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INDIA CAN BE A
GLOBAL SKILL CAPITAL

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TALIBAN SLAM 'BASELESS',
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MOODY'S SEES INDIA'S GDP
EXPANDING 6-6.3% IN Q1

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SACHIN FOCUSES ON FATHER'S DEATH ANNIV

Pilot mum on political venture

'People's trust is vital, I will continue to fight for justice'

PNS ■ JAIPUR/NEW DELHI

Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot chose not to address speculations surrounding the launch of his own political outfit during a mega event held in Dausa to commemorate the death anniversary of his father, Rajesh Pilot. Instead, the 45-year-old focused on his role as an anti-corruption crusader and advocate for the underprivileged, even if it meant challenging his own party's Government. Pilot's silence on his political future has left pundits intrigued.

Addressing the event, Pilot emphasised the importance of people's trust and stated that he would continue fighting for justice and not back down on his demands. He has been criticising the Ashok Gehlot-led Congress Government in Rajasthan for alleged inaction on corruption charges against the previous BJP-led dispensation under Vasundhara Raje.

"God gives the biggest justice and if not today, then tomorrow justice will be done," said Pilot, who has been engaged in a power tussle with Gehlot since the Congress-formed a Government in the State in 2018. Remembering his father, he said he always spoke with firmness and therefore, whether he was on any post or not, there were crores of people who used to listen to him.

Asserting that it is "very important" to speak out in poli-



Congress leader Sachin Pilot during the unveiling programme of his father Rajesh Pilot's statue, in Dausa, on Sunday.

PTI

tics, Pilot referred to the deaths of newborns in a hospital in Kota in January 2020 when he was still Deputy CM.

He said he had then stated that it should not have happened and if there was any shortcoming or mistake in the rule, then it should be corrected without blaming others.

"I believe that there should not be even a single death, the situation should be improved. Today, a good hospital in Kota has been made and the deaths have stopped," Pilot said.

Before the unveiling of the

statue, Sachin Pilot offered floral tributes to his father in Bandhana village. Ministers Parsadi Lal Meena, Mamta Bhupesh, Pratap Singh Khachariyawas, Rajendra Gudha, Hemaram Chaudhary and Brijendra Ola; MLAs Deependra Singh Shekhawat, GR Khatana, Murari Lal Meena, Mukesh Bhakar, Khiladi Bairwa and Mukesh Bhakar were among those present at the programmes.

The Congress party has expressed confidence in finding a "positive solution" to the internal discord in Rajasthan and dismissed reports of Pilot forming

a new party.

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and other party leaders also paid tribute to Rajesh Pilot, praising his commitment to raising the voice of the deprived, exploited, and farmers. Kharge tweeted his heartfelt tributes to Rajesh Pilot, tagging Sachin Pilot in the message. Last month, Kharge and Rahul Gandhi held extensive discussions with Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot separately in an attempt to defuse tensions. The party stated that Gehlot and Pilot have agreed to contest the

upcoming assembly elections together and have left all issues to be resolved by the party's high command.

The power struggle between Gehlot and Pilot has been ongoing since the Congress formed the government in Rajasthan in 2018. In 2020, Pilot led a revolt against the Gehlot government, resulting in his removal from the positions of the party's state unit president and deputy chief minister. Despite warnings from the party, Pilot staged a day-long fast in April to highlight Gehlot's alleged inaction on corruption.

Will fight 2024 poll from Kaiserganj: Brij

At Gonda rally BJP MP did not reveal from which party he plans to contest elections

PNS ■ GONDA



BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh addresses a programme in Gonda on Sunday marking the completion of nine years of the Narendra Modi-led BJP Government at the Centre.

PTI

Amongst allegations of sexual harassment raised by India's leading women wrestlers, the outgoing Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Member of Parliament (MP) from Kaiserganj constituency, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh announced on Sunday that he would definitely contest the forthcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Singh attempted to put an end to the controversy surrounding him by quoting a couplet from the 'Ramcharitmanas'. During a rally organised by the BJP in Gonda to commemorate the completion of nine years of the Narendra Modi-led Government at the Centre, Singh refrained from disclosing the party from which he plans to contest the next election.

Speculations are rife that the BJP leadership is not particularly enthusiastic about fielding Singh from Kaiserganj in 2024 due to the ongoing controversy surrounding his tenure as WFI chief.

Simultaneously, the support extended by Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav to the protesting wrestlers has conveyed a clear message to the

influential figure in Gonda that securing a ticket from the SP in 2024 may not be viable for him. While not explicitly addressing the protest by top wrestlers calling for his arrest on charges of sexual harassment, he said, "I have experienced tears, sorrow, and poison... This is the reward I have reaped for my love... I am labeled a betrayer... My name is whispered, both in infamy and fame."

While Singh had maintained a guarded silence regarding the wrestlers' protest, Akhilesh recently voiced his demand for justice in favour of the athletes who have been rallying against the WFI chief.

Singh, a seasoned politician and six-time MP in the Lok Sabha, has held parliamentary positions five times under the BJP and once under the SP and has also previously represented Gonda in 1991 and 1999.

During the rally, Singh directed his attention towards criticising the alleged shortcomings of the Congress' rule since India's independence. He highlighted the accomplishments of the Narendra Modi Government and denounced the previous Congress administrations for allegedly conspiring against the verdict in favour of the Ram Temple at the Babri Masjid site.

Singh further held the Congress party accountable for the encroachment of Indian territory by Pakistan in 1948 and China in 1962, emphasising that such encroachments would not have been possible in "Modi's India."

The roadshow, which commenced from Singh's residence in Vaishnoharpur, culminated at the rally venue, Raghu Raj Sharan Singh Degree College, which is owned by the BJP MP.

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'Delhi now, other States later'

Delhi CM slams Ordinance on control over services at rally

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday launched a scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, labeling the Centre's Ordinance on control over the administrative services in the national Capital as "Hitlerism and dictatorship."

Speaking at a mega rally held at Ramlila Maidan, Kejriwal warned that the Ordinance, if implemented in Delhi, would also be imposed in other States governed by the Opposition parties, such as Rajasthan, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. He called for an immediate halt to such measures.

Addressing the crowd gathered at Ramlila Maidan, where the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was founded and where three successive Kejriwal Governments were sworn in, the Delhi Chief Minister crit-



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal addresses supporters at the AAP's maha rally in the national Capital, at Ramlila Maidan on Sunday.

Ranjan Dimri

icised Prime Minister Modi for expressing his disbelief in the Supreme Court's decisions.

Kejriwal stated that such a stance was unprecedented in the 75 years of India's Independence and accused the Prime Minister of having excessive ego. He expressed concern that democracy was deteriorating in the country and referred to it as "taanaasahi" (autocracy).

Kejriwal stressed the urgency of stopping the Ordinance and asserted that if

Modi's actions were not curbed now, similar Ordinances would be introduced in every State ruled by Opposition parties in the future.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, senior AAP leaders, and Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal were also present on the occasion.

Following the introduction of the Ordinance, Kejriwal has been reaching out to leaders of non-BJP parties to rally their support against the measure.

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Staff crunch hinders work of Wildlife Crime Control Bureau

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), the country's top wildlife crime control agency, is currently facing a shortage of staff, with nearly half of its total posts remaining unfilled across various departments. The bureau's highest position that of Additional Director is currently being handled by Joint Director HV Girisha, who has been given additional responsibilities.

According to data available on the WCCB website, out of the 109 sanctioned posts, 42 are currently vacant.

Wildlife campaigners express concern that this acute shortage at various levels is impeding the bureau's functioning. The WCCB, established under the Union Environment Ministry to combat organised wildlife crime, plays a crucial role in preserving India's biodiversity.

Among the vacant positions, three out of the four Deputy Director posts remain unfilled, while half of the six Assistant Director posts are yet



to be occupied. The bureau is also facing a significant shortage of head constables, with 15 out of the 25 sanctioned posts remaining vacant.

In an unusual circumstance, the bureau currently lacks a public prosecutor to represent its cases in court. External lawyers are being hired on a contract basis as and when required.

The WCCB has advertised various positions, including that of additional director, but is yet to find suitable candidates. In March of this year, the bureau announced job openings for 13 Head Constable positions as part of its recruit-

ment drive, according to a Union Environment Ministry official.

Efforts are underway to fill all the vacant positions, as the WCCB, being a sensitive organisation, cannot function effectively without adequate and trained staff. Wildlife crime continues to occur unabated, with smugglers adopting new methods, including online platforms, for trafficking animal live and parts.

Despite the shortage, the WCCB, in collaboration with State Governments, has conducted seizures and dismantled trafficking networks.

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Govt gets 16 sailors held in Africa released

Crew members of cargo vessel were detained for nine months

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Intense negotiations by India with authorities in Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria have seen the return of 16 Indian crew members of a cargo vessel who were in detention for nine months, official sources said on Sunday. Oil tanker MT Heroic Idun and its 26 crew members, including 16 Indians, were in detention since August last year. They were first detained in Equatorial Guinea and subsequently in Nigeria. The ship and crew were accused of various crimes, including oil theft.

Following talks, all charges against the crew were dropped and the ship was released on May 27 after paying fines," they said.

"The Indian crew members have now returned to India," they added. They said the Indian Mission officials remained in

regular touch with the crew and undertook consular access on numerous occasions.

"From the outset, the Government of India, through its missions in Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria, and in bilateral meetings, took up the matter with the respective foreign authorities at various levels," said a source. "They were pressed for early resolution of the issue and repatriation of the Indian crew members," sources said.

Following interventions with the Nigerian Government, the crew was allowed to remain on board the ship with the provision of regular food, instead of being taken to a detention centre, the sources said. The crew members were also allowed periodic contact with their families.

"The Indian Mission worked with the shipping firm for legal representation to be arranged for the crew. It was highlighted to the Nigerian authorities that there had been no oil theft; necessary permissions had apparently been accorded; and that the crew was not privy to the decisions of operations," sources said.

CAPSULE

INDIGO FLIGHT STRAYS INTO PAK AIRSPACE

Lahore: An IndiGo flight from Amritsar to Ahmedabad strayed into Pakistani airspace for approximately half an hour on Saturday before heading back into Indian airspace due to bad weather. The incident took place at around 7:30 pm due to bad weather conditions with the plane going up to Gujranwala (close to Lahore). P4

LALU TURNS 76: FAMILY, RJD CELEBRATE

Patna: Undeterred by the sweltering heat, leaders and workers of the RJD in Bihar on Sunday celebrated the 76th birthday of Lalu Prasad, the party's founding president. Feasts were organised for the poor by workers in several areas city while senior leaders greeted him in person. P5

PM launches first National Training Conclave for babus

Session aims at capacity-building in civil services

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday inaugurated the "first-ever" National Training Conclave in New Delhi. The conclave aims to enhance capacity building in civil services and improve the training infrastructure for civil servants across India.

Its objective is to implement best practices and enable Government servants to con-



tribute better to administration and nation-building. The event was organised by the Capacity Building

Commission (CBC) and sponsored by the National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building (NPCSCCB) - "Mission Karmayogi".

It took place at the International Exhibition and Convention Centre at Pragati Maidan in the national Capital. The conclave brought together over 1,900 representatives from training and research institutes across various regions and zones.

Union Minister of State for Personnel, Jitendra Singh, CBC Chairperson Adil Zainulbhai, CBC Joint Secretary SP Roy, and other CBC members addressed the conclave.

Continued on Page 2

India's follies led to its loss at Oval

PTI ■ LONDON/NEW DELHI

India's hopes of adding an ICC trophy to their cabinet after 2013 were crushed mercilessly by Australia during the World Test Championship (WTC) final, but Rohit Sharma's men had to pay for their own follies, too, at the Oval. India's underwhelming record in ICC tournaments continued with a 209-run hammering by Australia in the WTC final on Sunday.

Australian pacer Scott Boland produced a bowling spell of rare quality to get rid of Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja in the same over, effectively shutting the door on India, who were bowled out for 234 in their second innings on the final day at The Oval. Australia were clearly the



Australian team poses after winning the WTC at the Oval after defeating India. PTI

better team on all fronts while India had only themselves to blame for yet another loss in a global event. While the non-selection of R Ashwin was the big talking point on the opening day, India lost the title contest mainly due to the failure of their high-profile batting lineup. The train of inanity started with the team selection and that percolated into the shot

selection of the much-vaunted India top-order batsmen. So, let's start over from that selection fumble.

India decided not to pick Ravichandran Ashwin, the No 1 Test bowler by the current ICC Rankings. But even if you discount the ranking factor, the veteran off-spinner has been India's most successful bowler in the 2021-2023 WTC cycle,

taking 61 wickets from 13 matches.

In team management's defence, they can say most of those 61 victims were scalped during home games on designer tracks. The team management might have been befuddled by the tinge of green on the pitch and the overhead conditions while taking that call, also the decision to bat first. India bowling Paras Mhambrey said precisely that.

"It's always a very difficult decision to drop a champion bowler (Ashwin) like that. But looking at the conditions in the morning, I thought having the additional seamer would definitely be beneficial. It has worked for us in the past," said Mhambrey in a post-day press do.

Continued on Page 2

In swipe at Cong, DMK, Shah dubs them '2G, 3G, 4G' parties

PTI ■ VELLORE

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday took a swipe at the Congress and DMK over dynasty politics and alleged corruption, calling them "2G, 3G, 4G" parties and said the time has come in Tamil Nadu to throw away these and give the power to a "son of the soil".

Responding to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin's demand that Shah list out the Centre's special schemes for Tamil Nadu in the past nine years, the senior BJP leader detailed the various initiatives of the Narendra Modi-led Union government for the state in sectors including aviation, railways and roads.

Addressing a public meet-

ing here to highlight the nine years of the BJP-led NDA government's achievements, Shah also lashed out at the two opposition parties at the Centre for opposing the abrogation of Article 370 and lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi for "uniting Kashmir" with India with a stroke of the pen.

"Congress and DMK are 2G, 3G, 4G parties. I am not talking about the 2G (spectrum allocation scam). 2G means two generations, 3G means three generations and 4G means four generations," he said.

"The Maran family (of the DMK) is doing corruption for two generations. The Karunanidhi family is doing corruption for three generations. The Gandhi family is 4G.

Rahul Gandhi is the fourth generation and for four generations they are enjoying power," Shah said attacking the two parties.

He said the time has come to "throw out 2G, 3G, 4G and give the power in Tamil Nadu to a son of the soil."

Asking the gathering if Article 370 should have been removed or not and "if Kashmir is ours or not," he said both Congress and DMK opposed the abrogation of the provision which gave Jammu and Kashmir a special status.

"Both these parties - Congress and DMK - were against its abrogation. With one stroke of the pen on August 5, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi ended Article 370 and united Kashmir with India,"



Shah added.

He charged the DMK and Congress of indulging in corruption running to several thousands of crores of rupees during the 10-year period from 2004 to 2014 and said there were no such allegations against the nine-year-old NDA

government.

Taking on Stalin over his remarks on the establishment of AIIMS Madurai, Shah said while the DMK was in power for 18 years at the Centre, it had not taken steps to bring the premier medical facility to Tamil Nadu "but only does corrup-

tion", even as he highlighted the various initiatives of the Centre for Tamil Nadu.

This included a manifold increase in devolution of funds to Tamil Nadu, allocation of a defence corridor, two Vande Bharat train services, a new integrated airport terminal that was inaugurated by PM Modi recently here, 11 medical colleges in as many districts benefiting over 1,400 students, renovation of major railway stations in the state including Chennai Egmore and Madurai, a new ESIC medical college hospital that would come up in Coimbatore at an estimated Rs 1,500 crore, 62 lakh toilets and over 2,500 km of roads.

Besides these, the Centre and PM Modi in particular were doing a lot for the Tamil

language. In many global fora, the prime minister has heaped praise on the Tamil language, its icons, the Tamil culture and the literature. Tamil classic Tirukkural has been translated into 13 Indian languages. Shah highlighted the Kashi and Saurashtra Tamil Sangamam events and said it was an effort by the Centre to popularise the language in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, respectively.

Referring to the 2019 summit between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mamallapuram near here, Shah said the PM promoted Tamil Nadu's tourism by inviting the neighbouring country's leader for talks here.

He also hailed the installation of the 'Sengol' (sceptre) in

the Parliament during its inauguration last month by Modi.

Further, aspirants can now write CAPF exams and NEET in Tamil, which was not the case when the Congress-led UPA, in which the DMK was a key constituent, was in power, he said.

Expressing confidence that the BJP will return to power with 300 seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the Union minister asked Tamil Nadu to return 25 NDA parliamentarians, and said some among them could be inducted into the cabinet as well.

At the event, Shah was presented a 'Sengol' as a memento. Earlier in the day, Shah attended a meeting of the BJP's Tamil Nadu leaders in Chennai.

Three drug busts in Kochi in last 2 days by excise dept, police; 7 held

PTI ■ KOCHI

In three separate drug busts in the port city in the last couple of days by Kerala police and the state Excise department, varying quantities of Methylendioxyamphetamin (MDMA), hashish oil and a highly toxic and potent variant of heroin were seized and seven people were arrested.



Police said these two were suspected of selling drugs to students in Kaloor, Pachalam and Elamakkara areas of the city.

Regarding the arrest of the Assam native, a release issued by the Excise department said that officials of its Ernakulam Intelligence Division and the Ernakulam Town Range caught him as part of a joint operation.

The Assam native is suspected of being a top member of a north Indian drug gang and allegedly a supplier of large quantities of synthetic drugs to the southern state, the release said.

Isadul Haque (25), an Assam native and also known as 'Chotta Mian' was arrested from Ernakulam Lissie Junction on Friday night by Excise officials and remanded

to judicial custody by a court on the next day, the release said.

It said that Excise officials came to know about him from his assistant, also hailing from another state, who was arrested a week ago by the agency's intelligence division.

The officials waited several days for Haque to return and when he arrived in Ernakulam he was surrounded and arrested from Lissie junction even though he made an attempt to flee, the release said.

During his interrogation, he allegedly revealed that he charged Rs 2,000 for a small packet containing 100 mg of the drug and used to bring large quantities of narcotics to Kerala from Assam's Karimganj area which is close to the international border, it said.

Maha man held for using Aurangzeb's pic as social media profile

PTI ■ MUMBAI

An FIR was registered by ANavi Mumbai police against a man for allegedly using Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's image as his Whatsapp profile picture after the issue was raised by a Hindu organisation, an official said on Sunday.

Police detained the man in Vashi, who works in an outlet of a mobile service provider. He was allowed to go and a notice was issued to him.

The screenshot of Aurangzeb's profile picture was submitted to the police by a Hindu organisation, leading to registration of the case under sections 298 (Uttering words, etc, with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings) and 153-A (Promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence) of the Indian Penal Code, the official said. Further investigation is underway, he added.

Incidents of communal tension have taken place in various cities of Maharashtra recently over the alleged glorification of Aurangzeb and Tipu Sultan.

In Kolhapur city, protesters pelted stones during a demonstration against the alleged use of Tipu Sultan's image along with an objectionable audio message as social media "status" by a few locals on Wednesday.

Earlier, photos of Aurangzeb were displayed in a procession in Ahmednagar. In Sangamner town, stones were hurled during a rally of Sakal Hindu Samaj in response to the alleged murder of a boy. Two persons were injured and five vehicles were damaged.

Separately, a poster of Aurangzeb was displayed with the raising of objectionable slogans during a religious procession, also in Sangamner, police had said.



NCP believes in democracy: Supriya on dynastic politics charge against party

PTI ■ PUNE

Amid Opposition's allegation that the NCP was indulging in dynastic politics, Baramati MP Supriya Sule, who was appointed the party's working president a day ago, on Sunday said she was proud of being the daughter of Sharad Pawar, and maintained that the party believed in democracy.

Sule dismissed as "gossip" the reports of her cousin and senior party leader Ajit Pawar being upset with her elevation in the party. Sharad Pawar on Saturday declared Praful Patel and Supriya Sule as the working presidents of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), marking a generational shift in the organisation and virtually sidelining nephew Ajit Pawar, who is known to display rebellious streaks.

Pawar made the announcement on the 24th anniversary of the foundation of the party. Sule, who was in Pune on Sunday, was asked about the allegation that her party was indulging in dynastic politics. Replying to it, she said, "Yes, there is dynastic politics and I am extremely proud that I am



a daughter of Sharad Pawar and Pratibha Pawar. I received the Sansad Ratna award not because I am the daughter of Sharad Pawar, but because of the work I am doing in Parliament." Those who point their finger at me, they should understand that the rest of the fingers are pointing back at them.

Therefore, let some people talk about such things, she added.

On Sunday, Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde also accused the NCP of promoting dynastic politics. Speaking in Srinagar, he said, "I will only say that like in the Shiv Sena, Uddhav ji became the CM himself, and made his son a minister, the same is happening in the NCP as well." Thanking the NCP workers and leaders for showing faith in her, Sule said,

"After the appointment (as the working president), I will now report to Prafulbhai (Patel) and Sharad Pawar. Rather, NCP is a party where we believe in democracy, it's not like a corporate office." When asked about Ajit Pawar being upset, Sule said, "This is all gossip. Dada (Ajit Pawar) is Leader of Opposition in the state (Assembly). His position is equivalent to that of the chief minister.

BJP is trying to target Ajit Pawar... Sometimes they target me." Ajit Pawar was seen as an heir-apparent in the NCP, but his dalliances with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including an early morning swearing-in as Maharashtra deputy chief minister along with chief minister Devendra Fadnavis in 2019, had not been received well by the party.

Staff crunch hinders work of Wildlife Crime Control...

From Page 1

For example, in May, the bureau, along with the Punjab Forest Department, seized 186 shahtoosh shawls from shops in Amritsar and Pathankot. In April, the WCCB, in conjunction with Ladakh's forest officials, confiscated 213 shahtoosh shawls from traders in Leh.

However, these operations represent only a fraction of the larger challenge, as a fully staffed bureau would have more resources to apprehend wildlife criminals.

