

**OPINION 6**  
BRINGING THE  
METAVERSE TO LIFE

**WORLD 9**  
WILL BAN US COMPANIES FROM  
TRADING WITH CHINA: VIVEK

**MONEY 10**  
INDIA'S RUSSIAN OIL IMPORTS MORE  
THAN IRAQ, SAUDI PUT TOGETHER

NEW DELHI, MONDAY MARCH 6, 2023; PAGES 12 ₹3



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## CAPSULE

### DELHI BUDGET SESSION FROM MARCH 17

**New Delhi:** Delhi Assembly's Budget Session will be convened from March 17 and will be presented on March 21, officials said on Sunday. This will be the first time since AAP came to power in Delhi in 2015 that the budget will not be presented by senior party leader and former deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, who held the finance portfolio. **P3**

### K'TAKA CONG CALLS FOR BANDH ON MAR 9

**Tumakuru:** The Karnataka Congress has called for a two-hour long bandh on March 9, as part of its fight against alleged corruption by ruling BJP, following the recovery of over ₹8 crore cash from its MLA Madal Virupakshappa's son Prashanth Kumar M.V. by Lokayukta, in an apparent bribery case. Announcing the bandh from 9 to 11 AM that day, Karnataka Congress president D K Shivakumar on Sunday said, schools, colleges, transport and health services will not be disturbed.

### 12 INDIANS STRANDED IN LIBYA RESCUED

**New Delhi:** A joint effort of the National Commission for Minorities, Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Embassy in Tunisia helped rescue 12 Indian workers who were stranded in Libya for the past two months. They were illegally taken to Libya from Punjab by an agent who promised them lucrative jobs, good salary and a happy life. A statement released by the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) informed that after they were taken to Libya, they were offered jobs in private companies without any salary and kept as bonded labour.



falling, and possibly even lower in real terms," said the former JNU Professor. Echoing the sentiments, Nagesh Kumar, Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), said per capita incomes have increased in real terms and they do reflect rising prosperity. "However, the point to be noted is that per capita income is an average income of Indians. The averages mask the rising inequalities. Rising concentration of incomes at the high end means incomes of those at the lower rung of the income ladder may not be changing much," he said.

As per the NSO data, the per capita income dipped during the Covid period, both in real and nominal terms. However, it has picked up in 2021-22 and 2022-23. Former director of premier economic research institute NIPFP Pinaki Chakraborty said as per the World Development Indicator data base, average growth of India's per-capita income in real term for the period from 2014 to 2019 was 5.6 per cent per annum.

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## India's personal income doubled since 2014-15

NSO data good news but uneven income distribution remains challenge, say Economic experts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's per capita income in nominal terms doubled to Rs 1,72,000 since 2014-15 when the Narendra Modi-led NDA came to power but uneven income distribution remains a challenge, say economic experts.

As per the National Statistical Office (NSO), the annual per capita (net national income) at current prices is estimated at ₹1,72,000 in 2022-23, up from ₹86,647 in 2014-15, suggesting an increase of about 99 per cent. In real terms (constant prices), the per capita income has increased by about 35 per cent from ₹72,805 in 2014-15 to ₹98,118 in 2022-23.

"You are looking at GDP in current prices, but if you account for inflation, the increase is much less," said noted development economist Jayati Ghosh on doubling of per capita income in nominal terms.

She further said distribution is critical. "Most of this increase has accrued to the top 10 per cent of the population. By contrast, median wages are

## Opp protects each other from graft charges, says BJP

DEEPAK KUMAR UPRETI ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Sunday lashed out at Opposition leaders over their allegation of misuse of probe agencies against them. These parties believe that corruption is their right in power, the BJP said, adding that many of them face corruption charges.

BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said while the BJP stands for the nation's progress, Opposition parties protect "each other from graft charges." During the current era of 'Azadi Ka Amrit Kaal', Trivedi said he was reminded of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's slogan that "self-rule is our birthright" and then took a swipe at opposition leaders, saying they seem to believe that "corruption is their right in power".

Eight Opposition leaders' joint letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the issue makes it clear that they are trying to intimidate probe agencies, he said. The BJP leader said their letter is akin to a thief crying hoarse against police. **cy.**

Continued on Page 2

## 8 OPP PARTIES WRITE TO PM ACCUSING CENTRE OF ABUSING POWER

# 'India transitioned from democracy to autocracy'

## Congress not among signatories of letter

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia's arrest in the excise policy case, nine leaders of eight political parties on Sunday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing his Government of misusing the office of Governor and Central agencies to target the Opposition parties and their leaders.

However, no Congress leader was among the signatories. According to sources, the letter was written at the behest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrababhan Nara. The letter said that India has "transitioned from being a democracy to an autocracy."

Apart from Kejriwal, the other signatories of the letter were Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress (TMC), Rao of the



File photo of Aam Aadmi Party leaders and supporters protesting against the arrest of former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia in New Delhi on March 4. Photo ANI

Bharat Rashtia Samithi (BRS), National Conference (NC) leader and former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Sharad Pawar, former Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, Samajwadi Party (SP) chief and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD).

Apart from the Congress, the JDS, the JD(U), and the CPM did not sign the letter.

This highlights divisions in the Opposition camp. The letter seems to be a signal of the alliance of political parties for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

Remarking on the role of the Governors, the Opposition leaders alleged that their offices in the country are "frequently hindering the governance of the State" they are sent to.

Pointing at Assam Chief Minister Hemant Biswa Sarma and other BJP leaders Mukul Roy, Narayan Rane and Suvendu Adhikari, the Opposition leaders said that the probe against the corrupt

politicians who joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been delayed.

The leaders alleged that the timings of the lodging of cases against and arrests of the Opposition leaders "coincided with elections" which makes it clear that the action taken was "politically-motivated".

"The blatant misuse of central agencies against the members of the Opposition appears to suggest that we have transitioned from being a democracy to an autocracy," the letter said.

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## Anti-India posters in Geneva: India summons Swiss envoy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Taking exception to "malicious anti-India" posters displayed in front of the United Nations (UN) building in Geneva recently, New Delhi on Sunday summoned the Swiss Ambassador here to lodge a strong protest.

The Swiss Ambassador Ralf Heckner conveyed to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) that he would convey India's concerns to Berne with all the seriousness it deserves.

Most of the posters, according to a video widely shared on social media, feature slogans opposing the alleged oppression of minorities and women in India.

"The Secretary (West), MEA, today called in the Swiss Ambassador and raised the issue of unfounded and malicious anti-India posters in front of the UN building in Geneva," said a source.

The envoy said the posters in Geneva are part of the space provided to all, but in no way



endorse the claims, nor reflect the position of the Swiss Government.

The posters appeared in a square in front of the UN office in Geneva soon after the start of the latest session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

One of the posters, as depicted in the widely shared video, states, "Women in India are treated as slaves".

Another claims child marriages are a "serious violation of child rights in India", and yet another states, "Indian Christians facing State-sponsored terrorism".

Most of the posters feature slogans in English and French. A tent put up nearby had more posters, including two that said, "India no to terror attacks on minorities" and "India stop burning churches".

A few more posters were focused on Dalits and one stated, "Indian Dalits children of a lesser god".

Similar posters have been put up in the past during sessions of the UNHRC. It is understood that the External Affairs Ministry decided to act on Sunday after the video shared on social media got more than a million views.

## In first, Navy to hold Commanders' meet aboard INS Vikrant

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Navy, for the first time, will start its commanders' conference from the recently-inducted indigenously-built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh will address the inaugural session of the meet onboard the carrier on Monday off the coast of Goa.

The aircraft carrier was commissioned into the Navy by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September last year. India now has two aircraft carriers, including INS Vikrant and Russian-built INS Vikramaditya.

As regards the Commanders' meet, it is held twice a year where the top echelon of the force reviews the operational readiness in the maritime domain. The situation in the strategically important Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean will be discussed



in detail in the backdrop of China adopting an aggressive stance there in the upcoming meet. Giving details of the five-day conclave beginning Monday, Navy officials said here on Sunday the conference serves as a platform for Naval Commanders to discuss important security issues at the military-strategic level as well as interact with senior Government functionaries through an institutionalised forum. The novelty of this year's conference lies in the fact that the first phase of the Commanders' Conference is being held at sea, and for the first-time, onboard India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant. **Details on P4**

## Drunk passenger wets himself, co-flyer suffers

American Airlines bars student from flying with it

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In yet another incident of peeing during a flight, a passenger was taken into custody on Sunday for allegedly urinating on a fellow passenger on a New York-New Delhi American Airlines flight in a "drunken" state. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has also sought a detailed report from American Airlines, while the accused passenger has been barred by the airline from flying in future.

This is the third such incident in the last few months where a flyer relieved himself on a fellow passenger in an inebriated state. The incident allegedly took place on flight number AA292, which took off from New York at 9.16 PM on Friday and landed after 14



hours and 26 minutes of flying at the Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) at 10.12 PM on Saturday. The accused, identified as Arya Vohra, 21, who was travelling in flight AA292 from New York to Delhi is a student at a US University.

He urinated on a US citizen on March 4 while he was drunk. The student perhaps involuntarily urinated while he was asleep due to the effect of alcohol. The leak somehow fell on a fellow passenger. According to Civil Aviation Rules, if a passenger is found guilty of unruly behaviour,

besides action under criminal law, he will be banned from flying for a particular time period, depending on the level of the offence.

Sources said the airline has submitted a report about the incident to the DGCA. The airline seems to have handled the situation professionally and taken all appropriate action. DCP (IGI) Divesh Kumar Mahla said a complaint of peeing on co-passenger has been received from American Airlines against one person, who is a resident of Defence Colony in Delhi.

Continued on Page 2

## Sania bids teary adieu to tennis

Ace sportswoman ends her career at place where it began

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

With "happy tears", Indian tennis legend Sania Mirza on Sunday ended her path-breaking journey as a player at the place where it all began. By playing in exhibition matches featuring Rohan Bopanna, Yuvraj Singh and her 'best friend' Bethanie Mattek Sands, Sania finally said goodbye to her illustrious career at the Lal Bahadur Tennis Stadium, the venue where she signalled her arrival on the big stage with a historic WTA singles title triumph nearly two decades ago.

The exhibition games were watched by eminent personalities, including Union Law Minister Kiren Rijju and former India cricket team captain Mohammed Azharuddin. Having arrived at the venue



Tennis star Sania Mirza during her farewell at the Lal Bahadur Stadium, in Hyderabad, on Sunday. She announced retirement from professional tennis earlier this month at Dubai Tennis Championships PTI Photo

in a swanky red car, the 36-year-old Sania was greeted by cheering fans that also included prominent personalities. Sania, who turned emotional while giving her farewell speech, said the greatest honour for her has been to play for the country for 20 years. On the occasion, the six-time Grand Slam winner (three in women's doubles and as many in mixed doubles) played two mixed doubles exhibition matches and won both of them.

The venue, where she had won some memorable titles, wore a festive look with banners like 'Celebrating The Legacy of Sania Mirza' put up. Some fans held placards that read 'thank you for the memories' and 'we will miss you, Sania'.

Spectators, mostly schoolchildren, cheered her as she entered the court. "I am so excited to play my last match in front of you all," she said, speaking ahead of the match. Rijju, who was formerly the Union Sports Minister, Telangana Minister KT Rama Rao, Azharuddin and Yuvraj were among the guests present at the venue. **Continued on Page 2**

## Gurus to lead war against drugs

Union Min inks pact with Mount Abu-based Prajapati Brahma Kumaris

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hoping that spiritual leaders can become an "agent of change" in its fight against drug menace, the Government, in a community based approach is reaching out to these scholars and their volunteers to influence the drug abusers to quit the deadly habit. To begin with, the Union Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry inked a pact with Mount Abu-based Prajapati Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya, wherein the latter's leaders and supporters will take



forward the Nasha Mukti Bharat Abhiyaan (NMBA), a central flagship programme which is operational in 372 districts to sensitise the youth against harmful impact of the substance drug abuse. "Collective and community-based approach can in a great extent help solve the problem of drug addiction," Dr Virendra Kumar, Minister of Social Justice &

Empowerment, said at an event here where a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Ministry and the spiritual organisation. At the event, BK Asha Didi, member, Brahma Kumaris Management Committee, stressed that a drug-free life is possible only after self-introspection, self-awareness and spiritual awakening. Under the

NMBA, awareness about ill effects of substance abuse among youth is created, with special focus on higher education institutes, university campuses, schools and reaching out into community and garnering community involvement and ownership of the Abhiyaan, shared an official from the Ministry.

More than 3 lakh educational institutions have been reached to spread message of drug de-addiction. Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment Ramdas Athawale was of view that the participation of spiritual leaders will not only increase outreach of this mission, but will also help people to keep distance from intoxication through spiritual enlightenment.

Continued on Page 2

# Nagaland heading for Opp-less Govt

PTI ■ KOHIMA

Despite having one of the highest number of political parties, new Nagaland Government is heading towards an opposition-less Government with almost all parties extending unconditional support to NDPP-BJP alliance which won the elctions held last month.

In the State Assembly elections, for which results were declared on March 2, the pre-poll alliance partners – NDPP-BJP won 25 and 12 seats respectively, totaling 37 in the 60-member House.

Other political parties, including NCP have won 7 seats, NPP – 5, LJP (Ram Vilas), Naga People's Front (NPF) & RPI (Athawale) – 2

each, JD(U) – 1 and Independents – 4. This is the first time that Nagaland is witnessing the victory of so many political parties in the State Assembly elections. LJP(RV) and RPI (Athawale) are newbies in the State politics.

While the NDPP-BJP is yet to stake a claim for Government formation, they have received unconditional support from other political parties to continue their second innings. LJP (Ram Vilas), RPI (Athawale), JD(U) have already submitted letters of support to the alliance partners, sources said.

NCP, which is the third single largest party, submitted a letter extending 'unconditional' support on Saturday to the Neiphui Rio-led NDPP, newly

elected NCP MLA Y Mhonbemo Humtsoe told PTI on Sunday. Similarly, NPF general secretary Achumbemo Kikon, who is also one of the newly elected MLA, said that though a final decision has not been taken, the party, which has two members, is 'likely to extend support to the Government'.

With all political parties supporting winning NDPP-BJP alliance, Nagaland will have another all-party Government. In the past, in 2015 and 2021 opposition-less Governments were formed during ongoing term of a Government, but this would be first ever Assembly which is set to be an opposition-less one even before House has been sworn in.

# Syndicate of illegal timber sale busted in U'khand

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Using digital tracking and electronic surveillance, Uttarakhand tax authorities have busted a group of traders who would float fake firms to give a legal cover to their illegal trade of timber and its products and evade GST worth crores of rupees, officials said on Sunday.

The Uttarakhand GST department launched an expansive search and seizure operation — named 'Operation D Day-Rising Woods' -- to unearth the racket in Jaspur area of Udham Singh Nagar district, they said.

Udham Singh Nagar is considered one of the biggest timber markets and timber and its products are supplied across the country from here. The investigators suspect the involvement of people from other states such as Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Bihar and Rajasthan. The operation involved 27 teams with more than 300 tax

and forensic officials and financial technology experts and they raided 27 commercial establishments and residences of transporters, advocates and chartered accountants.

The investigators, who have been tracking these illegal networks for the past nine months, found multiple firms in the name of a single person with the sole purpose of defrauding the tax authorities.

They believe the accused had worked out a plan to cheat the GST regime, since its implementation in 2017, by providing legal cover to the fake companies to show procurement of raw materials from the black market. The investigators suspect the involvement of bank officials in helping them with opening accounts without a proper KYC process.

The network involved 25 to 30 key people working in collusion with each other, officials said. Speaking to PTI, Ranveer Singh, a joint commissioner of the Special Investigation

Bureau, said, "The modus operandi was first to float fake firms which worked on paper only. Companies dealing in timber were sourcing raw materials from the grey market and using these fake firms as their genuine suppliers by getting purchase orders and bills from them. They paid input tax credits to these fake firms which caused a huge loss to the government."

"During the initial investigation, it was found that a syndicate was involved in creating fake firms by misusing the documents of others and allegedly causing huge loss of revenue," Singh said.

He added that the nexus was involved in passing on fake input tax credits by generating fake invoices without the actual supply of goods to Bijnor, Rampur, Moradabad, Saharanpur of Uttar Pradesh and Yamunanagar in Haryana. Prima facie, the turnover is estimated to be over Rs 100 crore with evasion of over Rs 18 crore

of tax. The search and seizure operation started at 11 am on March 4 and continued till late at night. Teams have seized substantial amounts of documents, electronic devices like mobile phones, laptops, tablets, stamps, bill books, debit and credit cards, chequebooks, and signed blank cheques, said Rajneesh Yashwathi, deputy commissioner, Special Investigation Bureau.

"We sought help from forensic experts to verify the data seized from the electronic devices. Rs 7 lakh in cash was also seized during operation. Firms and unregistered places of business that were found locked have been sealed with the help of the district administration," he added.

The operation was launched following directions from Commissioner Tax, Uttarakhand, Ahmed Iqbal and led on ground by Additional Commissioner, Kumaon, B S Nagnyal, officials said.

## AAP SOUNDS POLL BUGLE

# BJP, Cong looted Chhattisgarh for 23 years, vote AAP to wipe out corruption: Kejriwal

PTI ■ RAIPUR

Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday accused the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress of looting Chhattisgarh for the last 23 years and appealed people to give a chance to his party in the state to rid it of corruption and 'mafia raj'.

He also defended former Delhi deputy CM and senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia, who was recently arrested in Delhi excise policy case, calling him a 'sant' (saint) and 'mahatma' (great soul), and said Prime Minister Narendra Modi will face the curse of students and poor people in Delhi for putting him in jail. Sounding the poll bugle for the Assembly elections scheduled in the Congress-ruled Chhattisgarh this year-end, he also asked

people to keep their children's future in mind before casting their votes. He was addressing a rally of AAP workers at Jora ground on the outskirts of capital Raipur.

"Chhattisgarh is a mineral-rich state, but people in the state are struggling with poverty despite being talented and hard-working...Of the last 23 years (after Chhattisgarh was carved out of Madhya Pradesh in 2000), BJP ruled for 15 years, while Congress governed it for the remaining period.

They did nothing except looting the state. If any of them come to power again, the loot will continue," he alleged. He appealed to people to give a chance to the AAP in this year's Assembly elections in Chhattisgarh to get rid of corruption and 'mafia raj' (rule of mafia). After the formation of

Chhattisgarh in 2000, the Ajit Jogi-led Congress government ruled the state for the first three years. In 2003, the BJP came to power with Raman Singh becoming the chief minister.

The saffron party remained at the helm till 2018, after which the grand old party returned to power. Kejriwal hit out at PM Modi and said he loves industrialist Gautam Adani like his 'muh bola' (foster) brother and is handing over everything in the country to him.

He also slammed Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel for allocating coal mines in the biodiversity-rich Hasdeo Arand forest in the northern part of the state despite tribals' opposition. "Both BJP and Chhattisgarh want to loot Hasdeo. Does this jungle belong to BJP or Congress or Adani? A portion

of Hasdeo was sold to Adani. Modi ji has a muh bola brother (without naming Adani). You do not even love your child as much as Modi ji loves his muh bola brother. Previous BJP government in Chhattisgarh gave coal mines to Adani," the top leader of the AAP alleged.

"In 2018, Rahul Gandhi, Bhupesh Baghel and his cabinet colleague T S Singh Deo had visited Hasdeo and opposed mining by Adani there. But I want to ask Baghel sahib when did Adani become his muh bola brother as he allowed mining for the second phase of the coal mine to him.

If Congress or BJP are given more chances (to form government) in Chhattisgarh then the entire forest will be sold to Adani," he claimed. "We don't have any relationship with Adani, rather we have a

relationship only with people. Give us a chance, all mines and forests will be of people of the state and they will benefit from it, he added. Speaking on Sisodia's arrest, Kejriwal said, "Manish Sisodia is not a thief. He is a noble person. He transformed all government schools of Delhi in just five years.

He was sent to jail but those who take 40 per cent commission (apparently referring to the BJP government in Karnataka) are not sent to jail." Sisodia used to wake up at 6 am and visit schools in Delhi, he said. "A corrupt person does not go to (official) visit daily in the morning.

If anyone does corruption then what he will do with money... (he) will drink alcohol in the night and do 'ladki baji' (illicit acts). He will not visit school. He (Sisodia) is 'sant' and 'mahatma'," he said.

# Gurus to lead war against drugs

From Page 1

Studies have shown that spirituality and religion is an important protective factor against substance abuse and an important support for persons in recovery.

Since, spiritual leaders are less likely than others to use drugs, this gives them a pedestal from which to exert their massive influence in fighting the menace of alcohol and drug abuse among the people.

A 2019 report "Magnitude of Substance Use in India" by the AIIMS, Delhi has found that around 5 crore Indians reported to have used cannabis and opioids at the time of the survey. About 60 lakh people are estimated to need help for their opioid use problems and nationally, it is estimated that there are about 8.5 lakh people

who inject drugs. Of the total cases estimated by the report, more than half of them are contributed by states like Assam, Delhi, Haryana, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim and Uttar Pradesh with Punjab at the top of the list.

