

OPINION 6
BJP JUGGERNAUT ROLLS
IN HINDI HEARTLAND**WORLD 8**
HUNTER BIDEN INDICTED ON
NINE TAX CHARGES**MONEY 10**
SEBI CONSIDERING TO CREATE
NEW ASSET CLASS

RANCHI, SATURDAY DECEMBER 9, 2023; PAGES 12 ₹3



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12 SPORTS

RBI predicts faster growth for Indian economy

Mumbai: The Reserve Bank of India on Friday expectedly left its key lending rates unchanged for the fifth consecutive time and predicted faster growth in the world's fastest-growing major economy amid an uncertain outlook on inflation ahead of elections.

The six-member Monetary Policy Committee, consisting of three RBI and an equal number of external members, voted unanimously to keep the benchmark repurchase rate at 6.5 per cent. The central bank raised its forecast for economic growth to 7 per cent from 6.5 per cent, maintaining India's position as the world's fastest-growing major economy. **PTI**

IT raids Congress MP premises in Odisha, Jharkhand

Bhubaneswar/Ranchi: With the Income Tax department recovering a total of over ₹220 crore in cash during raids in places linked to an Odisha-based distillery group till Friday afternoon, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the money looted from the public will have to be returned.

Modi was apparently referring to political leaders in Odisha and Jharkhand who have links with the liquor firm. **PTI**

BJP selects its observers to appoint Chief Ministers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid a prolonged deliberation over the appointments of new heads for the States won by the BJP last week, the party appointed Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar, and Union Tribal Affairs Minister Arjun Munda as central party observers for the election of legislature party leaders in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, respectively. The legislature party leaders will become Chief Ministers of the three States and the meetings to elect them may take place over the weekend. There is a view within the party that its leadership may usher in fresh faces at the helm of these States. Singh will be joined by the party's vice president Saroj Pandey and its general secretary Vinod Tawde as central observers for Rajasthan amid an intense buzz within the BJP that the leadership will bring in a new leader, ignoring the claim of two-time former Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje. Sources said Raje has been

making efforts to get onto the hot seat and in this regard she called on Party chief JP Nadda. The choice of Singh, one of the senior most BJP leaders and a Rajput leader, is likely to help build a consensus around the leadership's chief ministerial choice among MLAs, a number of whom are seen as supporting Raje. Khattar will be joined by the party's OBC Morcha head K Laxman and its secretary Asha Lakra for the Madhya Pradesh legislature party meeting, while Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and BJP general secretary Dushwant Kumar Gautam will be central observers for Chhattisgarh along with Munda. In Madhya Pradesh where the BJP scored its biggest victory among the three States with a two-thirds majority, current Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's stake has gone up with the win but there is a view that the party leadership is looking at a leadership change after his 18-year uninterrupted stint in power except for 15 months after the 2018 Assembly polls.

Heritage left unattended, history threatened

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's invaluable treasures, the monuments of national importance, stand as cultural gems shielded by vigilant guards to prevent any harm or encroachment. Keeping this in mind, currently as many as 248 monuments/museums of national importance under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) have security guards, as per the Government data. However, a significant number of them i.e. 94 per cent are left unattended, lacking security personnel. There are a total 3,693 Centrally protected monuments (CPMs) across the States.

Expressing its dismay over the low percentage of CPMs that have security guards and the insufficient number of personnel to meet the requirements, a Department-related Parliamentary Panel on Transport, Tourism and Culture has asked the Government to ensure adequate funds so as to ensure safety of these heritage structures as well as safety of tourists visiting these spots. In its report tabled in Parliament on Friday, the panel noted that security guards are posted at only 248 CPMs/sites/museums i.e. less than about 6.7 per cent of the total number of CPMs. "Also, out of the total

requirement of 7,000 personnel for protection of monuments, the Government could provide only 2,578 security personnel at 248 locations due to budgetary constraints," said the panel led by Rajya Sabha member V Vijayasai Reddy. Taking the stringent view that budgetary constraints should not be an excuse for not providing security guards to protect our rich cultural heritage, the panel reminded the authorities that, "it is the duty of the Government of the day to protect our cultural heritage sites." The Committee, therefore, recommends that a budget may be provided by the

Government to appoint 7,000 personnel for protection of the monuments or as per the study conducted by IIT, Delhi. The Committee also suggested the Union Culture Ministry overseeing the ASI to conduct an urgent thorough assessment of the security requirements and budgetary allocation required for the same and "a strong case may be made to the Ministry of Finance requesting allocation of additional funds for this purpose so as to ensure a basic state of protection for all the monuments across the country to preserve them for generations to come."

Mahua Moitra Expelled from Lok Sabha, Exposed

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

Trinamool Congress leader Mahua Moitra was expelled on Friday from the Lok Sabha after the House adopted the report of its Ethics Committee that held her guilty of accepting gifts and illegal gratification from a businessman to further his interest.

After a heated debate over the panel report during which Moitra was not allowed to speak, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi moved a motion to expel the TMC member for "unethical conduct", which was adopted by a voice vote and the House was adjourned immediately. The Ethics Committee report found Moitra guilty of 'unethical conduct' and contempt of the House for sharing her Lok Sabha credentials, including the user ID and password of the Lok Sabha Member's portal, with unauthorised persons. This had an irrepressible impact on national security. Moitra received backing of her party as well members of the INDIA Bloc of Opposition parties on the action without giving her a chance to defend herself in Parliament.



TMC leader Mahua Moitra addresses the media with Congress MP Sonia Gandhi and other Opposition leaders after being expelled by the Lok Sabha during the Winter Session of Parliament, in New Delhi, on Friday **PTI**

TMC supremo West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee denounced the expulsion of her MP from the Lok Sabha and termed the move as a "betrayal" of India's parliamentary democracy. Mamata expressed her disappointment as Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not intervene in the matter. The motion moved by Joshi

said Moitra's "conduct has further been found to be unbefitting as a Member of Parliament for accepting gifts and illegal gratification from a businessman to further his interest which is a serious misdemeanour and highly deplorable conduct" on her part. Joshi urged the House to accept the recommendation and finding of the committee

and "resolve that continuance of Moitra as member of Lok Sabha is untenable and she may be expelled from the membership of the Lok Sabha". Ethics Committee chairman Vinod Kumar Sonkar tabled the first report of the Committee on the complaint filed by BJP member Nishikant Dubey against Moitra.

Modi may launch Mission 2024 from Kashi

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to launch Mission 2024 from his parliamentary constituency, Kashi, following the Bharatiya Janata Party's resounding victories in the recent State elections of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh.

"This marks a significant moment as the Prime Minister has chosen Kashi for the kickoff of his Lok Sabha election campaign in 2024. Modi is scheduled to engage in various programmes during his 43rd visit to the city on December 17 and 18," Vijay Bahadur Pathak, a senior BJP leader said. Kashi has been important centre for the BJP as any election campaign from this city is bound to affect the whole of eastern Uttar Pradesh which has 28 Lok Sabha constituencies. During this two-day visit, the Prime Minister is slated to present projects amounting to ₹1,000 crore to the public. Among the projects, the inauguration of the Swaraveda Mahamandir, recognised as the country's largest meditation center, is anticipated. Additionally, Modi will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone for several projects, including the Phulwaria Four Lane, Amul Plant, and Sarnath Beautification. Having been elected as the Member of Parliament from Varanasi in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Modi has cultivated a strong bond with Kashi, making a total of 43 visits over the past nine years of his tenure as the Prime Minister. The upcoming visit on December 17-18 is particularly



significant following the BJP's remarkable success in the Assembly elections of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has communicated the primary details of the visit to the district administration and BJP leaders. The visit will be centered around various development projects in Varanasi. Dilip Patel, the BJP Kashi area president, stated, "The PM will arrive at Babatpur airport by special plane on the afternoon of December 17." On the first day of his visit, the PM is scheduled to visit Chhota Cutting Memorial School grounds, where an exhibition based on 'Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra' for the urban area will be showcased. Later, he will interact with the beneficiary class. In the evening, Modi will attend the Kashi Tamil Sangamam program at Namo Ghat, meeting South Indian guests and participating in the Ganga Aarti. The PM will conclude the day by resting at the BLW Guest House.

Putin hails PM Modi as a force to reckon with



AGENCIES ■ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday, highlighting the progressive development of relations between India and Russia under Modi's guarantee. Putin also said he was "surprised" by Modi's tough stance on defending the national security interests of India. While addressing the "Russia Calling!" Forum, Putin said Modi cannot be intimidated by any pressure from unfriendly countries, reported TASS news agency. "I want to say that relations between Russia and India are developing progressively

along all trajectories, and the main guarantor of this is the policy pursued by Prime Minister Modi," the Russian leader said at the event. Speaking on international pressure, Putin said he "cannot imagine that Modi could be frightened, intimidated or forced to take any actions, steps, decisions that would be at variance with the national interests of India and the Indian people". "I just look at what is happening from the outside, and sometimes, frankly speaking, I am even surprised at his tough stance on defending the national interests of the Indian state," Putin further noted in his praise of Modi at the investment forum. The Russian President also asserted the importance of increasing settlements in national currencies between Russia and India, emphasising that Russia stands for a "truly democratic model" of global economic development, reported Sputnik.



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SAIL Chairman launches SAIL's first AI news anchor 'Pragati' at BSL

Chairman praises AI Initiative by Public Relations Dept of BSL

R SHARMA : BOKARO

In this era of Artificial Intelligence (AI), an AI news anchor 'Pragati' has been developed by the Public Relations Department of BSL for its daily video news magazine 'Bokaro Darpan', which was launched by SAIL Chairman Amarendu Prakash during his visit to Bokaro. Praising this new initiative in the context of digital transformation, SAIL Chairman said that such future-oriented innovations reflect the culture of innovation in SAIL.

It is noteworthy that this AI voice cum visual model for news presentation has been developed by Abhinav Shankar, a young manager of the Public Relations Department, BSL himself using techniques like signal



processing, sound engineering and natural language processing. Describing this model, Abhinav said that this AI voice has been developed completely in-house without the help of any external agency and it has been developed on Harvard's machine

learning model Neptune 3.0 for language learning. This AI voice, due to its Hindi voice modulation and fine tuning of its natural language processing in tonality, is not only able to pronounce even the most difficult Hindi words accurately but also processes

English words in Indian intonation, thereby it appears to be a natural voice without any robotic tone, and in this respect, it is not only the SAIL but also the most advanced Hindi AI voice model in the country at present.

Abhinav further told that in this series, another male AI voice named Utkarsh is also in the final stages of its development and he plans to develop 5 such AI news anchors for 'Bokaro Darpan' and Abhinav specialty extended his special thanks to the COC BSL Manikant Dhan for his round the clock support and guidance in developing AI Anchor. In this context, COC BSL Manikant Dhan said that 'Bokaro Darpan' is a daily video news magazine based on the day's major events of the plant and Bokaro city run by the Public Relations Department of BSL, which is broadcasted by all the cable operators of the city including YouTube and such initiatives like AI Anchor is just a small step towards a big lap as long way to go.

Firing incident rocks mango: Tiger Jawan succumbs to injuries, youth shot dead

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

The city witnessed a tragic firing incident at Jawaharnagar Road No. 15 under the Mango police station area, where a young man named Sajjad, known as Tanga, lost his life due to gunshot wounds. The incident also left another Tiger Mobile jawan critically injured. He was undergoing treatment at TMH however, he succumbed to injuries later this evening.

The assailants, believed to be three in number, specifically targeted Sajjad. As they attempted to flee the scene after the shooting, quick police response led to the surrounding and capture of one suspect. The suspect, found in possession of three pistols and cartridges, is currently in police custody.

It has come to light

through the police investigation that Sajjad alias Tanga had a criminal record. He was previously accused of detonating a bomb on a street in Sonari, adding a layer of complexity to the ongoing investigation. The police are diligently probing the entire matter, including the motives behind the attack and any potential connections to prior criminal activities.

The injured youth, undergoing critical treatment, adds to the gravity of the situation. The swift response by law enforcement in capturing one of the attackers is a testament to their dedication in maintaining law and order. Further details are expected to emerge as the investigation unfolds, shedding light on the circumstances leading to this unfortunate incident.

"It all happened so fast.

Gunshots echoed, and chaos ensued. Sajjad was targeted, and we're still in shock over the brutality of it all," said a local resident.

A police official said: "Swift action was crucial to preventing further harm. Our officers responded promptly, resulting in the capture of one suspect. The investigation is ongoing. This incident has left our community shaken. We hope for justice for the victims and trust the authorities to bring those responsible to account. It has come to light through the police investigation that Sajjad alias Tanga had a criminal record. The complexity of the case demands a thorough examination to unravel the motives behind the attack and any potential connections to prior criminal activities."

He added that the inci-



dent also left another jawan critically injured, currently undergoing treatment at TMH. The gravity of the situation is immense, and our thoughts are with the victims and their families during this difficult time. As the investigation unfolds, further

details are anticipated, shedding light on the circumstances that led to this unfortunate incident. The community remains vigilant, awaiting justice for the victims and seeking reassurance in the efforts of law enforcement.

DC CHAIRS MEETING OF THE DISTRICT DISASTER MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY

VINOD PRASAD ; LOHARDAGA

The meeting of the District Disaster Management Authority was held in the Collectorate Auditorium on Friday under the chairmanship of Deputy Commissioner Dr. Waghmare Prasad Krishna. Various points were discussed in it, in which the recommendation to pay compensation to the dependents of 10 persons who died due to drowning in Lohardaga district was unanimously approved. Similarly, approval was given to pay compensation to the dependents of four persons who died in a road



accident. Approval was given for compensation to 25 beneficiaries who suffered partial or complete house

damage due to heavy rains. Approval was given for compensation to the dependents of 02 persons and 10 ani-

mals who died due to lightning. Instructions were given for verification in the cases of payment to the

dependents of the fire. Apart from this, necessary discussion was held on the topic of forest and environment. Forest Divisional Officer Arvind Kumar, District Transport Officer cum Additional Collector Saurabh Prasad, DSP Headquarters Prameshwar Prasad, Civil Surgeon Dr. Rajmohan Khalkho, District Public Relations Officer Paltu Mahato, District Animal Husbandry Officer Dr. Anup Kumar, District Agriculture Officer Shiv Pujan Ram, Municipal Council were present in the meeting. Administrator Jaipal Singh, District Disaster Management Officer Vibhakar Kumar and others were present.

WOMAN COMMITS SUICIDE IN GOMIA

SURESH NIKHAR : BERMO

Twenty three-year-old Manisha Devi, wife of Sanjay Kisku, resident of Tulbul Kadal tola under Gomia police station area, committed suicide by hanging herself at home on Friday morning. As soon as information about the incident was received, Gomia police reached the spot and started an investigation. Police station in-charge Rajesh Ranjan said that Sanjay Kisku had filed a case of missing person of his wife. She was missing from home for the last 10-15 days. On Thursday night the police recovered her and handed him over to Sanjay Kisku. After this both husband and wife went home. According to the information, on Friday morning Sanjay had gone to call the people of the village asking for a Panchayat on the issue of his wife repeatedly running away from home. When he returned home, he saw that the door was locked from inside.

Cyclonic storm Michaung wanes, sudden drop in minimum temperatures expected

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

The impact of the cyclonic storm Michaung on Jharkhand has diminished, bringing about improved weather conditions across the state. The sun has made its appearance, signaling a positive shift in the atmospheric conditions. However, meteorological experts anticipate partly cloudy weather, particularly in the southern and central regions of Jharkhand over the next 24 hours. According to the forecast from the IMD's Met Centre, there is an expected abrupt fall in minimum temperatures starting tomorrow. The drop is anticipated to be around three degrees in most parts of the state over the next 72 hours. This change in temperature adds a new dynamic to the weather scenario in Jharkhand.

In the wake of the cyclonic storm, the circulation over south Chhattisgarh and its neighboring areas has now positioned itself over south Chhattisgarh and adjoining Vidarbha, extending up to 1.5 km above mean sea level.



Over the past 24 hours, the state witnessed light to moderate rainfall in most areas, with heavy rainfall reported at isolated places, including Jamshedpur. The highest recorded rainfall in this period was 75.4 mm at Kharsawan. Meteorological data reveals that Godda experienced the highest maximum temperature at 25.3°C, while

Ranchi recorded the lowest minimum temperature at 15.7°C. Reflecting on the improved weather conditions, a spokesperson from the meteorological department stated, "The dissipation of cyclonic impact has brought relief, allowing for a more stable atmospheric condition. We advise residents to stay updated with the latest forecasts as some

regions might experience partly cloudy conditions in the coming day."

The recent fluctuations in weather patterns underscore the importance of vigilance and preparedness, even as the immediate threat of the cyclonic storm diminishes. The state remains on alert, with meteorologists closely monitoring the evolving weather scenario.

"The dissipation of cyclonic impact has brought relief, allowing for a more stable atmospheric condition. We advise residents to stay updated with the latest forecasts as some regions might experience partly cloudy conditions in the coming day," said a Meteorological Department official.

This report reflects the current weather status in Jharkhand and emphasizes the need for ongoing weather monitoring and public awareness. Sunshine breaks through, but meteorologists predict partly cloudy conditions in southern and central Jharkhand for the next 24 hours. A sudden drop in minimum temperatures expected in the coming days.

XITE illuminates minds with session on fertility

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a transformative discourse, XITE College hosted the session "Fertility: Changing Perspective in the Present Era" on Friday, featuring Dr. Dorothy P. Ghosh, a seasoned fertility consultant with 15 years of expertise. The event, powered by Renew Fertility, aimed to educate and raise awareness on fertility-related matters.

XITE, a beacon of knowledge and innovation, unfolded a transformative chapter on December 8, 2023, through its enlightening session titled "Fertility: Changing Perspective in the Present Era." The stage was graced by the presence of Dr. Dorothy P. Ghosh, a distinguished fertility consultant known for her 15 years of invaluable experience in the field.

Facilitated by Renew Fertility, the event was conceived with the mission to bridge the information gap surrounding fertility and foster awareness on pertinent issues. The esteemed resource person, Dr. Dorothy P. Ghosh, shared profound insights that resonated with students, faculty, and attendees alike.

Prof. Sushmita Choudhury



Sen and Prof. Akinchan Xaxa added academic gravitas to the event, contributing to the depth and breadth of the discussion. The meticulous coordination of the session was masterfully handled by Ashish Singh, Head of Branding & Communication at XITE, with unwavering support from Vice Principal Fr. Dr. Mukti Clarence.

Beyond being an avenue for dispensing valuable information, the session cultivated a deeper understanding of fertility-related issues among the participants. Dr. Dorothy P. Ghosh's expertise shone a light on the complexities and

advancements in fertility treatments, leaving an indelible mark on the minds of those in attendance.

XITE, committed to shaping futures and igniting minds, extends heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Dorothy P. Ghosh for her expert contributions. Special appreciation is reserved for Renew Fertility for their instrumental role in making this insightful event a reality. This session aligns seamlessly with XITE's overarching mission of providing holistic education and empowering individuals with knowledge that transcends conventional boundaries.

Annual Athletics Meet held in PAS Bokaro



PNS : BOKARO

The 33rd Annual Sports Day at The Pentecostal Assembly School's Primary Wing emerged as a triumph of spirit, enthusiasm, and unwavering determination and this despite the inclement weather. Driven by the leadership of principal, Dr. Karuna Prasad, the event showcased the indomitable zeal of our young athletes, proving that no amount of rain could dampen their passion for sports. The day commenced with a burst of energy as all dignitaries

were welcomed on the stage. Torches were lit, and Junior house captains took their oath, setting the stage for an extraordinary display of athleticism.

Manoj Kumar, Principal of Kendriya Vidyalaya 1, graced the occasion. He delivered an inspiring speech, highlighting the significance of sports in shaping a student's character and fostering qualities of sportsmanship. Present on the occasion were Director Dr D . N Prasad, CAO, Rita Prasad. The resounding success of the day is to be attrib-

uted to the tireless efforts of Administrative Officer, Daniel Michael Prasad and Senior Sports Teacher, Biva Mishra. From the marshaled mass drill by Std 1-5 students to the vibrant formations of pre-primary students, the field was alive with energy. The ball drill, pom-pom drill, and stick drill by students of Std 3, 4, and 5 respectively showcased not just skill but the pure joy of participation. Colorful banners and flags adorned the venue, creating a lively atmosphere that added to the palpable excitement.

