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# Furore over German interference

BJP, Cong spar on  
German remarks  
on Rahul Gandhi's  
disqualification case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

Days after the US remarked it was "watching" legal proceedings regarding Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, Germany on Thursday said "fundamental democratic principles" should apply in his case.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, an MP from Wayanad, Kerala was disqualified last week as a Member of Lok Sabha (MP) from the date of his conviction in the criminal defamation case over his 'Modi surname' remark.

Enunciating her country's position, spokesperson of German Foreign Ministry said, "We have taken note of the verdict of first instance against the Indian Opposition politician Rahul Gandhi as well as the suspension of his parliamentary mandate. To our knowledge, Mr Gandhi is in a position to appeal the verdict." She also said, "It will then become clear whether this verdict will stand and whether the suspension of his mandate has any basis." The spokesperson said Germany expects that "standards of judicial independence and fundamental democratic principles" will apply in the case.

This statement by Germany sparked a political slugfest in the



NSUI members during a Loktantra Bachao protest at Raisina Road, in New Delhi, on Thursday against the disqualification of Rahul Gandhi from the Sabha. PTI

country with the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress exchanging sharp remarks on the issue.

Responding to Germany's remarks, the Congress said it firmly believes that India's democratic processes themselves have to deal with the threats posed to its democracy. It also hit out at the BJP, accusing it of attempting to divert attention from the Adani issue.

In a smart rejoinder to Germany's remarks, Union Law Minister Kiren Rijiju said India will not tolerate foreign interference in internal matters.

"Thank you Rahul Gandhi for inviting foreign powers for interference into India's internal matters. Remember, the Indian Judiciary can't be influenced by foreign interference. India won't tolerate 'foreign influence' anymore because our Prime Minister is Shri Narendra Modi Ji (sic)," Rijiju

said in a tweet.

Earlier this week, the US said it is watching the Rahul Gandhi case and they continue to engage with the Indian Government on a shared commitment to democratic values, including freedom of expression.

"Respect for the rule of law and judicial independence is a cornerstone of any democracy, and we're watching Mr Gandhi's (Rahul Gandhi) case in Indian courts," US Department of State Principal Deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

On Thursday, the BJP slammed Congress Rajya Sabha member Digvijay Singh for thanking Germany for taking note of Rahul Gandhi's disqualification from Lok Sabha and charged the Opposition party with "inviting foreign powers for interference into India's internal matters".

Global scamsters coming to help, Cong slams Lalit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■  
NEW DELHI

A word war began between a former IPL chief Lalit Modi, accused of financial irregularities in India, and the Congress on Thursday, with the former launching a scathing attack on Rahul Gandhi. This was in response to an acidic attack from the Congress which had called Modi a "fugitive of justice."

The Congress on Thursday used Lalit Modi's tweets threatening to take Rahul Gandhi to court to attack the Bharatiya Janata Party, saying that "global scamsters" were now coming to the defence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



Reacting to Lalit Modi's remarks, Congress general secretary in-charge organisation KC Venugopal said, "Lalit Modi is a fugitive in multi-million dollar frauds whose cowardice made him run away. He now enjoys a plush life abroad thanks to BJP's inaction. It's laughable if he thinks anyone takes him seriously."

## Patna court summons Rahul

Patna: In fresh trouble for beleaguered Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, an MP/MLA court in Patna has asked him to appear in court on April 12 in connection with a petition filed against him over his 'Modi surname' remark. In 2019, the then Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi had filed a petition before the Special Judge of MP/MLA Court for Rahul's alleged objectionable remarks on the 'Modi surname'. The Congress leader was granted bail in this defamation case on July 6, 2019.

Sushil Kumar Modi on Thursday expressed hope that Rahul Gandhi will get "adequate punishment" by the court. "Gandhi has been summoned for recording of statement under Section 317 CrPC. I am confident that like the court in Surat, the court here will hold him guilty and award adequate punishment (adequate punishment)," said Modi, who had filed his petition on April 18, 2019, five days after Gandhi made the impugned remarks at a rally in the thick of Lok Sabha polls. PTI

## 7 bouncers held for razing shops in BBSR



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Commissionerate police have arrested as many as seven bouncers for demolishing shops of a person at Nayapalli in the capital city on March 24.

The arrested were identified as Nakula Makakud, Asish Jena, Dipak Kumar Das, Laxmikanta Das, Rajesh Ku Patra, Pradeep Baliarsingh and Asish Ray.

All of them, who have

criminal antecedents, are members of a gang which helped people in getting possession of disputed properties.

The accused had razed the shops with help of a bulldozer and more than 100 people. A person, who owns a portion of the land on which the shops were constructed, had hired them to carry out the demolition in order to take possession of the land, over which a case is pending in court, said DCP Prateek Singh.

The owners of the two shops had lodged a complaint in this regard with the Nayapalli police, on the basis of which a case was lodged and investigation was going on.

Singh said four to five such gangs are active in the city and they are using muscle power to get possession of disputed lands.

Following their arrest, the bouncers were forwarded to court in bare bodies.

## Now, H-1B visa holders' spouses can work in US

PNS/AGENCIES ■ NEW  
DELHI/WASHINGTON

In a big relief for foreign professionals, including Indians working in the US technology sector, a judge there has ruled that spouses of H-1B visa holders can work in the US.

The H-1B visa programme is designed to allow skilled foreign workers to come to the United States and work for American companies. However, until recently, H-1B spouses were not allowed to work, which often placed a significant financial burden on families.

While giving her ruling, US District Judge Tanya Chutkan dismissed a lawsuit filed by Save Jobs USA which had approached the court to dismiss the Obama-era regulation that gave employment authorisation cards to spouses of certain categories of H-1B visa holders. Save Jobs USA said it plans to appeal against the court ruling. Tech companies such as Amazon, Apple, Google, and



Microsoft had opposed the lawsuit. The US has, so far, issued nearly 1,00,000 work authorisations to spouses of H-1B visa holders, a significantly large number of whom are Indians.

In her order, Judge Chutkan said the primary contention of Save Jobs USA is that Congress has never granted the Department of Homeland Security authority to allow foreign nationals, like H-4 visa holders, to work during their stay in the United States.

But that contention runs headlong into the text of the Immigration and Nationality Act, decades of executive-branch practice and both explicit and implicit congressional ratification of that practice, she wrote.

## In Bhubaneswar Ex-CSO kidnapped for Rs 1.5-cr ransom

Rescued; 5 held,  
car seized

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Commissionerate police have rescued former Civil Supplies Officer (CSO) and senior citizen Manoj Mohapatra, who was kidnapped from the city for ransom, and arrested five persons in this connection.

The arrested were identified as Kaalia, Raja, Krupa, Tikina and Banu.

The police also recovered a Hyundai Accent car, which had been used in the kidnapping.

Bhubaneswar DCP Prateek Singh said Manoj Mohapatra, a resident of Laxmisagar, had gone to supervise the construction work of his building at Jagannath Nagar in the evening of March 24 when he went missing. After a complaint was lodged in the Laxmisagar PS, a missing case was registered and probe



started.

However when his wife received a call to pay a ransom of Rs 1.5 crore for the victim's release, she informed the police, following which due to the sensitivity of the case, a team of selected officers of the Laxmisagar PS and Special Squad was formed to locate the kidnapped CSO and nab the miscreants, said Singh.

Based on intelligence inputs and investigations, it was ascertained that the victim was kept in the Delang area in Puri district. A raid was

carried out at the spot. Though the abductors managed to flee, the victim was rescued in 24 hours.

During further search operations, the five fugitives were arrested.

It was further ascertained that Tikina's brother-in-law Ugrasen used to work at Mohapatra's under-construction building. As he frequented the place, he came to know about Mohapatra. He then along his friends hatched a conspiracy to kidnap him and demand ransom for his release, said the DCP.

## 4 more Odias feature in India Postage Stamps

PRADIP DAS ■ CUTTACK

Union Ministers Dharmendra Pradhan and Ashwini Vaishnaw unveiled a collection of four commemorative postage stamps at the Ravenshaw University campus here on Thursday. The "Legends of Odisha" series of stamps honoured four distinguished personalities from the State and was launched on the eve of Utkal Divas, according to Chief Post Master General of Odisha Circle Suwendu Swain. The postage stamps showcased the distinguished poet Kantakabi Laxmikanta Mohapatra, legendary Odishi teacher Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, renowned music director and singer Akshay

Mohanty and the pioneering female Odia film figure Parbati Ghose.

Family members of these individuals were honoured by the Ministers during the event in the presence of Ravenshaw University Vice-Chancellor Prof Dr SK Nayak.

The Ministers hoped that more noteworthy Odia personalities would be

featured in the Department of Posts Philately Division in the future. Odisha had not been prominently highlighted in this department previously, making this the inaugural occasion where four commemorative postage stamps in this series were released simultaneously.

In the past, eminent person-

alities like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Utkalmani Pandit Gopabandhu Das, Utkalgaurav Madhusudan Das, Utkal Keshari Harekrishna Mahtab, Saheed Laxman Nayak, Vyasakabi Fakir Mohan Senapati and former CM Biju Patnaik had been featured on India Postage Stamps.

Besides, historic monuments and important places like Lingaraj Temple, Konark Horse, Konark Elephant, Ravenshaw College, Cuttack city, Sun Temple Konark, Bhitarkanika mangroves, Rath Yatra of Puri, Nabakalebar, SCB Medical College Hospital and numerous others have been showcased on India Postage Stamps.

## 'No one safe as lawlessness rules in Odisha'

■ Dharmendra castigates BJD Govt  
■ More crimes reported in BJP-ruled States: BJD

NALINI SAHU  
■ BHUBANESWAR

Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Thursday slammed the BJD Government and alleged that Odisha has plunged into lawlessness where no one is safe.

"Neither citizens nor public representatives are safe in Odisha. Gruesome incidents like murders happen on a regular basis. Such incidents have shocked everyone and weakened the trust of people of Odisha," he said.

Pradhan's observation came in the backdrop of two back-to-back murder cases in just two months in Jharsuguda. While Minister Naba Kisore Das was killed by a police officer on January 29, 15-year-old Class-X student Samarth Agrawal was brutally murdered by two miscreants on March 27. On Wednesday, police had recovered the half-charred body of Samarth, who was abducted for ransom.

Taking to Twitter, Pradhan said, "This is how high-time

people in power (the BJD Government) recognise the fault-lines in the law and order situation in the State. Murder of young Samarth exactly within two months of the broad daylight killing of Naba Das exposes the Odisha Government's tall claims on rule of law."

"No amount of empathy will bring solace to young Samarth's family. The Odisha Government must pull up its socks to ensure rule of law and safety of citizens," he added.

However, Rajya Sabha BJD member Sasmit Patra countered Pradhan's statement saying BJP-ruled States like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya

Pradesh and Maharashtra witnessed more number of murder cases than Odisha in 2021.

Calling Pradhan as Bhai (brother), Patra said, "Don't insult the peace-loving people of Odisha by branding them as lawless. Don't insult Odisha for your petty political narrative. It's surprising to see that despite you having been a Union Minister for so long, you are still unaware about the difference between lawlessness (law and order) and crime."

Lawlessness is when during a GST raid in Padampur, Odisha, hundreds of BJP leaders and workers storm in forcibly, snatch the papers

seized by the GST raiding party in a bid to help the businessman who had cheated in paying GST, he said.

When 500 people block the National Highway between Sambalpur and Cuttack, delay in completing NH work for many years and when thousands of farmers protest against Central neglect for not lifting surplus paddy are "law and order" issues, Patra said. As per the NCRB Report (2021), BJP-ruled States like UP, MP, Maharashtra, Assam and Haryana have more rape cases than Odisha. Similarly, the BJP-ruled States like UP, MP and Maharashtra have more murder cases than Odisha in 2021, Patra said.



# Molecular tests in cancer under NIDAN scheme

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

In what could prove a major stride in medical science, the Odisha Government has facilitated molecular tests in cancer by various health institutions in Bhubaneswar. The tests will be carried out through its NIDAN scheme by Acharya Harihar Post Graduate Institute of Cancer (AHPGIC), SCB Medical College and other tertiary care centres on PPP mode in part-

nership with the Bhubaneswar-based In DNA Laboratory.

While samples will be collected from these institutions, tests will be conducted in the laboratory in Bhubaneswar and reports submitted back to the institutions concerned. The laboratory is selected through an open tender by the Odisha State Medical Corporation Limited (OSMCL).

Official sources said the process has begun in AHPGIC

while other institutions like SCB Cuttack, MKCG Brahmapur, VIMSAR Burla, PRMMCH Baripada, FMMCH Baleswar, BBMCH Balangir, SLNMCH Koraput, Capital Hospital Bhubaneswar and RGH Rourkela would follow soon.

Molecular tests of tumours are an advanced version of tests that can help to understand the tumour biology and plan the treatment more precisely for targeted therapies.

While it is expensive and requires specialised laboratories and expertise, it is hoped that the facility will benefit cancer patients immensely.

The entire cost would be borne by the State Government through NIDAN, a flagship scheme which aims to provide better and high-standard health-related services to citizens. Under the scheme, all citizens will get free diagnostic services in public health facilities in the State.

## Rly allocation to Odisha has increased'

Bhadrak-Nayagarh MEMU train inaugurated

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

What Prime Minister Narendra Modi says he fulfils it, said Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan while flagging off the inaugural run of Bhadrak-Nayagarh Town MEMU train along with Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw at the Cuttack railway station on Thursday.

Pradhan said a long-pending demand of the people of

Bhadrak and Nayagarh districts has been fulfilled. The new train would benefit the local people and provide an upgraded railway infrastructure. The Prime Minister had approved the project on the request of Dhamnagar MLA Suraj Suryabanshi. The railway allocation to Odisha has increased during the Modi Government. For the first time, 56 railway stations would be revamped. The facilities for passengers are being upgraded. Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Puri, Rourkela and Sambalpur are being turned into national-level railway stations, he said.

## Festive spirit grips Odisha on Ram Navami



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The auspicious Ram Navami was celebrated with great religious fervour across Odisha on Thursday.

Thousands of devotees made beelines to several temples all over the State to have darshan and offer prayers to Lord Ram. Rituals that began with Mangala Alati in the wee hours were followed by Sringer Alati, Ramcharitmanas, Nabanna Parayana Purnahuti and Homa Yajna.

Capital city Bhubaneswar wore a festive look with devotees thronging the famous Ram Mandir in large numbers.

Elaborate security arrangements were made by the Commissionerate police in and around the temple premises.

Special rituals were performed at the Jagannath Temple in Puri.

In Bhadrak, a mega Yajna was performed at Gandhipadia to mark the occasion. A religious procession was taken out in the town. Security arrangements were made to maintain law and order during the huge procession.

Popular sand artist Sudarsan Pattanaik sculpted Lord Ram and Ayodhya's Ram Temple at the Puri beach.

## OMFED milk costlier by Rs 2 a packet

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The price of milk being sold by the Odisha State Cooperative Milk Producers Federation (OMFED) will increase by Rs 2 per packet (500 ml). The new rate will be effective from April 1, 2023.

A packet of 500ml OMFED Toned Milk will rise from Rs 21 to Rs 23, Premium Milk from Rs 24 to Rs 26, Gold Milk from Rs 24 to Rs 26 and Chai Special Milk from Rs 23 to Rs 25.

The OMFED in a state-



ment said it took the price hike decision as the prices of substances which are directly and indirectly connected to milk production have gone up. These include electricity tariff, packaging, transportation and fodder.

Last year in April, the OMFED had hiked milk price by Rs 2 per litre.

## 'Post Analysis of Union Budget' talk held at DSBM

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A seminar on "Post Analysis of Union Budget 2023-24" was organised by DAV School of Business Management (DSBM) here.

CEO, Livelihood Alternatives, Sambit Tripathy; Registrar, Shree Jagannath Sanskrit University, Puri Sumitra Pattanaik and Vice-President, HR and Corporate Affairs, Brahmani Rivers Pellets Ltd Debasish Dash joined as distinguished guests on the occasion.

Tripathy laid emphasis on the Digital Health Programme and talked about Aspirational Blocks of the Central Government which mainly focuses on malnutrition issues in India. Pattanaik deliberated on taxation policies and different norms laid down in the current Budget. Dash spoke about the inter-disciplinary research towards Artificial Intelligence in the education sector.



Two teams of DSBM put forward their presentations. Team-1 comprising Bipasha Rajasekharan of BBA 1st Semester and Ramakrishna Bhol of B Com 1st Semester presented their viewpoint on education and healthcare sector, whereas Team-2 comprising Aditi Choudhury of BBA 4th Semester and Smruti

Sonom of BBA 1st Semester showcased their presentation on infrastructure sector. A dedicated interactive session was conducted wherein the students put forward various questions to the experts and were answered in a phased manner.

President, DSBM MM Panda appreciated the presen-

tations and felicitated the participants. He also extended his heartfelt gratitude to all the eminent experts.

Principal, DSBM Dr DN Mishra delivered the welcome address and shared his ideas on National Education Policy-2020 for bridging the gap between the industry and educational platforms.

## AAP to put up 'Modi Hatao Desh Bachao' posters



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

During the British rule, pamphlets could not be distributed and laws were formulated to suppress the voice of the freedom fighters. Now, again taking help of those laws, the country's voice is being throttled, said the Odisha unit of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) here on Thursday.

"The 'Modi Hatao Desh Bachao' posters put up in New Delhi have rattled the Central Government. But even during the British time 138

FIRs were lodged for putting up a single poster and a pamphlet. From the day, the APP would put up Modi Hatao Desh Bachao posters throughout the country. Let us see how powerful police, FIRs and jails are," observed the speakers at a Press meet.

Wherever Modi went, he spread the empire of Adani. would Adani be probed during his tenure, they questioned.

AAP State secretary Soumya Ranjan Swain, convenor Nishikant Mishra and other leaders were present.

## 'Elevated position to women conceivable in Hindu culture'

Talk at Sri Sathya Sai College

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

A symposium entitled "The status of women in ancient India" was held at Sri Sathya Sai College for Women, Bhubaneswar, by its Philosophy Department in collaboration with IQAC on Tuesday.

Women have played a pivotal role in shaping up the society by acting as mother, life-partner, daughter and sister. Women in ancient India have been placed at such a sublime position that we are used to calling the earth as our good



old mother. Such a concept of elevated position attributed to women is only conceivable in the Hindu religious scriptures and culture, said founder president of AIPC and renowned philosopher-cum-historian

Prof Dr Lari Azad, who attended as chief guest.

Prominent among others who joined were guest of honour, poetess Prof Binapani Mishra, president of the college GB Prof Sunil Kumar

Ratha, members of the GB Debaraj Rout, Bandana Pattanaik, Nibedita Mohanty, president of Eastern India Satya Sai Sanghathan Narayan Prasad Sar and former Principal Nirupama Nayak.

At the outset, Principal of the college Prof Dr Debjani Singh introduced the guests, while HOD of Philosophy Prof Mrunmayee Rath presided. The meeting was successfully conducted by Prof Swapna Mallick, Prof Mina Mohanty and Prof Bindulata Panda. Prof Archana Pattanaik delivered the vote of thanks.

# Rath's book on Bhagat Singh a well-researched biography

Stories of the freedom struggle of India always inspire every Indian. It takes us to revisit the great ideas and dreams made to realize the sacrifice behind the birth of a nation. There has been an attempt by many to write and rewrite the stories of our unsung heroes to make them available in public domain to further the socio-political ideas they stood for, for building an egalitarian society. Bhagat Singh has been the most inspiring perennial source of a national icon of freedom, love and sacrifice.

Dr Bidhuprava Rath, a committed progressive social reformer and feminist activist and prolific writer, has made an attempt by writing an autobiographical novel on Bhagat Singh for Odia readers. After her retirement as an officer in the State Women and Child Development Department, she has been very active in the forefront of radical socio political movements while engaged in creative writings on socio political



MANAS JENA

subjects. She has written more than 16 books of different varieties to her credit. The autobiographical novel on Bhagat Singh is a well researched book that takes us to the heydays of freedom struggle of early twenties.

The writer's narrative is rich with references and very lucidly articulated following a chronology of events of 24 years from birth in 1907 to his death by hanging in 1931. Bhagat Singh comes from a farmer's family in Punjab and like others he was fond of his family and surrounding environment but

what is unique in him is that he did not move with ordinary individualistic ideas but thought about issues outside the family that impacted society at large. The family and social surrounding of Bhagat Singh's upbringing used to be quite supportive of his radical political activism of those days.

The socio-political and socio-economic conditions of those days were full of political struggles against feudal lords, colonial - imperialist rulers and those who were exploiters of ordinary masses, the producing communities, like the peasants and workers. The era also witnessed social reform movements to make people more human to fellow neighbours by breaking the shackles of decadent ideas that restricted human movement and social relationships and led to discriminations based on class, religion, caste, untouchability, gender and ethnicity. The political environment in those days was influenced by the ideas of liberty,

equality, parliamentary democracy and most prominently, the ideas of atheism and socialism after the great November revolution of 1917 on the political ideas of Marx and Lenin in the former Soviet Union. At home, there were groups and



organisations engaged to drive out the mighty oppressive British Government from Indian soil while dreaming to build an India free

from the vices of a colonial rule. The First World War, Simon Commission's visit and later the Round Table Conferences among others were events that brightened the hope of getting freedom.