Dr Smita Deshpande, well-known psychiatrist and ex-HOD (Psychiatrist) at Dr RML Hospital which has de-addiction centres also, pointed out that drug sub-cultures which are prevalent within the country are a huge problem.

For instance, tobacco is a major problem and is usually a gateway drug. It is usually children who start (as an experiment), as early as 8-9 years of age. Then gradually they progress to alcohol. After alcohol, they progress to cannabis, she noted.



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# Drunk passenger wets...

From Page 1

Mahla said that a case has been registered under relevant Section of the IPC and the accused has been released.

During interrogation, the accused revealed that he was under the influence of alcohol and that it happened unintentionally. "He says that he didn't do it knowingly. He did it in his sleep and it fell on a fellow passenger, after which the vic-

tim complained to the flight staff. The airline took it seriously and informed Air Traffic Control at IGI Airport. ATC alerted CISF personnel, who handed over the accused passenger to Delhi Police," said another police officer.

The victim, a male passenger, however was not keen on reporting the matter as the accused issued an apology and cited threats to his reputation and career. The airline, on its part, reported the matter to the Air Traffic Control (ATC) at IGI.

The airline stated that they will not allow the passenger on board in the future. In a statement, the American Airlines said, "American Airlines flight 292 with service from John F Kennedy International Airport (JFK) to Indira Gandhi International

Airport (DEL) was met by local law enforcement upon arrival in DEL due to a disruptive customer. The flight landed safely at 9:50 PM." It further added, "Upon aircraft arrival, Purser informed that the passenger was heavily intoxicated, and was not adhering to crew instructions on board.

He was repeatedly arguing with the operating crew, was not willing to be seated and continuously endangering the safety of crew and aircraft and after disturbing safety of fellow passengers, finally urinated on pax seated on 15C."

The pilot reported the matter to the authorities who further alerted the CISF personnel. The accused was then handed over to the Delhi Police, who recorded statements of the concerned people

in the matter. The airline, in a statement, said it was handled "professionally" and that the flight landed safely without any disruptions. "We're grateful to our crew members who are consistently dedicated to the safety and care of our customers and handle the circumstances with the utmost professionalism," it said.

This is the third such incident in the last few months where a flyer relieved himself on a fellow passenger in an inhabited state. On November 26, an almost similar incident took place on a New York-Delhi Air India flight, in which a man, Shankar Mishra, had allegedly urinated in a drunken state on an elderly woman.

That incident came to light almost a month later through a media report, after which an FIR was lodged and Mishra arrested. He was released on bail after spending nearly a month in jail. The DGCA imposed a fine of Rs 30 lakh on

Air India for not reporting the matter within 12 hours of the incident in accordance with the norm. While the Delhi Police is investigating the matter, Mishra has been banned from flying for four months.

In the second incident, another drunk man urinated on the blanket of a female co-passenger. The man had given a written apology following which no penal action was taken against him.

The incident had occurred on 6 December 2022 on the Delhi bound Air-India flight from Paris. During this time, the pilot of the aircraft reported the matter to the Air Traffic Control (ATC) at the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport, following which the male passenger was apprehended.

He was later allowed to leave after the two passengers had a "mutual compromise" and the accused tendered a "written apology"

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8	Executive Visitor Chair	60		
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4. Tender documents also available for ready reference on the website of MP Police ([www.mppolice.gov.in](http://www.mppolice.gov.in))  
5. Schedule :-

- Documents download/Sale Start Date : 23/02/2023 from 1800 Hrs.
- Bid Submission Start Date : 09/03/2023 from 1800 Hrs.
- Bid Submission End Date : 18/03/2023 up to 1700 Hrs.
- Bid will be Opened on Date : 20/03/2023 at 1200 Hrs.

**D.I.G. (Telecom)**  
**Sr. Superintendent of Police (Radio)**  
**M.P. Bhopal**

**G-23948/22**



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**Managing Director**

**विशेष शाखा पुलिस मुख्यालय**  
**मध्यप्रदेश भोपाल**  
क्रमांक :- वि.शा./स्टोर/2023-25 (72) दिनांक 03.03.2023  
**निविदा सूचना का शुद्धिपत्र**  
**(Corrigendum)**

विशेष शाखा पुलिस मुख्यालय की निविदा सूचना क्रमांक **SB/Store/2022-25 (38) Bhopal, Dated 06.02.2023** द्वारा **Night Vision Device (NVD)** के क्रय हेतु ई-निविदा सूचना जारी की गई है। उपरोक्त आमंत्रित निविदा अंतर्गत क्रय किये जाने वाले उपकरणों के तकनीकी मापदंडों (**Specification**) एवं समय-सारणी में किये गये "आंशिक संशोधन" के संबंध में "शुद्धि पत्र" (**Corrigendum**) जारी किया गया है जो [website https://mptenders.gov.in/nicegep/app](https://mptenders.gov.in/nicegep/app) पर तथा विभाग की वेबसाइट [www.mppolice.gov.in](http://www.mppolice.gov.in) पर उपलब्ध है।

**सहायक पुलिस महानिरीक्षक,**  
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**Email: [sec25-sb@mppolice.gov.in](mailto:sec25-sb@mppolice.gov.in)**

**G-23982/22**

# Opp protects each other...

From Page 1

It is laughable that the signatories of the letter include many leaders who face corruption charges themselves, "some even for two generations," he added. Those who were allegedly involved in corruption while occupying constitutional positions are now saying that probe agencies should not investigate, said Trivedi, a Rajya Sabha MP of the ruling party.

What is more surprising is that the Opposition parties have come out in support of the Aam Aadmi Party which entered politics by accusing most of them of corruption, the BJP leader said. The AAP used to say that people facing corruption charges should resign and now its leaders do not quit even after going behind bars and instead call themselves "kattar imaanदार", the BJP spokesperson said.

# India's personal...

From Page 1

"This growth is significant. We have seen improvements in outcome related to health, education, and economic and social mobility. Covid impacted us badly. However, we have seen significant economic recovery after Covid.

"Sustaining per-capita income growth at five to six per cent per annum with appropriate redistributive policies will help sustain this momentum. We also have to factor in unevenness in growth within the country. Balanced regional development will act as a catalyst for higher growth," he said.

The Modi Government has taken several pro-poor initiatives, and is trying to ensure benefits of Government schemes reach the needy people directly. The measures include a mega financial inclusion drive like opening landhan accounts and MUDRA loan scheme; focus on digitisation

# 'India transitioned from democracy ...

From Page 1

"The misuse of central agencies and constitutional offices like that of the Governor... is strongly condemnable as it does not bode well for our democracy," the letter continued. Highlighting Sisodia's arrest by the CBI in connection with the alleged irregularities in Delhi Liquor Policy, the leaders of nine parties said the charges against the AAP leader were "outrightly baseless and smack of a political conspiracy".

They claimed that Sisodia's arrest has "enraged" people across the country and alleged that his arrest will "confirm what the world was only suspecting" that India's democratic values were "threatened" under BJP rule. "Manish Sisodia is recognised globally for transforming Delhi's school education," the letter said.

"Out of the total number of key politicians booked, arrested, raided, or interrogated by the investigation agencies under your administration since 2014, the maximum belongs to the opposition. Interestingly, investigation agencies go slow on cases against Opposition politicians who join the BJP," the letter said.

# Sania...

From Page 1

"I have come to Hyderabad for Sania Mirza's send-off, her farewell match. I am delighted to see so many people turning up for this. Sania Mirza is an inspiration not just for Indian tennis but for India sports too. When I was the Sports Minister I used to be in touch with Sania. I wish her all the very best for her future endeavours," said Rijju.

Her family members and friends were also present at the venue. After the match, Sania was felicitated by Rama Rao and Telangana Sports Minister V Srinivas Goud.

"The greatest honour for me has been to play for my country for 20 years. It is every athlete's dream to represent their country at the highest level. I was able to do that," Sania, who thanked everyone for supporting her in her journey, said. As fans cheered her, Sania turned emotional.

"These are very, very happy tears. I could not have asked for a better send-off," she said. Though she may have retired, she is going to be part of tennis and sports in India and in Telangana, she said. She hoped that "many, many Sanias" would emerge in the country.

Azharuddin, whose son is married to Sania's younger sister Anam, praised her contribution to tennis. "I think today we are giving a great farewell to Sania. What she has done for tennis for women in India and all over the world, I think, it is an example. I wish her all the best," Azharuddin told reporters.

"I know people would want her to continue to play more. But every career has to end. I think she has taken right decision," he said. Several fans said they feel sad over Sania retiring from professional tennis.

# CBI torturing Sisodia: AAP

'Pressuring him to sign documents with false charges'

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

AAP national spokesperson Saurabh Bhardwaj Sunday claimed the CBI was "torturing" senior party leader Manish Sisodia and pressuring him to sign papers containing false charges.

The federal probe agency arrested Sisodia on February 26 for allegedly not cooperating in the investigation into the Delhi excise policy case and being evasive on questions from investigators. A special CBI court on Saturday extended the custody of Sisodia till March 6.

On February 28, Sisodia resigned from the Arvind Kejriwal-led cabinet. According to officials, the agency wants to utilise Sisodia's custody to locate the crucial missing file containing legal opinions on the expert committee recommendations on the excise policy, which remains untraceable even now.

"Manish Sisodia is being



tortured by the CBI and being pressured to sign the documents containing false charges framed against him. CBI has no evidence against Sisodia. They never mentioned any evidence is missing. They raided his residence but found nothing," Bhardwaj told reporters here on Sunday.

Sisodia, who was produced before the court on Saturday on the expiry of his five-day CBI custody, claimed that he was "sitting for eight to nine hours and answering the same questions again and again" and termed it "mental harassment".

To this, the judge, who had in the last hearing directed the CBI not to use the third degree on the accused, told the probe agency not to ask the 'same questions again and again'. "If you have something new, ask him," the judge said.

# Ashram flyover extension to open today

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Commuting between Delhi and Noida will become hassle-free after the Ashram flyover extension is opened to public on Monday.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal will inaugurate the flyover extension, which will allow motorists to bypass three traffic lights between Ashram Chowk and DND and make vehicular movement smoother.

The project was supposed to be inaugurated on February



28, but the event was postponed.

Officials had initially suggested that the delay was because of then PWD Minister Manish Sisodia's arrest, but Kejriwal told a Press conference

later that it was due to some pending work.

"It is likely to be inaugurated on Monday. The postponement was not due to (arrest of) Sisodia, but because a few works

were left," he had said. Kailash Gahlot, who was handed over the additional charge of PWD following Sisodia's resignation, will be present at the inauguration of the flyover extension on Monday.

Sisodia had said after the completion of this flyover, lakhs of people commuting from Noida and other parts of Delhi to south Delhi will not face traffic jams.

At present, traffic jams are witnessed from the DND loop to the Ashram intersection.

## Traffic advisory issued

**New Delhi:** The Delhi Police has issued a traffic advisory in view of the reopening of the Ashram Flyover from 5 pm on Monday following the inauguration of an extension.

In its advisory issued on Sunday, the Delhi Traffic Police advised commuters to plan their journey as usual and to follow the directions of its personnel posted in the area to avoid inconvenience.

It said commuters using Barapulla Flyover are advised to use Ashram Flyover for the following destinations.

According to the advisory, only light vehicles coming from DND and going towards Gurugram, Chirag Delhi, Kalkaji, Khanpur, Greater Kailash, Saket, AIIMS, INA and Safdarjung are advised to take the Ashram Flyover instead of Barapulla Flyover. **SR**

## Man creates ex-girlfriend's fake Insta account for revenge, held

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 21-year-old man was arrested for allegedly creating a fake Instagram account of his former girlfriend and using her father's picture to send obscene messages to her relatives to take revenge, police said on Sunday.

The accused has been identified as Vivek, a resident of southwest Delhi's Najafgarh area, they said.

The woman, in her complaint at Cyber Police Station, alleged that an unknown person created a fake Instagram profile by using her name and her father's pictures,

police said.

The accused was sending threatening and obscene messages on the complainant's Instagram account and to her relatives as well, they said.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Dwarka) M Harsha Vardhan said analysis of the fake Instagram account revealed that the mobile number used in the creation of the fake account belongs to Vivek.

"During the investigation, it came to notice that earlier the complainant and the alleged person were in a relationship for the last four years. Due to some reasons, the relationship broke up," he said.

## AAP: Both Cong, BJP want all other political parties to cease to exist

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Sunday slammed the Congress for not standing by it on the issue of Manish Sisodia's arrest, and alleged that both the grand old party and the BJP want all other political parties to cease to exist.

The Congress never stands by the Opposition and engages in a war of words with the BJP merely to "fool" the country, AAP chief spokesperson Saurabh Bhardwaj charged at a Press conference.

Meanwhile, Delhi Congress president Ch Anil Kumar lambasted the AAP, saying the



Kejriwal Government is misusing tax payers' money to canvas support for jailed former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia through FM Radio to whitewash his role in the liquor scam and urged the government to recover money the AAP.

Bharadwaj, who was replying to a question whether the Congress not joining the leaders of the nine Opposition par-

ties in writing a joint letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the alleged misuse of Central agencies was an indication that the grand old party and the AAP would never be together under a united Opposition umbrella.

"If you look at the history, you will find the Congress has never stood by the Opposition. Whenever it comes to raising voice on national issues, the Congress goes missing. They have gone missing today as well," Bhardwaj charged.

"The entire world knows that Sisodia has been arrested. Congress, which considers itself the big brother and says it will

lead if any opposition alliance is formed, should have reached out to the Opposition parties," he said.

"Where is the Congress, Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi?" he asked, alleging that all of them have gone missing because they are happy with what's happening in the country and with the AAP leaders.

Bharadwaj said the Congress is silent on the issue of alleged misuse of the Central probe agencies and the arrest of the AAP leaders because both the grand old party and the BJP "want all Opposition parties to cease to exist."

## Poster supporting Sisodia: Cops to grill school head

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police will question the principal and the management commitment coordinator of a government school over a poster pasted at its main gate supporting former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia following his arrest, officials said on Sunday. An FIR was registered against school management committee coordinator Gazala for allegedly pasting the poster supporting Sisodia.

Sisodia was arrested by the CBI in connection with the liquor policy scam case on Sunday last. He resigned from the Cabinet on Tuesday.

"As part of investigation, we will question both the school principal and its management committee coordinator. They will be questioned related to the incident and bound down in connection with the case," a senior police officer said.

The complaint sent by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) regarding alleged misuse of pictures of children by some leaders will also be probed alongside, he said.

The complaint to NCPCR was made by BJP MP Manoj Tiwari. Reacting to the NCPCR action on Tiwari's complaint, AAP national spokesperson Saurabh Bhardwaj said it was Tiwari who sang the song "Baby beer peeke naache" and if someone goes through the lyrics they will understand how disgraceful they are.

## Budget Session from March 17

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Assembly's Budget session will be convened from March 17. According to sources, the Budget will be presented on March 21.

This will be the first time that Manish Sisodia will not be presenting the AAP Government's Budget since 2015 when the party stormed to power in Delhi.

Sisodia resigned after he was arrested last Sunday in connection with a CBI probe into alleged irregularities into the implementation of Delhi excise policy 2021-22.

Kailash Gahlot, who handled revenue, transport and other departments, has been given the additional charge of the finance department, will present Delhi's outcome Budget on March 21. The Session is likely to be stormy after the arrest of Sisodia in the alleged excise policy scam case. After getting the finance portfolio, Gahlot has held several meetings with the ministry officials. Even before Sisodia's arrest, Gahlot was part of the Budget-related meetings.

"The Budget session of the Delhi Assembly will commence on March 17 and the Budget will be presented on March 21," said an official.

The session will begin with Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena's address. After that, economic survey of Delhi will be tabled in the



House.

The 2022-23 Budget was presented on March 26 last year by Sisodia. Called the Rozgar Budget, it was a Rs 75,800-crore budget with a five-year plan to create 20 lakh jobs through initiatives like a new electronic city and promotion of night economy to boost business and trade activities.

The Opposition Delhi BJP has chalked out a plan to corner the AAP government led by the Arvind Kejriwal in the Delhi Assembly.

Leader of the opposition in Delhi assembly, Ramvir Singh Bidhuri said that Kejriwal government has failed on every front.

"They misled the people of Delhi and came to power on false promises.

"The Delhi Government had promised 2 million jobs in the last Budget. In the last one year, it should have created 400,000 jobs. But the AAP Government did not create even 400 jobs, Bidhuri said.

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

AAP's national spokesperson Saurabh Bhardwaj, who will soon be joining the Delhi cabinet as a minister, said that the city's population has risen manifold since 1994 but its water share has remained unchanged and asked the Centre to increase it.

Bhardwaj said the priorities of the AAP government are infrastructure and providing clean water to the residents in Delhi, apart from education and health.

"We are trying to beautify stretches of Delhi with street furniture and creation of walking and sitting spaces. At 10 places, one-kilometre-long stretches have been redevel-

oped. Now the plan is to extend it to the rest of Delhi," he told PTI in an interview.

Bhardwaj, who is also the vice-chairman of the Delhi Jal Board, said they have promised that before the next election, Yamuna will be cleaned.

"The sewage that goes into Yamuna we will trap it and through different sewage treatment plants and release clean water into the river. Human waste flows into drains from all unauthorised colonies and then from those drains, it flows into the Yamuna. It is not only against environmental norms but all the waste goes into a pious river," he said.

Apart from ensuring a clean Yamuna, another issue that Delhi is grappling with is



Delhi Commissioner of Police Sanjay Arora was the Chief Guest at a friendly T-20 cricket G Murali Trophy match between CP-XI and Media-XI on Sunday at Arun Jaitley Stadium in Delhi

limited sources of water.

"It is something (water share of Delhi) that was decided in 1994 and since then the population has grown. We have requested the Centre that our share of water should be in proportion to the population.

"See, it is not Delhi's population. Delhi is a mini-India where people from other states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Bihar have settled. So we should get that share of water from India. We have been asking the Centre for it," he explained.

The senior leader said that as a minister, his priorities will be to make government departments more accountable to the people and ensure greater convenience in the public-government interface.

Bhardwaj and Atishi's names were sent by the Delhi government to LG VK Saxena for their elevation as Cabinet ministers, following the resignations of Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain, who were arrested in different cases of

alleged corruption.

The 43-year-old reminisced about the time before he joined India Against Corruption where he had fixed offs and a work-life balance.

"I went into India Against Corruption movement when IT was booming. I was earning good money, there was a work-life balance.

"Whenever we travelled, we stayed in five-star hotels. I have worked in Hyderabad, Milwaukee in Wisconsin, the US, and Gurugram. Then, I got invested in India Against Corruption. I met people there, registered as a volunteer, and then the party was registered on November 26, 2012. I am also one of the founding members of the party," he said.

## Bishnoi gang member held after exchange of fire with police

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A member of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang was arrested in the early hours of Sunday after an exchange of fire with police near Qutub Minar metro station here, officials said.

The accused, Neeraj alias Katiya (30), is a resident of Jhajjar district of Haryana, the police said.

Deputy Commissioner of

Police (Special Cell) Alok Kumar said information was received that absconding accused Neeraj would come near Qutub Minar metro station between 2 am and 3 am on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday.

Accordingly, a trap was laid near the spot. The accused, who came in an autorickshaw, was surrounded when he stepped out of the three-wheeler, the officer said.

## Tighten grip on stunt bikers on Shab-e-Barat, says Delhi Police

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has asked its officials to take steps to put a tight leash on stunt bikers and keep a vigil in sensitive areas to ensure there is no communal tension during Shab-e-Barat and Holika Dahan, both of which will be observed on the same night this year.

In an advisory issued to all the 15 police districts, the special branch directed them to take the help of religious leaders and local volunteers to prevent stunt biking during the night of March 7-8.

It cited past events when young men from areas such as Jafrabad, Seelampur, Welcome, Trilokpuri, Okhla and Jamia Nagar visit India Gate, Connaught Place and other areas in New Delhi district and perform dangerous stunts on two-wheelers and even on three and four wheelers.

In 2019, during the night of Shab-e-Barat, some people had



broken mirrors and glasses of vehicles and houses in Dabri, Khajoori Khas and Janakpuri, leading to the registration of cases, the advisory said.

"In order to prevent stunts, bikers (from) coming to the New Delhi area, religious leaders should be roped in to appeal to the masses in this regard as was done in the past," said the advisory seen by PTI.

The junior staff have been asked to immediately brief their seniors on incidents that may have a potential bearing

on law and order situations, particularly in mixed-population areas. "Watch should be kept on social media and action to be taken against rumour-mongers," the advisory said.

"All PCR calls concerning different communities should be dealt promptly and firmly as even minor issues should not remain unattended given the sensitive nature of events," it added.

On Shab-e-Barat night, Muslims offer prayers in large numbers in mosques. On Holika Dahan, Hindus light a

bonfire after sunset. "Holika Dahan would be celebrated in the evening of March 7 and hence there is every possibility that the devotees of both communities may come on the same route or place at a particular time," the advisory said.

"The local police should keep watch on the movements of Muslims to avoid any collision with other communities on the eve of Holika Dahan," it added.