Thieves make futile bid to steal cash from JVG bank in Palamu

PNS : DALTONGANJ

Thieves made an abortive bid to steal cash from the Kundri branch of the Jharkhand Vananchal Gramin Bank under the Lesliganj police station limits.

The attempt to steal cash was made on the intervening night of December 6/7.

The thieves using a gas cutter broke open the main gate and then unlocked the shutter. Inside the branch the thieves mistook an almirah there to be the currency chest. The said almirah was broken open but there were documents and papers of the bank only.

Officer in charge of the Lesliganj police station Gautam Roy said the thieves could not lay their hands on any cash. The bank's cash remained safe and totally untaken.

The thieves did not leave behind any of them so as to press in the sniffer dog. An FIR was lodged with the Lesliganj police station on December 7.

CMPDI inks MoA with NBJK, Hazaribag



PNS : RANCHI

CMPDI signed an MoA with Nav Bharat Jagriti Kendra (NBJK), Hazaribag on Friday to provide "Mobile Eye Care Van" equipped with all necessary eye health equipment to NBJK for facilitating comprehensive primary eye care services primarily in remote villages of Ranchi, Ramgarh and Hazaribag district of Jharkhand and to make Jharkhand free of preventable blindness.

R.K. Mahapatra, General Manager (HRD/CSR) from CMPDI and Satish Girja, Secretary from NBJK signed the MoA in presence of CMPDI team and NBJK members. The cost of Mobile van equipped with health care equipment is Rs. 34.816 lakhs. This is the first of its kind of project being taken up by CMPDI for facilitating door-step eye care facilities to the people located in remote villages.

Mobile Eye Care Van will be used to provide Comprehensive eye care services at the doorstep in Rural areas of Ranchi, to organize free eye screening camps every year for providing free primary, preventive, diagnostic and referral eye health services at the doorstep of patients with refractive errors, cataract blindness and other eye diseases and to raise awareness in villages about eye health, common diseases, timely diagnosis and treatment to protect eyes in the target areas.

Cancer screening camp organized at CMPDI Dispensary

PNS : RANCHI

A cancer screening camp for Oral cancer, Breast cancer and Cervical cancer was organized at CMPDI(HQ) Dispensary, Ranchi for the employees, contractual workers and their dependents on 07.12.2023 by Ranchi Cancer Hospital and Research Centre, a unit of Tata Cancer Care Foundation. A total of 45 members were examined in this screening camp.

CM gifts schemes worth Rs 441.06 Crore in Godda

Distributes assets worth Rs 300.96 Cr among 181303 beneficiaries

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Minister Hemant Soren today said that the schemes currently being made by our government are prepared only after assessing the applications received through the program "Aapki Yojana-Aapki Sarkar-Aapke Dwar". The soul of Jharkhand resides in the villages. Unless the village is strong the state will not be strong. Our government is working seriously on how to strengthen the roots of Jharkhand, so that the coming generations can get its fruits. The CM was addressing the program "Aapki Yojana-Aapki Sarkar-Aapke Dwar" organized at Mundar Kothi Stadium in Godda district on Friday.

Soren said that through the program "Aapki Yojana-Aapki Sarkar-Aapke Dwar" the state government is reaching out to villages, panchayats and panchayats to give people their rights. "In the last two years, we received lakhs of applications through the camp. Many types of problems came up. A list was prepared in a phased manner for disposal of the applications received. The result was that, first of all, our government showed sympathy towards all the needy people including the elderly, dis-



Chief Minister Hemant Soren distributes assets among the beneficiaries in the program organized under the third phase of "Aapki Yojana - Aapki Sarkar - Aapke Dwar" in Godda on Friday. Ministers Alamgir Alam, Satyanand Bhokta and others are also seen in the picture. PNS

abled, widowed mothers and sisters of the state and implemented the Sarvajan Pension Yojana in the state," he said. The CM said that Jharkhand is the first state in the country to implement Sarvajan Pension Scheme. Bringing all the needy under the ambit of social security, the state government is providing pension from time to time. He said that the previous governments had forced all these needy sections to fall into the trap of brokers. Now eligible people coming under the ambit of social security do not have to visit different offices for pension. Now they

don't need to go to anyone. We have provided support to the elderly. A stick has been given in his hands. A backward state like Jharkhand is now giving a pension of Rs 1,000 to all eligible beneficiaries.

The CM said that Jharkhand has turned 23 years old. This state has now come into its youth. But the previous governments did not work to give direction to this state but kept hollowing it out. He said that it was the responsibility of the government employees and contract workers of the state to serve the public. The government gives



Chief Minister Hemant Soren distributes assets among the beneficiaries in the program organized under the third phase of "Aapki Yojana - Aapki Sarkar - Aapke Dwar" in Godda on Friday. Ministers Alamgir Alam, Satyanand Bhokta and others are also seen in the picture. PNS

money to employees to serve the public. But the previous government, the double engine government, employed those employees not to serve you, but to serve them. The result is that at present we are receiving lakhs of applications regarding problems in the camps.

The CM said that the Central Government had promised to provide housing to all the poor by 2022. The Central Government knows that the number of poor in this state is high. Our government has tried many times to coordinate with the Central Government to provide hous-

ing to the poor. But they ignored our request. But the state government on its own has set a target of providing housing to 8 lakh poor families. For this purpose, Abua Housing Scheme has been implemented. Under this scheme, furnished houses of three rooms will be given to the poor. If there is a requirement of more than 8 lakh houses then houses will be provided in a phased manner.

Soren said that now free coaching is being provided to the youth of all categories including ST/SC living in remote and hilly rural areas for the preparation of compet-



Chief Minister Hemant Soren waves to people during the "Aapki Yojana - Aapki Sarkar - Aapke Dwar" in Godda on Friday. PNS

itive exams so that they can also become officers and serve the state. The Chief Minister said that about 800 km of road is being constructed under Godda district. He said that I received information that quality is being compromised in road construction. The district administration should keep an eye on this. Blacklist malfunctioning sensors. Seeing the smile on your face, we have come and stood among you. We do not believe in false propaganda. We do what people say.

The CM said that 8 lakh girls of the state have been linked to the Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana. The obligation to provide benefits of the scheme to the

two daughters of the family has been abolished. All the daughters of the family will get the benefit of the scheme. Our government is determined to ensure that no girl is deprived of education. He said that the sports activity of the boys and girls of Godda district has increased. The state can create a distinct identity regarding sports. But seriousness was not shown regarding this for 20 years. Presently playgrounds are being constructed in every village. Now the government is also honoring the players who perform better.

Soren said that the villagers of the state will now be able to get the benefits of the Mukhyamantri Gram

Gaadi Yojana. Under this scheme, the state government will also provide financial assistance to the transporter. This scheme is going to be started soon, due to which the agitators, elderly people, women and students will be able to travel in the bus for free.

On the occasion, the Chief Minister gifted 217 schemes worth Rs 441.06 crore to the people of Godda. In this, 02 schemes worth Rs 6 crore 96 lakh were inaugurated and the foundation of 215 schemes worth Rs 133 crore 34 lakh was laid. The CM distributed assets worth about Rs 300 crore 96 lakh among 181303 beneficiaries of various schemes to make them empowered and self-reliant.

On this occasion, Minister Alamgir Alam, Minister Satyanand Bhokta, MP Vijay Hansda, Podaiyhat MLA Pradeep Yadav, Mahagama MLA Deepika Pandey Singh, District Council President Baby Devi, 20 Point Vice President Bindu Mandal, Secretary to the Chief Minister Vinay Kumar Choubey, Santhal Pargana Division Commissioner Lalchand Dadel and other officials including the Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police of the district were present.



Union Tribal Affairs Minister Arjun Munda holds a meeting with senior officials of the Ministry of Agriculture after taking additional charge of the Minister of Agriculture in New Delhi on Friday. PNS

Youth have huge responsibility in development of nation: Guv



Governor CP Radhakrishnan during the state level Youth Festival 2023 programme organized by Nehru Yuva Kendra at Aryabhata Auditorium of Ranchi University, Ranchi on Friday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

Addressing the state level Youth Festival 2023 program organized by Nehru Yuva Kendra Organization at Aryabhata Auditorium of Ranchi University, Ranchi on Friday, Governor CP Radhakrishnan said that this organization plays an important role in encouraging the youth to move forward and serve the society.

He said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for five resolutions for the next 25 years for the all-round development of the society. These five resolutions will always inspire people towards India becoming a 'developed nation' and the responsibility of the youth increases significantly in this direction. This type of program further strengthens the feeling of patriotism among the youth.

The Governor said that our country will be self-reliant and developed only when we will be self-reliant

and progress in various fields like agriculture, manufacturing, health care, sports etc. For this, all necessary facilities will have to be provided to the youth by setting targets. The youth will also have to make continuous efforts and move forward on the path of progress. He said that the Prime Minister is continuously working in this direction. People, especially mothers and sisters, have benefited greatly from the Ujjwala scheme and tap water scheme implemented by him. The construction of roads has made it easier for farmers' produce to reach the city. What is needed today is that the youth, while being proud of their heritage, will have to play an important role in character building as well as in taking the society forward with their abilities. If we all make efforts, Ranchi University can become a world class university. On this occasion, the oath of Panch Pran was taken by the crowd present.

No compromise on the rights of daughters: Soren

Godda DSWO suspended on the orders of Chief Minister

PNS : RANCHI

Following the order of Chief Minister Hemant Soren, District Social Welfare Officer, Godda Anisha Kujur was suspended with immediate effect. She is accused of not providing the benefits of the scheme to the beneficiary girls of Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana on time and of being negligent towards his responsibilities and being disobedient and indifference to the government instructions given earlier. Chief Minister Hemant Soren was interacting with the children and the beneficiaries who came to the camps organized in various Panchayats during the 'Aapki Yojana, Aapki Sarkar, Aapke Dwar' program organized at Pathargama in Godda. In this sequence, some beneficiary girls of Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana have complained to the Chief Minister that they are not getting the benefits of the said scheme. The Chief Minister took this very seriously and ordered the suspension of the District Social Welfare Officer with immediate effect. The Chief Minister said that there should be no compromise on the rights given to daughters. It is known that Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana is an important scheme of the state government, under which financial assistance is provided to the eligible adolescent girls of the state for empowerment, education, health, eradication of child marriage and making them capable of taking independent decisions.



Chief Minister Hemant Soren speaks to people in the program organized under the third phase of "Aapki Yojana - Aapki Sarkar - Aapke Dwar" in Godda on Friday. PNS

Helpline launched for pre and post matric scholarship issues

PNS : RANCHI

Now the students of Jharkhand will get relief from the problems related to pre and post matric scholarship. For easy resolution of scholarship related problems, the Office of the Tribal Welfare Commissioner of Jharkhand Government has started a scholarship helpline. Under this new system, three provisions have been made keeping in mind the convenience of the students. To solve their problems, students can contact toll free number 1800-599-1289 from 11 am to 4 pm. Apart from this, a WhatsApp number 9440256299 will remain operational 24 hours to register the problems of students through online form. Students can also send their problems on X (Twitter) account @TWC_Office_Jhar. Problems received through the above three means will be responded to/resolved within 48 hours. Under this new system, students can mention their scholarship application number, full name, academic year, mobile number, and district along with their problem for timely resolution of their problem.

CM congratulates tribal student for obtaining degree from London University

He was aided with Mang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda Scholarship Scheme



PNS : RANCHI

The dream seen by Chief Minister Hemant Soren of bringing before the world the talent of the hardworking and promising tribal, backward and minority children of the deprived and exploited society of Jharkhand is turning into reality today. The youth of Jharkhand are now proving their talent in foreign countries in the field of education.

A similar talent has been shown by Ajay Hembram, a resident of Bhatin village in Potka block of East Singhbhum. Ajay obtained his degree with distinction from the University of London. Ajay is happy. It is said that even though I studied for a degree, the credit for it goes to Chief Minister Hemant Soren and Minister



Champai Soren, who gave the opportunity to youth like us to shine on the global stage through the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda International Scholarship Scheme. Now we will try to create a better image of our society, state and country among the people here.

The Chief Minister posted on X to Ajay and said, Respected Baba Dishom Guruji says that when the youth of poor and deprived society get opportunities for education, then not only they, but their home, village and society also progress. May you always keep touching the heights of success with your hard work and dedication. The Chief Minister wished Ajay a bright future and congratulated him. The Chief Minister said that his brother has always stood with the

youth of Jharkhand and will always remain so.

It is known that under the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda Overseas Scholarship Scheme, till now 50 young men and women of the state have received, or are doing, higher education in various universities of Britain.

Among those who have completed their studies, some are working abroad and some are working in higher institutions in the country. These include students from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Backward and Minority categories. The state government is providing 100% scholarship to all of them. For the first time in the country, such a scholarship scheme has been implemented in Jharkhand under the guidance of the Chief Minister.

BJP links Rs 300 Cr recovered cash with JMM, Congress

Demands ED probe, arrest of Rajya Sabha MP Dhiraj Sahu

PNS : RANCHI

State BJP President and former Chief Minister Babul Marandi made a big attack on Chief Minister Hemant Soren and the Congress Party on Friday. Addressing a press conference at the state office, Marandi said that around Rs 300 crore cash recovered in the IT raids from various locations of Congress Rajya Sabha MP Dheeraj Sahu belongs to top Congress leader and Chief Minister Hemant Soren.

He said that its links are connected to Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. This money is from the hard-earned money of the poor and is related to liquor scam, the compiler of which is also from Jharkhand. There is a possibility that this money was kept to influence the election results.

He said that I suspect that after the ED raid in Jharkhand, there was discussion overnight about carrying money in ambulances towards Odisha, West Bengal and Bihar. This discussion is happening even today after the recovery of such a huge amount.

He said that even before this, crores of rupees had been recovered in the ED



BJP State President Babul Marandi along with others during a press conference in Ranchi on Friday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

action in Jharkhand. The state of corruption is such that gold was bought with looted money, buried in the ground and hidden. He said that as the investigation intensifies, all this will gradually come to light.

He said that Modi's guarantee is to extract every penny from those who looted the poor and hoarded their money. The looted money of Jharkhand will have to be returned to the public.

He said that an FIR should be registered against MP Dheeraj Sahu immediately and he should be arrested and he should be strictly interrogated.

He said that the Prime

Minister is committed to a corruption-free India. He said that the state BJP will not tolerate the looting of public money. The party will struggle continuously by raising this issue from the House to the streets.

Marandi said that there will be a protest and demonstration on December 10 against the corruption prevalent in Jharkhand, including the demand for the arrest of MP Dheeraj Sahu in all the districts.

State General Secretary Dr. Pradeep Verma, State Media In-charge Shivpujan Pathak and Spokesperson Pratul Shahdev were also present in today's press conference.

Special camps for employees of essential services

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Electoral Officer K Ravi Kumar chaired a meeting with officials of departments related to essential services in his office auditorium as per a pre-planned program. In the meeting Kumar said that the Election Commission is working with the aim of achieving the goal that not a single voter should be left out. In order to ensure that officials and personnel working in essential services like Railways, Health, Fire, Electricity Corporation, Media etc are not deprived of their right to vote during the elections, the Election Commission has not only organized a one-day special in these institutions.

By setting up a camp, any kind of problem related to voter ID cards of all the

employees will be solved, along with this, arrangements for postal ballots will be made for those voters who are not able to be at the booth on the day of polling due to being connected with essential services. In the meeting, Deputy Election Officer (Headquarters) Sanjay Kumar, Junior Election Officer Sunil Kumar Singh, Deputy Director of Health Services Dr. Anil Kumar, Fire Commissioner Amit Kumar Singh, General Manager of JVN Sunil Kumar, AGM of BSNL R.R. Tiwari and B Singh, ADRA's APO Gautam Kumar, Diwakar Kumar from Doordarshan, Field Publicity Officer of PIB Mahvish Rehman and Shilpi from All India Radio and officials and personnel of the Chief Electoral Office were present.



Aditya Anand's 3rd Original release on Dec 10



Singer, Composer and Music producer Aditya Anand from Ratu Rodo, Ranchi is coming up with his 3rd original composition 'Dil Tera Ho Chala' which will be released through the legendary music composer Salim Sulaiman's music label Merchant Records on the 10th of December 2023. It's a groovy, feel good romantic song to dance & chill. The songs 'Wild' and 'Rutho Na' have been his previous releases with Merchant Records this year. The upcoming song has been sung, composed and produced by Aditya. Juhee Bhandarkar from Mumbai is the co-singer and the lyricist of the song. The song will be available on all audio platforms including a music video on Salim Sulaiman's youtube channel.

India looking to take giant leap in AI to empower citizens: Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said India is looking to take a giant leap in Artificial Intelligence(AI) to empower its citizens and asserted that it will not be an exaggeration to say the country achieved in a few years with technology what took others a generation.

In a LinkedIn post inviting people to the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence Summit 2023, which he described as a fascinating programme celebrating strides in AI and innovation, the prime minister said India is poised to be an active contrib-

utor to the evolution of AI as the world leaps into a not-so-distant future. The Prime Minister will inaugurate the two-day summit here starting December 12.

India is one of the youngest nations with a vibrant start-up ecosystem and a talented workforce, he said, adding that it offers solutions that are scalable, secure, affordable, sustainable, and replicable on a global scale. India's Digital Public Infrastructure initiative is a prime example of such pioneering efforts, Modi said.

"In the last nine to 10 years, India and its citizens have leapfrogged with the help of technology. It won't be an exaggeration to say that India

achieved, in a matter of few years, what took other countries a generation," he said. This was possible through the fast-paced penetration of mobiles along with internet connectivity and scalable models for digital inclusion, Modi added. "Similarly, in the field of AI, India is looking to take a giant leap to empower its citizens. Be it serving citizens in their language or making education easier and personalised." The prime minister spoke about the goals of making healthcare more accessible and making agriculture more informed and added that India is using AI for various productive purposes.

The world today is witnessing



that when India grows, it does so to ensure an equitable and inclusive model of growth, Modi said.

"When India innovates, it does so to ensure that no one is left

behind. When India leads, it does so to ensure that it can take everyone along towards the goal of the greater good," he said.

With the same spirit in the

realm of AI, India's approach has been to enable a universal understanding and a conducive environment, steering the use of AI towards the betterment of humanity, Modi added.

Noting that the world is living in a very interesting time, Modi said decades of fast-paced innovation and the power of human endeavour have brought to life what was once considered to be only in the realm of imagination.

In this whirlwind of rapid advancement, AI is one area where its applications are expanding at an exponential rate, he said, adding this revolutionary technology is now in the hands of a new generation -- young and brilliant minds

who are swiftly enriching its vast potential.

The prime minister said forums such as the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), of which India is a co-founder, are crucial. The GPAI brings along 28 member nations and the EU as its members to guide the responsible development and use of AI.

Since its inception in June 2020, India has made significant contributions to GPAI, actively engaging in various initiatives to foster the development, deployment, and adoption of open, safe, secure, and accountable artificial intelligence, the prime minister said.

"India's election to this Council

in November 2022 reflects its dedication to Safe and Trusted AI. As the Lead Chair of the GPAI, India reaffirms its commitment to harnessing technology, particularly AI, for the welfare of people, ensuring that nations of the Global South are not the last to reap its benefits," he said.

Asserting that India is dedicated to clearing the path for a regulatory framework that ensures safe and trusted AI, Modi said it will bring all nations together for widespread and enduring implementation.

The summit will have many interesting sessions, including the AI Expo, which will have 150 startups showcasing their strengths, he added.

Goyal, Vaishnav seek action against Rajya Sabha members making false charges in garb of questions

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Leader of House in the Rajya Sabha Piyush Goyal and Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav on Friday demanded that Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar take action against members who make false allegations and sensationalise issues without basis in the garb of asking questions.

Goyal termed it as "shoot and scoot."

The two ruling party members were reacting to what they called false allegations by opposition members Saket Gokhale(TMC)and John Brittas(CPM)on two different matters raised during the question hour.