Political ideas were more convincingly attractive for the educated youth of those days. With the development of science and rationalism, the radical social reform agendas got a further push. There was a call to bring social unity among people from different social identities to fight the common enemy, the mighty British.

Bertrand Russell wrote an essay - 'Why I am not a Christian' in 1927. It was the most influential book of the 20th century in the New York Public library's list. Many such new developments impacted people looking for changes. So it was more the new ideas and political developments that had impacted young minds of those days including Bhagat Singh, Sivaram Rajguru, Sukhadev Tapper and many other unsung heroes who did

not fear to die for a great cause of freedom and human dignity.

Dr Rath's book explains why Bhagat Singh was more attracted by atheist ideas as well as scientific socialism and got committed to it as a practice in personal life while preaching it in public as an instrument of radical change. The reading of Lenin in last hours of his life before he was going to be hanged is well exhibited in the book with quotes of Lenin's ideas that democracy and universal brotherhood can be achieved only when there is an equality of opportunity in social, political and industrial life.

The most attractive part of the book is the letters of Bhagat Singh to his brother, father and comrades that are produced as they are. The letters show us the political maturity and conviction of a person for the cause of freedom and the great uncompromising sense of dignity of a political activist. He fought against hypocrisy by making him a model before others. He refused to

appeal for pardon and wrote to his father that 'let my life be an example for others and my sacrifice of life will motivate others to join the freedom struggle.'

The book very well describes the role of the then prominent political leaders associated with anti-British movement and their understanding of fellow political workers of different ideas who adopted a radical line of struggle. It has taken note of confusions of some of our prominent leaders in taking political decisions and the act of exposing each other's strength and weakness before the public relating to Singh's death punishment. The debate over political lines and negotiations with limitations has been reflected in the narratives of the book based on evidence in letters and correspondences. The book in a way deserves appreciation as it is an additional treasure to the Odia political literature.

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# BeMC approves its budget for 2023-24

**Total receipt Rs 601, 85, 30,675**  
**11 projects worth Rs Rs.232,64,00,000 to be executed**  
**KRUSHNA CHANDRA PANDA ■ BRAHMAPUR**

A special meeting of the Berhampur Municipal Corporation (BeMC) on Wednesday approved its original budget estimate for the year 2023-2024. The budget would now be sent to the Government for its approval, said BeMC Mayor Sanghamitra Dalai.

The budget showed a total receipt of Rs 601,85,30,675 from eight different sources including holding tax, assigned revenue and compensation, rent, trade licences and fees under user charges, miscellaneous sources, Government grants, opening balance and capital grant. The highest receipt of Rs 326,15,19,500 is from Government grant while the lowest of Rs 1,63,70,000 is under miscellaneous sources. The budget has an equal amount of expenditure of Rs Rs.601,85,30,675. The heads of expenditure include Rs 49,87,50,000 towards establishment, Rs

34,10,00,000 towards operation and maintenance expenses (public health), Rs 21,12,00,000 for operation and maintenance of vehicles and streetlights, Rs 1,30,00,000 for operation and maintenance of office, Rs 12,98,60,000 miscellaneous expenditure and Rs 3,25,90,09,159 capital expenditure. The budget under its expenditure head has Rs 445,28,19,159 as revenue payment followed by closing balance of Rs 15,00,00,000. Rs 141,57,11,516 is expected capital grant payment. Fiscal experts are of the opinion that Rs 12,98,60,000 shown as miscellaneous

expenditure needs to be spelled out for information of taxpayers. The budget proposes eleven special projects to be executed at an estimated cost of Rs 232,64,00,000 which include rejuvenation of water bodies, construction of Kalyan Mandaps, shopping malls and market complexes, infrastructure development of different graveyards and crematoriums, construction of parks and skill development centres for SHG/urban employment, construction of shelter for homeless, improvement of smart roads, drainage and construction of libraries.

## Vigilance secures 3 convictions in a day

**3 clerks get RI in graft cases**

**PNS ■ CUTTACK**

The Court of Special Judge, Vigilance, Phulbani on Tuesday convicted Pradeep Kumar Choudhury, former Junior Clerk, Accounts Section, office of the Deputy Director, Horticulture, Phulbani in Kandhamal district in a graft case and sentenced him to undergo four years' rigorous imprisonment. He was also asked to pay a fine of Rs 10,000 and in default to undergo another six months' RI. Following the conviction, Choudhury was forwarded to jail custody. The Vigilance would now move the competent authority for dismissal of Choudhury from service following his conviction. In another case, the Court of Special Judge, Vigilance,

Balangir convicted Daman Prasad Mishra, former Head Clerk, office of Block Education Officer, Gudvela block in Balangir in a trap case and sentenced him to three years' RI and pay a fine of Rs 10,000. In case of default he has to undergo another three months' RI. The Vigilance would now move the competent authority for stoppage of pension of Mishra following his conviction. In another case, the Court of Court of Special Judge, Vigilance, Sundargarh sentenced Surendra Kumar Patel, former Senior Clerk, office of Tehsildar, Lephripada in Sundargarh district in a trap case and sentenced him to undergo four years' RI and pay a fine of Rs 1,000. The Vigilance would now move the competent authority for dismissal of Patel from service following his conviction.

## BU holds convocation; degrees awarded



**PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR**

The Berhampur University observed its 24th convocation ceremony in the gracious presence of Governor and Chancellor of universities Prof Ganeshi Lal on March 29. While Chairperson, Odisha Human Rights Commission, Justice Satrugan Pujari was the chief guest of the event, the guest of honour was Higher Education Secretary Bishnupada Sethi. Vice Chancellor Prof Geetanjali Dash delivering the welcome address, said that in the 57 years of the existence of the Berhampur University, the institution has produced many great alumni. Addressing the gathering, Governor Lal said that India aspires and is working on to

become a five trillion Dollar economy by 2024-25. The realisation of the goal hinges on the capability of its education and training institutions to equip the young men and women with knowledge and skill relevant to an evolving job market. It requires quality, excellence, innovations and constant upgradation, he said. Lal also added that the most significant feature of the National Education Policy (NEP)- 2020 is that it aims to promote both inclusion and excellence. The policy has been formulated with a great vision. On the occasion, eight DLit, two DSc, and 70 PhD scholars were awarded their degrees and 45 gold medals were conferred to the students in different subjects.

## In Keonjhar HM held for misbehaving with girls

**PNS ■ KEONJHAR**

The Headmaster of Dimiria Upper Primary School in Telkoi block of Keonjhar district was arrested on Wednesday for allegedly misbehaving with the girl students of the school. The headmaster Narayan Senapati was arrested based on the complaints lodged by as many as 12 girls. According to the complaint, Senapati used to call Class-VII and Class-VIII students to his office room on several pretexts and misbehaved with them. The matter came to the light

after the victim students informed their parents about the incident, sources said. Later, irate parents gheraoed the school and demanded action against the headmaster. Getting information the Additional Block Education Officer and police reached the spot and arrested the headmaster based on the complaint lodged by the students. However, Senapati claimed the allegations as baseless. Meanwhile, Senapati, who was booked under Sections 364(A), 8 and 10 of the POCSO Act, has been forwarded to court.

## Rampant corruption in A'malli NREGS road work

**Probe not ordered despite repeated complaints by locals**  
**SANGRAM MISHRA ■ ATHMALLIK**

Madhpur Panchayat of Athmallik block has earned a dubious reputation for rampant corruption in MGNREGS thanks to a nexus among leaders, contractors and officials. Though the villagers have repeatedly complained with the CMO about the corruption in the construction of different projects in the panchayat, including a road in Digpadar village, there has been no investigation into the cases. The road constructed in Digapadar village of Madhpur



panchayat in Athmallik block has invited much public criticism in the area. The road starts from Digapadar school and ends at Manarbeda canal. The code of this road construction project is 10529117 and it's estimated cost is Rs 2,20,000. According to the complaint, there are about 285 pits on the side of the constructed road but the RTI

data shows 489 pits have been dug as per the Muster roll. Therefore, it is alleged that about 205 of pits were only dug and money was looted by making false bills. It is alleged that junior engineer SP Tripathy and Block Assistant Executive Engineer Ramachandra Shatapathy are involved in the corruption. It is worth noting that

though there is a rule of transfer of Assistant Executive Engineer Ram Chandra Satapathy after promotion from Assistant Engineer but he continues in the same place of posting allegedly to serve the ulterior motives of the politicians. Tripathy, the Junior Engineer, was found to have bungled funds in digging of an old farm pond earlier. His name also comes in the corruption in the road construction case. The locals claimed that if a high-level investigation of the corruption in the construction of the road is ordered, the people involved will be exposed. When asked, Chief Development Officer cum EO, ZP, Angul Lalit Mohan Behera said, "The case will be investigated and action will be taken against the corrupt."

## Bikes handed over to RPF in Waltair Dvn

**For patrolling**  
**BADAL TAH ■ RAYGADA**

Rayagada has been declared as a Railway Division, for which there is a steady progress of work since Railway Minister Aswini Vaishnaw paid a visit to Rayagada two years back. Recently, the Railway Protection Force (RPF) of Waltair Division received nine two-wheelers for effective patrolling in the crucial work spots of the division including Rayagada and to enhance the mobility of field personnel at the ground level. The vehicles were handed over to the RPF



staff by Divisional Railway Manager (DRM) Anup Satpathy during a function. The vehicles would greatly help in enhancing patrolling in vulnerable sections, especially in hilly areas of Koraput -Rayagada line, Rayagada-Vizianagaram section, Kottavalasa-Kirandul

Line and other important locations. Principal Chief Security Commissioner cum IG/East Coast Railway Pankaj Gangwar had played a significant role in early procurement of these two wheelers. The motorcycles were flagged off by the DRM in

presence of Senior DSC/RPF/WAT Chokka Raghuvveer. Speaking on the occasion, the DRM said, "While discharging duties in trains and at railway station premises, the RPF do have to chase criminals at times. There are crucial locations in the Division in remote areas for which these two-wheelers will give an edge to the RPF unit." Meanwhile, the Railways has decided to use the Jagdalpur-Bhubaneswar Navratni special express from Jagdalpur to Bhubaneswar (one trip only) for the Navratni Festival.

## INBRIEF

### DEVANSHI OF KEONJHAR SHINES IN NAT'L TEST

Champua: Devanshi Mishra of the Kerala English Medium School (KEMS), Champua, recently won the third prize in the national level competition, DhanGyan. The competition was conducted by the United Schools Organisation of India (USO India) and was held in Delhi. The competition was conducted nationally in which top 10 students were selected for the Grand Finale. Devanshi was the only student from Odisha who got selected. She received tons of good wishes from every corner of the State. KEMS Chairman Dr Rajmohan PS and staffs congratulated her for the success.



### TRAFFIC HAVILDAR DIES FALLING OFF ROOF IN JSPUR

Jagatsinghpur: A Traffic Havildar, Kanduri Behera of Panisalia village here died after he fell down inadvertently from the roof of his residence on Wednesday. After falling off the roof, he had gone unconscious and family members took him to the DHH, where the doctor declared him dead. A palm of gloom descended on the police headquarters and Panisalia village after Behera's death.

### AGRI LOAN MELA BEGINS IN PALLAHARA

Pallahara: An agriculture Loan Mela began on Wednesday in Pallahara by the Nijigarh Cooperative Society. Under the chairmanship of Card Bank president Bishnu Prasad Das, a meet-



ing was held where Mohan Charan Pradhan (ARCS Talcher) was the chief guest. Pradeep Kumar Das (Deputy Registrar), Reenarani Naik (Block Chairman), Sabitri Majhi (member ZP zone 23), Sashibhusan Acharya (Nijigarh Sarapanch) and Pramod Biswal (Branch Manager Central Cooperative Bank, Angul) were present. The ARCS Talcher explained the objectives of the event. The registered farmers will get Rs 1 lakh loan according to their cultivated land without interest and the SHG group will avail Rs 5 lakh agri loan without interest. Five farmers and one SHG availed loans on the day.

### PHULBANI CLERK GETS RI IN GRAFT CASE

Phulbani: The Special Judge, Vigilance, Phulbani convicted Pradip Kumar Choudhary, Junior Clerk of District Horticulture Office and sentenced him to undergo rigorous imprisonment (RI) for four years and a fine of Rs10,000. In default, he would undergo RI for six months more. The case pertaining to Berhampur vigilance in the year 2018, Choudhary had been caught red-handed while demanding Rs 7,000 from one Sunil Kumar Behera, a field staff of the District Horticulture Office for transfer of his salary account from SBI Baliguda to Andhra Bank Phulbani.

### FEST 'MANZAR' HELD AT CUTM

Paralakhemundi: The School of Management, Centurion University of Technology and Management (CUTM), Paralakhemundi, organised a national level student management fest, MANZAR 2023, on March 28 and 29. Vice President of CUTM Prof DN Rao inaugurated the event and encouraged the participants. Registrar, CUTM, Dr Anita Patra delivered the welcome address while coordinator Dr Debi Prasad Sathpathy and director, administration Dr Durga Prasad Padi among others spoke. Dr Sushant Kumar Patnaik gave the vote of thanks. Around 60 college students participated in different events.



### B'PUR COMPERES WIN HEARTS IN DELHI

Brahmapur: Renowned stage presenters of Brahmapur, Hrushikesh Panigrahi and wife Sudipta Panigrahi won the hearts of people at the Odisha Festival which was held in New Delhi from March 25 to 27. Many Odia artists performed in the event, which was attended by people from all walks of life.



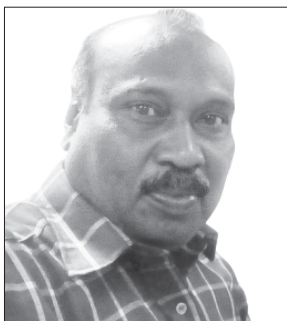
# Important to plan your money, plan your future

I am calling from your college. Are you Chandra? You have not deposited your admission fee in the bank. The last date is over and your admission is cancelled by the college. I can help you if you send the total admission fee to the number I am sending you now. Ok.'

'No thanks sir. I will contact our Principal and do accordingly,' replied Chandra. He narrowly escaped from the trap of a cyber fraudster. Chandra saved him because he attended the financial literacy classes last year during the Global Money Week observed from March 20 to 26 and was aware of the various online financial frauds.

Chandra is one of a few youths who learned a lot from the financial literacy classes and shared the knowledge with his friends to make them financially literate.

The Global Money Week (GMW) is an annual global awareness-raising campaign programme aimed at making



**SIBASHIS MAHAPATRA**

young people financially literate from an early age, well-versed and acquiring the knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviours necessary to make sound financial decisions. The 11th edition of GMW began on March 20 and will continue till March 26. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is the national coordinator for GMW 2023 in India. The NCFE conducted two webinars on March 20 and 21 on the theme "Plan your money, plant your future" in which the speakers from RBI,

SEBI, IRDAI and PFRDA educated the participants on various financial issues. On the first two days of the Global Money Week observations, the NCFE organised webinar talks of 30 minutes each by eminent personalities like Santosh Kumar Sharma, Chief General Manager, SEBI and Director, NCFE; Ankur Jarora, Manager, RBI; T Venkateswara Rao, General Manager, IRDAI; Nitin Hansda, Assistant Manager, PFRDA, which were well-received by thousands of participants. Many schools and colleges arranged watch parties to enable their students to listen to these stalwarts of financial education. According to a consortium of researchers, 2.5 billion adults, nearly half of the world's 4.7-billion adult population, are not aware of the use of formal financial services or the concepts of savings and investment. Around 2.2 billion of these financially-illiterate adults live in Asia, Africa, Latin America

and Middle East. The OECD/ INFE International Survey of Adult Financial Literacy Competencies revealed that only 42 per cent of adults are aware of the compounding interest on savings and 58 per cent are able to calculate simple interest. Knowledge of household budget is known to 60 per cent adults and only 50 per cent are having long-term investment. According to an S&P Survey, more than 75 per cent of Indian adults do not understand basic financial concepts. More than 80 per cent of our female population are financially-illiterate. In this back ground, a thrust on a national strategy for financial education becomes essential and the National Centre for Financial Education (NCFE) prepared the NSFE 2020-25 in consultation with the apex financial sector regulators, viz., RBI, SEBI, IRDAI and PFRDA and the Technical Group on Financial Inclusion. Financial Literacy was

unveiled by the RBI with the strategic objectives of inculcating financial literacy concepts among various segments of the population. It aims at boosting the savings behaviour of people which further helps in investment awareness and fulfilment of financial goals. The primary objective of NCFE is to promote financial education across India for all sections of the population as per the National Strategy for Financial Education of Financial Stability and Development Council. The second objective is to create financial awareness and empowerment through financial education campaigns across the country for all sections of the population through seminars, workshops, conclaves, training, programmes and provide training in financial education and create financial education material in electronic or non-electronic formats, workbooks, worksheets, literature,

pamphlets, booklets, fliers, technical aids and to prepare appropriate financial literature for target-based audience on financial markets and financial digital modes for improving the financial literacy so as to improve their knowledge, understanding, skills and competence in finance. How to open a bank account, how to withdraw money from the ATM, how to send money, how to write a cheque, how to open a demat account, budget preparation, difference savings and investment, types of insurance, types of loans, pension, UPI, mobile wallet, power of compounding, share market, digital currency and a lot of other things are taught to the youngsters in these financial literacy classes. They not only help the youngsters now but also in future as they can make sound financial decisions. National and international institutions are doing their parts to spread financial education as it is a global

challenge. Economic development of a country is unthinkable without financial education of the people. The task is more challenging in a country like India with its diversified languages and living styles. Financial illiteracy can be a great hindrance to the overall development of the country. All-round efforts are to be made to increase the financial literacy rates. Government should make it compulsory for the academic institutions to participate in programmes like Global Money Week. Similarly, observation of the World Savings Day on October 30 should be made compulsory in the educational institutions to highlight the importance and need for savings. Financial education should also be included in NSS and Red Cross programmes as it is an essential skill each and every volunteer should learn and disseminate among other students.

It is time to include financial education in the school and college education just like entrepreneurship, environmental studies and ethics and values. The National Strategy for Financial Education 2020-25 emphasised on the development of relevant content in the curriculum in schools, colleges and training establishments. Apart from the school and college curriculum, it recommended for integration of financial education content in various professional and vocational courses undertaken by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSD&E) through their Sector Skillings Missions and the likes of B.Ed./M.Ed. programmes. If there is a coordinated effort, the vision of NCFE 'financially aware and empowered India' can be achieved very soon. (Dr Biswal is Principal, Nabarangpur College, Nabarangpur, Odisha)



# 3 more held for Khalistani violence in OZ

Arrest made in connection with two incidents of brawl between Khalistanis, pro-India demonstrators: Police

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/MELBOURNE

Taking action in connection with a brawl between alleged Khalistan supporters and pro-India demonstrators in January in Melbourne, the local police said on Thursday they have arrested three more people in connection with two incidents of brawl that broke out between Khalistan activists and pro-India demonstrators. The alleged incidents happened during the so-called 'Punjab independence referendum' where two fights broke out between the two groups which injured several people on

January 29, Victoria Police said in a statement. Apparently, flag poles were used by several men as weapons which caused physical injuries to multiple victims, the statement said. The US-based Sikhs for Justice, the group spearheading the non-binding referendum, is a banned organisation in India. The three arrested include a 23-year-old man charged with affray and unlawful assault while a 36-year-old and 39-year-old have been charged with affray and violent disorder, the police said. The identities of the arrested men have not been disclosed. Earlier, two men aged 34



and 39 were arrested and issued a penalty notice for riotous behaviour. All those charged this week have been bailed to appear at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court on August 8. Further investigation is underway and police are making enquiries to identify and apprehend any further alleged

recent attacks on temples in Australia as well as pro-Khalistan activities there with his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese during their meeting in New Delhi this month. Albanese has assured Modi that the safety of Indians was a "special priority" for him. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had also raised the issue during his meeting with his Australian counterpart Penny Wong. "Signals that pro-Khalistan elements are stepping up their activities in Australia, actively aided and abetted by members of proscribed terrorist organisations such as the Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) and other inimical agencies from outside Australia, have been evident for some time," the Indian High Commission in Canberra said in a strongly-worded statement on January 26.