The advisory asked officials to pay special attention to 'qabristans' in Kotla, Khureji, Sarojini Park, Shastri Nagar, Narela, Gadaipur and Kadeemi in Hauz Khas village, stating these places had witnessed some incidents in the past.

The special branch asked the police districts to deploy adequate personnel, and PCR vehicles at all mosques and qabristans. Local police heads have been asked to keep a close liaison with event organisers.

## Kejriwal extends support to Sibal's 'Insaaf ke Sipahi'

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday appealed to people, including lawyers, to join Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal's newly launched platform 'Insaaf ke Sipahi' to fight injustice.

It's a very good initiative, he said.

Sibal, an eminent lawyer and an independent Rajya Sabha member, announced on Saturday that he was setting up a new platform called 'Insaaf ke Sipahi' to fight "injustice" prevailing in the country, and sought the support of chief ministers and other Opposition leaders. "This is a very important initiative of Kapil Sibal sahib. I appeal to everyone to join this and we will fight injustice together," Kejriwal said in a tweet in Hindi.

Later, speaking to reporters, the Delhi chief minister said Sibal is a well-known lawyer who is very active when it comes to social and political issues.

## Diplomats of 11 nations visit Asita East park on Yamuna floodplain

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In an effort aimed at showcasing Delhi's natural heritage before the world leaders congregating in the national Capital in run up to the G-20 meet, Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Sunday hosted envoys/diplomats of the G-20 and other nations at Asita East on the floodplain of River Yamuna.

It has been restored and rejuvenated by Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in a record time of less than six months. Union Minister of State for External Affairs, Meenakshi Lekhi was also present on the occasion.

Ambassadors and other diplomats of 11 countries visited Asita East early morning and went on a nature trail and bird watching tour along the floodplains, spotting over 30 species of birds.

Housing varied flora and fauna, including rare migratory birds, the complex has evolved into a paradise for



birders, in a short span of time. Diplomats also went cycling through the vast grasslands of Asita East. Considering the eco-sensitive character of the floodplains, the visitors left their vehicles right at the entrance on Vikas Marg and took electric carts to reach the floodplains. Some of the visitors also preferred walking down to the floodplains.

Visibly impressed by the turnaround of this stretch of the Yamuna Floodplains in a record time of less than six months, the foreign diplomats appreciated the rich bio-diversity and the efforts undertaken to restore the ecological

character of the Yamuna.

Speaking on the occasion, Saxena lauded the efforts that have gone into rejuvenating the Yamuna Floodplain and exhorted all stakeholders to put in collective efforts in undoing the destruction caused to the natural heritage due to rampant urbanisation.

"Asita has been our own effort at such rejuvenation. Just 6 months back, this fragile riverine eco-system was a dump yard of waste, squatters and stray animals. Persistent efforts by DDA has resulted in salvaging a self-contained eco system that houses rich natural diversity."

# Navy test-fires BrahMos missile successfully

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In an effort to hone its operational readiness, the Navy on Sunday successfully test-fired in the Arabian Sea the ship-launched version of the BrahMos supersonic missile. The missile had the indigenous "seeker and booster."

"The Indian Navy carried out a successful precision strike in the Arabian Sea by ship launched BrahMos missile with Defence Research and Development(DRDO)designed indigenous seeker and booster, reinforcing our commitment towards Aatmanirbharta (self-reliance) in defence," said officials.

BrahMos Aerospace Pvt Ltd, an India-Russian joint venture, produces supersonic cruise missiles that can be launched from submarines, ships, aircraft, or land platforms.

BrahMos missile flies at a



BrahMos precision strike missile successfully launched by Ship by the Indian Navy, in the Arabian Sea, on Sunday

speed of 2.8 Mach or almost three times the speed of sound. The anti-ship version of the supersonic cruise missile was successfully test-fired jointly by the Indian Navy and the Andaman and Nicobar

Command in April last year.

India is also exporting BrahMos missiles. In January last year, India sealed a 375 million dollar deal with the Philippines for supplying three batteries of the missile.

# No Deputy Speaker in LS for last 4 years, says Cong

## Cong slams it is unconstitutional

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress on Sunday raised the issue of the Lok Sabha having no Deputy Speaker for about four years and claimed that this was "unconstitutional". The Opposition party's assertion comes after the Supreme Court last month sought the Centre's response on a PIL that questioned the non-election of a deputy speaker in Lok Sabha and several State Assemblies and observed that the issue was "very important".

"For the last four years, there has been no deputy speaker in the Lok Sabha. This is unconstitutional," Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said in a tweet. "What a far cry from March 1956 when Nehru proposed the name of Sardar Hukam Singh



an opposition Akali Dal MP and a critic of Nehru for the post and he was unanimously elected," he said.

Article 93, which deals with the speaker and deputy speaker of the House of the People, reads: "The House of the People shall, as soon as may be, choose two members of the House to be respectively speaker and deputy speaker thereof

and, so often as the office of the speaker or deputy speaker becomes vacant, the House shall choose another member to be a speaker or deputy speaker, as the case may be."

The post of deputy speaker, which according to convention usually goes to the main opposition party, is vacant in Lok Sabha since June 23, 2019.

# Cong raps BJP over acquittal of 3 Hathras accused

## 'It has exposed shoddy and weak probe by UP Police, CBI'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday attacked the BJP over the acquittal of three persons accused in the Hathras rape-murder case and alleged that it has exposed the "weak and shoddy" investigation done by the Uttar Pradesh Police and later by the CBI.

A special court in Hathras on Thursday last sentenced the main accused in the 2020 Hathras rape-murder case to life imprisonment, while acquitting the three other accused.

Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters, Congress leader Dolly Sharma said the heinous crime in Hathras and then the government's role in this matter has exposed the BJP's "Beti Bachao" slogan.

"The crime of depriving the minor girl of the Dalit community of justice has been committed by the BJP, which keeps on giving the slogan of supporting everyone," she said.

The court finding one accused guilty and acquitting the other three has again "exposed the weak and shoddy investigation" done by the Uttar Pradesh Police and later by the CBI in this case, Sharma said.

"In this matter, voice was continuously raised by the Congress party and our leader Rahul Gandhi and the general secretary in-charge of Uttar Pradesh, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, constantly demanded justice for the victim's family," she said.

The most unfortunate thing is that the minor daughter of a Dalit family was bru-



tally gang-raped and murdered and only because of the "shoddy" investigation by the police, the prosecution could not even prove the charge of rape in the court, Sharma said.

The rape and murder charges could not be proved against the prime accused. The court held Sandeep (20) guilty under section 304 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder) of the Indian Penal Code, a lesser charge than section 302 (murder).

Ravi (35), Luv Kush (23) and Ramu (26) were acquitted in the case that triggered outrage and put Yogi Adityanath's BJP government in the dock over law and order in the state. The court also slapped a fine of Rs 50,000 against Sandeep.

Sharma alleged that as soon as the matter came to light, the government machinery was busy giving it the form of a "conspiracy" to save the accused and suppress the matter.

"The acquittal of three out of four accused once again proves our allegation that the police and the administration acted with serious negligence in the initial investigation, witnesses and evidence was tampered with, pressure was created in every way and a weak prosecution was presented before the Court which benefited the accused and denied justice to the victim," she alleged.

Sharma also cited other cases in which BJP leaders were allegedly involved in atrocities against women such as the Unnao rape case in 2017, Ankita Bhandari case in Uttarakhand and the release of the convicts in the Bilkis Bano case under the BJP government in Gujarat.

# 12 Indians stranded for two months in Libya rescued



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Taking a serious note of some Indian nationals stranded in Libya after promised lucrative jobs, Ministry of External Affairs and National Commission for Minorities in a joint effort managed to bring back all 12 of them. The rescued people were from the minority community from Punjab.

Giving details here on Sunday, officials said a joint effort of the National Commission for Minorities, Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian embassy in Tunisia helped rescue 12 Indian workers who were stranded in Libya for the past two months. They were illegally taken to Libya from Punjab by an agent who promised them lucrative jobs, good salary and a happy life.

A statement released by the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) informed that after they were taken to

Libya, they were offered jobs in private companies without any salary and kept as bonded labour. They also alleged that they were brutally beaten and not even offered proper food.

Chairperson of NCM Iqbal Singh Lalpura received a representation from some local leaders with a request to bring them back as they belong to the minority communities. He forwarded the representation to the ministry on February 6 and requested it to initiate action. The embassy of India in Tunisia was also contacted in this regard. As informed by the embassy, a resident of Benghazi in Libya helped in providing humanitarian assistance and relief supplies to the stranded Indians. With the help of the ministry and the embassy, four out of 12 Indians were successfully brought back from Libya on February 12. The remaining eight workers were brought back on March 2, it said.

# 'Hit team' member of banned PFI held for BJP leader's murder

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Sunday said it has tracked down an absconding Service Team (Hit Team) member in Praveen Nettaru Murder Case and arrested Thufail M H (Kodagu district Head of PFI Service Team/Hit Team and former PFI district Secretary of Kodagu) from his Bengaluru hideout.

"After painstakingly pursuing and developing leads from various sources, a NIA team managed to find him from the hole up and overpower absconder Thufail M H from his hideout in Amaruthahalli area of Bengaluru City. He was arrested late last night by the NIA," the agency said in a statement.

Tufail was wanted in the murder case of Praveen Nettaru, BJP



Yuva Morcha Member, who was murdered by PFI cadres in July 2022 in Bellare village of Sullia Taluk in Dakshina Kannada District.

In January 2023, NIA filed a chargesheet in the case against 20 accused persons before NIA Special Court, Bengaluru, including six absconding accused.

The NIA alleged Thufail M H had played a significant role in PFI's larger conspiracy to murder leaders of a particular community.

He also provided shelter and safe harbor at Ashiyana residency of Koppa village, Mysuru District to the three assailants of this case, who had reconnoitered and then hacked Praveen Nettaru to death.

Earlier, Thufail was also accused in FIR Number 79/2016 of Kushalnagar Rural Police Station (Prashanth Poojari murder case) and FIR Number 112/2012 of the same police station at Madikeri (attempt to murder VHP leader Ganesh).

# Intricacies of Rahul's remarks lost on BJP: Cong

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday said the intricacies of Rahul Gandhi's remarks in his Cambridge University lecture were lost out on the BJP and noted that he had defined key differences between a State-controlled corporation system of China and the pressing need for democratic nations like India to ramp up production mechanisms.

The Opposition party's reaction came after the BJP accused Rahul Gandhi of maligning India on foreign soil while praising China.

Tagging a short video of

Rahul's remarks at the university, Congress chief spokesman Jairam Ramesh said the former party chief clearly defines in his Cambridge lecture the key differences between a state-controlled corporation system as there is in China and the pressing need for democratic nations like India to ramp up production mechanisms – the intricacies of which are lost on the BJP.

"Whereas PM Modi simply gushes over his 'close friendship' with the Chinese," Ramesh said, tagging a video montage of Modi talking about ties with China.

The former Congress chief remarks at the university that Indian democracy is under attack and several politicians, including



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in conversation with the Indian Journalists' Association in London

himself, are under surveillance, has triggered a political slugfest with

the BJP accusing him of denigrating India and asking if Gandhi

was working as an agent on the payroll of an agency to bring down the country.

Congress has hit back by citing instances of Prime Minister Narendra Modi raking up internal politics abroad and said the ruling party's statements either stem from ignorance or from "completely contrived politics" both of which have no place in a democracy.

Referencing to a decline in manufacturing in democratic countries such as India and the US in recent years as production shifted to China, Gandhi had said the shift had produced mass inequality and anger which needed urgent attention and dialogue.

# Rajnath to address top Navy Commanders

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Navy ,for the first time, will start its commanders' conference from the recently inducted indigenously built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh will address the inaugural session of the meet onboard the carrier on Monday off the coast of Goa.

The aircraft carrier was commissioned into the Navy by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September last year. India now has two aircraft carriers including INS Vikrant and Russian built INS Vikramaditya.

As regards the commanders' meet, it is held twice a year where the top echelon of the force review the operational readiness in the maritime domain. Situation in the strategically important Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean will be discussed in detail in the backdrop of China adopting an aggressive stance there in the upcoming meet.

Giving details of the five-day conclave beginning Monday, navy officials said here on Sunday the conference serves as a platform for Naval Commanders to discuss important security issues at the military-strategic level as well as interact with Senior Government



functionaries through an institutionalised forum.

The novelty of this year's conference lies in the fact that the first phase of the Commanders' Conference is being held at sea, and for the first-time, onboard India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant.

Rajnath will address the Naval Commanders onboard INS Vikrant on the conference's opening day. The Chief of Defence Staff and the Chiefs of the Indian Army and Indian Air Force will also interact with the Naval Commanders on subsequent days to address the convergence of the three Services vis-à-vis common operational environment, and avenues of augmenting Tri-Service synergy and readiness towards the defence of the nation and India's national interests. An operational demonstration at sea is also planned as part of the activities on Day one.

Navy chief, along with other

Naval Commanders will review major Operational, Materiel, Logistics, Human Resource Development, Training and Administrative activities undertaken by the Indian Navy in the last six months and further deliberate upon future plans for important activities and initiatives.

During the conference, Naval Commanders would also be provided with an update on 'Agnipath Scheme' executed in the Indian Navy in November last year.

The first batch of Agniveers, which also includes the first batch of women Agniveers of the Indian Armed Forces, is scheduled to pass out from INS Chilka in March end.

Due to the prevailing geostrategic situation in the region, the Conference has its own significance and relevance. The Navy has witnessed significant growth in its operational tasking over the years in consonance with India's growing maritime interests.

The Commanders would also deliberate the Navy's readiness to address the challenges to our Maritime interests. The Indian Navy remains focused on being a combat-ready, credible, cohesive and future-proof force and continues to assiduously execute its mandate as the maritime security guarantor of the country.

# 'Judiciary must be allowed to interpret Constitution'



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The judiciary must be allowed to interpret the Constitution and its independence is not just a legal principle but fundamental pillar of a vibrant democracy, Justice Hima Kohli of the Supreme Court has said.

"It is imperative that all three pillars (legislature, executive and judiciary) of the State work in parallel and not in tandem, at arm's length and not hand in hand, to give strength to the democratic system.

"This itself will preserve the independence of the judiciary and protect its autonomy and impartiality. It is equally essential to recognise the judiciary's role in the constitutional dialogue as it acts like a safety valve for fostering our democratic values," Justice Kohli said.

She was speaking on the subject of "Independent Judiciary: Critical for a Vibrant Democracy" at a function organised by FICCI in collaboration with Bharat Chamber of Commerce and the Indian Council of Arbitration in Kolkata on Saturday.

# Bamboo crash barriers' installation planned on highways, expressways

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

To reduce the use of metallic, fibre, concrete etc in fencing crash barrier along the highways expressways and roads, an innovative way to use home-grown bamboo as crash barriers is being planned in large scale which will also earn carbon credits and translate into large scale employment opportunities both in rural as well as urban spheres.

With the India will become the world's first country to develop environmental friendly and pure natural crash barriers out of bamboos. The Nitin Gadkari led Road Transport and Highways Ministry has christened it a rustic lingo as 'Bahu Balli', where Bahu stands for Strength and Balli is Bamboo pole. The word has been picked similar to the word south India blockbuster Bahubali.

A prototype, bamboo crash barrier has been installed within a radius of 200 meters on the Vani-Warora highway in Nagpur area of Maharashtra. The 200-meter-long bamboo crash barrier has been installed on a highway connecting Chandrapur and Yavatmal districts in Maharashtra.

Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari described it as a special achievement for the country in the direction of self-reliant India. He said that this crash barrier is the right alternative to steel and it also does not harm the environment.

Road Ministry officials said the crash barrier has been installed only after testing the strength. Its strength has been tested in government institutions like the National Automotive Test Tracks (NATRAX) at Indore. "The barrier was then subjected to a fire rating test at the Central Building Research Institute (CBRI) in Roorkee, in which it received a Class 1 rating. The Indian Road Congress also recognized this," said the official.

Bamboo barriers are being described as a better step



towards Atmanirbhar Bharat and environmental protection. "Actually, it is a good alternative to steel barriers. While recycling value of steel or fibre crash barriers is 30-50 percent, while the recycling value of bamboo barriers is 50-70 percent," added the official.

Bamboo crash barrier has been made from the bamboo species Bambusa balcooa, which has been treated with creosote oil. It has a coating of recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE). This is also likely to give a boost to rural industry and employment for the ever growing demand with the expansion, renovation and extensions of highways and expressways.

The Centre has been aiming to reduce carbon emissions in construction activities related to the road and highways infrastructure.

India has the 2nd longest road network in the world. Amongst the different types of roads, the National Highways extending to 1,44,634 km l till date. Construction and maintenance of roads is known to be a source of CO2, which is over and above the CO2 emitted from fuel operated vehicles on roads.

"The new and improved state of the art NH replacing congested and often circuitous routes, however, can help avoid CO2 emissions by reducing fuel combustion in vehicles plying on them as well the constructions activities," explained the official.

# Workers' safety: Bihar team satisfied with TN Govt

PTI ■ COIMBATORE

A day after holding talks with Tamil Nadu government authorities over the brewing migrant workers issue in Chennai, the official delegation from Bihar visited knitwear hub Tirupur on Sunday to check on the safety of workers from the northern state after fake videos claiming attacks on the workforce had led to panic among them.

Led by Bihar Rural Development Secretary D Balamurugan, the four-member team expressed satisfaction over the steps taken by Tamil Nadu government and the Tirupur district administration to ensure safety and protection of the workers.

They discussed the issue with the officials including District Collector S Vineeth and Police Commissioner Praveen Kumar, representatives of textile industry and contractors who bring in workers from other states, Balamurugan said.

The delegation also interacted with the workers and told



them not to believe in rumours and fake videos, after which they regained their confidence, as many of them considered the information coming from them to be true, the senior officer said.

"We are satisfied by the steps taken by Tamil Nadu government and the district administration in ensuring safety of the workers to allay the fears from their minds," he said.

These confidence building measures have brought the situation to normalcy, the delegation said.

More than 1.7 lakh migrant workers are employed in Tirupur in readymade gar-

ment manufacturing and allied industries, district officials said.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Saturday had reassured his Bihar counterpart Nitish Kumar that all migrant workers are safe and the police of the southern state registered cases against two journalists, including the editor of a Hindi daily for spreading rumours.

The issue of fake claims on attacks in Tamil Nadu on migrant workforce snowballed into a political slugfest between the ruling DMK and the BJP. The saffron party targeted the Nitish Kumar-led regime in Bihar, which dispatched an official team for fact finding.

## Don't panic, people of TN friendly: Guv to workers

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi on Sunday sought to assuage any apprehensions of migrant workers in Tamil Nadu in the wake of alleged rumours of some of them being attacked in the state, saying the TN people were nice and friendly.

The workers need not panic, the Raj Bhavan said in tweets posted in Tamil, English and Hindi. "Governor urged the North Indian labourers in Tamil Nadu not to panic and feel insecure, as the people of Tamil Nadu are very nice and friendly, and the state government is committed to provide them security," Raj Bhavan said on its official Twitter handle.

On Saturday, Chief Minister M K Stalin had assured his Bihar counterpart Nitish Kumar all migrant



labourers in the state were safe and that the police had registered cases against two journalists of a Hindi daily for spreading rumours.

Deposed AIADMK leader O Panneerselvam said the state government was duty-bound to ensure the safety of the migrant workers and at the same time see to it that youth belonging to Tamil Nadu get employment in companies located in the state.

Meanwhile, BJP state unit chief K Annamalai was reportedly booked by the police in connection with the issue.

## Tejashwi slams BJP over 'attacks' on migrants

PTI ■ PATNA

Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav on Sunday slammed the BJP over the controversy around alleged attacks on migrants in Tamil Nadu, citing "lack of concern" on part of the Centre in the matter involving two states.

The RJD leader also said he was awaiting a report on the situation in Tamil Nadu by a team that went there the day before, though he also warned against generalised assumptions on the basis of isolated incidents.

"If a few people behave badly in Bihar, it must not be held out against the entire state. We must apply the same yardstick to Tamil Nadu as well," said Yadav, who has drawn flak from the BJP for his recent trip to Chennai upon Tamil Nadu Chief



Minister M K Stalin's invitation.

He also said, "I had simply read out, in the assembly, a statement issued by the DGP of Tamil Nadu who has denied violence against migrants. I never said I was taking it at face value. The reason why the government, of which I am a part, has sent a team is to get first-hand information."

A four-member team of officials from Bihar on

Saturday left for Tamil Nadu to look into allegations of attacks on migrant workers, which has been denied by the southern state.

"We have done what we could. But the BJP, which is in the opposition in Bihar, but rules the Centre, needs to be questioned. The Union government has, so far, shown lack of concern though this matter involves two states."

He also cited a newspaper report claiming that the Tamil Nadu BJP president, in a telephonic talk with his Bihar counterpart, has denied any violence against migrants in the southern state.

"This report, besides an FIR lodged against a BJP spokesman for sharing false and inflammatory material on Twitter, is things on which the BJP owes an answer," Yadav asserted.