In an article titled "Current Wildlife Crime (Indian Scenario): Major Challenges and Prevention Approaches," Ajay Kumar Rana from the Central Forensic Science Laboratory, Ministry of Home Affairs, Hyderabad, and Nishant Kumar from the Department of

Agriculture, Bihar Government, highlight the alarming transit routes for wildlife trafficking through States such as Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam.

These regions serve as major hubs for both domestic and international wildlife trafficking.

The researchers emphasise the urgent need to combat ongoing wildlife crimes, increase the protection of endangered species, rehabilitate exotic/extinct species, and restore natural ecosystems. The poaching and trafficking of wild species, driven by profit and fashion, have already caused the disappearance of numerous wildlife species, demanding critical attention to address this menace.

Will fight... 'Delhi now...

From Page 1

Last week, a social media poster featuring Singh as the convener of the Sunday rally and Madhya Pradesh Higher Education Minister Mohan Yadav as the chief guest was circulated.

Notably, Singh had to cancel a planned rally in Ayodhya on June 5, possibly due to directives from the BJP top leadership. While Singh claimed that the cancellation was due to the ongoing investigation into the allegations of sexual harassment made against him by protesting wrestlers, the exact reasons behind the decision remain undisclosed.

Kejriwal further alleged that Modi had sold the nation to his associates while the country grappled with unemployment and inflation.

Referring to the arrests of AAP leaders Manish Sisodia

No lathicharge on warkaris in Alandi, says Fadnavis

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday denied reports of lathicharge on warkaris by police in Alandi town in Pune district.

He said a minor scuffle broke out between warkaris-devotees of Lord Vitthal- and the police.

"There was no lathicharge on the warkari community," he told reporters in Nagpur.

Opposition parties, however, claimed police lathicharged warkaris and demanded a high-level probe and strict action. The incident occurred when devotees were scrambling to gain entry into Sant Dnyaneshwar Maharaj Samadhi Mandir in Alandi town, 22 km from Pune city, during the ceremonial proces-

and Satyendar Jain, Kejriwal claimed that their detention was an attempt to impede the progress of the Delhi Government. However, he assured the audience that there were many individuals within the party who would continue the good work that was started by the two now incarcerated leaders of the AAP.

Kejriwal concluded his speech by highlighting the significance of Ramlila Maidan in shaping the country's political landscape. He asserted that just as a successful anti-corruption movement had originated from this very location 12 years ago, the current movement to safeguard democracy in the country and the Indian Constitution would also triumph.

sion which is part of the annual Ashadhi Ekadashi pilgrimage to Pandharpur.

"We learned from the last year's stampede-like situation at the same place (Alandi) and tried giving a few number of the entry pass to various groups. It was decided to issue 75 passes to each group that participate in the pilgrimage," said Fadnavis, who handles the Home portfolio.

He said some 400-500 youths insisted that they would participate in the pilgrimage and won't follow the decision on the restricted allotment of the entry pass.

India's follies led to its loss at The...

From Page 1

But then teams wanting to write history hardly operate on past precedents. India hardly seemed to have tailored in the factor that Australia have four left-handers among their top seven batters, and Ashwin's proficiency against the south-paws is well-chronicled.

This is not to say that Ravindra Jadeja does not merit a place but when you have as potent a weapon as Ashwin in your ranks, then it would have been prudent to draft him in the first 11.

Aussie Nathan Lyon showed the usefulness of an off-spinner on this trampoline

picking up 5 wickets, and India would have been banging on their heads on the door for that slip.

Of course, Ashwin is also a more than handy contributor with the bat down the order and as the wisemen say a team should always pick the best 11 not an 11 for the conditions.

But then that's just one missing piece in the entire puzzle. Umesh Yadav who did the duty of third seamer hardly made an impact despite a reasonable outing in the second innings.

Umesh had a chance to make his presence felt in the first innings when Australia were in a minor turmoil at 76 for 3. But a rather toothless spell littered with several boundary balls that eased the pressure on Travis Head and Steve Smith.

The Aussie duo punished India with a massive 285-run stand for the 4th wicket which turned the match decisively in favour of the Antipodean outfit. It ever so painfully revealed the absence of a 'holding' (restrictive) bowler in Indian

ranks like Ishant Sharma in the past or Scott Boland for Australia in this match. The team management will have to burn some serious midnight fuel to sort this out in the coming months before hitting another World Test Championship cycle.

However, the batsmen, too, will have to share a part of the blame as many of them still looked under the IPL grip and played rash shots when that bit of patience would have helped their cause.

71 for 4 is not a great place to be in if you have as big a total as 469 in front of you, but that is where India found themselves in the first innings.

Shubman Gill and Cheteshwar Pujara, two batters who were perceived to be in form ahead of the WTC final, misjudged the length and shouldered arms to Boland with fatal results. Pujara was his solid self in the second innings until he decided to test his T20 prowess, playing an upper cut off Pat Cummins that ended in the hands of Alex Carey behind the stumps.

Rohit looked super smooth till he played an ill-thought sweep from a stump-to-stump line against Lyon to get trapped plumb in front. These were just not the natural shots for these players but they chose to play it with unwanted outcome.

There was a lot riding on Virat Kohli in this big match. A monster ball from Mitchell Starc that kicked off from the length ended his stay in the first innings but in the second dig he played a poor drive off Boland. Yes, the Aussie pacer varied the length and angle subtly in that over but Kohli could very well have avoided that expansive drive, so reminiscent of the days when that fifth stump line was his Achilles Heel. It was just symptomatic of India's batting woes in this Test.

There were bright spots. The 100-run partnership between Ajinkya Rahane and Shardul Thakur and that seven-wicket run by Indian bowlers in the second morning, but India were incapable of blooming those flickering into a roaring hedge fire.

PM launches first National Training ...

From Page 1

The CEO of "Karmayogi Bharat", Abhishek Singh, gave a presentation on "Integrated Government Online Training" (iGOT).

The conclave serves as a platform to identify strategies for building and improving the ecosystem of Civil Service Training Institutions (CSTIs). It includes participation from various training institutes such as Central training institutes, State administrative training institutes, regional and zonal training institutes, and research institutes. Attendees included civil servants from Central Government departments, State Governments, and local Governments, as well as experts from the private sector.

Kerala-cadre IPS officer Nitin Agarwal appointed BSF DG

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Nitin Agarwal, a 1989-batch IPS officer of Kerala cadre, was on Sunday night appointed as the new director general of the Border Security Force (BSF), more than five months after the post fell vacant.

Agarwal is currently posted as the Additional DG of operations at the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) headquarters in Delhi.

An order of the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) issued late night stated Agarwal has been appointed as the BSF DG "from the date of joining the post and up to 31.07.2026, his date of superannuation, or till further orders whichever is earlier."

The post of BSF chief has



(BGB) in Delhi.

Thaosen is heading the BSF delegation for these talks. The Bangladesh delegation is led by BGB DG Maj Gen AKM Nazmul Hasan.

The new DG is expected to take charge of the BSF after these talks end on June 14.

Agarwal has served in the Sashtra Seema Bal (SSB), another border guarding force under the command of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), apart from working in various capacities in his cadre state of Kerala.

The about 2.65 lakh personnel strong BSF is primarily tasked to guard Indian borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh apart from rendering a variety of duties in the internal security domain.

Kejriwal narrates '4th pass king' story in rally

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

ATTACKS MODI, SAYS HE FAVOURED FRIENDS



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal with Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann (2R), Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal, AAP leaders Sanjay Singh, Gopal Rai and others during AAP's 'maha rally' against the Centre's ordinance on control of services in the national capital, at Ramlila Maidan, in New Delhi on Sunday.

In a scathing attack at the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, AAP convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday narrated a story about a "Class 4 educated king", highlighting the extent to which an egoistic dictator favoured his special friends, regardless of the consequences for the country.

Through the story, the Chief Minister criticised the dictator's actions, pointing out that he granted unprecedented power to a single friend, bestowing airports, seaports, mines, and more, without considering the implications of such decisions.

Narrating the story at his mega rally at Ramlila Maidan, Kejriwal said, "In your childhood you would have heard lots of stories about kings and queens, but in today's story, there is no queen.

There is only the king. This king was not very educated as he was a "4th Pass", but at the same time he was very egoistic and greedy for money." Continuing the story, he said that in a village in this kingdom a boy was once born to a mother who belonged to a very poor family.

Just as the tradition was at the time, a fortune teller was called and he told the mother that her son would go on to become a king someday. She could not believe it as she was very poor and wondered how her son would go on to become a king one day.

The son grew up and went to school and since he was not very good at studies he somehow managed to study till Class 4 and then left the school.

Kejriwal continued that the boy then started to sell chai at a railway station that was near his house.

He continued, "The boy was good at giving speeches and would talk about everything under the sun. The people who came to the tea stall became his listeners. Once he started speaking, he just would not stop talking."

The Chief Minister said that as the fortune teller had predicted the boy went on to become the king. Continuing the story, Kejriwal said that

eventually the king began to feel bad as everyone referred to him as the "4th Pass King" and therefore he decided to get a fake university degree. "One day he told his citizens that he has a degree in MA," he said.

Kejriwal continued that one day some officers came to the king and told him that they have an excellent idea.

They informed the king that if he implements this demonetisation scheme, then it will end corruption and terrorism. "The king did not understand much of what the

officers said but he thought that it would be a great idea because the officers had said so. So one day he appeared in front of the TV cameras at 8 pm and announced the demonetisation exercise.

Four years later, someone asked him to abolish the note, and he brought an order for it, as he understood nothing," he said.

He said that similarly some officers went to him and asked him to sign the 'three farm laws'. The king blindly signed it and it caused chaos across the

country.

Kejriwal said that during the time of a major pandemic, some officers came and told the king that if the people were asked to come to their balconies and bang their metallic utensils with spoons the pandemic will vanish. This episode underscores the king's lack of scientific understanding and rational decision-making.

Kejriwal urged the people to spread this story to as many people as possible and urged them to understand its deep message.

Large crowd throngs rally in scorching heat

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI



Undeterred by the scorching temperatures, the national Capital on Sunday witnessed a resolute gathering of thousands at Ramlila Maidan to voice their discontent against a recent ordinance issued by the Central Government that effectively granted control over the bureaucracy to the Lieutenant Governor.

Amid sultry and hot weather, men, women, children, and the elderly filled the venue, while many others stood outside on the roads under trees.

Some covered their heads with scarves and splashed water on their faces to combat the harsh sun. Inside the maidan, many stood near coolers and fans while others used makeshift paper fans. AAP workers lined the roads, distributing water pouches and bottles to the supporters.

Sporting the distinctive signature caps of the Aam Aadmi Party, the party supporters carried the tricolour and marked their participation through the lens of their smartphones. The protesters chanted "Kejriwal jindabad" and anti-BJP government slogans, their collective voice reverberating through the streets surrounding Ramlila Maidan. Among the attendees were

efforts are deeply concerning," she said. The rally was also an opportunity for supporters to highlight the AAP government's achievements. Naveen Kumar, a 45-year-old businessman from south Delhi, commended the efforts to uplift the healthcare sector. "The Mohalla clinics and government hospitals have been a boon to the common man. I've personally experienced the excellent healthcare services they provide. It's a shame that the LG and the BJP are trying to disrupt this progress," Kumar said. Some people alleged that the BJP catered primarily to the interests of the affluent. Phulkar Singh, a 55-year-old farmer who travelled from Punjab's Sangrur to attend the rally, criticised the saffron party, stating, "The BJP is anti-poor. They prioritize the needs of industrialists and corrupt individuals. We need a government that works for the common man, and Arvind Kejriwal has proven his dedication to our welfare." Aarti Gupta, a 40-year-old social worker from West Delhi, said the LG and the BJP are engaged in a political game to stifle progress made by city government. "The LG's interference in our government's affairs is a blatant attempt to obstruct good work being done by Arvind Kejriwal.

'SelfieWithCorruptionKaRajmahal' launched by BJP to corner Kejriwal

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the AAP's mega rally at Ramlila Maidan, the Delhi BJP on Sunday launched the political campaign #SelfieWithCorruptionKaRajmahal from Connaught Place to expose the Kejriwal Government. The Delhi BJP also launched a "poster attack" on Kejriwal, both online and offline. The BJP accused AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal of trying to cover up his government's corruption with his rally at Ramlila Maidan.

The Delhi BJP's official twitter handle on Sunday morning tweeted a poster, based on the poster of a recent movie 'Sif Ek Banda Kaafi Hai', taking a jibe at the AAP convener and chief minister Arvind Kejriwal. "Just one guy is enough to destroy Delhi, Name is Kejriwal," BJP tweeted in Hindi. Several placards have also been strategically placed on Delhi's roads next to AAP posters on the rally. "Mega rally against the dictatorship of the Centre," the AAP poster reads. "Rs 45 crore for Kejriwal's house renovation."

Please answer. This money is from my taxes," the bigger BJP placard right next to it reads. Another BJP placard in Delhi reads, "Mr Kejriwal, we also want to see the AAP's palace worth Rs 45 crore."

The taunts refer to BJP's charge that Kejriwal lives in opulence like Iraq's Saddam Hussein and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.



Presenting pictures and videos of the Delhi Chief Minister's renovated home, BJP has alleged Kejriwal had spent Rs 45 crore on renovating the official residence. It bombarded social media with visuals of a two-storey bungalow with white columns, marble floors, fancy lighting, and automatic doors.

In a press conference at BJP headquarters, Delhi state president Virendra Sachdeva and MPs Manoj Tiwari and Ramesh Bidhuri said that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) under Kejriwal has transformed into a "Khas Admi Party." Tiwari said the Ramlila ground needs to be purified with Ganga Jal after Kejriwal's rally there. "I recall Kejriwal sharing dias with Anna Hazare during India

Against Corruption days at Ramlila ground and claiming to be against corruption. He was again heard screaming from Ramlila ground, this time to cover up his corruption," Tiwari said.

The northeast Delhi MP also accused Kejriwal of being a "political tourist" visiting different cities of the country while turning blind eye to such problems of Delhi as dirty water supply and pollution in Yamuna.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said AAP was no longer working for the common man and its only aim now is to "rob" the people of Delhi. "Kejriwal has ashamed Delhi people with low standard of his speech at the rally and asserting there were hundreds of Sisodias and Jains in his

party. Did he mean to say the entire AAP is corrupt?" Sachdeva said.

Bidhuri alleged that Kejriwal's claim that his rally will be attended by one lakh people was belied by a person who set up tents there and who told him that payment was made for 10,000 chairs only. Sachdeva alongwith, Leader of opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuri also launched the political campaign #SelfieWithCorruptionKaRajmahal from Connaught Place to expose the Kejriwal government.

Bidhuri has said that Kejriwal should stop giving a clean chit to his ministers and tell the public why their bail is not being granted for months if they are not involved in any scams.

Women inmates stitch clothes for models, run parlour in Tihar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

It's not all dun and drab inside Tihar central jail where women inmates are running a beauty parlour to give their jailmates a fragrant, spruced up alter-life, and sometimes dressing professional models with clothes stitched by them. These inmates lodged in Central Jail No 6 in Tihar are making great strides towards a normal life undertaking new enterprises such as making pickle, designing, weaving, and enrolling in a beauty course.

The training aims to give the inmates a chance to embark on a life of dignity and independence once they are out of prison. According to jail officials, the inmates – undertrials and convicts – are being trained by an academy to design fashionable clothes with offer of a certificate on completion of their course.

Models from across the world recently came to meet these women and walked the ramp wearing clothes stitched by them at a fashion show held inside the jail. A murder case undertrial said she was taught all kinds of stitching and embroidery by trainers from Pearl academy.

She hopes to put her newly honed skills to earn a living once she's out of jail. Just like her, around 100 female inmates are being trained at the handloom unit of Tihar Jail where they are trained in making



towels, sarees, and dresses. A murder convict, inside Tihar for the last nine years, said working at the handloom keeps her busy and fills her with hopes of a good life. Sanjay Beniwal, Director General (Delhi Prisons), said it is very important to engage inmates in something positive and productive.

The new beauty parlour in Tihar jail no 6 which is run by the women inmates trained by Habib's is a well-furnished room plastered with photos of Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Kareena Kapoor and Madhuri Dixit. There is a big mirror on one of the walls and wooden chairs for waiting customers.

It is not unusual for many of these women inmates to pay a visit to the parlour for a touch up every time a relatives comes to meet them, or even ahead of a court hearing. An inmate who works at the parlour said she knew some beauty hacks but after being trained here, she feels like a professional and loves her work.

Inmates working at the parlour are paid wages for their work.

SC to hear today pleas against HC order on bike-taxi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court will hear on Monday two pleas filed by the Delhi Government against the high court order permitting bike-taxi aggregators, Rapido and Uber, to operate in the national capital till notification of the final policy by the administration on plying of two-wheeler non-transport vehicles.

The AAP government has challenged in the Supreme Court the May 26 order of the Delhi High Court asking it not to take any coercive action against the bike-taxi aggregators till the final policy is notified.

According to the cause list uploaded on the apex court web site, a vacation bench of justices Aniruddha Bose and Rajesh Bindal would hear the pleas of the AAP government on June 12. "Let copies of both the petitions be served upon the learned Solicitor General so that the stand of the Union of India can be obtained," the bench had said in its order.

Earlier, senior advocate Manish Vashist, appearing for the Delhi government, said the high court's decision to stay the government's notice till the final policy is notified is like virtually allowing the writ petition by Rapido.

On May 26, while issuing a notice to the Delhi government on Rapido's plea chal-

lenging a law that excludes two-wheelers from being registered as transport vehicles, the high court directed that no coercive action should be taken against the bike-taxi aggregator till the final policy is notified. The high court, which listed Rapido's plea on August 22 before the registrar for completion of pleading, said, "The counsel for the petitioners (Rapido) submits that policy is under active consideration." "Accordingly, we hereby stay the notice and make it clear that the stay shall operate till the final policy is notified. However, once the final policy is notified, if the petitioners are still aggrieved, they are at liberty to take steps before the appropriate forum," the high court said.

Vivekananda institute holds workshop on mediation

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In pursuit of bolstering the culture of building peace through collaborative dispute resolution, Maadhyam International Council for Dispute Resolution, in collaboration with Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies organised a two days National Workshop on Mediation last week.

The workshop was designed to ameliorate the knowledge of students relating to the concept and process of mediation. The workshop was conducted by lawyers who are internationally trained and are seasoned senior mediators having conducted numerous mediations over the years.

Amarjit Singh Chandhok, Senior Advocate, and President of Maadhyam addressed the gathering and pointed out the advantages of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), and explained why ADR, which today, is an integral part of the law syllabus should in fact, be acknowledged as Appropriate Dispute Resolution.

3 persons arrested for killing 70-yr-old woman in Jafrabad

New Delhi: Delhi police have arrested three persons for allegedly killing a 70-year-old woman and robbing valuables from her house in northeast Delhi's Jafrabad area. The accused were identified as Zahid (22), Nazim (23) and Soheb (23).

Accused Zahid, is the nephew of the deceased, police said, adding that he was staying as a tenant at some house and executed the robbery with the help of his associates as he was being pressured by his aunt to return Rs 10 lakh that he had borrowed from her. On June 8, police were informed about the robbery incident in a house at Ambedkar Basti, Maujpur in

Jafrabad area following which a team reached spot and found that Abbas, his wife Shamim and Zahid who had sustained injuries during the robbery were shifted to a hospital by neighbours, according to police. Shamim (70) was declared brought dead by doctors, a senior police officer said.

Meanwhile, the house was found to be ransacked. Crime team and forensic experts inspected scene of crime and collected exhibits, they said. In his complaint, victim Abbas said on afternoon of June 8, when he along with his wife and Zahid were at his house, he noticed four to five persons had broken into his house. SR

Minor girl raped in auto in Burari

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 13-year-old girl was allegedly raped inside a three-wheeler loading vehicle at an isolated place in north Delhi's Burari area. The accused, who is a school dropout and drives a tempo has been nabbed, police said, adding his age is being verified.

According to police, the incident took place on June 8 around 7.30 pm, when the victim was on a walk with her friend in the area close to her home. Her friend knew the accused and requested for a ride in his three-wheeler.

After initial reluctance, the two girls went on a drive with the man who later dropped the victim's friend at her home and took the victim to an isolated place in Ajit Vihar in Shakti Enclave area where he raped her inside the vehicle, police said. Based on the girl's statement, a case under sections 376 (rape) and 506 (criminal intimidation) of the Indian Penal Code and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act has been registered against the accused and he was nabbed, said Sagar Singh Kalsi, Deputy Commissioner of Police (North).

Suspicious items recovered from man held for forcible conversion: Police

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police on Sunday said that suspicious items have been recovered from the mobile phone of Mohammed Kalim, a B.Tech graduate in Computer Science who is accused of forcible conversion and is under arrest.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Sanjay Kumar Sain, said that suspicious items have been recovered from Kalim's mobile phone and they have recorded the statements and taken cognizance of the case. "We have received three complaints against him from three different individuals. The



accused is a Bachelor of Technology graduate. We have lodged an FIR and arrested him. However, before reaching any conclusion, we would like to further investigate the matter," Sain said.

According to sources, the police have sent his mobile phone for forensic examination to determine his associates and those instructing him to convert people to Islam. Kalim was arrested by the Delhi Police in

connection with an alleged conversion racket at Turkman Gate Night Shelter. He would show Hindu youths YouTube videos about his religion and tactically question their faith. He would also compel the Hindu youths to recite Islamic religious verses before starting their work.

"The modus operandi is the same as the Ghaziabad conversion racket, where the victims were shown YouTube videos and asked to recite religious verses before beginning any work," a source said. The accused is currently in judicial custody. Further details are awaited.

IAF-Army joint exercise held in central sector

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a bid to enhance synergy between the forces in combating modern-day warfare, the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the army conducted a joint exercise in the areas covering central sector of India. The exercise tested the operational readiness of both services by deploying various weapon systems and aircraft to meet any potential challenge.

The central sector, which comprises Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, falls within the LAC, while the western sector covers Ladakh, and the eastern sector includes Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

This joint exercise follows the recent strategic missions undertaken by the IAF over the Indian Ocean region, involving Rafale and Su-30MKI jets. Furthermore, the Indian Navy's two aircraft carriers conducted an intense exercise in the Arabian Sea, deploying a total of 35 aircraft.