# India rising as one of strongest nations under Modi: Min

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said here on Thursday from secure borders and self-reliance to a strong economy and transformed global image, India is rising as one of the strongest countries under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He also said Lord Ram is India's identity and not merely an embodiment in stone or wood and asserted that the government will construct hospitals, schools, set up industries and also build temples. Making this assertion while addressing the 'Rising India Conclave' organised by a private media organization, he pointed out that all sectors, especially defence, have been witnessing a transformative change in the last few years, which has guided India to a respectable position on the world map. Rajnath credited the bold approach and unwavering resolve of the government, which has ensured secured borders and a battle-ready Armed Forces backed by a self-reliant defence industry. Terming national security as Government's top priority and self-reliance as the only medium to achieve it, he asserted that relentless efforts are being



made to attain 'Aatmanirbharta' in defence. On the success achieved due to these decisions, the defence minister said the domestic defence production has witnessed a significant increase in the last few years. "We are not only catering our own needs, but are also exporting weapons and equipment to other countries. From Rs 900 crore 7-8 years ago, defence exports have skyrocketed and are nearing Rs 14,000 crore in the current Financial Year. Our target is export defence equipment worth Rs 40,000 crore by 2026," he said. Rajnath described India's diplomacy as another facet of Rising India. The presidency of G-20 and

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) this year is proof that India's stature is continuously growing on the world stage. Rajnath added that India has led the world on issues like terrorism and has been successful in garnering support to eliminate the menace. He emphasised that countries, which use terrorism as a tool, are well aware of the fact that India never harms anyone unnecessarily, nor does it spare anyone who tries to hurt its unity, integrity and sovereignty. Mentioning about the surgical strikes, he stated that the move broke the back of terrorists and sent a strong message to the world that India will eliminate terrorism on its own soil, and if need be, on foreign land as well. He added that "Whether it was the stand-off with China or ill intentions from Pakistan, our forces have been giving a befitting reply, whenever required." The defence minister termed the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir as another example of the strong will of the Government. He stated that the Union Territory has ushered in a new era of peace and progress due to the decision.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi makes a surprise visit to the new Parliament building on Thursday evening in New Delhi and inspected various works as well as interacted with construction workers

# BSY hints at fielding son against Cong strongman Siddaramaiah

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As Karnataka gears up full Aswing for an 'evenly matched' political contest between the political rivals, former BJP Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa on Thursday indicated that his son B Y Vijayendra may be fielded against Congress strongman and former state CM Siddaramaiah from Varuna constituency for the May 10 Assembly polls. Congress and JD(S) have announced their first list of candidates even before the elections were announced and Chief Minister Basavraj Bommain have announced that the BJP would release its list "soon" within a week's time. The 80-year-old Lingayat caste leader Yediyurappa gave indications that his son Vijayendra who is also state Vice-President may be fielded against the opposition leader Siddaramaiah from Varuan assembly constituency in Mysuru, southern Karnataka. Varuna is among the key seats to watch out for as Siddaramaiah, the Congress legislature party leader has thrown his hat in the ring in this assembly segment, cur-



rently held by his son Yathindra. Siddaramaiah is an influential leader of the Kurba (Shepherd community), the third largest caste in the state after Lingayats and Vokkaligas. When asked by newsmen whether Vijayendra would be fielded from Varuna, Yediyurappa said, "Discussions are going on. Siddaramaiah knows that his ground is slipping away. I don't think it is so easy for him. We will field a good candidate. We will give a tough fight. Let's see what happens." The BJP veteran and four-time Chief Minister said the decision on whether to give the Varuna ticket to Vijayendra, who is the state BJP vice-president, would be left to the party's central leadership. BJP General Secretary and

# Planners of 2008 Mumbai terror attack should pay heavy price, says Speaker of Israeli Parliament

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/JERUSALEM

Underlining that fight against terrorism is common concern for both countries, the Speaker of Israel's Parliament has said the planners of the "abominable" 2008 Mumbai terror attack should pay a heavy price for it. He made these remarks ahead of his four-day visit to India starting Friday. Amir Ohana, a close confidante of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will be on his first official visit abroad after assuming office in December last year. Stating that the menace of terrorism is a common concern, Ohana, a former Shin Bet (Israeli internal security agency) official, told PTI that the fight to counter it requires all the progressive countries to come together. Both India and Israel face the problem of terrorism, and the fight against it is a joint one, Ohana said. "We all remember the abominable terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008 in which



over 207 people were murdered, of which 178 were Indians. Among the foreigners who were murdered were unfortunately also Israelis and Jews who came to the Chabad house," Ohana pointed out. "It was an attack not only on India but also on Jews and free people everywhere," the Knesset Speaker said, adding that it was an attack on the shared values of India and Israel. "Whoever planned and sent the terrorists from the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba should pay a heavy price for it," he said. "The attack on the Chabad house (in Mumbai) symbolises a common pain for India and Israel, but also our partnership in the uncompromising fight against terrorism," Ohana said.

# ₹9K-cr deal signed for Akash weapon system, weapon locating radars

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Boosting the capabilities of the armed forces to guard the Line of Actual Control (LAC) facing China, the defence ministry on Thursday inked contracts for procurement of improved Akash Weapon System and 12 Weapon Locating Radars, WLR Swathi (Plains) for the Indian Army at an overall cost of over Rs 9,100 crore. The contract for procurement of improved Akash Weapon System (AWS) for 3rd & 4th Regiments of Army Air Defence, comprising live Missiles & Launchers with upgrades, Ground Support Equipment, Vehicles and Infrastructure was signed with Bharat Dynamics Limited, worth over Rs 8,160 crore. The AWS is a Short Range Surface to Air Missile (SRSAM) Air Defence System, indigenously designed and developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). In order to meet aerial threats, two additional Regiments of AWS with Upgradation are being procured for Indian Army for the Northern borders (China). Improved AWS has Seeker



Technology, Reduced Foot Print, 360° Engagement Capability and improved environmental parameters. The project will give a boost to the Indian missile manufacturing industry in particular and the indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem as a whole. The project has overall indigenous content of 82% which will be increased to 93% by 2026-27. The induction of the improved AWS into the Indian Army will increase India's self-reliance in Short Range Missile capability. This project will play a role in boosting the overall economy by avoiding outgo of precious foreign exchange to other countries, increasing employment avenues in India and encouraging Indian MSMEs through components manufacturing.

Around 60% of the project cost will be awarded to the private industry, including MSMEs, in maintaining the supply chain of the weapon system, thereby creating large scale of direct and indirect employment. The contract for WLR Swathi (Plains) was signed with Bharat Electronic Limited (BEL) at a cost of over Rs 990 crore. It is an indigenously designed WLR which is capable of locating guns, mortars and rockets firing own troops, thereby facilitating their destruction through Counter Bombardment by own fire-power resources. This will enable troops to carry out their operational tasks without any interference from the enemy and also provide them safety against enemy fire. Induction is planned to be completed in 24 months.

# NIA files chargesheet against 2 LeT operatives in Udhampur IED blast case

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Following investigations into the Udhampur IED blast cases by the banned terror group Lashkar-e-Tayabba (LeT) through their Pakistan-based handlers, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Thursday filed a chargesheet against two Lashkar operatives. Accused Mohd Aslam Sheikh alias Adil and Mohd Amin Bhat alias Abu Khubaib have been charged for their efforts towards revival of terrorist activities in Jammu by carrying out recruitments from the pool of over ground workers (OGWs) and surrendered terrorists and activating and motivating them to carry out terrorist acts. The NIA had taken over investigations into the case on November 15 last year from Jammu and Kashmir Police.

NIA Investigations revealed that Mohd Aslam Sheikh was in touch with Mohd Amin Bhat, an 'individual terrorist' of the LeT listed by the Union government, who was now operating from Pakistan. Pinna recruited Adil to carry out the two IED blasts on buses parked in the public areas of Udhampur district of Jammu and Kashmir, which had inflicted injuries to two persons. Mohd Amin Bhat was initially a resident of Doda district in the Valley. In 1997, he joined the terrorist ranks of Hizb Ul Mujahideen and was involved in the execution of various terrorist acts in Jammu and Kashmir. Later, he escaped to Pakistan in 2009 and is presently an active LeT handler who is playing a vital role to revive and accelerate terrorist activities in the Jammu region, the NIA has alleged in the chargesheet.

# Navy ships make port call at Port Victoria after joint surveillance with Seychelles Coast Guard



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The ships of First Training Squadron (INS Tir, Sujata and ICGS Sarathi) on overseas deployment made port call at Port Victoria, Seychelles on Wednesday after undertaking joint Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) surveillance with Seychelles Coast Guard. Giving details here on Thursday, navy officials said Senior Officer First Training Squadron along with Commanding Officers of ships

called on High Commissioner of India Kartik Pande and Brigadier Michel Rosette, Chief of Defence Force (CDF), Seychelles Defence Forces. In a ceremony onboard INS Tir, machinery spares and stores meant for Seychelles Coast Guard were handed over to CDF. The squadron presently has trainees from six friendly foreign countries in addition to 120 Indian trainees. It was a proud moment for young Trainee Benjamin from Seychelles to interact with his CDF.

# Same-sex marriage issue: Minority groups write to CJI



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Some minority religious groups have written to Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud to cite their religious beliefs to express opposition to same-sex marriage, an issue being heard by the Supreme Court. Sayed Salman Chishty of the Chishty Foundation, Ajmer, has conveyed his "concerns and reservations" to CJI, claiming that any legal validation for same-sex marriage will contradict India's religious, social and moral values, and cause "havoc" with the delicate balance of personal laws and accepted societal values.



# India sees 3,016 fresh Covid cases

## Highest in nearly six months

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India saw a single-day rise of 3,016 fresh coronavirus cases, the highest in nearly six months, while the active cases increased to 13,509, according to the Union health ministry data updated on Thursday.

A total of 3,375 cases were recorded on October 2 last year. The country's COVID-19 death toll has increased to 5,30,862 with 14 latest fatalities — three reported by Maharashtra, two from Delhi and one reported by Himachal Pradesh in a span of 24 hours and eight reconciled by Kerala.

According to the ministry data updated at 8 am, the daily positivity was recorded at 2.73 per cent, while the weekly positivity was pegged at



1.71 per cent. The infection tally stands at 4.47 crore (4,47,12,692).

The active cases now comprise 0.03 per cent of the total infections, while the national COVID-19 recovery rate has been recorded at 98.78 per cent, according to the health ministry website.

The number of people

who have recuperated from the disease surged to 4,41,68,321, while the case fatality rate was recorded at 1.19 per cent. According to the ministry's website, 220.65 crore doses of Covid vaccine have been administered in the country so far under the nationwide COVID-19 vaccination drive.

# Delegates warm up for G20 Sherpa meeting in Kerala

PTI ■ KUMARAKOM

Thousands of miles away from her country with much of it being below sea level, a woman diplomat of Netherlands was excited to see a bicycle placed at a resort on the bank of a beautiful lake in this scenic Kerala village where side events of the second G20 Sherpa meeting are currently underway.

The bicycle was placed in front of a screen that was erected to showcase CoWIN, a powerful example of how digital technology can expand public health programmes, and reflects the strides India, world's most populated nation, continues to make in digital technology for public services. As she pedaled the stationary bicycle, the screen displayed the fascinating story of India which as of March, 20, 2023 delivered 2.2 billion vaccination doses to 1.1 billion registered persons.

Cycling is part of Dutch life and a very patriotic means of



transportation for them. "I did experiment cycling. As a Dutch woman, I love cycling," she told PTL. Dr Kalyani Raju, a young medical doctor assigned to narrate India's success story to the delegates, said the Dutch delegates really enjoyed pedalling the cycle and took note of the presentation.

She informed the delegates about the historic achievement of the nation after Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled CoWIN along with the launch of the national

Covid-19 vaccination campaign on January 16, 2021. Indian officials said it was indeed a moment marking the beginning of a story that touched over a billion lives in less than 18 months.

They said it took almost nine months to reach the 100 crore mark and another nine months to reach the 200 crore vaccination mark, with the highest single day vaccination record of over 2.5 crore doses achieved on 17 September 2021.

# Ex-civil servants criticise Rijiju for his comments on judiciary in open letter

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Former civil servants in an open letter on Thursday criticised Law Minister Kiren Rijiju for several of his comments which, they said, constituted a concerted attack by the government on the collegium system of appointments and on judicial independence.

The open letter, signed by 90 former bureaucrats, argued that preserving the independence of the judiciary is non-negotiable, and any sign of executive overreach cannot be accepted in a democracy.

"We write to you today in response to comments you made on various occasions and very recently at the India Today Conclave on March 18, 2023. Your statements that day are the latest in what is emerging as a concerted attack by the government on the collegium system of appointments, the Supreme Court of India and,

ultimately, on judicial independence. We unequivocally condemn this onslaught," the letter said. In the appointment of judges to the High Courts and Supreme Court it appears that it is the government that is stonewalling appointments, it said.

"Names forwarded by the collegium are left pending for years, only to be finally returned without approval. Candidates with distinguished careers marked by their commitment to due process and to constitutional norms are turned down by the government," said the letter, written by the former civil servants under the banner of Constitutional Conduct Group.

Rather than engage constructively with the Supreme Court and collegium, high offices of the executive such as yours, and that of the Vice President, have responded with venomous barbs, it said.

# CM compares BJP regime to one run by Tughlaq Will unite Opp to oust BJP: Didi

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Days after asserting her Ekla Chalo (go it alone) policy in the 2024 general elections Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday made a somersault championing the cause of Opposition unity warning the Narendra Modi Government that she would now proceed to unite the Opposition parties with the sole purpose of ousting the BJP from power.

On the concluding day of her two-day dharna against central deprivation of Bengal the Chief Minister said that a time had come when the wily and whimsical BJP Government — which had no feeling for the common people and no respect for democratic norms — should be thrown out of power.

Comparing the present saffron regime to the one run by Md bin Tughlaq in the medieval period Banerjee said "they will collect GST from the states and spend it on fanciful projects and if you raise a question they will send CBI, ED, Income Tax, CAG and NIA



to your house." Banerjee said how the BJP sends protesters to her residence when she goes to Delhi adding, "now enough is enough ... if I descend to unite the opposition I will do it at any cost ... so as to throw this Government out of power." The BJP Government would not last beyond 2024, she asserted adding the saffron outfit's fall would begin from Karnataka.

"For Bengal they will hold 8-9 phase elections and in Karnataka they will complete polling in one day thinking that they will win their."

But this time they are going

to be defeated in that State," Banerjee said. On the question of leadership she earlier said that the issue could be decided later.

"First it is the question of defeating the BJP. And the Khela (game) will start from Uttar Pradesh where we will play alongside the Samajwadi Party of Akhilesh Yadav." Attacking the BJP for blocking funds she said "it is the constitutional obligation of the government to pay the wages for getting the works done but here in Bengal they have blocked the wages of 17 lakh families."

Saying that she had

"approached the Prime Minister Narendra Modi four times and Home Minister Amit Shah once with the State's request to clear its dues Banerjee said, "please listen to me BJP ... when we are asking for the MNREGA funds we are asking for our rights ... we are not your servants ... we are not your bonded labourers ... after repeated requests you have not cleared the State's dues and have forced me to sit in a dharna ... and even after that not a tiny leader of the BJP showed up to give some assurance ... now I will take thousands of youth from Bengal and jam Delhi to get our rights."

Curiously the TMC supremo had fallen comparatively silent in the past several months particularly after the arrest of her senior ministerial colleagues and a number of party leaders in recruitment scam and cattle smuggling case.

The latest rise in the decibel level of her anti-BJP voice comes days after ED notices being sent to some of her close relatives regarding some cases, sources said.

# India's new edu policy based on Gandhi's teachings: Shah

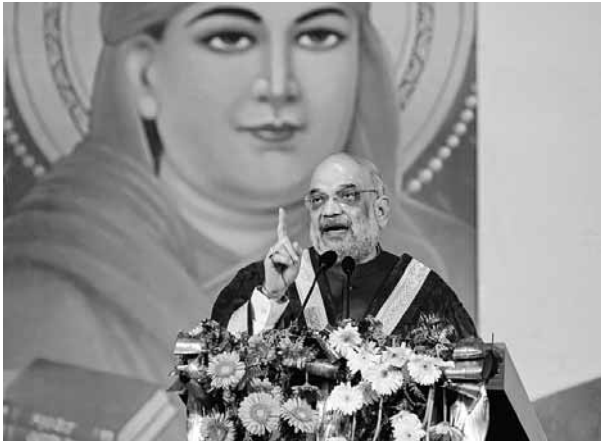
PTI ■ HARIDWAR

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday hailed the central government's New Education Policy for its emphasis on learning in mother tongue and universal education based on the teachings of Indian visionaries such as Mahatma Gandhi and Dayanand Saraswati.

Addressing the 113th convocation of the Gurukula Kangri here, Shah credited the university (deemed to be) for the revival of vedic education in India and combining it with modern education.

Shah paid tributes to the university's founder Swami Shradhdhanand and saying he set India's education system free from the stranglehold of the British and revived the country's vedic education system, all the while emphasising on culture and modern education.

Shah praised the NEP brought by the Narendra Modi-led central government saying it represents the combined visions of Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati, Swami



Union Home Minister Amit Shah speaks at the 113th convocation of the Gurukula Kangri University, in Haridwar, on Thursday

PTI

Shradhdhanand, Mahatma Gandhi, and Lala Lajpat Rai." The new education policy, which is the country's third, contains the visions of four great people.

Accessible education as propagated by Maharshi Dayanand, combining vedic education with modern as propagated by Swami Shradhdhanand, Mahatma

Gandhi's education in mother tongue, and Lala Lajpat Rai's principle of education for all are at the core of this policy," Shah said. Education in engineering courses has begun to be imparted in the mother tongues of 10 states, while people appearing in JEE, NIIT, and IAS exams have the option of taking the tests in their own mother tongues, he said. The

NEP makes education streamless and classless, with no barriers to science and arts streams, and freedom to learn anything in accordance with one's interest and aptitude, he said. He said Prime Minister Modi has brought international glory to India and Indianness.

"Narendra Modi readily took decisions which the country was not able to take for decades. Be it abolition of article 370 or securing the boundaries of the country through such measures as surgical strikes or making the country jump from the world's 111th to the 5th largest economy in the world, the Prime Minister has done everything to make the country proud," Shah said.

Congratulating the 1,800 students conferred with degrees at the convocation, he said they should be proud of having studied in a great institution such as the Gurukula Kangri University, and urged them to apply their learning in nation building so that it emerges as the world's leading country in its 100th year.

# TN Assembly witnesses sharp exchanges over Amma Canteen, breakfast scheme

**Chennai:** The Tamil Nadu Assembly on Thursday witnessed sharp exchanges between the ruling DMK and main opposition AIADMK over the running of Amma Canteens and the government's breakfast scheme for students.

Opposition legislator S P Velumani referred to welfare measures that his party AIADMK had introduced during its previous terms in power, such as the 'Thalikkku Thangam' (Gold for Mangalsutra) and free-laptop-for-students schemes, saying that such initiatives would be continued by the DMK regime.

If this was not implemented, his party chief and Leader of Opposition Edappadi K Palaniswami would do it

after returning as Chief Minister, Velumani, a former minister said, initiating the debate on Demand for Grants to the Municipal Administration Department.

When Velumani made a point on the Amma Canteens and said that funding should be provided, Minister K N Nehru intervened and said no canteen had been shut down and that a fund allocation of over Rs 120 crore had been made.

The principal opposition was making allegations in respect of running Amma Canteens for political reasons, the Minister said. Amma Canteen, the low-cost chain of eateries, is run by local bodies and was launched during the AIADMK regime.

PTI

# ISIS threatens mass murders against 'love jihad' law

RAKESH K SINGH ■ NEW DELHI

In its latest propaganda material, the international terror group ISIS has threatened to resort to mass murders and beheadings to mark its protest against laws being enacted against 'love jihad' in several States. The propaganda article has claimed that Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh have enacted anti-love jihad laws and other States are also resorting to put in place similar legislations.

Claiming that such laws are aimed at empowering certain communities to embroil Muslim youths and weaken them, the outfit has claimed that the so-called mujahideens are coming to behead those who have framed the Ummah (Muslim community).

# There needs to be equal treatment of all States, says ex-Cabinet Secy

**New Delhi:** The Centre is the engine for every government and there needs to be equal treatment of all states. We have to be Team India and have to incorporate differences that are part of Team India, KM Chandrasekhar, former Union Cabinet Secretary in the UPA Government said recently.

He was speaking at a session on 'Reflections on Governance' based on his memoir, "As Good as My Word," which dwells in detail on his experiments in public administration, his experiences as India's ambassador to the World Trade Organization, his working relationship with the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his run-ins with some notable ministers of the time, and his reflections on Indian democracy, economy, and defence.

The ex-administrator said that the civil service gives lots of opportunities in diverse areas and the wide range of functions performed is unparalleled.

He also added that whatever he achieved has been because of teamwork. He further added that officers need to take risks and have courage to achieve results as the cost of delays is very high.

He also remarked that officers have to work in a result-oriented manner rather than just being process-oriented. He said, "I totally worship the Constitution and Democracy."

Also present on the occasion was Amitabh Kant, ex-CEO NITI Aayog and currently G20 Sherpa, who said that he has learned to Think Big, Think multi Disciplinary and also to take risks in his career.

# Gujarat: 6 farm labourers killed in road accident

**Bhavnagar:** At least six farm labourers were killed and eight others injured after the mini-truck they were travelling in turned turtle in Vallabhipur taluka of Gujarat's Bhavnagar district on Thursday, said police. The deceased included two women.

A preliminary probe revealed the mini-truck carrying cattle fodder toppled on the roadside following a tyre burst, said police sub-inspector of Vallabhipur P D Zala. The vehicle was heading towards Bhavnagar city after loading green fodder from a village in neighbouring Botad district, he said, adding 14 farm labourers were sitting on the stacked animal food. "When the mini-truck reached near Mevasa village of Vallabhipur, one of its front tyres burst.