# Narco money goes back to Pak for terror in J&K: DGP

PTI ■ JAMMU

Money generated from the narcotics trade is returned to Pakistan and subsequently used to fund terror activities in Jammu and Kashmir, Director-General of Police Dilbag Singh on Sunday.

Singh's comment comes close on the heels of a large stockpile of drugs, cash and weapons being recovered near the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch.

"We are faced with a new challenge where the drugs and weapons are smuggled from Pakistan together. While the weapons are delivered to the terrorists, the major part of the drug proceeds are returned to handlers (across the border) and the rest shared by the peddlers. "The proceeds (from the drugs trade) are being utilised to keep terrorism alive (in Jammu and Kashmir)," the police chief told reporters here on the sidelines of the Jammu Marathon.

The 'Run for Fun' Jammu Marathon was organised by the police here as part of its civic action programme and drew hundreds of participants from all walks of life at Gulshan Ground.

Responding to a question on the seizure of seven kilogramme of heroin, over Rs 2.30 crore in cash and some arms and ammunition from the home of a notorious drug pedler in Mandi sector on March 3, Singh said a dozen major peddling rackets had been busted in the recent past.

"The probes unearthed interstate connections of drug



trafficking, especially connected to Punjab, and raids were conducted. We are also roping in the Narcotics Control Bureau and, like in the past, investigated various cases together.

"In this (Poonch) case, the entire module involved in the drug trafficking will be unveiled and stern action taken against those found involved," he said.

This was the second time such a huge recovery of cash was made near the Line of Control following the earlier seizure of Rs 1.50 crore in Poonch.

"The money generated from the drugs trade is returned to handlers in Pakistan who use the cash to fund terror activities. Some cash is handed over to infiltrating terrorists. Money is also sent to this side by drones," he said.

Singh said if anyone is assigned the task of triggering a blast, he is given both the improvised explosive device and the prize money in advance by drone.

"This is the same money that is generated by the drugs trade and used by Pakistani

agencies and terrorist groups operating from there," Singh said.

Asked about the criticism of security agencies by certain political leaders, he said they must refrain from making such comments and added that otherwise, action will be taken if the need arises.

"Politicians will play politics but the police and the forces have to do their own work. It is not good on the part of anyone, whether a politician or otherwise, to do something that will vitiate the peaceful atmosphere. People should desist from such things," he said.

The police chief said, "We have opposed such type of actions (criticism of police) and when, at times, the things move beyond a limit, action is being taken accordingly."

Speaking on the security arrangements for the upcoming G20 meetings, Singh said necessary measures would be ensured for the events' success.

"It is a proud moment for all of us that a few G20 events are being organised in Jammu and Kashmir. We are making adequate arrangements to ensure security.

# Villagers near the LoC ecstatic as Indo-Pak ceasefire enters 3rd yr

PTI ■ RAJOURI/JAMMU

Mohammad Yousuf Kohli is constructing a new house for his family of six in a forward village near the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri district, a dream which he says is fulfilled only because of the ceasefire between India and Pakistan that entered its third year last month.

The border villagers are enjoying peace along the borders by going for normal activities like tending their land and grazing their cattle without the fear of cross-border shelling.

The villagers said they are praying for continuation of the agreement so that the schooling of their children is not affected and benefits of developmental activities reach the last village on the border.

On February 25, 2021, India and Pakistan announced implementation of renewed ceasefire along the borders in Jammu and Kashmir, which came as a major relief to the people living along the LoC and the International Border.

India and Pakistan had initially signed a ceasefire agreement in 2003, but Pakistan frequently violated the agreement with over 5,000 violations reported in 2020 - the highest



in a single year.

"For the last four years, my family was thinking of constructing a new house but we were not able to do this as ceasefire violation was a regular scene in our village," Kohli's elder son Ibrar Ahmd, a college student, told PTI at the construction site in his Niaika village which is close to the LoC. He said even repairing houses damaged due to shelling was a distant dream as venturing out of the house was like going into the death trap.

"No mason or labourer used to come for work in our village."

"But things have changed now and we are living our lives in a calm atmosphere with everyone busy in their normal routine," he said.

Niaika is the last village on the Indian side in Tarkundi sector of Manjakote tehsil and was witness of intense shelling before February 2021. Two women of the village died when a mortar shell from Pakistan hit their houses in the village in 2017.

## Cong launches 'Haath Se Haath Jodo' drive in J&K



PTI ■ JAMMU

The Congress launched a month-long 'Haath Se Haath Jodo' campaign from here on Sunday, with its leaders and workers chanting slogans against the imposition of property tax and calling for early restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's statehood.

Led by AICC incharge of 'Haath Se Haath Jodo' yatra in Jammu and Kashmir Bharat Singh Solanki and Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president Vikar Rasool Wani, the yatra began from Janipur and headed to Raipur in Jammu north assembly.

Jammu and Kashmir Congress working president Raman Bhalla, former ministers Mula Ram and Yogesh Sawhney, party chief spokesperson Ravinder Sharma and other senior leaders joined the march which saw participants raise slogans against property tax and anti-encroachment drives.

They also carried placards criticising the BJP-led central government over its alleged failure to check inflation and provide employment to the educated youth.

# BJP falls back on BSY, makes him 'mascot' for Assembly polls

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The BJP seems to be falling back on its seasoned oarsman B S Yediyurappa making him a key poll mascot, along with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as it shores up campaign in poll-bound Karnataka.

The octogenarian, who has already announced his retirement from electoral politics, is sought to be put on the pedestal by the governing party's central leaders.

The reasons are not far to seek as to why Yediyurappa has been pushed to the top of the campaign plank, the four-time Chief Minister, who built the party from grassroots level, has a mass appeal and connect — particularly the political influential Lingayat community — that no other party leader in the State commands.

It's now quite evident from the BJP's campaign narrative that the party is banking on the "Yediyurappa factor" and putting him up as the "poster boy" by leveraging his clout to the hilt.

The BJP central leadership have been lavish in their praise of Yediyurappa, during their public meetings in the State in recent days.



## K'taka Cong calls statewide bandh on March 9 against BJP's 'graft'

PTI ■ TUMAKURU (K'TAKA)

The Karnataka Congress has called for a two-hour long bandh on March 9, as part of its fight against alleged corruption by ruling BJP, following the recovery of over Rs 8 crore cash from its MLA Madal Virupakshappa's son Prashanth Kumar M V, by Lokayukta, in an apparent bribery case.

Announcing the bandh from 9 to 11 am that day, Karnataka Congress president D K Shivakumar on Sunday said, schools, colleges, transport and health services will not be disturbed.

Lokayukta police seized Rs 8.02 crore in cash belonging to Kumar, this includes Rs 6.1 crore from his residence in Bengaluru on Friday and Rs 2.02 crore from his private office on Thursday.

Of the Rs 2.02 crore, Rs 40 lakh was allegedly the bribe that Kumar had received from the head of a private company that had won a contract to supply raw materials to the Karnataka Soaps and Detergents Ltd (KSDL), of which his father Virupakshappa was the Chairman, the post from which he resigned on Friday.

# 'EC has taken away Sena's name, symbol but can never take party away from me'



PTI ■ KHED

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday said the Election Commission has allotted the party's name and symbol to the rebel faction but the poll body can never take away the party from him.

Addressing a rally for the first time after losing the party name and election symbol "bow and arrow" to the faction led by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, Thackeray said he has nothing to offer to his supporters.

"I have come to seek your blessings and support," he said.

In a big blow to Uddhav Thackeray, the Election Commission had last month allotted the name 'Shiv Sena'

and its poll symbol to the group led by Shinde who has the support of most of the MLAs of Shiv Sena.

Thackeray said he didn't accept the EC's decision.

"If the Election Commission is not suffering from cataracts it should come and see the ground situation. The EC is a 'chuna lagav' commission and a slave of those in power. The principle based on which the EC took this decision is wrong," he said.

Thackeray said the party has appealed in the Supreme Court. "You (the Election Commission) have taken away the party name and the symbol from us, but you can't take away Shiv Sena from me," he said pointing out a huge turnout at the rally.

# Adenovirus alarm: 94 kids die in 2 months in Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bengal, including capital Kolkata, continued to be in the grip of deadly adenovirus with scores of children succumbing to the diseases almost on an hourly basis, health department sources said asking the parents however to take precautionary measures instead of pressing the panic button.

Even as the adeno menace continued to spread its tentacles in newer areas at least six children succumbed to the deadly virus in a close span of seven hours at state-of-art BC Roy Hospital on Sunday morning.

The Sunday's deaths took the toll to 94 in past about two months, sources said adding these were the confirmed reports of adeno deaths and there could be many more unconfirmed adeno deaths. About 5,500 children all over the state have been infected by the virus Health department sources said adding the number could be even higher as many more children are getting cured without even visiting the hospitals.

Unlike corona which is RNA virus, Adeno is a DNA virus first isolated in the 1950s



in adenoid tissue. These primary cell cultures were often noted to spontaneously degenerate over time, and adenoviruses are now known to be a common cause of asymptomatic respiratory tract infection that produces in vitro cytolysis in these tissues.

The Health Department has issued advisory to the doctors to take special care of children --- especially those who are two years or younger --- admitted with flu-like symptoms. Instances are also there that many children often 14-15-year-old are also getting infected and have to be hospitalized and put under life support system.

The common symptoms of adenovirus are flu-like including cold, fever, breathing problems, sore throat, pneumonia, and acute bronchitis.

The virus can spread through skin contact, by air through coughing and sneezing, and through an infected person's stools. So far, there are no approved medicines or any specific treatment-line to treat the virus, doctors said adding standard symptomatic treatment using paracetamol is advised.

Antibiotics may be given but only by the medical practitioners to avoid secondary infection.

Various known diseases like conjunctivitis and some kind of flue are caused due to adenovirus, doctors at BC Roy Hospital said adding, "it comes every year ... but this year it is more infectious and is mostly attacking the children ... normally it is harmless but can turn serious or even fatal in children with co-morbidities."

## Path to progress

PM Modi’s continued emphasis on infrastructure development will boost growth and prosperity

Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightly said on Saturday, “Infrastructure development is the driving force of the country’s economy.” He was addressing a post-Budget webinar. He is relentless in his focus on infrastructure development. This fact can be better comprehended if we look at the big picture of infrastructure—in a historical perspective. A close look will show that the conspicuous feature of prime ministers belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party is their emphasis on infrastructure development. In 2001, Atal Bihari Vajpayee launched the Golden Quadrilateral Highway Project. Many experts and his detractors ridiculed him for his bold initiative. The biggest point of criticism was: where is the money for this ambitious project? The criticism was not without substance, for the fiscal deficit as a proportion of gross domestic product or GDP was estimated at 5.5 per cent for 2000-01 and 5.1 per cent for 2001-02. The revenue deficit, which reflects the excess of current expenditure over the current receipts, was 3.2 per cent of GDP in 2001-02. Despite the criticism and the derision the idea of Golden Quadrilateral was treated with, it proved to be successful. It was carried forward by the Congress-led UPA, though sluggishly. Which was not surprising given the UPA’s Left-leaning policies. The UPA regime was excessively focused on entitlement-oriented, revenue-guzzling programmes.

It is not that the Modi Govt has disbanded the welfare state; quite the contrary, it has made welfare measures extremely efficacious by streamlining the delivery mechanisms. Technology has been deployed for this purpose. In fact, the efficiency of pro-poor measures has improved to such an extent that political analysts had to coin a new term for the beneficiaries—labharthies. This has also helped the BJP in various elections. At the same time, the Govt has persisted with its emphasis on infrastructure. So, in her Budget 2023-24, Nirmala Sitharaman hugely increased, third time in a row, capital investment outlays. For the next fiscal, capital expenditure has been pegged at Rs 10 lakh crore, which would be 33 per cent more than the one in 2022-23. This is a big sum, around 3.3 per cent of the country’s GDP. The ‘effective capital expenditure’ would be to the tune of Rs 13.7 lakh crore if the provision for the creation of capital assets through grants-in-aid to states is also taken into account. Under Modi, infrastructure development has already made considerable progress, but he is impatient: “Now we have to improve our speed and move in top gear.” The PM Gati Shakti Master Plan is a critical tool which will “change the face of India’s infrastructure and its multimodal logistics.” Commenting on the prevailing mentality that poverty is a virtue, PM Modi claimed that his present government has not only been successful in eliminating this mentality but also in making record investments in modern infrastructure. The good work should continue.



Children suffering from cerebral palsy play with colours during Holi celebrations, in Prayagraj

## BJP: The formidable election machine

BJP’s success in the North East shows that it is a well-oiled formidable election machine that takes up challengers head on

Barely two months into 2023 and the election scene for the National polls due in 2024 is already hot. While Rahul Gandhi of the Congress party has finished his Bharat Jodo Yatra, in an attempt to unify the party and the country, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has hit the ground running. On January 16 and 17, the party held its national executive meeting in the capital. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who remains the chief vote-getter for the party, put out an impressive road show. The state Assembly polls are now the priority.

It wouldn’t be wrong to say that India, as a country, is always in election mode. And the BJP is a party that today matches that fervour, as being a political party that has evolved into a formidable election machine. This year nine States will go to the polls followed by the 2024 National elections in which Modi is expected to seek a straight third term as Prime Minister. There are many who predict that 2024 is a done deal and that the BJP in all likelihood will come back to power. There are many reasons



behind the evolution of the BJP from a fringe political party to the world’s largest political party today. As of 2019, its total membership stood at 180 million and it leaves the Chinese Communist Party in the second slot in terms of the number of members. It is also the richest political party in India today. Its cadre which is spread across the country is one of its biggest strengths. The party, despite its impressive political victories in the last decade, doesn’t take any election lightly. A simple pointer in this direction is the recent Delhi Municipal elections which saw BJP ministers and leaders campaigning hard. Party insiders point out that in 2024, the emphasis will be on the 144 seats that the

party didn’t win in 2019. Another factor that the party has been building on in recent years is its social media outreach. Other parties realised the potential of digital media in mobilising public opinion much later. It is estimated that from 2014 to 2019, Internet users in India increased by 65%. This surpasses mainstream media and also gives social media the power to influence opinions and narratives. It is estimated that today the party supervises at least 100,000 WhatsApp groups and over 100 pages on Facebook. This electoral battle in the social media space is something the Opposition is still far behind. The BJP as a party also relies strongly on data and planning. The welfare

## Bringing the metaverse to life

The emerging use cases for Web3 and Blockchain can bring about a radical change in governance, writes **Karam Grover**

Web3 products and services are capable of providing digital solutions to real-world problems across multiple sectors – be it healthcare, public administration, law and order, entertainment, education... the list is endless. Web3 refers to a group of technologies including blockchain, virtual digital assets including NFTs, DeFi etc. It enables decentralisation and increases transparency, allowing users of the internet to retain ownership over their data.

The applications of this transformative technology are growing in popularity in India. According to a report on Web3 by KMPG, India ranks fifth worldwide in terms of consumer interest in blockchain-based products and services, after the United States, Indonesia, Japan and the Philippines. Over 5 lakh Indians (as of November 2021), many from the ‘Gen Z’ age group, have indicated an interest in non-fungible tokens (NFTs). More than half of consumers surveyed said that they are interested in both physical and virtual goods, and about 46% said that they would be willing to shop on the Metaverse.

**HEALTHCARE** The highly sensitive and personal nature of medical records demands a drastic change in the way the healthcare industry operates. Modern healthcare facilities operating under Web 2.0 have become data centres that control and monetise patient information – a prospect that gives rise to serious ethical concerns. A decentralised patient information system under Web3 redirects the focus towards patients as central to the healthcare system and not merely a source of revenue. A Web3 healthcare metaverse, for instance, could allow patients to interact with doctors without relinquishing control over their personal information. More crucially, Web3 has the potential of providing seamless virtual assistance to patients who may not otherwise be able to access quality healthcare – readers may be able to recall the magnitude of



this problem when the Covid19 pandemic was at its peak.

**LAND RECORDS** The Government of India 2016 launched the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP), an ambitious project aimed at digitising India’s 800 million parcels of land, whereby each parcel of land is surveyed and assigned a Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN). Poorly kept land records have translated into millions of land disputes before the courts of India, which stretch on for years at a time and could span multiple generations. Web3 solutions could go a long way in tackling this monumental problem.

**DIGITAL IDENTITY** With individual virtual presences growing at break-neck speed and immense volumes of data being processed every minute of every day, it is of paramount importance that individuals be given sovereignty over their personal data and identity. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in December 2021 published its National Strategy on Blockchain, which noted “Identity management” in its

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OFFICIALS ARE ADOPTING BLOCKCHAIN IN DELHI’S FORENSIC SCIENCE LABORATORY (FSL) FOR FAILSAFE RECORDING AND STORAGE OF EVIDENCE OBTAINED FROM CRIME SCENES

list of potential applications, and also considered the use of technologies such as Self Sovereign Identity and Zero Knowledge Proof, among others, for integration into existing frameworks at the appropriate layers.

This is a prime example of how distributed ledger technology (DLT) can be used to create a digital infrastructure where citizens’ digital personal data and digital identity can be recorded on the blockchain in a democratic manner, with individuals in the driving seat vis-à-vis their own personal data.

**IT SERVICES** India’s world-famous IT sector is also making inroads into the metaverse, with companies like Tech Mahindra throwing their hat into the ring. Tech Mahindra is exploring use cases such as car dealerships, gaming centres, NFT marketplaces, and virtual banks and intends to provide an immersive metaverse experience for its customers. Hyperlink Infosystem – another multinational corporation headquartered in India – is looking to leverage its expertise in developing applications using blockchain, AI, metaverse, IoT and so on.

**LAWF ENFORCEMENT** A most interesting new use case that has emerged

recently is the use of DLT by crime investigation units in New Delhi. Officials are adopting blockchain in Delhi’s Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) for failsafe recording and storage of evidence obtained from crime scenes. This is part of a larger ongoing exercise by the Delhi Police to foster greater public trust in the criminal investigation system.

**EDUCATION** Web3 and the metaverse are expected to impact the world of education and learning in a big way, through virtual campuses and ‘gamified’ learning experiences where students can unlock new chapters and earn points. There are many use cases for the Metaverse in learning, such as virtual labs, exam simulations, practical skill set training, and so on.

The process is already underway worldwide, with Hong Kong University has launched its first virtual campus. In India, Mahindra University has collaborated with Tech Mahindra to establish a ‘Makers lab’ to facilitate development in the metaverse.

(The writer is the Director of Public Policy at Aakhya India. The views expressed are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### GST ON HEALTHCARE

Sir — It is shocking that the patients are forced to shell out an extra 5 per cent by way of GST towards room rent of hospitals if the rent exceeds Rs. 5000 per day. A decision to this effect has been reported to have been taken at the 47th GST council meeting. This rule shall come into force from July 18. This is the indirect tax levied on people because, in any business activity, the tax burden is shifted onto the consumers of Goods and Services. Patients are hit hard by the decision of the government. The Council is also said to have decided to levy GST @ 12% on biomedical waste treatment plants. It has also been decided that no input tax credit would be given. The input tax credit is the output tax minus the input tax already paid the balance output tax becomes payable. This has also been denied.

The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) has reportedly written to the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Seetharaman seeking zero rates GST for healthcare services to enable service providers to claim an input tax credit (ITC). Nirmala Seetharaman is not people-friendly. She has been exploring the possibilities of augmenting more and more revenue to show that the economy is rosy. Many patients will be fighting the battle of life and death. GST on healthcare cuts into the pocket of patients already groaning under heavy medical expenses. People are voting for the charisma of Modi. The Finance Minister should not take undue advantage of Modi’s fair name.

Efforts must be made to recover the tax from habitual offenders. Properties of the people who have acquired wealth disproportionate to their known sources of income must be confiscated. The courts must come to the support of the government in breaking the backbone of economic delinquents. This would alleviate the tax burden on honest taxpayers. If patients are also persecuted financially, the BJP will be at risk of losing the next Lok

### Controversial Holi ban



The Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi has banned the Holi celebration on its campus, sparking a huge uproar. The university administration’s ruling on banning the celebration of Holi has caused a tremendous uproar among the student body and on social media. Additionally, it was brought forth that the same Banaras Hindu University had hosted an alleged Iftar celebration. The University issued a directive on February 28, 2023, forbidding students from participating in Holi celebrations on campus. The university administration warned that individuals who disobey this directive will face consequences. On

March 3, 2023, students disobeyed the prohibition and observed Holi on campus and in their respective dorms. On Thursday, however, BHU students violated this ban and enjoyed Holi on campus. The students reportedly marked the celebration by shoving one other about in mud and water while listening to music on DJ systems. Together with the enjoyment, they also rebelled against the administrator, and the ban decision made the fun even more intense. All directors, faculty deans, and administrative patrons were urged to take administrative measures against offenders in this regard. On April 26, 2022, VC Professor Sudhir Jain of BHU hosted an Iftar celebration on campus, which led to student protests. The vice chancellor and numerous professors attended an Iftar celebration held on the campus of Women’s College during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. With this, there is a tense moment at BHU and the coming days will be crucial.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

Sabha election. Sitharaman must read the writings on the wall.

