

OPINION 6
CHINA RESORTS TO
'BUYING' SUPPORT**WORLD 9**
PAKISTAN COURT STRIKES DOWN
SEDITION LAW**MONEY 10**
ADANI PINS HOPES ON 20%
GROWTH TO REPAY \$23 BN DEBTDELHI LUCKNOW BHOPAL BHUBANESWAR
RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH
DEHRADUN HYDERABAD VIJAYWADALate City Vol.33 Issue 88
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CSK TO FACE
GT IN IPL 2023
OPENER TODAY
12 SPORT

Furore over German interference

BJP, Cong spar on German remarks on Rahul Gandhi's disqualification case**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

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

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

Enunciating her country's position, spokesperson of the German Foreign Ministry said, "We have taken note of the verdict of first instance against the Indian Opposition politician Rahul Gandhi as well as the suspension of his parliamentary mandate. To our knowledge, Mr Gandhi is in a position to appeal the verdict."

She also said, "It will then become clear whether this verdict will stand and whether the suspension of his mandate has any basis." The spokesperson said Germany expects that "standards of judicial independence and fundamental democratic principles" will apply in the case.

This statement by Germany



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

sparked a political slugfest in the country with the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress exchanging sharp remarks on the issue.

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

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

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

Ji (sic)," Rijiju said in a tweet.

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

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

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

Continued on Page 2

Global scamsters coming to help, Cong slams Lalit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Reacting to Lalit Modi's



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

Continued on Page 2

Patna court summons Rahul

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

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

PTI

Celebrations turn to tragedy in Indore

14 killed, many missing as roof of temple well caves in during havan on Ram Navami**PNS/PTI ■ BHOPAL/INDORE**

Ram Navami celebrations at a temple in Madhya Pradesh's Indore took a tragic turn when the roof of a 'bawdi' (well) collapsed during a havan (a fire ritual), killing 14 people. The toll is expected to go up during the night as of the 30-35 devotees who fell into the well, many are still to be fished out and are missing.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan revealed the number of people killed at the Beleshwar Mahadev Jhulelal temple in Indore's Patel Nagar. Earlier, Indore Collector Ilaiyaraja T had given the death toll as 12.

State Home Minister Narottam Mishra told reporters in Bhopal that a few children are feared to be missing and a search operation is on to trace them by pumping out the bawdi's water.

Nearly 30-35 devotees fell into the well after the accident at the temple, said Indore Police Commissioner Makrand Deoskar. *Continued on Page 2*



Rescue operations underway after the roof of a well collapsed at Beleshwar Mahadev Jhulelal, in Indore, on Thursday. At least 14 people got killed and several others are feared trapped, according to officials PTI

Clashes in Maha, Bengal, Gujarat mar festivities

PTI ■ NEW DELHI / AURANGABAD / VADODARA

Ram Navami was celebrated across the country on Thursday with grand processions and special pujas, but the festivities were marred in Maharashtra where a clash left 12 injured and in Gujarat and West Bengal some clashes were witnessed. In Delhi, a large number of people defied a police order and took out a procession in Jahangirpuri, which witnessed riots last year during Hanuman Jayanti celebrations, while stones were pelted at a march in Gujarat's Vadodara too.

In the Aurangabad city of neighbouring Maharashtra, at least 12 people, including 10 policemen, were injured after a mob of around 500 people went berserk and hurled stones and petrol-filled bottles when the personnel tried to control the situation following a clash between two groups near a Ram temple, officials said on Thursday. The incident, in which 13 vehicles were torched by the miscreants, occurred during the wee hours of Thursday in Kiradpura. *Continued on Page 2*

Stalin calls Opp meet on social justice on Monday

Leaders of 20 parties, including Cong, to attend meet**PNS ■ NEW DELHI**

DMK president and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin has called a meeting of Opposition parties in Chennai on Monday to discuss issues relating to social justice in the country. Leaders of around 20 parties, including the Congress, are slated to attend the meeting either in person or virtually. The meeting will discuss the topic, "Taking social justice in India forward — Social Justice, the Way Forward".

Among the speakers who have confirmed their participation include Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, RJD's Tejashwi Yadav, Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav, National Conference patron Farooq Abdullah, BRS leader K Keshav Rao, CPI(M)'s Sitaram Yechury,



CPI's D Raja, AAP leader Sanjay Singh and TMC's Derek O'Brien. The NCP and Shiv Sena (UBT) are yet to confirm their participation. The BJD's Sasmit Patra and YSRCP's A Suresh are also among the likely attendees. If they do, then their parties would be attending such a meeting for the first time, sources said. However, the two parties are yet to confirm their presence to the DMK. Opposition leaders said the BJD and the YSRCP are likely to attend the meeting as it is not an out and out Opposition "political" meeting but a discussion on a social issue. The BJD's decision to participate would come close on the heels of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's meeting with Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

Also, Opposition leaders said while the parties have confirmed presence, the names of

their representatives is tentative and will depend on availability.

With Rahul Gandhi's disqualification from the Lok Sabha coming as a blessing in disguise for the fragmented Opposition, the Congress, too, has decided to convene a meeting of top Opposition leaders next month after some of them urged the grand old party to take the lead in strengthening unity among anti-BJP forces.

Party sources said the meeting would take forward the bonhomie displayed by several Opposition parties during the Budget Session of Parliament and it would be expanded outside too. Congress sources said the proposal for this meeting was made at the meeting of Opposition leaders convened by Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge at his residence on Monday evening. NCP chief Sharad Pawar, DMK leader TR Bалу, JDU's Lallan Singh and a CPI-M leader, called upon the Congress leadership to convene a meeting of party's national presidents and top leaders to chalk out a blueprint for the 2024 general elections.

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

PNS/AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/WASHINGTON

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

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

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



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

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

But that contention runs headlong into the text of the Immigration and Nationality Act, decades of executive-branch practice and both explicit and implicit congressional ratification of that practice, she wrote. *Continued on Page 2*

Govt inks ₹36.4K-cr deals with Indian firms

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Aatmanirbharta got a fillip on Thursday, with the Government inking several deals totalling over Rs 36,400 crore for the purchase of arms and armaments for the military.

The Ministry of Defence inked contracts with Indian shipyards for the acquisition of 11 next generation offshore patrol vessels and six next generation missile vessels at an overall cost of around Rs 19,600 crore, said an official press release.

The contract for acquisition of 11 next generation offshore patrol vessels was signed with Goa Shipyard Ltd (GSL) and Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE), Kolkata, at a total cost of Rs 9,781 crore. Of the 11 ships, seven will be indigenously designed, developed and manufactured by GSL and four by GRSE. The delivery of the ships is scheduled to commence from September 2026.