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# Majority of Himalayan glaciers melting at varying rates: Parl panel tells Govt

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Majority of Himalayan glaciers analysed are melting or retreating at varying rates in different regions, the government has said.

It has noted that melting glaciers due to any impact of climate change will not only severely affect the flow in Himalayan river system but will also give rise to natural disasters.

The government's response was given to a parliamentary standing committee looking at Glacier Management in the Country - Monitoring of Glaciers/Lakes, including Glacial Lake Outbursts, leading to Flash-floods in the Himalayan Region. The parliamentary standing committee report was tabled in Lok Sabha

on Wednesday. Explaining the problem of incessant melting and retreating of Himalayan glaciers and the estimated volume loss of glaciers between the year(s), the Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation said the Geological Survey of India has conducted studies on their melting by assessment of mass balance studies on nine glaciers and also carried out monitoring the recession or advancement of 76 glaciers.

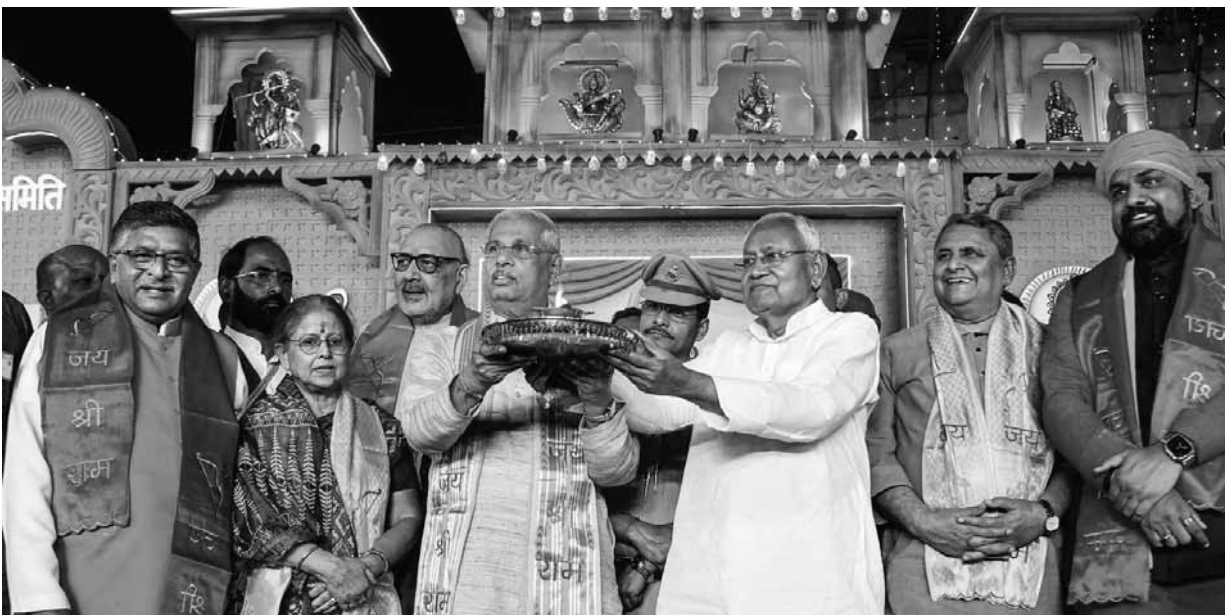
"Majority of Himalayan glaciers are observed melting/retreating at varying rates in different regions," it said. The department pointed out that melting glaciers due to any impact of climate change will not only severely affect the flow in Himalayan river system but

will also give rise to disasters like Glacier Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF), glacier avalanche, landslide etc.

Asked about the other adverse consequences of melting glaciers, especially on the ecology of the Himalayas, the department said melting of glaciers may lead to shift of tree line in the Himalaya and may also cause change in phonological behaviour of plants.

"It may impact the livelihoods of mountain people and downstream populations. Such changes may lead to negative impact on biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services of the Himalaya," it said.

The parliamentary standing committee flagged the lack of data sharing on hydrological information with the neighbouring countries.



Bihar Governor Rajendra Arlekar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Union Minister Giriraj Singh and BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad during Ram Navmi celebration, in Patna, on Thursday

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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Fighting hate speech

Some sort of mechanism must be developed to curb hate speech, but it'd be better if it is informal

The Supreme Court and the Government made important points about hate speech on Wednesday. A bench of Justices KM Joseph and BV Nagarathna said, "Hate speeches are like a vicious circle. One person will make it and then another will make it. When our Constitution was founded, there were no such speeches. Now cracks are coming up in the idea of fraternity. There has to be some restraint. Some sort of mechanism needs to be developed by the state so that we can curb these kinds of statements." The apex court's insistence on restraint is welcome, but the objective conditions are not conducive for it. The biggest reason is that politics, as practiced by all parties, has been reduced to realpolitik, in which principles and scruples play a very little role; emphasis is on winning elections, whatever be the cost. Hence mindless populism, with politicians vying with each other in offering freebies, throwing fiscal prudence and caution to the wind. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has underlined the perils of freebie culture but there is little to suggest that parties are willing to behave responsibly. Then there is the instinct to play to the gallery and appeal to the lowest common denominator. There are leaders who became popular and important not by public service but by making deplorable remarks. This is not surprising because political debate is rarely illumined

by cogent arguments and elevating oration; it is rather animated by loud sloganeering and sanctimonious posturing.

On the subject of hate speeches, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta also made an important remark: such speeches are also made against Hindus. On the face of it, this might appear whataboutery, but this is factually accurate. Two wrongs don't make a right, so statements against Muslims or Christians are not justifiable because similar ones are also made against Hindus. Mehta informed the court that in Tamil Nadu, "a spokesperson of DMK" said "whatever Periyar says should have been done... if you want equality, you must butcher all Brahmins." Against such a backdrop, as the Supreme Court said, some mechanism has to be developed, but it would be better that this mechanism is informal rather than formal. There are already a zillion laws; what is needed is a code of behaviour that political parties, rather than the Indian State, should evolve together. Something like the model code of conduct that governs the behaviour of parties and candidates before elections. It is not legally enforceable, yet it is widely adhered to. We should not forget that behavioural patterns are difficult to change with laws, rules, and fiat; when people themselves realise that something should be avoided, they avoid that. After all, politicians do observe the code of conduct. Therefore, the best way out would be a consensus among politicians and parties that decency in political discourse would be nice.



Artistes dressed as Hindu deities distribute sweet juice and buttermilk to celebrate Ram Navami, in Bengaluru

## Let them write an essay on Khalistan

This protest has no content except vilification and terror. It dodges issues of territory, Government form, State-religion ties and economy

Indian diplomatic missions in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada have recently been subjected to violent and abusive protests by pro-Khalistan Sikhs. If I were at Ground Zero, I would have simply walked around with a sheaf of foolscap papers and asked the agitators to write an essay about the proposed Khalistan. The essay must address the issues of territory, a form of government, the relationship between the state and church (SGPC), economy, demography (38 per cent non-Sikhs in Punjab, and Sikhs in the rest of India) etc. However, the essay reveals the "Khalistan" (empty space) that exists in their minds.

Over the last 50 years, the 'movement' has preferred to dodge these fundamental questions. Thousands of lives have been lost in an organised misconception. Territory is the basic component of a sovereign state. The maps of the proposed Khalistan are ludicrous. In the 1980s, Khushwant Singh purchased a Khalistan map published in England, for £2. "According to this map", he wrote in 1992, "Khalistan will include



Jammu, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, New Delhi, chunks of UP, Rajasthan and Saurashtra to give the state an outlet to the sea. By rough reckoning, the Sikh population will be 13 per cent. What kind of Sikh state will this be? Clearly, not democratic." (*My Bleeding Punjab*, P.155-156).

A recent example of this lack of clarity is the fanciful Khalistan map issued by Gurbatwant Singh Pannun, of Sikhs For Justice, in June 2022 at the Lahore Press Club. Besides the Indian Punjab, it encompasses almost the whole of Haryana, Himachal, five Rajasthan districts, several Uttarakhand districts (including Dehradun and Haridwar), and a number of districts of UP. It included

Gurugram, though Delhi was left out. Shimla was the capital of Khalistan, though Sikhs comprised 1.95 per cent of the city. Pro-Khalistani graffiti was actually found pasted on the Assembly Building at Dharamsala (Kangra district) on May 8, 2022, and scribes in Himachal Pradesh received pre-recorded Khalistani threat calls on their mobiles. However, in the Melbourne round of a referendum by the outfit in January, the question was whether "Indian-governed Punjab should be an independent country— Yes or No". Where does that leave the June 2022 map?

As per the referendum, sovereign Khalistan would be a landlocked country between India and Pakistan. Punjab farmers, overwhelmingly Jatt Sikhs, are heavily dependent on rice and wheat from the Centre. This was borne out by the massive farmers' agitation (2020-21) compelling the Government to cancel the farm laws. One would be interested in knowing how Khalistan proponents plan to offload Punjab rice and wheat mounds.

Nobody has yet seen a draft Khalistan constitution

even after 50 years. The Khalsa Raj Party Constitution issued by Lt Col Partap Singh (Retd) on May 15, 1991, at Chandigarh, issued towards the end of the Khalistani insurgency, was expected to condense all wisdom on Khalistan. It advocates an independent, sovereign Sikh homeland and restricts its boundaries to Punjab and adjoining Punjabi-speaking areas 'fraudulently kept out during a Punjab reorganisation in 1966'. Herein, Lt Col Singh assumes all Punjabi-speaking persons in India are Sikhs, and vice versa, wherein in reality 38 per cent of Punjab population according to Census 2011 is Hindu.

Will Khalistan be a democracy and a theocracy at the same time? It is open to multiple interpretations but it says nothing about the SGPC. The 'movement' is a bundle of imponderables, deliberately retained by its sponsors. It fits American author Paul Elridge's description, "Man is willing to die for any idea, provided that idea is not clear to him."

(The writer is an author and independent researcher based in New Delhi)



PRIYADARSHI DUTTA

rumours of a switchover. Xiomara remained garbled in her justification, "a sign of my determination to fulfil the government plan and expand borders", but her foreign minister, Eduardo Reina, did some plain speak when he said that the switchover was about, "pragmatism, not ideology" and that Honduras was in desperate need of finances as its urgent requirements were, "drowning the country"! This leaves the shrinking list of those countries that still recognise Taiwan to just 13 out of the 193 UN member states i.e., the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, the Federation of Saint Christopher and Nevis, St Lucia, Eswatini, the Holy See and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Access to the Chinese market and Treasury triumphs over all moral and diplomatic positions. Ironically, Taiwan remains formally unrecognised even by its most prominent allies, the USA (despite bipartisan unity on Taiwan). Jimmy Carter's abandonment of diplomatic ties with Taiwan to recognise Beijing instead, initiated a complexity and absurdity of relationship that the USA continues to grapple with as it supplies weapons to a nation that it does not fully recognise.

China's unofficial mouth-

piece, Global Times noted bluntly, "The US does not have enough resources to assist Honduras or make any effective pledges to Honduras in exchange for Honduras' change of mind. The case of Honduras shows that as long as countries stay firm, US obstruction and interference will not work. This will have a domino effect on Taiwan's remaining "allies" such as Guatemala, Belize and Paraguay." The Chinese have no qualms about simply 'buying out' the last bastions in South America, as the USA cannot make a counteroffer that is financially attractive enough to spurn Beijing's advances. As if to confirm its intent, the Global Times concludes, "The sleepwalking of "Taiwan independence" is ending."

Taiwan or its allies in Capitol Hill cannot compete with the Chinese coffers and are getting outbid, but that does not mean that there are no underlying concerns in accepting the Chinese terms. The reality of Chinese debt traps is legendary and short-term bailouts do not end well. Micronesia's outgoing President, David Panuelo had accused Beijing of 'political warfare' by insinuating that it was interfering and preventing the switchover from China to Taiwan. China remains hyper-

In 2000, China accounted for less than 2% of South America's exports which spiralled thereafter at over 30% annually to reach \$180 billion in 2010, \$450 billion by 2021, and expected to exceed \$700 billion by 2035! Beijing is now South America's top trade partner with countries like Chile accounting for nearly 40% of their exports to China. It didn't happen by chance, but by concerted Chinese design. China had invested disproportionately and knowingly with a 'no-strings-attached' policy that necessitated no preachy conditions or reform insistence. This leniency appealed to a host of illiberal and undemocratic regimes (e.g., pariahised Venezuela was given loans of more than \$64 billion, causing fears of a debt trap to arise). China's internal 'South-South cooperation' policy was further bolstered by the inclusion of initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or even the more recent 'Covid-19 diplomacy' that ensured transactional support and investments. Besides the reciprocal gratification of raw materials and the emergence of an alternative power centre, China replaced US control and assert its diplomatic muscle and leverage on the world stage.

One obvious element of quid pro quo sought by the Chinese for loosening their purse strings in economically struggling South America was the switch to derecognize its nemesis Taiwan (Republic of China) to the 'One-China' policy (with the assumption that Taiwan is an essential part of the Chinese mainland, to be reunified one day). South American countries were especially in large numbers among those who recognised Taiwan as the Chinese had little or no leverage, historically – today, with its deep pockets and flexing of bargaining muscle, one South American country after the other flipped sides in favour of China. Oddly enough, even the US and India remain vested in the 'One-China' stance, grandstanding and sabre-rattling notwithstanding.

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FIRST COLUMN

JAPANESE THRUST TO OUR LOOK EAST POLICY

The policy needs more push for stronger relations with SE Asia through NE States



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

India's vision of a 'Look East' policy and Japan's vision regarding a free and open Indo Pacific meet in India's landlocked northeast. India for long has championed its 'Look East' policy. This aims to develop deeper relations with countries in South East Asia and the Bay of Bengal region through northeastern (much to be tapped) States as a major gateway. Meanwhile, for more than a decade, Japan has been focusing on free, open and fair Indo Pacific policy, with emphasis on free movement of people, trade across land, sea and air routes, all through the region. India's northeastern States form an important access node.

Last week Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, during his India visit, reemphasised the desire to pursue a more engaged Indo Pacific policy. This has for the past two years become the most strategic foreign policy component for the US and Europe. It is also the glue holding together India, US, Australia and Japan in their QUAD grouping. Japan has been promoting key infrastructure projects in India's



northeast to create seamless trade and transport routes. It has been assisting in developing northeast road network connectivity improvement projects in Assam and Meghalaya, sewage and water supply projects in Assam, development of schools in Manipur, projects related to forest management in Tripura and Nagaland and sustainable agriculture projects in Mizoram. Japan's investment in the northeast is \$2 billion so far. In addition, the Japanese Government has picked up key infrastructure projects such as the MatarBari deep water port in Bangladesh. This will be complemented by the construction of connecting roads in Assam, Mizoram and Tripura. Once completed, these infrastructure projects would provide seamless access from the northeast to Bay of Bengal sea ports. In addition, they would serve as a major trade transit route for goods from Southeast Asia and beyond.

This promises to bring more prosperity to the entire region, not just within India's geographical boundaries. It fits well into the Japanese vision of comprehensive economic and regional development, based on law. It may be noteworthy that the other Asian giant, China, has rapidly expanded its sphere of influence in the region through its opaque Belt and Road Initiative. This has tied many of these countries into multiyear fatal debt traps. India and Japan are the major economies not part of China's debt trap infrastructure financing projects. Their vision for the Indo Pacific is different from China's.

India and Japan, during the leadership meeting in New Delhi, highlighted the need for expanding the partnership to more ASEAN countries. Even the QUAD Foreign Ministers' meeting in March emphasised the centrality of ASEAN and the need for greater engagement. It is significant that Japan is working in a structured manner in India's neighbourhood. This is with some of India's most trusted allies such as Bangladesh on a path of regional prosperity. Japan has been working with India since 2017 to support NE's development. Japan has clearly articulated that it is keen to tie the two ports, one in Bangladesh and the other in India's NE, for greater economic cooperation.

Meanwhile, Minister of State for External Affairs Rajkumar Ranjan Singh while addressing a BIMSTEC meet in Kolkata this week stressed the need for India's north eastern region to be the leading edge of India's Act East diplomacy. He emphasised the need for developing transportation facilities and trade within BIMSTEC partners. His caution for BIMSTEC countries was to follow a modest yet practical approach. Any creative solutions for increasing trade in this region also click well with Japan's push for increased economic prosperity and connectivity for the Indo Pacific.

(The author is a foreign affairs commentator)

Societal needs stretch beyond skill formation

The current overemphasis on acquiring skills at the cost of compromising life fundamentals would be counterproductive in the long run and needs a relook

Nowadays, the most popular phrases are skill formation and employability. There's nothing wrong with that. These are apparently innocent favourites which also contribute to social growth. Even innocent phrases can have ramifications, even for the purpose of social growth. Illustratively, skill formation would reference educational institutions. Educational institutions cannot just focus on 'skill formation' and 'employability'. Educational institutions must have as their priority training the mind, educating a person and making him a worthy member of society capable of contributing to overall growth. There is indeed a school of thought which argues that education requires as its end objectives character building, preparing for responsible citizenship and the like. Ever since the current system of university education with its segmented approach to degrees came into being, there has been a running debate on the objectives of education.

Mind training and general orientation towards learning are multi-layered processes. Liberal education is supposed to cater for them. It is difficult to conceive of a skilled person who is not a good human being, ethical and contributes to collective welfare.

Individual growth, by definition, is embedded in a social environment with sound values and norms. There is clearly not much debate on the issues outlined above. However, factoring in the economic context, including gaps and shifts in livelihood processes, becomes a poignant element in its own right. An illustration may be in order; consider India's rural sector. There are various processes and learning segments in agriculture which give the farmer a position of primacy in the country's economic framework.

However, a closer look at the lay of the land, both literally and methodologically, will show two things. The amount of land on the subcontinent is constant. Other variables are not. The number of people who rely on a livelihood from agriculture has exponentially increased. This means, the number of people deriving their livelihood from agriculture has grown to the extent that the land available per head has substantially 'receded'. Further even as the productivity of agriculture has grown, the revenues to the farmer per head have declined. This is, also, because the portion of land per head has become smaller with an increasing population.

That is not the end of the story. Additionally, there is the factor of the switch in crops, at times, from cereal to cash crops, and from cash crops to cereal. This means that, in certain cases, the total income from agricultural products has gone down for various reasons. Not the least of which would be the consequences of continuing cereal cultivation. Further, however, if the farmer switched to cash crops, it would be difficult to sustain. This is due to a lack of understanding of how to choose, cultivate and market cash crops.

The problem does not end there. There are other shifts because of the economic transition as cereal land value declines. There emerges an exponentially rising demand for tertiary sector earnings in rural areas, such as for carpenters, blacksmiths, electrical workers, and the



AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, FEW STATES HAVE SHOWN A TENDENCY OR PROPENSITY TO FRAME ECONOMIC POLICIES THAT WOULD HELP CREATE A SOCIAL FEEDBACK LOOP

(The author is an internationally acclaimed management consultant. The views expressed are personal)



like. This is different from the earlier dispensation. Then, it is not as if the blacksmith and the cobbler were not required. However, the rising demand for their numbers was consistent with the rise in population growth. If the income from the tertiary sector in the rural areas grew it still did not divert people, in terms of percentages, from agriculture in any significant way. In agriculture itself the market was not a prime determinant of switching from cash to cereal crops or vice versa. The market remained essentially local. The introduction of technology changed all that.

Technology caused a serious disruption of the economy and disturbed the economic viability and health of the existing socio-economic system of the villages. The present excessive serenading of technology virtues eschews taking a balanced view of the prerequisites and consequences of the technology factor.

To illustrate the point, consider a family of five young men living with an elderly gentleman (their father?). If three of them entered the wage market of the tertiary sector and two of them continued making their livelihood by tilling the land, even then there would be further land fragmentation. As a result, the return per head would go down since the 'elderly gentleman's' labour and talent would now be split among two

heads. This would be a generational issue.

Whether the output was cereal or cash crops would be a separate consideration. The one producing cash crops would likely be better off than the one producing cereals. So in effect, among the five young men in the family, there would be an income differential among those (three of the five) who earned from the tertiary sector and even between the two still tilling the land.

This economic reality is the outcome of social disturbances, which could affect the collective social fabric of the village's occupational profile. If allowed to run its course, the real need is economic policies at a local level. This would rationalise and smoothen the disruptions caused.

Unfortunately, at a local level, few states have shown a tendency or propensity to frame economic policies that would help create a social feedback loop. This will grow talent in each of the required income-generating avenues.

This is a serious matter that seems to be escaping the attention of policymakers at a time when it needs to be addressed. For a stable society, with proper wage-earning channels and comparable lifestyles arising therefrom, a requirement is viable and organic economic growth. Having a system so severely divided will create gaps in the economic framework

in general, not only in the hinterland but elsewhere. This could lead to manpower shortages in critical sectors of the economy and, among others, encourage population growth in urban areas. Social and economic equity require talent and compensation to be available in equal measure in all critical sectors of the nation's life.

As noted earlier it is not as if in the earlier dispensation the blacksmith and the cobbler were not required. It has also been analysed how, as the population grows and the income from the tertiary sector in the rural areas grows, fewer and fewer people take an interest in the tilling of the land. Further, even in the tilling of the land, cash crops are preferred over cereals.

