopefully they can perform as per the game plan," Hussey said.

CSK to miss Moeen for IPL opener due to visa issues

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Defending champions Chennai Super Kings will miss the services of Moeen Ali for their IPL-opener as the star England all-rounder is yet to receive his India visa for competing in the lucrative T20 tournament, beginning in Mumbai on Saturday.

CSK CEO Kasi Viswanathan confirmed the development

"It is almost certain that Moeen Ali will miss the first game. He has still not got the visa. We are on it as well as BCCI. Hope it is sorted in a day or two," Viswanathan said.

"It is disappointing that he has not been able to join us. They follow set procedures for players with Pakistan descent. That looks like the reason (for delay)." His grandfather migrated to



England from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir but Moeen is born in England and is a frequent visitor to India.

CSK, four-time IPL champions, will take on last edition's runner-up side Kolkata Knight Riders in the opening match of the this year's IPL at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Saturday. Viswanathan said even if he manages to reach India by Thursday, Ali will be unavailable for the opener because of the quarantine protocol laid down by the IPL organisers.

"There is three-day mandatory quarantine which Moeen has to undergo before joining the IPL bio-bubble. So he will be out of the first game even if he gets his visa today or tomorrow."

Because of his fine all-round show which helped the team lift its fourth IPL title, Moeen was retained by CSK

alongside inspirational captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Ravindra Jadeja and Ruturaj Gaikwad.

Moeen scored 357 runs from 15 innings for CSK in the IPL last year, while also taking six wickets from 15 games with his off-spin bowling.

DEEPAK TO MISS A GOOD NO OF MATCHES

Besides Moeen, CSK will also miss their star pacer Deepak Chahar, who has been ruled out of the first half of the IPL due to a right quadriceps injury which he sustained during the third and final T20 match against the West Indies in Kolkata last month. Asked about Chahar's progress, Viswanathan said: "He will remain in the NCA until he gets fitness clearance from the BCCI."

Andrew Tye joins Lucknow Super Giants

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Lucknow Super Giants have signed Andrew Tye as a replacement for the injured England pacer Mark Wood for the upcoming Indian Premier League, it was announced on Wednesday

The announcement was made via an IPL media advisory. Wood suffered an elbow injury during England's first Test against West Indies earlier this month.

Tye has represented Australia in 32 T20Is and picked 47 wickets. The right-arm pacer, who has so far played 27 IPL matches and has picked 40 wickets, will join LSG for the price of ₹1 crore.

LSG - who will be making their IPL debut this season - will begin their IPL 2022 campaign on March 28 when they take on Gujarat Titans at the Wankhede Stadium here.

The IPL-15 begins with a match between Chennai Super Kings and Kolkata Knight Riders on March 26.

Tye, who was with Rajasthan Royals earlier, had left the IPL midway last season due to personal reasons.

Cummins, Starc give advantage to Aus



AP ■ LAHORE

Pakistan was 268 all out against the persistent pace of Australia captain Pat Cummins and impeccable reverse swing of Mitchell Starc to concede a massive 123-run lead on Wednesday in the third and final Test.

In a sensational collapse after tea on Day 3, Pakistan lost seven wickets for 41 runs - the last four wickets without adding a run - as Cummins finished with 5-56 and Starc took 4-36.

Australia had stretched its lead to 134 runs by reaching 11-0 by stumps with Usman Khawaja not out on 7 and David Warner unbeaten on 4.

In-form opening batter Abdullah Shafique (81) and veteran Azhar Ali (78) had carried Pakistan to 170-1 and denied Australia a breakthrough in the first session after resuming on 90-1 before the visitors took control of the series deciding test.

Nathan Lyon (1-95), who dried up the runs with his marathon spell of 30

overs on Day 3, provided the opening when he found the outside edge of Shafique's bat after lunch to end a patient 150-run stand.

Shafique's prolific run in the series has seen the opening batter score his maiden Test hundred in the drawn first Test in Rawalpindi before his patient 96 in Karachi led Pakistan to force a draw.

Shafique defied Australia with yet another patient knock off 228 balls which featured 11 fours before Lyon struck in the fifth over after lunch and successfully overturned umpire Aleem Dar's not out decision through a television referral.

With the second new ball only seven overs old, Cummins took a spectacular return catch to dismiss Azhar in his homecoming test match as Pakistan was restricted at 227-3 at tea.

Azhar, playing in his 94th Test match but for the first time in his hometown of Lahore, became the fifth Pakistani batter to complete 7,000 test runs when he reached 74 by sweeping hard at Lyon to deep square leg for a single.

Former test captains Younis Khan (10,099), Javed Miandad (8,832), Inzamam-ul-Haq (8,829) and Mohammad Yousuf (7,530) are the other Pakistan batters to score more than 7,000 Test runs.

B'desh win ODI series in SA

AP ■ CENTURION

Taskin Ahmed and Tamim Iqbal starred as Bangladesh sealed an historic series triumph with a nine-wicket win in the third one-day international against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Wednesday.

Fast bowler Taskin took five for 35 as South Africa were bowled out for 154, their lowest total against Bangladesh.

Visiting captain Tamim then scored 87 not out off 82 balls to take Bangladesh to victory with 23.3 overs to spare, sharing a century opening partnership with Liton Das (48).

Bangladesh won the World Cup Super League series by two matches to one, consolidating their place at the top of the table.

South Africa were left languishing in ninth place and in danger of missing one of the eight automatic qualifying places for the 2023 Cricket World Cup.



series opener by 38 runs at the same venue on Friday.

South Africa won the second match by seven wickets in Johannesburg but Bangladesh dominated Wednesday's series decider.

South Africa made a fast start, with Janneman Malan and Quinton de Kock putting on 46 for the first wicket inside seven overs.

But Taskin bowled superbly after off-spinner Mehidy Hasan made the first breakthrough by dismissing De Kock.

Taskin, 26, produced his best performance since taking five for 28 on debut against India on debut in Mirpur in 2014. He bowled at a lively pace in three spells and troubled all the batsmen.

With South Africa defending a low total, Keshav Maharaj dropped Litton Das at backward point off Kagiso Rabada in the first over of the Bangladesh innings before Das had scored.

Das and Tamim took full advantage of the let-off, putting on 127 for the first wicket.