Gokhale had sought to know the reasons for many states rejecting dal (pulses) and other grains supplied under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). Brittas said elderly passengers were facing difficulties due to the "discontinuation" of concessions for senior citizens by the railways. He also said "there is a premium tatkal which has been brought in to fleece the passengers" and that sleeper and general compartments have been replaced with AC coaches, and asked if the railway minister "will review his stand?"

In response, Vaishnav said, "The honourable member could not ask a question. He has made some comments, which are very misleading



comments and I fully, fully refute all the points that he has made."

The minister further said if Brittas had any specific matter related to the particular question being discussed, he was most welcome to come forward and discuss.

Immediately, Goyal stood up and said, "This is the second instance in one day that a member shoots and scoots. First I had the case of dal and now we have the case (pointing to Vaishnav)...I want a ruling on what will happen to a member who makes false allegations or just sensationalises an issue to draw your attention to something which is not factual. If found so what action will be taken against such a member?"

Vaishnav also chipped in, saying "this is a matter of great importance. If any honourable member in the garb of asking the question is plainly making allegations which are baseless, absolutely false, have absolutely no direction then what should be the treatment, what should be the punishment to that particular honourable

member?"

In response, Dhankhar said, "Let me take the House into confidence. I will look into all aspects."

Earlier during the question hour, Gokhale said a lot of states, especially during COVID-19 and even after that, have rejected dal and other grains supplied under the PMGKAY.

"I would like to ask the minister what were the reasons for states rejecting foodgrains that have come under this yojana and what steps have been taken to ensure that high-quality food is now being supplied to different states under the scheme," he asked.

When minister of state of the department concerned was about to respond, Goyal, who is also the Cabinet Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, intervened and said, "I don't think there is any incident of rejection of dal because we don't supply dal under PMGKAY. There is no such incident that is reported to us."

He further said, "The states have rejected the foodgrains. In fact most states, they themselves are procuring the foodgrains and distributing it in their states. I think the honourable member may kindly place some specific incident where there is a rejection of dal or whatever foodgrain he is claiming to have been rejected." If at all there is any misdemeanour at the fair price shop level, certainly the state gov-

ernments should investigate that, Goyal said while asserting that "no incident of FCI sending any material which has got rejected is currently available with us. If he gives us some specific details we can respond to it".

The chairman then asked Gokhale to share with the Leader of the House if there is an instance. In response, Gokhale said, "Tamil Nadu is one example. What had happened was after the foodgrains were rejected, they went to NAFED, they instituted a committee and NAFED thereafter changed the procurement process wherein out of 100 per cent that is given by millers, 70 per cent is taken and the OTR (out-turn ratio) lower limit was removed."

He further said, "...I would request the honourable Leader of the House to kindly let the minister whose jurisdiction it is to respond because he does not seem to be aware of the fact."

To this, Goyal said, "I strongly rebut what has been said by the honourable member... I would like him to place that on record on the table of the House since he has made a very grave allegation against a very reputed organisation." Dhankhar responded by saying the "member (Gokhale) has put in a firm perspective and assertion which has been disputed by the Leader of the House. The honourable member may put it on the table of the House. We will examine it."

Golden future awaits Indian youths, says Shah



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday said a golden future awaits the country's youths as corruption, nepotism and casteism have been replaced by growth and development in the last 10 years.

Speaking at the inauguration of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad's (ABVP) national conference at Burari here, he said education is not just for shaping careers but also for nation building.

A golden future awaits the country's youths. In the last 10 years, great changes have taken place in the country with corruption, nepotism

and casteism replaced by growth and development, Shah said.

Youth power is the backbone of the country and drives its growth and development, he said.

"India's time has come and the whole world looks up to it for solutions to various problems," he added.

Conserving cultural heritage and development are not contradictory. No one believed the Ram temple could be constructed in Ayodhya, the minister said.

Lauding the ABVP, Shah said it has not only struggled against imperfections of the education system but also helped in character building of students.

Time of post lunch session of Rajya Sabha changed

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar on Friday said the time of the post-lunch session of the House has been changed to 2 pm from 2.30 pm on Fridays earlier in line with the Lok Sabha schedule.

He made this assertion after T Siva(DMK)in the morning session of the house pointed out the change of time printed on the business schedule of the day and wanted to know the reason.

"The convention is that on Friday the afternoon session convenes at 2.30 pm. But today in the revised list of business, we have received it as 2 pm. When such a decision was arrived at, the members were not aware. We would like to know why there was such a change," Siva remarked.

To this, the chairman said the time was changed by him during the last session itself as the afternoon session in the Lok Sabha starts at 2 pm.

"This is not being done for today. This has already been done earlier by me. And the reason was given. Lok Sabha sits at 2 pm. Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha being integral parts of Parliament need to adhere to the same time to the extent possible. Therefore it



was 2 pm on earlier occasion as directed by me. So this is not a beginning today," Dhankhar said.

Meanwhile, another DMK member M.M Abdullah stood up and pointed out that the 2.30 pm time for post-lunch session was kept so that Muslim members could offer prayers on Friday.

Responding to his statement, Dhankhar said, "Both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha have members drawn from all sections of the society. Lok Sabha sits at 2 pm. There are members from every segment. Consciously, after due deliberation, I had effected it, indicated to the House and this was already in place in the last session."

The chairman reiterated that the Rajya Sabha will meet after lunch at 2 pm, being in line with the time frame indicated by the Lok Sabha.

6 crore hospital admissions authorised under AB PM-JAY till November 30: Mandaviya

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Approximately six crore hospital admissions entailing an expenditure of Rs 77,298 crore have been authorised under the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana till November 30, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya told Lok Sabha on Friday.

As of December 2, a total of 26,774 hospitals, including 11,733 private facilities, across the country have been empanelled to provide healthcare services to the scheme beneficiaries, he said, adding that 4.98 crore claims have been submitted between financial years 2020-21 and 2023-24 as of November 30.

The AB PM-JAY is the largest publicly funded health assurance scheme in the world which aims to provide health cover of Rs 5 lakh per family yearly for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization to 12 crore families, the Union health minister said.

He said AB PM-JAY provides health cover to families which constitute the bottom 40 per cent of the population. The budget allocated for Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY for the financial year 2023-24 is Rs 7,200 crore, he said.

"With respect to utilization, it may kindly be noted that as of November 30, 2023, approximately, six crore hospital admissions worth Rs 77,298 crore have been authorised under the scheme," he said.

The AB PM-JAY scheme is completely cashless and paperless and without the concept of reimbursement. Beneficiaries can avail treat-

ment under defined packages.

The Empanelled Healthcare Providers are paid based on specified health benefit packages with standardised rates. As per the latest health benefit packages (2022), a total of 1,949 procedures across 27 specialties are available for AB PM-JAY beneficiaries. Further, states and Union Territories have been given the flexibility to add state-specific packages over and above the national master.

Also, they have been provided flexibility to change the cost of the package as per local requirements. The scheme provides treatment corresponding to a total of 1,949 procedures under 27 different specialties, including diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart ailments.

Leprosy as a package is not included under PM-JAY. However, 26 procedures related to skin diseases and 549 procedures related to cancer are covered under AB PM-JAY.

"Further, to ensure that AB PM-JAY beneficiaries are not denied care for treatments/procedures that do not feature in the health benefit packages, one unspecified package has been included in it to avail treatment for such procedures under the scheme. "Approximately 34.92 lakh hospital admissions worth Rs 6,537 crore and 1.68 lakh hospital admissions worth Rs 254 crore have been authorized as of December 2, 2023, under Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY for cancer-related treatment and skin-related treatment respectively," Mandaviya stated.

Indian Navy facing shortage of 10,896 personnel: Defence Ministry



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Indian Navy is facing a shortage of 10,896 personnel including 1,777 officers, according to details provided by the defence ministry in Parliament on Friday.

Responding to a question in Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Defence Ajay Bhatt also said 9,119 posts of sailors are lying vacant in the Navy as on October 31. He said the shortage in the officer-rank is 1,777.

The sanctioned strength of officers and sailors in the Navy is 11,979 and 76,649. Bhatt said a total of 323 officers were recruited in 2021 while the number in 2022 was 386. In 2021, 5,547 sailors were inducted into the Navy. The number in 2022 was 5,171, he added.

To a separate question, he said a technology development fund to provide financial assistance to Indian industries, startups as well as academic and scientific institutions for the development of defence and dual use technologies. The fund is also aimed at engaging the private industries especially MSMEs and startups to bring in the culture of design and development of military technology and support them with grant in aid, Bhatt said in his written reply.

'2.63 crore kids received measles vaccine between April 2022 and March 2023'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

More than 2.63 crore children across the country received the first dose of measles-containing vaccine (MCV) between April 2022 and March 2023, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya told the Lok Sabha on Friday.

Mandaviya was responding to a question on whether an estimated 11 lakh children in India missed their first measles vaccine dose in 2022, as stated in a report by the World Health Organisation and the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

"While the World Health Organisation (WHO) publishes various reports on Immunisation, under Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP), data regarding Measles Containing



Vaccines (MCV) administered free of cost to all eligible children is captured in the Health Management Information System (HMIS).

"As per HMIS, a total of 2,63,63,270 children received 1st dose of MCV throughout the country against the estimated target of 2,63,84,580 children in the period between April 2022 to March 2023," Mandaviya said.

Listing steps taken by the government in coordination with the states and union territories to ensure that all eligible children receive missed or due doses of vaccines, including MCV, Mandaviya said that special catch up campaigns of Intensified Mission Indradhanush (IMI) are carried out in areas of low immunisation coverage to vaccinate all unvaccinated or par-

tially vaccinated children.

Also, IMI 3.0 and IMI 4.0 were carried out in select districts with low immunisation coverage whereas IMI 5.0 was carried out in all districts of the country. In IMI 5.0, the age for administration of missed doses of MCV was increased from 2 years to 5 years.

Additionally, states and union territories have conducted Outbreak Response Immunisation (ORI) and Supplementary Immunisation Activities (SIA) to increase the coverage of MCV, Mandaviya stated.

Mandaviya's junior Minister of State for Health SP Baghel in a written reply in the Lower House said that investigations into the reported data breach on the CoWIN portal have ascertained that there was no bulk data download from its beneficiary database.

The CoWIN portal of the Union health ministry already

has adequate security measures and safeguards for data privacy with Web Application Firewall (WAF), Anti-DDoS and SSL/TLS (regular vulnerability assessment) identity and access management, the minister said.

The CoWIN portal is the repository of all data of people who have been vaccinated against COVID-19. "There were media reports of apparent breach of CoWIN data of beneficiaries who have received Covid vaccination in the country. The matter was investigated and analysed by CERT-IN under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and it was ascertained that there was no bulk data download from Co-WIN beneficiary database," Baghel said. In view of media reports on CoWIN data breach, additional steps have been taken to strengthen data safety on the portal, he said.

Army conducts table top exercise for women officers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In a landmark initiative to promote gender inclusivity and enhancing the capabilities of women military personnel in peacekeeping operations, the Indian Army conducted a Table-Top Exercise (TTX) for the Women Officers of Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at Manekshaw Centre here from December four to December 8.

The Exercise is part of ongoing efforts of Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK) to strengthen international cooperation and capacity-building in peacekeeping missions, with special focus on empowering



women in the field, defence ministry said here on Friday.

The CUNPK is a premier institution of the Indian Army to impart training in peacekeeping operations. It had earlier conducted ASEAN Women Military Officers Course from 18th to 29th September 2023.

This TTX is a follow up exercise of ongoing joint military training between India and ASEAN member states. The Exercise

underscores India's shared commitment to the world peace, stability, and gender equality.

This Exercise served as a platform for participants to simulate and strategise responses to complex peacekeeping scenarios, reflecting real-world challenges. It also included exposure to complex operational peacekeeping environment and methods to ensure women peace and security.

The engagement also included a heritage tour of Delhi to showcase the rich & vibrant culture of India. The program also included lecture and demonstration on UN peacekeeping drills besides display of "Made in India" equipment being deployed in various UN Missions.

Defence Ministry signs contract worth ₹588.68 crore

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In alignment with the government's strategic vision for Digital Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence on Friday here signed a contract with Telecommunications Consultants India Limited (TCIL)at a total cost of Rs 588.68 crore, for the acquisition of Digital Coast Guard (DCG) project, under the Buy (Indian) category.

A pivotal Initiative for the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), the DCG Project will unfold a comprehensive narrative of

technological progression, encompassing the construction of an advanced Data Centre, the establishment of a robust Disaster Recovery Data Centre, amplification of connectivity across ICG sites, and the development of the ERP system, officials said.

The project also leverages secured MPLS/VSAT connectivity, propelling itself to the forefront of cutting-edge defence technology. At its core, the DCG project marks the establishment of a Tier-III standard Data Centre, with the latest technological capabilities.

Modi for more weddings in India

PTI ■ DEHRADUN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said India needs a movement like ‘Wed in India’ on the lines of ‘Made in India’ and asked affluent industrialists to hold at least one destination wedding in their families each year in Uttarakhand saying it will help the hill state emerge as a wedding destination.

Addressing the inaugural session of the Uttarakhand Global Investors Summit at the FRI here, he said it has become fashionable among millionaire and billionaire business families to go abroad for destination weddings.

Modi had given a similar call during his last Mann Ki Baat programme to affluent business families to hold destination weddings in the country instead of going abroad.

“There is an old saying that marriages are made in heaven. But then why are young couples going abroad for their



wedding instead of coming to the land of gods (Devbhoomi). My prescription to the young and rich couples is that there should be a movement like ‘Wed in India’ on the lines of ‘Made in India,’ he said.

“Wed in India,” Modi said, adding if the practice of hold-

ing destination weddings in Uttarakhand begins and continues for five years it will emerge as an international wedding destination.

“If rich business families start holding their family marriages in Uttarakhand once a year for the next five years and even if

5,000 marriages start taking place here in a year, a suitable infrastructure will grow and it will emerge as a major wedding destination,” he said.

“India has great power. If you decide collectively and make a beginning, anything can happen,” he said.

IREF nominated to export 20 tonnes rice to earthquake hit Nepal



PIONEER NEWS ■ SERVICE NEW DELHI

Dr Prem Garg, president of Indian Rice Exporters Federation (IREF) has welcomed Government's decision of one-time exemption allowing the export of 20 tonnes of non-basmati rice to Nepal which is currently grappling with the aftermath of a devastating earthquake.

This exemption is not just a gesture of support but a testament to the humanitarian val-

ues we uphold as a nation and as an organization. The timely aid will play a crucial role in providing relief to those affected by this natural calamity.

IREF is committed to ensuring the prompt and efficient delivery of this essential aid. This initiative will undoubtedly strengthen the bonds of friendship and cooperation between India and Nepal.

In a letter DGFT the federation has said We are grateful for the trust placed in our Federation and for the opportunity to serve in this noble cause.

Mizoram Government will give top priority anti-corruption measures: CM

PTI ■ AIZAWL

Newly sworn-in Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Friday said the state government will give top priority to farmers and anti-corruption measures.

Addressing a press conference soon after the swearing-in ceremony here, the 73-year-old leader announced 12 priority programmes of his government to be implemented in the next 100 days.

“Our Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) government will buy four local products from farmers such as ginger, turmeric, chilli and broomsticks by fixing minimum prices. Farmers will have the choice to sell their products on their own or to the government. This is our topmost priority,” he said.

The former IPS officer-turned-politician said his government will also accord priority to anti-corruption measures and will invite the CBI to probe graft cases in the state.

“The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) will be given general consent to probe corruption cases in the state.



The government will also assess whether the state's Lokayukta needs to be strengthened and upgraded,” he said.

He urged his cabinet colleagues, MLAs and their relatives, party workers, NGOs and people in general to support the government to make the state corruption-free.

Among the 12 priorities, Lalduhoma said his government will form a monitoring committee to keep tabs on all development projects across the state.

The committee will have a representative each from recognised political parties, NGOs, Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (conglomerate of major churches) and Mizoram

Protests held in parts of Maharashtra against Priyank over Savarkar remarks

PTI ■ NAGPUR

The BJP and its youth wing on Friday held protests in parts of Maharashtra, including Mumbai and Nagpur, to condemn Karnataka minister Priyank Kharge's remarks against Hindutva ideologue V D Savarkar.

Kharge, a Congress leader, on Thursday said it would be appropriate to remove the portrait of Savarkar from the chamber of the Karnataka assembly, and if allowed, he would remove it.

“Who gave the title Veer to Veer Savarkar? There is no clarity on it. If they (BJP) know, let them tell. Whether Savarkar was taking pension from the British or not? Did he write an apology letter (to the British) five to six times or not? Did his family write the apology letter or not,” he asked.

Condemning his remarks, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)



legislators in Maharashtra staged a protest outside the Vidhan Bhavan, the state legislature complex in Nagpur, where the winter session of the legislature is currently underway.

Several BJP MLAs gathered on the steps of the legislature complex, raised slogans condemning the Karnataka minister's comment and demand-

ed responses from Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray on the issue.

In Mumbai, the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), the BJP's youth wing, held a demonstration against Kharge at Dadar in central Mumbai. In neighbouring Thane, a protest was held outside the collector office.

In Nashik, the BJYM activists took out a symbolic funeral procession in the Red Cross signal area to denounce Kharge's remarks against Savarkar. “Everyone knows Congress' hatred towards Savarkar.

Uddhav Thackeray and Sanjay Raut should clear their stand about the Congress which consistently makes controversial statements against Savarkar. Hindutva as per their convenience and double standards about Congress, which hates Savarkar, is the real face of Thackeray's lust for power,” BJYM's Nashik city unit president Sagor Shelar said during the protest.

The BJYM activists warned the Congress leaders to stop making objectionable statements against Savarkar and said those supporting such people should be alert or else they will have to face their wrath.

Tiranga my identity, Hindustan my country: Kashmiri rappers set internet on fire with rap song

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

Two rappers from Kashmir have taken the musical route to highlight the “transformation” of the valley following the abrogation of Article 370 that provided special status to Jammu and Kashmir.

The video of the rap song “Badalta Kashmir” has become a hit on social media, garnering over two million views.

The over three-minute-long song is by the rappers Raasiq Sheikh (MC Raa) and Humaira (8MR). It was released on Youtube on December 3.

Those who have shared the song include Corps Commander of the Srinagar-based 15 or Chinara Corps, Lt Gen Rajiv Ghai.

“Good to see this... The young here are remarkably talented and music has always resonated in Kashmir... Power to the youth,” Ghai said in a post on X.

The track highlights the positive transformation in Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019. The song also talks about religious inclu-



siveness and freedom of girls to wear the clothes they like. It also references tourist seasons, the Amarnath yatra, Srinagar Smart City and Digital revolution.

The youngsters sing about how people in the valley were proud to be Indian. “Tiranga is in my heart, it is my identity, Hindustan is my country,” the lyrics read. The idea of the song, Sheikh said, came after observing the changed situation and development in the valley.

“Every hip-hop artist observes things minutely. I saw the transformation in Kashmir like smart-city, G20, and other developments, and that was my inspiration. I wanted to vent my feelings,” Sheikh, a resident of south Kashmir's Shopian, told PTI.

Expelled JD(S) Karnataka president to conduct party's national convention

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Expelled JD(S) Karnataka Estate president C M Ibrahim is gearing up for a major showdown against JD(S) supremo H D Deve Gowda and his family by organising party's national convention in Bengaluru on December 11.

In his capacity as the 'state president', the 75-year-old leader has convened a national level meeting in Bengaluru. He claimed that the party members and leaders from across the country will participate.

“We are organising a national level meeting where we will provide accommodation. State presidents from Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala leaders, Rajasthan and all over the country are coming here,” the former Civil Aviation Minister told reporters here.



According to Ibrahim, the agenda is 'Stand for Secularism'. Ibrahim who was expelled for rebelling against the party leadership for forging an alliance with the BJP for the Lok Sabha election, said, “I am an elected man. They can't remove me. My father has not appointed me as a president. I have been

elected by the voters of the Janata Dal (Secular) leaders.” The convention is aimed at aligning the party with the INDIA bloc instead of BJP led NDA. He also said he is in touch with like-minded people such as Akhilesh Yadav, Nitish Kumar, RJD leaders, K Chandrashekar Rao of BRS,

M K Stalin and Pinarayi Vijayan.

Noting that Congress MP Rahul Gandhi is contemplating contesting in the Lok Sabha election from Karnataka, he welcomed the decision. He added that 'his party' will back him.

“Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi had contested from Karnataka and now her grandson will be contesting from here. We will welcome him here. Let him choose whichever constituency he wants. We will support him,” Ibrahim said.

The expelled JD(S) leader alleged that the BJP won in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh due to EVM hacking. Ibrahim demanded that the Election Commission of India conduct elections using ballot papers.

Madhubani private varsity looks to check flight of students from Bihar

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI/PATNA

Amidst the mushrooming private universities across the country and footfall of students from across the States including Bihar increasing every academic session, a state of the art university in the heart of Mithila region in Bihar now aims to 'contain' the students within the educationally rich State.

Over the years students of Bihar have been 'migrating' to other states for higher and technical education causing loss to Bihar exchequer and also denting the progress of land of Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramshila as the students who turn professionals seldom do get back to their parent State.

Understanding the importance of technical education renowned personality of Mithila region Dr. Sandeep

Jha established the Bihar's first state-of-the-art private university in Madhubani district of Bihar in the years 2017.

Although, there are many private universities in other states of India where students from Bihar are obtaining degrees in technical education; yet in a state like Bihar, the need for this was being felt for a long time,” said Jha, who is founder Chairman of the Sandeep University.

Within five years of its inception the graduates of this university are now on the rolls of MNCs at India and abroad.

Well known companies like TCS, Amazon, Cognizant, Asian Paints, Godrej and others organise campus placement drives and offers constructive opportunity to job aspirants every year.

He said country aims to establish its own identity in the

world by becoming a centre of innovation, entrepreneurship and economic development in near future.

“To achieve this goal, the most important requirement is to create a large pool of professionals through technical education who can meet the huge need of skilled quality professionals in various sectors of the Indian economy, including manufacturing and infrastructure,” added Jha.

He mentioned that the university is approved by UGC and AICTE as well bringing a larger academic interest within the state.

Establishing this university in the heart of Mithila has a fantastic impact on the educational landscape by creating an atmosphere for innovative teaching techniques, a curriculum to nurture bright minds of Bihar. State of the art facilities and updated labora-

tories contribute to the all round development of students promising highly qualified professionals. By nurturing the talents and aspirations of young students, the university plays important role in empowering local population of the state.

By introducing latest technologies and methods of teaching, the university is trying its best to connect students with professionals for job opportunities. As per the latest brochure placement ratio of the university is remarkable with cent percent assistance in Management and Engineering courses in recent years.

“Young minds and their parents often consider placement facility as one of the crucial aspects in the selection of the academic institutions and this aspect gives us edge over other universities.

Himanta stresses on region-specific urban planning policies

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday stressed on the need to formulate region-specific policies for urban planning, especially for the Northeast due to its peculiar topography and geographical constraints.

Delivering the inaugural address at the 'North East States Conclave on Urban Planning' here, he highlighted the importance his government has put on urbanisation, particularly in Guwahati.

Sarma called upon policymakers to take into consid-

eration the peculiar topography and geographical constraints of the Northeastern states while formulating urban planning and development policies.

He emphasised the need to depart from the often-practiced “one size fits all” philosophy while formulating policies as what is workable in one region may not provide fruitful results in another.

He expressed hope that while formulating national policies, policymakers would consider drawing “regional and sub-regional policies” too.



The chief minister said Guwahati has the potential to transform itself into the 'Gateway to South-East Asia', and necessary works and planning in this regard have

been undertaken at a massive scale for the last couple of years.

He said urban planning in Guwahati required crossing numerous barriers as there is

very little scope for expansion of the city's geographical expanse owing to natural barriers such as rivers, hills, reserve forests and water bodies.

Sarma also referred to the state government's tie-up with Singaporean consultancy firm Surbana Jurong for the development of the city.

Delegates from the Northeastern states, chairman of the High-Level Committee of the Union Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry Keshav Verma and Urban Planning expert PSN Rao were among those present at the programme, an official statement said.

HC reserves judgment in Gyanvapi mosque case

PTI ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Allahabad High Court reserved its judgment on Friday in a petition challenging the maintainability of a suit seeking “restoration” of a temple at the site of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi.

Justice Rohit Ranjan Agrawal reserved the judgment after hearing the counsel for the parties.

The future date in the case would be decided by the court.

The Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee of Varanasi as well as the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board have challenged the maintainability of the original suit

filed in the matter in 1991 in the Varanasi district court.

The suit seeks restoration of an ancient temple at the site where the Gyanvapi mosque currently stands. It has been claimed in the suit that the mosque was a part of the temple.

By an order dated August 28, the then Chief Justice Pratikrit Diwakar had transferred the case from Justice Prakash Padia to himself, saying the “single judge continued with the hearing of these cases for more than two years, even though he had no jurisdiction in the matter as per the roster.”

He had further said the decision to withdraw the case

from the single-judge bench to the chief justice's court was taken on the administrative side in the interest of judicial propriety, judicial discipline and transparency in the listing of cases.

Justice Diwakar retired on November 22 and after his retirement, the case was listed before Justice Agrawal.

The counsel for the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee, S F A Naqvi, said the petition also challenges a Varanasi court direction to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct a comprehensive survey of the Gyanvapi mosque. The order was passed on April 8, 2021.

FIRST COLUMN

OVERCOME MENTAL APARTHEID

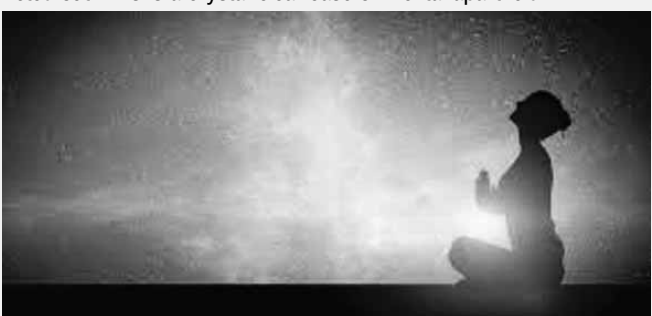


RAVI VALLURI

The human mind is cannonaded with innumerable thoughts. It is estimated that around sixty thousand thoughts arise in our mind, on any given day. When the human mind is not at rest or lacks peace, this acts as an obstruction in the pursuit of spiritual growth.

The Banana Swing bowler
Accuracy and rigour were the forte of the master swing bowler John Kenneth Lever. This ubiquitous workhorse for Essex had the uncanny ability to prodigiously bring the ball into the right-handed batsman (universally termed the Banana Swing) with quotidian ability.

The infamous Vaseline incident
However, in 1976, this consummate fast bowler was charged with applying Vaseline on the red cherry to produce English-like conditions at the arid Feroze Shah Kotla grounds in Delhi. It was perhaps the first recorded incident of ball doctoring. The then Indian captain Bishan Singh Bedi vehemently opposed this blatantly unethical method deployed but Lever was acquitted of the charges. One can safely argue that had bowlers from subcontinental countries resorted to such unethical tactics against teams like England, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand (SENA teams) it is quite likely that deservedly rasping punishment would have been meted out. This is a crystal-clear case of mental apartheid.



Monetary figures from international economics
It will be noteworthy to peruse the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures of two Asian giants, India and China as calculated by Professor Angus Maddison, Emeritus Professor at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. The figures are quite revivifying and inspiring. India's share of world GDP was slightly more than a quarter of the total in the year 1000 AD, and just a little less than a quarter between the years 1500 AD and 1700 AD.

Reclaiming a piece of the pie: It is indeed revealing that the Oriental world, in particular, India and China had acquired a significant world share of wealth and economy. Thus, several European trading companies, following the doctrine of Gold, Glory, and God – adopted overt and covert methods to target these gargantuan economies. Over time they successfully subjugated and enslaved these economies. Meanwhile, India's share of world GDP dropped to an insignificant 3.65%. How did things come to such a state? The vastly superior Indian culture reached a plateau.

Yogic power and spirituality: our salvation: However, many Indians themselves condemn and denigrate it, no matter how much the people disparage it, yet it is the Yogic power (Shakti), techniques of meditation and our spirituality which has again catapulted India to the status of prima donna and helped the country scale exalted heights. The contribution of Maharishi Patanjali, our Vedic literature, the splendidous epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana, various philosophical schools and the contribution of Jainism, Buddhism and subsequently of Islam and Sikhism had all made India the hub and cradle of mental invigoration and wondrous contribution. It is indeed the very same mental invigoration that led to the discovery of the concept of zero or even the existence of galaxies in the universe. We were then not victims of mental apartheid.

Way out: Today the world has become a yoga mat. Indians must strive beyond Hatha Yoga repose faith from within and work on certain cardinal principles that have stood the test of time. These are to lead a regulated life and endorse the belief that life is something sacred and precious, acquire spiritual wealth and understand the universal law of attraction. It is only then that we can unshackle mental apartheid.

(The writer is CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd and is a faculty at Art of Living. Views are personal)

SC should declare poll freebies a corrupt practice



UTTAM GUPTA

When a candidate uses his money to bribe the voter, it is treated as corrupt practice, but when his party bribes voters using ‘public money’ it is not treated the same way

Taking a cue from the practice of mesmerizing voters with freebies - an acronym for “something is given free of charge” - started by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the February 2020 Delhi elections, early this year, in Karnataka elections, the grand old party (GOP) gave five guarantees (a more respectable nomenclature for freebies) on a grand scale. These delivered the intended result.

In the just concluded elections in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Telangana, the guarantees have occupied the centre stage in the manifestos of all parties expanding their ‘scope’ and ‘scale’. Apart from free electricity, subsidized gas cylinders, free smartphones and tablets, free education/access to English-medium schools, OPS (old pension scheme) etc, the parties have tried to outsmart each other by promising cash transfers.

In Rajasthan, the GOP promised Rs 10,000 every year to the female head of the family under the Griha Lakshmi Yojana. In MP, BJP has promised Rs 1,250 per month under Ladli Behna Yojana; the amount will gradually be hiked to Rs 3,000 per month. Additionally, under the Ladli Lakshmi Yojana, girls will get Rs 200,000/- till they get married. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP has promised Rs 12,000 per year to married women under the ‘Mahtari Vandan Scheme’. In Telangana, the GOP has gone a step ahead by promising 10 grams of gold in addition to Rs 100,000/- cash to women getting married.

In the past, farm loan waivers have been a favourite with most parties. This time, they have also gone for a hefty increase in the minimum support price (MSP) for farmers. In MP, BJP has promised MSP of wheat at Rs 2,700 per quintal - 27 per cent higher than the current Rs 2,125 per quintal (fixed by the Centre). For paddy, it has promised an MSP of Rs 3,100 per quintal - 42 per cent higher than the current level of Rs 2,183 per quintal; ditto in Chhattisgarh.

The guarantees are being justified as welfare schemes. This is a farce. A welfare scheme is rooted in three basics viz. the state assistance goes to persons who are poor and primarily focused on bare essentials such as food, fuel, water, housing, education and health; it should be backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue so that budgetary position is not destabilized; finally, it is given for a ‘limited period’ after which the beneficiaries should stand on their own.

Mooted with an eye on winning elections, freebies defy these cardinal principles. Barring a few instances where the poor tag is appended to the Scheme, most of them are given to all and sundry. The parties promising these freebies don't even make an assessment of the funding required forget making efforts to garner resources. Finally, no party ever whispers about exiting from the scheme.

In such a scenario, destabilisation of the State budgets is inevitable. In Karnataka, the five guarantees promised by the GOP imposed additional liabilities of around Rs 62,000 crore thereby doubling its fiscal deficit (FD) to over Rs 120,000 crore. The precariousness of the situation can be seen from a comment by the Deputy CM “The government has no money to



give to the MLAs for carrying out development work; courtesy the poll guarantees’.

In MP, at the current rate of Rs 1250 per month to 12.5 million beneficiaries, the Ladli Behna Yojana costs the state exchequer about Rs 18,750 crore per annum. This will go up to Rs 45,000 crore per annum as the quantum of assistance eventually goes up to Rs 3,000 per month. Meanwhile, the promised hike in MSP to farmers in MP and Chhattisgarh will dent their budgets. For instance, MP will have to spend Rs 5000 crore more on its purchase of paddy.

Unlike any well-intentioned scheme that could have a sun-set, a poll-induced guarantee once given, is more likely to stay eternally and over time, the quantum of assistance will only increase. Besides, it will have repercussions at the all-India level.

For instance, in view of the impending Lok Sabha elections next year, there could be pressure on Modi to give a similar hike in MSP as promised by MP and Chhattisgarh. That will upset the Centre's budget drastically. Since 2021-22, the tax revenue of both the Centre and states have been increasing at a rapid pace and this is helping them rein in their FD levels. If the taxpayers realise that their contributions are being used to indiscriminately give poll-bound freebies to all and sundry, it may even trigger non-compliance amongst them.

The giveaways covering a wide spectrum of items besides large-

scale cash transfers also become a breeding ground for corruption. This is evident from the inclusion of millions of ineligible or fake persons in the list of beneficiaries. For instance, during scrutiny of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), 24 million ineligible farmers were found to have received income transfers in 2021-22 under the Scheme.

The biggest damage freebies inflict is to change the mindset of people in a way that makes them complacent towards work. When, people get access to most of their basic needs free of charge that too ‘perpetually’, they won't be inclined to make efforts. Whichever way one looks at it, freebies are a recipe for economic disaster. The only way to avoid it is to prohibit parties from promising doles. The question is: who will do it?

In an order in S Subramaniam Balaji vs the Government of Tamil Nadu & Ors in July 2013, the Supreme Court (SC) observed that the distribution of freebies of any kind influences all people. “It shakes the root of free and fair elections to a large degree.” Yet, it held:-

“the promises in the election manifesto cannot be construed as ‘corrupt practice’ under the Representation of People Act (RPA), or any other prevailing law and, hence, distribution of freebies can't be stopped when the ruling party uses public funds for this purpose through the passage of Appropriation Acts in the state Assembly”.

After nearly nine years, of hearing a PIL seeking directions against ‘freebies’ on January 25, 2022, the SC observed “This is no doubt a serious issue, budget for freebies is going above the regular Budget. This disturbs the level playing field”. Yet, on August 3, 2022, it threw the ball in the court of political parties asking them to enact a law on curbing freebies. When the latter are deeply rooted in this practice, why would they enact a law to curb it?

A big deterrent is none other than the SC order of July 2013 which says “... it can't be construed as corrupt practice...” Within the meaning of section 123(1)(A) of the RPA, 1951, the expression ‘bribery’ has been defined to mean any gift, offer or promise by a candidate or his agent or by any other person with the consent of a candidate or his election agent of any gratification with the object of inducing an elector as a reward to his candidature.

The irony is when a candidate uses his own pocket money to bribe the voter, it is treated as corrupt practice, but when the party on whose symbol he is seeking election bribes voters using ‘public money’, the top court doesn't treat it that way. Currently, a three-judge bench, headed by CJI is hearing a plea to take a re-look. Will it alter its stance?

(The writer is a policy analyst, views expressed are personal)

Inclusivity for visually impaired is still a dream

Visually impaired experts need to be involved at every stage of decision making on inclusion and accessibility!

The recent news that Fssai has asked food operators to have QR codes on their products, is certainly very encouraging and reassuring, for making this disabling world, somewhat enabling, for people with total blindness and low vision! However, I have a few very pertinent reservations and questions about independent shopping for the visually impaired here:

Does every blind or low-vision person own a smartphone, and are they all trained and able to use this gadget properly to be able to avail of this facility? Are there alternatives there for those blind or low-vision persons who are not technology savvy? How will the information,



PREETI MONGA

that every food product label has a QR Code printed on it, and the blind and low-vision persons can access the same independently, while shopping; reach all end users? How can a totally blind or a low vision person, in the first place, be able to locate and reach the store where the food products with printed QR Codes are available? How will the visually impaired person, thereafter, find and then reach independently, the shelves or areas, where these food products with QR Codes printed, are placed in the store or shop? Will these shelves have any indications for the visually impaired to pick up the food product on their own, without obstruction or accidentally dropping other products

that may be lying around the same area? My request is that we need to think more comprehensively, so all kinds of visually impaired persons are able to shop independently. For, these visually impaired persons include the entire spectrum in our population, ranging from children right people who have lost their sight due to age-related issues and have very little support. I would also like to state here; that inclusion is slowly being thought about, all it needs is to include the end-users at all stages from planning to execution of any such initiatives for them; so we come up with effective, simple and comprehensive solutions to make our environment inclusive! Awareness

needs to be created and please do not exclude the end users at any stage of how the existing environment can be made inclusive for all! The solution lies in acknowledging a simple fact; “this world was and is made by sighted people for sighted people, and the blind and low-vision people were completely left out”! And, believe me, we are still left out! A little bit here and there is done, that too, hardly scratches the surface of the disabling environment that we are still forced to live in! It starts with our families, and the mainstream society and goes up to enabling full participation for the visually impaired, we continue to be called as special people with special needs!

We talk about the needs of the disabled as special, because, everything was, is and is being designed for only those who have all parts of the body working perfectly! We are still not provided the same services or facilities in anything; including education, employment or should I say, everything that a non-disabled person enjoys! We are supposed to sit and wait on the margins and wait for things to come to us, that is, if at all someone around feels that that particular thing, knowledge or activity, according to them, is something that could be important for the disabled person/child there! If we are not given the opportunity to learn and to participate in life equally, then how are we ever expected to

become performing and contributing citizens? Strangely, for the sighted world, everything and every activity is being made more and more user-friendly, but, if the same product or activity is to be made user-friendly for a blind or a low vision person, it becomes a special task! For example, modern lifts have become totally inaccessible for independent travel for the blind and low-vision! The buttons indicating floor numbers, have been cleverly replaced by modern technology and are now only touch pads, which can only be used by a sighted person! I strongly feel, that more visually impaired experts need to be involved at every stage of inclusion and accessibility! We all do need to remember that with the kind of lifestyle and other factors around, disability of any type can easily invade any nondisabled person's life in the blink of an eye! Please note, I do not wish this on anyone, for I have myself lived with blindness for the last 5 decades, and, have suffered, struggled and still continue to do so, and will never want to have any of my fellow humans meet with such a dreadful plight! However, when one is not the sufferer, sympathizing with others is a real feel-good activity, but living with any disability is definitely not a cakewalk!

(The writer is the founder and CEO of Silver Linings, views are personal)

Israel’s war against Hamas enters 3rd month

Palestinians crowd into ever-shrinking Gaza areas

AP ■ RAFAH (GAZA STRIP)

Desperate Palestinians fleeing Israel’s expanding ground offensive crowded into an ever-shrinking area of the Gaza Strip as the Israel-Hamas war entered its third month on Friday. The United Nations warned that its aid operation is “in tatters” because no place in the besieged enclave is safe. Israel’s military assault on Gaza, a tiny, densely populated territory, has led to widespread civilian casualties and mass displacements, triggering international alarm. The Israeli army said Friday that over the past day the military had struck about 450 targets in the Gaza Strip by air, sea and ground, signalling the continued intensity of its campaign. Palestinian TV stations reported airstrikes on various parts of the territory. “Airstrikes and

random artillery shelling have continued intensely since last night until this morning,” said Hassan Al Najjar, a journalist speaking by phone from northern Gaza. Earlier this week, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres used a rarely exercised power to warn the Security Council of an impending “humanitarian catastrophe”, and Arab and predominantly Muslim nations have called for a vote on Friday on a Council resolution to demand an immediate cease-fire. The United States, Israel’s closest ally, appears likely to block any UN effort to halt the fighting, which was triggered by the deadly October 7 attack by Hamas militants on southern Israel. Still, US concern over the devastation is growing. US officials told Israel

ahead of the expansion of its ground offensive to southern Gaza several days ago that it must limit civilian deaths and displacement, saying too many Palestinians were killed when it obliterated much of Gaza City and surrounding areas in the north. On Thursday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a call with Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer that casualties are still too high, a senior State Department official said. Blinken told Dermer that Israel must also do more to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private diplomatic discussion. Israel insists it must crush the military capabilities of Hamas, which rules Gaza, and remove it from power following the group’s October 7

attack. In the first stage of the war, Israel’s air and ground campaign focused on the northern half of Gaza, leading hundreds of thousands of residents to flee south. Intense battles continued in parts of the north in recent days, while troops there have rounded up hundreds of Palestinian men. In photos and video published on Thursday, dozens of men are seen sitting in rows on a street in northern Gaza, stripped down to their underwear with their heads bowed as they are being guarded by Israeli troops. The images were the first showing such detentions in the war. Israeli military spokesman Daniel Hagari said troops have detained and interrogated hundreds of people in Gaza suspected of militant links. UN monitors said troops reportedly detained

men and boys from the age of 15 in a school-turned-shelter in the town of Beit Lahiya, in the north. During the war, there has also been a dramatic surge in deadly military raids and an increase on restrictions on Palestinian residents in the occupied West Bank. Israeli forces stormed into a refugee camp in the West Bank on Friday to arrest suspected Palestinian militants, unleashing fighting with local gunmen in which six Palestinians were killed, health officials said. The Israeli military did not respond to a request for comment on the operation. Over the past week, Israeli forces expanded their ground offensive into southern Gaza, with a focus on Khan Younis, the territory’s second largest city. On Friday, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society said Israel’s air force

attacked a home facing the society’s office in the city of Khan Younis in southern Gaza. It did not give details about casualties. Medhat Abbas, a spokesperson for the Health Ministry in Hamas-controlled Gaza, reported a strike in the city of Deir al-Balah in central Gaza, saying it killed and wounded a number of people but gave no exact numbers. The military says it makes every effort to spare civilians and accuses Hamas of using them as human shields as the militants fight in dense residential areas. With the entire Gaza Strip under military assault, tens of thousands of people displaced by the fighting have packed into the border city of Rafah, in the far south of the Gaza Strip, and Muwasi, a nearby patch of barren coastline that Israel has declared a safe zone.