K V Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

### CONTRADICTING VIEWS ON PITCHES

Sir — While spin pitches are delivering results within 3 days (of a test match) and arousing interest in the test format, the losing team and nation are crying foul of the pitch. The same team is appreciating the spin (turning) pitch when it wins the match. This sounds contradictory.

Hence prepare pitches that encourage all types of bowling i.e. spin, pace etc. Then the real skills of both batsmen and bowlers are elucidated. To avoid boredom of all-5 days of play without result, limit each of the 4 innings of a test match to 50 overs. The result is guaranteed, that too within a short and limited period.

Madhu Sreelekha PS | Secunderabad

### GEORGIA MELONI’S ADDRESS

Sir — In her recent joint interaction with Her Indian Counterpart Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Italian Prime Minister

Georgia Meloni addressed Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a very beloved, benevolent leader across the Globe.

This remark came into the spotlight as the 2 Nations India and Italy are on the way to tying up the rope for the start-up journeys on the vivid platforms as in the past few recent years, India has been one of the emerging Countries in terms of start-ups. Diplomatic Relations are one of the strongest weapons that India has been using since its inception.

Italy is India’s fourth largest European trading partner and the 12th largest foreign investor in the country with FDI reaching the US\$2 billion mark in 2020. With this continuous Joint venture technique Italy and India can further strengthen Bilateral relations in every aspect of governance and can prove to each other’s Comrades

Sarthak Sharma | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

FIVE-DAY WEEK: BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Many countries have introduced shorter work weeks which are productive and cost effective



S KALYANASUNDARAM

Bank employees are finally getting their long pending demand of a five-day work week with the Indian Banks Association (IBA) considering giving them fixed two days off every week. At present banks are closed on all Sundays and the second and fourth Saturdays in a month. According to media reports, the IBA and the United Forum of Bank Unions have tentatively agreed to implement a five-day workweek. This needs final approval by the Government. Currently, bank employees work on alternate Saturdays. However, with the new proposal in place, banks may remain closed on all Saturdays, leading to an increase in bank holidays. This move, if approved, will provide much-needed relief to bank employees who have been demanding a five-day workweek for a long time. According to reports, as per the new proposal in a five-day work week, the working hours will be increased for the bankers. This means that employees will need to work 40 minutes more every day from 9.45 am to 5.30 pm.

For the past many years, bank employees have been demanding a five day work week, as it is prevalent all over the world and also as it is prevailing in other segments in India. It is unexplainable why the bank management (read it as government) has taken so many years to concede the same, while the government itself has adopted a five day week.

Only the Banking department of the Reserve Bank of India works on the first and third Saturdays of the month and even here cash counters are not open to the public. This is kept so as in alignment with the commercial banks. Otherwise, in a way, RBI is also following five days a week for many of its functions. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), which has taken over the Agricultural credit functions of RBI, is also working five days a week. The Supreme Court of India has 193 working days a year for its judicial functioning, while the various High Courts function for approximately 210 days, and trial courts for 245 days. When the bank employees were struggling to convince the government to have a 5-day week, other developed countries are trying to experiment with a 4-day week. When a five-day week is adopted, various benefits accrue to the banks and the following are considered significant: Enhanced efficiency, Reduced absence rate, Enhanced enterprise competition, Retention of talents and Promotion of corporate image. Complete shutting of offices will also result in considerable savings on the cost of electricity etc. The following benefits may accrue to the employees also: Rest and recuperation leading to greater devotion, Enhance time with family, lesser travel to the office, the scope for further studies and improvement of knowledge. With increased holidays, people may travel more and this will boost the economy.

Indian banks have adopted core banking solutions long back. Most of the transactions can be done online without visiting the bank branch. Practically there is no need for customers to visit a bank branch nowadays. The International Monetary Fund has reported the achievement of India on the following lines (in Sep 2022) "India's digital payment volume has climbed at an average annual rate of about 50 per cent over the past five years. That itself is one of the world's fastest growth rates, but its expansion has been even more rapid—about 160 per cent annually—in India's unique, real-time, mobile-enabled system, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI). Transactions more than doubled, to 5.86 billion, in June from a year earlier as the number of participating banks jumped 44 per cent, to 330. Values nearly doubled in the same period. In addition, the RBI in March introduced a UPI for feature phones (older devices with buttons instead of touchscreens) that can potentially connect 400 million users in distant rural areas. Some customers who could visit the bank branch on Saturdays for their loan processing may not able to do so. Then some industries have peculiar requirements like construction industries which may need huge cash on weekends for payment of wages etc. would have to shift to online payments.

*(The writer is a retired banker. The views expressed are personal.)*

# Resurrecting three farm laws

Farmers will continue to be in distress as long as they are shackled by the state APMC laws

Reports of a farmer from Maharashtra's Solapur getting a measly Rs 2.49 from the sale of 512 kg onions to a trader (for Rs 1 per kg on sale executed at the Solapur market yard, total sale value comes to Rs 512; after deducting labour, weighing, transportation and other charges adding to Rs 509.5, the net realization is Rs 2.49) in the district has led to all-round consternation.

Rs 2.49 is the net revenue from the sale of the crop; it isn't a profit. To arrive at it, we need to deduct from this the cost of producing 512 kg onions which includes the expenses on seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, labour, cost of credit and so on. All of this amount (minus Rs 2.49) is the loss incurred by this farmer. It means an increase in debt and attendant disastrous consequences.

The condition of the majority of other farmers is no less precarious as their realization from sales at depressed prices is far from adequate to fully cover the cost. Juxtapose this with the retail price of an onion being as high as Rs 40 per kg in some markets (albeit domestic) and the current global scenario wherein there is an acute shortage in many countries, so much so, the authorities are forced to take recourse to the ration of its supply in supermarkets. The state of affairs is highly inequitable, unjust and unconscionable.

**Who is responsible for this?**

The small and marginal farmers (those with land holdings less than 2 hectares) who constitute about 86 per cent of the total number of land-owning farmers sell their crop produce on two outlets viz. Agricultural Produce Market Committee or APMC mandi (marketplace notified under the state APMC Act); (ii) 'private local market'.

The "Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India", SAS in short, released by the National Statistical Office (NSO), covering the period July 2018 to June 2019, reveals widespread dissatisfaction among farmers with the price realized from the sale of their produce. Their highest dissatisfaction is with sales in the APMC mandi followed by sales in the private local market.

The low price from sale in APMC mandi has to do with state laws under which farmers can sell their produce only in 'designated' mandis. In the mandi, arthritis – the local term for commission agents (they arrange for auction and delivery of the produce) – and the licensed trader/buyer rule the roost. The duo ensures that the farmer gets a low price besides facing other adversities viz. rejections, weighing less, delayed payment, etc. Levies such as market fees, anthias commission, rural development cess (RDC) etc further add to their woes.

The capacity of APMC mandis is extremely limited; the majority of small and marginal farmers are forced to come to private local markets, where sales are legally barred. At these markets, they end up selling their produce to the very traders who dominate the APMC mandis, at throwaway prices. The latter has the blessings of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians (in many cases, they or their kin also masquerade as traders) and hence, won't face any action for violating the law.



THE CAPACITY OF APMC MANDIS IS EXTREMELY LIMITED; THE MAJORITY OF SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS ARE FORCED TO COME TO PRIVATE LOCAL MARKETS, WHERE SALES ARE LEGALLY BARRED

*(The writer is a policy analyst)*



The farmers also look to the state agencies such as The Food Corporation of India (FCI), National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd (NAFED) etc where their level of dissatisfaction - as per the SAS survey - is low. This is natural as state agencies buy at the minimum support price (MSP) notified by the Union government (at present, it notifies MSP for 23 farm items). But, their purchases are limited.

Except for paddy and wheat where FCI and other state agencies buy only 30 per cent of farmers' produce, for all other crops their purchase is minuscule. In the case of paddy and wheat, the percentage share is high essentially because these purchases are meant for feeding the beneficiaries/poor under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Even so only 6 per cent of farmers - mostly rich with larger land holdings - get the benefit of government procurement.

There has been increasing clamour for the government to substantially hike purchases by its agencies (albeit at MSP), increasing coverage of crops under their procurement plans, legal guarantee for the purchase of all farmers' produce at MSP even by private trade and so on. All of this sounds like building castles in the air.

The government neither has the infrastructure - physical and administrative - nor the financial muscle to purchase, store and handle the mountain of crop produce all farmers offer for sale. Even if, it had, a fundamental question remains whether the State should

be involved in such activity. As for legal backing to MSP, the government can't force a private person to pay a certain price to the farmer. It won't pass judicial scrutiny.

The extant arrangements are far from addressing the concerns of the farmers. What then is the way forward?

**They need to be liberated from the clutches of the state APMC.**

The agri markets should be opened up and farmers allowed to sell their produce in other outlets as well. Towards this end, in 2017, Modi Government passed a Model Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) Law. Besides giving more options to farmers for selling, it provided greater flexibility to traders such as a 'single pan-State licence' for buying from anywhere in the State. But, the majority of the states showed no interest.

In September 2020, the Union government enacted three central farm laws. For this purpose, it invoked entry 33 of the Concurrent List in the Constitution - inserted vide an amendment in 1954 - which allows it to regulate inter-State trade and intra-State trade and enable the purchase of specified farm commodities directly from farmers anywhere in the country, even outside designated APMCs.

The laws fill the existing void by legitimising sales on all non-APMC platforms such as private traders, processors, aggregators, exporters and so on without dis-

turbing APMC mandis. These opened up unlimited opportunities for farmers to sell their produce, thereby helping them get higher prices, which could even exceed MSP depending on the demand-supply scenario. They don't have to pay any levies for selling at non-APMC platforms and can save on transport costs in case the buyer picks up from their doorsteps.

The farmers could also enter into contractual arrangements with enterprises (private companies, cooperatives etc) that would not only give them an assured market at pre-set good prices but also the timely supply of quality agricultural inputs viz. fertilizers, seed, pesticides etc and a package of good agronomic practices for securing higher yield and quality foodstuff.

Despite manifold gains including higher crop yield and remunerative prices and the laws holding a promise of doubling farm income (or even more), these triggered prolonged protests and demonstrations - mostly confined to Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. The intervention of the Supreme Court by staying their implementation in January 2021 and no decision despite having got a recommendation from a committee (set up by none other than itself) favouring these laws emboldened the protestors to continue with their stir. As a result, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was forced to announce the repeal of the laws on November 19, 2021.

# Don't succumb to soft emotions

Different religions have different ethos and value systems; we must understand them and should not get carried away by emotions

Mohammed Ali Jinnah stated that Partition began when the first Hindus converted to Islam. In the course of his presidential address to the Muslim League on March 22, 1940, at Lahore proposing the Partition, he had said: "The question of Hindu-Mohammedan unity is neither possible nor practicable. There is no finer Mohammedan in Hindustan than Hakim Ajmal Khan, but can any Muslim leader override the Quran? Also, what about the injunctions of the Hadiths? No Muslim can override them". He quoted the London Times saying that "the differences between Hindus and Muslims are not only of religion but also of law and culture. They may be said indeed, to represent two



PRAFULL GORADIA

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entirely distinct and separate civilizations". Jinnah continued "Notwithstanding years of close contact, the nationalities, which are as divergent today as ever, cannot at any time be expected to be transformed into one nation". "Moreover, in India", he went on, the problem is manifestly an international one and must treat as such". He further said, "The only course open to them is to allow them to have separate homelands". Further, on the same issue, Jinnah added, "The notion of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits and is the cause of most of our troubles. If not Partition, this will lead India to destruction". "It is extremely difficult to appreciate why our Hindu friends fail to understand the

real nature of Islam and Hinduism. They are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders. It is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality. This notion of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits and is the cause of most of our troubles and will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise this misconception in time. The Hindus and Muslims have different religious philosophies, social customs and literatures. They neither intermarry nor inter-dine and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their views on life and of life are different. It is also

quite clear that Hindus and Muslims derive their inspiration from different sources of history. They have different epics, heroes in different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other and, likewise, their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one a numerical minority and the other a majority, must lead to growing discontent and the final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a state."

It is clear from many discussions on social media that some Pakistani citizens, in desperation born of the current crisis in that country, are suggesting that Pakistan should merge back with India. Many also say that Qaide-e-

Azam Jinnah made a mistake in striving for and achieving Partition. There would be some in India too, who would desire such a merger, for old times' sake. Due to the fundamentals described above most by Jinnah's words - such a merger is not desirable. We in India remember the year 1991, when Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, assisted by the then finance minister Yashwant Sinha, was dispatching gold to London every day, as a pawn against an IMF loan. It was only when P.V. Narasimha Rao became prime minister and New Delhi was able to retry the situation, including getting India's gold back.

We also remember how, some 25 years ago, the Pakistani per capita GDP had overtaken its Indian counter-

part. Such ups and downs are the features of the history of many countries. No country merges with another at the advent of a doubt. In the case of Pakistan, such emotions may be understandable because it has undergone a demerger twice; once in 1947, from India and again in 1971, out of East Pakistan, which subsequently became Bangladesh. New Delhi should, therefore, not take the current emotional outbursts emerging from Pakistan seriously and should turn a deaf ear to such fleeting emotions.

The perennial problem of India is not the issue of the two religions Hinduism and Islam. The inescapable syndrome is the contrasting systems of logic, upon which the two faiths are based. Islam, as well

as Christianity and Judaism, were founded and followed based on a system reminiscent of deductive logic. This branch of logic begins with an assumed premise. In religion, this premise is the assertion that there is only one good and then the logic follows flawlessly. In sharp contrast, the spine of Hinduism is inductive logic, which begins with facts on the ground and moves upwards to a conclusion. This may not be a singular postulate, but merely an agreement to disagree. In light of the difficulties, it would be useful to recount Dr B.R. Ambedkar who had written that from 1920 onwards, India suffered a continual civil war (and in fact, continues to do so). Surely, India should not risk a repeat of that misfortune all over again.

# China sets GDP target to 5% for '23

PTI ■ BEIJING

China on Sunday set a five per cent growth target for 2023 as the country's rubber-stamp Parliament commenced its annual session which also heralded a new era for Xi Jinping's presidency as he began an unprecedented third five-year term.

Premier Li Keqiang, 67, the No. 2 ranked leader after Xi and is widely regarded as far less powerful than his predecessors, signed off his 10-year stint by presenting his last work report to the National People's Congress (NPC) in which China, the world's second-largest economy, set a five per cent growth target for 2023, lowest in decades.

He also firmly warned of "escalating" external attempts to "suppress, and contain" China. "The term of this government is about to come to a close," said Li, as he began his 39-page address to NPC, the national legislature, outlining the decade-old achievement of his administration which included seismic changes in China and its relations with the world.

The NPC during the session will herald new official appointments at the top expected to be packed with Xi's loyalists many of whom were elected along with him at the last October's once-in-a-five-year Congress of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC). The session formally heralded the beginning of the 'unprecedented' third five-year term for Xi.

The Congress, besides electing Xi, 69, for an unprecedented third term also chose most of his loyalists for key bodies consolidating his power at all levels.

Li, an economist and a contender for the post of General Secretary of the CPC in 2012 along with Xi, settled for a number two position



Chinese President Xi Jinping, centre, and other leaders stand during the opening session of China's National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Sunday

## ...increases military spending to \$225 billion

PTI ■ BEIJING

China on Sunday hiked its defence budget by 7.2 per cent, marginally higher than last year, to 1.55 trillion yuan (about USD 225 billion), marking the eighth consecutive year of increase in its military spending.

China, last year, pegged its defence budget at 1.45 trillion yuan, a 7.1 per cent increase. This year the defence spending is increased to 1.55 trillion yuan. However, in view of the appreciation of the dollar against the yuan, this year's defence spending of China totalled, according to the state-run China Daily, about USD 225 billion.

after his mentor and former president Hu Jintao backed Xi at the last minute, enabling him to emerge as the most powerful

Last year, in dollar terms China's defence spending amounted to USD 230 billion.

This is for the eighth consecutive year that China has announced a single-digit percentage point increase in its military budget.

In his work report presented to the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) - the country's rubber-stamp parliament - outgoing Premier Li Keqiang spoke highly of the armed forces' achievements at the borders without directly referring to the Eastern Ladakh standoff.

"They carried out operations in a firm and flexible way, and they effectively conducted major missions relating to

border defence, maritime rights protection, counterterrorism and stability maintenance, disaster rescue and relief, Covid-19 response, peacekeeping, and merchant ship escorting," Li's work report said. The reference to "major missions relating to border defence" was regarded as significant in the context of offensive actions by the PLA in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020 along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India, triggering a prolonged standoff virtually freezing the relations between the two countries.

Both sides held 17 rounds of high-level military talks to resolve the standoff and the self to managing the economy, unlike his predecessors who enjoyed more power in running the government.

18th round was expected to take place soon. China is the second biggest spender on defence next to the US whose defence budget for 2023 totalled USD 816 billion.

From India's point of view, however, China's defence budget continued to be over three times higher. India's defence budget for 2023-24 amounted to Rs 5.94 lakh crore (about USD 72.6 billion).

Aided by increasing defence budgets, the two-million-strong People's Liberation Army (PLA), the world's largest military, is increasingly getting powerful and assertive with the ever-expanding military modernisation of its Army, Navy and Air Force.

Li is widely expected to be succeeded by Li Qiang, a Xi loyalist and the former party boss of Shanghai, to head the

new administration to grapple with China's external and internal challenges under Xi's leadership. In his last work report, Li who last year announced his retirement from politics, set a five per cent GDP target for this year after China last year logged a three per cent growth rate, the country's second lowest in 50 years, besides the target to generate 12 million jobs.

Li said during the past 10 years China's GDP registered an annual growth rate of 6.2 per cent.

Foreign exchange reserves remained stable at over USD trillion. These figures show that China's economic strength has increased significantly, he said.

Besides highlighting a host achievement under Xi's leadership in the last 10 years, including eradicating absolute poverty, Li also cautioned about problems China faces, including "prominent imbalances and inadequacies in its development".

"Today, many difficulties and challenges still confront us. Uncertainties in the external environment are on the rise. Global inflation remains high, global economic and trade growth is losing steam, and external attempts to suppress and contain China are escalating," he said, apparently referring to Beijing's growing rivalry with the US and European Union.

"At home, the foundation for stable growth needs to be consolidated, insufficient demand remains a pronounced problem, and the expectations of private investors and businesses are unstable," he said.

"Corruption remains a common problem in some fields, sectors, and localities," he said, adding that "we must face these problems and challenges squarely, make every effort to make improvements, and do all we can to live up to the people's trust."

# CPN objects to SC order against PM Prachanda

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal's ruling CPN (Maoist Center) on Sunday objected to the Supreme Court's order to its administration to register writ petitions against Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" for claiming responsibility for 5,000 deaths during the decade-long insurgency in the country.

In a press statement, party's General Secretary Dev Gurung said that the order passed by the joint bench of justices Ishwor Prasad Khatriwada and Hari Prasad Phuyal on Friday has drawn serious attention of the CPN (Maoist Center).

"We deplore such activities that are directed against the achievements of secularism, inclusiveness and democratic republic system, guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal," the statement said.

"At a time when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Commission for Disappearance are doing its work under transitional justice, such activities will pose a serious threat to the peace process," it added.

On January 15, 2020, CPN (Maoist Center) Chairman Prachanda had said that as the leader of the Maoist party that led the decade-long insurgency, he would take the responsibility for the deaths of 5,000 people and that the state should take responsibility for the remaining deaths.

"I am accused of killing 17,000 people, which is not true. However, I am ready to take the responsibility of killing 5,000 people during the conflict," Prachanda said while addressing a Maghi festival celebration event in Kathmandu. He added that the rest of the 12,000 were killed by the feudal regime.



Advocates Gyanendra Aaran and Kalyan Budhathoki, who are also conflict victims, filed separate writ petitions at the Supreme Court demanding that Prachanda be investigated and prosecuted for his statement.

The administration, however, in November last year refused to register them, claiming that the issue was related to transitional justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was dealing with the cases.

On Friday, the Supreme Court ordered its administration to register writ petitions against 'Prachanda' for claiming responsibility for 5,000 deaths during the insurgency.

Due to busy schedules and lack of manpower, the case could not be registered on Sunday and it is likely that the same would be registered after the Holi festival which falls here on Monday.

The rebellion that started on February 13, 1996 officially came to an end after a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was reached with then government on November 21, 2006.

It is estimated that around 17,000 people lost their lives during the decade-long insurgency. Prachanda waged the armed conflict for a decade in the name of 'People's War'

## Ukraine ally Kallas fights for re-election in Estonia

**Tallinn:** Polling stations have opened in Estonia for a general election that the center-right Reform Party of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, one of Europe's most outspoken supporters of Ukraine, is a favourite to win.

She faces a challenge from the populist opposition EKRE party that is seeking to limit the Baltic nation's exposure to the Ukraine crisis and is blaming the government for citizens' economic misery.