On Sunday, the IAF tweeted, "The #IAF recently con-



cluded a joint exercise with the Indian Army in the central sector. Multiple combat assets were employed to simulate realistic combat situations for all participants." However, specific details regarding the date and venue of the operations were not disclosed.

Just a few days ago, a fleet of Su-30MKI jets from the IAF carried out a strategic mission over the Indian Ocean region for eight hours. This mission followed a similar operation carried out by four Rafale aircraft. The Su-30MKI jets demonstrated their opera-

tional prowess by flying over the South Western region of the Indian Ocean, while the Rafale fighter aircraft covered the eastern region in a six-hour mission last month.

These missions by the IAF coincide with China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region, which is largely considered the Indian Navy's domain.

The Rafale jets, India's most recent acquisition of fighter planes in 23 years since the import of Sukhoi jets from Russia, possess the capability to carry a wide range of potent weapons.

Preparedness to tackle cyclone Biparjoy reviewed

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla conducted a review on Sunday of the preparedness of various central government departments and the Gujarat administration to tackle the approaching Cyclone Biparjoy.

The cyclone has intensified into an "extremely severe cyclonic storm" and is expected to make landfall between the Kutch district of Gujarat and Karachi in Pakistan on June 15. The Union Home Secretary chaired a meeting of the National Executive Committee to assess the preparedness of central ministries, agencies, and the Gujarat government in dealing with the imminent cyclone, as reported by a ministry spokesperson.

Under the Disaster Management Act, the National Executive Committee is responsible for implementing disaster management policies and plans in the country.

Adequate teams and assets from the National Disaster Response Force, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard are being deployed to assist the Gujarat government in preparedness, rescue, and restora-



tion efforts.

The Gujarat government has taken all necessary precautions to handle Cyclone Biparjoy and is fully prepared for post-cyclone restoration of services, the spokesperson stated.

The Chief Secretary of Gujarat and senior officials from central ministries and agencies, including the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), attended the meeting.

According to the IMD, the "extremely severe cyclonic storm Biparjoy" is expected to cross the Saurashtra-Kutch and adjoining Pakistan coasts between Mandvi in Gujarat and Karachi in Pakistan around noon on June 15, with maxi-

imum sustained wind speeds of 125-135 kmph, gusting to 150 kmph.

The Gujarat government is deploying NDRF and SDRF teams in coastal areas and will establish shelters in six districts as the extremely severe cyclonic storm Biparjoy is projected to make landfall between the Kutch district and Pakistan's Karachi on June 15.

The precise location of the cyclone's landfall will become clearer in the coming days. Kutch, Jamnagar, Morbi, Gir Somnath, Porbandar, and Devbhumi Dwarka districts are expected to be affected by heavy rainfall and very high wind speeds during June 13-15, which could reach up to 150 kmph, according to an official.

IndiGo flight strays into Pak airspace

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

An IndiGo flight from Amritsar to Ahmedabad strayed into Pakistani airspace for approximately half an hour on Saturday before heading back into Indian airspace due to bad weather. The incident took place at around 7:30 pm due to bad weather conditions with the plane going up to Gujranwala (close to Lahore). According to Pakistan media reports, it eventually returned to India at 8:01 pm. In May, a Pakistan International Airlines flight entered Indian airspace and stayed there for nearly 10 minutes due to heavy rainfall in Pakistan.

According to officials, it was not unusual as it was internationally allowed in bad weather conditions, the report added. Several flights heading to Lahore were also diverted to Islamabad on Saturday due to 'poor visibility'.

According to data from flight tracking websites, the IndiGo flight had entered north of Lahore with a



ground speed of 454 knots. The plane had deviated from its route soon after takeoff from Amritsar at 7:45 pm. The IndiGo flight travelled over Gujranwala and formed a wide loop around Lahore before it eventually returned to Indian airspace near the Sri Muktsar Sahib City in Punjab.

Earlier in May this year, a Pakistan International Airlines flight entered Indian airspace and stayed there for nearly 10 minutes due to heavy rainfall in Pakistan. The flight, PK248, was returning from Muscat on May 4 and was attempting to land at the Allama Iqbal International Airport in Lahore. However, heavy rainfall made it difficult for the pilot to land the Boeing 777 aircraft.

High dropout rates in several States revealed:PAB Data

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Recent data from the Ministry of Education's Project Approval Board (PAB) meetings has revealed that Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Punjab, and Karnataka are among the seven states where the school dropout rate at the secondary level exceeded the national average of 12.6% in the academic year 2021-2022.

The PAB meetings, held between March and May 2023, focused on the implementation of the "Samagra Shiksha" program for the upcoming academic year 2023-2024. Addressing the dropout issue is crucial for the government to achieve the ambitious goal of 100% Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) at the school level by 2030, as outlined in the new National Education Policy.

According to the PAB meeting minutes, Bihar recorded a dropout rate of 20.46% at the secondary level in 2021-2022, while Gujarat had a rate of 17.85%. Assam reported a dropout rate of 20.3%, followed by Andhra Pradesh (16.7%), Punjab (17.2%), Meghalaya (21.7%), and Karnataka (14.6%).

Although West Bengal saw



significant improvements in reducing the dropout rate, particularly at the elementary level, it was noted in the minutes that further measures are needed to enhance retention and reduce dropout rates at the secondary level.

The minutes also highlighted the presence of a considerable number of out-of-school children in Delhi. The documents emphasized the need for uploading details of mainstreamed out-of-school children on the PRABANDH portal.

Unfortunately, the dropout rate figures for West Bengal and Delhi were not available in the minutes.

In Madhya Pradesh, the dropout rate at the secondary level decreased from 23.8% in 2020-2021 to 10.1% in 2021-2022, attributed to a special annual enrollment drive and a focused household survey conducted using a mobile app.

Govt incapable of preventing 'predatory behaviour' in air: Cong

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday stepped up its attack on the Centre over rising airfares, alleging that the government has been incapable of preventing "predatory behaviour" on part of airlines and has "facilitated a loot at the hands of crony airport operators".

Senior Congress leader K C Venugopal and Union minister Jyotiraditya Scindia engaged in a verbal duel on Twitter over the state of the aviation sector.

The government had last week asked airlines to devise a mechanism to ensure reasonable airfares amid a surge in air ticket prices, particularly on certain routes that were earlier served by grounded budget carrier Go First.

Venugopal on Saturday had said it was criminal to lift caps on airfares in August 2022 when the economy was in the "doldrums" and asked if the government has planned any "intervention" to ensure that consumers do not suffer.

Hitting back at Venugopal, Civil Aviation Minister Scindia in the wee hours of Sunday tweeted that even as the global economy continues to strug-



gle, "ours continues to stand as a beacon of hope" with a growth rate of 6.0%-6.5% in FY 2023-24.

"That said, there is no reason that a deregulated sector like aviation should be put under government control - the repercussions of which have known to dent the growth potential of this sector in the past," he said.

Scindia said it's important to note that a sector that was earlier 'elitist' has been truly democratised under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"We have doubled the number of airports, helipads and water aerodromes from 74 to 148. Domestic daily pax traffic has broken all past records. Connectivity has finally begun to reach the last mile, and soon India will emerge as an international civil aviation hub. Let's get the facts right K C Vnugopalmp Jil!" he said.

Jaishankar reviews India's ties with Germany, Oz in Varanasi G-20 conclave

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Germany on Sunday reviewed the entire spectrum of their bilateral ties during talks between External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and German Development Minister Svenja Schulze.

Jaishankar also held a separate bilateral meeting with Australian Minister Pat Conroy. The meetings took place on the margins of the G20 Development Ministers' conclave in Varanasi.

"Pleasure to begin G20 Development Ministers' meeting with German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development @SvenjaSchulze68. Discussed our shared priorities that #G20DMM seeks to take forward. Also spoke about the Sustainable Development Summit and third country partnerships," Jaishankar tweeted.

On his meeting with Conroy, he said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Australia figured in the talks. "Glad to welcome Australian Development Minister @PatConroy1 in Varanasi for the #G20DMM. Naturally, we spoke about PM @narendramodi's recent visit to Australia. Also discussed how

our two countries can cooperate on development issues in the Pacific," Jaishankar said in another tweet.

The external affairs minister also held talks with Secretary General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development Rebeca Grynspan.

"A good meeting with Secretary General of @UNCTAD. @RGrynspan on #G20DMM sidelines. Agreed that G20 plays an important role in alleviating concerns of Global South. Will also work closely to ensure the advancement of SDG goals," Jaishankar tweeted.

He also held separate talks with European Union (EU) Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen. "A great meeting with EU Commissioner for International Partnerships @JuttaUrpilainen. Discussed the G20 meeting. Also took forward our conversation about synergizing Global Gateway with India's development partnership initiatives," Jaishankar said. India is hosting the conclave of development ministers of the G-20 member nations from June 11-13 in its capacity as the current chair of the grouping. It is expected to focus on disruptions in global supply chains, food and ener-



gy security challenges and impacts of climate change, among other issues.

The G20 Development Ministers' conclave follows the Voice of the Global South Summit that was hosted by

India in January, and the decisions taken at the Varanasi meet will also contribute to the UN summit on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September, the Ministry of External Affairs said.

300 experts to gather for NTDs programme partners' meeting

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

As part of the WHO Road Map for Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTD) 2021-2030, nearly 300 experts from various countries, including donors, technical partners, academia, and patients' associations, will gather for a two-day NTDs Programme Partners' Meeting in Geneva starting on Monday.

This significant event holds particular importance for India, which bears the largest absolute burden of at least 10 major NTDs globally, including hookworm, dengue, lymphatic filariasis, leprosy, visceral leishmaniasis or kala-azar, and rabies. Many of these diseases, such as lymphatic filariasis and dengue, disproportionately affect millions of people throughout the country, especially those who are poor and vulnerable.

The objectives of the meeting are to assess progress on the WHO road map, enhance understanding of global NTD operations, explore disease-specific and cross-cutting perspectives, and engage in comprehensive discussions on the vision of eliminating NTDs.

The WHO road map for neglected tropical diseases 2021-2030 serves as a comprehensive framework, setting targets, mechanisms for alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and other global agendas, and calling for strategic shifts in NTD



approaches to end the epidemic of neglected tropical diseases by 2030.

The meeting will focus on several key areas, including reviewing the current progress toward achieving the 2030 targets, identifying major gaps and challenges in reaching those targets, establishing principles and practical steps to implement action plans, mobilizing support and commitment from NTD partners, and planning for a Global Action Plan for 2025-2030.

The WHO's latest progress report, titled "Global Report on Neglected Tropical Diseases 2023," released earlier this year, highlighted positive developments, stating that the number of people requiring NTD interventions decreased by 80 million between 2020 and 2021. Additionally, eight countries were certified or validated as having eliminated at least one NTD in 2022 alone. As of December 2022, 47 countries had achieved the target of

eliminating at least one NTD, with more countries working towards this goal.

However, the report emphasizes the need for further action. It calls for increased efforts and investments to overcome delays and accelerate progress towards the NTD road map targets by 2030. The report underscores the importance of promoting country ownership, accountability, sustainability, and predictability of financing, including robust domestic funding, to achieve the goals outlined in the road map and enable countries to provide quality NTD services to affected populations.

The NTDs Programme Partners' Meeting provides a platform for global experts to collaborate, exchange knowledge, and strategize on effective measures to combat neglected tropical diseases, ultimately improving the health and well-being of millions of people worldwide.

'Centre's reforms in governance will create future-ready civil servants'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Sunday said the Centre's reforms in governance would create future-ready employees empowered by digital training platforms.

Addressing the first National Training Conclave organised by the Capacity Building Commission at the International Exhibition and Convention Centre in Pragati Maidan here, he said Mission Karmayogi is inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of consistent capacity building.

"Mission Karmayogi has been designed as a comprehensive programme which would enable civil servants and other government employees to acquire the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary for delivering high-quality public service in a rapidly evolving world," said Singh, the minister of state for personnel.

The National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building (NPCSCB) or Mission Karmayogi aims to create a competent civil service rooted in Indian ethos, with a shared understanding of the country's priorities, working in harmony for effective and efficient public service delivery.

Singh said that encouraged by its successful use among civil servants, it has now also been introduced for new appointees in Rozgar Mela as



Mission Karmayogi Prarambha.

In a country as diverse as India, there are complex ranges of issues but it provides the opportunity for civil servants to learn and to improve their ability and expertise, the Union minister said, adding that the Centre's governance reforms would create future-ready civil servants empowered by digital training platforms.

The national training conclave witnessed participation from over 700 national civil service training institutes across the country.

In his address at the conclave, Singh highlighted the various initiatives undertaken by the Narendra Modi government to deliver on the promise of "minimum government-maximum governance".

Following the directions of the prime minister, the first-ever Capacity Building Commission (CBC) has been established, he said, adding that this "first-of-its-kind" institution fulfilled the need to have a dedicated agency for improving skill and a provision for periodic training for gov-

ernment functionaries.

"The commission facilitates the preparation of annual capacity building plans of departments, ministries and agencies, aims to create shared learning resources, exercise functional supervision over all central training institutions and undertakes an audit of human resources in government and outcome of the capacity building efforts," the minister said.

Singh pointed out that in 2014 the government had done away with the colonial-era practice of requiring a citizen to get certificates and documents attested by a gazetted officer or file affidavits for government-related work.

The Government of India, in pursuance of its commitment to zero tolerance against corruption, has taken several measures, including the recent amendments made to the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, he said.

The amendment introduces a number of new provisions, including criminalising giving or taking bribes and putting in place an effective deterrence for such actions. It also includes a robust mechanism to protect an honest and performing officer, the minister said.

He also pointed out that the Union government has abolished the process of taking interviews for recruitment to Group-B (non-gazetted) and Group C posts since 2016.

22 youngsters begin internship at National Centre for Good Governance

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Twenty-two candidates have been selected for internship at the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), a premier think tank, according to an official statement issued on Sunday.

The internship programme aims to provide young and brilliant minds to carry out research, critical study, documentation and dissemination of best practices to develop a national repository, and establish a platform for wider dissemination, it said.

This will also provide opportunities for these young students to learn as well as contribute to public policy, according to the statement issued by the Personnel Ministry.

"NCGG internship programme attracted huge interest and over 1,700 applications were received for the June 2023 batch. From these applications, after scrutiny and interactions, 22 candidates have been selected based on their academic and extra-curricular achievements and passion for public policy, governance, and related domains," it said.

The internship is for a minimum period of eight weeks and a maximum of six months. Interns are to be paid Rs 10,000 per month as honorarium, the statement said.

The NCGG, set up in 2014



by the Government of India as a premier think tank, opened its door to bright young minds and launched its first internship programme, it added.

The interns represent a wide range of disciplines, including law, development studies, public health, economics, geography, political science, and more. They have pursued their education at reputed institutions such as Harvard Law School, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Indian School of Public Policy, and National Law Universities, among others, the statement said.

The internship programme covers various domains of governance for interns to choose from such as education, decentralised planning, e-governance, public service delivery, laws & regulations, rural development & poverty elimination, water, sanitation, hygiene & public health, governance in healthcare, sustainability besides disaster resilience infrastructure and disaster mitigation, among others.

Manipur Govt extends internet ban till June 15

PTI ■ IMPHAL

The Manipur Government extended its ban on internet services till June 15. The suspension of mobile data services, including broadband, has been extended till 3 pm of June 15, an order issued by Commissioner (Home) T Ranjit Singh on Saturday night said.

The ban was imposed on May 3. "Some anti-social elements might use social media extensively for transmission of images, hate speech, hate video messages inciting the passions of the public which might have serious repercussions for law and order situation in the state," said the order extending the ban on the internet services till June 15.

"The suspension includes mobile data services, internet/data services including broadband except those specifically exempted by the gov-



A burned vehicle is seen along with the charred remains of houses following fresh violence that occurred in several areas of Manipur on Sunday

ernment. ... And internet lease line on a case to case basis as permitted by competent authority," it said.

At least 100 people lost their lives and 310 others were injured in the ethnic violence in Manipur that broke out a month ago. Clashes first broke out on May 3 after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organ-

ised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur's population and live mostly in the Imphal Valley. Tribals Nagas and Kukis constitute another 40 per cent of the population and reside in the hill districts.

Violence continues to hit panchayat poll-bound WB

BJP, Left, Cong accuse TMC of preventing their candidates from filing nominations

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Relentless violence continued in panchayat poll-bound Bengal with most Opposition parties including the BJP, Left and the Congress accusing the ruling Trinamool Congress of preventing their candidates from filing nominations.

Till Sunday evening one person had died and at least 50 others injured — including one seriously at Dinhatra in Coochbehar district of North Bengal — in sporadic violence over filing of nomination forms.

Things reached such a pass that the supporters of BJP and Trinamool Congress clashed at Thakurnagar the spiritual headquarters of the Matua community moments before TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee was to visit the area in North 24 Parganas. Banerjee who was to address a rally at nearby Gaighata was welcomed with



"go back" slogan raised allegedly by the supporters of junior Union Minister Shantanu Thakur himself a Matua and scion of the now deceased Matua religious head Baro Maa.

Matuas are a scheduled caste community — following the preaching of Guruchand Harichand Thakur — and migrated from Bangladesh in large numbers both during Independence and during the Bangladesh war.

The BJP and the TMC have been engaged in a fierce

dogfight for winning over the allegiance of the community that boasts of about 80 lakh people influencing the voting pattern of 6-8 parliamentary constituencies and about 50 Assembly seats of the State. Banerjee, who was prevented from entering the Thakurnagar temple and could only do so with the help of the police, later attacked the BJP for dividing the people along religious lines.

"The BJP's fall is imminent as their efforts to divide the people on the basis of religion will boomerang ... They are dividing the Matua community ... they are inciting violence ... they passed the CAA Bill but are yet to make rules on that and are still trying to milk that issue ... but they will miserably fail to do so," Banerjee said.

Reports of violence also came from Murshidabad, Birbhum, East Midnapore, East Bardwan, Coochbehar, and other places, sources said.

A mob entered a Block Development Office at Bhangar, in South 24 Parganas district and assaulted Bidyut Ghosh an employee allegedly for distributing nomination forms to opposition candidates, while a local Trinamool Congress leader was caught with a handgun in Murshidabad district.

The TMC, however, trashed the charges saying the nomination filing process was by and large incident free and the opposition was making false charges as they are sure about the imminent loss in the panchayat polls having very little support base among the rural populace.

"Just because the BJP and CPI(M) do not have enough number of candidates they are creating trouble to mislead the people and offer an excuse for losing the elections.

In 2018 there had been a massive violence in the panchayat elections which not only saw more than a hundred

deaths but also led the ruling TMC to win about 34 percent of seats uncontested. However, in the wake of multiple scams and unearthing of currency of notes from the TMC leaders' houses the TMC was facing stiff challenge from the Opposition parties which had been resisting the ruling party onslaught in equal measures.

Apprehending massive bloodshed the opposition parties have not only demanded deployment of central forces but also asked for extension of the timing of filing nominations.

Approaching the High Court seeking the BJP had said that each candidate has been given a time of little less than a minute to file nomination which was not practicable. The matter is likely to be heard this week.

With the Panchayat elections for about 62,000 seats scheduled to be held on July 8 there are only about 72,000 police men to man the polls.

ISI involving women, juveniles in terror network: Army

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

A 'dangerous move' by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and heads of terror groups to rope in women and juveniles to carry weapons and messages has come to light amid a decline in the use of traditional means of communication by terrorists in Kashmir valley, a top army officer has said.

The General Officer Commanding of Srinagar-based 15 Corps, also known as Chinara Corps, Lt Gen Amardeep Singh Aujla also said the forces need to be cautious as people sitting across the Line of Control (LoC) are busy scheming and planning to disturb the prevailing peaceful atmosphere.

"Today's threat, as I see it, is involving women, girls and juveniles in carrying messages, drugs or, at times, weapons. So far, the army has detected some cases highlighting an emerging

trend which in itself is a dangerous move that Pakistan's ISI and heads of 'tanzeems' (terror groups) have adopted. We, along with other agencies, are jointly working out on this," Lt Gen Aujla told PTI.

Asked if it means that terror groups have stopped using mobile communication, the army officer said the Techint (technical intelligence) signatures have reduced considerably. Also, many Over Ground Workers (OGWs) who acted as conduits for them have been picked up.

"Therefore, now women, girls and juveniles have been roped in as an alternative to mainly carry messages," the top army officer in the valley said.

As part of the deradicalisation strategy, the army, with the cooperation of the Union Territory administration, has undertaken a series of initiatives - one of which is the 'Sahi Rasta' (right path) programme that has in recent times proved



to be a game changer in the right earnest.

"We have come a long way in ensuring peace and stability in Kashmir, but I will be naive to claim an early victory as we feel that every gain needs to be cemented before achieving lasting peace in the Union territory," he said.

Without naming Pakistan, Lt Gen Aujla said the challenge is that the neighbouring country has not given up on its intent and is repeatedly creat-

ing trouble on both sides of Pir Panjal. The latest infiltration bid in the Machil sector of north Kashmir is a testimony of his blatant indulgence.

He stressed that all security agencies, including those from the Union Territory administration, were well geared up to thwart any nefarious designs of the adversary. "The propensity of infiltration along the Line of Control in Kashmir may have shown some decrease but there have

been some attempts in South of Pir Panjal as well as neighbouring Punjab. "We need to be cautious and not let our guard down at any cost. National security is our prime responsibility. We will leave no stone unturned to maintain it," he said.

"We are cognisant of the likely threats from across and accordingly ensure to the best of our abilities that the current peace and normalcy achieved through collective efforts is not put at risk by inimical elements," he said. He said the mounting pressure and actionable intelligence-based operations have kept the terrorists on their toes and a majority of them have either "migrated out of the valley or have been lying low".

The "invisible form of terrorism is a cause of concern and we are jointly working towards weeding out this phenomenon", the officer said. "It is difficult to give the exact

number of terrorists either local or foreign but to my estimates, it is definitely at its lowest since the past 33 years," the officer said.