‘94 media workers killed this year, mostly in Gaza’

AP ■ BRUSSELS

A leading organisation representing journalists worldwide expressed deep concern on Friday at the number of media professionals killed around the globe doing their jobs in 2023, with Israel’s war with Hamas claiming more journalists than any conflict in over 30 years. In its annual count of media worker deaths, the International Federation of Journalists said 94 journalists had been killed so far this year and almost 400 others had been imprisoned. The figure for deaths is up from 67 in the same period of 2022 — including 12 killed in Ukraine — and double the total of 47 recorded for the whole of 2021.

The group called for better protection for media workers and for their attackers to be held to account. “The imperative for a new global standard for the protection of journalists and effective international enforcement has never been greater,” said IFJ President Dominique Pradalié. The group said 68 journalists had been killed covering the Israeli-Hamas war since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7 — more than one a day and accounting for 72 per cent of all media deaths worldwide this year. It said the overwhelming

majority of them were Palestinian journalists in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli forces continue their offensive. “The war in Gaza has been more deadly for journalists than any single conflict since the IFJ began recording journalists killed in the line of duty in 1990,” the group said, adding that deaths have come at “a scale and pace of loss of media professionals’ lives without precedent”. Ukraine also “remains a dangerous country for journalists” almost two years since Russia’s invasion, the organisation said. It said three reporters or media workers had been killed in that war so far this year.

The organisation also deplored media deaths in Afghanistan, the Philippines, India, China and Bangladesh. It expressed concern that crimes against media workers are going unpunished and urged governments “to shed full light on these murders and to put in place measures to ensure the safety of journalists”. It noted a drop in the number of journalists killed in North and South America, from 29 last year to seven so far in 2023. The group said the three Mexicans, one Paraguayan, one Guatemalan, one Colombian and one American were slain while investigating armed groups or the embezzlement of public funds.

Rocket attack targets US Embassy in Baghdad

Baghdad (AP): A rocket attack on the sprawling US Embassy in Baghdad caused minor damage but no casualties Friday morning, US and Iraqi officials said. The attack is the first on the embassy located in the heavily fortified Green Zone of Iraq’s capital to be confirmed since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war. The Green Zone houses Iraqi government buildings and embassies on the west bank of the Tigris River. Iran-backed militias in Iraq have claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks that targeted bases housing US troops in Iraq and Syria since Israel declared war on Hamas two months ago. The US military says 78 attacks have been carried out against US facilities over the past weeks, of which 37 were in Iraq and 41 in Syria.

An Iraqi security official said 14 Katyusha rockets were fired on Friday, of which some struck near one of the US Embassy’s gates while others fell in the river. The official said the rocket attack caused material damage but no casualties. A US military official said a multi-rocket attack was launched at American and coalition forces in the vicinity of the embassy complex and the Union III base, which houses offices of the US-led coalition. The official added that no casualties and no damage to infrastructure were reported. An embassy spokesperson said the US Embassy was attacked by two salvos of rockets at approximately 4:15 a.m. (0215 GMT). “Assessments are ongoing, but there are no reported casualties on the embassy compound,” the official said, adding that no specific group had claimed responsibility for firing the rockets as of Friday morning but early indications pointed to Iran-aligned militias. “We again call on the government of Iraq, as we have done on many occasions, to do all in its power to protect diplomatic and Coalition partner personnel and facilities,” the official said.

UK says it has paid Rwanda \$300 mn for a blocked asylum deal

AP ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was under pressure on Friday to explain why Britain has paid Rwanda 240 million pounds (USD 300 million) as part of a blocked asylum plan, without a single person being sent to the East African country. The total is almost twice the 140 million pounds that Britain previously said it had handed to the Rwandan government under a deal struck in April 2022. Under the agreement, migrants who reach Britain across the English Channel would be sent to Rwanda, where their asylum claims would be processed and, if successful, they would stay. The plan was challenged in UK courts, and no flights to Rwanda have taken off. Last month, Britain’s Supreme Court ruled the policy was illegal because Rwanda isn’t a safe country for refugees. Despite

the ruling and the mounting cost, Sunak has pledged to press on with the plan. The Home Office said it had paid a further 100 million pounds to Rwanda in the 2023-24 financial year and expects to hand over 50 million pounds more in the coming 12 months. Junior Immigration Minister Tom Pursglove defended the cost, saying the money would ensure “all of the right infrastructure to support the partnership is in place”. “Part of that money is helpful in making sure that we can respond to the issues properly that the Supreme Court raised,” he said. The opposition Liberal Democrats said it was “an unforgivable waste of taxpayers’ money”. The Rwanda plan is central to the UK government’s self-imposed goal to stop unauthorised asylum-seekers from trying to reach England from

France in small boats. More than 29,000 people have done so this year, compared to 46,000 in 2022. Since the Supreme Court ruling, Britain and Rwanda have signed a treaty pledging to strengthen protections for migrants. Sunak’s government argues that the treaty allows it to pass a law declaring Rwanda a safe destination. The law, if approved by Parliament, would allow the government to “disapply” sections of UK human rights law when it comes to Rwanda-related asylum claims and make it harder to challenge the deportations in court. The bill, which has its first vote scheduled in the House of Commons on Tuesday, has roiled the governing Conservative Party, which is trailing the Labour opposition in opinion polls, with an election due in the next year. It faces opposition from centrist

Conservative lawmakers who worry about Britain breaching its human rights obligations. Former Conservative Solicitor-General Edward Garnier said the bill was “trying to define things when there is no evidence, or no safe evidence, for that being the case”. He told the BBC that changing the law to declare Rwanda a safe haven is “rather like a bill which says that Parliament has decided that all dogs are cats”. But the bigger danger for Sunak comes from Conservatives on the party’s authoritarian right wing that views curbing immigration as essential to the government’s pledge to “take back control” now that Britain has left the European Union. They think the bill is too mild and want the UK to leave the European Convention on Human Rights. Almost every European country, apart from Russia and Belarus, is bound by the con-

vention and its court. Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick piled pressure on the prime minister when he quit the government this week, saying the bill did not go far enough. Sunak insists the bill goes as far as the government can without scuttling the deal because Rwanda will pull out of the agreement if the UK breaks international law. The party differences erupted on social media after the party posted an attack ad aimed at Labour, using an image of a BBC presenter caught making a rude gesture to camera this week. While some Tory lawmakers retweeted the middle-finger image approvingly on X, formerly known as Twitter, others called it crass. “Amazed this has not – despite requests – been taken down, it is beneath us,” Conservative legislator Alicia Kearns posted.



Lebanese journalists hold a portrait of Reuters videographer Issam Abdallah, right on the poster at front, who was killed by Israeli shelling, and slain Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh during a protest in front of the United Nations headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon, Sunday, Oct. 15, 2023. **File photo**

Hunter Biden indicted on nine tax charges

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Hunter Biden was indicted on nine tax charges in California on Thursday as a special counsel investigation into the business dealings of President Joe Biden’s son intensifies against the backdrop of the looming 2024 election. The new charges — three felonies and six misdemeanours — are in addition to federal firearms charges in Delaware alleging Hunter Biden broke laws against drug users having guns in 2018. They come after the implosion of a plea deal over the summer that would have spared him jail time, putting the case on track to a possible trial as his father campaigns for reelection. Hunter Biden “spent millions of dollars on an extravagant lifestyle rather than paying his tax bills”, special counsel David Weiss said in a statement. The charges are centred on at least USD 1.4 million in taxes Hunter Biden owed dur-



ing between 2016 and 2019, a period where he has acknowledged struggling with addiction. The back taxes have since been paid. If convicted, Hunter Biden, 53, could a maximum of 17 years in prison. The special counsel probe remains open, Weiss said. In a fiery response, defense attorney Abbe Lowell accused Weiss of “bowing to Republican pressure” in the case. “Based on the facts and the law, if Hunter’s last name

was anything other than Biden, the charges in Delaware, and now California, would not have been brought,” Lowell said in a statement. The White House declined to comment on Thursday’s indictment, referring questions to the Justice Department or Hunter Biden’s personal representatives. The charging documents filed in California, where he lives, details spending on everything from drugs and strippers to luxury hotels and exotic cars, “in short, everything but his taxes”, prosecutor Leo Wise wrote. The indictment comes as congressional Republicans pursue an impeachment inquiry into President Biden, claiming he was engaged in an influence-peddling scheme with his son. The House is expected to vote next week on formally authorising the inquiry. No evidence has emerged so far to prove that Joe Biden, in his current or previous

office, abused his role or accepted bribes, though questions have arisen about the ethics surrounding the Biden family’s international business. The separate, long-running criminal investigation into Hunter Biden had been expected to wind down with a plea deal where he would have gotten two years’ probation after pleading guilty to misdemeanor tax charges and avoided prosecution on the gun charge if he stayed out of trouble. The agreement was pilloried as a “sweetheart deal” by Republicans, including former President Donald Trump. He is facing his own criminal cases, including charges that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., the chairman of the House Oversight Committee, gave credit for the new charges on Thursday to two IRS investigators who testified before Congress that the Justice

Department had mishandled and “slow walked” the investigation into the president’s son. Justice officials have denied those allegations. The two IRS employees, Gary Shapley and Joseph Ziegler, said the indictment was “a complete vindication of our thorough investigation”. The new charges against Hunter Biden include filing a false return and tax evasion felonies, as well as misdemeanor failure to file and failure to pay. The defence signalled that it plans to fight the new charges, likely at least in part relying on immunity provisions from the original plea deal. Defence attorneys have argued those remain in force since that part of the agreement was signed by a prosecutor before the deal was scrapped. Prosecutors have disagreed, pointing out the documents weren’t signed by a judge and are invalid. Lowell said he’s also planning to push for dis-

missal of the gun charges next week, calling them “unprecedented and unconstitutional”. The three federal gun charges filed in Delaware allege Hunter Biden had lied about his drug use to buy a gun that he kept for 11 days in 2018. Federal law bans gun possession by “habitual drug users”, though the measure is seldom seen as a stand-alone charge and has been called into question by a federal appeals court. Hunter Biden’s longstanding struggle with substance abuse worsened after the death of his brother Beau Biden in 2015, according to court documents and his memoir “Beautiful Things”, which ends with him getting clean in 2019. His gross income nevertheless totalled some USD 7 million between 2016 and 2020, prosecutors said, pointing to his roles on the board of the Ukrainian energy company Burisma and a Chinese private equity fund as well as his position at a law firm.

Judge rules against Prince Harry in early stage of libel case against Daily Mail publisher

London (AP): Prince Harry lost a preliminary round on Friday in his libel case against the publisher of the Daily Mail tabloid over an article that said he tried to hide his efforts to retain publicly funded protection in the UK after giving up his status as a working member of the royal family. A London judge said the Duke of Sussex failed to knock out Associated Newspaper Ltd.’s defence that its article reflected an honest opinion. A hearing is scheduled Tuesday to discuss the consequences of the ruling. Justice Matthew Nicklin said in that ruling that “it is not fanciful that the Defendant will be successful, at trial”. He scheduled a hearing on Tuesday in the High Court to discuss the consequences of the ruling. The ruling comes just a day after another judge concluded three days of arguments — mostly behind closed doors — over whether the government unfairly stripped Harry of his security detail after he and his family moved to the US in 2020. Harry, 39, the younger son of King Charles III, is challenging the government’s decision to provide security to him on a case-by-case basis when he visits Britain. Harry has said hostility toward him and his wife on social media and relentless news media hounding threatens their safety. The Mail on Sunday and Mail Online published an article in February 2022 about the issue headlined: “How Prince Harry tried to keep his legal fight with the government over police bodyguards a secret ... then — just minutes after the story broke — his PR machine tried to put a positive spin on the dispute.” Harry claims the article was “fundamentally inaccurate” and the newspaper libelled him when it suggested he lied in his initial public statements about his case challenging the government.

Greece may be able to benefit from Turkish power plant

Ankara (AP): Türkiye is considering allowing neighbouring Greece to benefit from a nuclear power plant it plans to build near its Black Sea coast, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was quoted as saying on Friday. Erdogan made the comments on his return from a visit to Athens on Thursday, where longtime regional rivals Greece and Türkiye took significant steps toward mending their troubled ties. “We strive to develop and expand cooperation with Greece not only in the field of energy but also in all areas, including nuclear energy,” Erdogan told a group of journalists on his flight back. “For example, we can provide Greece the opportunity (to benefit) from energy from our nuclear power plant to be built in Sinop (Province).” His comments were reported by state-run Anadolu

and other media on Friday. During Erdogan’s visit on Thursday, Greece and Türkiye signed more than a dozen cooperation deals on trade, energy and education and announced a roadmap for future high-level consultations aimed at avoiding crises. Erdogan travelled to Greece promising to pursue a “win-win” approach that could lay the foundation for broader cooperation. “I believe that my visit, which took place in a very positive atmosphere, will open a new page in Türkiye-Greece relations,” Erdogan said. Longstanding disputes have led Athens and Ankara to the brink of war three times in the past 50 years. The latest flare-up occurred in 2020, when Greek and Turkish navy ships shadowed each other in the eastern Mediterranean over a dispute

French teens await verdict over their alleged roles in killing of teacher

AP ■ PARIS

A French juvenile court is handing down a verdict on Friday for six teenagers accused of involvement in the killing of teacher Samuel Paty, who was beheaded by an Islamic extremist after he showed caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad to his class for a debate on freedom of expression. Paty, a history and geography teacher, was killed on October 16, 2020, near his school in a Paris suburb by an 18-year-old of Chechen origin who had become radicalised. The attacker, Abdoulakh Anzorov, was then shot dead by police. Paty’s name was disclosed on social media after a class debate on free expression during which he showed prophet caricatures published by the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. The publication

had triggered a deadly extremist massacre in the Charlie Hebdo newsroom in 2015. All those on trial were students at Paty’s school. If convicted, they face up to two-and-a-half years in prison. Five of the defendants, who were 14 or 15 at the time of the attack, are accused of staking Paty out until he left school that day and identifying him for the attacker in exchange for promises of 300-350 euros (USD 350-400). Investigators found that the attacker wanted to target Paty but didn’t have the means to identify him. The five are facing charges of criminal conspiracy with the aim of preparing aggravated violence. The sixth defendant, who was 13 at the time, is accused of wrongly claiming that Paty had asked Muslim students to raise their hands and leave the classroom before he showed

the class the prophet cartoons. She was not in the classroom that day, and later told investigators she had lied. She is facing a charge of making false allegations. Her father shared the lie in an online video that called for mobilisation against the teacher. He and a radical Islamic activist who helped disseminate virulent messages against Paty are among eight adults who will face a separate trial for adults suspected of involvement in the killing, expected late next year. In sometimes tearful testimony, the teenagers on trial said they had no idea the teacher would be killed, according to French media reports. The trial has been held behind closed doors, and the media are not allowed to disclose the defendants’ identities according to French law regarding minors.

‘Increasing Covid-19 cases put strain on S’pore hospitals’

Singapore (PTI): Covid-19 infections and hospitalisations are increasing and putting a strain on hospitals in Singapore, the Ministry of Health warned on Friday. Though the health ministry has raised the alert, it has also reassured people that the numbers are not as high as during the pandemic and that the circulating variants are not known to cause more severe illness. In the week ended on December 2, as many as 32,035 people were diagnosed with COVID-19 — the highest number of infections recorded this year, according to a report by The Straits Times newspaper. The previous high was 28,410 infections a week in March, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said. The latest number is almost

10,000 more than the 22,094 diagnosed the previous week. The number of weekly infections has been hovering around 15,000 infections over the past two to three months. The number of people being hospitalised and needing intensive care treatment has also gone up, it said. An MOH statement on December 8 said the average daily COVID-19 hospitalisations rose to 225 from 136 the week before, and the average daily intensive care unit (ICU) cases increased to four compared with one case in the previous week. It said: “This has added workload to our hospitals, which are already busy.” Nine people severely ill with Covid-19 were admitted to a hospital in ICU in the week of November 26 to December 2, up from four the previous week.

Putin aims to extend his rule of over 2 decades

AP ■ MOSCOW

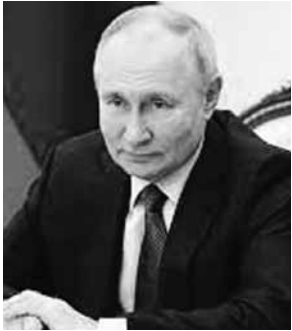
Vladimir Putin on Friday moved to prolong his repressive and unyielding grip on Russia for at least another six years, announcing his candidacy in the presidential election next March that he is all but certain to win.

Putin still commands wide support after nearly a quarter-century in power, despite starting an immensely costly war in Ukraine that has taken thousands of his countrymen's lives, provoked repeated attacks inside Russia — including one on the Kremlin itself — and corroded its aura of invincibility. A short-lived rebellion in June by mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin raised widespread speculation that Putin could be losing his grip, but he emerged with no permanent scars. Prigozhin's death in a mysterious plane crash two months later reinforced the view that Putin was in absolute control.

Putin announced his decision to run in the March 17 presidential election after a Kremlin award ceremony, when war veterans and others pleaded with him to seek reelection in what Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described as "spontaneous" remarks. "I won't hide it from you — I had various thoughts about it over time, but now, you're right, it's necessary to make a decision," Putin said in a video released by the Kremlin after the event. "I will run for president of the Russian Federation."

Tatiana Stanovaya of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Centre noted that the announcement was made in a low-key way instead of a live televised speech, probably reflecting the Kremlin's spin effort to emphasize Putin's modesty and his perceived focus on doing his job as opposed to loud campaigning. "It's not about prosperity, it's about survival," Stanovaya observed. "The stakes have been raised to the maximum."

About 80 per cent of the populace approves of Putin's performance, according to the independent pollster Levada



Centre. That support might come from the heart or it might reflect submission to a leader whose crackdown on any opposition has made even relatively mild criticism perilous. Whether due to real or coerced support, Putin is expected to face only token opposition on the ballot.

Putin, 71, has twice used his leverage to amend the constitution so he could theoretically stay in power until he's in his mid-80s. He is already the longest-serving Kremlin leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, who died in 1953.

In 2008, he stepped aside to become prime minister due to term limits but continued calling the shots while his close associate Dmitry Medvedev served as a placeholder president. Presidential terms were then extended to six years from four, while another package of amendments he pushed through three years ago reset the count for two consecutive terms to begin in 2024.

"He is afraid to give up power," Dmitry Oreshkin, a political analyst and professor at Free University of Riga, Latvia, told The Associated Press this year. At the time of the amendments that allowed him two more terms, Putin's concern about losing power may have been elevated: Levada polling showed his approval rating significantly lower, hovering around 60 per cent.