The contract for acquisition of six next generation missile vessels was signed with Cochin Shipyard Limited (CSL) at a cost of Rs 9,805 crore. The delivery of ships is scheduled to commence from March 2027. The NGMVs would be heavily armed war vessels incorporating stealth, high speed and offensive capability. The primary role of the ships would be to provide offensive capability against enemy warships, merchantmen and land targets.

The indigenous manufacturing of these ves-



sels will encourage the active participation of Indian shipbuilding and associated industries, including MSMEs. With the majority of the equipment and systems sourced from indigenous manufacturers, these vessels will be a proud flag bearer of Aatmanirbhar Bharat, the release said.

The Ministry also signed a Rs 8,160-crore deal with Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) for procurement of improved the Akash Weapon System (AWS). This is for 3rd & 4th Regiments of Army Air Defence, comprising live missiles and launchers with upgrades, ground support equipment, vehicles and infrastructure.

The Ministry also signed a contract with Bharat Electronics Limited, Bangalore, for the procurement of 13 Lynx-U2 fire control systems for the Indian Navy at a total cost of over Rs 1,700 crore.

CAPSULE

WILL SOON APPEAR, SAYS AMRITPAL

Chandigarh: A day after during the Punjab police to arrest him, radical preacher Amritpal Singh surfaced in a fresh video on Thursday, asserting he was not a fugitive and would soon appear before the world. The purported video surfaced hours after his audio clip came out on social media in which he debunked speculation he was negotiating his surrender. "Those who feel that I have turned fugitive and I have left my associates, should not keep this illusion in their mind. I do not fear death," he said. **P2**

A BANGA SET TO BE WORLD BANK CHIEF

Washington: Indian-American business leader Ajay Banga is poised to become the next president of the World Bank after the nomination period closed and no country proposed an alternate candidate for the prestigious post. **P10**

PM lauds brilliance of 'The Elephant Whisperers'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday met the team associated with "The Elephant Whisperers", a documentary that became the maiden Indian production to win in the Documentary Short Subject category at the 95th Academy Awards, and noted that its cinematic brilliance has drawn global attention and acclaim.

"The Elephant Whisperers", directed by Kartiki Gonsalves and produced by Guneet Monga, explores the bond between humans and an abandoned elephant calf in a Tamil Nadu sanctuary, is India's first win in the Documentary Short category.

Modi met some of the team members who were behind the Tamil documentary, including Gonsalves and Monga.

"The cinematic brilliance and success of 'The Elephant Whisperers' has drawn global attention as well as acclaim. Today, I had the opportunity to meet the brilliant team associated with it. They have made India very proud," Modi said in a tweet and posted pictures with the team and their Oscar trophies.

"The Elephant Whisperers" created history at the 95th Academy Awards by becoming the maiden Indian production to win in the Documentary Short Subject category.



Prime Minister Modi with Oscar 2023 winning short documentary film 'The Elephant Whisperers' producer Guneet Monga and director Kartiki Gonsalves, in New Delhi, on Thursday. PTI

S'jung neurosurgeon, 4 held for extorting money from patients

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI on Thursday arrested a neurosurgeon of Safdarjung Hospital here and his four accomplices for allegedly compelling patients into buying surgical equipment from a particular store at exorbitant prices for granting early dates for their surgery.

The agency searched several locations in the national Capital and Uttar Pradesh and arrested the accused neurosurgeon Dr Manish Rawat in the early hours of Thursday.

Besides Rawat, the agency also apprehended four of his confidants, including Deepak Khattar, the proprietor of Kanishka Surgical, New Delhi, and middlemen Avnesh Patel, Manish Sharma, and Kuldeep.

After his arrest, Rawat underwent a medical examination at the same hospital at 7.52 AM on Thursday, the CBI said. The allegations against them relate to bribery and corruption.

The CBI has accused Rawat of colluding with his accomplices to demand payment from patients for medical consultations and surgical procedures, bypassing the hospital's established protocols regarding treatment of patients.

According to information obtained by the CBI, Patel contacted patients' relatives on behalf of Rawat and asked them to obtain the necessary surgical instruments from Khattar's shop in Jangpura to secure early appointments for surgery. *Continued on Page 2*

Will soon appear before world: Amritpal in video

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

A day after daring the Punjab police to arrest him, radical preacher Amritpal Singh surfaced in a fresh video on Thursday, asserting he was not a fugitive and would soon appear before the world.

The purported video surfaced hours after his audio clip came out on social media in which he debunked speculation he was negotiating his surrender.

"Those who feel that I have turned fugitive and I have left my associates, they should not keep this illusion in their mind. I do not fear death," he said in the video in Punjabi.

"And soon will appear before the world and will also be amongst the 'Sangat'," he said. Police have stepped up security in and around Amritsar and Bathinda amid reports that Amritpal Singh may surrender after entering any of the two Sikh shrines - Golden Temple in Amritsar



and Takht Sri Damdama Sahib in Bathinda. The pro-Khalistan preacher said he was not like those who would flee the country. "One has to face a lot during the days of rebellion... These days of rebellion are difficult to pass," he said.

It was his second video since being on the run amid a police crackdown on his outfit 'Waris Punjab De'. The police action began on March 18, weeks after Amritpal Singh's supporters stormed a police

station in Ajnala, near Amritsar, to secure the release of one of his associates. The preacher escaped the police net in Jalandhar district by switching vehicles and changing appearances multiple times.

In the first video, which appeared on social media on Wednesday, he asked the Jathedar of Akal Takht, the highest temporal body of Sikhs, to summon a congregation to discuss issues concerning the community.

25L people take dip in Saryu in Ayodhya on Chaitra Ram Navami

PTI ■ AYODHYA (UP)

About 25 lakh people took a dip in river Saryu in Ayodhya on Thursday and visited temples in the city to mark the Ram Navami festivities, administrative officials said.

They said lakhs of devotees thronged the temple town on the occasion of Chaitra Ram Navami amid tight security arrangements with the administration.

The celebrations got off early in the morning. Special prayers were performed in all the temples of Ayodhya at midday. People sang devotional songs and took out 'Rath Yatras' of Ram, his wife Sita, brother Lakshman and Hanuman from many temples.

District Magistrate Nitish Kumar said around 25 lakh devotees took a dip in the Saryu on Thursday morning and visited major temples,



including Kanak Bhawan, Hanumangarhi and Nageshwarnaath. The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust had made beautiful decorations with fresh flowers in the premises of the Ram Janmabhoomi site.

Special prayer services were offered by chief priest Acharya Satyendra Das and the idol of Ram Lalla was decked up in green-coloured clothes.