It has further been argued that this is a serious distortion of the economy. It creates dissonance in the economic viability and health of the social fabric of the villages. Many professionals and policy makers seem to have missed the point, and employment promotion based on catchy slogans seems to confuse the issue.

To conclude, nobody grudges the emphasis on skill formation, but like everything else, overemphasis on skill formation to the neglect of fundamentals of life and distorted by profit oriented economics, is something which requires a good second and third look.

A film festival with its heart in the right place

The Habitat International Film Festival, an annual treat for the Delhi-NCR film lovers, was back in its full-fledged form this year

The 10-day Habitat International Film Festival (HIFF) was a visual treat for film-loving communities in Delhi and the NCR. Thanks to Sunit Tandon (Director, India Habitat Centre) and Vidyun Singh (Programme Head) along with her team to bring the award-winning, critically acclaimed films from Cannes, Berlin and other renowned film festivals.

This year, HIFF screened 60 films from 20 countries, with Australia as the focus country. From factual to fantastical, from surreal to sci-fi, this edition took place from March 17 to 26.

Tandon says, "The HIFF is back in its full-fledged form this year. We also bring a cutting-edge VR Section to the festival for the first time.

SANTANU GANGULY

(The writer is a Delhi-based film festival curator, freelance writer, filmmaker and producer)

Aspiring filmmakers will not want to miss the unique opportunity provided by Kieslowski Film School Documentary Workshop."

From Australia, six of the finest contemporary films of 2022 and 2023 have been screened with the opening film, *The Dreamlife of Georgie Stone*, showcasing the elliptical memories of the teen activist's historic fight for transgender rights; Ivan Sen's *Limbo* arrives fresh off the boat from its Berlinale 2023 premiere; others include *The Lonely Spirits Variety Hour*, *Sweet As*, and *Survival of Kindness*.

Filmmakers and editors from the Kieslowski Film School from Poland trained the young minds in a four-day documentary workshop. Grzegorz Paprzycki, an

acclaimed upcoming voice in contemporary Polish cinema and Kieslowski Film School alumni was one of the workshop trainers. A hands-on workshop, with live editing sessions, discussions and practical exercises designed to hone their skills as filmmakers was an added advantage for the local young filmmakers.

For the first time as part of the festival, cinema's latest innovation — VR and 360° video — was presented in partnership with the Goethe Institute. The Virtual Reality programme — a package of animation, short and documentary films — explores the relationship between the past and present. It also adds a whole new dimension to film watching for the audience.

Four films in the MUBI

Friday section that approach the anarchy of love and its expression across different eras — the classic *In The Mood For Love* by Wong Kar-wai, to the contemporary *Paris, 13th district* by Jacques Audiard and *The Worst Person in the World* by Joachim Trier, even the futuristic *Crimes of The Future* by David Cronenberg.

Eight biggest attraction at HIFF were: *Elvis*, the buzzing Austin Butler-starrer, Baz Luhrmann biopic that premiered at Cannes (and has won many awards subsequently); *Rheingold*, Fatih Akin's (Germany, Netherlands, Morocco, Mexico) high-octane adaptation of the swag-er and bombast of German rap star Xatar's 2015 autobiography '*All Or Nothing*'; winner of 16 awards and 51 nominations, including the much-coveted Golden Bear (Berlinale 2022) - Carla Simon's (Spain), *Alcarras*, a deeply intelligent and empathetic humane drama that engulfs you in the heat and dust and dysfunction created by market forces; *Perfect Number* - the return of veteran Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi and his search for philosophical answers in mathematical theories; the poignant *We are Still Here*, an anthology film about stories of indigenous heroes from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific; winner of the Best Screenplay at Cannes 2022, *Boy From Heaven*, takes us into the heart of a ruthless power struggle between Egypt's religious and political elites; the latest Berlinale awardee (2023), *The Survival of Kindness*, follows a black woman's escape from a cage in the middle of the desert to the city, recapture, and tragedy; and Oscar nominee '*EO*' by Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland) follows a donkey that encounters good and bad people, experiences joy and pain, exploring a vision of modern Europe.

Further enriching the feature line-up are some equally remarkable documentaries, shorts, and animation films. DOC NYC 2022 nominee *Closed Circuit* by Tel Inbar (Israel) is a documentary that captures the heart-pounding trauma of the 2016 terrorist attack in Tel Aviv's Saron Market; Winner of 'Best Documentary Feature' at The Roxbury International Film Festival and Filmocracy Fest, *Hostile* by UK filmmaker Sonita Gale explores the UK's complicated relationship with its migrant communities; Winner at the Warsaw Film Festival 2022, *Region of Heroes* by Artur Lerman (Ukraine) is the story of those who selflessly saved thousands of Ukrainians during the Russian occupation; winner of the Special Jury Award at Roxbury Film Festival and the International Humanitarian Award at Flickers' Rhode Island International Film Festival, *The Bengali* by Kavery Kaul (USA) is the story of a writer from Louisiana who embarks on a quest to India to look for her grandfather's descendants. Curated packages from Poland and Sri Lanka also embellished the festival.



# Russia arrests WSJ reporter for spying

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia's security service arrested an American reporter for The Wall Street Journal on espionage charges, the first time a US correspondent has been detained on spying accusations since the Cold War. The newspaper denied the allegations. Evan Gershkovich was detained in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg while allegedly trying to obtain classified information, the Federal Security Service, known by the acronym FSB, said Thursday. The service, which is the top domestic security agency and main successor to the Soviet-era KGB, alleged that Gershkovich "was acting on the US orders to collect information about the activities of one of the enterprises of the Russian military-industrial complex that constitutes a state secret." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Wednesday: "It is not about a suspicion, it is about the fact that he was caught red-handed."

"The Wall Street Journal vehemently denies the allegations from the FSB and seeks the immediate release of our trusted and dedicated reporter, Evan Gershkovich," the newspaper said. "We stand in solidarity with Evan and his family."

The arrest comes at a moment of bitter tensions between the West and Moscow over its war in Ukraine and as the Kremlin intensifies a crack-down on opposition activists, independent journalists and civil society groups. The sweeping campaign of repression is unprecedented since the Soviet era. Earlier this week, a Russian court convicted a father over social media posts critical of the war and sentenced him to two years in prison while his 13-year-old daughter was sent to an orphanage.

## Chinese State-sponsored hacking group highly active, says report

**Bangkok (AP):** A Chinese hacking group that is likely state-sponsored and has been linked previously to attacks on U.S. state government computers is still "highly active" and is focusing on a broad range of targets that may be of strategic interest to China's government and security services, a private American cyber-security firm said in a new report Thursday. The hacking group, which the report calls RedGolf, shares such close overlap with groups tracked by other security companies under the names APT41 and BARIUM that it is thought they are either the same or very closely affiliated, said Jon Condra, director of strategic and persistent threats for Insikt Group, the threat research division of Massachusetts-based cybersecurity company Recorded Future. Following up on previous reports of APT41 and BARIUM activities and monitoring the targets that were attacked, Insikt Group said it had identified a cluster of domains and infrastructure "highly likely used across multiple campaigns by RedGolf" over the past two years. "We believe this activity is likely being conducted for intelligence purposes rather than financial gain due to the overlaps with previously reported cyberespionage campaigns," Condra said in an emailed response to questions from The Associated Press.

Gershkovich is the first American reporter to be arrested on espionage charges in Russia since September 1986, when Nicholas Daniloff, a Moscow correspondent for US News and World Report, was arrested by the KGB. Daniloff was released without charge 20 days later in a swap for an employee of the Soviet Union's United Nations mission who was arrested by the FBI, also on spying charges.

At a hearing Thursday, a Moscow court quickly ruled to keep Gershkovich behind bars pending the investigation, according to the official Telegram channel of the capital's courts. Gershkovich, who covers Russia, Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations as a correspondent in The Wall Street Journal's Moscow bureau, could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted of

espionage. Prominent lawyers noted that past investigations into espionage cases in the past took a year to 18 months during which time he may be held with little contact with the outside world. The FSB noted that Gershkovich had accreditation from the Russian Foreign Ministry to work as a journalist, but ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Gershkovich was using his journalistic credentials as a cover for "activities that have nothing to do with journalism." Gershkovich speaks fluent Russian and had previously worked for the French agency Agence France-Presse and The New York Times. His last report from Moscow, published earlier this week, focused on the Russian economy's slowdown amid Western sanctions imposed when Russian troops invaded Ukraine last year.

## 'Russian spy operations weakened in Nordic nation'

**Helsinki (AP):** Expulsions of Russian intelligence officers and visa refusals have substantially weakened Moscow's intelligence operations in neighbouring Finland in the past year, the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service said Thursday. The intelligence agency, known by the abbreviation SUPO, said in a statement that Russian intelligence has been "squeezed" in the Nordic country because of the agency's ability to compromise spy operations in 2022.

"The Russian intelligence station (in Finland) shrank to about half of its former size last year," SUPO Director Antti Pelttari said, adding that the main reason for the decline were expulsions of suspected spies and visa refusals on the advice of his agency.

The falling number of intelligence officers and restrictions on travel across the Russian-Finland border amid Moscow's war in Ukraine have significantly undermined operating conditions for Russian spies in Finland, SUPO said.

It noted that operations under diplomatic cover have traditionally been the main instrument of Russian intelligence abroad, and Moscow was seeking to use, among other methods, cyberespionage to make up for the shortfall in human intelligence.

"While Russia is still seeking to station intelligence officers under diplomatic cover, it will have to find ways of compensating for the human intelligence shortfall, such as by increasingly adopting other forms of covert operation abroad," Pelttari said.

The agency said that Russia, China and "certain other countries" were the most active users of intelligence operations to acquire information for their own ends and against the interests of Finland. Finland, a nation of 5.5 million people, applied for NATO membership together with neighbouring Sweden in May.

It shares a 1,340-kilometer (832-mile) land border with Russia, the longest of any European Union member.

SUPO has earlier said that Finland's future NATO membership will make the Nordic country a more interesting target for Russian intelligence and influencing operations, and Moscow may seek to acquire NATO-related intelligence through its neighbour.

## Russia to keep missile test notices under Cold War-era deal

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia will continue to give the U.S. advance notice about its missile tests despite suspending the last remaining nuclear arms treaty between the two countries, a top Russian diplomat said Thursday.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov's statement reversed one he made Wednesday, when he said Moscow had halted all information exchanges with Washington envisioned under the 2011 New START nuclear pact, including missile test warnings.

But Russia intends to stick by its pledge last month to keep notifying the U.S. about missile tests in line with a 1988 U.S.-Soviet agreement, Ryabkov said. Russian President Vladimir Putin suspended the country's participation in the New START treaty last month, saying Russia could not U.S. inspections of its nuclear sites at a time when Washington and its NATO allies have openly declared Moscow's defeat in Ukraine as their goal.

Moscow emphasised at the time that it wasn't withdrawing from the pact altogether and would continue to respect the caps on nuclear weapons the treaty set. Earlier this week, the U.S. announced that Moscow and Washington have stopped sharing biannual nuclear weapons data as envisioned by New START. U.S. officials said. Washington had offered to continue providing the information after Putin suspended Russia's participation, but Moscow told Washington it would not share its own data.

## US backs int'l court for Russia's war in Ukraine

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The Biden administration is offering support for the creation of an international court to prosecute alleged crimes of aggression by Russia against Ukraine.

In comments this week, senior U.S. officials said the administration believes that would be the best way to hold Russia accountable for its year-old invasion. However, they also acknowledge that the prospects for a court to actually take custody of any Russian official for trial are slim. "The United States supports the development of a special tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine in the form of an internationalized court that is rooted in Ukraine's judicial system, with international elements," the State Department said in comments emailed to reporters. The officials said they envision a hybrid tribunal based on the Ukrainian justice system but with international components — similar to previous ad hoc war crimes courts set up for Cambodia, Chad, the Central African Republic and Bosnia — and likely based in The Hague, Netherlands. "This kind of model — an internationalized national court — will facilitate broader international support and demonstrate Ukraine's leadership in ensuring accountability for the crime of aggression," the State Department said. "It also builds upon the example of other successful justice mechanisms." The Hague will be home to the International Center for Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression, a Ukraine-focused investigations unit that is expected to be fully operational this summer. The center's offices and staff could be incorporated into whatever tribunal is eventually created, the U.S. officials said. The Hague also hosts the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice.

## Top UN court rejects Iranian bid to free assets frozen by US

**The Hague:** The United Nations' top court has rejected Tehran's legal bid to free up some USD 2 billion in Iranian central bank assets frozen by US authorities to be paid in compensation to victims of a 1983 bombing in Lebanon and other attacks linked to Iran. In a 10-5 majority ruling, the International Court of Justice said Thursday it did not have jurisdiction to rule on the Iranian claim linked to the central Markazi Bank. In a complex, 67-page judgment, the world court found that some other US moves to seize assets of Iran and Iranians in the United States breached a 1955 treaty between the countries and said they should negotiate compensation. If they fail to reach a number, they will have to return to the Hague-based court for a ruling. But the largest part of the case focused on Bank Markazi, and its frozen assets of USD 1.75 billion in bonds, plus accumulated interest, that are held in a Citibank account in New York. The court said that it did not have jurisdiction based on the 1955 Treaty of Amity.

## 'Huge win' for Russia as TikTok propaganda fails

AP ■ WASHINGTON

A year ago, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, TikTok started labelling accounts operated by Russian state propaganda agencies as a way to tell users they were being exposed to Kremlin disinformation. An analysis a year later shows the policy has been applied inconsistently. It ignores dozens of accounts with millions of followers. Even when used, labels have little impact on Russia's ability to exploit TikTok's powerful algorithms as part of its effort to shape public opinion about the war. Researchers at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a bipartisan, transatlantic non-profit operated by the German Marshall Fund that studies authoritarian disinformation, identified nearly 80 TikTok accounts operated by Russian state outlets like RT or Sputnik, or by individuals linked to them, including RT's editor-in-chief.

More than a third of the accounts were unlabelled, despite a labelling policy announced by TikTok a year ago. The labels, which appear in bold immediately below an account's name, read "Russia state-controlled media."

Clicking on the label brings up more information, including a description that "the government has control over the account's editorial content."

The accounts have spread pro-Russian propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine as well as false and misleading claims about the US and the international coalition that stands against Russia's war.

"US to hold biggest satanic gathering in history," claims one of the videos on Sputnik.

## Vatican: Pope's health condition improving

**Rome (AP):** Pope Francis rested well overnight and was "progressively improving" Thursday, the Vatican said, after he was hospitalised with a respiratory infection that has called into question his participation in Palm Sunday and upcoming Holy Week events. The 86-year-old pontiff, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, ate breakfast, read the newspapers and was working from his hospital room at Rome's Gemelli hospital, according to a statement from Vatican spokesman Matteo Brunni.

"Before lunch he went to the little chapel in the private apartment, where he gathered in prayer and received the Eucharist," the statement said. Francis was hospitalised Wednesday after having trouble breathing in recent days and was diagnosed with a respiratory infection that wasn't COVID-19.

The Vatican said he would remain for a few days of treatment; his audiences were cancelled through Friday.

Despite his absence, the Vatican was abuzz with activity Thursday: Two Vatican offices issued an historic statement repudiating the "Doctrine of Discovery," the legal theory backed by 15th century papal bulls that legitimised the colonial-era seizure of Native lands and form the basis of some property law today. And there was continued fallout over the sudden resignation of a founding member of the pope's sex abuse prevention board, with Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley pushing back against Rev. Hans Zollner's critiques in his remarkable resignation statement issued the previous day.

## China to SCO countries: End disputes through cooperation

PTI ■ BEIJING

China has called on SCO member states to bridge their differences through dialogue, resolutely tackle the forces of terrorism and jointly create a sound security environment for the economic recovery and social stability of all countries. Chinese State Councillor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong, who took part in Security Council Secretaries of the SCO Member States held in New Delhi on Wednesday via video link, said joint efforts are needed to foster a new regional security structure that is balanced, effective and sustainable. National Security Advisor Ajit Doval presided over the meeting.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) comprises China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India holds the presidency of the grouping for this year. Wang said it is important that member countries of the SCO bridge their differences through dialogue and resolve disputes through cooperation, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported. He asked the member states to resolutely con-



Wang Xiaohong

tain and tackle the forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism, and strengthen cooperation to combat transnational crime like telecom and internet fraud, online gambling, and drug trafficking. Wang said the SCO countries should deepen pragmatic cooperation in the fields of law enforcement and security, and jointly create a sound security environment for the economic recovery and social stability of all countries. He asked all countries to defuse the risks of external interference and safeguard their core interests, such as national sovereignty, territorial integrity and independently choosing development paths. Wang asked the member states to continue to engage in

positive interactions to promote a stable structure in war-torn Afghanistan.

Separately, the spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry, Senior Colonel Tan Kefei, told an online media briefing here on Thursday that a working group of the ministry recently visited India to participate in meetings among the international military cooperation departments under the defence ministries of the SCO member states. In mid-to-late March, the Chinese side also sent delegates to India to attend respectively the SCO Workshop on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and the SCO think-tank exchange on military health and medicine, and participated in the Expert Working Group (EWG) affiliated with the Meeting of the Council of Defence Ministers of the SCO Member States through a video link. During these meetings, the Chinese delegates had close and extensive communication with other participants, which profoundly enhanced the mutual trust and coordination among the parties, he was quoted as saying by the official website of the Chinese military.

## Ohana: 26/11 perpetrators should pay heavy price

**Jerusalem (PTI):** The planners of the "abominable" 2008 Mumbai terror attack should pay a heavy price for it, the Speaker of Israel's Parliament has said ahead of his maiden visit to India, asserting that the fight against terrorism is common concern for the two countries. Amir Ohana, a close confidante of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will travel to India for four days starting March 31, on his first official visit abroad after assuming office in December last year.

Stating that the menace of terrorism is a common concern, Ohana, a former Shin Bet (Israeli internal security agency) official, told PTI that the fight to counter it requires all the progressive countries to come together. Both India and Israel face the problem of terrorism, and the fight against it is a joint one, Ohana said.

"We all remember the abominable terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008 in which over 207 people were murdered, of which 178 were Indians. Among the foreigners who were murdered were unfortunately also Israelis and Jews who came to the Chabad house," Ohana pointed out.

"It was an attack not only on India but also on Jews and free people everywhere," the Knesset Speaker



said, adding that it was an attack on the shared values of India and Israel. "Whoever planned and sent the terrorists from the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba should pay a heavy price for it," he said.

"The attack on the Chabad house (in Mumbai) symbolises a common pain for India and Israel, but also our partnership in the uncompromising fight against terrorism," Ohana said.

The fight against terrorism is a necessity for all free countries, he added, and in particular for two countries like India and Israel. Shared values, concerns, pain and immense potential in the strategic partnership continue to strengthen Indo-Israeli ties, Ohana said.



Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is shown a 3-D printed model of an All Terrain Armoured Transport Walker from Star Wars, made by apprentices, during a visit to the UK Atomic Energy Authority, Culham Science Centre, for a discussion on energy security and net zero, in Abingdon, Englands on Thursday. AP/PTI

## Bahrain sentences 3 for questioning Islamic teachings

**Dubai (AP):** Prosecutors in the Arab Gulf nation of Bahrain on Thursday have handed down yearlong prison sentences to three people for debating Islamic theology in a series of blog posts and online videos. The three are part of a local cultural society called Tajdeed, Arabic for Renewal, that says it questions traditional Islamic scholarship and jurisprudence but not the religion itself. Critics, including prominent Shiite clerics in the kingdom, have accused the group of attacking the foundations of Islam and have waged a campaign of incitement against them.

The case has divided the majority Shiite community in Bahrain, which is ruled by a Sunni monarchy. The public prosecutor's office said the

three defendants were guilty of "infringing on the foundations of the Islamic faith" and insulting its prophets, in part by dismissing purported miracles as popular myths.

It did not name the defendants, but activists have identified them as Jalal al-Qassab and Redha Rajab, who were summoned to court, and Mohammed Rajab, who lives in Britain.

They are free on bail pending appeal. Islam, like other world religions, has a rich tradition of theological debate going back to its earliest days.

But in modern Muslim-majority countries both political and religious authorities often enforce a conservative orthodoxy, and reformers are censured and in some cases targeted with violence.

## Thailand uses helicopters to fight mountain wildfires

**Bangkok:** Thai authorities used helicopters Thursday to try to contain a fire that overnight engulfed two mountains on largely undeveloped forest land in a province northeast of the capital Bangkok. The fire broke out Wednesday night in Nakhon Nayok province, 114 kilometers (70 miles) northeast of Bangkok, but firefighters could not directly tackle it because the mountains are too steep to safely climb, especially in the darkness of night, provincial Governor Bancha Chaowarin told reporters.