Over 900,000 people are eligible to cast ballots Sunday to pick representatives to Estonia's 101-seat Parliament, or Riigikogu, from a range of nine political parties. National security in the wake of neighboring Russia's assault of Ukraine and social-economic issues, particularly the rising cost of living, have been the main themes of the election. Kallas, 45, has emerged in the past year of war as one of Europe's most outspoken supporters of Ukraine. Holding the country's top post since 2021, she's seeking a second term, with her standing enhanced by her international appeals to impose sanctions on Moscow. A Baltic nation of 1.3 million people that borders Russia to the east, Estonia broke away from the Soviet Union in 1991 and has taken a clear Western course, joining NATO and the European Union. Polls indicate Kallas' center-right liberal Reform Party is likely to win more votes than any other party. Her main challenger is Martin Helme, head of the nationalist far-right EKRE party, which faults Kallas for the inflation rate of 18.6% and accuses her of undermining Estonia's defences by giving weapons to Ukraine. **AP**

## 20 cars of Norfolk Southern cargo train derail in Ohio

AP ■ SPRINGFIELD

About 20 cars of a Norfolk Southern cargo train derailed near Springfield Saturday evening, the second derailment of the company's trains in Ohio in a month, officials said.

But unlike the Feb 3 derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, a company spokesperson said there were no hazardous materials aboard the train, The Columbus Dispatch reported.

The train, which did not have passengers, derailed around 5 p.m. Saturday by State Route 41, near the Clark County Fairgrounds, the Dispatch reported. Springfield is about 46 miles (74 km) west of the state capital of Columbus, Ohio.

The 20 cars of the 212-car train derailed while traveling south, the Norfolk Southern spokesperson said.

Shawn Heaton told the

Springfield News-Sun that he was waiting at the intersection as the train crossed the intersection and captured the start of the derailment on video.

"I was right there and I was playing on my phone and then I heard a loud bang. And when I heard the loud bang, I started recording," Heaton said.

"When I heard the bang, there was all kinds of debris and metal shoot out from under the cars and that's when I started recording and you could see them start jumping off the tracks."

The Clark County Emergency Management Agency has asked residents within 1,000 feet of the derailment to shelter in place, but the agency said it has not issued formal evacuation orders.

In an update at 8:50 p.m. EDT, the agency said officials are working to make sure that no hazardous materials were involved.

## 4 children killed in fire in Serbia

**Belgrade(AP):** A fire in a southwestern Serbian town has killed four children and injured their parents, police said on Sunday.

The fire broke out around 7 am in one of the apartments in a residential building in Novi Pazar, about 200 kilometres (120 miles) southwest of Belgrade. Police said firefighters came to the scene within minutes of being alerted but that the apartment was already engulfed in fire.

Firefighters found all the children in one room. They apparently died of carbon monoxide poisoning, a statement said.

The parents were in another room and have been hospitalised, police said. The Novosti newspaper reported they suffered severe burns.

# Comments to erase village 'inappropriate': Netanyahu

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the remarks by a key Cabinet ally calling for a Palestinian village to be erased were inappropriate in a Twitter thread on Sunday, after the US demanded that he reject the statement.

In the thread, posted in English shortly after midnight, Netanyahu did not appear to condemn the remarks outright and implied that the ally, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, misspoke.

Netanyahu thanked Smotrich for later walking the comments back and "making clear that his choice of words" was "inappropriate."

The bulk of the thread urged the international community to seek condemnations from the Palestinians over



attacks against Israelis. It appeared to be his first public

response to Smotrich's remarks since they were made on Wednesday.

Netanyahu's Twitter thread underlines how the Israeli leader has had to balance the ideologies of the far-right members of his government with the expectations of Israel's chief ally, the United States.

Smotrich is the head of one of several ultranationalist parties that help make up Netanyahu's government, its most right-wing ever.

Jewish settlers of the occupied West Bank last week rampaged through the Palestinian village of Hawara, where earlier in the day two Israeli brothers were killed in a Palestinian shooting attack. Later in the week, Smotrich said the village should be erased — by Israeli forces and not by private citizens.

Smotrich later backtracked, saying

he didn't mean for the village to be erased but for Israel to operate surgically within it against Palestinian militants. Still, his earlier comments sparked an international outcry.

The US called them repugnant and urged Netanyahu to "publicly and clearly reject and disavow them." The United Nations and Middle East powerhouses Egypt and Saudi Arabia also condemned Smotrich's remarks.

In a Hebrew tweet posted around the same time, Netanyahu said even foreign diplomats make mistakes, an apparent reference to a report by Israeli Channel 12 that US Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides made disparaging remarks about Smotrich ahead of his visit to Washington this week, saying he would "throw him off the plane," if he could.

# Countries agree historic oceans treaty to protect marine life

AP ■ WASHINGTON

For the first time, United Nations members have agreed on a unified treaty to protect biodiversity in the high seas - nearly half the planet's surface - concluding two weeks of talks in New York.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea came into force in 1994, before marine biodiversity was a well-established concept.

An updated framework to protect marine life in the regions outside national boundary waters, known as the high seas, had been in discus-

sions for more than 20 years, but previous efforts to reach an agreement had repeatedly stalled. The unified agreement treaty was reached late Saturday.

"We only really have two major global commons - the atmosphere and the oceans," said Georgetown marine biologist Rebecca Helm. While the oceans may draw less attention, "protecting this half of earth's surface is absolutely critical to the health of our planet."

Now that long-awaited treaty text has been finalised, Nichola Clark, an oceans

expert at the Pew Charitable Trusts who observed the talks in New York, said, "This is a once in a generation opportunity to protect the oceans - a major win for biodiversity."

The treaty will create a new body to manage conservation of ocean life and establish marine protected areas in the high seas. And Clark said that's critical to achieve the UN Biodiversity Conference's recent pledge to protect 30% of the planet's waters, as well as its land, for conservation.

The treaty also establishes ground rules for conducting environmental impact assess-



ments for commercial activities in the oceans.

"It means all activities planned for the high seas need to be looked at, though not all will go through a full assessment," said Jessica Battle, an oceans governance expert at the World Wide Fund for Nature. Many marine species - including dolphins, whales, sea turtles and many fish - make long annual migrations, crossing national borders and the high seas. Efforts to protect them - and human communities that rely on fishing or tourism related to marine life - have previously been ham-

pered by a confusing patchwork of laws. "This treaty will help to knit together the different regional treaties to be able to address threats and concerns across species' ranges," said Battle.

That protection also helps coastal biodiversity and economies, said Gladys Martinez de Lemos, executive director of the nonprofit Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense focusing on environmental issues across Latin America.

"Governments have taken an important step that strengthens the legal protection

of two-thirds of the ocean and with it marine biodiversity and the livelihoods of coastal communities," she said.

The question now is how well the ambitious treaty will be implemented.

The high seas have long suffered exploitation due to commercial fishing and mining, as well as pollution from chemicals and plastics. The new agreement is about "acknowledging that the ocean is not a limitless resource, and it requires global cooperation to use the ocean sustainably," said Malin Pinsky, a biologist at Rutgers University.

# Will ban US companies from trading with China: Vivek

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Three secular religions -- race, sex and climate -- have put the US in a chokehold today, Republican presidential aspirant Vivek Ramaswamy has said.

Addressing his fellow conservative Republicans, he also proposed disruptive ideas of dismantling the Department of Education along with the FBI and banning American companies from doing business with China if he is elected as the president of the country in 2024.

“The Declaration of Independence of today is our declaration of independence from China. If Thomas Jefferson were alive today, that is the Declaration of Independence he would sign. That is the Declaration of Independence I will sign if I am elected as your next President,” Ramaswamy, 37, said.

Jefferson was an American statesman, diplomat, lawyer, architect, philosopher, and one of the Founding Fathers of the US. He served as the third president of the US from 1801 to 1809 and was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence.

**‘The Declaration of Independence of today is our declaration of independence from China. If Thomas Jefferson were alive today, that is the Declaration of Independence he would sign. That is the Declaration of Independence I will sign if I am elected as your next President’**

Ramaswamy, who announced his decision to enter the 2024 race to the White House last week, noted that he was inspired by former president Donald Trump, 76, and his “America first” vision.

It is time to identify the issues and work aggressively towards them, Ramaswamy said during his address to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) -- the top annual event of the Republican



Party and its support base -- on Saturday. It was his first major address from the national stage of the CPAC. In his 18-minute speech, Ramaswamy said “three secular religions have America in a chokehold today.”

The first of them is this “woke racial religion” that says someone’s identity is based on his skin colour.

“That if you are black, you are inherently disadvantaged. That if you are white, you are

inherently privileged no matter your economic background or your upbringing. That your race determines who you are and what you can achieve in life,” he said. This has created “this new culture of fear in America,” combined with the “second secular religion” that says the “sex of the person you are attracted to has to be hard-wired on the day you were born” but your “own biological sex is completely fluid over the

course of your lifetime”.

“It makes no sense unless it is a religion. It does not match up to reason, it matches up to religion. And then it makes the same move as the first religion,” Ramaswamy said.

The third one is the climate religion in America that says that “we have to fight carbon emissions at all costs in the United States while we shift those same carbon emissions to places like China,” the Indian-American entrepreneur said.

“...Even if you believe in this religion, you would have embraced nuclear energy, which is the best form of carbon-free energy production known to mankind”.

“And yet these people oppose nuclear energy. What is really going on is that the climate religion has about as much to do with the climate as the Spanish Inquisition had to do with Christ, which is to say nothing at all. It is about power, domination, control, punishment and apologising for what we have achieved in this country and the modern West as we know it,” Ramaswamy said amidst applause from the audience. The US, he said is in the middle of a national identity crisis.

## Trump eyeing 2nd term

AP ■ OXON HILL



Former US president Donald Trump cast himself on Saturday as the only Republican candidate who can build on his White House legacy but shied away from directly critiquing his potential rivals, including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

Trump, giving the headlining address at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, told a cheering crowd that he was engaged in his “final battle” as he tries to return to the White House. “We are going to finish what we started,” he said. “We are going to complete the mission. We are going to see this battle through to ultimate victory.”

Though DeSantis, seen as Trump’s biggest potential rival, is frequently a subject of name-calling and other attacks in Trump’s social media posts and interviews, he was not mentioned directly in Trump’s address before conservative activists, who earlier in the day

celebrities in the hallways and dominated the list of speakers. The handful of other potential and declared candidates not named Trump who spoke received only tepid applause. And the annual CPAC straw poll, an unscientific survey of attendees, found Trump the top choice to be the party’s nominee, with 62 per cent support, trailed by DeSantis at 20 per cent and businessman Perry Johnson, who announced his long shot bid at the conference, with 5 per cent.

Nearly all -- 95 per cent of the respondents -- said they approved of Trump’s performance as president. Ahead of his speech, Trump told reporters that he would continue his third presidential campaign even if indicted. He is under investigation by prosecutors probing his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election in Georgia and by the US Justice Department, as well as his handling of classified documents, among other issues.

## Imran Khan evades arrest

PTI ■ LAHORE



**The court issued a non-bailable arrest warrant against Khan last week and adjourned the hearing till March 7 for his repeated failure to appear before the court**

said.

The Prime Minister’s special assistant on interior Attaullah Tarar told reporters that the Islamabad police went to Khan’s residence to deliver a notice to him to appear before a court in the Toshakhana case on March 7 when he will be indicted in the case.

“Today Imran Khan locked himself in a room in Zaman Park. Khan’s chief of staff Shibli Faraz said he wasn’t at home when the Islamabad police came to deliver a court’s notice. But Khan later appeared from his house addressing the party workers,” Tarar said.

A large number of PTI workers reached the Zaman Park following the news of his possible arrest. “Arrest of Imran Khan is our red line and we will not allow this,” PTI senior leader Shafqat Mahmood said.

As the Islamabad police were present outside his residence to deliver the court’s order, Khan was speaking at the gathering of those workers arrested in ‘Jail Bhara Tehreek’ (court arrest movement) at his

residence.

Khan claimed “they” wanted to kill him while on the way to his court appearance. “They have made yet another plan to kill me during a court appearance,” he alleged.

“I will write to the chief justice of Pakistan telling him that 74 false cases have been registered against me. I have a threat to my life from those who are supposed to protect me,” he said, in an indirect reference to the establishment.

“Take an example of criminals like (Prime Minister) Shehbaz Sharif and (Interior Minister) Rana Sanaullah who were involved in killing people and an attempt on his life (in Wazirabad in November last year),” he said.

Khan also named “Dirty Harry,” a reference to a top ISI officer, for brutal torture of his party leaders and social media activists. “Dirty Harry is a psychopath. He is a sick man. There is a threat to my life from such people,” he said.

In a series of tweets, the Islamabad Police earlier said an operation to arrest Khan was being conducted with the cooperation of the Lahore police.

“Imran Khan is avoiding the arrest. The superintendent of police had gone into Imran’s room but he was not present there. Islamabad Police will transfer Imran Khan to Islamabad under their protection. Law is equal for all. Legal action will be taken against those obstructing the execution of court orders,” the Islamabad police said.

The Islamabad police said its team is still present in Lahore. IG Islamabad Akbar Nasir said that the court has ordered police to present Khan before it by March 7 after arresting him.

“The Islamabad police team will remain in Lahore till further orders,” he said.

Meanwhile, senior PTI leader Fawad Chaudhry told reporters that Khan is filing a protective bail petition in the Lahore High Court in the attack on Islamabad judicial complex.

## 19 killed in fuel depot fire in Indonesia

AP ■ JAKARTA



People examine the damaged at a neighborhood affected by a fuel depot fire in Jakarta on Saturday

Indonesian rescuers and firefighters on Sunday searched for three people who were still missing under the rubble of charred houses and buildings, after a large fire spread from a fuel storage depot in the capital and killed at least 19 people.

The Plumpang fuel storage station, operated by state-run oil and gas company Pertamina, is near a densely populated area in the Tanah Merah neighbourhood in North Jakarta. It supplies 25 per cent of Indonesia’s fuel needs.

At least 260 firefighters and 52 fire engines extinguished the blaze just before midnight on Friday after it tore through the neighbourhood for more than two hours, fire officials said.

Footage showed hundreds of people running in panic as thick plumes of black smoke and orange flames filled the sky.

National police chief General Listyo Sigit Prabowo said a preliminary investigation showed the fire was caused by a technical problem involving excess pressure as the depot received fuel from Pertamina’s Balongan Refinery in West Java province.

“It was found that a fire occurred during a filling of Pertamina fuel,” Listyo told a news conference late on Saturday, referring to a type of fuel oil produced by Pertamina.

He did not elaborate as investigators from Pertamina and the police were still working to establish the cause of the fire, including by questioning dozens of witnesses and examining video recordings from surveillance cameras.

Residents living near the depot said they smelled a strong odour of gasoline, causing some people to vomit, after which thunder rumbled twice, followed by a huge explosion.

Sri Haryati, a mother of three, said the fire began to spread about 20 minutes later, causing panic.

“I was crying and immediately grabbed our valuable documents and ran with my

husband and children,” Haryati said, adding that she heard smaller blasts that echoed across the neighbourhood as orange flames jumped from the depot.

Rescuers were still searching for three people who were reported missing. About 35 people were receiving treatment in five hospitals, some of them in critical condition.

Listyo said more than 1,300 people were displaced and taking shelter in 10 government offices, a Red Cross command post and a sport stadium.

Pertamina’s head Nicke Widyawati apologised and said the company would provide help to the community and

cooperate in the investigation.

“We will carry out a thorough evaluation and reflection internally to prevent similar incidents from happening again,” Widyawati said in a statement, adding that the company ensured the safe supply of fuel oil.

On Saturday, grieving relatives gathered at a police hospital’s morgue in eastern Jakarta to try to identify their loved ones. Officials said the victims were burned beyond recognition and could only be identified through DNA and dental records. In 2014, a fire at the same fuel depot engulfed at least 40 houses, but no casualties were reported.

## Massive fire hits Rohingya camp in Bangladesh

COX’S BAZAR (AP): A massive fire raced through a crammed refugee camp for Rohingya Muslims in southern Bangladesh on Sunday, leaving thousands homeless, a fire official and the United Nations said.

No casualties were reported immediately at Balukhali camp in Cox’s Bazar district, said Emdadul Haque, a fire service official.

The UNHCR in Bangladesh said in a tweet that Rohingya refugee volunteers were responding to the fire with the agency and its partners providing support. It provided no further details.

More than 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar over several decades, including about 740,000 who crossed the border starting in August 2017, when the Myanmar military launched a brutal crackdown.

Conditions in Myanmar has worsened since a military takeover in 2021, and attempts to send them back have failed.

## Iran schoolgirl poisoning crisis escalates

The attacks have raised fears that other girls could be poisoned for going to school

AP ■ DUBAI

A crisis over suspected poisonings targeting Iranian schoolgirls escalated on Sunday as authorities acknowledged over 50 schools were struck in a wave of possible cases. The poisonings have spread further fear among parents as Tehran has faced months of unrest.

It remains unclear who or what is responsible since the alleged poisonings began in November in the Shiite holy city of Qom. Reports now suggest schools across 21 of Iran’s

30 provinces have seen suspected cases, with girls’ schools the site of nearly all the incidents.

The attacks have raised fears that other girls could be poisoned apparently just for going to school. Education for girls has never been challenged in the over 40 years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran has been calling on the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan to have girls and women return to school.

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi on Saturday said without elaborating that investigators had recovered “suspicious samples” in the course of their investigations into the incidents, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

He called for calm among the public, while also accusing the “enemy’s media terrorism” of inciting more panic over the alleged poisonings. However, it wasn’t until the poisonings

received international media attention that hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi announced an investigation into the incidents on Wednesday.

Vahidi said at least 52 schools had been affected by suspected poisonings. Iranian media reports have put the number of schools at over 60. At least one boy’s school reportedly has been affected. Videos of upset parents and schoolgirls in emergency rooms with IVs in their arms have flooded social media.

Making sense of the crisis remains challenging, given that nearly 100 journalists have been detained by Iran since the start of protests in September over the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. She had been detained by the country’s morality police and later died. The security force crackdown on those protests has seen at least 530 people killed and

19,700 others detained, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran. Attacks on women have happened in the past in Iran, most recently with a wave of acid attacks in 2014 around Isfahan, at the time believed to have been carried out by hard-liners targeting women for how they dressed.

Speculation in Iran’s tightly controlled state media has focused on the possibility of exile groups or foreign powers being behind the poisonings.

That was also repeatedly alleged during the recent protests without evidence.

In recent days, Germany’s foreign minister, a White House official and others have called on Iran to do more to protect schoolgirls — a concern Iran’s Foreign Ministry has dismissed as “crocodile tears.” However, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted that Iran has “continued to tolerate attacks

against women and girls for months” amid the recent protests.

“These poisonings are occurring in an environment where Iranian officials have impunity for the harassment, assault, rape, torture and execution of women peacefully asserting their freedom of religion or belief,” Sharon Kleinbaum of the commission said in a statement. Suspicion in Iran has fallen on possible hard-liners for carrying out the suspected poisonings.

Iranian journalists, including Jamileh Kadivar, a prominent former reformist lawmaker at Tehran’s Ettelaat newspaper, have cited a supposed communique from a group calling itself Fidayeen Velayat that purportedly said that girls’ education “is considered forbidden” and threatened to “spread the poisoning of girls throughout Iran” if girls’ schools remain open.

## One killed, three arrested in Philippine Governor’s killing

AP ■ MANILA

Police have killed one suspect and arrested three others in the brazen shootings that killed a central Philippine provincial governor and eight others, including poor villagers seeking aid from the political leader, officials said Sunday.

The killing of Negros Oriental Governor Roel Degamo at his home on Saturday by at least six men armed with assault rifles and wearing military-like camouflage uniforms and bullet-resistant vests was the deadliest in a series of attacks on politicians in recent weeks in the country.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. condemned the killing of Degamo, who backed him in the presidential election last year, and said his “government will not rest until we have brought the perpetrators of

this dastardly and heinous crime to justice.”

Degamo was meeting poor villagers who were seeking medical and other help when the armed men walked calmly into his residential compound in Pamplona town and opened fire.

They fled in three SUVs, which were later abandoned in a nearby town and from which about 10 men were seen fleeing, according to police reports.

At least 17 others, including a doctor and two army soldiers, were wounded, police said.

Police quickly set up road checkpoints and later Saturday arrested three suspects, including two former army soldiers, and killed one in a clash as they chased the gunmen. A number of rifles and a pistol were recovered from the suspects, police said without elaborating

or disclosing if they have determined a motive for the attack.

Degamo, a longtime politician, initially lost the race for Negros Oriental’s governorship in last year’s elections but was later installed governor after filing a court petition. He said a few years ago without elaborating that he had received death threats in the province, which has a history of bloody political conflicts and communist insurgency-related violence.

Degamo’s killing underscores that even local politicians are not immune from high-profile gun violence that has persisted despite the government’s pledge to combat it. Last month, Gov. Mamintal Alonto Adiong Jr. of southern Lanao del Sur province was wounded and four of his bodyguards killed in an attack on their convoy.

# Health and the ‘Amrit Kaal’ Budget initiative

The Minister of Finance, Government of India, unveiled the Union Budget for April 1, 2023-March 31, 2024 on February 1, 2023. The Amrit Kaal Budget (as it is commonly known) may be the first step towards India's global agenda of *Vasudeva Kutumbakam*. And what better way than to start with healthcare for all through Government-run initiatives and close cooperation with the public sector.