In the view of some analysts, that dip in popularity could have been a main driver of the war that Putin launched in Ukraine in February 2022.

"This conflict with Ukraine was necessary as a glue. He needed to consolidate his power," said commentator Abbas Gallyamov, a former

Putin speechwriter now living in Israel. Brookings Institution scholar Fiona Hill, a former US National Security Council expert on Russian affairs, agreed that Putin thought "a lovely small, victorious war" would consolidate support for his reelection.

"Ukraine would capitulate," she told AP earlier this year. "He'd install a new president in Ukraine. He would declare himself the president of a new union of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia over the course of the time leading up to the 2024 election. He'd be the supreme leader."

The war didn't turn out that way. It devolved into a grueling slog in which neither side makes significant headway, posing severe challenges to the rising prosperity integral to Putin's popularity and Russians' propensity to set aside concerns about corrupt politics and shrinking tolerance of dissent.

For the first time, voting in the presidential election will take place over three days from March 15 to 17, 2024, including in four regions of Ukraine partially and illegally annexed by Russia. The election commission argued that the practice of multi-day voting, used in other elections since the COVID-19 pandemic, is more convenient for voters.

Putin's rule has spanned five US presidencies, from Bill Clinton to Joe Biden. He became acting president on New Year's Eve in 1999, when Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned. He was elected to his first term in March 2000.

Although Putin has long abandoned the macho photo shoots of bear hunting and scuba diving that once amused and impressed the world, he shows little sign of slowing down. Photos from 2022 of him with a bloated face and a hunched posture led to speculation he was seriously ill, but he seems little changed in recent public appearances.

"He's a wartime president, is mobilizing the population behind him," Hill said. "And that will be the message around the 2024 election, depending on where things are in the battlefield."

Pak EC issues notice to PTI on plea against intra-party polls

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan's election commission on Friday issued a notice to jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party on a petition challenging its recent organisational polls, which were termed as "rigged and fraudulent".

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), held its election on December 2 following a ruling by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) for fresh intra-party polls to elect its chairman and other key officer-bearers to retain the cricket bat as its election symbol. The same day, the party announced that it had elected Imran Khan's nominee, Barrister Gohar Khan, as the party Chairman.

Gohar, 45, was hand-picked by the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician after consultation with his loyalist lawyers who frequently meet him in jail where he has been kept since being arrested on August 5 after conviction in the Toshakhana corruption case. Khan himself avoided filing the nomination due to conviction and disqualification.

However, one of its founding members, Akbar S Babar, who developed differences with the party years ago, filed a petition with the ECP, terming the exercise as "rigged and fraudulent" with a plea for fresh organisational elections. At least 13 other PTI members joined Babar in challenging the election. The members in the petition maintained that no schedule was given before the elections and the voter lists were also not released. "There was no activity in the PTI central secretariat related to elections," the plea said.

Separately, the country's mainstream parties, including the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), also questioned the legitimacy of the intra-party elections. A five-member ECP panel, led by Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja, conducted the hearing on the petition. Babar's counsel implored the commission to declare the PTI's polls null and void and to mandate a fresh conduct of the elections.

Chinese military surveillance balloon seen in Taiwan Strait

AP ■ TAIPEI

Taiwan's Defence Ministry says a Chinese military surveillance balloon was spotted in the Taiwan Strait, as well as a large-scale movement of military aircraft and ships. The ministry said the balloon passed southwest of the northern port city of Keelung on Thursday night, then continued east before disappearing, possibly into the Pacific Ocean.

However, there seemed to some uncertainty about whether the balloon was operated directly by the People's Liberation Army, the military branch of China's ruling Communist Party. The ministry referred to it both as a "PLA surveillance balloon" and as "1 PRC's balloon", using the acronym for the People's Republic of China, China's official name.

A Defence Ministry spokesperson said they had no additional information.

China has long blurred the lines between military and civilian functions, including in the South China Sea, where it operates a huge maritime militia — ostensibly civilian fishing boats that act under government orders to assert Beijing's territorial claims.

Taiwan has threatened to shoot down such balloons, but the ministry did not say what, if any, action was taken. It said the balloon was monitored flying at an altitude of approximately 6,400 metres (21,000 feet). It also said 26 Chinese military aircraft were detected, along with 10 Chinese navy ships, in the 24 hours before 6 am on Friday.

Of the aircraft, 15 had crossed the median line that is an unofficial divider between the sides, but which Beijing refuses to recognise. Some also entered Taiwan's self-declared air defense identification zone outside the island's airspace, which encompasses the 160



kilometer (100 mile) - wide Taiwan Strait. Taiwan's military monitored the situation with combat aircraft, navy vessels and land-based missile systems, the ministry said. The incident came just over month before Taiwan is to hold elections for president and the legislature and raises questions about possible Chinese efforts to influence the vote.

Such incursions occur regularly as a means of advertis-

ing China's threat to use force to annex the self-governing island republic it considers its own territory, wear down Taiwan's military capabilities, and impact morale among the armed forces and the public, who remain largely ambivalent to China's actions.

The Chinese missions have also prompted Taiwan to up its purchases of aircraft from the United States, its chief ally, and revitalize its own defence industry, including producing submarines. Beijing strongly protests all contacts between the island and the US, but its aggressive diplomacy has helped build strong bipartisan support for Taipei on Capitol Hill. US President Joe Biden vowed sharper rules to track, monitor and potentially shoot down unknown aerial objects after three weeks of high-stakes drama sparked by the discovery of a suspected Chinese spy balloon transiting much of the country early in the year.

Japan's leader grilled in parliament over widening fundraising scandal, link to Unification Church

AP ■ TOKYO

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and several key Cabinet ministers were grilled by opposition lawmakers in parliament on Friday over a widening fundraising scandal and an alleged connection to the Unification Church which threaten to further drag down the government's sagging popularity.

Support ratings for Kishida's government have fallen below 30 per cent because of public dissatisfaction over its slow response to rising prices and lagging salaries, and the scandal could weaken his grip on power within the governing Liberal Democratic Party. Still, the long-ruling party remains the voter favourite in media polls because of the fragmented and weak opposition.

Dozens of governing party lawmakers, including Cabinet members, are accused of failing

to fully report money they received from fundraising. Kishida has acknowledged that authorities are investigating the scandal following a criminal complaint.

The party's largest and most powerful faction, linked to late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is suspected of failing to report more than 100 million yen (USD 690,000) in funds in a possible violation of campaign and election laws, according to media reports. The money is alleged to have gone into unmonitored slush funds. Kishida has instructed party members to temporarily halt fundraising parties. "It's a first step," he said on Friday. "We will thoroughly grasp the problems and the cause and will take steps to regain public trust."

Kishida also said he will step down as head of his own party faction while serving as prime minister to show his

determination to tackle the problems. Kishida was bombarded with questions from senior opposition lawmakers about the scandals during Friday's parliamentary hearing.

He separately faces allegations related to a 2019 meeting with former US House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who visited him with top officials from the Unification Church, a South Korea-based religious group that the government is seeking to dissolve over abusive recruiting and fundraising tactics that surfaced during an investigation of Abe's assassination last year. The investigation also led to revelations of years of cozy ties between the governing party and the Unification Church.

Kishida said he was asked to meet with Gingrich as a former foreign minister and that he did not remember the other guests. Photographs in Japanese media show him exchanging

business cards with Unification Church officials.

"I don't see any problem with that," Kishida said. "If there were church-related people in the group, that does not mean I had ties with the Unification Church."

Yukio Edano, a lawmaker for the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, accused Kishida of lax oversight and of attempting to distance himself from the fundraising scandal by withdrawing from leadership of his faction.

Media reports say Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno allegedly diverted more than 10 million yen (USD 69,000) over the past five years from money he raised from party events to a slush fund.

Matsuno was a top official in the Abe faction from 2019 to 2021 and is the first key minister implicated in the scandal by name.

ADB approves US \$200 mn loan to debt-stricken SL

Colombo (AP): The Asian Development Bank said on Friday that it has approved USD 200-million concessional loan to debt-stricken Sri Lanka to help stabilise the country's finance sector following an unprecedented economic crisis that engulfed the Indian Ocean island nation last year.

The bank's announcement comes as Sri Lanka is awaiting International Monetary Fund approval for the second installment of a USD 2.9-billion bailout package to rescue the country from bankruptcy.

The ADB said its Financial Sector Stability and Reforms Program for Sri Lanka includes two subprogrammes of USD 200 million each that would help strengthen the stability and governance of the country's banking sector, and deepen sustainable and inclusive finance, particularly for women-led micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises.

"The programme's overarching development objective

is fully aligned with the country's strategy of maintaining finance sector stability, while ensuring that banks are well-positioned for eventual recovery," Takafumi Kadono, ADB's director for Sri Lanka, said in a statement.

He added that the "expected development outcome is a stable financial system providing access to affordable finance for businesses in various sectors of the economy".

Sri Lanka plunged into an economic crisis in 2022, creating severe shortages and drawing strident protests that led to the ouster of then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. It declared bankruptcy in April 2022 with more than USD 83 billion in debt — more than half of it to foreign creditors.

The IMF agreed in March to a USD 2.9-billion bailout package, releasing the first payment shortly thereafter. However, the IMF delayed the second tranche, citing inadequate oversight and debt restructuring.

S Korea's defence chief vows strikes on North if provoked

AP ■ SEOUL

South Korea's defence minister on Friday vowed massive retaliatory missile strikes on "the heart and head" of North Korea in the event of provocation, as the rivals escalate their rhetoric over their respective spy satellite launches in recent days. The South Korean warning — unusually fiery rhetoric by Seoul directed at Pyongyang — came as the top security advisers from South Korea, the US and Japan gathered in Seoul for talks to discuss North Korea's evolving nuclear threats and other issues.

During a visit to the army's missile strategic command, South Korean Defence Minister Shin Wonsik ordered command officers to maintain a readiness to fire precision-guided and powerful missiles at any time, according to his ministry. Shin said the main role of the command is "lethally striking the heart and head of the enemy, though the types

of its provocations can vary," a ministry statement said.

Animosities between the two Koreas deepened after North Korea launched its first military reconnaissance satellite into space on Nov. 21 in violation of U.N. bans. South Korea, the U.S. and Japan strongly condemned the launch, viewing it as an attempt by the North to improve its missile technology as well as establish a space-surveillance system. South Korea announced plans to resume front-line aerial surveillance in response. North Korea quickly retaliated by restoring border guard posts, according to Seoul officials. Both steps would breach a 2018 inter-Korean deal on easing front-line military tensions.

Last week, when South Korea also launched its first military spy satellite from California's Vandenberg Space Force Base, North Korea slammed the US for alleged double standards and warned

of a possible grave danger to global peace. In a statement Friday, Jo Chol Su, a senior North Korean Foreign Ministry official, said the North would make all available efforts to protect its national interests in the face of threats by hostile forces. The national security advisers from South Korea, the U.S. and Japan are to hold their first trilateral meeting in six months in Seoul on Saturday.

Ahead of the three-way meeting, South Korean national security adviser Cho Tae-yong and his Japanese counterpart, Takeo Akiba, met bilaterally on Friday and reaffirmed a need to strengthen their cooperation with the U.S. to cope with provocations by North Korea. Cho and U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan also met and affirmed that Seoul and Washington remain open to diplomacy with North Korea, according to South Korea's presidential office.

Taiwan prez candidates to hold televised debate as race heats up

Taipei (AP): The three candidates running in next month's Taiwanese presidential election will hold a televised debate on December 30 as the race heats up under pressure from China. The outcome of the January 13 election could have a major effect on relations between China and the United States, which is bound by its own laws to provide Taiwan with the weapons it needs to defend itself and to regard threats to the self-governing island as a matter of "grave concern."

Differences over Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory, are a major flashpoint in US-China relations. The debate will feature current Vice President William Lai of the Democratic Progressive Party; Hou Yu-ih, a local government leader representing the main opposition Nationalist Party, or KMT; and former

Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je, of the smaller Taiwan People's Party. Lai, whose party favours the status quo of de facto independence, is favoured to win the election, ensuring that tensions with China will likely remain high. The KMT, which formerly ruled in China before being driven to Taiwan amid the Communist takeover of the mainland in 1949, formally backs political unification between the sides, a prospect most Taiwanese reject. Ko, who briefly flirted with an alliance with the KMT, has advocated restarting talks with China. "The whole world wants to know whether the people of Taiwan will continue to move forward on the path of democracy in this major election, or whether they will choose to rely on China, follow a pro-China path, and lock Taiwan into China again," Lai said in a recent speech.

Dutch police arrest Syrian accused of sexual violence

The Hague (AP): A Syrian refugee was arrested on Friday in the Netherlands on suspicion of crimes against humanity including sexual violence while he was allegedly head of an interrogation team in a militia aligned to the government of President Bashar Assad.

The arrest of the 55-year-old man marks the first time Dutch authorities have charged a suspect with sexual violence as a crime against humanity, the National Public Prosecution Service said in a statement. He is the latest suspect charged in the Netherlands with crimes committed during Syria's grinding civil war. Under universal jurisdiction, the Netherlands can prosecute certain crimes even if they were committed abroad.

The Netherlands and Canada have also taken Syria to the United Nations' top court, accusing Assad's administration of a years-long campaign of "institutionalised" torture

Post-summit news conferences highlight divide between China, EU

AP ■ BEIJING

From trade to human rights, the leaders of China and the European Union differed on a wide range of issues at a summit this week in the Chinese capital. China, which sees Europe as an important export market, raised concerns about trade protectionism and "de-risking", the EU initiative to reduce its reliance on any one country — such as China — for vital raw materials and products.

The EU, which sees imports from China as a potential threat to companies and jobs, pressured China on its large trade surplus with Europe and its de facto support for Russia in the war in Ukraine. Separate post-summit news conferences on Thursday evening highlighted the divergent positions. Wang Lutong, the director general for European affairs, spoke to journalists at China's Foreign Ministry. Then EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU Council President Charles Michel held a joint

news conference at the European Union office in Beijing.

TRADE IMBALANCE
VON DER LEYEN: "If you just look at the last two years, the trade deficit has doubled. This is a matter of great concern for a lot of Europeans. Such imbalances are just unsustainable. The root causes are well known, and we discussed them. They range from a lack of market access for European companies to the Chinese market to preferential treatment of domestic Chinese companies and overcapacities in the Chinese production."

WANG: "Sometimes the EU relates the imbalance of trade between us to overcapacity and subsidies. But we don't think there is overcapacity in such areas like green energy and clean energy. ... China could be very useful to the green transition not only of the EU but also the whole world. So if you want us to support the EU in green transition, do not be protectionist. You make the choice between being pro-



tectionist and encouraging China to participate in your goal in order to achieve that green transition."

TRADE SUBSIDIES
WANG: "The Chinese side has expressed concerns to the EU side on its de-risking and restrictive economic and trade policies, including the anti-subsidy investigation against Chinese electric vehicles as well as its

5G policies. The Chinese side has urged the EU to ensure openness of its trade and investment market, provide an equitable and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese enterprises and be prudent in using trade remedies."
VON DER LEYEN: "Politically, European leaders will not be able to tolerate that our industrial base is undermined by unfair competition. We like competition. It makes us better; it lowers prices; it is good for the consumers. But competition needs to be fair. ... Europe does not want to decouple from China. ... What we want is de-risking. De-risking is about managing the risks we see, addressing excessive dependencies through diversification of our supply chains ... and thus increasing our resilience. And this is not exclusive to China."

UKRAINE
VON DER LEYEN: "Russia's war of aggression is a blatant violation of international law and the UN Charter,

and it is a serious threat to European security. And this is why we recalled the need for China to use all its influence on Russia to stop this war of aggression and to engage in Ukraine's peace formula. We also reiterated (to China) to refrain from supplying lethal equipment to Russia and to prevent any attempts by Russia to undermine the impact of sanctions."
WANG: "Sometimes European politicians said to us that China needs to speak to Russia, you need to speak to President Putin about withdrawing their soldiers. This is a very independent sovereign nation. President Putin is making his decision based on his own national interest and security. So that's why we are also urging Europeans to speak to Russians about it. We think ... it's important that Europeans and Russians talk about the possible security architecture in Europe and it's also important that Russians and Americans talk about the possible strategic stability."

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Stock markets hit new peaks

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark Sensex and Nifty rebounded to close at their new lifetime highs on Friday after the Reserve Bank raised the growth forecast for the current fiscal and kept policy rates unchanged, triggering heavy buying in banking and other rate-sensitive stocks. The 30-share BSE Sensex rose 303.91 points, or 0.44 per cent, to hit its new peak of 69,825.60. The index touched the highest intra-day level of 69,893.80. The broader index Nifty also climbed 68.25 points or 0.33 per cent to reach a fresh record high of 20,969.40. Among major Sensex movers, HCL Tech logged the biggest gain of 2.69 per cent, followed by JSW Steel (2.44 per cent) and Infosys (1.67 per cent). Other gainers included HDFC Bank, Titan, Axis Bank and



ICICI Bank. In contrast, ITC, Mahindra & Mahindra and Bajaj Finance were among the laggards. “The RBI took a balanced approach by raising the economic growth forecast and also expressing concern on food inflation, which may have

an elevated trajectory in the short term. A drop in rabi sowing and dipping reservoir levels provides a perception that foodgrain prices can rise. The impact was visible on FMCG stocks, which underperformed today,” said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial



Services. Foreign institutional investors sold shares worth Rs 1,564.03 crore on Thursday, according to exchange data. The six-member Monetary Policy Committee of the RBI on Friday decided to keep the benchmark repurchase (repo)

rate at 6.5 per cent. The central bank raised its forecast for economic growth to 7 per cent from 6.5 per cent, maintaining India’s position as the world’s fastest-growing major economy, after a stronger-than-expected 7.6 per cent growth in the July-

September quarter. Elsewhere in Asia, Shanghai Composite gained 0.11 per cent, while the Nikkei 225 and Hang Seng fell by 1.68 per cent and 0.15 per cent, respectively. European markets were trading higher with France’s CAC 40 gaining by 0.91 per cent and London’s FTSE 100 rising by 0.55 per cent. Germany’s DAX was trading 0.39 per cent higher. The US markets ended with significant gains in overnight trade on Thursday, with the Nasdaq rallying more than 1 per cent. Global oil benchmark Brent crude was trading 1.62 per cent higher to USD 75.25 a barrel. On Thursday, the 30-share index fell 132.04 points, or 0.19 per cent, to close at 69,521.69. Nifty declined 36.55 points, or 0.17 per cent, to settle at 20,901.15.



Crossborder remittances using e rupee to halve cost of such payments to 3 per cent: Ajay

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) or e-rupee can help halve the cost of cross-border remittances to 2-3 per cent, an official said on Friday. Economic Affairs Secretary in the Finance Ministry Ajay Seth said CBDC can be used for trade, remittances, or any other cross-border payment. “At the moment, cross-border payment is not a very efficient system, it takes time. At the same time, there is cost factor,” Seth said. Giving data, he said remittances to India is around USD 100 billion annually and compared to the global level of 8-9 per cent, the cost in India is low at 5 per cent of each transaction value. “So, for cross-border pay-

ments, CBDC can be very effective to bring down cost further to the range of 2-3 per cent,” the Secretary said at the Ficci Annual Convention here. The introduction of CBDC was announced in the Union Budget 2022-23 by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. The RBI began the pilot wholesale CBDC project on November 1, 2022, while the pilot on retail version was launched on December 1, 2022. The e-rupee is in the form of a digital token that represents legal tender. It is being issued in the same denominations as the paper currency and coins. It is being distributed through financial intermediaries, i.e., the banks. Users are able to transact with e-rupee through a digital wallet offered by the participating banks.