"Apart from the wind's direction, I also have to look after the lives and safety of those conducting the operation. After reviewing the situation, since it is at a mountaintop, we had to retreat to standby and convene over what we can do," Bancha said late Wednesday night. PTI

## Ethnic conflict must be resolved to achieve prosperity: Lanka Prez

**Colombo (PTI):** President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Thursday said Sri Lanka's progress was hindered by the decades-long ethnic conflict involving the Tamil minority and underlined that the debt-trapped country should not miss its "last chance" to make a "decisive choice" and achieve prosperity. Sri Lanka has been hit hard by a catastrophic economic and humanitarian crisis, sparked by years of mismanagement and the raging pandemic.

In a keynote address "Economic Dialogue - IMF and Beyond," Wickremesinghe said it is essential to look beyond the IMF programme and focus on creating a prosperous society for the next generation. "Our task is not merely to stabilise the economy but to ensure growth, to grow in this new global economy, and to go ahead. These are



facts that we can't get away from," Wickremesinghe said.

The Sri Lankan President said the country's progress was hindered by ethnic issues, and added that if the country is to prosper, this issue must be resolved.

"Sri Lanka has missed an opportunity to regain its footing due to the ethnic crisis. This is the last chance for Sri Lanka to make a decisive choice and move forward, or risk falling back again," he asserted.



# Taliban terrorist attack in Pak kills 4 cops, injures 6

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

Taliban terrorists opened fire at a vehicle ferrying security forces in northwest Pakistan on Thursday, killing at least four policemen, including an officer, and wounding six others.

The terrorists attacked the police mobile van in Lakki Marwat district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. The vehicle was on its way to the Saddar police station when it came under the attack, police said.

Four policemen, including a deputy superintendent of police (DSP), were killed and six others were injured in the attack, they said, adding that Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa police chief Akhtar Hayat Khan has ordered an inquiry into the incident.

Lakki Marwat police spokesperson said the attack was launched in the early hours of Thursday, resulting in an exchange of fire between the police and the terrorists. During the gunfight, six policemen were injured, he said. A police statement said that the militants were equipped with advanced and



heavy weaponry, the Dawn newspaper reported.

“The police were on alert and the attackers had to flee when the police returned fire,” it said. The terrorists fled while taking advantage of the darkness, it added. The outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed the attack in a statement, the report said. Condemning the incident, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said that the sacrifices of police officers in the war against terrorism were unforgettable and prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured persons. “Police are performing magnificent duties against the terrorist as the first line of defence.

Elimination of terrorism is a must for Pakistan’s survival and development,” Shehbaz said in a statement.

The latest attack comes as terrorism-related incidents are surging in Pakistan. Over the past few months, the law and order situation in the country — especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan has worsened — with terrorist groups conducting attacks with near impunity across the country. Since the talks with the Taliban group broke down in November, the TTP has intensified its attacks, particularly targeting the police.

In January, a powerful suicide blast in a mosque in Peshawar Police Lines killed 84 people and injured many others. According to statistics released by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, an Islamabad-based think-tank, January 2023 remained one of the deadliest months since July 2018, as 134 people lost their lives — a 139 per cent spike — and 254 received injuries in at least 44 militant attacks across the country, the report said.

# Pakistan court strikes down sedition law

PTI ■ LAHORE

A high court in Pakistan on Thursday struck down a colonial-era sedition law that criminalised criticism of the federal and provincial governments, terming it inconsistent with the Constitution.

Justice Shahid Karim of the Lahore High Court (LHC) annulled Section 124-A of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) dealing with sedition, the Dawn newspaper reported.

Justice Karim pronounced the verdict in response to identical petitions seeking to annul the sedition law, the paper said.

One of the petitions, filed by a citizen named Haroon Farooq, which was identical to all other pleas urged the court to declare Section 124-A of the PPC as “ultra-vires in terms of Article 8 of the Constitution being inconsistent with and in derogation of fundamental rights provided under Article 9, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 19, 19A of the Constitution”.

The law states: “Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Federal or Provincial

Government established by law shall be punished with imprisonment for life to which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or with fine.”

It was argued in the petition that the sedition act was enacted in 1860 which is a sign of British colonial rule, Geo News reported. The petition added that this law was used for slaves under which a case can be registered at anyone’s request.

It was stated in the petition that the Constitution of Pakistan gives every citizen the right to freedom of expression but still, Section 124-A is imposed for making speeches against the rulers.

According to the petition, the law has been recklessly used in Pakistan as a tool of exploitation to curb the right to free speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19 of the Constitution.

The petition said the law was serving as “a notorious tool for the suppression of dissent, free speech and criticism in free and independent Pakistan”. Over the past few years, the petition argued, various politicians, journalists and activists had been booked under Section 124-A.

# Three more Khalistan supporters held in Aus

**Melbourne (PTI):** Australian police have arrested three more people in connection with two incidents of brawl that broke out between Khalistan activists and pro-India demonstrators here in late January, police said on Thursday. The alleged incidents happened during the so-called ‘Punjab independence referendum’ where two fights broke out between the two groups which injured several people on January 29, Victoria Police said in a statement.

Apparently, flag poles were used by the several men as weapons which caused physical injuries to multiple victims, the statement said.

The US-based Sikhs for Justice, the group spearheading the non-binding referendum, is a banned organisation in India.

The three arrested include a 23-year-old man charged with affray and unlawful assault while a 36-year-old and 39-year-old have been charged with affray and violent disorder, the police said.

The identities of the arrested men have not been disclosed. Earlier, two men aged 34 and 39 were arrested and issued a penalty notice for riotous behaviour.

All those charged this week have been bailed to appear at the Melbourne Magistrates’ Court on August 8. Further investigation is underway and police are making enquiries to identify and apprehend any further alleged offenders from the day, the statement added. India has asked the Australian government to curb the anti-India activities of the Khalistani separatists and frequent attacks on the Hindu temples in the country. Narendra Modi raised concerns over the recent attacks on temples in Australia as well as pro-Khalistan activities there with his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese during their meeting in New Delhi this month.



Britain's King Charles III and Camilla, Queen Consort are welcomed by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his wife Elke Buedenbender in front of Bellevue Palace for a state banquet in Berlin, Germany

AP/PTI

# King Charles III addresses German parl

**Berlin (AP):** King Charles III became the first monarch to address Germany’s parliament, the Bundestag, on Thursday as part of a high-profile visit by the U.K. head of state aimed at bolstering ties between the two European powers. Speaking to lawmakers and other dignitaries in the packed lower house, Charles stressed the close bonds between the United Kingdom and Germany going back centuries, including his own family links to the royal House of Hannover, and the present-day economic, scientific, cultural and military cooperation between the two countries.

Charles noted that London and Berlin have provided considerable aid to Ukraine in its efforts to fend off Russia’s invasion, a point that will appeal to German government officials

more used to hearing how their country isn’t doing enough to help Kyiv. “Germany’s decision to provide so much military support to Ukraine is extremely brave, important and welcome,” Charles said.

Speaking mostly in fluent German, he noted how the intertwined history of the two nations could be seen in the home of the Bundestag itself. The restoration in the 1990s of the former Reichstag building, that was heavily damaged during World War II, was capped with a glass cupola designed by British architect Norman Foster intended as a symbol of transparency and accountability. “From here the citizens can actually watch their politicians work,” Charles said. “Democracy in action.”

The 74-year-old largely

trod on safe territory, making gentle jokes about soccer rivalry, national humour and mutual admiration for each other’s cultures — from the Beatles to Kraftwerk and from Brahms to Byron.

Charles briefly touched on the grim history of Nazism and WWII. Charles and Camilla, the queen consort, will visit Hamburg on Friday to pay respects at a memorial to the Kindertransporte, or children’s transports, which saw more than 10,000 Jewish children rescued from Nazi Germany 85 years ago. They will also commemorate those killed in the Allied bombing of Hamburg in 1943.

“Heeding the lessons of the past is our sacred responsibility, but it can only be fully discharged through a commitment to our shared future,” he

said. “Together we must be vigilant against threats to our values and freedoms, and resolute in our determination to confront them. Together we must strive for the security, prosperity and well-being that our people deserve.”

When Charles finished his speech, the lawmakers rose for a long, standing ovation, something rarely seen in Germany’s parliament. Charles is on his inaugural foreign trip since becoming king. He and Camilla arrived in Berlin on Wednesday. Crowds of well-wishers and Germany’s head of state, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, greeted the couple at the capital’s iconic Brandenburg Gate. They later attended a banquet in their honour at the presidential palace.

# Taiwan’s prez speaks to her island’s safety on US stop

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Taiwan’s president addressed members of New York’s Taiwanese community in a US stopover on her way to Central America as she seeks to rally allies of the self-ruled island amid tensions with China.

Pro-China demonstrators waving the Chinese flag rallied against President Tsai Ing-wen’s events in New York. One protester held a sign whose slogan declared the Taiwanese leader a “big traitor of China.”

In a speech on Wednesday night to fellow Taiwanese in New York, Tsai thanked the United States for its security assistance and urged Taiwanese unity. “The safer Taiwan is, the safer the world will be,” she said, and pledged Taiwan would work with its democratic partners to remain on the path of democracy.

Tsai arrived in New York on

Wednesday and was expected to spend Thursday in closed events in the city. Taiwan is carefully calibrating Tsai’s stops in the United States and forgoing official meetings with senior US leaders in Washington in an effort to limit the scale of China’s response.

On Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning restated China’s furious objections to any interactions between Tsai and US officials. “China firmly opposes any form of official interaction between the US and Taiwan,” Mao told reporters at a daily briefing in Beijing. “China will continue to closely follow the situation and resolutely safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity.” A senior Chinese diplomat in Washington, embassy charge d’affaires Xu Xueyuan, pointed to an expected meeting between Tsai and House

Speaker Kevin McCarthy, likely next week. The meeting would have significant repercussions overall and a “serious, serious, serious” impact on US-China relations, she said in a virtual session with reporters on Wednesday.

While the US terms relations with Taiwan as unofficial, it remains the island’s chief source of military hardware and cooperation. US law requires Washington to treat all threats to the island as matters of “grave concern,” but does not explicitly say whether the US would commit troops.

Sen Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he hopes any US officials meeting unofficially with the president convey that Taiwan is “strong and unequivocal.”

# NATO, US forces join Romania-led Black Sea military drills

**Mahmudia (Romania):** Romania’s navy led multinational military drills in the Black Sea region Thursday that brought together US and NATO troops as the 30-nation alliance looks to boost security on its southeastern flank amid Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine.

The sea and air exercises are part of a series of drills known as Sea Shield 2023 that involve some 3,400 military personnel from 12 NATO member countries and some partner nations.

Romania’s navy said Thursday’s drills in the Mahmudia region of the Danube Delta, which flows into the Black Sea, would demonstrate how the combined forces would “neutralise an enemy air landing” in an area adjacent to such a waterway. More than 30

naval ships, 14 aircraft and 15 “fast intervention” boats and other patrol vessels are taking part in Sea Shield 2023, which started March 20 and runs until April 2. Anti-explosive divers have participated in drills, as have chemical, biological, and nuclear defence specialists.

In response to Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, NATO bolstered its presence on Europe’s eastern flank by sending additional multinational battlegroups to alliance members Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. Romania, which joined NATO in 2004, has played an increasingly large role in the alliance throughout the war, including hosting a NATO meeting of foreign ministers in November. **AP**

# UAE leader designates his son as crown prince

AP ■ DUBAI

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the president of the United Arab Emirates, appointed his eldest son Khaled as crown prince of Abu Dhabi on Wednesday, placing him as next in line to take over as the leader of the federation.

The state-run WAM news agency announced the appointment of Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as crown prince late Wednesday, without providing further details. After Sheikh Mohammed, who is commonly known as MBZ, ascended to the presidency last year, rumors swirled about whether he would make one of his brothers his heir.

In that case, the front-runners would have been Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed, the pow-



erful national security chief, Sheikh Mansour, the owner of the Manchester City football club, or the foreign minister, Sheikh Abdullah.

Sheikh Khaled was appointed chairman of the country’s intelligence agency in 2016. The United Arab Emirates, a close U.S. ally, is best known as the home of Dubai, a major international hub for business and travel.

Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the first president of the UAE and the driving force

behind its creation, ruled from 1971 until his death in 2004. He appointed his eldest son Khalifa as his successor and MBZ as deputy crown prince.

Sheikh Mohammed has been the nation’s de facto leader since Sheikh Khalifa suffered a stroke in 2014. Sheikh Khalifa died eight years later, in May 2022. During Sheikh Mohammed’s rule, the UAE cultivated close ties with neighboring Saudi Arabia, initially joining it in its war against Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels before exiting the conflict years later. The UAE has sought to project military power across the region as it has opposed the rise of Islamist groups. In 2020, the UAE normalized relations with Israel in the first of the so-called Abraham Accords, followed by Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.

# Bolsonaro returns to Brazil after 3-month stint in Florida

**Brasilia (AP):** Former President Jair Bolsonaro arrived back in Brazil on Thursday after a three-month stay in Florida, seeking a new role on the political scene as authorities in the capital braced for the far-right populist’s return. Hundreds of supporters dressed in yellow and green chanted for him as they waited in the capital city of Brasilia, where the far-right leader is the subject of several investigations. The District’s security secretariat mobilised hundreds of police officers and the Esplanade of Ministries was closed to prevent gatherings. Bolsonaro left Brazil just before the end of his presidential term. In so doing, he broke with tradition by declining to hand the presidential sash to his successor, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who won the October election with the narrowest finish since Brazil’s return to democracy over three decades earlier. While in the US, Bolsonaro mostly kept a low profile, although he delivered several speeches to Brazilian expats and conservatives, including at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Maryland.

# Kenya Opp in fresh protests amid warning by Government

**Nairobi (AP):** Kenya’s opposition leader Raila Odinga has led thousands of protesters in a third round of anti-government demonstrations on Thursday as the government warned that no more violent protests would be tolerated. The opposition is blaming President William Ruto for the rising cost of living and alleges he illegally manipulated his election in last year’s polls, although the Supreme Court has upheld the validity of the election results.

Odinga says the protests will only stop after the government lowers the cost of basic food items and allows access to the 2022 election results from the electoral commission’s main computers.

Ruto, who on Thursday arrived back in the country from a four-day trip in Belgium and Germany, has remained adamant that the ongoing protests are illegal. Interior Minister Kithure Kindiki, who is in charge of the police, on Wednesday said no more violent protests would be tolerated, stating “we must halt the descent.” US Senator Chris Coons on Wednesday met Kenya’s Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua for what the Kenyan leader described as

“strengthening ties.”

Coons also met opposition leader Odinga for talks about “upholding the constitution and the rule of law,” according to the Kenyan politician. Police have been using force to disperse protesters and so far four people are reported to have died since the protests started last week. Odinga said the protests will be held twice every week until the opposition’s demands are met. A governor from Odinga’s stronghold of Kisumu county had banned protests in the area but quickly rescinded and local government officials joined in Thursday’s demonstrations.

The protests have sparked counter violence against opposition targets. Last Monday saw the destruction of private property at former President Uhuru Kenyatta’s family farm outside the capital, Odinga’s gas cylinder manufacturing firm near the central business district and the burning of shops in Odinga’s stronghold of Kibera slums. The independent Policing Oversight Authority is investigating four incidents of police shooting and killing protesters as well as allegations that police failed to respond to a report on the damaging of private property.

# Mexico investigates 8 over deadly fire at migrant facility

**Ciudad Juarez (Mexico):** Mexican authorities said on Wednesday that eight employees or officials are being investigated for possible misconduct at a migrant detention centre where a fire killed 39 detained men. Anger and frustration in the northern border city of Ciudad Juarez boiled over as hundreds of migrants walked to a US border gate hoping to make a mass crossing. Mexican officials appeared to place blame for the deaths in the fire late on Monday largely on private, subcontracted security guards at the detention centre in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Video showed guards hurrying away from the smoky fire apparently without trying to free detainees. No charges were announced, but authorities said they would seek at least four arrest warrants later in the day, including one for a migrant who was part of what they described as a small group that started the fire. They said a migrant also damaged a security camera inside the cell where the fire occurred.

Five of those under investigation for possible misconduct are private security guards, two



Migrants cross the Rio Grande river into the United States from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on Wednesday.

AP/PTI

are federal immigration agents and one is a Chihuahua state officer, federal Public Safety Secretary Rosa Icela Rodriguez said. The investigation has centred on the fact that guards appeared to make no effort to open cell doors for the detained men — almost all from Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela and El Salvador — before smoke filled the room in a matter of seconds.

The deaths caused frustration, and may have played a role in a mass march late Wednesday afternoon by hundreds of migrants, who began walking

toward a US border crossing in the belief that American authorities would let them through. Adding to anger over the deaths was pent-up frustration of migrants who have spent weeks trying to make appointments on a US cellphone app to file asylum claims. Rumors spread among the migrants that they might be let in into the US. Jorman Colon, a 30-year-old Venezuelan migrant, walked hand-in-hand with his 9-year-old daughter, saying he had heard on social media that acquaintances had gotten through.

# Covid during pregnancy may increase obesity risk in children: Study

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Children born to mothers who contract COVID-19 during pregnancy may be more likely to develop obesity, according to a new study.

More than 100 million COVID-19 cases have been reported in the United States since 2019, and there is limited information on the long-term health effects of the infection. Pregnant women make up 9 per cent of reproductive-aged women with COVID-19, which exposes millions of babies to maternal infection during foetal development over the next five years.

“Our findings suggest that children exposed in utero to maternal COVID-19 have an altered growth pattern in early life that may increase their risk of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease over time,” said Lindsay T. Fourman, MD, of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, Mass.

“There is still a lot of research needed to understand the effects of COVID-19 on

pregnant women and their children,” she said.

The researchers studied 150 infants born to mothers who had COVID-19 during pregnancy and found they had lower birth weight followed by greater weight gain in the first year of life as compared to 130 babies whose mothers did not have a prenatal infection. These changes have been associated with an increased risk for obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in childhood and beyond.

“Our findings emphasise the importance of long-term follow-up of children exposed in utero to maternal COVID-19 infection, as well as the widespread implementation of COVID-19 prevention strategies among pregnant individuals,” said Andrea G Edlow, MD, of Massachusetts General Hospital. “Larger studies with longer follow-up duration are needed to confirm these associations,” she said. The study was published in the Endocrine Society’s Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Me.



# Free trade pact talks with UK continuing; trade stands on its own legs, says Goyal

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Amid a diplomatic row following protests by secessionist groups near the Indian mission in London, Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal on Thursday said talks on a Free Trade Agreement with the UK are continuing.

Talks are “going on very well” with the UK, Goyal said, adding, “trade stands on its own legs”.

The Union minister, however, made it clear that India will take into consideration a respect for her sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will not tolerate any interference in her Indian affairs.

India's Ministry of External Affairs summoned the senior-most British diplomat in New Delhi on a Sunday evening recently, over reports of some Khalistani elements pulling down the Indian flag at the Indian high commission in London during a protest. India has also responded by proposing or undertaking several actions, like reducing security at the British mission and constructing a public toilet there.

When asked about the impact of the ongoing events on the trade agreement, Goyal seemed to suggest that negotiations continue.

“I can assure you that talks are going



on very well with the UK, Canada, with the EU countries, we are also in dialogue with Israel,” he told reporters here.

Goyal said there was no deadline to have an FTA with the UK, but a former PM of the country has announced an aspiration to conclude before Diwali of 2022.

“...We are back at the negotiating table, both sides are discussing at the official level,” he said.

Goyal said there is a high interest for FTAs with India shown by many countries, and discussions are on at a “fren-zied pace” with many countries, and quipped that he is not left with bandwidth

to discuss such agreements.

Meanwhile, Goyal also said that talks are also on with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), following a request from four ministers of the group-ing to meet the Indian commerce and industries minister.

“They have assured me that they will be coming with very attractive propos-als in terms of opening up services and a deeper understanding of India's own concerns around our patent laws and the need to protect our domestic industry,” Goyal said.

On a query on rupee trade with part-ners, and if the same is being pushed with

G-20 countries during the ongoing meetings of the grouping's trade and investment group in the financial cap-ital, Goyal said this subject is more of a bilateral subject which is anchored by the RBI and the Ministry of Finance.

He added that many countries have evinced interest in having such an arrangement with India.

Goyal attended a dinner meeting with the 100 delegates attending the G-20 meeting in the financial capital on Wednesday evening, and is also address-ing the delegates at the closing event later on Thursday.

Meanwhile, when asked about Parli-ament passing important bills sans any discussions and the treasury bench-es taking to protests at a time when the government is responsible for running the Houses, Goyal shot back saying the Opposition is using the platform to cast baseless and wild allegations against those in the government under the influence of forces inimical to India's interests.

“Sometimes in life, propriety, self respect and the nation's interest overrides everything else. And this is one such occasion when we cannot allow the nation's independence, our sovereignty, our respect to be tarnished by any indi-vidual especially on foreign soil,” he said.

# Adani pins hopes on 20% growth to repay \$23 bn debt

Met bankers, investors from Singapore to US in last 3 weeks

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Embattled Adani Group is looking at a 20 per cent growth in earnings across busi-nesses spanning from sea ports to airports, edible oil and com-modities, energy, cement and data centres, to repay about USD 23 billion of debt over the next 3-4 years in a comeback strategy, sources said.

Adani group executives have met bankers, bond holders, analysts and investors from Singapore to the US in the last three weeks to address stake-holders' concerns in the after-math of a damning US short seller report that ripped off USD 135 billion in market value of listed companies of the con-glomerate.