The terror attacks and encounters between terrorists and security forces have witnessed a decline in Kashmir this year which reflects a positive sign and augurs well towards peace and normalcy in all spheres and domains, he said.

The officer said there is a perceptible shift in the sentiments of the local population towards violence which is highly commendable and "the challenge for us is to sustain it in the coming times."

The need of the hour is to strengthen the confidence of the population with the security forces and the relevant government machinery, he said. "After all, if we have been able to reach this point, it is thanks to cooperation of people," Lt Gen Aujla said.

Not many Kashmiri students learning Hindi language

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

People of Kashmir love watching Bollywood movies. A large number of artists/singers, script writers, lyricists, technicians are also working in the film and television industry and winning hearts with their stellar performances.

But when it comes to studying Hindi in a classroom environment, not many Kashmiri students are stepping forward to learn the language. Abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 and renewed focus on introducing Hindi in the school curriculum has also failed to enthuse students from taking the first step.

As per the result gazette issued by the Jammu and Kashmir Board of School education, less than 50 students opted for studying Hindi between 2019 and 2021 in class 12.

According to the statistics, "only 12 students appeared in the Hindi language exam in 2019, 19 in 2020 and 18 in 2021 in class 12 board examinations from Kashmir division. In contrast, more than 18,000 students opted for Hindi in 2022 and in 2023 a total number of 10198 students, mostly from Jammu, opted for Hindi as an optional language. The exact number

of students who opted for Hindi from Kashmir was not immediately known as the result gazette had not issued separate data for Jammu and Kashmir division after conducting a joint examination for the first time in this session.

Students from the Arts stream choose one of the languages as an optional subject beside other streams. On the other hand, Urdu language tops the chart while Arabic, Persian, Kashmiri and Punjabi fare better than Hindi. Interestingly, due to the sizable Sikh population in Kashmir valley the number of students opting for Punjabi is more than even Hindi language.

After Urdu, Arabic, Persian and Kashmiri language is the most preferred in the classrooms.

In the first week of February 2023, the Jammu Kashmir State Council of Educational Research and Training (JKSCERT) had constituted a committee to chart out a mechanism for teaching and learning of Hindi language in schools of Jammu and Kashmir.

The idea was to teach the Hindi language of classes 1st to 10th in all schools of the Union Territory and the Director, JKSCERT had even sought suggestions from the expert committee.

BJP facing revolt by cadre in Kerala, Tamil Nadu

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The BJP is facing a massive revolt by the cadre in States of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. While resentment against the present State leadership is at its peak in Kerala, Brahmins in neighboring Tamil Nadu are cut up with the Hindutva party because of them being sidelined. V Mythreyan, who recently joined the BJP from the AIADMK, is yet to get an invitation from Chennai's Kamalalayam, the Tamil Nadu headquarters of the BJP.

Having failed in its attempt to take roots in Kerala, the BJP is on a mission to invoke divine power to reenergize the party in the State and to ensure its victory in the next Lok Sabha polls when 20 seats would be at stake. It has also targeted the 2026 assembly elections with the intention to anoint K Surendran, the present State chief as chief minister.

An eight-day long Sahasra Chandika Yaagam and Maha Kiratha Rudra Yagam held last month saw 160 'accomplished' priests picked from all over the country reciting mantras and performing pujas to ward off all 'evil forces' preventing and retarding the progress of



Surendran's passage to the Chief Ministers Office. The BJP in Kerala with hardly 10 per cent votes is confident of forming a ministry led by the party and Surendran if it manages 32 seats out of the 141 seats at stake in the State.

The Rs 3 crore worth pooja saw the office bearers of the party including Surendran lining up at Thottathil Mana seeking divine blessings. S a s t h r u s a r m a n Namboodirippadu, the head of Thottathil Mana led the battery of priests in performing the havan and the devotees are offered sumptuous breakfast, lunch and dinner.

B Gopalakrishnan, vice-president of Kerala BJP said he did not attend the pooja or heaven in any of the days. "These are all futile exercises. The party should take up the cause of the people and fight for the same instead of wasting

money and energy on these obscurantist policies.

The people of Kerala are intelligent enough to understand the good works done by any political outfits," Gopalakrishnan told The Pioneer. Sandeep Warriar, former spokesman of the party, said he does not believe in these measures being followed by the party leadership in Kerala.

"We are all trying to work out solutions to make life easy for the people of the State who are facing severe hardship like corruption in high places and nepotism," said Warriar.

The reports that the homam and havan were part of the BJP's mission to weaken and Muslim and Christian communities have upset the latter as the party is yet to find a common route through which it could sail with the minorities. More than 12,000 coconuts were broken by priests on the concluding day of the Homam to invoke divine blessings.

B L Santhosh, national secretary of the BJP who is the south India chief of the party is making a visit to Kerala to take stock of the post-pooja scenario and suggest more such measures for the future.

CPI(M) cracks whip, warns media for writing against party

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

M V Govindan, secretary, Kerala CPI(M), warned the media in the State against writing anything against the party and its tributary organizations like Students Federation of India.

The warning comes at a time when a section of the media has exposed the role of SFI leaders in making counterfeit degree and post graduate certificates to get employment as lecturers in the universities of the State.

"The media in the State should stick to its responsibility of reporting. It should not play the role of advocate and judge and keep away from holding media trials.

There is a widespread belief that the Opposition parties including the media are conspiring against SFI because of its unprecedented growth in the State," said Govindan while speaking to reporters at Thiruvananthapuram on Sunday. M Arsho, secretary, SFI and Vidya, who claims to be a post graduate in literature, allegedly furnished fake edu-



PTI ■ PATNA

Lalu Prasad celebrates his 76th birthday



PTI ■ PATNA

Undeterred by the sweltering heat, leaders and workers of the RJD in Bihar on Sunday celebrated the 76th birthday of Lalu Prasad, the party's founding president.

Fests were organised for the poor by RJD workers in several parts of the city while senior leaders, who greeted their leader in person, joined him in savouring a huge cake, weighing 76 pounds, which was cut in presence of followers and family members.

The uniqueness of the occasion was enhanced by the twin facts of the party now being in power, and the septuagenarian supreme being in town, unlike past many years when prison sentences and poor health kept him away from his people on his birthday.

Pregnant women should read Ramayana: T'gana Guv

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Pregnant women should chant 'Sunderkand' and read epics like Ramayana to have mentally and physically sound babies, Telangana governor Tamilisai Soundararajan said on Sunday.

Soundararajan, who is also a gynaecologist and fetal therapist, made the remarks while launching 'Garbha Sanskar' programme of an RSS-linked body.

Under the 'Garbha Sanskar' programme developed by Samvardhinee Nyas, doctors associated with the organisation will provide a mix of "scientific and traditional" pre-



scriptions to expectant mothers so that they give birth to "sanskari and deshbhakt" babies.

These prescriptions will include reading of religious texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, chanting of Sanskrit mantras and practice of yoga.

The process will start from the pre-conception to delivery stage and continue till a baby attains two years of age.

Family members of the expectant mothers will also be guided during the programme, according to the 'Garbha Sanskar' module launched virtually. Samvardhinee Nyas is a wing of Rashtra Sevika Sangh, a women's organisation that parallels the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Addressing the virtual launch event, Soundararajan appreciated the efforts of the Samvardhinee Nyas in developing 'Garbha Sanskar' programme module and said implementation of this "scien-

tific and holistic approach" towards pregnancy will "definitely" yield positive results.

"In villages, we have seen expectant mothers reading Ramayana, Mahabharata and other epics as well as good stories. Particularly in Tamil Nadu, there is a belief that pregnant ladies should learn Sunderkandam of Kamba Ramayana," she said.

Chanting of "Sunderkand" during pregnancy will be "very good for the babies", she added. "Sunderkand" is a chapter in Hindu epic "Ramayana", which depicts the adventures of Lord Hanuman and his selflessness, strength, and devotion to Lord Rama. PTI

Congress Govt rolls out first poll guarantee with launch of free bus rides for women across K'taka

Bengaluru: Women in Karnataka can travel for free in government buses in the state from Sunday with the rollout of the first of the five poll guarantees of the ruling Congress — the 'Shakti' scheme.

This free travel service will benefit more than 41.8 lakh women passengers everyday and would cost the state exchequer Rs 4,051.56 crore annually, officials said. The scheme is available for women, who are domiciled in Karnataka, for the journey within the state limits from 1



pm today. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah launched the scheme, which will provide

free rides for women and girl students of the state in government buses, from the

grand steps of Vidhana Soudha, the seat of Karnataka legislature and secretariat here.

Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar and Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy were among others present at the event, where the logo of the Shakti scheme was unveiled, while Shakti Smart Cards were symbolically issued to five women.

Women can apply for the Shakti Smart Card by registering on the 'Seva Sindhu' government portal to avail the benefit of the scheme. PTI



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Change of guard

The internal politics of NCP is fast taking shape which would have an impact on Maharashtra Politics

The political landscape of Maharashtra witnessed a significant upheaval recently as the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) is undergoing radical changes. The NCP, one of the key players in the state's politics, is undergoing a leadership transition that promises to have far-reaching consequences for Maharashtra's political dynamics. NCP largely a show managed by Sharad Pawar is now ready to go to the next-gen leaders as Sharad Pawar seems to be withdrawing and assigning himself less and less of routine work. Nationalist Congress Party president Sharad Pawar on Saturday named his daughter Supriya Sule and senior party leader Praful Patel as working presidents of NCP Pawar made the announcement in Delhi on Saturday during the NCP foundation celebrations of the party completing 20 years. This also could start a tussle. Ajit Pawar, Sharad Pawar's nephew and the opposition leader in the state assembly, has been the second man so far in the party but now his wings are being clipped much to his anguish. This is the first time that the party is having a working president for the national unit, a clear indication that the process of passing on the baton has begun and gives a clear indication of who would be the Pawar's choice. The decisions taken by Pawar including handing out more responsibilities to party leaders like Sunil Tatkare and Jitendra Ahwad among others would sideline Ajit even further in the party.

Praful Patel in the new setup gets the responsibility of the party machinery in several important states while Sule has been entrusted with the responsibility of Maharashtra, Haryana, and Punjab. She would be the chief strategist for the Lok Sabha polls.

But this might annoy the Ajit group. A large number of NCP MLAs are with Ajit. A face-off between the two sides is imminent. Ajit has been on the backfoot ever since his uncle and party chief Sharad Pawar announced his resignation as party president early last month, only to take back the resignation three days later on demand from senior and mid-rung party leadership. That was Pawar's power play, showing that he had the confidence of the party and he was comfortably saddled. Sharad Pawar has once again shown that he owns the party and is capable of tough decisions when somebody wants to step out of his shadow. Earlier Ajit Pawar, Sharad Pawar's nephew had emerged as the chosen successor to lead the NCP. But things have changed drastically in a few months. Ajit had started drifting towards the BJP much to the consternation of Sharad Pawar who has single handedly managed the party affairs for over 20 years. Ajit had become the sole voice of dissent that crossed his path. Maharashtra politics is characterised by strong regional identities and concerns. Ajit Pawar hails from the western Maharashtra region, which has traditionally been a stronghold of the NCP. It would be difficult to say what fate awaits NCP.

PICTALK



Devotees on their way to Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, at Katra in Reasi district near Jammu

PTI

India can be a global skill capital

A sizable section of the population is employed in the unorganised sector, and many of them have underutilised skills

New entrants to the workforce will need to be skilled and made employable if India's economy is to stay competitive on a global level while it goes through structural changes, technological advancements, and changes in demographics. Using the same logic, it is predicted that an extra 70 million people who are working age (15-59) will be in the labour force by the end of 2023. This number has been computed using the country's current population. As a consequence, 59 million more young people (15 to 30 years) will be employed, raising the overall number of persons in the labour force to around 404.15 million. According to the findings of the periodic survey of the labour force, mechanisms for reskilling and upgrading the capabilities of the current workforce, as well as the official recognition of skills that have been acquired informally, will need to be enhanced in the future.

Given this circumstance, India is taking creative action to maximize the potential of its population that fuels the country's economy. Additionally, skilled workers can move from India due to the ageing populations that are present in many developed nations, which is favourable for both the nation that is hosting them and the one to which they are migrating. Consequently, both countries gain. Three key challenges may divert India from developing its workforce as skills required at a global level: first, there aren't many trustworthy avenues for foreign travel; second, the public and private sectors don't work together; and third, there aren't enough women in the workforce.

INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

The India International Skill Center (IISC) program and other organized initiatives might help India achieve its goal of becoming the "skill capital" of the world. In April 2022, the state of Odisha, where Dharmendra Pradhan is the current Union Minister for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, hosted the official opening of the first IISC. The development of 14 IISCs across



India was planned for the year 2018 as a pilot project for the NSDC. In reality, India should turn the IISCs into a national organization. The NSDC must now decide to construct 30 IISCs in a public-private partnership to carry out the Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PKVY), a program for young people who are seeking opportunities outside of India, after the introduction of the Union Budget 2023-2024.

To advise and guide prospective immigrants, a new network of IISCs will conduct International Internship and Student Certificate (IISC) Program with a focus on skill assessments, upskilling, language learning, and pre-departure orientation. There is a further need to establish government-to-government and business-to-business connections with new markets, such as those in Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and East Asia, which is required to increase the mobility of India's blue-collar and white-collar workforce.

There are 262 million working people in India over the age of 30 years, 259 million of them are now employed and need future preparedness. To promote reskilling and upskilling programs, build tight business ties, and prepare the workforce for cutting-edge technology and the workplace



IF EMPLOYERS HAD ACCESS TO ALL THE INFORMATION, THEY WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO BE PREPARED TO PAY MORE FOR A SKILLED EMPLOYEE

of the future, several skill development options may be used. These models can be utilized in a variety of contexts. These techniques include on-the-job training directed by the industry, market-driven training, and apprenticeship programs. In India, a sizable section of the population is employed in the unorganized sector, and many of them have underutilised skills. Even though a substantial majority of India's workforce works in the unorganized sector, this is still the case. Since having a formal certification may improve a person's bargaining skills, interventions based on the notion of "Recognition of Prior Learning" (RPL) are crucial in this circumstance. According to the findings of many surveys, persons who had earned their RPL certification made an average monthly salary that was 20% greater than those who had not. Both full-time and contingent workers encountered this.

Over 390 million individuals in India, according to the findings of a survey performed by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), have acquired skills outside of the job. It's possible that a combination of self-study, on-the-job training, and natural talent, helped these folks build their abilities. One of the most significant and urgent strategic

concerns for India is the creation of new entry points for the country's thriving private sector to engage in political decision-making. Information asymmetries are one example of a market failure that prevents people from improving their talents: a competent person is aware of their skills, but a potential employer is not. If employers had access to all the information, they would be more likely to be prepared to pay more for a skilled employee. RPL is one kind of intervention that might be employed to address the identified informational imbalance. The persistent problem of low levels of female participation in the labour force is a third factor that casts doubt on the health of the economy. There are presently 395.2 million individuals working in the country, but only 91.6 million of them are women, according to data gathered from the labour force census. The use of skill-building activities in conjunction with a stronger push for empowerment, which includes the provision of economic opportunities, gender sensitization, as well as financial and social aid, may be able to increase this number.

(The writer is co-founder and MD, of Orane International, a training partner with the National Skill Development Corporation)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LIFESTYLE DISEASES ON THE RISE

Sir — The exponential increase in the prevalence of lifestyle diseases globally, particularly in India, in this decade is a cause for concern. Hypertension, diabetes mellitus, obesity and unhealthy levels of lipids in the blood have registered a significant rise in the community. Obesity can be taken as the mother of all these ailments which is directly related to an unhealthy lifestyle. The growing fast of the fast food industry is an indication, of how people are more addicted to junk food now than before. The availability of ready-to-eat food and food delivery services to doorsteps is making people switch over to them their traditional home food. Unhealthy eating coupled with a sedentary lifestyle, which is topped with stress has been taking a toll on personal health. This load of non-communicable diseases is a proven burden on the social economy. The limitations the diseases imposed on an individual at the workplace and the increased expenses for treatment on that family financially have become an additional and avoidable burden to him and society as well. So there should be a comprehensive plan at the National level to formulate and achieve goals to reduce the incidence of these diseases which should be implemented from the top to individual level. Inculcating a healthy lifestyle in the populace since childhood by discouraging junk foods, encouraging exercise, yoga and focusing on spreading sports culture are a few steps that the government can do. It's high time, the danger bells would not be ignored.

Dr DVG Sankararao | Vizianagaram

TRUMP STUMPED

Sir — Donald J Trump is in a soup as he was indicted for hoarding classified documents and he is finally stumped. This is the first time a former US President is facing criminal charges. It's against the law to keep classified or unauthorized documents, and a conviction could carry jail time, although it is highly unusual for

The contentious tableau



The contentious tableau on Thursday appearing during a social event in Canada glorifying the gory killing of Indian Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi on October 31 of 1984 in India by her bodyguard can be justified by no stretch of the imagination including even the artistic freedom, as it files in the face of a peace-loving religion like Sikhism preferred by an outstandingly great saint, Guru Nanak Dev. Simultaneously, this beyond-the-pale act showing Sikhs in a bad light also comes across as a pathetic bid to malign the high image of the entire community.

Thankfully, both the Canadian as well as Indian Governments taking serious note of it, have in the same breath condemned the misfortunate incident even as a couple of arrests have reportedly been made in this connection. Hopefully, the bilateral relations between India and Canada will have no beating on account of this untoward happening!

Azhar A Khan | Rampur

senior officials to go to prison. Ex-CIA boss David Petraeus was charged with giving classified documents to his former mistress and biographer. He reached a plea deal with the justice department, avoiding felony charges but getting sentenced to two years probation and a \$100,000 fine. Trump is facing his second indictment - a historic first for a US president - over a Department of Justice investigation into the removal of government documents from the White House, which were then taken to Trump's Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago after he left office. He is accused of unauthorized retention of national defence files and obstruction of justice, his lawyer says, but the indictment is not yet public. Thus, Trump is trapped.

CK Ramani | Mumbai

NCP'S NEW WORKING PRESIDENTS

Sir — Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) President Sharad Pawar on Saturday announced the names of senior leader Praful Patel and his daughter Supriya Sule

as the new Working Presidents of the party. He made the important announcement at the party's main Silver Jubilee Anniversary function held in New Delhi, in the presence of the top brass. Sule, MP from Baramati, will also be in charge of the upcoming state elections in Maharashtra, Punjab and Haryana. Pawar has also effected major organisational changes though so far his nephew Ajit Pawar has not been entrusted with any responsibility, and he left the venue without comments. The developments came exactly 35 days after Pawar had stirred the NCP cauldron with this resignation and then bowed before the party's wishes to remain as the party's supreme on May 6. With this, a crack has developed between Sharad Pawar and his nephew Ajit Pawar who have been completely sidelining the NCP chief.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



DINESH SOOD

Are we even serious about conserving nature?

The forest cover is shrinking, wild life is dying and flora and fauna is disappearing. When are we going to wake up?

Every day of the year is a celebration for us. June is the month that stands out for two important days of celebrations. On the 5th of the month, we had World Environment Day which saw hundreds of thousands of students marching across cities and towns and planting saplings on both sides of roads and in public places like parks. This is a practice that has been going on since 1973 when it was established as an annual event to put a full stop to environmental degradation and pollution. Had all the saplings (may, at least one-fourth of them) grown into full-fledged trees, our roads and public places would have become dense forests! But the truth is that the forest cover in India has come down drastically over the years.



Along with greenery, the country's wildlife is fast getting disappeared. During the colonial era, the rulers of the princely States had taken to hunting as a passion. Their masculinity was measured by the scores of wild animals like cheetahs, tigers and leopards which were shot by them! These Kings used to entertain their guests by taking them to dense jungles where they would use sophisticated weapons to kill the harmless animals thereby stoking their egos and energizing their macho feelings! Even as students and youth of Kerala were staging rallies and planting saplings last Monday to mark world environment day, a wild elephant named Ari Komban was running helter-skelter through the streets of small towns adjoining the dense forests of the Western Ghats in neighbouring Tamil Nadu. The elephant, whom politicians and leaders of religious factions, address as a rogue elephant, was not running after any human beings but it was frantically searching for water to quench its thirst. Ari Komban belonged to the jungles of Chinnakkal in the Idukki district of Kerala from

where he was tranquilized and transported to the Periyar Tiger Reserve, nearly 100 km away so that he would not invade the human settlements in Idukki. Indeed, Ari Komban regularly called on the villages to have his quota of drinking water and food because there was no water or food available in the forest.

The massive deforestation and planting of eucalyptus trees in nearly 2000 acres of forest land had led to the disappearance of wild streams and tributaries of the Periyar river which were the water sources for the wild animals. Political parties that rule the State of Kerala vied with one another in resettling the tribals in forest areas, the home territory of these animals. Whenever the animals felt thirsty and hungry and they could not find out water or eatables inside the forests, they would trespass into areas that legally belong to them in search of water. How can we expect the wild animals to know the nuances of title deeds issued by the Revenue Department to persons constituting the vote banks?

While tree saplings were being planted by students,

hundreds of original "Vanvasis" (tribals) were staging a demonstration in Chinnakkal demanding that Ari Komban be brought back to the forest adjoining their settlements. They had reasons for making such a demand. All of them were familiar with the tusker who may be in his late 20s or early 30s and had maintained cordial ties with it. According to P A Sojan, a small-time farmer in Chinnakkal, at no point in time, the pachyderm had attacked any human being. The Kerala Government officials have slapped murder charges against him for all the unresolved murder mysteries in the region underscoring the age-old dictum "if you fail to nab the original accused, nab whoever comes across you and make him the accused"! Well, this too comes under the Jungle Law!

Last heard the health of Ari Komban is a matter of concern. Who will be able to withstand the effect of power-packed tranquilizers? We forget the fact that wild animals too have a right to live in this world.