India urea production rises to 284.95 L tonne in 2022-23

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India’s urea production has increased to 284.95 lakh tonnes last fiscal from 225.08 lakh tonnes in 2014-15, the government informed Lok Sabha on Friday. In written replies, Minister of State for Chemicals and Fertilisers Bhagwanth Khuba said the central government ensures adequate availability of urea to meet the requirements of states/Union Territories. To increase the availability of urea through indigenous sources, the Centre announced New Investment Policy (NIP) - 2012 to facilitate fresh investment in the urea sector and to make India self-sufficient in the sector. “A total of 6 new urea units have been set up under NIP - 2012, which together have added 76.2 lakh tonnes per annum in the existing indigenous urea production capacity of the country. “In addition, Government of India also introduced the New Urea Policy (NUP)-2015 on 25th May, 2015 with one of the objectives of maximising indigenous urea production. As a result, the indigenous production of the country increased from 225.08 lakh tonnes in 2014-15 to 284.95 lakh tonne in 2022-23,” Khuba said. The minister also said that the gap between demand (requirement) and production of fertilizers is met through imports. Under the Urea Subsidy Scheme (USS), urea is provided to the farmers at a statutorily notified



Maximum Retail Price (MRP). Besides, under the Nutrient Based Subsidy Policy, a fix amount of subsidy is notified on annual/semi-annual basis, which ensures availability of P&K fertilizers at reasonable prices to farmers. Urea is imported on government account. However, all P&K (phosphatic and potassic) fertilizers (DAP, MOP and NPK) are covered under Open General License (OGL) under the Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) Scheme and they are imported by the fertilizer companies on commercially viable terms. According to the data, imports of urea fell to 75.8 lakh tonnes in 2022-23 from 91.36 lakh tonnes in the previous year. Imports of Di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) rose to 65.83 lakh tonnes from 54.62 lakh tonnes, while the inward shipments of MOP fell to 18.66 lakh tonnes from 24.6 lakh tonnes. NPK imports increased to 27.5 lakh tonnes from 11.7 lakh tonnes.

IIFL Securities stock settles 5 per cent higher

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Shares of IIFL Securities settled 5 per cent higher on Friday after the SAT set aside Sebi’s order prohibiting the company from onboarding new clients for two years. The stock of the brokerage firm rallied 5.13 per cent to settle at Rs 124.05 apiece on the BSE. On the NSE, scrip of IIFL Securities jumped 4.20 per cent to close at Rs 122.85 per piece. During the day, shares of brokerage firm IIFL Securities touched a 52-week high of Rs 134.40 each on BSE and NSE. On the volume front, 1.02 crore shares were traded on the NSE, while 8.10 lakh shares exchanged hands on the BSE, during the day.

At the close of the session, the 30-share BSE Sensex bounced 303.91 points or 0.44 per cent higher to settle at 69,825.60, while NSE Nifty rose 68.25 points to close at 20,969.40. On Thursday, the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) set aside the market regulator Sebi’s order prohibiting IIFL Securities from onboarding new clients for two years, and slashed the fine levied on the brokerage house to Rs 20 lakh from Rs 1 crore. The order came after IIFL Securities, earlier known as India Infoline Ltd., filed an appeal against the order passed by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) in June. The capital markets regulator, in June, prohibited IIFL Securities



from taking up new clients for two years for alleged mis-utilisation of client funds.

Setting aside Sebi’s order, SAT Presiding Officer Justice Tarun Agarwala and technical member Meera Swarup said, “There has been no misuse of client funds and by wrongly considering the non-funded portion of the bank guarantee as per the 2016 circular, an attempt has been made out to show that there was a misuse of client funds which, in our opinion, is patently erroneous”. Further, it said that there was no failure on the part of the appellant (IIFL Securities) to segregate the money of the client. It is not that these monies have been misused for their purposes, and so no penalty under the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act (SCRA) could be imposed.

India has 3 years window to attract companies moving out of China: NITI Aayog

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has a two-to-three-year window to capitalise on the global strategy of de-risking from China and the government needs to be very alert to come up with a set of policies that make the shift of businesses to India attractive and easier, NITI Aayog CEO Subrahmanyam said on Friday. Addressing CII Global Economic Policy Forum 2023, Subrahmanyam further said India is in a sweet spot due to the outcome of geopolitics and the fact that the country has a young working-age population. “So I think, in the next 15 to 20

years time span, India has an opportunity in manufacturing. But the opportunity and the window for India is at best two to three years, because supply chains are unwinding, they’re becoming shorter, and they’re looking for new geographies. “This is going to be a two-three year phenomenon, and then supply chains will get frozen,” he said. Subrahmanyam pointed out that it is not just non-Chinese companies but even Chinese companies which want to move out of China because of labour shortages. “They are having a shortage of demand because there is a population shift in terms of the age,



a shortage of labour supply, the rising cost of labour and the stressed capital markets,” he said. Noting that the capital market system is under stress in China, Subrahmanyam also

said it is a very clear signal to big MNCs from their capitals that de-risk from Beijing. “So even if global trade does not grow in total, there could be a shift in trade from one geogra-

phy to the other. So that is something which India can capitalize in the short run,” he emphasised. The NITI Aayog CEO opined that to attract businesses from China, India will have to compete with Vietnam, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico and Bangladesh. “So I think... We need to be very alert to come up with a set of policies, a set of programs to make doing business and shifting business to India attractive,” he said. Subrahmanyam also pointed out India’s customs rule does not allow import of used goods when companies shift the factory as they move pre-owned

stuff. “So you need to allow that to happen as there are half-a-dozen other countries who are going to be competing with you to get the shift out of China,” he said. On the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), Subrahmanyam said Indian companies need to adapt fast to the carbon tax if the major markets are moving in that direction. “The fights will be fought by the government at the international level. But at the bottom level, for survival’s sake, I think companies will need to adjust and the government would have to come up with policies to facilitate that,” he added.

Nayara to start polypropylene plant

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Nayara Energy, India’s second-largest private oil firm, on Friday said it will start operations of a new polypropylene plant in the first half of next year, marking its entry into the lucrative petrochemical sector. In the last financial year (April 2022 to March 2023), India’s consumption of polypropylene stood at 6.4 million tonnes, of which around 1.6 million tonnes or around 25 per cent was imported. With wide applications in segments like packaging, automotive applications, consumer durables and lifestyle products, the demand for polypropylene (PP) is projected to rise. “Nayara is well on track for its entry into the petrochemicals sector with its upcoming 4,50,000 tonnes per annum polypropylene plant expected to be commercially operational during H1 2024 - when Nayara expects the demand to accelerate and margins to kick in,” the firm said. As India’s GDP grows, the demand for polypropylene is expected to grow to around 7.5 million tonnes in the next two years, creating sufficient room for new and upcoming domestic capacities. Nayara said it will be the first polypropylene (PP) producer in the country using the latest



phthalate-free catalyst for the entire PP production. Phthalate-free grades will provide cleaner PP for pharma, health and hygiene applications. “Our customers are also expected to achieve higher throughput, quality consistency and smooth processing with our PP grades produced using advanced catalyst and technology platform,” it said. “We will be packaging our products in pilferage-contamination proof HDSS bags. Our customers will also have the advantage of our all-India sales distribution network and strong technical support. We believe it will be the best product in India for food applications.” Presently, refinery-based PP economics are lower due to strong fuel cracks and lower PP prices (which have fallen significantly in the last 18 months). This is the cyclical nature of the business and the long-term

prospects of the industry remain bright. Importantly, integrated refineries with Petchem portfolios are expected to achieve margin resilience through business cycles as compared to stand-alone refiners. “At the same time, we are actively considering increasing investment in the India growth story, especially in the petchem sector,” Nayara said. With its strategically located refinery at Vadinar in Gujarat, which is the largest petrochemical consumption region in the country, the company is positioned to make a strong entry into this high growth segment. Nayara operates a 20 million tonnes a year oil refinery at Vadinar and also has more than 6,500 petrol pumps in the country. It delivers about 8 per cent of India’s refining output.

Sebi considering to create new asset class

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator Sebi is looking to create a new asset class -- which lies between mutual funds and portfolio management services (PMS) -- and the new product can cater to high-risk investors, its chief Madhabi Puri Buch said on Friday. The Sebi chief said that there is a spectrum of asset classes for investors. Of these, “mutual funds are the highly retail investors, then you have in between a PMS and then you have AIF (alternative investment fund) for private equity”. “We feel there is room for an additional asset class somewhere between mutual funds and PMS... Sebi is looking into a whole new asset class,” Buch told reporters here at the sidelines of a CII event. In October, mutual funds industry body AMFI clarified that the idea of introducing a new asset class, which lies between mutual funds and PMS, was at a “very nascent stage”. According to the industry body, there was a deliberation within the industry for an instrument that caters to investors who are looking for an intermediate investment product between mutual funds and PMS. When asked about the total expense ratio (TER), she said that a lot of back-testing is happening and co-creation is happening. In May, Sebi floated a consultation paper and proposed a uniform total expense ratio across mutual fund schemes in a bid to bring in transparency in the costs charged to unitholders. TER is a percentage of a scheme’s corpus that a mutual fund house charges towards expenses, including administrative and management.

GDP growth of 7 per cent in FY24: RBI DG Michael Patra



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Reserve Bank Deputy Governor Michael Patra on Friday termed the revised 7 per cent growth expectation of the RBI as a “conservative estimate”. Speaking to reporters after the announcement of the bi-monthly policy review, Patra said the real GDP growth in the first half of the fiscal year has beat all estimates, including the RBI’s. Patra said if one were to add the RBI’s estimates for the second half, the GDP growth for FY24 will come at 6.9 per cent. But, the high frequency data for October and November points to robust economic activity. “So at the current time, 7 (per cent) is like a conservative estimate,” the Deputy Governor in-charge of the important monetary policy department said. Earlier in the day, the Reserve

Bank sharply revised up its GDP estimate for FY24 to 7 per cent from the earlier expectation of 6.5 per cent. Many watchers were expecting the RBI to do the revision, but the 0.50 per cent push was not expected by any analyst. On growth, Governor Shaktikanta Das said that the demand for two-wheelers is high as seen in over 20 per cent growth during the festive season and also added that fast moving consumer goods companies are also reporting a turnaround in rural demand. He added that private capex is also showing signs of revival, particularly in sectors like petroleum, steel cement and chemicals, and pointed out that capacity utilization has reached a threshold at 74 per cent. “It has reached a point where we can expect private investment also to start picking,” he said. “Many companies in the manufacturing sector are using their own internal reserves and surpluses to invest. They’re not approaching the bank or they’re not resorting to any other kind of borrowing or raising funds. They’re using their own internal reserves and surplus for investment,” Das said. Das also said that there is growing international confidence in India’s economy, and he has seen the same in interactions with governors of other central banks, other regulators and foreign investors.



CCI conducting market study on artificial intelligence

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Fair trade watchdog CCI is conducting a market study to assess the impact of artificial intelligence on the competition landscape, the regulator’s chief Ravneet Kaur said on Friday. In recent times, there has been an increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) applications in several sectors. “We are doing a market study on artificial intelligence... In that study (we will) try to understand the dynamics better. We can differentiate what kind of AI that we would like to support and which one is stifling competition,” Kaur said at an event organized by industry chamber FICCI here. This can provide valuable insights into the competitive landscape. The CCI has the mandate to curb unfair business practices in the marketplace across sectors and also promote fair competition. Since its inception, the CCI has cleared 1,000 combinations, mergers & acquisitions cases, Kaur said. The CCI has played a key role in regulating and ensuring a competitive market in the country.

Junior Women Hockey World Cup

India beat Korea 3-1 in classification match

PTI ■ SANTIAGO (CHILE)

India came from behind to outwit Korea 3-1 in the 9th-12th place classification match of the Junior women's hockey World Cup here. Ropni Kumari (23rd minute), Mumtaz Khan (44th) and Annu (46th) scored for India, while Jiyeun Choi (19th) was the goal-getter for Korea on Thursday. In the opening quarter, Korea dominated possession and secured the first penalty corner, but they could not utilise the chance.



India, opting for counter-attacks, kept Korea's defence busy but couldn't convert their promising entries to the opposition circle, resulting to a goal-less deadlock after the first 1 quarter. The second quarter mirrored the intensity of the first, with India and Korea persisting in their attacking plays. Choi broke the deadlock with a precise penalty corner strike, but India swiftly responded through Ropni, who equalized from another penalty corner. Korea, desperate to regain the lead, ramped up their aggression. Despite their fervent efforts, India's solid defence thwarted Korea's advances and counter-attacked skillfully, keeping the pressure on their opponent's defensive line. However, no more goals were scored in the second quarter as both teams entered the half-time break with the score levelled at 1-1. In the third quarter, India dominated the proceedings by keeping possession and troubling Korea's defence rigorously. The

strategy paid dividends as Mumtaz brilliantly slotted the ball home from a penalty corner to give her team the lead. The penultimate quarter ended 2-1 in favour of India. India intensified their attacks and extended their lead early in the fourth and final quarter of the game as Annu netted a superb field goal, securing a two-goal advantage for her team. India continued to unsettle Korea's defence, maintaining their momentum and denying any chance of a comeback. The victory means that India, who had earlier bowed out of the title contention after finishing third in Pool C, will stand a chance to finish ninth in the tournament when they take on either Chile or USA in their last match on Saturday.



Suárez wins the golden ball

AP ■ SAO PAULO

Uruguayan striker Luis Suárez, a former teammate of Lionel Messi at Barcelona, won the golden ball as the player of the season in the Brazilian league. The 37-year-old Suarez, who played with Messi in Spain after several seasons at Liverpool and Ajax, scored 17 goals for Brazilian league runner-up Gremio. The season ended Wednesday with Palmeiras defending its title. Suárez scored two goals on the final day of the season in a 3-2 victory over Fluminense at the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro. The Brazilian league's top scorer was Atletico Mineiro forward Paulinho with 20 goals. Suárez said many times he feared he could not finish the season in Brazil because of intense knee pain and the hassle of long flights, but a selection of journalists voted for him to win the golden ball award.

Suárez played 53 matches for Gremio and scored 26 goals in three competitions this season. "I am almost 37 years old, this is the year I played the most times in my career. It was also the year I was most often distant from my family. This award belongs to them," a tearful Suárez said Thursday after receiving the trophy from former national team teammate Diego Lugano. When asked about his future, however, Suárez did not respond. But he said he will remember not only Gremio fans, but also those of other clubs who respected him as an opponent. "It is hard to see rival fans here applaud you when you play, and that did happen to me in some places," Suárez said. "This is all about the player's mind, it doesn't matter how old they are. It could be Endrick at age 17, Hulk, Suárez ... The mindset and the commitment have to be there for you to play and do what you like.

Soccer fans take legal action

To stop French authorities from banning away supporters at games

AP ■ PARIS

An umbrella organisation for soccer fan groups has taken legal action aimed at stopping French authorities from banning away supporters attending some games this weekend. The National Supporters' Association said Friday it has referred the matter to France's highest administrative court as it seeks to challenge bans targeting four matches, including two in the top-tier of the French league. The bans ordered by the French government and local authorities followed the death of a supporter in Nantes last weekend. Sports minister Amelie Oudea-Castera said this week that preventing supporters from traveling to rival clubs could help restore calm following a series of incidents this season. "These appeals are in no way intended to minimize the seriousness of last Saturday's tragedy," the group said. "No one can doubt the immense sadness in the French stands. Nor can anyone doubt our sense of responsibility." The group argued that it's essential to let away fans attend the matches involving Reims, Lens, Auxerre and Bordeaux to guarantee safety for all, especially because many fans are already on site. "The aim of our approach is to ensure that these matches can take place in an atmosphere of respect and freedom," the group said. Reims said this week that its fans were not allowed to

travel to Nice because their French league match on Sunday has been identified as "at risk" of violence. Lyon fans were not allowed to attend Wednesday's 3-0 loss at Marseille and Lens supporters have been banned from travelling to Friday's match in Montpellier. In France, travelling fans are regularly banned from high-risk games such as those between bitter rivals Paris Saint-Germain and Marseille. But Oudea-Castera suggested the measure could be used more often. Marseille fans at their Stade Velodrome deployed banners protesting such bans before their team's match against Lyon. "Banned from travelling in the country of freedoms. Today more than ever, freedom for ultras," their message read, in a reference to diehard fans often described as "ultras." The National Supporters' Association said it decided not to challenge the bans imposed on away fans for matches between PSG and Nantes, Saint-Etienne and Nimes, Lorient and Marseille, as well as Lyon and Toulouse. "These orders are highly questionable. But (these matches) will attract very large crowds. It's too late to change their framework," the group said. The Nantes fan who died last week was killed following a fight between supporters before the club's 1-0 win over Nice. The public prosecutor's office has launched an investigation into voluntary manslaughter.

Naruka, Raiza unstoppable in shooting trials

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hangzhou Asian Games silver medalist Anantjeet Singh Naruka was unchallengeable in the men's skeet national selection trials 1, while Raiza Dhillon overcame national champion Ganemat Sekhon in women's skeet at the Karni Singh range here on Friday. Rajasthan's Naruka and Haryana's Raiza, both shot down 58 clay targets in the 60-shot final to register victories. National champion Naruka, following his exploits in Hangzhou, shot 24 early in the morning in the final qualification round to finish on top in the 40-strong field with a score of 121 out of a possible 125. He missed a target on his very first station in the six-man final, but only one more after that, to leave behind Sheeraz Sheikh comfortably in second



place. Sheeraz shot 56, while Gurjaot Khangura was third with 45-hits in the first 50 targets.

Sheeraz, on a comeback trail, also kept his poise throughout the day, coming second in a four-man shoot-off for two

final qualification spots. Gurjaot won the shoot-off to take the other spot. In women's skeet, Raiza was in sublime form throughout the three-day competition and shot three rounds of perfect 25s to top the qualifiers with a score of 122. She would have broken Ganemat's current national record by two had the scores of the trials been considered. Indian No. 1 Ganemat shot a perfect 25 on the day to get into the finals in second place with a score of 120. There was no stopping Raiza, however, as she shot down 58 targets as against Ganemat's 54 in the finals, to win. Rajasthan shooter Maheshwari Chauhan finished third with a score of 43. The skeet finals concluded the first shotgun national selection trials and the second is due to take place in Bhopal from December 15-21.

Jon bolts for LIV Golf in stunning blow to PGA Tour

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Masters champion Jon Rahm bolted for Saudi-funded LIV Golf for what's believed to be more money than the PGA Tour's entire prize fund, a stunning blow that deepens the divide in golf as the two sides were negotiating a commercial deal. Rahm confirmed the move in an interview with Fox News on Thursday. Wearing a black letterman's jacket with the LIV logo, he said it was not an easy decision. "I've been very happy," Rahm said. "But there is a lot of things that LIV Golf has to offer that were very enticing." He said he would keep private how much the deal was worth amid reports that put his compensation in the \$500 million range, which likely would include equity in his new team.

The PGA Tour's total purse in 2023 was about \$460 million. The development comes 25 days before the deadline for the PGA Tour and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund try to finalize their June 6 agreement to become commercial partners in a for-profit enterprise, along with the European tour. Talks have been going slowly, and Tiger Woods said last week there were a lot of moving parts. The biggest moving part turned out to be the 29-year-old Rahm, the No. 3 player in the world and a two-time major champion approaching his prime, being the latest to defect. Rahm had been adamant that he has enough money and that he cares only about history and legacy. He recently said he "laughed" whenever he saw his name linked to LIV. "It was a great offer. The money is great, obviously it's wonderful," Rahm said.