Sources aware of the devel-opment said Adani at these roadshows presented the growth story of the sprawling conglom-erate that is refocusing its ener-gies on higher efficiency in business and bringing down debt rather than breakneck speed expansion.



The group saw a 20 per cent growth in EBITDA or earnings before interest, taxes, deprecia-tion, and amortization, helping it pare debt. Between 2013 and 2022, earnings grew by 22 per cent year-on-year. And a 20 per cent growth will help bring down the debt-to-EBITDA ratio from 7.6 per cent to 3 per cent by 2025, they said.

Debt/EBITDA is a ratio measuring the amount of in-come generated and fund avail-able to pay down debt before covering interest, taxes, depre-ciation, and amortization expen-ses. Debt/EBITDA measures a company's ability to pay off its incurred debt. A high ratio

result could indicate a company has a too-heavy debt load.

Sources said the company management told investors that once the revenue increases, the debt ratio will come down.

Adani group's current EBITDA stands at Rs 61,200 crore while its net debt stood at Rs 1.89 lakh crore (about USD 23 billion).

Since then, it has repaid USD 500 million of debt and will repay most of the remaining debt in the next 3-4 years using earnings growth coming from cement, renewables, solar, ports and roads businesses, they said citing management's conversa-tion at the roadshows.



# ‘Domestic stainless steel demand will continue to see healthy growth till FY25’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The domestic stainless steel demand is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9 per cent till 2024-25 financial year, accord-ing to Crisil Ratings.

The domestic demand for stainless steel was at 4 million tonnes (MT) in fiscal 2021-2022, the ratings agency said in a report on Thursday.

“Domestic demand for stainless steel is projected to log a healthy compound annual growth rate of 9 per cent in the three fiscals through 2025, double the 4.5 per cent pace of the past five fiscals,” the Crisil Ratings report said.

The demand will be driven by increasing adoption of stain-less steel in railways which is a focus area for government infra-structure spending, and rising application in the automobile and construction sectors.

The demand growth, in turn, will spur capacity addi-tions.

However, the credit profiles of players are expected to remain comfortable, given stable profit levels and healthier balance sheets.

“Adoption of stainless steel is increasing because of its high-

er durability and lower mainte-nance. Demand from railways is expected to more than triple by fiscal 2025 and constitute 20 per cent of incremental demand for the metal over fiscal 2023-2025.

“To be sure, the recent Union Budget has doubled the amount earmarked for manu-facturing railway coaches to Rs 47,500 crore for fiscal 2024,” said Ankit Hakhu, Director, CRISIL Ratings.

Demand from other major sectors with application of stain-less steel, including consumer goods (45 per cent of demand) and process industry (25 per cent), is also expected to grow at a healthy clip of 7-9 per cent over the next 3-5 fiscals given high-er consumer spends and recov-ery in consumption.

Strong demand prospects, coupled with the absence of any major supply addition in the last three fiscals, have set the stage for capital expenditure (capex).

Domestic manufacturers are undertaking capex to add 1 MT of steel melting capacity by fiscal 2024.

The industry added 1.3 MT between fiscal 2009 and 2012, post which utilisation and prof-itability issues led to a phase of stress build-up.

# Direct selling industry's growth declines 5.3% to ₹19,020 cr in FY22

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian direct selling industry's growth has declined 5.3 per cent to Rs 19,020 crore in FY22, impacted by a devastating second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a report. Nearly 60 per cent of the direct selling companies reported negative growth due to multiple chal-lenges faced by them during the pandemic, said an Annual Survey Report released by the industry body Indian Direct Selling Association (IDSA).

The direct selling industry stood at Rs 18,067 crore in the FY 2021, reporting a 7.7 per cent growth. “The industry is correct-ing itself from the COVID peri-od and returning to pre-COVID times,” it said.

IDSA believes that India has a “vast untapped market poten-tial” for the industry and the ris-

ing middle class, estimated to comprise more than 25 crore, “has higher disposable income and is more receptive to pur-chasing premium products”.

Now, technology-driven offerings, especially in the well-ness and personal care space, have been witnessing great trac-tion among consumers.

In FY22, the industry has also added more numbers of direct sellers, taking the total count to around 84 lakhs — reg-istering a growth of 6 per cent from 79 lakh over the previous year, the report said.

According to IDSA, there has been a steady growth in the number of Active Direct Sellers in India over the last four years.

However, it also said that there is a change in direct seller's profiles as the person who had engaged with direct selling companies during the pandem-ic period for additional income



have started focusing on their core job and the focus on direct selling seems to have reduced.

“As per the survey, we have noticed a reduction in direct sellers considering direct selling as part of their extra income from 41 per cent in FY21 to 21 per cent in FY22,” it said.

Moreover, products like sanitisers, masks and other hygiene, and sanitising products saw a degrowth post-pandem-ic. Companies handling these

products have taken a hit in this category, it added. IDSA Chair-man Rajat Banerji said India has been seen as a market that holds tremendous potential for direct selling, reflected in the consistent and sustained growth of a CAGR of 13 per cent over the past half a decade.

“The Direct Selling industry has been the one major indus-try vertical that has consistent-ly provided sustainable self-employment and micro-entre-

# Govt expected to invite bids for ₹1.50-lakh crore transmission projects in 18 months: Sterlite Power

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The industry is expecting the government to invite bids for power transmission infrastruc-ture projects worth Rs 1.50 lakh crore in the next 18 months, Sterlite Power Transmission said on Thursday. In December, the government had launched a plan with investment opportu-nities of about Rs 2.44 lakh crore for building a transmission sys-tem for evacuating 500 gigawatts (GW) of non-fossil based ener-gy by 2030.

“We expect that nearly 60-65 per cent of these projects totalling Rs 150,000 crore will come up for bidding in next 18



months since completion of all processes and then construction of projects will take another 4-5 years,” said a senior Sterlite Power Transmission official.

The industry expects the government to invite bids under tariff based competitive bid-ding (TBCB) for power trans-mission infrastructure projects as it accelerates creation of new power lines and green energy corridors to integrate rising share of renewable power, the

official said. As one of India's leading transmission compa-nies, Sterlite Power Transmission is keen to participate in the bid-ding process to increase its TBCB market share beyond the current 31 per cent level.

The push to build transmis-sion infrastructure will have a significant, multi-year impact on the order book for all the busi-ness lines of the company, the official said, adding his compa-ny's revenues rose 37 per cent year on year (y-o-y) to Rs 4,784 crore for the nine-month peri-od ended December 2022.

“The EBIDTA during this period rose 8 per cent y-o-y to nearly Rs 950 crore while the

cash position has improved 4.8 times to Rs 1,047 crore y-o-y for the corresponding period,” the official said.

Sterlite Power Transmission recently commissioned a major green energy corridor project, Lakadia-Vadodara Transmission Project Limited (LVTPL) in Gujarat with a capacity of 5,000 MW. With 812 towers spanning seven districts in Gujarat, this transmission corridor is also one of the largest power transmission corridors built in India till date. It has also concluded the sale of its Khargone Transmission Ltd (KTL) asset to IndiGrid at an enterprise value of around Rs 1,497.5 crore.

# Srinivasan to lead Wipro's India, Southeast Asia biz

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

IT services company Wipro on Thursday announced that Badri Srinivasan will lead its India and Southeast Asia busi-nesses. Wipro, in a statement, said Srinivasan will be taking over the leadership of these two regions to drive deeper syner-gies, facilitate sharing of best practices, deliver consistent and exceptional client experiences, and scale Wipro's ability to cap-italise on the emerging growth opportunities.

“Wipro Limited announced that Badri Srinivasan will lead the India and Southeast Asia businesses under the company's APMEA (Asia Pacific, Middle

East, India and Africa) Strategic Market Unit,” the statement said. Srinivasan joined Wipro in January 2022 as the Managing Director for Southeast Asia, where he led the consolidation of strategic transformational engagements with clients while strengthening the company's talent base and brand presence.

The initiatives under his leadership helped accelerate Wipro's business growth and revenue expansion across key markets in the region.

Badri is a member of the Board of Wipro's strategic sub-sidiaries and acquired entities in Asia (Capco, Rizing and Desig-nit), and a member of Wipro's Global Leadership Team.

# Ajay Banga poised to become World Bank chief unopposed

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Indian-American business leader Ajay Banga is poised to become the next President of the World Bank after the nomina-tion period closed and no coun-try proposed an alternate candi-date for the prestigious post.

In February, President Joe Biden announced that the US would be nominating Banga to lead the World Bank because he is “well equipped” to lead the global institution at “this critical moment in history.”

The World Bank on Wed-nesday closed a month-long window for nominations for its next president, with no alterna-tives announced to 63-year-old Banga. The former Mastercard Inc. Chief, Banga currently serves as Vice Chairman at General Atlantic.

The bank's board is expect-ed to announce the next steps in its selection process on Thurs-day, with a view to confirming a new leader by early May.

“Over the next few months, you will see the World Bank undergo an important transi-tion. We expect that Ajay Banga - President Biden's nominee - will be elected President of the World Bank,” US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told law-



makers at a Congressional hear-ing on Wednesday. “He will be charged with accelerating our progress to evolve the institution to better address 21st century challenges. This evolution will help the Bank deliver on its vital poverty alleviation and develop-ment goals,” Yellen said.

If confirmed, Banga would become the first-ever Indian-American and Sikh-American to head either of the two top international financial institu-tions: the International Mone-tary Fund and the World Bank.

Banga is expected to replace the current World Bank presi-dent David Malpass, who will step down in June, nearly a year before his term is scheduled to expire. Malpass faced strong criticism over the bank's com-mitment to climate action and over his personal views on cli-mate change.

Last week, reports emerged that China sounded doubtful about backing Banga, saying it

is “open” to supporting “other potential candidates” based on merit. Banga, however, received overwhelming support from major countries across the world, including India.

Following Banga's nomi-nation, he has travelled to sev-eral countries for support.

A coalition of 55 advocates, academics, executives, lumina-ries, and former government officials — including four Nobel Laureates — wrote an open let-ter to welcome and support Banga's nomination as the next President of the World Bank.

Raised in India, Banga has a unique perspective on the opportunities and challenges facing developing countries and how the World Bank can deliver on its ambitious agenda to reduce poverty and expand prosperity, President Biden had said. He has also worked closely with Vice President Harris as the Co-Chair of the Partnership for Central America.

He was awarded the Padma Shri in 2016. Banga is expected to take over the reins of the anti-poverty lender at a crucial time, with the US and Western nations pitching for reforms to focus on addressing a slew of wide-ranging global issues like climate change.

# Current savings, investment rates can't propel GDP to 8% growth orbit: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Clawing the economy back to an 8 per cent growth path will require bringing savings and investment rates closer to 35 per cent on a sustained basis, which were 30.2 and 29.6 per cent, respectively, in FY22, according to a report.

As per India Ratings, a large part of investments will have to be in infrastructure, which can

help revive private investments by easing supply constraints and offset the weakening of external demand due to global headwinds.

Higher investments will have to be accompanied by higher domestic savings to keep the savings-investments gap under check. The big missing link now is the government's focus on stepped-up capital expenditure on infrastructure,



but not enough commensurate steps to encourage savings, the report noted.

This is because, this govern-ment, in its bid to simplify the

# Accelerated implementation of reforms to speed up India's growth: World Bank

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's potential growth could benefit from accelerated implementation of an already ambitious reform agenda, the World Bank said in a new report that warns that the global econ-omy faces the prospect of a “lost decade” on account of nearly all drivers of economic progress in recent history fading.

The report titled ‘Falling Long-Term Growth Prospects: Trends, Expectations, and Pol-icies’ said the global economy's ‘speed limit’ — the maximum

rate of long-term growth with-out causing inflation — is set to decline to its lowest point in three decades by 2030.

“In the decade before COVID-19, a global slowdown in productivity — which is essential for income growth and higher wages — was already adding to concerns about long-term economic prospects,” the report said.

The report further said, adding that investment growth is weakening, global labour force is growing sluggishly, human capital reversals have

been triggered by the coron-avirus pandemic, and growth in international trade is barely matching GDP growth.

“The result could be a lost decade in the making — not just for some countries or regions as has occurred in the past — but for the whole world. Without a big and broad policy push to rejuvenate it, the global average potential GDP growth rate... Is expected to fall to a three-decade low of 2.2 per cent a year between now and 2030, down from 2.6 per cent in 2011-21,” it said.

The analysis shows that global potential GDP growth can be boosted by as much as 0.7 percentage points — to an annual average rate of 2.9 per cent — if countries adopt sustainable, growth-oriented policies that would convert an expected slow-down into an acceleration of global potential GDP growth.

While India has been grow-ing at a faster pace than peers, its ‘growth could benefit from accelerated implementation of an already ambitious reform agenda,” it said.

**BRIEF**

**EMERGING HYDROGEN ECONOMY. FINEST ALTERNATIVE TO POLLUTING FOSSIL FUEL: PROF GANESH**

A safe solution to problems caused by pollution and an alternative to fossil fuels like petroleum and coal was 'hydrogen,' and India has now launched its mission to produce, use, and export it, Krishna N Ganesh, Professor and Director, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Tirupati, said on Wednesday.

While delivering the Inaugural Address at the 4 th Dr Paarivendhar Research Colloquium (DPRC) 2023 at SRM Institute of Science and Technology Kattankulathur, Prof Ganesh said only science-based solutions could find alternatives to problems of pollution caused by fossil fuels, whose resource was also fast depleting.

Prof Ganesh, who was bestowed with Padma Shri this year, said addressing energy-related challenges with the current availability of global infrastructure was one of the main problems today and science alone could design effective strategies and new technologies to find solutions and ensure sustainable development.



# CIRSTEA UPSETS SABALENKA IN MIAMI



AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS

World number two Aryna Sabalenka suffered a shock straight sets Miami Open quarter-final loss to resurgent Romanian Sorana Cirstea, who reached her first WTA 1000 semi-final in a decade. Cirstea, ranked 74th in the world, triumphed 6-4, 6-4 against the Australian Open champion to secure her first WTA 1000 semi-final since Toronto in 2013. The 32-year-old is enjoying

an upturn in form since taking on Swede Thomas Johansson as her coach, reaching the quarter-finals at Indian Wells and beating world number four Caroline Garcia of France in both legs of the "Sunshine Swing." In her first meeting with the big-serving Belarusian, Cirstea looked comfortable and composed as she broke Sabalenka's first service game. The 24-year-old from Minsk, who is now based in Miami, broke back to make it 4-4 but Cirstea swiftly got back in

front and held to win take the opening set with her opponent looking visibly irritated and frustrated as she laboured in the early afternoon heat and humidity. Again, Cirstea broke on her opponent's first serve game and then at 5-4 up, she survived two break points before a superb ace down the middle gave her match point, which she converted when Sabalenka went long. The veteran reacted with a broad smile and a fist pump and conceded she was surprised by the victory.

"I am a bit speechless," she said. "I came out hoping that it would be a really tough match. I tried to hold my ground. I'm very happy with my performance today, it is a bit unexpected to be honest." "I had confidence in my game. I knew I was playing well, and I knew that if I come out swinging and being aggressive, I would have my chance," she added. "I'm very happy to get the win against Aryna, because she has been playing great lately.

She's probably one of the two or three best at the moment. So this gives me a lot of confidence." Sabalenka, whose year began with victory at the Australia Open before she reached the final in Indian Wells, losing to Elena Rybakina, said she had struggled with the heat. "It definitely wasn't my best match. I was struggling a lot with the conditions, like heat. I felt like balls were flying too much and I couldn't find control," she said. "I was just trying to do my

best 'til the last point. I just couldn't adjust to these conditions unfortunately." "The first three months of the year were fantastic for me. I'm just proud of the consistency of my game and I have to keep working, keep improving," said the Belarusian. In the last four, Cirstea will face the winner of the quarter-final between Ekaterina Alexandrova and Petra Kvitova which was postponed due to heavy rain and will be moved to Thursday.

## Sinner into Miami semis after beating Ruusuvuori

AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS

Italy's Jannik Sinner eased into the semi-finals of the Miami Open after a comfortable 6-3, 6-1 win over Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori on Wednesday. The game was delayed for two hours by rain with Sinner 2-0 up in the second set but the stoppage did nothing to change the momentum of the match.

In the last four, Sinner will face the winner of the other quarter-final between world number one Carlos Alcaraz and American Taylor Fritz which was postponed due to heavy rain on Wednesday and is expected to be played on Thursday.

The 23-year-old Ruusuvuori was the first Finnish player to feature in a Masters 1000 quarter-final since Jarkko Nieminen a decade ago, but he came up against Sinner in determined mood.

The 21-year-old from South Tyrol has not dropped a set so far in Miami and he coped well with the first break point of the match, holding in the fourth game.

The Italian, who has not lost to a player



outside the top 50 this year, never looked back after that brief threat, breaking the Finn's serve for 3-2 and again to win the set.

An early break in the second further established his control of the match and while the rain made him wait for victory, he needed just 74 minutes on court to finish off the 54th-ranked Finn.

"I just won the important points, especially in the first set, and I am happy with my level today," said Sinner.

"After the rain, the condition was different and I think I adapted well," he added.

With his 20-4 record, Sinner could face another semi-final meeting with Alcaraz who beat him in the last four in Indian Wells earlier this month.

While Sinner said he would see both the Spaniard and Fritz as challenging opponents, it is clear he would relish the chance of revenge against Alcaraz, who also beat the Italian en route to the US Open title in September.

"I would be happy to play again him again because I look forward to these kind of matches. I feel like he makes me a better player," he said.

## FIFA strips Indonesia of Under-20 WC

AP ■ LAUSANNE

FIFA announced on Wednesday it had removed Indonesia as hosts of this year's under-20 World Cup amid political turmoil over Israel's participation.

The decision was made "due to the current circumstances", FIFA said in a statement without specifying details.

"A new host will be announced as soon as possible, with the dates of the tournament currently remaining unchanged," it added.

The draw for 24-team tournament beginning on May 20 was due to be held on Friday in Bali, but FIFA cancelled the event last week without offering a reason or setting a new date.

Indonesia and Israel do not have formal diplomatic relations, and support for the Palestinian cause in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation runs high, fuelling local opposition to hosting the Israeli team.

As well as Bali's governor calling for Israel to be kicked out of the tournament, around a hundred conservative Muslim demonstrators marched in the capital Jakarta this month to protest its participation.

Indonesian officials earlier this week said any failure to host the tournament could result in sanctions that would leave them out of other international football competitions including qualifiers for the World Cup and the Asian Cup.

They said losing the tournament could result in trillions of rupiah (1 trillion rupiah = \$66 mn) in economic losses.

FIFA added that potential sanctions against the Indonesian football association (PSSI) "may also be decided at a later stage".

## Barca thrash Roma, Arsenal beat Bayern to reach Women's CL semis

AP ■ BARCELONA

Barcelona booked their place in the Women's Champions League semi-finals by thrashing Roma 5-1 on Wednesday as Arsenal came from behind to knock out Bayern Munich 2-1 on aggregate thanks to a 2-0 win at the Emirates.

Tournament favourites Barca had been held to a slender 1-0 advantage from the first leg in the Italian capital last week.

But last season's runners-up stormed into a 3-0 lead before half-time in front of 55,000 at the Camp Nou.

Swedish international Fridolina Rolfo struck twice in the first half either side of Mapi Leon's spectacular long-range effort.

Asisat Oshoala netted from close range immediately after the break and Patri Guijarro headed home the fifth from a corner.

Annamaria Serturini pulled one back for Roma against a Barcelona side who have won 100 percent of their games in the Spanish league and only suffered one defeat all season, against Bayern in the group phase.

Barca have now reached the semi-finals



in five consecutive seasons and will face either defending champions Lyon or Chelsea in the last four.

"We can't hide that our aspirations are at the max," said Barcelona coach Jonatan Giraldez.

"Olympique (Lyon) and Chelsea are the best in Europe, it's a reality and it will be difficult, but it's true that playing the second leg at home gives us a feeling of strength."

Arsenal overcame a 1-0 first leg defeat to reach the last four for the first time in 10 years in front of a record crowd of over 20,000 for a Women's Champions League game in England.

Despite the absence of injured star forwards Vivianne Miedema and Beth Mead, the Gunners blew Bayern away in the first half.

Frida Maanum levelled the tie with a blistering strike in off the underside of the crossbar on 20 minutes.

Moments later Arsenal led as Stina Blackstenius had the simple task of rounding off a brilliant team move with a header into an unguarded goal from Katie McCabe's cross.



## Australian F1 chief keen on night race

AP ■ MELBOURNE

The chairman of the Australian Grand Prix has said he is keen on the event changing to a nighttime race but admitted on Thursday it would take years of planning.

A handful of F1 races currently held under artificial lights, including Singapore and Abu Dhabi, saw global TV ratings boosted by the spectacle, Paul Little said.

"I'd love to not rule out a night Grand Prix," he told the Melbourne Herald Sun newspaper. "I just think if we could make that work, that would be amazing. An amazing spectacle but also great for reaching the rest of the F1 audience."

A night race would be more favourable for European and US audiences.

"There is no question more people would watch it if they could see it live at a reasonable hour on the other side of the world," Little said.