Ayodhya Superintendent of Police (City) Madhuban Singh said police and paramilitary forces were deployed all over the temple town to ensure the security and safety of devotees.

Raj Govt should appeal acquittals in 2008 Jaipur blasts case: Sachin Pilot



Jaipur: Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot Thursday said the acquittal of the four men who were given capital punishment by a lower court for the 2008 Jaipur serial blasts was a serious issue and the Rajasthan government should appeal against it.

The former deputy chief minister also said a probe should be conducted against those who were responsible for investigating case. He said lapses that took place in investigation is a serious issue. The state government should immediately appeal against high court ruling so that affected people can get justice, he said.

PM reviews armed forces' integration

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Given the fast changing nature of warfare, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to review several issues including creation of theatre commands for better synergy amongst the army, navy and air force during the three-day Combined Commanders' Conference in Bhopal beginning Thursday.

Incidentally, the government last week introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha to empower the commander-in-chief and officer-in-command of the Tri-service commands and proposed theatre commands with disciplinary powers. Till now, personnel from the army, IAF and navy are governed by their respective acts. The bill is titled 'Inter-services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Bill'. It may come up for discussion next week in Parliament. Announcing his schedule, the Prime Minister's

Office (PMO) said here on Thursday, Modi will address the Combined Commanders' Conference-2023 and later flag off the Vande Bharat express train between Bhopal and New Delhi during his visit to Madhya Pradesh on April 1.

The PMO said the three-day conference of military commanders will be held from March 30 to April 1 on the theme "ready, resurgent, relevant". During the conference, deliberations will be held over a spectrum of issues pertaining to national security, including jointness and theaterisation in the armed forces.

The armed forces' preparation and progress in defence ecosystem towards attaining "aatmanirbharta" will also be reviewed, the statement said.

The conference will witness participation of commanders from the three armed forces and senior officers from the Ministry of Defence. Inclusive and informal interaction will also be held with soldiers, sailors and airmen.

Furore over German interference

From Page 1

The ruling party described Singh and his party as a "disgrace to the nation". The BJP leaders reacted after he thanked the German Foreign Ministry and Richard Walker, Chief International Editor of Deutsche Welle, for "taking note of how Democracy is being compromised in India through the persecution of Rahul Gandhi".

Attacking the Congress over Singh's tweet, Information and Broadcasting minister Anurag Thakur said, "disgrace to nation, @INCIndia & @RahulGandhi don't believe to fight India's democratic, political and legal battle within country, hence, invite foreign powers to interfere in our internal matter. But New India headed by @narendramodi Ji will not tolerate any foreign intervention." Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also slammed the Congress over Singh's tweet.

"Apparent that @INCIndia wants foreign interference in our affairs. Sign Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Communist Party of China with opaque contents. During interactions abroad, plead for help to change government. Thank them when help forthcoming. Any more proof needed?" she said.

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

Without taking names, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said on Twitter, "@INCIndia firmly believes that India's democratic processes themselves have to deal with the threats posed to our democracy by Mr. Modi's assault on our institutions & his politics of vendetta, intimidation, threats & harassment."

The Congress and Opposition parties will take him on fearlessly, Ramesh said. Attacking Rijiju for his comments, Congress' media department head Pawan Khara said, "Mr. Rijiju, why divert from the main issue?"

The issue is that the Prime Minister cannot answer Rahul Gandhi's questions about Adani." Instead of "misleading" people, please answer the questions, Khara said.

Earlier, tagging Singh's tweet, BJP's foreign affairs department head leader Vijay Chauthaiwale said on Twitter, "Look how happy @digvijaya_28 ji with comments from Germany."

It only shows how they are desperate to involve external agencies in domestic matters." BJP's IT department head Amit Malviya also tagged Singh's tweet and said, "Shameful that Congress continues to lean on foreign agencies and seek their intervention in India's internal affairs."

"Rahul Gandhi had recently sought Europe and US intervention and now it is Digvijay Singh.

G20
INDIA 2023

NORTHERN RAILWAY
E-TENDER NOTICE

SMME/EMU/GZB acting for and on behalf of the President of India invites E-Tender against Tender No. 46235020-29-03-2023. The details are as under.

1. Name of Work:	single bottle VCB Along with matching accessories of EMU/MEMU Coaches as per CLW spec no. CLW/ES/C-47 Alt. g or latest.
2. Approx. cost of work	2.25,12,000.000
3. Quantity	96 Nos
4. Last Date & Time of Submission of tender bid of tender:	20.04.2023 (11:00 Hrs.)
5. Date of Time of Opening of tender document	20.04.2023 (11:00 Hrs.)
6. Website particulars where complete details of tender documents can be seen	www.ireps.gov.in

Note: (i) The tenderers must be registered on the Indian Railways E-Procurement System (IREPS) site i.e. www.ireps.gov.in. (ii) Please refer to the tender document for all terms and conditions. (iii) No manual offers are acceptable.

NIT No. - 46235020 Date- 29.03.2023

959/2023

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PUBLIC NOTICE

This is to bring to the notice of general public that I, Ashok Anand S/o Late Shri Dharam Pal Anand R/o House No.K-32, Lajpat Nagar II, South Delhi, New Delhi-110024 have Lost Original Share Certificates of Hindustan Unilever Ltd bearing folio No. HLL2802445. That I, Ashok Anand is the Legal Successor of Late Shri Dharam Pal Anand, would like to Claim the 190 number of shares under the above said folio held with the Company.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given to the general public on behalf of our client RBL Bank Ltd. that (1) Mr. Ashok Kumar, (2) Mrs. Kanika Chadda, (3) Mrs. Seema Sachdeva, (4) Mrs. Rajshri Virayak, (5) Mr. Anupam Mathur, (6) Mr. Shivam Arora are the joint owners of Property Bearing no. 30/17, area measuring 100 Sq. Yds., Situated at West Patel Nagar, New Delhi "the said property", by virtue of various sale deeds executed in the years of 2021-2022. All persons are hereby informed that above mentioned owners want to sell Second floor without roof rights, of the said property and someone want to purchase the same by taking Home loan from our client. If anybody has any objection/s upon the said property, and its ownership / its title / sale and mortgage, kindly inform the undersigned in writing on the below mentioned address within 10 days of the present.

Kumar & Associates (Advocates & Consultants)
202, Ind Floor, 23, Shivaji Marg, Moti Nagar, N. Delhi-15
Ph: 9114112927-28
tga@kmatelgal.com

From Page 1

The locality that houses the famous Ram temple, they said. The police used tear gas and fired some plastic bullets as well as live rounds to control the mob, the officials said, adding that eight teams have been formed to identify and arrest the perpetrators.