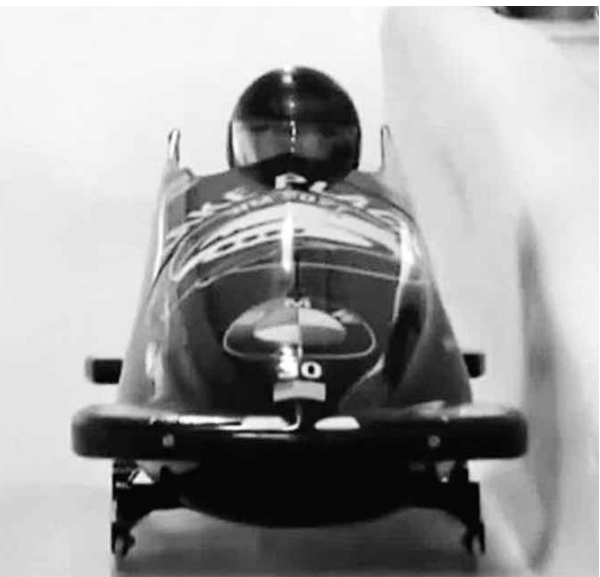
"But what I said before is true: I do not play golf for the money. I play golf for the love of the game and for the love of golf. But, as a husband, as a father and as a family man I have a duty to my family to give them the best opportunities and the most amount of resources possible and that is

where that comes in." He remains eligible for the majors for the next five years - the Masters for life, the U.S. Open until 2031. Still to be determined is how the move affects his eligibility for the Ryder Cup. "It's hard to sit here and criticize Jon because of what a great play-

er he is," Rory McIlroy said in an interview with Sky Sports. "Jon is going to be in Bethpage in 2025 (for the Ryder Cup). Because of this decision, the European tour is going to have to rewrite the rules. There's no question about that." Rahm's addition gives LIV Golf seven of the last 14 winners at the majors. "LIV Golf is here to stay," Lawrence Burian, the COO of LIV Golf, said in a news release sent out after Rahm's appearance on Fox News. PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan had been scheduled to meet this week with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the head of the PIF. The meeting was delayed until next week, but it wasn't clear if it was still on or how Rahm's announcement affects the negotiations. Since the stunning commercial partnership was proposed on June 6, the tour has also enter-

tained offers from private equity groups. Those include Fenway Sports Group and Acorn Growth, which includes former AT&T Chairman Randall Stephenson. He resigned from the PGA Tour board out of protest with its deal with Saudi Arabia. The agreement originally included language to end the poaching of players, but that was removed when the Justice Department had antitrust concerns. Signing with LIV is counter to everything Rahm has said about the league. He has declared his support for the PGA Tour dating to February 2022, and as recently as August he told a Spanish podcast that "I laugh when people rumor me with LIV Golf. I've never liked the format." He had said 54 holes with no cut and a shotgun start "is not a golf tournament."

Lake Placid offers proposal to host sliding sports for 2026 Winter Games



AP ■ LAKE PLACID (US)

Lake Placid has put forth an offer to host sliding sports for the 2026 Winter Olympics, which are scheduled to take place in Italy, where organizers are struggling to provide a venue for bobsled, luge and skeleton racing. The U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee

announced the bid after its quarterly meeting Thursday, only two days after the chief of the Milan-Cortina Games said it is possible the hosts could come up with a new proposal to build a track. In October, organizers told the IOC the Italian government had ordered them to move the events due to cost overruns involved in renovating the

Cortina sliding track. Sliding centers in Switzerland and Austria were considered the best options. Lake Placid hosted the Winter Olympics in 1932 and 1980 and, as home of a U.S. Olympic Training Center, has a state-of-the-art sliding center. Last year, a \$104 million renovation of the Olympic center was wrapped up in time for Lake Placid to host the FISU World University Games. USOPC CEO Sarah Hirshland said Olympic organizers invited the proposal from Lake Placid. "At this stage, our role is simply to help them present a proposal and to endorse that proposal and ensure that we have the broad support required from the municipalities as well as from the athlete and (national governing body) community," she said. Milan-Cortina is hopeful of not becoming the first Winter Games to hold events outside the host nation's borders, though it's not unheard of on the Summer side: Next year's surfing competition for the Paris Olympics will be held in Tahiti.

HI names 22-member Indian women team

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Goalkeeper Savita Punia will continue to lead the Indian women's hockey team, while veteran forward Vandana Katariya will be her deputy as the national federation on Friday announced a 22-member team for the upcoming 5-Nation Tournament in Spain. India will play against Ireland, Germany, Spain and Belgium in the tournament which is scheduled to be held from December 15 to 22 in Valencia. It will serve as the preparatory assignment ahead of the all-important Olympic Qualifiers in Ranchi beginning from January 13. "We are going with a well-balanced, strong team," Indian women's hockey team chief coach Janneke Schopman said in a release from HI. "The tournament gives the players an ideal platform to build on the recent performances and keep themselves in the right frame of mind heading into the all-important Olympic Qualifiers. "The matches against the top European teams will also help



us identify areas that need improvement ahead of the tournament, and we are looking forward to making the most out of the opportunity." The Squad: Goalkeepers: Savita (Captain), Bichu Devi Khairabam Defenders: Nikki Pradhan, Udita, Ishika Chaudhary, Gurjit Kaur, Akshata Abaso Dhekale Midfielders: Nisha, Vaishnavi Vitthal Phalke, Monika, Salima Tete, Neha, Navneet Kaur, Sonika, Jyoti, Baljeet Kaur Forwards: Jyoti Chhattri, Sangita Kumari, Deepika, Vandana Katariya (Vice-Captain), Beauty Dundung, Sharmila Devi.

FIA ends its conflict of interest investigation into Toto, Susie

AP ■ PARIS

Formula One's governing body has dropped its probe of a potential conflict of interest between Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff and his wife Susie Wolff, who works for F1's management group. The FIA's compliance department had been looking into the Wolffs following allegations of a conflict of interest and whether they have shared confidential information. "The FIA can confirm that there is no ongoing investigation in terms of ethical or disciplinary inquiries involving any individual," the organization said in a statement on Thursday. Susie Wolff is the managing director of the all-female series F1 Academy. She had rejected the claims "in the strongest possible terms" and said she was "deeply insulted." The probe began after a report in BusinessF1 magazine that rival team executives raised concerns about whether Toto and Susie Wolff passed on information discussed in private meetings. Susie Wolff reports to F1 chief executive Stefano Domenicali.



The BusinessF1 report said team officials were alarmed when Toto Wolff made comments in a recent meeting that included details they felt could only have come from F1. The report did not detail what was discussed. The Mercedes team and Formula One Management, which runs the commercial side of F1, denied any allegations of improper sharing of information or conflict of interest. "Following a review of Formula One Management's F1 code of conduct and F1 conflict of interest policy and confirmation that appropriate protective measures are in place to miti-

gate any potential conflicts, the FIA is satisfied that FOM's compliance management system is robust enough to prevent any unauthorized disclosure of confidential information," the FIA's statement said on Thursday. On Wednesday, nine Formula One teams released nearly identical statements denying they had complained to the FIA about an alleged conflict of interest. The flurry of statements followed an appearance by Red Bull team principal Christian Horner on Sky Sports in which he denied instigating the investigation.

‘NO COACH CAN CREATE ARTIST LIKE SHAMI’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mohammed Shami possesses a rare ability of landing the ball in an upright seam position every single time and no coach in the world can create such a fast bowling “artist”, gushed India’s bowling coach Paras Mhambrey. Shami, who finished on top of the bowling charts with 24 wickets from seven matches in the ODI World Cup, has been India’s go-to bowler in ODIs and Tests. Mhambrey, one of the quietest back-room workers in the current Indian set-up, doesn’t want to take any credit for Shami’s success. Will India get another talent like Mohammed Shami? “Well, if I tell you that coaches could create a bowler like Shami, then I would be lying. If a bowler can land it on upright seam every time then

every other bowler in the world will be Shami,” Mhambrey told PTI in an exclusive interview before leaving for the tour of South Africa. “It is a skill that Shami has acquired with tremendous hardwork and developed himself into the bowler that he is. “Bowling ball after ball on the seam and with that perfect wrist position and getting it to move either ways is a rare skill set. A lot of bowlers, even if they land deliveries on the seam, will see the ball straightening up after pitching,” Mhambrey said. The former India pacer also spoke about another brilliant operator Jasprit Bumrah in the same vein. “Even Bumrah with his unusual action gets the ball to move in or away with same action. This is an art and lot of hard work and dedication goes into perfecting the art.”



The way Shami and Bumrah have managed to dominate the the batters around the world is something that has surprised Mhambrey. Many would be envy of their success. “I think in Test matches, we had Bumrah, Shami and Ishant (Sharma), who created this kind of magic but frankly speaking, if you ask me now if I would have expected this kind of dominance, I wouldn’t have dreamt of this level of performance.” “I mean to bowl out Sri Lanka for 50 and then to repeat it against a team like South Africa, score 320 odd and bowl them out for 80. That was surreal. Obviously with an attack like ours, we expected them to do well but to put up such a performance on the biggest stage for such a sustained period was something that was really commendable.” The goal to create perfect bench-strength

Mhambrey, who came on board along with head Rahul Dravid was asked to assess the performance of Indian bowlers in the two-year cycle that ended with World Cup. He spoke about the takeaways, like qualifying for WTC final, beating a strong Australian team and also becoming the first Indian team to win ODI series in England. However Dravid and his team never lost sight of bigger picture, which is to create a bench strength. “When we took over, we needed to see that two years down the line, we have also created a sufficient bench strength in every format. We had to identify at least 3-5 bowlers from next batch and also ensure that they get enough game time and are ready for the challenges of international cricket. Rahul, Vicky (Rathour), myself and (T) Dilip got together and identified the bowlers.”



Veda desperate to revive cricket career

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tragedies and snubs are nothing new for Veda Krishnamurthy as she has seen it all in the last three years, but the out-of-favour India cricketer is desperate to make a fresh start and has pinned her hopes on the upcoming WPL to regain her spot in the national women’s side. Having got a snub in the inaugural Women’s Premier League auction earlier this year, a leaner and much fitter Veda is now hoping to earn a WPL contract on Saturday, an opportunity which can open the national team’s door for her. “I feel that the ability and experience I have will not take much time for me to get into a system and adjust again. It is all about going there and showcasing whatever I can,” Veda told PTI in an exclusive interview. “Definitely, it’s (WPL) a great platform for players, especially who are on the same boat like me. I haven’t played international cricket for the last three years, so this is a platform where you want to do well, and if you are able go and perform in situations and platforms like this it opens up the door for the Indian team as well. “We have seen that happen in men’s cricket. So that is something which I will have in my mind.” Veda, who has played 48 ODIs scoring 829 runs with a best score of 71, was an integral part of the Indian team that finished runner-up in the 2017 Women’s ODI World Cup final, losing to hosts England by just nine runs at Lord’s.

Veda was also part of India’s squad for the 2018 and 2020 ICC Women’s World Twenty20 tournaments in the West Indies and Australia respectively. But twin personal tragedies halted her career in 2021 when she lost her mother and elder sister to COVID in a span of two weeks, and it took her a long time and effort to come out of that. “Very difficult, honestly, because suddenly when you have been shaken you don’t know what to do. There was a lot of mental health issues I faced because I didn’t know how to live with the grief. There was a lot of anxiousness, there was lot of depression. I was not sleeping well. You want to come out of it but it’s not that easy. I used to be awake till 5-6 in the morning, I used to be scared of closing my eyes,” she said. “It took me close to one-and-a-half years to get back to normal without any medicine. It still kind of comes back and haunts you, but you need to keep that side and focus of the physical aspect. It feels good to be back in shape,” added the right-handed batter, who featured in 76 T20s for India scoring 875 runs. Once she managed to defeat her inner demons, Veda concentrated on reviving her career to be in shape for the WPL auction slated for Saturday and all she wants is an opportunity to showcase her mettle. “I have been putting a lot of hours in my practice. I have become a lot fitter, lot leaner in the last four months. I have been hitting the ball really well. So, now, just hoping what happens on December 9.

ICC rates Ahmedabad pitch which hosted ODI World Cup final as average

NEW DELHI, DEC 8 (PTI)

The pitch at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, which hosted the ODI World Cup final between India and Australia on November 19, has been rated “average” by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

“very good”. Australia had won the World Cup final after beating India by six wickets on a pitch which was slow and sluggish. Opting to bowl, India could score just 240 in 50 overs with Australia achieving the target in 43 overs, with opener Travis Head making a 120-ball 137. The pitches used in India’s league matches against South Africa, England, Pakistan and

Australia in Kolkata, Lucknow, Ahmedabad and Chennai respectively were also rated as ‘average’ by the ICC. However, the Wankhede Stadium pitch on which India faced New Zealand in the semi-finals received a ‘good’ rating. There were media reports ahead of that match suggesting that the hosts had switched pitch, offering a used surface instead of a fresh one.

The ICC also gave an “average” rating to the Eden Gardens pitch in Kolkata which hosted the second semifinal between Australia and South Africa. It turned out to be a low-scoring match where Australia dismissed South Africa for 212 in 49.4 overs. Australia then managed to overhaul the target in 47.2 overs, losing seven wickets. ICC match referee and former India pacer Javagal Srinath,

however, gave a “very good” rating to the outfield at Eden Gardens. According to the ICC, a pitch is rated average if it “lacks carry, and/or bounce and/or occasional seam movement, but consistent in carry and bounce. A degree of turn, but with average bounce for the spinner. Falling significantly short of ‘very good’ with respect to carry, bounce and turn.”

England withdraw Emma Lamb from Test against India

PTI ■ MUMBAI

England batting all-rounder Emma Lamb was on Friday withdrawn from the upcoming one-off Test against India to be played here from December 14-17. The 25-year-old has suffered a back injury and will be returning home to consult with a spinal surgeon, according to England Cricket. Middle-order batter Maia Bouchier and left-arm spinner Kirstie Gordon have been added to the Test squad, stated ECB. “Emma Lamb has been withdrawn from the England Women Test squad to play India due to a back problem. Lamb has returned home to the UK where she will see a spinal surgeon to determine next steps,” ECB said in a statement. While Gordon played her only Test against Australia Women four years ago in Taunton, Bouchier is yet to make her debut in the conventional format but has played 22 T20Is and three ODIs for England Women. Squad: Tammy Beaumont, Danni Wyatt, Maia Bouchier, Alice Capsey, Kate Cross, Charlie Dean, Sophia Dunkley, Sophie Ecclestone, Lauren Giles, Kirstie Gordon, Amy Jones (wk), Bess Heath (wk), Heather Knight (c), Nat Sciver-Brunt, Lauren Bell.

Phillips helps New Zealand hit back on Day 3

PTI ■ MIRPUR (BANGLADESH)

Glenn Phillips played an Gattacking knock as New Zealand hit back strongly on Day 3 of the rain-affected second cricket test against Bangladesh on Friday to leave the game evenly poised. Phillips struck a 72-ball 87 to help New Zealand put up 180 in its first innings and take an 8-run lead, and then New Zealand’s bowlers left Bangladesh on 38-2 before play was called off due to bad light. Bangladesh was dismissed for 172 in its first innings. After the entire second day and the first session of the third day were washed out, Phillips led the charge with one-day style batting as New Zealand resumed at 55-5.



Phillips hit nine fours and four sixes in his innings and was particularly harsh on Mehidy Hasan, hitting three fours and one six in his first three overs to keep the runs flowing. Phillips formed two crucial partnerships - 49 with Mitchell for the sixth wicket and 55 with Kyle Jamieson for the eighth to help New Zealand earn the lead. Mitchell was struggling against the spinners and eventually was caught out by Mehidy at

long-on for 18 off offspinner Nayeem Hasan’s first over. In his next over Nayeem, who took 2-21, dismissed Mitchell Santner for 1 to leave New Zealand at 97-7 but Phillips got the support of Jamieson to keep Bangladesh at bay. Shoriful (2-15) broke through with the wicket of Jamieson, who made 20 with three boundaries. Skipper Tim Southee hit a four and a six for his 14 as New Zealand went past Bangladesh’s total. With Phillips attacking relentlessly on a tough wicket, New Zealand appeared set to take a substantial lead. But his knock came to an end when he edged a delivery of Shoriful behind. Taijul (3-64) removed Southee in the next over, to limit the lead to single digits.

Everyone entitled to their opinions: Warner to Johnson

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Veteran opener David Warner on Friday ignored former Australia pacer Mitchell Johnson’s scathing attack on him for setting his own retirement date, saying that “everyone’s entitled to their opinions”. In a newspaper column, Johnson had questioned whether Warner had been in strong enough form to set his own retirement date. Johnson had also opened up old wounds by referencing Warner’s role in the ball-tampering saga in South Africa. The 37-year-old Warner had expressed his desire for a Sydney farewell after the third and final Test against Pakistan starting from January 3, 2024. The three-match Test series starts in Perth on December 14. Warner, who has scored 8,487

runs from 109 Tests since making his debut in 2011, refused to be drawn into the controversy, saying his former teammate is entitled to his opinions, however scathing. “It wouldn’t be a summer without a headline, would it?” he asked at the launch of Fox Cricket’s summer coverage in Paramatta on Friday, according to cricket.Com.Au. “It is what it is. Everyone’s entitled to their own opinions,” the explosive opening batter said in his first comments after Johnson’s scathing attack on him. “Moving forward, we’re looking forward to a nice Test over in the west.” Since the summer of 2020-21, Warner has managed one Test century from 25 matches -- a memorable double-hundred against South Africa in his 100th Test at the MCG in 2022.

Indian women’s team faces stern challenge against England

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Eying to keep the three-match series alive, India will look for an improved show, especially in the bowling and fielding departments, when they take on a rampaging England in the second women’s T20I here on Saturday. England extended their dominant run against India with a comprehensive 38-run win which gave them a 1-0 lead in the three-match series. It also

was England’s 21st victory in 28 T20Is against India and eighth in 10 matches in the country. India failed to read the conditions adequately and also made glaring errors in the first game which turned out to be a one-sided affair. On a flat pitch not offering much to the bowlers especially in the first innings, India used four different spinners - including the rookie Kanika Ahuja - and England took them apart, scoring 121 runs from a collec-

tive 12 overs for three wickets. India handed debuts to two left-arm spinners Shreyanka Patil (2/44) and Saika Ishaque (1/38) but both were wayward and expensive in their respective four-over spells. Senior spinner Deepti Sharma (0/28) was not even trusted with completing her quota of overs. Indian spinners bowled short as well as full tosses at times for England batters to dominate, whereas their fielders did not support them enough. Both



Danni Wyatt and Nat Sciver-Brunt were given lifelines which proved to be costly for the home team. The only bright spot in India’s bowling was seamer Renuka Singh Thakur, who had left England reeling at 2 for 2 in the opening over of the match. But India not only allowed England to stage a comeback, the hosts, coming off a two-month break, also could not force their way back into the game at any stage.

SA return just a process at moment: Du Plessis

PTI ■ BENGALURU

While a return to South African national team remains an enticing proposition for him, former captain Faf du Plessis wants to regain his peak fitness and game-touch before seriously nourishing such ambitions. Recently, Proteas coach Rob Walter had indicated that doors to the national team are open for senior pros like Du Plessis, Quinton de Kock and Rilee Rossouw. But for that, Du Plessis wanted to reach his highest point of fitness after an elbow surgery that he underwent in September during the

Caribbean Premier League (CPL 2023). “I wouldn’t say the process is not on (his SA comeback). I mean, international cricket is still the pinnacle. You still feel like that’s where cricket comes with the most pressure and that’s what makes you really feel alive as a sportsman,” Du Plessis told PTI. “But now, it’s just about getting back into cricket after my operation, and a long layoff with my arm. So yeah, just taking the pressure off and just really enjoying playing some cricket again, and allowing my arm to get back to where it needs to get to,” he said. “It (SA return) is just the

process at the moment. South Africa has come out and said that there will be some T20 contracts coming out in March. So, then it’s up to the players to perform and do well (in leagues and other international matches) to make sure that they are eligible for selection.” In fact, Du Plessis has been one of the early-moving freelance cricketers hopping across T20 leagues, and he opined that the governing bodies will have to find a way to make international cricket co-exist with franchise cricket. Du Plessis cited the example of New Zealand cricketers Trent Boult and Jimmy Neesham, who declined NZC Central



Contracts recently to honour commitments to foreign leagues. Even England Test captain Ben Stokes declined a three-year contract with the ECB, settling for a one-year deal instead.

“I find that cricket has changed so much now, you have all these amazing cricketers playing around the circuit. Things that’s changed probably over the last couple of years or so that there weren’t those T20

contracts (earlier). “Now if you look at the world, there’s a lot more players doing it (moving over to T20s). You know guys like Boult and Neesham from New Zealand recently went that way. So, it’s good to see that the leagues are growing in terms of the pedigree that players are coming in. I think both are equally important for the game,” said Du Plessis. However, Du Plessis said the cricket boards should find a middle-path. “So, it’s happening more and more. I think it’s important that the countries realise that (players opting for T20s), and make sure that you keep your players playing inter-

national cricket. “The last thing you want is guys stopping playing international cricket when they’re 28-29 years old when they are supposed to be reaching their prime,” he said.

The 39-year-old is currently playing in the Abu Dhabi T10 for Samp Army, and he wants to sharpen his skills and fitness, leveraging on that experience to impress the South African establishment.



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