(The writer is special correspondent, The Pioneer)



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

FIRST COLUMN

SEEK GOD'S HELP TO MAKE THINGS WORK

Everyone wants to make things work but hardly anyone knows how



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

People keep on experimenting in their ways. We don't have to. Read on. For things to work well, God has to be involved. Without Him being in the picture, it is a non-starter. Why? Nothing moves without His permission, tacit or otherwise. Imagine being in a company, owned by some individual. Do you think anything happens in the company without the knowledge of this individual? Yes, this person may be hampered in many ways but God is not; He has absolute control. So, God must be favourable. The difficulty arises because God strictly goes by dharma and must enforce the 'Karmaphala' principle. But God helps out in coming out of difficulties if one becomes deserving. How you become one, will be detailed later in this article.

God must guide because that is all-important. Unless the direction is proper one cannot hope to achieve desirable results. Only God and Him alone know the 'Big Picture'; we cannot. God knows our past, present and future also, that too in full. Nothing is unknown to Him. We can only speculate; He knows. That is how God can alert us about looming dangers. Then, God must help in the accomplishment of anything of consequence, because we, small souls, can manage only small deeds; God has to step in. God's help is most crucially required in a change of our natures, which are most obstinate and keep us back from achieving what suits us. Only God has this power because our natures are the result of our past karmaphalas. Just like helping us out of our painful karmaphalas, only God can help change our deeply ingrained natures.



I can go on but let me take up what will make us deserving to get God interested in our lives. The answer in two words is: please Him. How do you do that? Two ways, i.e. follow dharma in your activities and behaviour and the other is to be dutiful. If you are more keen then try to increase the percentage of 'sattva guna' in yourself, i.e. in comparison to the other two modes of passion and darkness – the ones we normally favour. Purity will enhance and divine qualities will be reinforced. 'Yajna' (sacrifice for others), 'dana' (charity) and 'tapa' (austerities) will please the Lord further. Try to do some simple spiritual acts like having 'darshan' of God in His Deity form and even His photo like in a calendar, do 'namaskar' to Him, and pray for whatever according to dharma you need. Yes, it is both a spiritual act and a request for help. Chanting God's names is another simple act. God has made it very easy to connect with Him. What could be easier than what has been mentioned earlier? And if you wish to please God, follow His instructions as detailed in scriptures like the Geeta. You will gradually get aligned with God's plans for you.

If we do all these, what will happen? You will be completely amazed by the results, which will come sooner than later. Intuitions will begin to come giving guidance for making important decisions in life.

God also begins to help as only He can. Someone is seriously sick and you pray sincerely for his recovery. God may help if you have qualified for his 'kripa' (mercy). It is all as per dharma. You become deserving having done sufficient spiritual acts and God steps in. We begin to succeed in many ways more than we could have imagined. 'Saubhagya' (prosperity) becomes part of our lives. (18.78)

This is what the challenge is all about. But as mentioned earlier, it is not going to be easy. It requires long sustained practice to please God such that He begins to shower His 'Kripa' on us. I have experienced some of it, but more requires to be done. Sometimes fears to overpower faith, which indicates the need for more practice. Are you up to it? I am.

Bishnoi is a spiritual writer and can be reached at spiritual@ajitbishnoi.com

E-commerce policy conundrum

The government must provide a level playing field to all. It should legitimize 100 per cent FDI in retail, online and offline, big and small



UTTAM GUPTA

Referring to the national e-commerce policy, the Secretary Department for the Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) in the Ministry of Commerce Rajesh Kumar Singh has said it will "put in place a streamlined regulatory framework for the ease of doing business, adoption of modern technologies and the integration of supply chains". It will seek to create "a conducive environment for the overall development of the sector and boost exports".

According to the foreign trade policy, the Union government is aiming at an e-commerce export potential of \$200 billion to \$300 billion annually by 2030 which is 10-15 per cent of the projected global cross-border e-commerce exports of around US\$2 trillion. The claims of a 'streamlined regulatory framework' which is fundamental to realizing the goal don't inspire.

E-commerce is the process of selling goods and services over the Internet. A policy was introduced in early 2016, to allow 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) under the so-called marketplace model. The marketplace is a platform where vendors sell their products to consumers even as its owner merely acts as a facilitator by providing services such as booking orders, raising invoices, arranging the delivery, etc. She can't hold inventory or undertake direct selling.

Two conditions are prescribed. First, the foreign entity owning marketplace cannot permit more than 25 per cent of total sales on the marketplace from one vendor or its group companies. Two, it cannot directly or indirectly influence the sale price. On December 26, 2018, the commerce ministry clarified "The owner of the marketplace or its subsidiary or its joint venture (JV) with an Indian company can't have ownership of the seller."

Further, "a seller on the platform can't source more than 25 per cent of its inventory from a firm connected with the latter."

In 2020, the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA), in the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, issued the Consumer Protection (e-commerce) Rules, under Section 101 of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. The rules bar affiliated entities from selling on e-commerce platforms, restrict 'flash sales' and disallow sellers from using the name or brand associated with the marketplace e-commerce entities for the promotion of goods.

In 2021, DCA made amendments to restrict business-to-business, or B2B, sales in e-commerce and a provision to prevent an 'abuse of dominant position' by e-commerce firms.

Meanwhile, the commerce ministry has come up with a couple of drafts of the e-commerce policy first in 2018; another draft was released in 2019. According to Rajesh Kumar Singh, inter-ministerial consultations are still going on. How can a policy that remains on the drawing board for over five years, is still under deliberation and has no deadline as to when it will be finalized help attract FDI and provide a sustainable basis for the development of the sector?



UNLESS THE ANOMALIES IN EXTANT RULES ARE REMOVED, THE RESULTING POLICY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK WILL BE FAR FROM CONDUCTIVE

The writer is a policy analyst



The delay apart, various contours of the policy that have so far come out send contradictory and confusing signals. The overarching intent behind the 2016 order was that foreign investors won't be allowed to undertake direct selling. But, its content permitted him to set up four companies (call them subsidiaries or JVs) and control 25 per cent each of total sales on the platform.

Having allowed its entities to control almost all of the sales made on the marketplace, a requirement that the latter can't directly or indirectly influence the sale price is laughable. By issuing December 26, 2018 clarification, the government almost took a U-turn saying that the subsidiary/JV floated by the owner of the marketplace can't have ownership of the seller. It is a different matter that foreign investors can circumvent it by having less than 50 per cent shareholding in the seller firm and arguing that they have no control (majority) over the latter.

The second clarification whittled down the 2016 circular but kept a leeway for the marketplace owner to sell his 'own' product - albeit through its wholesale arm - on the platform. All that the wholesale arm needs to ensure is to restrict supplies to the seller within the 25 per cent threshold.

The amendments brought by DCA (2020/2021) seek to bar affiliated entities from selling on e-commerce platforms and prevent 'abuse of dominant position' by them. When the 2016 circular was already allowing affiliated entities to 'explicitly' sell on the platform and even 2018 clarification permitting it in a 'subtle' way, how can the subsequent amendments bar it?

Now, the DPIIT is talking about aligning e-commerce policy with the amendments brought by DCA. This would be a gross violation of what the former had done vide its 2016/2018 circulars. It will be tantamount to a retrospective change of policy and send a wrong signal to foreign investors.

When the rules are opaque, every stakeholder picks up what suits it. While, foreign e-commerce giants such as Amazon, and Flipkart say they comply with the law, trade bodies argue that the former are violating FDI rules. This puts even judicial forums in a quandary. Umpteen petitions are pending in the courts. But, there hasn't been a conclusion of any case either this way or that way.

The commerce ministry is putting together all existing rules to arrive at the policy. But, unless the anomalies in extant rules are removed, the resulting policy and regulatory framework will be far from conducive. We need to get to the root of why the rules were crafted the way they are.

Traditionally, BJP has been opposed to FDI in physical retail fearing that the ubiquitous mom-and-pop store - a colloquialism used to describe small, independent (and often family-owned) businesses - would be threatened by the presence of big retailers in the locality.

This would be amply clear from the stance its leaders took during the parliamentary debates in 2012 when the then UPA - government sought a discussion on allowing 51 per cent FDI in multi-brand retail. Being subject to onerous riders, that was a non-starter.

Yet, it wants that mom and pop get help in procurement,

transportation, storage and all other areas required for logistics support. That is where Amazon/Flipkart has an edge. To get them here, Modi - government came up with the idea of a marketplace. But, they won't come merely to provide services (this is what the marketplace is all about). They needed a foothold in the Indian retail space which was allowed to leverage 'clever drafting' of the rules. This has boomeranged.

Amazon/Flipkart et al has occupied disproportionately larger space in online retail leaving small traders high and dry. Even in offline or physical retail, FDI has come surreptitiously despite being barred as per extant policy (2012). For instance, in 2020 Jio Platforms Limited (JPL), a 100 per cent subsidiary of Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) received a foreign investment of Rs 1,50,000 crore (Rs 43,450 crore from US internet major Facebook alone) a major chunk of which was used by JioMart commerce.

JioMart commerce is an e-commerce platform that offers technology-enabled wherewithal to help 30 million stores to deliver products to consumers. It also integrates with itself thousands of retail stores spread all over India operated by Reliance Retail Limited (RRL). RIL having access to FDI in offline retail using the e-commerce marketplace route is outright unfair and discriminatory.

To clear the mess, the government should dispense with the marketplace and legitimize 100 per cent FDI in retail to provide a level playing field to all retailers, online or offline, big or small.

Child trafficking is rampant despite tall claims

Sad truth is children are being trafficked in large numbers to work as bonded labourers. The faulty statistics mask the true picture

Deva Kumar (name changed), a 13-year-old boy from Gaya district in Bihar, was offered a job in a bangle factory in Hyderabad. The employer promised that he would be sending Rs 4000 per month to his family. Deva left for Hyderabad. Months went on. But Deva's family did not receive a penny. After six months, Deva called his father saying he was made to work 16-18 hours a day all seven days a week. He was beaten badly if he dozed off in the dead of night. Realising Deva had been forced into child labour, his father, Ramesh Paswan, a daily wage labourer, visited a police station in Gaya to register a case against the trafficker. The police refused to register the FIR



SURESH KUMAR

(The writer is the author of Child Trafficking: The Fight for Freedom)

against the human trafficker. Paswan had to struggle for two months to get the case registered. He reached out to a lawyer-turned-child rights activist Neeraj Kumar Kashyap who went to the police station with him.

The latest Census 2011, although quite old, says that the number of working children in India in the age group 5-14 years is 10.1 million of which 5.6 million are boys and 4.5 million are girls. Child trafficking, both for sex and labour, is a horrific crime-plagued by poor statistics. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, in 2021, there were 2691 children rescued.

In law, child labour is prohibited. Yet, it continues to thrive. Across the country,

there are a few sectors noted for high child labour employment: bangle factories, brick kilns, carpet weaving, domestic service, agriculture, fisheries and mining. Some sectors primarily engage children; others are largely dependent on them. Such sectors fuel the demand for children. The demands are met with trafficked children.

The trafficked children are sent to the sectors spread across the country, and in some cases to neighbouring countries. Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are the main states in the country where child labour is present.

The number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide - an increase of 8.4 million children

in the last four years - with millions more at risk due to the impacts of COVID-19, according to a new report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF released in 2021. The trafficked children invariably belong to the underprivileged sections of society. It is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Human traffickers give false hope to the parents for their children's future before trafficking them.

I've worked in the anti-trafficking space for over 20 years. Last month, I spoke to the parents of nine rescued children. They said sending children to a government school is a waste of time and they cannot afford private schools. That is why they send them to work instead. Deva's

father, Ramesh Paswan is one such parent. At 13, Deva was a school dropout when he was trafficked. The progress on this case shows everything that needs fixing if we're looking to solve the problem of child labour. Deva had come back with a broken neck. Other children who returned with him had injuries and cut marks all over their bodies. Before setting them free, the trafficker and his goons had beaten them. The local hospital had to send them to the district government hospital where they received treatment for five days before going home. Still, their trafficker-Jaidun - was at large two months after the registration of the FIR. The FIR in question highlights a bunch of issues; one, registering an FIR against

a human trafficker by the victim of the parents is an uphill task. Second, even after registration of the case, the police do not take the case of human trafficking seriously, in this case, police did not go to Hyderabad to rescue them. Third, no compensation, by any government agencies, has been received by the child trafficking survivor even after the passing of a year. In the absence of any support from the government, rehabilitation becomes difficult.

Child labour is a demand-driven problem. The demands are met by the children of the most underprivileged sections or children experiencing difficult circumstances. The crime of child labour should be seen through the lens of organized crime by the police who

should not oppose resistance in registering the case, rather police should work proactively. There are around 1000 children trafficked from Gaya and transported to Hyderabad to engage in bangle factories. The police have not visited Hyderabad, so far, to bust the racket and rescue the children enslaved in bangle factories. However, after the new set of FIRs, two more human traffickers were arrested.

Jaidun was arrested after two months. He has been in jail for over ten months. It shows how much money human traffickers make. With annual profits as high as \$150 billion, it is the world's third largest and most profitable crime industry after illicit drugs and arms trafficking, says an international study.

Ex-Scottish leader held US confirms China's spy base in Cuba since 2019

AP ■ LONDON



Former Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who dominated politics in Scotland for years, was arrested Sunday by police investigating the finances of the governing, pro-independence Scottish National Party.

Police Scotland said a 52-year-old woman was detained "as a suspect in connection with the ongoing investigation into the funding and finances of the Scottish National Party."

government. She said that it was the right time for her, her party and her country to make way for someone else.

Sturgeon left office amid divisions in the SNP and with her main goal — independence from the UK for the nation of 5.5 million people — unmet.

Scottish voters backed remaining in the UK in a 2014 referendum that was billed as a once-in-a-generation decision.

The party wants a new vote, but the UK Supreme Court has ruled that Scotland can't hold one without London's consent.

The central government has refused to authorise another referendum.

Sturgeon's departure unleashed a tussle for the future of the SNP amid recriminations over the party's declining membership and divisions about the best path towards independence.

AP ■ WASHINGTON

China has been operating a spy base in Cuba since at least 2019, part of a global effort by Beijing to upgrade its intelligence-gathering capabilities, according to a Biden administration official.

The Biden administration has stepped up efforts to thwart the Chinese push to expand its spying operations and believes it has made some progress through diplomacy and other unspecified action, according to the official, who was familiar with US intelligence on the matter.

The existence of the Chinese spy base was confirmed after The Wall Street

Journal reported on Thursday that China and Cuba had reached an agreement in principle to build an electronic eavesdropping station on the island. The Journal reported China planned to pay a cash-strapped Cuba billions of dollars as part of the negotiations.

The White House called the report inaccurate.

"I've seen that press report, it's not accurate," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said in an MSNBC interview Thursday. "What I can tell you is that we have been concerned since day one of this administration about China's influence activities around the world; certainly in this hemisphere and in this region, we're watching this very, very closely."

Cuban Deputy Foreign

Minister Carlos Fernández de Cossío also refuted the report in a Twitter post Saturday.

"The slanderous speculation continues, evidently promoted by certain media to cause harm and alarm without observing minimum patterns of communication and without providing data or evidence to support what they disseminate," he wrote.

President Joe Biden's national security team was briefed by the intelligence community soon after he took office in January 2021 about a number of sensitive Chinese efforts around the globe where Beijing was weighing expanding logistics, basing and collection infrastructure as part of the People's Liberation Army's attempt to further its influence, the official said.

Chinese officials looked at sites spanning the Atlantic Ocean, Latin America, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and the Indo-Pacific. The effort included looking at

existing collection facilities in Cuba, and China conducted an upgrade of its spying operation on the island in 2019, the official said.

Tensions between the US and China have been fraught throughout Biden's term.

The relationship may have hit a nadir last year after then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to democratically governed Taiwan. That visit, the first by a sitting House speaker since Newt Gingrich in 1997, led China, which claims the island as its territory, to launch military exercises around Taiwan.

US-China relations became further strained early this year after the US shot down a Chinese spy balloon that had crossed the United States.

Beijing also was angered by Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's stopover in the US last month that included an encounter with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. The speaker hosted the Taiwanese leader at the

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in southern California.

Still, the White House has been eager to resume high-level communications between the two sides.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken is planning to travel to China next week, a trip that was cancelled as the balloon was flying over the US.

Blinken expects to be in Beijing on June 18 for meetings with senior Chinese officials, according to US officials, who spoke Friday on condition of anonymity because neither the State Department nor the Chinese foreign ministry has yet confirmed the trip.

CIA Director William Burns met in Beijing with his counterpart last month. White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan met with his Chinese counterpart in Vienna over two days in May and made clear that the administration wanted to improve high-level communications with the Chinese side.

9 hurt in SF mass shooting; 1 critical

San Francisco (AP): Nine people were wounded in a mass shooting in San Francisco's Mission District on Friday night in what police said appeared to be a "targeted and isolated" incident.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported that the shooting happened shortly after 9 p.m. during a party hosted by a clothing store near the intersection of 24th Street and Treat Avenue.

The San Francisco Police Department initially said that all of the victims were "expected to survive their injuries." But a statement from the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital said one of the victims remained in critical condition as of Saturday afternoon. Another was said to be in serious condition, four were in fair condition and three had already been discharged. The victims were eight men and one woman ranging in age from 20 to 34, the hospital said.

victims of gun violence," Scott said. "Our investigators are working diligently on this case, and we will have a visible police presence moving forward in the community where this occurred."

Dying Breed, a clothing store located near the intersection where the shooting happened, was scheduled to celebrate its sixth anniversary Friday night with a block party, according to a post on the store's Instagram account.

A person who answered the phone at the store declined to comment. The Mission District is one of San Francisco's oldest neighbourhoods, named after the Mission Dolores — a Spanish mission that dates back to 1776. Historically Latino and increasingly gentrifying in recent years, the vibrant area is home to numerous restaurants and shops. Mayor London Breed said first responders were quick to react to the shooting and noted that "no lives were lost." "I know there are a lot of questions and concerns in the community, and people want answers," Breed said.

Trump blasts indictment as 'baseless'

AP ■ GREENSBORO

Former President Donald Trump blasted his historic federal indictment as "ridiculous" and "baseless" on Saturday during his first public appearances since the charges were unsealed, painting the 37 felony counts as an attack on his supporters as he tried to turn dire legal peril to political advantage and project a sense of normalcy.

Speaking at Republican state conventions in Georgia and North Carolina, Trump cast his indictment by the Department of Justice as an attempt to damage his chances of returning to the White House as he campaigns for a second term.

"They've launched one witch hunt after another to try and stop our movement, to thwart the will of the American people," Trump alleged in Georgia, later telling the crowd that, "In the end, they're not coming after me. They're coming after you."

The strategy is a well-worn one for Trump, who remains the front-runner for the 2024 GOP nomination despite his mounting legal woes, which also

include criminal charges filed against him in March in New York.

Again and again, in the face of investigation, Trump has tried to delegitimise law enforcement officials and portray himself — and his supporters — as victims, even when he is accused of serious crimes.

Trump also vowed Saturday to remain in the race, even if he is convicted in the case. "I'll never leave," he told Politico in an interview aboard his plane after his speech in Georgia. He further predicted that he wouldn't be convicted and sidestepped questions about whether he would pardon himself if he wins a second term.

"I don't think I'll ever have to," Trump said. "I didn't do anything wrong."

The indictment unsealed Friday charges Trump with willfully defying Justice Department demands that he return classified documents, enlisting aides in his efforts to hide the records and even telling his lawyers that he wanted to defy a subpoena for the materials stored at his residence. The indictment includes allegations that he stored documents in a ball-



room and bathroom at his Mar-a-Lago resort, among other places.

Trump is due to make his first federal court appearance Tuesday in Miami. He was charged alongside valet Walt Nauta, a personal aide whom prosecutors say moved boxes from a storage room to Trump's residence for him to review and later lied to investigators about the movement. Nauta traveled with Trump on Saturday, appearing by his side at a Georgia Waffle House stop where the former president signed autographs, posed for photos and told supporters, "We did absolutely nothing

wrong." Earlier on Saturday, Trump was given a hero's welcome at the party convention in Georgia, where he drew loud applause as he slammed the investigation as "a political hit job" and accused his political enemies of launching "one hoax and witch hunt after another" to prevent his reelection.

"The ridiculous and baseless indictment by the Biden administration's weaponized Department of Justice will go down as among the most horrific abuses of power in the history of our country," he said.

He also used his remarks to rail against President Joe Biden and his 2016 Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, accusing them of mishandling classified information and insisting he was treated unfairly because he is a Republican.

But Trump overlooked a critical difference: Only he has been accused of intentionally trying to impede investigators by not returning the documents in question.

In the Clinton probe, for instance, FBI investigators concluded that although she was extremely careless in her handling of classified emails on a

private server, there was no evidence that she intended to break the law. And though the Biden investigation is still ongoing, no evidence has emerged to suggest that he intentionally held onto the records or even knew that they were there, with his representatives turning over records after they were discovered and voluntarily consenting to FBI searches.

Trump also lingered on Georgia's role in his 2020 defeat, repeating his lies that he had won the state and defending his efforts to overturn Biden's victory, which is the subject of another ongoing investigation, this one by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis. Willis has suggested that any indictments would likely come in August.

At the heart of the investigation is a recorded phone conversation in which Trump urges Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find 11,780 votes" — just enough to overtake Biden and overturn Trump's narrow loss in the state.

Trump has defended the phone call as "perfect," and on Saturday lashed out against both Willis and the special counsel in the Mar-a-Lago case.

Israelis protest govt's judicial overhaul plan

Tel Aviv (AP): Israelis continued protests Saturday for the 23rd week against plans by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government to overhaul the judiciary in the country.

The mass demonstrations started in January shortly after



the government, made up of ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox religious parties, was sworn in.

Gaining momentum and seeing large turnouts of more than 200,000 demonstrators at times, protest organizers have said they will not give up until the government cancels the proposed legal changes rather than delaying them.

The protests have become a weekly occasion to express on current affairs in the country.

In the coastal metropolis of Tel Aviv, where the main protest with tens of thousands is held, protesters held a giant banner reading "Type of citizen: dead," a reference to surging crimes among Israel's Arab communities.

Other protesters marched behind an effigy of a chained-up Netanyahu amid a sea of Israel's blue-and-white flags.