Stones were hurled at two Ram Navami processions in Gujarat's Vadodara city on Thursday, police said, adding that some persons were injured in one of the incidents. While the first incident took place near Panjrigar mohalla in Fatehpura area in the afternoon, the second took place in nearby Kumbharwada in the evening. While no one was injured in the Fatehpura inci-

dent, some persons including women were injured in the stone pelting by a mob in Kumbharwada, police said. The procession that came under attack in Panjrigar mohalla had been organised by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). The other procession had been organised by local residents.

Elsewhere, leaders of the BJP and RSS led processions in different parts of West Bengal where the RSS organised about 1,000 small and large rallies across the state.

Chanting slogans of 'Jai Shri Ram', thousands of people took part in those processions in Howrah, Kharagpur, Barrackpore, Bhadreswar, Siliguri and

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

From Page 1

The judge wrote that Congress has expressly and knowingly empowered the US Government to authorise employment as a permissible condition of an H-4 spouse's stay in the United States.

The fact that the federal Government has had longstanding and open responsibility for authorizing employment for similar visa classes further manifests Congress' approval of it exercising that authority, she said. The Department of Homeland Security and its predecessors have authorised employment not just for students, but also for their spouses and dependents, Judge Chutkan wrote in the ruling.

Also, the Department of Homeland Security has long extended work authorisation to spouses of foreign Government officials and spouses of employees or officers of international organisations, the judge wrote as she dismissed the lawsuit filed by Save Jobs USA.

Ajay Bhutoria, a prominent community leader and advocate for immigrant rights, has applauded the decision by the court to allow H1B spouses to work and support their families.

"With the court's decision to allow H1B visa holders' spouses to work, thousands of families across the country will be able to breathe a little easier.

This decision will provide much-needed relief to families who have been struggling to make ends meet and it will help to ensure that these families can stay together and thrive," Bhutoria said. "Allowing H1B spouses to work is not just a matter of economic fairness, but it is also a matter of family unity and stability.

I applaud the court's decision, and I hope that this is just the first step towards a more compassionate and equitable immigration system," he said.

Celebrations turn to tragedy in Indore

From Page 1

He was citing eyewitness accounts. Earlier, a witness had put the number at nearly 25. The CM said he has ordered a probe into the incident. According to Chouhan, 19 persons were rescued and taken to the hospital but one of them succumbed to his injuries.

He announced financial assistance of Rs 5 lakh each to the kin of the deceased and Rs 50,000 for every injured person.

Expressing anguish soon after the accident, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had tweeted, "Extremely pained by the mishap in Indore. Spoke to CM Shivraj Chouhan Ji and took an update on the situation. The state government is spearheading rescue and relief work at a quick pace. My prayers with all those affected and their families."

The temple was constructed by laying a slab over the bawdi in a covered campus, Home Minister Mishra said. A probe has been ordered into the matter, particularly to find out how the temple was allowed to be constructed over a bawdi, Mishra said.

Kantibhai Patel, president of Patel Nagar Residents Association, said no ambulance reached the spot for an hour even after authorities were alerted about the accident.

Officials have identified the deceased persons as Lakshmi Patel (70), Bharti Kukreja (58), Jaivanti Khobchandani (84), Daksha Patel (60), Madhu Bhammani (48), Manisha Motwani (40), Ganga Patel (58), Kanak Patel (32), Pushpa Patel (49), Bhumika Khanchandani (31) and Indra Kumar Harwani (53).

An eyewitness said that during the religious programme, there was a huge crowd of devotees on the roof of the bawdi in the temple. As the structure could not bear the load of so many people, it caved in, he said. After the accident, people gathered around the temple looking for their family members who were present on the premises at the time of the tragedy.

S'jung neurosurgeon held for extorting money from patients

From Page 1

Patel then requested them to pay the sum either in cash to Sharma or Kuldeep, who were Khattar's employees, or transfer it online to mobile numbers linked to the bank accounts of these employees, the CBI said.

Patel allegedly delivered the money received from the patients' attendants to Rawat personally in cash or sent it to others as per the surgeon's directives after collecting it from Sharma, Kuldeep, or Khattar.

The CBI alleged that Rawat coerced patients into paying a price which was manifold over the actual price for the instruments. The shop owner shared the profits of overbilling with the accused surgeon, the agency said.

The investigation has further exposed Rawat's directions to his patients to deposit bribes ranging from Rs 30,000 to Rs 1.15 lakh into a middleman's bank account.

The agency has also accused Rawat of siphoning off the excess money generated by the sale of overpriced surgical equipment, enriching himself and his co-conspirators through bribes, and laundering their ill-gotten gains through various companies controlled by Ganesh Chandra, a private individual in Bareilly.

"It was further alleged that bribes of Rs 1.15,000, Rs 55,000 and Rs 30,000 were taken recently in three different instances from the attendants of patients of the said doctor through a private person (middleman) in the bank account of another private person.

The same was allegedly done at the directions of said doctor. It was also alleged that the accused doctor was laundering his illegally earned money through companies, being managed by a private person," the CBI said in a statement. The searches led to recovery of incriminating documents and digital devices among others. The arrested accused persons are being produced before a competent court here, it added.

City registers 295 Covid cases, positivity rate 12.48%

Health Min holds meeting to review Covid cases, says situation not alarming

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi recorded 295 fresh Covid cases on Thursday with a positivity rate of 12.48 per cent, according to data shared by the city health department. On Wednesday, the city had logged 300 cases, the first time since August 31, and two deaths while the positivity rate had mounted to 13.89 per cent.

Meanwhile, Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bhargava on Thursday held a meeting with all stakeholders to review the COVID-19 situation in the national capital said that the COVID situation in the capital is not alarming and the department was fully prepared to tackle any surge in cases.

Bhargava assured people that there was no need to panic since the hospitalisation rate was low. The Centre also focuses on the six states —



Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Delhi — where a surge has been witnessed.

The meeting saw the attendance of virologists, epidemiologists, genome sequencing experts, the Director General Health Services, Special Secretary Health, and other senior officials of the Health Department, closely observed the current situation of COVID-19 in Delhi.

The meet came a day after Delhi's COVID-19 cases climbed to 300 for the first time since August 31 last year, while the positivity rate rose to 13.89

per cent, according to the data shared by the health department. Two Covid-related deaths were also reported, it said.

"We reviewed the situation. We have asked hospitals to advise coronavirus tests to those who are symptomatic. People visiting hospitals should wear masks. The test positivity rate was high because the number of tests was low. There was no proposal to make masks mandatory, as per the earlier advisory," said Bhargava during a press conference after chairing an emergency meeting to review the COVID situation.