"So I think we will continue to explore the viability and the capability of doing that."

Sunday's grand prix, the third of the season, is due to start in Melbourne's Albert Park at 3 pm, but has previously been run as late as 5 pm.

While it could be held at night, getting the infrastructure in place to make it happen would not be easy, given the expense, Little said.

"As it is today, we couldn't run a night race even if we wanted one without a significant amount of work to put lighting in place."

Little also suggested the Melbourne race could be extended to five or six days of events and entertainment in the future, compared to its current official four-day programme. "I do see it growing," he said. "I think it will continue to get bigger than just a couple of days of motor racing for sure."

The Australian Grand Prix is traditionally one of the drivers' favourites and also one of the most popular, with nearly 420,000 spectators pouring into Albert Park last year -- a record for the country.

### MAX STILL FEELING EFFECTS

Double world champion Max Verstappen admitted Thursday he still wasn't fully over a stomach bug that hit him hard in Saudi Arabia, but is confident Red Bull will get a result in Australia this weekend.

The 25-year-old Dutchman delayed his arrival into Jeddah two weeks ago due to illness and missed the media day before lining up for the first practice session on Friday.

He battled through the discomfort to finish the race second behind team-mate Sergio Perez after his victory in the season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix.

## Spurs managing director Paratici handed worldwide FIFA ban

AP ■ LONDON

Tottenham managing director of football Fabio Paratici has been given a worldwide ban by FIFA that could end his time with the north London club.

Paratici was handed a 30-month ban from Italian football in January after his former club Juventus were found guilty of false accounting.

The 50-year-old Italian was sporting director and managing director at Juventus before joining Tottenham in June 2021.

His initial ban only applied to his homeland, meaning he was free to continue working at Tottenham, where he was involved in Sunday's departure of manager Antonio Conte and the start of the search for a new boss.

But a statement issued by FIFA on Wednesday threatened to cut short his spell at Tottenham, with the global governing body saying: "FIFA can confirm



that following a request by the Italian FA (FIGC), the chairperson of FIFA disciplinary committee has decided to extend the sanctions imposed by FIGC on several football officials to have worldwide effect."

Both Paratici and Juventus have appealed against the initial decision.

Tottenham published a lengthy interview with Paratici on Tuesday in which he insist-

ed Conte's exit was "the right decision for everyone". Paratici said the club were "focused" on backing interim head coach Cristian Stellini as they try to qualify for the Champions League by securing a top-four finish in the Premier League.

Tottenham said they are seeking further clarification from FIFA as they believe Paratici's ban would not kick in until his appeal has been heard.

## Hamilton says he will be with Mercedes till 'last days'



AP ■ MELBOURNE

Seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton on Thursday emphatically put to bed any concerns that he wanted to leave Mercedes, saying he planned to be the team "till my last days".

The Briton's disappointment after the season-opening grand prix in Bahrain, where he finished a distant fifth in his under-performing W14 car, led to claims that he was set to seek a move elsewhere.

He insisted that was not the case after a more competitive

race in Saudi Arabia a fortnight ago. And to make it crystal clear, the 38-year-old said ahead of the Australian Grand Prix that he wanted to finish his career with the once all-conquering Silver Arrows.

"I feel amazing about it (the future), I continue to feel very, very much at home, it's a family," he said in Melbourne of remaining with a team that has been his home for a decade.

"I see myself being with Mercedes till my last days."

"If you look at the legends, Sir Stirling Moss was with Mercedes till the end of his days, and that's been the dream for me, to one day have that. I mean, I have that, so just continue on with that, continue to build with the brand."

Hamilton's first race for Mercedes was in Melbourne in 2013, and he has since delivered them an unprecedented 82 wins and 77 pole positions.

## Man Utd fans would be 'backbone' of Zilliacus' proposed takeover

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Thomas Zilliacus said in an interview published on Thursday that Manchester United supporters would be at the centre of his proposed takeover of the Premier League club, with a say on major issues such as ground redevelopment and squad building.

The Finnish businessman recently joined the race to buy United from the Glazer family, who announced in November they were considering selling the 20-time English champions.

The 69-year-old Zilliacus, who founded investment company Mobile FutureWorks, is the third potential buyer to go public with his interest in the club.

Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim

Bin Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jaber Al Thani and British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe have also thrown their hats into the ring.

Both parties made second bids last week.

US hedge fund Elliott Investment Management, which sold AC Milan for \$1.3 billion last year, has reportedly made a bid for a minority stake in the club.

No figures have been revealed by the Raine Group, which is handling the offers on behalf of the Glazers, but one or more of the initial bids is understood to be in the region of £4.5 billion (\$5.5 billion).

The Glazers have reportedly put a price tag of £6 billion on the three-time Champions League winners.

Zilliacus, said to be a United sup-



porter, favours a model in which his consortium would buy the club and then sell shares to supporters worldwide.

"It (United) was there long before all these people who are bidding for it were born and it will be here long after all these people who are bidding for it have passed away," he told the I newspaper.

"The backbone of that institution is the fans and in that respect it's hugely important the fans are at the centre of the decisions."

United fans have spent years complaining about the Glazers, even breaking into Old Trafford to force the postponement of a match against Liverpool in 2021 in protest at the Americans' unpopular reign.

Zilliacus said if his bid is chosen, fans would be given a say on major

issues such as potential redevelopment of Old Trafford and squad building, but not team selection.

Although he is a latecomer in the takeover battle, Zilliacus is adamant his investment group should be considered a serious contender.

"I have been doing business all my life. I have started companies, bought companies, sold companies so I have a global network and I have done this on a global scale — first with the largest phone company in the world, Nokia, then with my own group," he said.

"I have a network that spans the globe of people who want to participate in interesting ventures, and this certainly is one."

"To put together financing for something like this — and it is a big sum — is something I'm used to."



# IPL TURNS ‘SWEET 16’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The never-ending speculations about Mahendra Singh Dhoni's impending 'last dance', Virat Kohli's endless pursuit of an elusive silverware and Rohit Sharma's customary nonchalance are things that make the IPL starting Friday a heady cocktail of cricket and entertainment.

Megastars Dhoni, Kohli and Rohit have been the IPL's driving force in the past 15 seasons, getting the cricket crazy Indian fans hooked on the event for nearly two months every year.

As it enters the 16th season, innovations introduced in the form of potential game changer like the 'Impact Player' rule, DRS on wides and waist-high no balls, and two broadcasting giants locked in an ugly war of TV vs Digital' act as ingredients garnishing the mouth-watering dish, which will be devoured by millions for more than 50 days.

However, the product will remain the driving force and players the main stakeholders, as the likes of Dhoni, Kohli and Rohit set the narratives for their respective franchises with amazing fan bases.

Nearing 42, Dhoni has defied the law of diminishing returns when it comes to his manic following among CSK fans, who thronged the Chepauk to see their 'Thala' hit towering sixes at his spiritual home.

They say it will be his last year in the 'canary yellow' jersey, but when it comes to MSD, never say never. Even Rohit agrees with that, and won't be surprised if his 'captain' continues playing till 45.

Having finished outside the play-offs in 2022, Dhoni would like to equal Mumbai Indians' record with five titles, and he knows how to get the best out of the resources available at his disposal.

He will have Ben Stokes in his roster to give him the firepower in batting — in powerplay and at the back-end.

Devon Conway and Rituraj Gaikwad both understand the grammar of IPL cricket and Ambati Rayudu with the willow and Deepak

## CSK, MI remain premier contenders as RCB eye fresh start



Chahar with the white Kookaburra have all been there and done that.

CSK have never been a grooming school. There it's more about the finished product or those in whom the skipper sees the potential, like he saw in Simarjeet Singh last year, or someone like Matheesa Pathirana, who could be an 'Impact Player' if the CSK begin with three foreigners. Stokes, Moeen Ali and Conway look sure-shot starters as of now.

For Rohit, it will be a season in which he would like to sing the redemption song. Rohit has a casual exterior but scratch the surface, and

he can be as intense as anybody, and being the most successful skipper in the history of IPL, losing isn't an option. Before last year, Rohit never knew what it feels to be the wooden spooner. This season however, Mumbai Indians appear to be the team to beat, at least on paper.

A lot will depend on the skipper's own batting form and the two marquee men in Ishan Kishan and the world's No. 1 T20 batter Suryakumar Yadav, who would like to brush off the three first-ball ducks against Australia recently as an aberration in an otherwise sterling journey.

Jofra Archer's presence does boost the pace attack, but Jasprit Bumrah's absence, to some extent, nullifies the advantage.

But what MI is doing is to prepare a team for the next five years with young guns like Dewald Brevis, Tim David, Cameron Green, Tilak Verma, Hrithik Shokeen and Kumar Kartikeya set to serve them for the longest time. This core will be a formidable one in the years to come.

Just like Dhoni and Rohit, Kohli has landed up in every IPL with fire in his belly, but the rub of the green hasn't gone his way.

He has had a 973-run season, in 2016, something that will be difficult to surpass even in these day and age where the shelf life of records is too less. He has played a few finals but, as far as winning the title is concerned, the IPL has had a fickle relationship with one of India's greatest batters. He is no longer the skipper and is probably in the best mental phase that he has been in the past three to four years.

The hunger is intact, but the desperation isn't there. The swagger remains, but the aggression is no longer there to be found.

With Michael Bracewell, Glenn Maxwell and Dinesh Karthik ready to do the heavy-lifting, Kohli will be free to play his own game and also help skipper Faf du Plessis in putting his best foot forward.

This season holds special significance for Hardik Pandya. Having led Gujarat Titans to title triumph in only their inaugural year, the 16th IPL will be a platform for Pandya to soar higher and higher with bigger ambitions.

With coach Ashish Nehra for company, he would want the Rashid Khans, Mohammed Shamis and the Shubman Gill to maintain the tempo of last year from start to finish. An encore would certainly make him Rohit's heir apparent in the ODI format post the World Cup.

The only tactical shift is the absence of Lockie Ferguson and the jury is still out on whether trading him to bring in Shivam Mavi was a good choice or not. For Aiden Markram, it will be an onerous task to lift a perennially under-performing Sunrisers Hyderabad.

However, the composition is better compared to previous years with talented Indian players like Mayank Agarwal, Rahul Tripathi and Abhishek Sharma in their ranks. Glenn Phillips and Harry Brook are among some top overseas batting recruits.

However, bowling remains a worry with Umran Malik, now well studied by analysts, and Bhuvneshwar Kumar past his prime. A lot will depend on whether SRH are able to use their fourth foreign player as per conditions. There is Marco Jansen with his left-arm seamers and Adil Rashid with his wrist spinners.

Punjab Kings under Shikhar Dhawan is another team that has never believed in continuity and never got results since their runners-up finish in 2014.

They have kept on changing captains, unceremoniously dumping coaches after one bad season, and the team never had any stability. This time they have got Sam Curran in excess of USD 2 million dollars.

A good start is key but not getting Liam Livingstone (injury),

Kagiso Rabada (national duty) in the first couple of games could upset the team's tempo.

Save Arshdeep Singh, the Indian pace unit lacks quality and the PBKS could again be out of the play-off race. The team simply doesn't inspire confidence and the composition indicates lack of proper homework.

KL Rahul is having a nightmare 2023 and a good IPL can raise his profile which has been on a downward spiral despite him being a top performer in the league. Rahul's captaincy has been devoid of any tangible improvisation and his style of run gathering is archaic.

LSG have a balanced team and in Gautam Gambhir a tactician par excellence, one who could safely be called the non-playing captain. The presence of utility players like Krunal Pandya, Deepak Hooda and Ayush Badoni in the middle-order adds a lot of depth, while Mark Wood's 150 clik thunderbolts will be a nightmare for the opposition.

Nicholas Pooran, who was paid an astronomical Rs 16 crore, would look to justify that billing after a forgettable last season with SRH.

When it comes to remote-control captaincy, there can't be a better example than KKR head coach Chandrakant Pandit, who will have to do all the planning and plotting on behalf of Nitish Rana, who will be leading a side that isn't looking very strong in the absence of regular skipper Shreyas Iyer.

In fact, Andre Russell and Sunil Narine's form will dictate how far KKR progress.

Ditto for Delhi Capitals, who will find it difficult to have anyone get remotely close to Rishabh Pant's impact, even though David Warner wouldn't mind winning a second IPL trophy.

Amid all the chaos in some teams, Rajasthan Royals look the most sorted outfit. The world's most dangerous T20 hitter Jos Buttler, wily wrist spinner Yuzvendra Chahal, and the best cricketing brain, R Ashwin, will look to ensure that the legend of skipper Sanju Samson grows exponentially.

# Its Dhoni vs Hardik in IPL 2023 opener Vice-captaincy is reward of my hard work: Patel



PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Hardik Pandya's youthful leadership Htemplate will meet its match in Mahendra Singh Dhoni's time-tested improvisations as defending champions Gujarat Titans clash with eternal title contenders Chennai Super Kings in the Indian Premier League opener here on Friday.

The 2022 was Pandya's first year as an IPL captain and despite his flamboyance on and off the field, he did invoke a certain sense of calm in Titans' campaign that had the an identical start to finish tempo, unmatched by any other team.

With Shubman Gill in the form of his life, Rashid Khan not losing one bit of his consistency and Pandya himself having his worth weight in gold, Gujarat are once again the team to beat.

David Miller's absence from the opener due to national duty will reduce some

middle-order muscle but Rahul Tewatia, who has improved by leaps and bounds in recent years, could compensate for the temporary miss.

Kane Williamson might not be most sought after in this format but in low-scoring games on difficult surfaces, he could still be the man to watch out for.

Pandya has never shied away from admitting that he has learnt the ropes of leadership from Dhoni, who has always been his 'Mentor'.

But at 42, playing from IPL to IPL, Dhoni knows the template of IPL success only too well. There have been blips here and there, like last time when they failed to qualify for the play-offs but even with shut eyes, one can vouch that there was no fault in planning but the execution wasn't on expected lines.

On Friday, as the 16th edition starts, it will be very different from earlier ones as 12

players per side will take part in the pitched battle at the Motera Stadium with the 'Impact Player' rule coming into play for the first time.

Dhoni, who manoeuvres his resources having put in a lot of thought into his actions, might well make himself the 'Impact Player' if need be during chases.

That for sure won't happen in the first few games as both teams try to make optimal use of the rule.

For CSK, the presence of Ben Stokes is sure to make the opposition wary but to Gujarat Titans' delight, the England Test captain perhaps won't bowl at least in the initial phase of the tournament.

That makes him an ideal candidate as 'Impact Player' depending on whether the team bats first or second and accordingly Dhoni can think of playing three foreigners instead of four.

Devon Conway, Stokes and Moeen Ali at this point look the non-negotiable three starters in the playing eleven.

A lot will depend on how well Ravindra Jadeja, Ambati Rayudu and Dhoni himself perform with willow as the Indian pace bowling unit of Deepak Chahar and Simarjeet Singh will have their task cut out.

How well Dhoni can use either spinner Mahesh Theeksana or slinger Matheesa Pathirana will also go a long way establishing a pattern in selections.

As far as GT is concerned, there is one strategic decision which has been baffling and that is release of tearaway quick Lockie Ferguson and bringing in Shivam Mavi. However Alazarri Joseph's presence is a bit reassuring in this format.

Save Mohammed Shami, the only other pacer of repute is the skipper himself. Yash Dayal had a good first season hasn't been in great form in Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy with only 2 wickets from 6 games but to be fair, he was coming back from injury. Pradeep Sangwan and Mohit Sharma are both experienced campaigners but they are now well past their prime.

The other cause of worry for GT will be keeper's slot. While Wriddhiman Saha was decent as an opener last year, they have a better T20 batter in Kona Bharat this time round, who incidentally bats in the top order in the shortest format.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Axar Patel is excited about his new role as Delhi Capitals vice-captain, terming the responsibility entrusted upon him as a reward for all the hardwork he has put in for the franchise over past few seasons.

"In my opinion, if you have gotten this role that means you are growing as a senior player. It's like getting a reward for all that you've done for the team. I'm excited about this role," the lanky all-rounder said in a video posted on DC's twitter handle.

## ‘IPL-16 wonderful opportunity for Bharat to showcase talent’

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Former national selection committee chairman MSK Prasad says the IPL-16 is a "wonderful opportunity" for wicketkeeper KS Bharat to showcase his talent in white-ball cricket and stake a claim for India selection.

"Bharat is a Test cricketer and now he has an opportunity to showcase his talent in white-ball cricket. So, it will be a wonderful opportunity for him to do that," Prasad said of the Andhra stumper, who made his Test debut in the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia.

The wicketkeeper, however, came in for some criticism over his not being able to make big contributions with the bat.

Prasad, a former India player, said in an interaction, "He (Bharat) is there in a good fran-

"Our team is mostly the same, we have the same players from the last 3-4 years. We know our players well and that will be an important point."

Axar will be deputy to Australian David Warner, who has been named as DC skipper for this season in place of Rishabh Pant, who is currently undergoing rehabilitation following a horrific car accident in December.

Axar said that he would provide full support to new skipper Warner.

"David is a talented player. I will provide him with an atmosphere where he can make



best use of his abilities. It's a different feeling altogether when you join DC Camp. It's been 3-4 years with the franchise now and it feels like home," Axar said.

DC will start their campaign with an away game against Lucknow Super Giants on April 1 before returning to their home base to play defending champions Gujarat Titans on April 4.

"We are playing here at Kotla after so long. I feel it will be really important. We will have our fans here and I'm sure the fans would be excited to cheer for us," Axar said.

## IPL beckons Northeast as Guwahati gears up for 2 matches

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

The Northeast is all set to debut as an Indian Premier League (IPL) host for the first time since the marquee tournament started, with two Rajasthan Royals' 'home' games scheduled in Assam's Guwahati next month.

The Assam Cricket Association (ACA) Stadium has been designated as one of the 'home' venues for RR, which will take on the Punjab Kings on April 5 and Delhi Capitals on April 8.

"We were allotted two IPL matches of RR in 2020. But, the matches couldn't happen due to the outbreak of COVID-19. We are happy two games have been scheduled here this year," ACA secretary Tridib Konwar said.

He said preparations are in full swing, and ACA is working in close coordination with the Rajasthan Royals team.

"We urge the cricket lovers of Assam as well as the entire Northeast to come and watch the matches. Rajasthan Royals has already started online ticketing for the games," Konwar said. The Jaipur-based franchise had earlier partnered with the association for a cricket academy, which is now functional at the ACA Stadium.

Devajit Saikia, joint secretary of the BCCI, said there are a lot of aspiring cricketers who cannot make it to the national side due to tough competition, and the IPL is a good opportunity for them. All eyes will be on local boy Riyan Parag, who plays for the Rajasthan Royals, during the two matches.

# Sindhu, Srikanth enter quarterfinals of Madrid Spain Masters

PTI ■ MADRID

Indian shuttlers PV Sindhu and Kidambi Srikanth moved to the singles quarterfinals of the Madrid Spain Masters badminton tournament with straight game wins here on Thursday. Two-time Olympic medallist, Sindhu dispatched Putri Kusuma Wardani of Indonesia 21-16, 21-14 in a little over half an hour to enter her first quarterfinal in 2023.

World No. 21 Srikanth, on the other hand, pulled off a 21-15, 21-12 second round win over compatriot B Sai Praneeth.

Second seed Sindhu has been struggling for form this season since returning to action following a long injury lay off. It is the first time in 2023 that the 27-year-old former world champion has crossed the second round.

Sindhu, who has dropped out of the top 10 for the first time since November 2016, will take on 25-year-old Danish Mia Blichfeldt in the last eight stage of the Super 300 tournament.

While World No. 21 Srikanth, seeded fifth, has a tough contest ahead of him as the former world No. 1 is pitted against top seed Kenta Nishimoto of Japan in the quarterfinals.

Nishimoto was handed a walkover by France's Arnaud



Merkle in their second round contest. Kiran George and Priyanshu Rajawat crashed out of the men's singles event after suffering second round defeats.

While George went down to Denmark's Magnus Johannesen 17-21, 12-21 in 31 minutes, Rajat was outplayed 14-21, 15-21 by eight seed Toma Junior Popov of France. Later in the day, Aakarshi Kashyap, Ashmita Chaliha Malvika Bansod and Sameer Verma will play their second round matches.

The men's and women's doubles pair of MR Arjun and Dhruv Kapila and Sikki Reddy and Arathi Sara Sunil will also be in action.

## Hazlewood to miss initial stage of IPL, Maxwell uncertain for RCB's opener

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Royal Challengers Bangalore Rast bowler Josh Hazlewood is set to miss the initial stages of the Indian Premier League beginning in Ahmedabad on Friday. According to a report in cricket.Com.Au, Ha?zlewood is, however, hopeful of playing a part in the later stages of the T20 tournament.

The 32-year-old is currently recovering from an Achilles problem which kept him out of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in India. Hazlewood will consult Cricket Australia's medical staff



before deciding on his participation in the IPL, the report said.

In another big development, all-rounder Glenn Maxwell, who missed Australia's final two ODIs against India earlier this month, is also doubtful for RCB's opening game against Mumbai Indians on April 2 in Bengaluru as he is yet to recover from a leg injury.