The plan would weaken the judiciary and limit judicial oversight on laws and government decisions, what critics say poses a direct threat to civil rights and the rights of minorities and marginalised groups.

They also warn it will grant the government unrestrained power and upend the country's system of checks and balances.

The government says the judicial plan is meant to rein in what it says is an overly interventionist Supreme Court and restore power to elected legislators.

European leaders offer more aid to Tunisia

AP ■ TUNIS

European leaders visiting Tunisia held out the promise of more than 1 billion euros in financial aid as well as investments in undersea data cables and renewable energy Sunday in an effort to restore stability to the North African country — and to stem migration from its shores to Europe.

Tunisia's increasingly autocratic president hosted the leaders of Italy, the Netherlands and the European Commission for talks aimed at smoothing the way for an international financial bailout of the increasingly troubled country.

Support from Tunisian President Kais Saied is crucial to any European Union deal to curb migration.

On the eve of the talks, Saied made an unannounced visit to a migrant camp in the coastal city of Sfax, a central jumping-off point for boat journeys crossing the Mediterranean to Italy.

Saied spoke with families



living in the camp, and pleaded for international aid for Africans who converge on Tunisia as a transit point to reach Europe.

His caring words, and sympathetic images posted on the president's Facebook page, contrasted sharply with Saied's stance earlier this year, when he stoked racist abuse of Black African migrants in Tunisia with a speech railing against a perceived plot to erase his country's Arab identity.

The president and Tunisian Prime Minister Najla Bouden

met Sunday with Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

After the talks, von der Leyen announced a five-point program to support Tunisia, including up to 1.5 billion euros (USD 1.1 billion in aid for Tunisia's indebted budget. The plan will be discussed with all 27 EU countries at their next summit in late June, she said. In addition to the budgetary aid, the EU is discussing

investment in high-speed broadband and other digital infrastructure for Tunisia, and 300 million euros in hydrogen and other renewable energy projects, von der Leyen said.

The plan also includes 100 million euros for Tunisian authorities to carry out search-and-rescue operations for migrants and anti-smuggling operations, she said.

Amid criticism from migrant advocacy groups about forced repatriations, von der Leyen and Rutte insisted the program would respect human rights. The aim is to "kill that cynical business model of the boat smuggler. Migration is at this moment one of the most important issues facing all of us," Rutte said. Stemming migration is especially important for the far-right Meloni, who was making her second trip in a week to Tunisia. Italy is the destination for most Europe-bound migrants leaving from the North African nation, whose economy is teetering toward collapse.

Indian-origin ex-police officer jailed in UK

London (PTI): An Indian-origin former police officer in the UK has been sentenced to 16 months in jail for sexually assaulting a colleague while on duty, the Metropolitan police said.

Archit Sharma, a former police constable, was sentenced on Friday to 16 months imprisonment and added to the Sex Offenders Register for ten years, the Met said in a statement on Saturday. A restraining order was also issued against Sharma, preventing him from contacting the victim for ten years, and he was ordered to pay a victim surcharge of GBP 156. The allegation that Sharma, then attached to the North Area Command Unit of the Met, had sexually assaulted a colleague while both were on duty was received in December 2020.

IS militants kill 2 Iraqi soldiers, wound three

Baghdad (AP): Islamic State group militants attacked an Iraqi army position in the northern governorate of Kirkuk, killing two military officers and wounding three soldiers, Iraq's security media office said in a statement on Sunday.

The Iraqi Security Media Cell said militants belonging to the extremist group late Saturday targeted the military position in the district of Dibis with light and medium weapons but did not provide further details.

The statement said that Iraqi authorities held a meeting to investigate the attack. IS, in a late Saturday statement, claimed responsibility for the attack on their website.

This comes as the Iraqi military has cracked down on IS sleeper cells near the country's borders over the past month.

Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service launched airstrikes tar-

getting the group's positions in the western desert of the Anbar province and in the Hamrin mountains near Kirkuk, killing 27 militants.

The militant group in recent years has targeted Iraqi army positions in the governorate of Kirkuk. In November 2022, IS militants killed four Iraqi soldiers in the governorate's district of Dibis, and took their weapons and communications gear.

Kirkuk's governor, Rakan Saeed al-Jiboury, told The Associated Press at the time that the attack happened in an area divided between the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga forces who don't coordinate their actions "and (IS) takes advantage of this."

IS's territorial control in Iraq and Syria was crushed by a years-long US-backed campaign, but its fighters continued with sleeper cells that have killed scores of Iraqis and Syrians.

American musician arrested in Moscow on drugs suspicion

Moscow (AP): An American musician who has lived in Russia for more than a decade has been arrested on suspicion of drug trafficking, Russian news media reported.

The reports said Michael Travis Leake is suspected of selling mephedrone, whose effects are similar to those of cocaine and MDMA. A Moscow court ordered him to be held for two months in pre-trial detention, the reports said. He faces charges of production or distribution of drugs, which carry a sentence of up to 20 years in prison. An Instagram page under the name Travis Leake Instagram identifies him as the singer for the band Lovi Noch (Seize the Night). News reports said Leake is a former paratrooper with the US military and has lived in Moscow since 2010.

French town unites in support of stabbed victims

AP ■ PARIS

Children, parents and grandparents joined a few thousand well-wishers Sunday in a park in the French Alps town of Annecy to show solidarity and support for the victims of a playground stabbing attack that left four young children and two adults hospitalised with serious wounds.

The children represent "the poetry of life," Annecy Mayor Francois Astorg told the crowd, calling on Annecy residents to "come together to build, instead of to hate."

Astorg had called for a "citizens' gathering" in the lakeside park where a man with a knife raced around stabbing people Thursday. City officials reopened the playground hours after the attack in an attempt to show the area was again safe.

People have heaped flowers, stuffed toys and messages



of support on the playground's padded surface in the days since. A pink heart-shaped balloon tied to a bench read, "For the children - LOVE."

The children targeted were a 22-month-old Dutch girl, a 3-

year-old British girl, and two 2-year-old French cousins, a boy and a girl. They received grave injuries and remain hospitalised, but their conditions improved to the point where their lives no longer were in

danger, the regional prosecutor said Saturday.

One of the wounded adults, a Portuguese man who was knifed while trying to stop the attacker from fleeing, and then shot by police as they detained the suspect — also remains hospitalised.

Multiple bystanders sought to deter the assailant, including a French Catholic pilgrim named Henri who repeatedly swung at the attacker with his backpack, and has been dubbed 'the hero with the backpack.'

The suspect, a 31-year-old Syrian refugee with permanent Swedish residency, was handed preliminary charges Saturday of attempted murder and armed resistance. Witnesses told investigators that the suspect mentioned his own 3-year-old daughter, his wife and Jesus Christ during the attack, regional prosecutor Line Bonnet-Mathis said.

USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS DURING MAOIST INSURGENCY

Writ petition against Prachanda

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

A writ petition was on Sunday registered at the Supreme Court seeking the prosecution of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', the then Maoist supreme commander, for using children as soldiers during the decade-long war against the monarchy in Nepal.

Lenin Bista, a former child soldier, approached the apex court with a writ petition claiming that the then-leadership breached international humanitarian law by using child soldiers in the Maoists' war.

Prachanda was chief of the erstwhile rebel Maoist party and former premier Baburam Bhattarai second-in-command. According to court sources,



the petitioner demanded the prosecution of Prachanda and Bhattarai, arguing that it was a war crime to force unintelligent minors like him as child soldiers and forcefully expel them from the camp as disqualified combatants.

Earlier, the Supreme Court administration had refused to register Bista's petition. The petitioner then approached the court against its dismissal. On

Friday, a single bench of Justice Ananda Mohan Bhattarai ordered the registration of the writ.

The date of hearing on the writ petition has been fixed for June 13. The United Nations Mission in Nepal had disqualified 4,008 soldiers of the Peoples Liberation Army of then-rebel CPN-M, saying they were minors and late recruits.

During the verification that ended in December 2007, it was found that 2,972 guerrillas were minors, while 1,036 were recruited into the Nepal Army under the army integration process in accordance with the Comprehensive Peace Accord signed in 2006 when the Maoists joined politics by laying down arms. However, the Maoist leadership delayed their release.

Imran upset over losing army's backing: Bilawal

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has said that deposed prime minister Imran Khan is not against the army's interference in politics but is upset with the powerful establishment only because it is no longer supporting him, according to a media report.

"Khan's problem with the Pakistan Army began in April of last year when it declared that it would not get involved in politics and would not take sides," Bilawal told Qatar-based Al Jazeera news channel on Saturday.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf chairman's issue with the army is not that they're involved in politics; his problem with the army is they're not getting involved to support him, he said.

Bilawal said that the role of the army in Pakistan's politics cannot be denied. "More than half of our history has been covered by military rule. My party, the Pakistan Peoples Party, has challenged each and every single dictatorship in Pakistan's history."

He said Khan, however, supported every dictatorship in Pakistan, including the last dictatorship of former president General (ret'd) Pervez Musharraf.

"Khan's political history is that he has supported every dictator and he supported every autocrat in Pakistan's history," he said.

The foreign minister said that former cricketer-turned politician's rise to power in 2018 is well-documented. "It is an established fact that he was brought into power through a rigged election in collaboration with some former officers of the Pakistan Army."

Responding to a question about the army's popularity after May 9 events, Bilawal said the majority of the people of the country want the army to remain apolitical.

"As far as the army's popularity as an institution is concerned, the PTI supporters will be upset with the Pakistan Army for not violating the Constitution and supporting Khan," he said. He said the majority of Pakistanis are deeply offended by the actions that took place on May 9 where Khan encouraged his supporters to attack army installations.

'Legal proceedings for May 9 violence within 2-3 weeks'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah has said that legal proceedings against Imran Khan will be initiated within 2-3 weeks for bloody violence that erupted after the former premier's arrest in a corruption case on May 9. Khan, the 70-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chief, has denied his involvement in the violence, saying he was in jail when the incidents took place. He has said that the establishment plans to keep him in jail for 10 years in a sedition case.

Sanaullah in an interview with the Geo News on Saturday night said Khan was "100 per cent" responsible for the violent protests.

The arrest of Khan by paramilitary personnel from the Islamabad High Court premises on May 9 triggered unrest in Pakistan, leading to several deaths and dozens of military and state installations being destroyed by the angry PTI protesters.

"Whatever had happened in Pakistan...the hatred in Pakistani politics; the chaos in Pakistan politics; the economic deterioration in Pakistan; and the instability in the country; only one person is the architect of all this. His name is Imran Khan," he said.

The minister said that Khan injected poison into the youth and they are not ready to accept anything less than the death of political opponents. "Khan is responsible for all this. But as far as action is concerned, see there is a process...First of all, the criminal carrying out an illegal act is arrested. Then with evidence the actual mastermind is traced," he said.

Sanaullah also claimed that the government is well aware of the fact who was behind the mayhem of May 9, but waiting for more evidence. When asked about how long it may take to complete the investigation to begin formal legal proceedings against Khan, the minister said that "it will take two to three weeks." When asked why he was naming Khan for involvement in violence on May 9 without having proper evidence, the minister said there was still enough evidence to point him out.

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Ex-PM booked for land scam

Lahore (PTI): Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan was booked on Sunday in yet another case related to the purchase of over 5,000 kanals (625 acres) of land at throwaway prices through fraud in the country's Punjab province.

The total number of cases against the 70-year-old Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chief has now swelled to over 140 following his ouster as the prime minister of Pakistan in April last year.

Khan's cases mostly relate to terrorism, inciting the public to violence, arson attacks, blasphemy, attempted murder, corruption and fraud. The

Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) of Punjab registered the new case against Khan. Khan's sister Uzma Khan, her husband and former Punjab chief minister Usman Buzdar have also been booked.

"Khan and other suspects are accused of buying 5,261 kanals of expensive land in Layyah district of Punjab at cheap rates. They bought the land at PKR 13 crores against the actual price of PKR 6 billion (600 crores)," the ACE said.

The ACE said the suspect, using political influence, "snatched" 500-kanal land from the local people who had been living there for many years.

Honduras opens embassy in China after breaking ties with Taiwan

AP ■ BEIJING

Honduras opened an embassy in Beijing on Sunday, Chinese state media reported, months after the Central American nation broke off relations with Taiwan to form diplomatic ties with China.

China sees self-governed Taiwan as a breakaway province, to be retaken by force if necessary, and prohibits its own diplomatic partners from having formal ties with Taipei. Castro arrived in Shanghai on Friday on her first visit since the establishment of relations. During her stay in Shanghai, she visited the headquarters of the New Development Bank, a bank established by the BRICS nations, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Honduras requested admission to the bank, Castro's office tweeted Saturday.

two sides' strengthening diplomatic ties came during Honduran President Xiomara Castro's six-day visit to China. Honduras established formal relations with China in March, becoming the latest in a string of countries to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

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China complains to S Korean ambassador after Seoul summons Beijing's envoy

Beijing (AP): A Chinese official lodged a complaint with South Korea's ambassador to China, in a tit-for-tat move after Beijing's envoy to South Korea was summoned last week over his comments accusing Seoul of tilting toward the United States.

Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong expressed dissatisfaction with Seoul's response to last week's meeting between Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming and a South Korean opposition leader, according to a statement Sunday from China's Foreign Ministry.

Nong said it was Xing's duty to meet with different people in South Korea and he hoped Seoul would reflect on the relationship between the two countries and work with China to promote healthy and stable ties, the statement added.

The diplomatic row between China and South

Ukraine army 'recaptures' village

AP ■ KYIV

Ukraine's military on Sunday reported recapturing a village in the southeast of the country amid Russian claims of repelling multiple attacks in the area, the latest indication that a highly anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive might be underway even as officials in Kyiv stop short of publicly acknowledging it.

The 68th Separate Hunting Brigade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces posted a video on Facebook showing soldiers installing a Ukrainian flag on a damaged building in what the post said was the village of Blahodatne in the partially occupied eastern Donetsk region. In a separate social media post, Ukraine's Ground Forces confirmed that the brigade had retaken Blahodatne.

Myroslav Semeniuk, spokesman for the brigade, told The Associated Press that an assault team captured six Russian troops after entering several buildings where some 60 soldiers were holed up. "The enemy keeps shelling

us but this won't stop us," Semeniuk said. "The next village we plan to reclaim is Urozhayne. After that, (we'll proceed) further south."

While the capture of Blahodatne pointed to a small Ukrainian advance, Western and Ukrainian leaders have repeatedly cautioned that efforts to expel Russian troops more broadly are expected to take time. Russia has made much of how its troops have held their ground elsewhere.

The Russian Defence Ministry on Sunday continued to insist that it was repelling Ukrainian attacks in the area. It said in a statement that Ukrainian attempts at offensive operations on the southern Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia axes of the front-line over the past 24 hours have been "unsuccessful."

Vladimir Rogov, a Russian-installed official in the Zaporizhzhia region, insisted that Blahodatne, along with two other villages in Zaporizhzhia, are in a "gray area" in terms of who controls them. According to Rogov, the Ukrainian forces have briefly



Ukrainian soldiers stand in front of a building with a Ukrainian flag on it, during an operation that claims to liberate the first village amid a counter-offensive, in a location given as Blahodatne

seized another village in the neighboring Donetsk region, but were swiftly routed by the Russian troops.

"The situation is developing. Nothing extraordinary is happening," Rogov said in a Telegram post. The Russian military has also accused Ukrainian forces of attacking — albeit unsuccessfully — one

gas pipelines in the southeastern part of the Black Sea."

All the speedboats were destroyed by the Russian military, and the ship didn't sustain any damage, the ministry said. The claim could not be independently verified, and Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment.

Moscow made a similar allegation last month and reported that Ukrainian unmanned speedboats targeted another reconnaissance ship in the Black Sea, the Ivan Khurs. Several days later, Ukraine's Defence Ministry published video that appeared to show a marine drone heading for the Ivan Khurs, but didn't show the drone hitting the ship. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Saturday that "counteroffensive and defensive actions" were underway against Russian forces. He refused to disclose any details but asked to pass it on to Russian President Vladimir Putin that his top commanders were in a "positive" mindset as their troops engaged in intense fighting along the front line.

Quake rattles northern Japan

Tokyo (AP): A magnitude 6.2 earthquake shook Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido on Sunday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries. No tsunami warning was issued. There were no reports of problems at the nuclear plants in the area, or of disruptions to power supply or bullet trains running in northern Japan.

The quake, which hit at 6:54 p.m., was 136 kilometers (85 miles) deep and struck the southwestern part of Hokkaido, according to the Japanese Meteorological Agency. It shook much of the island, including the cities of Chitose and Atsumacho, the agency said. It warned people should watch for strong tremors that could follow over the next few days, as well as for landslides.

Hokkaido HTB News reported local train and subway services were delayed, and a part of a freeway was temporarily closed off. News footage showed a display hanging from a ceiling at a Hokkaido airport, swaying slightly by the shaking. A resident told the broadcaster the shaking lasted about 20 to 30 seconds.

'Haqqani seeking control of lucrative economic projects'

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

Afghanistan's Taliban-appointed Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani is reportedly seeking to take under his control the most promising economic projects, primarily the construction of the Afghan section of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, a UN report has said.

The fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council said that discor

among Taliban officials over the distribution of positions in the de facto state apparatus and provincial administrations is "significant".

"Disagreements are reportedly ripe between acting Interior Minister and leader of the Haqqani Network, Sirajuddin Haqqani and acting First Deputy Prime Minister, Mullah Baradar," the report, issued here on Friday, said.

It added that while Baradar has "less influence" in government, he retains the support of southern provincial administrations. In addition, Baradar is seeking to control the

process for the Taliban gaining international recognition, unfreezing Afghan assets abroad and expanding foreign assistance. "The conflict revolves around competition for positions in government and control of financial and natural resources and channels for smuggling commercial goods," the report said.

A footnote accompanying this observation said that "Sirajuddin Haqqani is reportedly seeking to take under his control the most promising economic projects, primarily the construction of the Afghan section of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline."

The 1,814-km natural gas pipeline originates from Turkmenistan and passes through Afghanistan and Pakistan to reach India. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India signed an Inter Government Agreement (IGA) and Gas Pipeline Framework Agreements (GPFA) in December 2010 for the development of the pipeline.

The construction work began in 2015 but made little progress due to instability in Afghanistan.

Taliban slam 'baseless', 'biased' UN report

Islamabad (AP): The Taliban condemned on Sunday a "baseless and biased" report from the UN Security Council highlighting rifts within the group's ranks. The last seven months have seen a greater shift of power from the capital Kabul to the southern city of Kandahar, a Taliban heartland and the base of the group's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.

A report — issued earlier in June — by the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team said that the Taliban governance structures remain "highly exclusionary, Pashtun-centred and repressive" toward all forms of opposition. It also said Kandahar's

return as the seat of power — like it was during the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan in the 1990s — circumvents senior Taliban ministers in Kabul, the centre of the current government, because of the way decisions are made.

Key figures, such as the Taliban's main spokesman, have set up offices in the south of Kandahar. Monumental decrees such as those excluding women and girls from education and work were issued from the city instead of Kabul.

The report also said the group was battling internal conflict over key policies, the centralisation of power and the control of financial and natural resources in Afghanistan.

Ongoing power struggles are further destabilising the situation, to the point where an outbreak of armed conflict between rival factions is a manifest risk, the report added.

The Taliban's main spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid rejected the report's "accusations" of strife, saying they were baseless and demonstrated "obvious hostility" to Afghans.

Rumours of disagreement between the group's leaders are a continuation of the propaganda of the past 20 years, he said. "The publication of such biased and baseless reports by the Security Council does not help Afghanistan and international peace and security, rather, it increases worry

among the people (Afghans)." The report described the Taliban leader, Akhundzada, as "reclusive and elusive" and said he had elaborate measures to ensure his safety while holding meetings.

It also cited an unnamed UN Security Council member state as saying Akhundzada had survived two bouts of COVID-19, leaving his respiratory system weakened, in addition to existing kidney problems, leading to suggestions that senior Taliban figures are waiting for his health to lead to a natural succession.

"Hibatullah has been proudly resistant to external pressure to moderate his policies," the June 1 report said.

PUBLIC NOTICE
License Nos. 49 of 2008 dated 14.03.2008 & 184 of 2008 dated 25.10.2008 have been granted to NCR Business Park Private Limited & Others for development of a Commercial Colony over an area measuring 10,218.7 acres in Sector-66, Gurugram.

APPENDIX- IV-A
[See proviso to rule 8 (6)]
Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Property
E-Auction Sale Notice for sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8(6) and Rule 9(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002.

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DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY
SECOND FLOOR WITHOUT ROOF/TERRACE RIGHTS BUILT ON FRONT SIDE, RIGHT HAND SIDE, SOUTH EAST PORTION OF PROPERTY BEARING NO. C-1/11-42, AREA MEASURING 55 SQUARE YARDS, OUT OF TOTAL MEASURING 217 SQUARE YARDS, OUT OF KHASRA NO. 314, SITUATED IN THE AREA OF VILLAGE BINDAPUR, COLONY KNOWN AS SANJAY ENCLAVE, UTTAM NAGAR, NEW DELHI - 110059, ALONGWITH COMMON USE OF LIFT AND ONE SMALL HATCH BACK CAR PARKING RIGHTS, IN STILL PARKING AREA, ALONG WITH PROPORTIONATE UNDIVIDED, INDIVISIBLE & IMPARTING OWNERSHIP RIGHTS IN THE UNDERNEATH LAND, WITH ALL RIGHTS, TITLE, INTEREST IN THE SAID PROPERTY. THE SAID PROPERTY IS BOUNDED AS UNDER:-

APPENDIX- IV-A
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Tel No.: +91 22 49116300
FINAL AUCTION CUM SALE NOTICE FOR GOLD ORNAMENTS
The borrower(s) (whose details are provided in the table herein below), in particular, and the public, in general, are hereby informed that the below mentioned accounts are overdue, and the borrower(s)/account holders have not responded/complied with the communication, and notice sent by HDB Financial Services Limited (the "Company") requesting the borrower to clear his/her/their dues as per the documents in respect of the below mentioned loan signed/accepted by the borrower(s) (such documents, collectively "loan agreement") and therefore defaulted in terms thereof. The Company has in exercise of its rights as a pledgee, decided to enforce the pledge and therefore hold a public auction of the gold ornaments pledged to the company on the date and for the purpose of selling the same and realizing/recovering the dues owned by the borrower(s) to the company. The auction will be conducted on 16-06-2023 at the below mentioned local branch of HDB Financial Services Limited from 11.00 am onwards on the date and branches mentioned in the below table:-

Moody's sees India's GDP expanding 6-6.3% in Q1

Flags fiscal slippage risks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Moody's on Sunday said the Indian economy is expected to clock a 6-6.3 per cent growth in June quarter, and flagged risks of fiscal slippage arising from weaker-than-expected government revenues in the current fiscal.