"A trend has been seen that when Maharashtra witnesses a surge, Delhi also sees a spike in cases due to the large number of international flights which land in Mumbai and Delhi. We are fully prepared for it," he said.

Bhargava said they were getting some indicators about the spike in Covid cases but they are fully prepared. He also said that genome sequencing of samples is also being carried out and nothing worrisome has been found till now.

"Last night, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal called me to discuss about the Covid situation and he asked me to convene an emergency meeting on Thursday. In the meeting today, epidemiologist, genome sequencing expert, special secretary (health) were present and we analysed the situation closely," he said.

He said there is no need to

panic due to the high positivity rate.

The review meeting on Friday will include a presentation of the results of the mock drill done recently at Delhi government-run hospitals, which will be shown to the chief minister, the minister said.

The minister said the health department will brief Kejriwal on Friday on the situation following which he will issue directions to the government.

"The chief minister will also be briefed about the Covid situation in other states and how they are tackling the rise in cases," he added. "Mock drill has been conducted already. We have taken an update on oxygen cylinders and liquid medical oxygen (LMO). The health department will show the results of the mock drill to the chief minister as a presentation on Friday at noon.

G'gram sees rapid increase in new cases

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

A rapid increase in new Covid cases has been recorded in Gurugram. The district on March 26 recorded 39 Covid cases, 46 cases were reported on March 27, 57 on March 28, on March 29, 75 and on Thursday the numbers stood at 75. In the last 14 days, a total of 433 new cases have been reported.

The number of active patients was 272 (as of Thursday), out of which 265 are in home isolation. The Covid-19 tally in Gurugram has now risen to 3,01,734, according to the official daily health bulletin. A total of 3,01,809 have been cured and discharged since the outbreak of the pandemic in



2020. "It has been observed that people can be safe if they follow the necessary guidelines of the health department," a health official said. Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Virender Yadav said that efforts are being made by the district administration to prevent the spread of the corona infection.

The Covid positivity rate in Gurugram is 4.67 per cent. "In the last few months, we have had several patients who suffered from Covid-like symp-

toms, such as high fever, dry cough, and sore throat. These symptoms usually persisted for less than a week, with their intensity peaking for 1 or 2 days before subsiding. While these symptoms may look similar to those exhibited by Covid patients, however, these are the symptoms of illnesses caused by influenza," Dr Arunesh Kumar, Senior Consultant and Head of Pulmonology and Respiratory Medicine, Paras Hospital, Gurugram said.

"Moreover, to avoid extreme exposure to seasonal infections, it is advisable to follow basic hygiene precautions and preventive measures. Accurate information and timely diagnosis remain our most effective medical panacea," he said.

Strong winds, thunder showers hit traffic; 17 flights diverted

IMD predicts rainfall in Capital for next 2 days

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The national Capital region on Thursday witnessed a light to moderate spell of rain for the second consecutive day with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) predicting rainfall activity for the next two days.

As many as 17 flights were diverted from the Delhi airport due to bad weather in the national Capital while many areas including Kashmeri Gate, AIIMS, Dhaura Kuan, Apsara Border, Khajuri Chowk, ITO, witnessed heavy traffic jam on Thursday evening.

The airport official said that out of the 17 flights diverted from the Delhi airport, 8 flights each were diverted to Lucknow and Jaipur while one was diverted to Dehradun. These flights were diverted to Lucknow, Jaipur and Dehradun, an airport offi-



cial said.

"Delhi/ NCR is likely to have rain and thundershowers during late evening and night. With a break sometime tomorrow forenoon/afternoon, the wet spell will resume tomorrow as well. The remnant showers, albeit light, may even continue on Saturday morning and cease thereafter," the SkyMet weather said.

According to IMD, Delhi has recorded a total of 34mm rainfall in the month of March - exceeding its monthly normal of 19.1mm with strong winds and thunder showers.

"It is likely to raise this margin further," the weather agency said. A similar rain spell coupled with a thunderstorm hit the Delhi-NCR region on Wednesday.

The minimum tempera-

ture in the national capital settled at 18.8 degree Celsius on Thursday, while the maximum temperature was around 32 degree Celsius, as per the IMD.

A Western Disturbance, labelled as an extra-tropical storm originating in the Mediterranean, is an area of low pressure that brings sudden showers, snow and fog.

They bring moderate to heavy rain in low-lying areas. Nearly 5 to 10 per cent of India's annual rainfall is thought to be a result of western disturbances.

While the rain has been delaying the heat wave by bringing down the temperature, it has also damaged the standing crop in the northern and central parts of India, including Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh.

'Forced by LG to prepare proposal to stop free power to farmers, lawyers' chambers'

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The political war of words over power subsidy continued between the ruling AAP and the BJP in the national Capital.

Delhi Power Minister Atishi on Thursday alleged that her department has been forced by Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena to prepare a proposal to stop free electricity to farmers and lawyers' chambers.

No immediate reaction was available from the LG office over the minister's allegation. Responding to her allegations, the Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri has claimed that no such order has been issued by the Lieutenant Governor.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva has also said that Atishi's claim that the Lt. Governor has got a proposal made by the authorities to stop free electricity for farmers and lawyers is completely false.

He further alleged that Delhi Power Minister Atishi herself forced her electricity department officials to make a proposal and then started bad



propaganda.

Earlier, Atishi said at a press conference that a file from the Power department was received by her earlier in the day which proposed to stop free electricity for farmers and the chambers of lawyers in Delhi.

"Power department officials said there is a lot of pressure from LG and BJP leaders to stop free electricity provided by the Delhi government," Atishi claimed, and wondered how could such a proposal come without approval of the Chief Minister or the minister concerned.

"This proposal has been prepared under pressure from the LG. I want to say to him that you hate AAP and Arvind

Kejriwal, but I request you not to hate us so much that you also come to hate even people of Delhi including farmers and lawyers," she said. "Free electricity scheme will not be stopped till Kejriwal is there," the minister stressed.

She added that Delhi LG must remember that the people of Delhi also vote for BJP, and his dirty politics to disrupt the free power supply in Delhi will impact his party too. This would be an injustice to the people of Delhi.

Reacting to Delhi Power Minister's claim, Delhi BJP said that the truth is that the Delhi government does not give even a single unit of free electricity to the farmers, infact collects a load charge of 10 to 20 KW per tubewell from the poor farmers. Today the condition of the farmer is that whether he uses electricity or not, he has to pay a bill of about Rs.1800 per month.

The Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri has claimed that that no electricity of any kind is being provided free of cost to the farmers of Delhi by the Kejriwal government.

DERC's Principal (tariff) Adviser resigns from post

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Electricity Regulatory Commission (DERC)'s Principal Adviser (tariff) Ashok Kumar Singhal has resigned from his post.

This comes after Delhi government Vigilance Department issued a memorandum to him regarding alleged serious malpractice in the DERC in which it was pointed out that his appointment as Principal Advisor (Tariff) was in violation of all rules and regulations.

He had worked as OSD to the then Minister of Health (also for Power) Satyendra Jain, who is in jail in connection with money laundering case. He had also served as a member of DERC.

"Due to family circumstances and my ill health, I may not be able to continue further as Principal Adviser (tariff). Therefore, I hereby resign from the post.

"It is requested that the resignation may be accepted and notice period of the month may be waived off,"

Singhal said in his resignation letter. DERC is currently functioning with only one member.

"Singhal, currently working as Principal Adviser (tariff), DERC, may explain as to why suitable recommendations be not made against him for taking action as per rules, for various omissions and Commissions and for violations of statutory provisions, not maintaining good conduct after superannuation, dereliction of duty and compromising with the neutrality and independence of D E R C , " reads the memorandum issued to him.

The memorandum said that it appears that Power Department remained silent and have not taken any steps to undo the appointment of Singhal as Principal Advisor (Tariff), and Satya Gopal (the then Additional Chief Secretary/Power/IPGCL/PPCL) (Now Retd. on superannuation basis) thus extended undue favor to Singhal in violation of above mentioned statutory position.

Man posing as journalist arrested for trying to extort ₹50K from businessman

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 52-year-old man posing as a journalist was arrested along with his son for allegedly trying to extort Rs 50,000 from a businessman and later beating him up for reporting the matter to police.

According to police, Laxman Indoriya and his 26-year-old son Lakshay Indoriya have been arrested while Laxman's wife and second son Pragyan are absconding and efforts are on to arrest them. Indoriya threatened the businessman that he will defame him by posting fake news related to his business and other interests. But when he came to know that he reported the matter to police, Indoriya with his sons thrashed him with



plastic pipes and iron rods, police said.

The matter was reported at Nabi Karim Police Station by the businessman on March 27, they said. In his complaint, the victim, who runs a restaurant in Ram Nagar Market, alleged that a man named Laxman Indoriya was harassing him and demanding Rs 50,000.

According to the complainant, on March 23, Indoriya with a few associates of his came to his restaurant and demanded Rs 50,000 and threatened to kill him if he did not pay up.

City Govt schools' students will teach people to be happy through mindfulness: Atishi



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Students of Delhi government schools will take forward the Happiness Curriculum activities in the community and family and will teach people to be happy through mindfulness, Education Minister Atishi said on Thursday.

She addressed Delhi gov-

ernment school teachers, principals and happiness coordinators at an event organised by the Education Department at Thyagaraj Stadium. She discussed the responsibilities of teachers and administrators and highlighted the role of Happiness Curriculum and mindfulness in the entire process of teaching and learning in Delhi government schools.

Fresh posters questioning Modi's educational qualifications surface

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Fresh posters questioning the educational qualification of Prime Minister Narendra Modi surfaced in the national Capital on Thursday.

As per the allegations, some parts of Delhi had blue posters on the walls and pillars on the roadsides with the caption "Kya Bharat ke pradhan mantri padhe-likhe hone chahiye (should the PM of India be educated)?"

Meanwhile, the AAP has also launched a poster campaign with the slogan "Modi Hatao, Desh Bachao" on Thursday and banners in several languages have been put up across 22 states.

The posters had been



released in 11 languages including Gujarati, Hindi, English, Punjabi, Telugu, Bengali, Oriya, Kannada, Malayalam and Marathi.

The AAP claimed that Rajya Sabha MP Dr. Sushil Gupta and senior leader Anurag Dhanda detained by Haryana Police over poster campaign. Police also confiscated posters and detained dozens of workers of AAP in Pune, Ahmedabad, and other cities in the country

It has become a crime to

ask if the prime minister of the country should be educated... A police sub-inspector arrives soon after the posters were put up and removes the posters. It means that the PM and the entire BJP want to say that the country's PM should be uneducated," senior AAP leader and Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Singh said in a video statement.

Singh's statement was a reference to posters in Hindi that came up in parts of the national capital, which asked, "should India have an educat-

ed prime minister". The AAP leader ended his message with an appeal to people to run a similar campaign on social media and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, AAP national convenor Gopal Rai also launched a poster campaign with the slogan "Modi Hatao, Desh Bachao" on Thursday and banners in several languages have been put up across 22 states including Punjab, Gujarat, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, and Maharashtra, and all Hindi speaking states like Rajasthan, MP, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, UP, HP, and Uttarakhand.

The campaign was announced on March 23, on the martyrdom day of Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh, Shaheed Rajguru, and Shaheed Sukhdev.

People take out march in Jehangirpuri on Ram Navami amid heavy security

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A large group of people on Thursday took out a march amid heavy security deployment in Jahangirpuri here on Ram Navami in contravention of rules following which riot control force was deployed to prevent any untoward incident.

The Delhi Police had denied permission for holding the "Shree Ram Bhagwan Pratima Yatra" as part of Ram Navami mahotsav in the area where violence broke out last year during a Hanuman Jayanti procession.

The group gathered at a park in the northern Delhi locality and performed puja there, a senior police officer said. "We deployed local police

personnel, riot control force along with four companies of other forces to ensure law and order is maintained and no untoward incident takes place. The situation remained under control and people cooperated," he said.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (northwest) Jitendra Meena said paramilitary forces were also deployed in the area and the event passed off peacefully. "We also conducted Aman committee meetings in the area. The organisers were advised to cut short their route to 100 metres to which they agreed and the program passed off peacefully," he said. Police also closed some streets in the area for security reasons.

While police said that around 500 people attended the



procession, the organisers claimed "thousands" of people had participated. According to police, the procession started at 11.30 am and concluded around 1 pm. A total of seven processions, including the one in Jahangirpuri, were taken

out in the northwest district.

In an official order earlier, ACP headquarters, Northwest Delhi, informed Hindu leaders that their request to hold Shree Ram Bhagwan Pratima Yatra to celebrate Ram Navami on March 30 cannot be allowed. "I

am directed to inform you that your request for Shree Ram Bhagwan Pratima Yatra on the occasion of Ramanavami Mahotsav... has been considered by the competent authority but could not be acceded to from a law and

order point of view."