The National Health Mission (NHM) envisages the achievement of universal access to affordable, equitable, and quality healthcare, which is responsive to the population's needs. To strengthen India's public health system, including the various medical and nursing professionals that compose such a system, the Economic Survey for 2023-24 highlights the rising importance of public healthcare.

The Budget seeks to set up 157 nursing colleges with the already proposed medical colleges, increasing the number of medical and nursing professionals to cater to the ever-demanding nature of an efficient public health system while attempting to eliminate health set-backs such as sickle cell anaemia by

2047.

The Department of Health and Family Welfare (DOHFW) will be allotted Rs 86,185 crores. However, records have registered a failure to fulfill its earlier targeted estimate of Rs 83,000 crores for the previous Budget for the DOHFW, which resulted in a drastic reduction to a more realistic assessment of approximately Rs 76,000 crores.

The Economic Survey mentions the rise in health sub-centers, primary and community health centers. However, it fails to consider the Rural Health Statistics 2021-22, which establishes that the number of nurses or medical professionals was considerably low to almost non-existent, rendering the healthcare service in rural areas negligible. If this were to continue due to a shortfall in the allocation of the estimated Budget, the proposal to establish nursing colleges would remain merely a number, requiring not only a revision in the Budget



Sidharth Shankar



Arjun Krishnamoorthy

estimate but probably also a revision in the number of nursing colleges proposed to be established.

The NHM was allocated rs 29,085 crores, which is considerably lower than the Rs 37,000 crores allocated in 2022-23, thereby raising doubts on the success of the Mission's agenda of quality healthcare for all.

In the pharmaceutical sector, facilities in select Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Labs will be made available by public and private medical college faculty and private sector research and develop-

ment (R&D) teams to encourage collaborative research and innovation. A new program to promote pharmaceutical research and innovation will be launched through centers of excellence. The pharma industry would be encouraged to invest in R&D in specific priority areas. The Budget has allocated INR 2980 crores for this select purpose. This may further result in curtailing imports of active pharmaceutical ingredients, which remain



higher than their exports despite PLI (Production Linked Incentive) schemes for their manufacture. Yet another important priority of every pharmaceutical set-up is a robust regulatory mechanism.

With the negative press, following incidents in The Gambia and Uzbekistan, the Government has allocated Rs 651.97 crore to strengthen the drug regulatory system, set up new testing labo-

ratories, and upgradation of existing laboratories, amongst other positive steps to make India the pharmacy of the world.

This move is likely to improve the manufacturing and testing

processes, but it can only do so if coupled with more current legislation, considering the concepts of good manufacturing practices, stringent regulation of clinical trials, and a clear distinction between drugs, cosmetics, and medical devices (including software as a medical device).

Winston Churchill once remarked, "The discoveries of healing science must be the inheritance of all, and disease must be attacked."

Overall, while the Amrit Kaal Budget does prioritise improved health systems in its blueprint for a prosperous, just, and self-reliant India, the need of the hour is ensuring an increased number of nursing professionals, the elimination of sickle cell anaemia, as well as a public-private model towards healthcare, without compromising the Budget estimate. Else, the Amrit Kaal Budget, insofar as health care is concerned, may not prove to be Amrit!

*Sidharth Shankar is an M&A Partner, and Arjun Krishnamoorthy is a Principal Associate at JSA, Advocates & Solicitors. Views are personal.*

## Govt to check imports of substandard goods

To come up with 58 quality control orders in next six months

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Government will come up with as many as 58 quality control orders (QCOs) for products such as aluminium, copper items and household electrical appliances in the next six months, in a move aimed at containing import of the substandard goods and boost domestic industry, a senior government official said.

The department for promotion of industry and internal trade (DPIIT) is working hard to promote manufacturing of high quality products in the country.

"Since 1987, only 34 QCOs have been issued. But now we are coming up with 58 QCOs in the next six months. The main objective is to stop import of sub-standard goods. These mandatory norms will be for domestic and foreign players," Joint Secretary in the DPIIT



Sanjiv told PTI.

There will be 315 product standards under these orders. The items, under these orders, cannot be produced, sold/traded, imported and stocked unless they bear the BIS (Bureau of Indian Standards) mark.

"These QCOs will be notified within a year after following due process," he added.

He said that the move would also help in providing

global markets for domestic goods. In order to facilitate smooth implementation of these orders, particularly for micro and small industries, provisions for additional time periods to get BIS licences and upgrade their testing facilities are being contemplated, he added.

Similarly, exemption to very micro units (investment in plant and machinery up to Rs 25 lakh) is being contemplated on a case to case basis.

"With the notification of CCOs, manufacturing, storing and sale of non-BIS certified products are prohibited as per the BIS Act 2016," the official said.

The violation of the law can attract a penalty of up to two years of imprisonment or with fine of at least ₹2 lakh for the first offence which increases to ₹5 lakh minimum for the second and subsequent offences.

## Mcap of 5 among top 10 valued firms climbs ₹88,605 cr

### State Bank, ICICI Bank biggest gainers

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Five of the top 10 valued firms together added ₹88,604.99 crore to their market valuation last week, with State Bank of India and ICICI Bank emerging as the biggest gainers.

While HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, State Bank of India, HDFC and Bharti Airtel witnessed gains in their market valuation, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys, Hindustan Unilever and ITC were the laggards. Last week, the BSE benchmark climbed 345.04 points or 0.58 per cent.

The valuation of State Bank



of India jumped ₹35,832.32 crore to ₹5,00,759.98 crore, the most among the top-10 firms. The market capitalisation (mcap) of ICICI Bank rallied ₹20,360.13 crore to ₹6,06,514.71 crore.

HDFC Bank's valuation climbed ₹15,236.59 crore to ₹9,01,307.58 crore and that of HDFC advanced ₹13,051.48 crore to ₹4,84,417.42 crore.

The mcap of Bharti Airtel rose by ₹4,124.47 crore to ₹4,26,158.52 crore.

However, the market valuation of Infosys plunged ₹30,150.9 crore to ₹6,22,711.80 crore and that of Tata Consultancy Services tumbled ₹20,966.36 crore to ₹12,23,129.40 crore.

## Govt removes import duty on whole Tur

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Government has removed the basic customs duty of 10 per cent on whole Tur or pigeon peas as part of steps to check the local prices of the lentil. In a notification dated March 3, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) said import duty on Tur (whole) will be 'Nil. The reduced duty is effective from March 4.

However, import of tur, other than whole tur, continues to attract basic customs duty of 10 per cent. The exemption to whole tur import duty comes amidst lower tur production estimates in the country.

Tur production is pegged lower at 3.89 million tonnes in the 2022-23 crop year (July-June) from 4.34 million tonnes in the previous year as per the initial projection made by the agriculture ministry. Fearing likely shortage, the Government in January said it has made an advance plan to import about 10 lakh tonnes higher quality of tur dal.

## India is dangerously close to Hindu rate of growth: RBI former Guv Raghuram Rajan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sounding a note of caution, Former Reserve Bank Governor Raghuram Rajan has said that India is "dangerously close" to the Hindu rate of growth in view of subdued private sector investment, high interest rates and slowing global growth.

Rajan said that sequential slowdown in the quarterly growth, as revealed by the latest estimate of national income released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) last month, was worrying.

Hindu rate of growth is a term describing low Indian economic growth rates from the 1950s to the 1980s, which averaged around 4 per cent. The term was coined by Raj Krishna, an Indian economist, in 1978 to describe the slow growth.

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the third quarter (October-December) of the current fiscal slowed to



4.4 per cent from 6.3 per cent in the second quarter (July-September) and 13.2 per cent in the first quarter (April-June).

The growth in the third quarter of the previous financial year was 5.2 per cent.

"Of course, the optimists will point to the upward revisions in past GDP numbers, but I am worried about the sequential slowdown. With the private sector unwilling to invest, the RBI still hiking rates, and global growth likely to slow later in the year, I am not sure where we find additional growth momentum," Rajan said in an email interview to PTI.

## FY'23 fiscal deficit: FinMin monitoring daily receipts, expenses in March

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Finance Ministry has started daily monitoring of the revenue receipts, including tax collections, as well as expenditure beginning March 1, with an aim to keep fiscal deficit in check during the current fiscal.

Although the Government is expected to meet the revised tax revenue estimates, meeting the ₹50,000 crore target from disinvestment receipts could be a challenge.

According to officials, the daily monitoring of tax and non-tax revenue collections will help the government in taking timely corrective actions, wherever needed.

"In order to keep a close track of receipts, expenditure and involving fiscal position of the Central Government in



the month of March, 2023, it is necessary to have updated information on a day-to-day basis," the Controller General of Accounts (CGA) under the finance ministry said in an office memorandum dated March 1.

The Ministry has also asked the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) to report flash figures. Besides, other non-tax and disinvestment receipts too would have to be reported on a daily basis, as per the memorandum.

## India's Russian oil imports hit record high in Feb; now more than Iraq, Saudi put together

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's imports of crude oil from Russia soared to a record 1.6 million barrels per day in February and is now higher than combined imports from traditional suppliers Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Russia continued to be the single largest supplier of crude oil, which is converted into petrol and diesel at refineries, for a fifth straight month by supplying more than one-third of all oil India imported, according to energy cargo tracker Vortexa.

Refiners continue to snap up plentiful Russian cargoes available at a discount to other grades. From a market share of less than 1 per cent in India's import basket before the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022, Russia's share

of India's imports rose to 1.62 million barrels per day in February, taking a 35 per cent share.

India, the world's third-largest crude importer after China and the United States, has been snapping Russian oil that was available at a discount after some in the West shunned it as a means of punishing Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine.

The rise in Russian imports have been at the expense of Saudi Arabia and United States. Oil import from Saudi fell 16 per cent month-on-month and that from the US declined 38 per cent.

According to Vortexa, Russia now accounts for more than the combined oil bought from Iraq and Saudi Arabia — India's mainstay oil suppliers for decades.

## India, Sri Lanka mulling using INR for economic transactions

PTI ■ COLOMBO

India and Sri Lanka are exploring the possibility of using the Indian Rupee for economic transactions and have discussed the initiative that will help in building a stronger and closer partnership through trade and investment-led measures between the two countries.

The High Commission of India here organised a discussion on the use of the Indian Rupee (INR) for transactions between India and Sri Lanka on Thursday.

"Representatives from the Bank of Ceylon, State Bank of India and the Indian Bank shared their experiences and informed the audience that they had started carrying out INR-denominated trade transactions through respective Vostro/Nostro accounts after



the creation of enabling framework by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) in 2022," the High Commission said in a statement.

The participating banks also outlined the benefits of settlements denominated in INR which includes shorter timelines, lower exchange costs and easier availability of trade credits. The beneficial impact of this initiative on the tourism and hospitality industry was also highlighted including its role in helping increase collections

which could be utilised by other sectors.

High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka Gopal Baglay highlighted the positive impact that the initiative will have in the joint efforts for building a stronger and closer economic partnership between the two countries through trade and investment-led measures.

Sri Lanka's finance minister Shehan Semsasinghe appreciated the close economic relationship between the two countries and the financial and humanitarian support extended by India over the past year, including the strong financing assurances provided by New Delhi, in the context of the IMF support programme for Sri Lanka.

India extended assistance worth over USD 3.8 billion to Sri Lanka last year to help it deal with the economic crisis.

## \$2-bn bonds due for repayment in 2024: Adani to investors

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Adani group has almost \$2 billion worth of foreign-currency bonds coming up for repayment in 2024, according to a presentation the conglomerate made to investors.

The apples-to-airport conglomerate borrowed over \$10 billion in foreign currency bonds between July 2015 and 2022 across group companies.

Of this, \$1.15 billion of bonds matured in 2020 and 2022. There are no maturities in 2023 but three issuances — \$650 million by the ports arm APSEZ and two of renewable energy unit Adani Green Energy Ltd (\$750 million and \$500 million — are due for payment in 2024, according to a presentation.

## Maruti Suzuki expects chip shortage to continue for a few more quarters

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Maruti Suzuki India expects semiconductor shortage to continue for the next few quarters leading to further increase in order backlog of certain models, according to a senior company official.

The country's largest car-maker has seen its pending bookings stretch to 3.69 lakh units with Ertiga leading the pack with close to 94,000 bookings. Other models like Grand Vitara and Brezza have an order backlog of around 37,000 and 61,500 units, respectively. Further, the company has received around 22,000 and



12,000 bookings, respectively, for Jimny and Fronx.

Due to the chip shortage, Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) has already witnessed a production loss of close to 46,000 units in October-December period and is expecting some impact on the production in the ongoing quarter as well.

## Kotak Bank to create vertical for mid-mkt firms to focus on under-penetrated segment

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Kotak Mahindra Bank is set to create a separate vertical for mid-market companies having turnover between Rs 500-1,500 crore to up its focus on the segment.

The private sector lender is also keen to increase its focus on high-margin structured finance, a top official has said. At present the mid-market segment is part of the large corporate team, which covers companies between ₹500-6,000 crore. From April 1 onwards, the new vertical will be created while the large corporate team will serve clients having



revenues between ₹1,500-6,000 crore.

"Our large corporate growth is relatively benign compared to SME (under ₹500 crore revenue companies) growth, and that is one of the reasons for this change. Mid-Market opportunity is large and we believe we are under-penetrated in this segment," Paritosh Kashyap, president and head of wholesale banking, told PTI.

## Rupee trade policy gets traction; number of special vostro accounts now 50

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's policy of facilitating trade in rupee is gaining momentum with the total number of Special Rupee Vostro Accounts (SRVA) touching half a century mark in about six months.

As many as 49 accounts have been opened so far and some are awaiting regulatory approval, sources said.

These accounts would facilitate overseas trade in rupee with eight countries — Russia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Israel and Germany.

The RBI issued detailed



guidelines on cross-border trade transactions in the domestic currency in July, 2022.

Following the Russia-Ukraine war and the sanctions imposed by the West, India has been trying to promote rupee trade.

## HCL Tech aims to double semiconductor biz in 4 yrs; needs 2 yrs to build infra

PTI ■ BARCELONA

IT company HCL Technologies expects to double semiconductor services business in 3-4 years following capabilities and infrastructure that it will develop around electronic chip plants to be set by its group firm, a senior company official said here. HCL Group is among the companies that have applied to set up electronic chip plants under the "Scheme for Compound Semiconductors" and HCL Technologies will assist HCL Corporate in end-to-end processing of chips. "One of the



focus sectors for HCL Technologies, especially in engineering services is semi chip. Our plan is to double our business. There is an internal plan to do it in a period of three to four years. I say only three to four because it is ongoing and we see demand enough to do that," HCL Technologies executive vice president and BU head Ameer Saithu told PTI.

# Bayern beats Stuttgart 2-1

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Bayern Munich held on to return to the top of the Bundesliga with a 2-1 win at Stuttgart, which dropped into the relegation zone.

Matthijs de Ligt and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting scored for Bayern to move back ahead of Borussia Dortmund on goal difference. Dortmund has clawed back a nine-point deficit before the winter break by winning every game since to reinvigorate the title race.

Union Berlin remained third, five points behind the big two, by drawing with visiting Cologne 0-0.

Bayern was forced to defend late on when Juan José Perea pulled one back in the 88th, but Tanguy Coulibaly missed Stuttgart's best chance to equalize in injury time.

De Ligt proved the difference between the sides in the first half, producing a goal-line clearance to deny Konstantinos Mavropanos, then breaking the deadlock with a speculative effort from distance in the 40th.

Stuttgart keeper Fabian Bredlow should have stopped the Dutch defender's shot, but he had already shown his prowess with two big saves to deny Leon Goretzka. Silas Katompa Mvumpa twice went close for Stuttgart.

The game was briefly interrupted after the break when traveling Bayern fans produced a huge pyrotechnic display in their corner of the stadium.

Alphonso Davies was about to take a throw-in for



Bayern when he flinched because of a loud bang. Referee Christian Dingert beckoned the players away from the red flares while they waited for the situation to calm.

Both sets of fans set off flares for the remainder of the game, though they didn't impact the game.

Choupo-Moting scored what proved to be the winner in the 62nd, finishing off a fine

move involving Thomas Müller and Jamal Musiala.

Bayern next hosts Paris Saint-Germain on Wednesday for the second leg of their Champions League round-of-16 tie. Bayern leads 1-0 from the first leg.

**SCHALKE REVIVAL CONTINUES**

Marius Bülter scored late for Schalke to win at Bochum 2-0 and leave the bottom of the

standings.

Bülter sealed the visitors' win in the 79th minute following an own goal from Bochum goalkeeper Manuel Riemann in the 45th. Riemann bundled the ball into his own net as he attempted to scoop it out of danger in a mix up involving his own defender Erhan Masovic. Masovic opted not to clear the ball and left it for the goalkeeper, with the outcome

unfortunate for Bochum.

Schalke's second consecutive win in a six-game unbeaten run dragged the Gelsenkirchen-based club above Bochum on goal difference.

Both teams are among four including Hoffenheim and Stuttgart on 19 points, while Hertha Berlin has 20 before its visit to Bayer Leverkusen on Sunday.

# Mbappe now PSG's all-time top scorer

AP ■ PARIS

Kylian Mbappe became Paris Saint-Germain's all-time leading scorer when he netted in added time of the 4-2 win over Nantes in the French league.

Producing the sixth and last goal of the match gave Mbappe his 201st goal for PSG and eclipsed Edinson Cavani's record.

The third consecutive win moved PSG 11 points clear at the top of the standings, but it was marred by the replacement of Marquinhos late in the match. Marquinhos was substituted with 15 minutes left, clutching his back in pain at the Parc des Princes. He's a doubt for when PSG travels to Bayern Munich on Wednesday for the second leg of their Champions League round-of-16 tie. Bayern leads 1-0 from the first leg.

Mbappe missed several chances for the milestone goal in the last five minutes. Then he collected a pass from Timothee Pembele, quickly turned toward the goal and fired home with a left-footed shot. PSG fans chanted Mbappe's name amid fireworks and he was later presented with a trophy marking the achievement.

"I was still a young player when I arrived here. I've learned a lot here," Mbappe said after his 247th game with PSG.

"I play to write history, and I always said that I want to do it here, in France, in its capital city. ... It's a personal achieve-



ment but I also came here for collective achievements."

PSG led 2-0 after 16 minutes and looked set for a comfortable evening, but for the second time in a row at home, Christophe Galtier's players wasted a two-goal lead before they prevailed. Following a 3-0 win at second-placed Marseille last weekend, PSG returned home full of confidence against Nantes and quickly took control with a fluid passing game.

Lionel Messi broke the deadlock with a low shot in the 11th minute after connecting with a cross from Nuno Mendes that took a deflection. PSG doubled the lead when Jaouen Hadjam, under pressure from Nordi Mukiele, beat his own goalkeeper with a poor clearance attempt.

Nantes needed an individual moment of brilliance from Ludovic Blas to pull one back. After being set up down the left, the attacking midfielder took Gianluigi Donnarumma

by surprise with a shot from a tight angle as the Italy goalkeeper expected a cross and was a bit slow to react in the 30th. Ignatius Ganago leveled in the 37th after a corner when the ball went in off his back.

Nantes defended well and played boldly after the interval. There were space and chances for both teams and PSG found an edge at the hour mark. Danilo Pereira headed home from Mbappe's cross, then the France striker beat Cavani's record to seize the limelight.

**DAVID EQUALS HAZARD**

Canada forward Jonathan David snatched a second-half equalizer for Lille to finish 1-1 at bitter rival Lens in the northern derby.

David's 16th goal of the season — second to Mbappe — came in the second half after goalkeeper Brice Samba denied consecutive efforts from Jonathan Bamba and Remy Cabella in the box.



## Weightlifter Mirabai Chanu wins BBC Indian Sportswoman Of The Year award

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tokyo Olympic Games silver-medallist weightlifter Mirabai Chanu has bagged the 2022 'BBC Indian Sportswoman Of The Year' award after a public vote.

The 28-year-old weightlifter from Manipur became the first athlete to win the award twice in a row after bagging it in 2021 as well.

At the Tokyo Games, she had become the first Indian to win a silver in the sport. Last year, she went on to secure gold at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. She also won a silver medal at the World Weightlifting Championships in 2022.

"I am really excited and want to say that I will be working even harder for the forthcoming games and win more medals for India," said Chanu.

The other short-listed contenders for the award were wrestlers Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik, boxer Nikhat Zareen and badminton player PV Sindhu. Table tennis player Bhavina Patel won the BBC Para Sportswoman of the Year award, a category introduced this year. She won a silver at the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo, becoming the first Indian paddler to achieve the feat. Bhavina also won gold at the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

"It is indeed a gratifying feeling to win this prestigious award which is part of a wonderful initiative empowering women and sports persons. It is also commendable to see BBC focusing on para sports and making India more inclusive," said Bhavina.

Former captain of the Indian women's hockey team Pritam Siwach was conferred with the 'BBC Lifetime Achievement Award' for her contribution to Indian sports and inspiring generations of players. Siwach was the first woman hockey coach to be given the Dronacharya Award, the highest national award for coaches. "This award has been conferred upon eminent sportswomen in the past three years. I was very happy to know that this year, I will be getting the award. The speciality of this award is that it is given to women. It motivates us when we get such awards," said Siwach.