Moody's growth estimate is lower than the 8 per cent projection for the first quarter made by the Reserve Bank last week. In an interview with PTI, Moody's Investors Service Associate Managing Director Gene Fang said India has a relatively high level of general government debt at around 81.8 per cent of GDP for 2022-23, and low debt affordability.

India, he said, has a high growth potential and its credit strengths include a stable domestic financing base for



government debt, as well as a sound external position.

"We expect India's growth to come in around 6-6.3 per cent in the first quarter of the current fiscal year, which remains relatively flat from the 6.1 per cent recorded in the final quarter of fiscal 2022-23," Fang said.

While household demand is likely to see an improvement given the moderation in both headline and core inflation readings, lagged effects of higher interest rates pose some risks on gross fixed capital formation, in particular, Fang added.

Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) is an indicator of investment in the econ-

omy. Fang said as a 'Baa3' rated sovereign, India's strengths lie in its large and diversified economy with a high growth potential, which is evident in the relatively strong growth forecast this year despite the weaker global economic outlook.

The government has largely met its fiscal objectives over the past two years, assuaging concerns on fiscal policy, he said.

The fiscal deficit, which is the difference between government expenditure and revenue, narrowed to 6.4 per cent of GDP in 2022-23 from 6.7 per cent in 2021-22.

In the current fiscal, the deficit is budgeted to come in

lower at 5.9 per cent of GDP.

"As the government balances the commitment to longer-term fiscal sustainability against its more immediate priority of supporting the economy amid high inflation and weak global demand, and ahead of general elections due by May 2024, we expect some risks of fiscal slippage arising from possibly weaker-than-expected government revenues," Fang said.

For the full 2023-24 and 2024-25 fiscals, Moody's projects economic growth at 6.1 per cent and 6.3 per cent, respectively. On a calendar year basis, Moody's expects growth to be 5.5 per cent in 2023, which could

improve to 6.5 per cent in 2024.

In its monetary policy last week, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) projected India's GDP to expand by 6.5 per cent in the current fiscal, on the back of supportive domestic demand conditions.

The RBI projected June quarter (Q1) growth at 8 per cent, Q2 at 6.5 per cent, Q3 at 6 per cent, and Q4 at 5.7 per cent.

Moody's has a 'Baa3' sovereign credit rating on India, with a stable outlook. Baa3 is the lowest investment grade rating.

All three global rating agencies -- Fitch, S&P, and Moody's -- have the lowest investment grade rating on India, with a stable outlook. The ratings are looked at by investors as a barometer of the country's creditworthiness and impact borrowing cost.

Fang said India has a relatively high level of general government debt, estimated at around 81.8 per cent of GDP for fiscal 2022-23, compared with the Baa-rated median of around 56 per cent.

V Jagannathan quits from Board of Star Health and Allied Insurance Company

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The founder of one of the largest private sector health insurers Star Health and Allied Insurance Company Ltd Venkatasamy Jagannathan has tendered his resignation from its Board with immediate effect, sources said on Sunday.

An industry veteran, the 78-year-old Jagannathan had stepped down from his role as the Chairman of the city-headquartered firm in May.

"We wish to inform you that Venkatasamy Jagannathan vide e-mail dated June 10, 2023 has tendered his resignation from the Board of the Company with immediate effect from June 10, 2023," Star Health and Allied Insurance Company Ltd said in a BSE filing on Saturday.

Jagannathan, after attaining superannuation from the United India Insurance as its Chairman and Managing Director, founded Star Health and Allied Insurance with the backing of Dubai-based ETA Group.

In an interaction with PTI about confirming his resignation, Jagannathan said: "I was with Star Health and Allied Insurance and I became its Executive Chairman. Then, I became the

non-executive Chairman and handed over the executive functions to my juniors."

"Now, I have also resigned from the role of non-executive Chairman," he said.

"I always believe that every beginning has an end and every end has a beginning. God willing, I am looking forward to start something in the next two months, it may be in any industry, something that is close to my heart..." he said and declined to elaborate further. Asked about his journey in Star Health, he said: "We started with just 12 people, rented premises with Rs 30,000. Star Health is now valued at more than Rs 30,000 crore," he said.

"The journey I started as an insurance man 53 years ago, I gave record profits last year. My (Star Health) profit was the highest in FY 2022-23," he pointed out. Star Health and Allied Insurance reported Rs 102 crore net profit for the fourth quarter ending March 31, 2023. The standalone health insurance had booked a loss of Rs 82 crore in the January-March quarter of the last financial year. For the entire 2022-23, profit after tax stood at Rs 619 crore as against a loss of Rs 1,041 crore in FY22.



FY24 to be golden year for Punjab National Bank: MD

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The current financial year will be "a golden year" for Punjab National Bank due to its multi-pronged strategy and steady focus, its managing director Atul Kumar Goel has said. The state-owned bank's aim for FY24 is to adopt a multi-pronged strategy that seeks to build upon the existing synergies and capabilities to further scale up operational efficiency for facilitating sustainable and profitable growth, Goel said in his message to shareholders.

"The strategy relies on increasing market share, which includes boosting both CASA (Current Account Savings Account) share and increasing credit offtake, especially in the RAM (Retail, Agriculture and MSME) segment; improving asset quality through increasing the rate of recoveries, minimising slippages, robust monitoring of special accounts to prevent their movement to the delinquent category and enhanced collections efficiency," he said.

Besides, as per the annual report, the bank will focus on accelerating digital transformation with an emphasis on leveraging digitisation to procure more business, thrust on customer centricity through the rendering of enhanced customer service and superior customer experience and affect the employee-centric transformation to enhance efficiency and productivity of the workforce.

Builders launching bigger flats; avg apartment size rises 5% annually in Jan-Mar 2023: Anarock

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Real estate developers are building bigger apartments to meet consumer demand, with the average size of flats launched in January-March this year rising 5 per cent annually across seven cities, according to property consultant Anarock.

As per the data, the average size of flats across seven major cities rose to 1,225 square feet in January-March this year from

1,170 square feet in the year-ago period. Among seven cities, Delhi-NCR saw average flat size rising 50 per cent to 1,700 square feet in the first quarter of 2023 from 1,130 square feet in January-March last year.

Developers in Delhi-NCR are closely tracking demand and launching bigger homes in this region, Anarock noted.

Kolkata saw flat sizes increase by 44 per cent to 1,150 sq ft in Q1 2023 from 800 sq ft

in the year-ago period.

The average flat size in Hyderabad rose 29 per cent to 2,200 sq ft in January-March from 1,700 sq ft in Q1 of 2022.

Pune witnessed a 16 per cent yearly increase to 1,013 square feet in Q1 2023 from 877 square feet in the first quarter of the last calendar year.

Bengaluru witnessed an 8 per cent rise in average flat sizes to about 1,300 square feet in January-March 2023 from 1,200

square feet in the year-ago period. The average size of flats in Chennai declined 6 per cent to 1,175 square feet in Q1 2023 from 1,250 sqft in the year-ago period.

Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) saw average flat sizes decrease by 5 per cent to 743 sq ft in January-March this year from 783 square feet in Q1 2022. "Before COVID-19, apartment sizes were shrinking annually to meet the demand for

compact homes prevalent then," Anarock Chairman Anuj Puri said. "The central concerns were affordability and millennials' preference for low-maintenance homes. 2020 saw an abrupt reversal of buyer preferences," Puri added.

With a sudden emphasis on the WFH (work from home) and study-from-home culture, flat sizes began increasing for the first time in four years, he added.

L&T Finance group focuses on retail, aims 25% CAGR in 3-4 yrs

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Larsen & Toubro Group's non-bank financing vertical aims to maintain a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of over 25 per cent predominantly by focusing on retail financing as a long-term strategy, a senior official said on Sunday.

With the current growth rate, the retail portfolio of the group is estimated to reach Rs 1,00,000 crore by FY2025-26. "In FY23 we grew by 35 per cent. Our CAGR for the next few years will continue to be at least 25 per cent with the opportunities lying ahead," L&T Finance group CFO Sachinn Joshi told PTI.

L&T Finance Group would predominantly become a retail finance company in the long term, gradually reducing the wholesale book from its existing portfolio, which is around Rs 19,500 crore now," he said.

In the current fiscal year itself, he expects retail to reach 80 per cent of the total loan book, two years ahead of the target under its goal "Lakshya."

The group's non-banking finance companies' loan book currently stands at about Rs 81,000 crore spread across its group companies.

The share of retail in the total loan book is expected to scale up to about 90 per cent by FY'26 from around 75 per cent, fueled by streamlining with the ongoing corporate restructuring, according to a senior official.

The group is currently undergoing a restructuring process where it will amalgamate its finance subsidiaries, L&T Finance, L&T Infra Credit Limited, and L&T Mutual Fund Trustee Limited with the listed L&T Finance Holding Ltd to simplify the corporate structure and enable greater focus on retail financing. These wholly-owned subsidiaries have already received approval from the Reserve Bank of India.

Out of the total outstanding loan book of Rs 81,000 crore spread across its group companies, only Rs 4,500 crore is on the books of L&T Infra Credit Limited. L&T had hived off its mutual fund business to HSBC.

Perfume brand Zighrana ties up with Taj Khazana

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Kannauj-based luxury perfume brand Zighrana has tied up with Taj Group of Hotels' lifestyle brand, Khazana, for its range of traditional attar and Eau de perfumes, according to a statement. The alliance is a celebration of the One District One Product (ODOP) initiative in Uttar Pradesh and the coveted Geographical Indication (GI) tag of Kannauj, where the art of Attar-making thrives, Zighrana said in the statement. Under its collaboration with Taj Khazana, Zighrana will showcase the brand's portfolio in multiple cities, including New Delhi, Mumbai and Hyderabad, in the form of an exhibition.

Its range of perfumes is also available on leading online retailer amazon.in and other offline and online stores in the country.

'Shriram Properties eyes 25% growth in housing sales in FY'24, beating record ₹1,846 cr last fiscal'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Realty firm Shriram Properties is targeting a 25 per cent growth in sales bookings this fiscal from a record Rs 1,846 crore in the previous year on strong housing demand, its CMD M Murali said.

In an interview with PTI, the company's Chairman and Managing Director M Murali said the housing demand has been robust across all price categories, helping the company to post record sales bookings in the 2022-23 fiscal.

Shriram Properties achieved an all-time high sales bookings of Rs 1,846 crore last fiscal, up 25 per cent from Rs 1,482.4 crore in the previous year, driven by higher volumes, better realisation and change in product mix.

Asked about the target of sales bookings for this fiscal, Murali said, "We are looking at about 20 per cent growth in volume terms and 25 per cent



growth in value."

Sales volumes of 4.02 million square feet in the last fiscal, which is a new record, as against 3.8 million in 2021-22.

The average annual sales realisation grew 8 per cent annually during the last financial year. The company would launch multiple housing projects this fiscal to tap the rise in housing demand, he added.

"Market is really good. There has been a very good demand for the mid-income and affordable segment. So, I expect the demand to continue for 3-5 years comfortably due to various factors. Macroeconomic situation is very good and the overall stability in the country is good," Murali said.

BPCL's Bargarh bio-refinery to invigorate circular economy: Pradhan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd's (BPCL) Bargarh 2G bio-refinery which will use rice straw to produce ethanol for mixing in petrol, will invigorate a circular economy and give impetus to waste-to-wealth creation, Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said on Sunday. Pradhan, who is the Union Minister for HRD, visited the under-construction Bargarh 2G bio-refinery site in Odisha as part of the Vikas Teerth Yatra to mark nine years of the Modi government.

"Bargarh bio-refinery is making steady progress and is expected to be commissioned soon," he tweeted. After producing ethanol from sugarcane, India is now pushing for producing low-carbon fuel from grains and agri waste. This is part of an ambitious programme to mix ethanol in petrol to cut down emissions as well as the country's dependence on imports for meeting oil needs.



Presently, 10 per cent ethanol is mixed in petrol (10 per cent ethanol, 90 per cent petrol) and this volume is targeted to be doubled by 2025. The Bargarh 2G bio-refinery is part of the plan to augment the production of ethanol to meet the higher mixing target.

The Bargarh bio-refinery in Odisha is being built at a cost of Rs 1,607 crore and will produce 100 kilolitres per day of 1G ethanol (ethanol from rice grain) and a similar volume of 2G ethanol (ethanol from rice straw). "The Bargarh 2G bio-refinery will invigorate a circular economy, give impetus to waste-to-wealth creation, boost farmers' income & welfare, create

large-scale employment, augment indigenous production of green fuel and lead Odisha towards prosperity and self-reliance as envisioned by PM @narendramodi," Pradhan tweeted. The plant is the first of its kind in the world with rice-based 1G and 2G bio-ethanol production. Ethanol produced from the plant shall be utilized for blending with petrol under Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme for a significant reduction in GHG emissions and savings in crude import bill for India.

"Keeping in mind GoI's focus on #greengrowth and upcoming bio-refineries in Odisha and neighbouring Chhattisgarh and West Bengal, suggested to design relevant courses & modules in ethanol engineering, economics & technology in regional Govt IIT for connecting local youth with the emerging green jobs and also prepare competent and skilled manpower," Pradhan tweeted.

'Customers continue to prioritise network build-outs; 5G rolls out, fibreisation driving India growth'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Optical and digital solutions company Sterlite Technologies is seeing a strong commitment and demand for fibre, as customers across markets continue to prioritise network build-outs, including in India, where massive 5G infrastructure deployments are taking place.

Sterlite Tech Managing Director Ankit Agarwal said the company is "quite positive" about the India market prospects, given the rapid pace of fibreisation, and expectation of 5G scaling up from 50 million users to 250 million users in the coming years.

"We are excited with the progress we are making, and are positive about mid-to-longer-term opportunities for our sector. In our conversation with customers that commitment remains in terms of their network plans," Agarwal told PTI.



At a macro level, STL continues to see strong focus from customers, largely telcos, internet service providers and data centres players.

"They continue to have strong commitment to 5G, Fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) and enterprises," he said.

In India too, companies are aggressively going after 5G roll outs. "Our own view is that 5G in India will go from 50 million users to 250 million users in the next couple of years. Rapid growth of 5G is expected," Agarwal observed.

There is also a large headroom to scale up fibre services from home and enterprise perspective, as well.

"From telcos' side, we do

not see any major degrowth in spending. Fibre, in particular, is becoming a strategic asset for telecom operators," he said.

At the same time, robust focus from the government to invest in building fibre networks is also driving demand. "The challenges we are seeing globally is a shortage of trained manpower to deploy the networks fast enough," he said.

Agarwal said STL is quite positive about India market prospects but was quick to add that the US and Europe will also continue to grow for the company.

"So we are definitely quite positive about the growing Indian market but this is not vis-a-vis the US and Europe. "The US and Europe will also continue to grow as those are large markets, nearly 3-4 times India market, in size," he said, adding that it is important for STL to have a balance of all the geographies in its portfolio.

UAE emerges as fourth largest investor in India in FY23

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), with which India implemented a comprehensive free trade agreement in May last year, has emerged as the fourth largest investor in India during 2022-23, according to government data.

In the last fiscal, foreign direct investment (FDI) from the UAE to India jumped over three-fold to USD 3.35 billion from USD 1.03 billion in 2021-22, the data of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) showed.

The UAE was the fourth largest investor in India in 2022-23 compared to the seventh in 2021-22.

Singapore was the largest investor in India with USD 17.2 billion investment in FY23, followed by Mauritius (USD 6.1 billion) and the US (USD 6 billion).

"The rapidly strengthening of bilateral ties and investment cooperation between India and United Arab Emirates (UAE) can be chiefly attributed to the strong bilateral relations



between India and UAE, growth in investment commitments from UAE, and the policy reforms to further ease of doing businesses between the two countries," Rudra Kumar Pandey, Partner, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co, said.

UAE's investments in India are mainly in sectors like services, sea transport, power and construction activities.

One of the crucial factors for the increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) from UAE is the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and UAE on February 18, 2022 (effective from May 1, 2022), Pandey added.

FinMin starts process for deciding on convener of GST rate rationalisation GoM

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The finance ministry has started the process of deciding on a new convener of the GoM on GST rate rationalisation, sources said.

The position has been lying vacant following the change of government in Karnataka. Former Karnataka chief minister Basavaraj Bommai was the convener of the seven-member Group of Ministers (GoM) set up under the GST Council in September 2021. The finance ministry has initiated the process of consultation with other members of the panel. "Karnataka is likely to continue as a member of the GoM. We are not proposing any convener. It will be selected based on consultation among GoM members," one of the sources told PTI.

Besides Karnataka, other members of the GoM are Bihar, Goa, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and West Bengal.

Sebi's SCORES platform disposes of 2,457 complaints in May

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 2,457 complaints against companies and market intermediaries have been disposed of through Sebi's SCORES platform in May.

At the beginning of May, as many as 2,984 complaints were pending, and 2,626 fresh complaints were received, according to the data released by markets regulator Sebi on Saturday.

The regulator also noted that as of May 2023, 28 complaints were pending for more than three months, the data showed.

These complaints were related to investment advisers, research analysts, corporate governance/ listing conditions, minimum public shareholding, venture capital funds and takeover/ restructuring.

The average resolution time for a complaint was 31 days, as per the data.

In a separate public notice, the markets watchdog Sebi mentioned 12 entities

against whom complaints have been pending for more than three months on SCORES as of May 2023.

The entities included Brightcom Group Ltd, Ankur Jain, Research Guru, Umesh Kumar Pandey proprietor -- Aurostar Investment Advisory Services, Dharmesh Parmar, Grovalue financial services and Highlight Investment Research.

Deepak Ostwal proprietor of -- Capital Ways Investment Adviser, Wealth Factor, Rajiv Kumar Singh proprietor -- Elite Investment Advisory Services, Kausal Mehta and Cinema Capital Venture Fund were among the entities against whom complaints are pending for over three months.

SCORES is a grievance redressal system that was launched in June 2011. It is designed to help investors to lodge their complaints online with Sebi, pertaining to the securities market, against companies, intermediaries and market infrastructure institutions.

Finally! Man City win Champions League

Rodri strike in 2nd half gives Manchester City 1-0 victory over Inter in CL final

AP ■ ISTANBUL

Manchester City tasted Champions League glory at last on Saturday as a second-half Rodri strike gave the favourites a 1-0 victory over Inter Milan in a tense final, allowing Pep Guardiola's side to complete a remarkable treble.

Rodri fired in from a Bernardo Silva cutback midway through the second half at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium to decide a game in which City were knocked out of their usual rhythm and lost Kevin De Bruyne to injury.

Erling Haaland, scorer of 52 goals this season, went a fifth straight match without finding the net, but City had enough to edge out opponents who had never been expected to get this far.

"It wasn't easy. What a team we faced, unbelievable," Rodri told British broadcaster BT Sport.

Having already claimed a fifth Premier League title in six seasons, and added the FA Cup, City are the first English



club to win such a treble since Manchester United in 1999.

That same month 24 years ago, City won the English third-tier play-off final on penalties against Gillingham.

Now they have established themselves as England's dominant side and have finally added the biggest prize in European club football, two years after losing to Chelsea in their first final.

"I think we made history. The good thing is that we want more. This project is to want more, more ambition," Rodri added.

The match was watched by owner Sheikh Mansour, who made a very rare appearance at a City game as his team capped their rise from also-rans to superpower in the years since he bought the club in 2008.

GUARDIOLA'S THIRD TITLE

Twelve years after last lifting the trophy with Barcelona, meanwhile, Guardiola joins an elite club of coaches to have won the competition three times.

"It's so difficult to win it," Guardiola said, before adding that City's triumph this season was "written in the stars".

Having brushed aside RB Leipzig, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid to reach the final, City did not have it easy against Inter, who saw Federico Dimarco and substitute Romelu Lukaku both almost equalise.

Inter had hoped to spring a surprise and lift the trophy for the fourth time. It was not to be, but Simone Inzaghi's side will be back in the competition again next season.

"We didn't deserve to lose," Inzaghi said. "We played against a top team, absolutely, but Inter also played a great final."

De Bruyne battled hamstring injury in treble charge

AP ■ ISTANBUL

Kevin De Bruyne has revealed his Champions League final hamstring injury had plagued him through the final weeks of Manchester City's charge to treble glory.

He knew he had been at risk of aggravating the problem for several weeks, but opted to play on as City powered to Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League silverware.

The Belgium midfielder now faces a fight to be fit in time for the start of next season after reportedly snapping the hamstring.

"I give everything for my team and the people in the club know that. I feel proud that I've been able to do what I did," De Bruyne said.

"It's a shame that it went the way it did for me here, but we go away winning the Champions League so there's nothing bad towards it.

"I felt all right this week, but I've been told for two months it was a risk but, you know, you take it.

"I did what I had to do. Obviously, I missed some games, but the games like



Arsenal, Bayern and Madrid I managed to do it.

"I had some personal things happen with my family on top of that and I managed that, but here, the hamstring just snapped."

De Bruyne also failed to complete the 2021 Champions League final against Chelsea after sustaining a serious facial injury.

On that occasion, City were beaten 1-0, but this time Pep Guardiola's men triumphed without De Bruyne to end their long wait to win Europe's elite club competition for the first time.

"I don't look at football that way. It is what it is," De Bruyne said.

CL win was 'written in the stars': Guardiola



AP ■ ISTANBUL

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said his team's maiden Champions League title was "written in the stars" after their final victory over Inter Milan on Saturday.