Sachin Sharma alias Mohit Sanatani, Delhi Pradesh President of Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Yuva Morcha, said, "We took out the procession as a symbol of peace. We applied for permission around a month ago, however, it was denied by police citing law and order situation.

"We were preparing for the programme and two days ago, a written communication was received that the permission had been denied. We had a plan to cover four to five kilometres in the Jahangirpuri area, but it was restricted to around 200 metres," he said.

"We avoided the area where riots took place last year on Hanuman Jayanti as we didn't want to disturb our

(Muslim) brothers who are fasting during Ramzan," he said. Shivom Mishra, national president of Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Yuva Morcha, said he had come from Surat, Gujarat to attend the event but several other people couldn't join due to police barricades around the park from where the march began. Mahant Mangak Das, who runs an ashram near Rajghat, said the participants followed police instructions and did not break the barricades as they are followers of Lord Ram who is a symbol of peace. The organisers of the programme also said Pinky Chaudhary, president of Hindu Rakshak Dal who was arrested for allegedly raising communal slogans at Jantar Mantar, also attended their procession.

Sheik Abdul Qadir, who has a shop near the mosque in block C where the riots took place, said, "We were assured by police that the peaceful environment will be maintained in the area. The Imam of the mosque also kept asking people to follow instructions. When the riots took place last year, my shop remained closed for 15 days. We don't want to face that again."

Meanwhile, a police officer said permission for praying at a local park during Ramzan was also denied by the authorities. On April 16, 2021, clashes broke out between two communities during the Hanuman Jayanti procession at Jahangirpuri in which eight police personnel and a local resident were injured.

3 more held for Khalistani violence in OZ

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/MELBOURNE

Taking action in connection with a brawl between alleged Khalistan supporters and pro-India demonstrators in January in Melbourne, the local police said on Thursday they have arrested three more people in connection with two incidents of brawl that broke out between Khalistan activists and pro-India demonstrators.

The alleged incidents happened during the so-called 'Punjab independence referendum' where two fights broke out between the two groups which injured several people on

January 29, Victoria Police said in a statement.

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

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

The three arrested include a 23-year-old man charged with affray and unlawful assault while a 36-year-old and 39-year-old have been charged with affray and violent disorder, the police said. The identities of the arrested men have not been disclosed.

Earlier, two men aged 34



and 39 were arrested and issued a penalty notice for riotous behaviour. All those charged this week have been bailed to appear at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court on August 8.

Further investigation is underway and police are making enquiries to identify and apprehend any further alleged

offenders from the day, the statement added.

India has asked the Australian government to curb the anti-India activities of the Khalistani separatists and frequent attacks on the Hindu temples in the country.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised concerns over the

recent attacks on temples in Australia as well as pro-Khalistan activities there with his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese during their meeting in New Delhi this month. Albanese has assured Modi that the safety of Indians was a "special priority" for him.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had also raised the issue during his meeting with his Australian counterpart Penny Wong.

"Signals that pro-Khalistan elements are stepping up their activities in Australia, actively aided and abetted by members of proscribed terrorist organisations such as the Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) and other inimical agencies from outside Australia, have been evident for some time," the Indian High Commission in Canberra said in a strongly-worded statement on January 26.

India rising as one of strongest nations under Modi: Min

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said here on Thursday from secure borders and self-reliance to a strong economy and transformed global image, India is rising as one of the strongest countries under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He also said Lord Ram is India's identity and not merely an embodiment in stone or wood and asserted that the government will construct hospitals, schools, set up industries and also build temples.

Making this assertion while addressing the 'Rising India Conclave' organised by a private media organization, he pointed out that all sectors, especially defence, have been witnessing a transformative change in the last few years, which has guided India to a respectable position on the world map.

Rajnath credited the bold approach and unwavering resolve of the government, which has ensured secured borders and a battle-ready Armed Forces backed by a self-reliant defence industry.

Terming national security as Government's top priority and self-reliance as the only medium to achieve it, he asserted that relentless efforts are being



made to attain 'Aatmanirbharta' in defence.

On the success achieved due to these decisions, the defence minister said the domestic defence production has witnessed a significant increase in the last few years.

"We are not only catering our own needs, but are also exporting weapons and equipment to other countries. From Rs 900 crore 7-8 years ago, defence exports have skyrocketed and are nearing Rs 14,000 crore in the current Financial Year. Our target is export defence equipment worth Rs 40,000 crore by 2026," he said.

Rajnath described India's diplomacy as another facet of Rising India. The presidency of G-20 and

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) this year is proof that India's stature is continuously growing on the world stage.

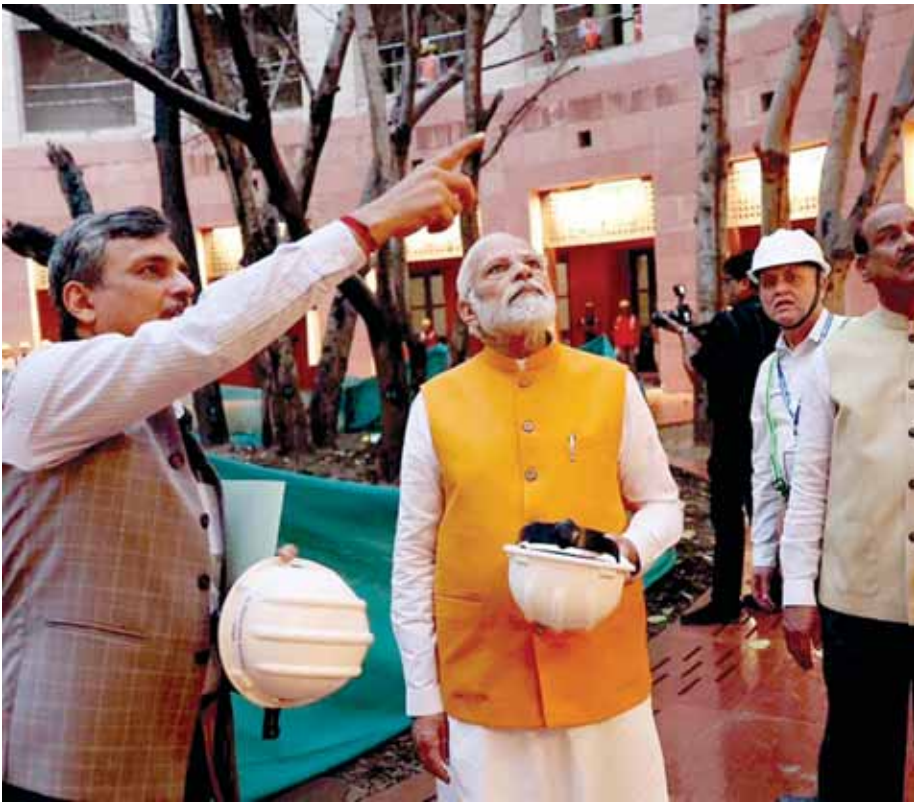
Rajnath added that India has led the world on issues like terrorism and has been successful in garnering support to eliminate the menace.