# India's Vaidehi advances at ITF Women's Open



## Hiroko Kuwata of Japan, who was the top-seeded in the qualifiers, went down 2-6 0-6 to Germany's Sarah Rebecca Sekulic

ond set to wrap up the match comfortably at the KSLTA Stadium.

Vaidehi will look to seal a place in the main draw when she plays the final qualifying match on Monday. She was the only Indian on the day to enter the second round of the qualifiers as the rest of the players suffered defeats.

Hiroko Kuwata of Japan, who was the top-seeded in the qualifiers, went down 2-6 0-6 to Germany's Sarah Rebecca Sekulic. But Chinese Taipei's second-seeded player Lee Pei Chi had little trouble warding off India's Humera Baharnus 6-3 6-3.

The main draw of the \$40K tournament will start on Tuesday. India's Karman Kaur Thandi, Ankita Raina and promising 15-year-old Brenda Fruhvirtova of the Czech Republic will be seen in action.

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Japan's Junri Namagata 6-2 6-0 here on Sunday.

Indian tennis player Vaidehi IChaudhari advanced to the second round of the singles qualifiers at the KPB Trust ITF Women's Open, thrashing

Vaidehi, seeded ninth, did not have to stretch herself for the win as a double break took her to victory in the first set, and she bettered it in the sec-

# Champions League elimination games put coach jobs at risk

AP ■ LONDON

Exiting the Champions League at the round-of-16 stage is never good for a coach's often shaky job security at Europe's top clubs.

Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain have earned reputations for burning through top coaches — including Carlo Ancelotti and Thomas Tuchel at both — and head into second-leg games trailing 1-0.

Graham Potter has been in charge at Chelsea for just six months though he is under pressure heading into Borussia Dortmund's visit to Stamford Bridge on Tuesday.

Christophe Galtier has PSG leading the French league in his debut season but elimination by Bayern Munich on Wednesday in Germany could put his job at risk. Galtier is the seventh coach in less than 12 years of Qatari ownership in Paris. Even before the takeover, no coach lasted four full seasons at a club that has had 31 different coaches in its 53-year history.

Job insecurity is not unusu-



al among the European elite and the eight coaches whose teams are in Champions League action this week have a combined service time of less than 10 years.

That is less than Diego Simeone's 11-plus years of coaching Atlético Madrid through a stable era that includes two La Liga titles, two Champions League finals — both lost to Real Madrid in games that went to extra time — and two Europa League

titles. Rapid turnover in the dugout is working this season for Benfica, which is best set to advance from the four games this week, hosting Club Brugge on Tuesday with a 2-0 lead from the first leg in Belgium.

Coach Roger Schmidt is in his first season at Benfica as its fifth permanent or interim coach since the start of 2019. AC Milan takes a 1-0 lead to Tottenham on Wednesday in the only game this week between teams that both retain

the same coach they had last season, respectively Stefano Pioli and Antonio Conte.

**BAYERN-PSG REUNION**

The two clubs that helped stop the Super League project in 2021 by refusing to join it have met in the knockout rounds of soccer's elite club competition for the third time in four seasons. Bayern won the 2020 final and PSG then eliminated the defending champion in the QF. That was the last time the away-goal rules was decisive in the Champions League before UEFA abolished it in 2021. History repeated itself in Paris three weeks ago when Kingsley Coman scored the only goal for Bayern, just as the former PSG player had in the final three years ago.

PSG has made many headlines since the first leg. Three straight wins in Ligue 1, including a 3-0 dismissal of rival Marseille, 11 goals scored and Kylian Mbappe setting a club record with his 201st aged just 24. Lionel Messi was also named the world's best men's player in FIFA's annual awards.

AP ■ BARCELONA

Diego Simeone reached a new milestone for coaching longevity after overseeing a club-record 613th match for Atletico Madrid.

And his players gave him every reason to keep on going after putting on their best attacking display of the season in a 6-1 rout of Sevilla. The big win lifted Atletico above Real Sociedad and into third place in the Spanish league.

Simeone surpassed the previous mark of 612 games coached by Luis Aragonés. Since the former Atletico midfielder took over as coach in December 2011, Atletico has won two Spanish league titles, two Europa League crowns, a Copa del Rey trophy, and reached a pair of Champions League finals.

Simeone changed the fate of the club, turning it from an erratic team into a fierce competitor that could challenge Barcelona and Real Madrid for titles thanks to its defense and his disciplined approach.

"From my first day as a player here I knew that this was a different club. ... And I knew that I would end up coaching here," Simeone said looking back on his start.



He also revealed one of the elements of his success: "You always know that they can fire you tomorrow, and that is what keeps you focused on the game at hand."

Dressed in his customary all-black outfit, Simeone received a standing ovation before kickoff when he was presented with a commemorative shirt with the number 613 and "Legend Simeone" in Spanish.

He then spent the match as he always has for the past decade, stalking the coaching box, pumping his fists to rev up the crowd, and relishing his team's demolition of Sevilla.

"We can't imagine an Atletico without 'Cholo,'" Atletico's Koke Resurrección said, using his coach's nickname.

"He has been with us over 11 years now. When he arrived he had a clear idea and changed our mentality, unified and strengthened the club. I hope he won't forget this night after the way we played."

**DEPAY BRACE**

Memphis Depay scored twice in his first start since joining Atletico from Barcelona in January after his playing time dwindled following the arrival

of Robert Lewandowski to Camp Nou.

The Netherlands striker opened from a pass by Antoine Griezmann in the 23rd and added the second from outside the area three minutes later.

Youssef En-Nesyri pulled one back after Pape Gueye chased down a ball and crossed it for his striker against the flow of play in the 39th, but Griezmann restored the two-goal cushion in the 53rd with an exquisite shot from long range. Yannick Carrasco made it four in the 69th with Sevilla in disarray.

Gueye again tried to get Sevilla back in the match after he was fouled by Marcos Llorente in the box, only for Ivan Rakitic to send the penalty kick off the post.

Álvaro Morata, who replaced Depay, tacked on two goals, one coming after Sevilla was left with 10 men when Gueye was sent off for a second booking in the 80th.

"We were not up to the task today," Sevilla coach Jorge Sampaoli said after seeing his team sink to one point above the relegation zone. "We are in a bad rut. Rivals are punishing us. And in a game like this against talented opponents it is very tough."

# Asia's top golfers at DGC Open



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Some of Asia's best and brightest young stars will return in the second DGC Open golf tournament scheduled here from March 16-19.

This will be the strongest Asian Tour full-field event ever witnessed in India and will offer a massive prize purse of USD 750,000.

The field includes five among the current Top-10 of the Asian Tour Order, seven players who have won in the last few seasons including

defending champion Nitithorn Thippong and upcoming youngsters. The current crop of highly talented stars include Sadom Kaewkanjana, currently third on the Asian Tour Order of Merit, besides Gunn Charoenkul (4th), Berry Henson (5th), Suradit Yongcharoenchai (6th) and Phachara Khongwatmai (10th).

In addition, there are four others in Top-20 and 11 more, including the defending champion Nitithorn, in the Top-50. The star-studded list will be

supplemented by as many as eight foreign players who have previously won in India.

Further, almost 10 Indians, who have won Asian Tour events at home, many of them at this very course, will tee up.

Several legends of the game, including Thaworn Wiratchant (twice), Jyoti Randhawa and Scott Hend, who have won Asian Tour Order of Merit, will be present alongside the likes of Chapchai Nirat, who set a Tour record of 32-under in a 72-hole tournament in India in 2009.

The home challenge will be spearheaded by Gaganjeet Bhullar, who in late 2022 became the first Indian to win 10 Asian Tour titles when he won the Mandiri Indonesia Open.

The emergence of youth stars like Yuvraj Sandhu, Veer Ahlawat, Honey Baisoya, Viraj Madappa, Karandeep Kochhar and S Chikkarangappa besides proven winners like SSP Chawrasia and Shiv Kapur will get strong home support. Chawrasia and Kapur have all won at the DGC at least once and have a huge following.

India's top three amateurs and the DGC's club champion will also be seen in action at the prestigious event.

# Delhi Capitals thrash RCB by 60 runs

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Shafali Verma and Meg Lanning slammed attacking fifties, while left-arm pace bowler Tara Norris grabbed a five-wicket haul as Delhi Capitals thrashed Royal Challengers Bangalore by 60 runs in their Women's Premier League opener, here on Sunday.

Norris destroyed the RCB lineup, returning figures of 5/29 after Delhi Capitals had put up an imposing 223 for two at the Brabourne Stadium.

Chasing the mammoth 224, the Smriti Mandhana-led side were restricted to 163 for eight in 20 overs.

Earlier, thanks to opener Shafali and Australian skipper Lanning's fine knocks of 84 and 72 runs respectively, DC posted WPL's second successive 200-plus score. Mumbai Indians notched 207 for five before bowling Gujarat Giants out for 64 in the inaugural WPL fixture on Saturday.

While the young India opener played some breathtak-



ing power-packed strokes in her 84-run knock, which came off just 45 deliveries (10 fours, and four sixes), Australia skipper Lanning was more clinical in her shots, smashing 72 off 43 balls (14 fours) as the duo destroyed left RCB bowling in a tailspin.

The duo's 162-run partnership ended in an equally dramatic manner, with both getting dismissed in the 15th over, with England off-spinner Heather Knight accounting for the two off the third and fifth deliveries of her second over.

Their departure off the third and fifth ball of the 15th over though did not slow the scoring rate, with Marizanne Kapp (39 not out) and young India player Jemimah Rodrigues (22 not out) helping the side cross the 200-run mark.

Brief scores: Delhi Capitals 223/2 in 20 overs (Meg Lanning 72, Shafali Verma 84, Marizanne Kapp 40 not out, Jemimah Rodrigues 22 not out; Heather Knight 2/40).



## Was nervous at start, Lanning calmed me down: Shafali

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Indian batting sensation Shafali Verma, who returned to form with an aggressive fifty, credited her senior partner Australian skipper Meg Lanning for calming her "nerves" as Delhi Capitals secured a 60-run win over Royal Challengers Bangalore in their WPL opener here on Sunday.

Delhi Capitals piled up an imposing 223 for two on a batter-friendly track with openers Shafali (84) and Lanning (72) toying the RCB attack.

"I was a bit nervous at the start. The experience of playing with Lanning was good, she's a good friend of mine and she told me to be responsible with the bat," Shafali said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

Shafali managed just 102 runs with a best of 33 not out in the recently-concluded Women's T20 World Cup where India made a semifinal exit.

"We just wanted to play good shots and play according to our strength. You feel happy when you get to a landmark, yes, happy with the total," she said about their strategy.

Delhi Capitals skipper Lanning said she was always confident of their batting prowess and was relieved that their bowling also came off well after defending the target on a batting-friendly strip.

"We were thinking about (our) bowling but we weren't too concerned about the batting," Lanning said.

In reply, RCB managed 163/8 with DC's left-arm quick from the USA Tara Norris returning with 5/29.

"We felt like it was a good score but it was such a good

wicket so we knew we had to bowl well. It's great to begin the tournament with a win," added Lanning, who recently led Australia to an unprecedented sixth Women's T20 World Cup title.

On her rollicking 162-run opening stand with Indian batting sensation Shafali, she said: "(It) was fun watching Shafali bat from the other end. We were smiling all the time.

"That's the great thing about this competition, you get to play with players you wouldn't have otherwise played with."

Tara Norris, who was adjudged Player of the Match for her fifer, said she was delighted with her performance and the outcome of the contest.

"Delighted. Meg (Lanning) and Shafali started well with the bat and the bowlers executed their plans. It is amazing to be here and delighted with the win. The first wicket is pretty special and will definitely take that."

Gave away 20-30 runs extra: Smriti

The losing team skipper, Smriti Mandhana, while conceding her team gave away far too many runs, added there were still plenty of positives in defeat.

"We gave away too many runs, around 20-30 runs too many. As a pace bowling unit, we didn't go about badly, that's something we'll take away from this game."

"We have back-to-back games, we'll have to take away some positives from the game before coming back tomorrow. We got plenty of starts, but couldn't continue and play a big innings. The wicket didn't change a lot, just needed someone to take it till the 20th over."

## In Indore, we doubled down on what we set out to achieve, says Andrew McDonald

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Australia head coach Andrew McDonald has admitted that visiting teams need to be "near perfect" to challenge India in their own backyard, something they sought in Indore by "doubling down" on what they had set out to achieve initially.

Hammered by the hosts inside three days in the first two Tests of the Border-Gavaskar trophy, Australia fought back strongly to claim the third match on an Indore pitch that offered vicious turn and variable bounce. "You have almost got to be near perfect against India in India. I think this game (Indore Test) besides that 6 for 11 was near perfect," McDonald was quoted as saying 'ESPNcricinfo'.

According to McDonald, the team's success in the Indore Test showed there is a core group of players who are learning what it takes to win in the subcontinent and can help the side taste greater success in the future. "Everyone's journey starts at some point in time on the subcontinent, and I think there's a core group of players that will come back here more experienced and, in theory, better equipped for the challenges."

"We're talking about a series here where we've had certain

conditions that probably aren't relatable to any other subcontinent tour over time, so it's always a different challenge when you do arrive here."

He said Australia lost the chance to retain the trophy due to one hour of chaos in the second Test in Delhi.

However, on a pitch rated "poor" by the ICC, the visitors rode on star off-spinner Nathan Lyon's 11-wicket match haul to humble the visitors by nine wickets and confirm their place in the World Test Championship (WTC) final.

"We had a little bit of luck. Marnus (Labuschagne) getting bowled off a no-ball, how critical was that at that point in time, (and) that allowed a partnership to flourish. We took our opportunities as well."

"Usman's flying catch and then Smudge (Smith Smith) winding back the clock with that one at leg slip. You compare that to the Delhi game where Smudge dropped one at first slip and then we dropped one at leg slip in Matthew Renshaw, and they were critical. "We had one hour of chaos there and that cost us that Test match when we'd played pretty good cricket. We came here and doubled down on what we'd set out to achieve at the start of the tour," McDonald said.

## Harris, Ecclestone seal UP's win vs Gujarat Giants

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI

Kim Garth's splendid five-wicket haul went in vain as UP Warriorz held their nerves to pull off a dramatic three-wicket win over Gujarat Giants in a thrilling last-over finish in the Women's Premier League, here on Sunday.

Australian Grace Harris remained calm under pressure to slam a 26-ball 59 not out to seal the thrilling chase off the penultimate delivery. She found a formidable ally in Sophie Ecclestone as the duo turned it around with an unbroken 70-run stand that came off just 25 balls. Twenty-four hours after they crashed to 64 all out in the WPL opener, Gujarat Giants showed their unflappable spirit and revived their hopes as Garth reduced UP to 20/3 inside three overs.

The Irish-Australian recruit, Garth, who replaced star Windies all-rounder Deandra Dottin, blew away the UP top-order en route her 5/36, the second fifer in the WPL -- both coming on the same day.

Shortly after a little known Tara Norris of an Associate Nation (USA) picked WPL's first fifer, it was time for the another nondescript cricketer to set the WPL on fire with wickets of Alyssa Healy (7), Shweta Sherawat (5) and Tahila McGrath (0) in one over.

After a sedate first over in



which Healy smashed a half-volley for a boundary, Garth bounced back to take a stunning catch off her own bowling on her second attempt to dismiss the star Australian.

Garth got her second scalp dismissing Sehrawat courtesy a top-notch catch by Mansi Joshi. She followed it up accounting for McGrath for a golden duck that reduced UP to 20/3 inside the third over.

Promoted to No 3, the burly hard-hitting Kiran Navgire then revived UP's hopes with an aggressive fifty.

They lost half of their side after Navgire departed after a fighting 43-ball 53 (5x4, 2x6) with Garth taking her fourth scalp of the day.

Number six batter Harris then took charge of the proceedings but wickets kept falling with Garth racing to her

fifer after cleaning up Simran Shaikh.

Having reduced UP to 105/7 in 15.4 overs, Gujarat Giants were staring at an easy win but Sophie and Harris had other ideas.

Needing 65 from the last four overs, UP broke free when Harris danced down the track to smash Tanuja Kanwar for a six over midwicket.

Garth ended up leaking 20 in her last over with Harris and Ecclestone smashing four boundaries, to take the equation down to 33 off 12 balls.

Ecclestone smashed Gardner for a six in a 14-run penultimate over.

Seamer Annabel Sutherland then was given the task to defend 19 in the last over and Harris pulled her for a six off the first ball. Ten needed off four balls, Harris

# Ponting floored by Army's 'awesome' gesture to Cummins' ill mother



PTI ■ DUBAI

Batting great Ricky Ponting says the cricket community has showed its empathetic nature with its reaction to the illness of Pat Cummins' mother and highlighted the "awesome" gesture by the Barmy Army, the famous supporter group of Australia's arch-rivals England.

Australian captain Cummins flew back home from India after the conclusion of the second Test in Delhi to be by the side of his ailing mother, Maria, who is in palliative care.

He missed the third Test in Indore, and his participation in the fourth Test in

Ahmedabad remains uncertain.

"I have actually spoken to Pat a couple of times," Ponting said in the latest episode of The ICC Review.

"When I first heard that he was making the trip home between Test matches, I had a pretty good understanding of what that was - his mum hasn't been well for a few years now, so I thought that might have been the reason. I reached out to him there and then."

"I think we've seen as well just how small and how tight the cricket world can be. I'm sure that he would've received a lot of well-wishes from all parts of the world, the crick-

**And that's the exact point that I was making about how small the cricket fraternity is and how tight and how close it is**

et-loving fraternity, that would've sent some messages of support to him and the rest of his family in obviously what is a really difficult time for them."

The Barmy Army's tribute was among the wishes that

came Cummins' way. During England's Test against New Zealand in Wellington, the group shared a video of their trumpet player playing 'Maria' from West Side Story as a tribute to Cummins' mother.

"I mean, that's fantastic," Ponting said, when asked if he'd seen the video.

"And that's the exact point that I was making about how small the cricket fraternity is and how tight and how close it is."

"I've said this for forever, I was lucky to play a lot of Ashes cricket and lucky to witness a lot of really good, light-hearted banter from the Barmy Army. I think they are the best group of sporting fans that I've ever seen."

"They travelled the world supporting their team and are up and about from the first ball of the Test match to the end, whether their team's going well or not."

"So that was a fantastic gesture from everyone concerned and involved with the Barmy Army. It was awesome."

Ponting also stressed on privacy for the Cummins family in this hour of crisis.

"I don't need to say anything too public, but just to let him know everyone's thinking of him and his family and, hopefully, everyone respects that and gives them the time and the privacy that they need."

"I guess from the cricket lovers' point of view as well, everyone just wants to see Pat back out there playing again."

# Rest of India crush MP by 238 runs to retain Irani Cup

PTI ■ GWALIOR

Rest of India's bowling unit performed like a well-oiled machine as the team thrashed Madhya Pradesh by 238 runs to retain the prestigious Irani Cup here on Sunday.

Chasing a near-impossible 437 for victory, MP were bowled out for 198 in 58.4 overs as the match ended during the opening session of the fifth day.

With the so-called result-oriented and under-prepared pitches for the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy receiving a lot of flak, the Gwalior track was a throwback to the days when there used to be help for every department of the game.

There were four tons scored in the match, 40 wickets fell and pacers and spinners had equal say during the course of the game.

A case in point is the MP second innings where the pacers and spinners shared five wickets apiece.

Seamers Mukesh Kumar (2/34), Atit Sheth (2/37) and Navdeep Saini (1/34) blew away the MP top-order while off spinner Pulkit Narang (2/27) and left-arm spinner Saurabh Kumar (3/60) took advantage of the deteriorating surface to mop up the lower middle-order and tail.

In the morning, MP skipper Himanshu Mantri (51) got a raw deal from umpire Rohan Pandit, who raised his finger when the batter hadn't actually nicked one behind



the stumps.

MP lost wickets at regular intervals as first-innings centurion Yash Dubey got a lethal in cutter from Mukesh Kumar and was cleaned up in the process.

There was no let-up in intensity from Rest of India bowlers and MP didn't even have the remotest chance to make a match of it.

For the RoI team, made up of mainly India A players, Yashvi Jaiswal with 357 runs across two innings (213 and 144) was the showstopper.

"If I would have remained not out (on Day 1) I would have gotten a 300 and that would have been better," Jaiswal said after the match.

He praised opener Abhimanyu Easwaran (154), with whom he shared a triple hundred plus stand.

"I had an experienced partner in Easwaran and it was amazing to bat alongside him," the southpaw said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

Another good news was Navdeep Saini bowling 29

overs across two innings at a brisk pace.

Easwaran also showed why he is rated highly among the Gen-Next openers. The only aspect that people tend to criticise him for is his inability to deliver in pressure games for Bengal.

There have been eight knockout games (quarterfinals, semifinals and final) across the three red ball seasons that Bengal have played but the Team India contender didn't make a mark in the matches which mattered.