"It's so difficult to win it," Guardiola told BT Sport after the nervy 1-0 victory.

draw. This competition is a coin.

"It was written in the stars. It belongs to us."

"After the World Cup the team made a step forward and we were there," added Guardiola, whose side completed the campaign with just one loss in their last 28 matches.

"We're going to celebrate in the hotel with family and friends. Monday the parade is in Manchester. With this competition, the treble is so difficult.

He is just the second coach to lead an English club to such a treble, following in the footsteps of Alex Ferguson.

"It is an honour for me to be alongside Sir Alex Ferguson in that situation," he told reporters.

"I have to say I got a message from him this morning on my phone that touched me a lot. It is an honour for me to be with him. It is so nice."

City had suffered several near-misses in the Champions

League since being taken over by their Abu Dhabi backers in 2008, including a defeat by Chelsea in the final two years ago.

They also lost in the semi-finals last season in dramatic circumstances to Real Madrid, following other unexpected defeats in recent years against the likes of Lyon and Tottenham Hotspur.

"You have to win in Europe to be considered a really good team, and we did it," Guardiola admitted.

Inter Miami fall to sixth straight loss

AP ■ MIAMI

Lionel Messi's future club Inter Miami suffered a sixth straight defeat and remained rooted to the bottom of Major League Soccer's Eastern Conference after a 3-1 defeat at the New England Revolution on Saturday.

If Messi, who announced this week he intended to join Miami, was tuning in to watch what awaits him in MLS, his disappointment at his new club's dismal form would have been tempered by a wonder goal from his compatriot, Lucas Zelarayan of Columbus.

Three minutes into stoppage time, with the game at 1-1, the Crew's Zelarayan won the game at Chicago with an audacious shot from inside his own half that became an instant goal-of-the-season contender.

New England took a 27th-minute lead with a Carles Gil penalty after former Newcastle United fullback DeAndre Yedlin gave away a penalty with a clumsy foul on Matt Polster and they doubled the lead with an angled Polster header from a Gil corner.

The Revolution made sure of the win in the 51st minute with some dreadful defending allowing Bobby Wood to fire in the third.

An beats Yamaguchi for fifth title of 2023

AP ■ SINGAPORE

South Korea's An Se-young won her fifth title this year as she outclassed Japan's world number one Akane Yamaguchi in straight games 21-16, 21-14 to capture the Singapore Open badminton on Sunday.

Playing in her eighth consecutive final of 2023, the 21-year-old An added the Singapore crown to victories in India, Indonesia, the All England Open and Thailand.

"I've been feeling very confident since the start of the year and I'm very pleased I found my winning formula," An, ranked second in the world, said.

"This victory is especially meaningful as it's also my first competitive professional tournament in Singapore. I'm so happy I have won here."

Despite being the highest-ranked player in the

women's draw and having more experience, the 26-year-old Yamaguchi could not match her rival's ferocious attacks and deceptive net play.

"An's a formidable opponent and she was very aggressive today. I was mentally not prepared for it and it showed in the match," said Yamaguchi, the two-time world champion.

Indonesia's Anthony Ginting became the first player in 20 years since China's Chen Hong to successfully defend his Singapore men's singles title when he defeated Anders Antonsen 21-16, 21-13.

China's Chen Qingchen and Jia Yifan clinched the women's doubles, while the Danish pair Mads Christensen and Alexandra Boje claimed the mixed doubles title.

The men's doubles went to Japan's Takuro Hoki and Yugo Kobayashi.



India win maiden Women's Junior Asia Cup title

PTI ■ KAKAMIGAHARA

India put up a collective show to stun four-time champions South Korea 2-1 and clinch their maiden Women's Junior Hockey Asia Cup here on Sunday.

Annu and Neelam scored for India while Park Seo Yeon was the lone goal scorer for Korea.

After a barren first quarter, India got going with a 22nd minute goal by Annu from a

penalty corner.

Annu made amends for her miss in the semifinal against Japan, as she stepped up in style to beat the goalkeeper and give India the lead against the run of play.

South Korea took three minutes to bring it level when Park Seo Yeon struck from the right following a brilliant surge from the right.

Neelam struck powerfully to the low right of the South Korean goalkeeper to help

India regain the lead in the 41st minute.

India held on to their slender lead in the third quarter to seal the issue.

South Korea had a lot of chances with India generously giving them PCs one after the other, but they failed to convert.

Before this, India's best-ever finish in the tournament was in 2012 edition in Bangkok when they entered the final of the continental showcase for the first time, only to lose to China 2-5.

Kyrgios 'super excited' to return

AP ■ STUTTGART

Nick Kyrgios said he is "super-excited" to return to tennis following knee surgery as he begins his build-up to Wimbledon where last year he made a stunning run to the final.

The fiery Australian takes the eighth seeding at the Stuttgart grass court tournament having not played an ATP match since early October in Tokyo before managing a well-paid Saudi Arabian exhibition appearance in December.

The 28-year-old was forced to withdraw prior to his opening match at January's Australian Open before the procedure on his knee and has been home in Canberra ever since.

"The grass season is the best part of the year," said Kyrgios, runner-up to Novak Djokovic at Wimbledon last year.

"This year has been tough for me recovering from knee surgery. It was not major but I had quite a serious surgery. It's taken me five months to get back to even playing and moving again."

The Australian described



himself "super-excited" to be back on court.

In 2022, Kyrgios made the Stuttgart semi-finals, where he lost to Andy Murray.

This year he starts against China's Wu Yibing, ranked 54th, in the first round.

"I'm coming back at a tournament where I've done well in the past," said world number 26 Kyrgios.

"I've played some amazing matches here and the crowd is always really supportive. I'm looking forward to playing the sport that I've been working so hard to get back to."

DJOKOVIC CLAIMS RECORD 23rd GRAND SLAM TRIUMPH

AP ■ PARIS

Novak Djokovic created history on Sunday when he captured a record-breaking 23rd Grand Slam title with a third French Open triumph, reinforcing his case to be crowned the greatest player of all time.

The 36-year-old Serb brushed off an early wobble to defeat Casper Ruud of Norway 7-6 (7/1), 6-3, 7-5 and snap the tie of 22 Slams he shared with career-long rival Rafael Nadal.

"It's an incredible feeling to win 23. I'm beyond grateful and blessed to be standing here with so many incredible achievements," said Djokovic as Nadal immediately described his rival's victory as "an incredible achievement".

Victory for the third time in Paris, after 2016 and 2021, adds to his 10 Australian Open

titles, seven at Wimbledon and three at the US Open.

Djokovic is the first man to win all four majors at least three times and is once again halfway to the first calendar Grand Slam since Rod Laver in 1969.

"Your skill and unwavering mental fortitude on all surfaces is astonishing," tweeted Laver. Only Margaret Court and Serena Williams in women's tennis have managed to rack up 23 Grand Slam titles. Court's all-time mark of 24 will now be in his sights at Wimbledon next month.

There is little sign of Djokovic slowing down. He is now the oldest French Open champion but 11 of his Slam trophies have now been won after he turned 30.

On Monday, he will reclaim the world number ranking and start his 388th



VICTORY FOR THE THIRD TIME IN PARIS, AFTER 2016 AND 2021, ADDS TO HIS 10 AUSTRALIAN OPEN TITLES, SEVEN AT WIMBLEDON AND THREE AT THE US OPEN

week in top spot.

"Many congrats on this amazing achievement. 23 is a number that just a few years back was impossible to think about, and you made it! Enjoy it with your family and team!" tweeted Nadal, a 14-time Roland Garros winner who missed this year's tournament through injury.

Ruud added sportingly: "Novak, another day, another record for you. And another day you rewrite tennis history once again."

The sense of Sunday's occasion certainly attracted sports A-listers.

NFL legend Tom Brady watched from the Djokovic box, football stars Kylian Mbappe and Zlatan Ibrahimovic sat side by side in the VIP area which also accommodated former world heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson, a regular this weekend.

PLACE IN HISTORY

Djokovic was playing in his seventh French Open final and boasted a 4-0 career record over Ruud, not having lost a single set.

However, the fourth-ranked Norwegian was the more composed of the two at

the start, sprinting out of the blocks for a 2-0 lead when Djokovic shanked an overhead.

Ruud, the 2022 runner-up to Nadal, stretched to 3-0 and 4-1 before Djokovic retrieved the break in the seventh game when his opponent buried an easy smash into the net with an open court begging.

It came at the end of a lung-busting 28-shot rally.

Djokovic missed a break point in the ninth game, tumbling to the red clay as he chased down a Ruud drive.

His frustration boiled over when he angrily accused umpire Damien Dumousois of rushing the players between changeovers on a heavy, humid afternoon in the French capital.

Fired up, he then raced through the tiebreak, sealing the opener with a running

forehand.

Tellingly, that was Djokovic's sixth tiebreak at this French Open and in none of them had he committed a single unforced error in the 55 points contested.

Despite being Djokovic's junior by 12 years, Ruud, who also lost the 2022 US Open final to Carlos Alcaraz, suddenly looked spent.

Djokovic broke for 2-0 in the second set and despite Ruud saving two set points in the eighth game, the Serb moved closer to his dream.

Ruud saved a break point in the third game of the third set before Djokovic was hit with a warning for taking too long between points.

But he wasn't thrown out of his stride.

Djokovic broke for love at 6-5 and sealed his place in history when Ruud went wide.

INDIA LOSE YET AGAIN

Pat Cummins' Australia win WTC title by beating Rohit & Co. by 209 runs

PTI ■ LONDON

The widely-followed and much-loved Indian cricket team lost yet again when it mattered the most, the country's calibrated youth structure, the multiple superstars, and the presence of a legend in support staff coming to naught for the sport's financial powerhouse.

India's underwhelming record in ICC tournaments continued with a 209-run hammering by Australia in the World Test Championship (WTC) final here on Sunday.

Australian pacer Scott Boland produced a bowling spell of rare quality to get rid of Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja in the same over, effectively shutting the door on India, who were bowled out for 234 in their second innings on the final day at The Oval.

Australia were clearly the better team on all fronts while India had only themselves to blame for yet another loss in a global event. India's last ICC title came way back in 2013 and it was their second successive defeat in the WTC final, having gone down against New Zealand two years ago.

India lost seven wickets for the addition of 70 runs on the final day.

Australia thus became the first team to win all ICC titles. The Aussies won the ODI World Cup in 1987, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2015. It has also also claimed the ICC



Champions Trophy in successive editions in 2006 and 2009.

Australia had ended its T20 World Cup title drought during the 2021 edition held in the United Arab Emirates, beating New Zealand in the final under the leadership of Aaron Finch.

While the non selection of R Ashwin was the big talking

point on the opening day, India lost the title contest mainly due to the failure of their high-profile batting lineup.

The top four comprising Rohit Sharma, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara and Kohli failed to deliver in the high-stake game.

Chasing a record 444 at The Oval, Indian fans went

into day five high on hope with Kohli (49) and Ajinkya Rahane (46) walking into the middle.

However, Boland removing Kohli and Jadeja (0) in the seventh over of the morning pretty much shut the door on India, who resumed the day at 164 for three needing another 280 runs for an improbable win. "It was a tough one. We

started well, winning the toss and putting them into bat in those conditions. We bowled pretty well in the first session and then we let ourselves down a little bit with how we bowled," India skipper Rohit Sharma said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

"But again, credit to the Australian batters, in particular, Travis Head came in and

played really well. That took us off guard a little bit and then we knew it was always hard to come back. We (did) put up a show.

"We fought hard but congratulations to Australia. We spoke of a lot of things. We spoke of bowling tighter lines. But it didn't work out. Things like that can happen," the India captain added.

Kohli, who had looked in extremely good touch on day four, had to make a big hundred if India had to get anywhere close to the massive target.

On a surface with variable bounce, there was always going to be an odd ball that had your name on it, and that is what happened with both Kohli and Jadeja.

K S Bharat then joined Rahane who played a couple of beautiful straight drives off Mitchell Starc to keep crowd going.

Starc drew his length back soon after and Rahane went hard at a ball that he could have left to be caught behind, sealing his team's fate. The experienced batter was left tapping his head in frustration knowing he went for the wrong shot.

Shardul Thakur lasted just five balls, lbw off Nathan Lyon, to make it 213 for seven. It seemed the match would last till lunch but the Indian tail made the task easier for the Australians and were bowled out in the extra half hour of play.



Rohit would 'love to' have best-of-three finals

PTI ■ LONDON

India skipper Rohit Sharma has advocated a best-of-three finals format and a preparation for at least 20-25 days in case they reach a third successive World Test Championship final following back-to-back defeats.

India lost to Australia by 209 runs at The Oval on Sunday to extend their barren run in ICC events since 2013. They had finished runners-up to New Zealand in the inaugural WTC final, also held in England, two years ago.

Then head coach Ravi Shastri and captain Virat Kohli had highlighted the need for a best-of-three finals following the game against New Zealand at Southampton.

A best-of-three format would need at least a one month window, which is extremely tough to fit in a calendar busier than ever with the advent of T20 leagues around the world. However, Rohit would love to have that.

"I would love that. But is there a time? That's the big question. But honestly, in a big event like this, you need to have fair opportunities to both the teams. You know, a three-match series would be nice, but it's about finding that window where it can fit in.

"But I would love to have - in an event like this, you work hard for two years and then you have only one shot at it. So, it's not really - you cannot get into that momentum that you need in Test cricket, you know.

"Test cricket is all about finding that rhythm, finding that momentum as well. So, I think, yeah if in the next cycle, if it is possible, three match series would be ideal," said the skipper.

However, his opposite number Pat Cummins has politely disagreed after tak-

ing his team to a maiden WTC title.

"I think it's fine. No qualms. I think ideally you'd have 50 match series but Olympics have come down to one race to win a gold medal. AFL, NRL seasons have finals. That's sport," said Cummins in his brief response.

20-25 DAYS OF PREP

Since most of the squad members were busy with the IPL, they could only get a week to train together for the final against Australia.

Going forward, Rohit would like much longer preparation period and he would also want to see the final being played at a different time and in a different location.

"Ideally, yes, event like this, final like this, you need a lot of time to prepare yourself and that is what we did in the last time when we were here in England. We had good 25-30 days to prepare ourselves. And you saw the result. We were 2-1 up until that game got called off.

"We would want to have good time in hand to prepare, give enough rest to the bowlers.

"And then Test cricket obviously requires a lot of discipline, hitting that area consistently and challenging the batsmen - but again you know Shami, Siraj, Umesh they all are experienced. But in an ideal scenario, yes, I would prefer if we have 20, 25 days to prepare for a game like this," said Rohit.

The ICC has already stated that the next WTC final will be played at the Lord's but Rohit said the game can be played anywhere.

"I mean, June is not the only month we should play the finals. It can be played any time of the year. And anywhere in the world, not just in England. It can be played anywhere in the world," he added.

Boland my favourite player: Cummins

PTI ■ LONDON

Australia captain Pat Cummins commended Scott Boland for playing a decisive role in his team's comprehensive 209-run win in the World Test Championship final, saying the seamer remains his favourite player.

Boland troubled India throughout the game with his incisive bowling, not allowing the famed Indian batting lineup to breathe easy at any point in the contest which lasted a little over lunch on the fifth and final day.

The right-arm seamer Boland accounted for Shubman Gill (18), Virat Kohli (49) and Ravindra Jadeja (0) in the second innings.

"We left Day One feeling like we were on top of the game. When it counted, we played really well. We could have really driven the game, didn't have our best day and let India closer back in. For the most parts, we were in control. Boland - he's my favourite player. He just continues to be my favourite," Cummins said.

The Australia captain Cummins also praised Travis Head (163) and Steve Smith (121) for their first-innings heroics. "We made the most of it (losing the toss). We were certainly going to bowl. The way Travis (Head) and Smithy (Steve Smith) put on that partnership, gave us comfort after a nervy morning," Cummins said.

PTI ■ LONDON

Head coach Rahul Dravid defended India's decision to bowl first in the World Test Championship Final against Australia, saying the call was dictated by overcast conditions and grass on the pitch.

Dravid was posed some tough questions by Sourav Ganguly, who commented during the WTC Final.

Ganguly asked his former teammate Dravid the logic behind the reason to bowl first and he responded by saying that the decision was not about "tackling pressure".

"We decided to bowl first in the Test match because the conditions were overcast and there was quite a lot of grass on the pitch," Dravid said.

"So, we thought that it would get easier to bat on later in the pitch and that was the same case here also. Most teams in recent times have opted to field first in England," Dravid said.

Overcast conditions, grass on pitch influenced decision to bowl first: Dravid

"We thought that it was a great decision when Aussies were at 70/3 and then we leaked a lot of runs in the next two sessions. Even if we would have gotten them out by 300, we would have been in the game. We could have had a chance in the fourth innings," the India head coach added.

Dravid said the team was confident of chasing down a 300-plus target in the fourth innings.

"We had hoped that however behind we were, we could've shown more fight but we knew we needed exceptional performances. It was not a 469-run wicket. We gave away a lot of runs -- bowling was disappointing. We played



some poor shots yesterday," Dravid said.

Dravid was further asked about the lack of an ICC trophy that has eluded the team for 10 years now as the Champions Trophy in 2013 remains India's last victory in a global event.

"You have a good point that we haven't won a major ICC trophy since 2013. We are getting close. We are getting to the semifinals, we are getting to finals, but I don't think we played our best game in the last five days. We will be going through the data, the numbers, and stats... We will look back and see."

"We have been at our best, in the T20 World Cup but we are getting close," said Dravid.

We let ourselves down with the ball: Rohit

PTI ■ LONDON

India skipper Rohit Sharma blamed poor bowling in the first innings for their crushing defeat in the World Test Championship against Australia but said no one can take away from his side the good work done in the last two years.

"It was a tough one. We started well, winning the toss and putting them into bat in those conditions. We bowled pretty well in the first session and then we let ourselves down a little bit with how we bowled," Rohit said during the post-match presentation ceremony.

"But again, credit to the



Australian batters, in particular, Travis Head came in and played really well. That took us off guard a little bit and then we knew it was

always hard to come back. We (did) put up a show.

"We fought hard but congratulations to Australia. We spoke of a lot of things. We

spoke of bowling tighter lines. But it didn't work out. Things like that can happen," the India captain said.

Rohit was disappointed for finishing second for as many times in a WTC final but hoped for better returns in the future.

"We've worked really hard for four years to make two finals. It's disappointment for us. We would like to go one better. But you cannot take anything away from what we've done in the two years. It's a great effort.

"A lot of players took part in those series. We'll keep our heads high and fight for the next championship as well," he said.



Kohli should be questioned over shot selection: Gavaskar

PTI ■ LONDON

Aavid Sunil Gavaskar on Sunday hit out at the Indian players and did not spare Virat Kohli after the team's meek surrender in the World Test Championship final against Australia, saying the batting was "ridiculous".

"The batting was shambles today. It was just ridiculous what we saw today. Especially the shot making. We saw some ordinary shots yesterday from (Cheteshwar) Pujara, somebody you never expect to play that shot.

"Maybe somebody has gone into his head and said 'strike rate, strike rate'. You have not even lasted a session. Eight wickets have not lasted a session? Come on," Gavaskar told broadcaster Star Sports.

The result meant India's underwhelming record in ICC tournaments continued. Australian pacer Scott Boland produced a bowling

AUSTRALIAN PACER SCOTT BOLAND PRODUCED A BOWLING SPELL OF RARE QUALITY TO GET RID OF KOHLI AND RAVINDRA JADEJA IN THE SAME OVER, EFFECTIVELY SHUTTING THE DOOR ON INDIA

leaving till then. Maybe he was conscious that he needed one run to reach his half century. It happens when you are nearing a milestone.

"It happened to Jadeja. He played a delivery he shouldn't have when he was (on) 48. Happened to Ajinkya Rahane who was on 46. He hadn't played that shot all this while. Suddenly why do you play that shot? Because you are aware of that landmark."

Having made 49 off 78 balls, Kohli was the first Indian to get out on the final day, off Boland who invited the batter to go for a drive on a wide delivery and the batter obliged.

Slamming Kohli for his shot selection, Gavaskar said, "It was a bad shot. You should ask Kohli what shot he played. He talks so much about how to win a match you need a long innings. How are you going to do that if you play a ball so far outside the off stump?"

ACC could accept PCB's 'hybrid model' for Asia Cup

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Asian Cricket Council, headed by BCCI secretary Jay Shah, is expected to approve PCB's proposed 'hybrid model' for conducting four non-India Asia Cup games in Pakistan while the rest of the matches will be played in Sri Lanka's Galle and Pallekele.

The ACC is likely to make a formal announcement on Tuesday and once the hybrid model is officially accepted, decks will be cleared for Pakistan team's travel to India for the ODI World Cup scheduled in October-November.

Now, Pakistan will have no problems playing in



Ahmedabad.

"Oman Cricket board chief Pankaj Khimji, one of the respected ACC executive board members, was entrusted to find a solution as most

countries didn't want a hybrid model.

"But as of now four non-India games -- Pakistan vs Nepal, Bangladesh vs Afghanistan, Afghanistan vs

Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka vs Bangladesh -- will be held at the Gadaffi Stadium in Lahore.

"The two India vs Pakistan games and all other Super Four Games will be held in either Pallekele or Galle," an ACC board member said.

The Asia Cup is expected to be held in September.

It is understood that once ICC CEO Geoff Allardice and chairman Greg Barclay visited Karachi to meet PCB chairman Najam Sethi, it was decided that Pakistan won't set any conditions to come for the World Cup, provided four Asia Cup games are held in the country as they have the hosting rights.

Playing a tournament without Pakistan would have meant that the broadcasters would be giving half the amount committed for the tournament because of two assured Indo-Pak games and may be a chance of a third, if the two teams reach the final.

The solution looked the most feasible one as this now will lead to Pakistan travelling to India without setting any pre-conditions with the much-awaited schedule for the ODI World Cup to be released early next week.

India will probably play Pakistan in Ahmedabad in the World Cup. Pakistan's remaining matches could be held in Chennai and Hyderabad.