He emphasised that countries, which use terrorism as a tool, are well aware of the fact that India never harms anyone unnecessarily, nor does it spare anyone who tries to hurt its unity, integrity and sovereignty.

Mentioning about the surgical strikes, he stated that the move broke the back of terrorists and sent a strong message to the world that India will eliminate terrorism on its own soil, and if need be, on foreign land as well.

He added that "Whether it was the stand-off with China or ill intentions from Pakistan, our forces have been giving a befitting reply, whenever required."

The defence minister termed the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir as another example of the strong will of the Government. He stated that the Union Territory has ushered in a new era of peace and progress due to the decision.



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

BSY hints at fielding son against Cong strongman Siddaramaiah

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As Karnataka gears up full aswing for an 'evenly matched' political contest between the political rivals, former BJP Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa on Thursday indicated that his son B Y Vijayendra may be fielded against Congress strongman and former state CM Siddaramaiah from Varuna constituency for the May 10 Assembly polls.

Congress and JD(S) have announced their first list of candidates even before the elections were announced and Chief Minister Basavraj Bommain have announced that the BJP would release its list "soon" within a week's time.

The 80-year-old Lingayat caste leader Yediyurappa gave indications that his son Vijayendra who is also state Vice-President may be fielded against the opposition leader Siddaramaiah from Varuan assembly constituency in Mysuru, southern Karnataka.

Varuna is among the key seats to watch out for as Siddaramaiah, the Congress legislature party leader has thrown his hat in the ring in this assembly segment, cur-



rently held by his son Yathindra.

Siddaramaiah is an influential leader of the Kurba (Shepherd community), the third largest caste in the state after Lingayats and Vokkaligas.

When asked by newspersons whether Vijayendra would be fielded from Varuna, Yediyurappa said, "Discussions are going on. Siddaramaiah knows that his ground is slipping away. I don't think it is so easy for him. We will field a good candidate. We will give a tough fight. Let's see what happens."

The BJP veteran and four-time Chief Minister said the decision on whether to give the Varuna ticket to Vijayendra, who is the state BJP vice-president, would be left to the party's central leadership.

BJP General Secretary and

Defence Ministry inks ₹1,700 cr deal with BEL

For Lynx-U2 fire control systems for Indian Navy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a fillip to self-reliance in defence manufacturing, the defence ministry on Thursday signed a contract with Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), Bangalore for procurement of 13 Lynx-U2 Fire Control Systems for Indian Navy at a total cost of over Rs 1,700 crore. The systems will be procured under Buy {Indian – IDMM (Indigenously Designed Developed and Manufactured)} category.

The Lynx-U2 System is a Naval Gun Fire Control System designed and developed indigenously. It is capable of accurately tracking and engaging targets amidst sea clutter as well as air and surface targets.

The fourth generation, completely indigenous systems, will be installed on New Generation Offshore Patrol Vessels to be built indigenously at Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers and Goa Shipyard Limited.

This move will generate an employment of two lakh man-days over a period of four years and encourage active participation of various Indian industries, including MSMEs, thus significantly contributing to the Government's efforts to achieve 'Aatmanirbharta' in defence.

On Wednesday, the ministry signed three contracts worth Rs 5,400 crore to bolster defence capabilities of the armed forces. While two deals were with Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), Ghaziabad, the contract was with NewSpace India Limited (NSIL).

Giving details of the deals,



officials said here the first contract with the BEL pertains to procurement of Automated Air Defence Control and Reporting System 'Project Akashteer' worth Rs 1,982 crore for the Indian Army.

The second contract with the BEL relates to acquisition of Sarang Electronic Support Measure (ESM) systems along with associated Engineering Support Package from BEL, Hyderabad at an overall cost of Rs 412 crore for the Indian Navy.

The contract with NSIL, a Central Public Sector Enterprise under Department of Space, Bengaluru pertains to procurement of an advanced Communication Satellite, GSAT 7B, which will provide High Throughput Services to the Indian Army at an overall cost of Rs 2,963 crore. All these projects are under Buy {Indian – IDMM (Indigenously Designed Developed and Manufactured)} category.

The Automated Air Defence Control and Reporting System 'Project Akashteer' will empower the Air Defence units of the Indian Army with an indigenous, state-of-the-art capability, to effectively operate in an integrated manner. Akashteer will enable monitoring of low level airspace over the battle areas of the Indian Army and effectively control the Ground Based Air Defence Weapon Systems.

Sarang is an advanced Electronic Support Measure system for helicopters of Indian Navy, designed and developed indigenously by Defence Electronics Research Laboratory, Hyderabad under programme Samudrika. The scheme will generate an employment of approximately two lakh man-days over a period of three years. Both the projects will encourage participation of Indian Electronics and associated industries, including MSMEs, who are sub vendors of BEL.

The advanced Communication Satellite will considerably enhance the communication capability of the Indian Army by providing mission critical beyond line of sight communication to troops and formations as well as weapon and airborne platforms. The geostationary satellite, being a first-of-its-kind in the five-tonne category, will be developed indigenously by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/JERUSALEM

Underlining that fight against terrorism is common concern for both countries, the Speaker of Israel's Parliament has said the planners of the "abominable" 2008 Mumbai terror attack should pay a heavy price for it. He made these remarks ahead of his four-day visit to India starting Friday.

Amir Ohana, a close confidante of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will be on his first official visit abroad after assuming office in December last year.

Stating that the menace of terrorism is a common concern, Ohana, a former Shin Bet (Israeli internal security agency) official, told PTI that the fight to counter it requires all the progressive countries to come together.

Both India and Israel face the problem of terrorism, and the fight against it is a joint one, Ohana said.

"We all remember the abominable terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008 in which



over 207 people were murdered, of which 178 were Indians. Among the foreigners who were murdered were unfortunately also Israelis and Jews who came to the Chabad house," Ohana pointed out.

"It was an attack not only on India but also on Jews and free people everywhere," the Knesset Speaker said, adding that it was an attack on the shared values of India and Israel. "Whoever planned and sent the terrorists from the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba should pay a heavy price for it," he said.

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Boosting the capabilities of the armed forces to guard the Line of Actual Control (LAC) facing China, the defence ministry on Thursday inked contracts for procurement of improved Akash Weapon System and 12 Weapon Locating Radars, WLR Swathi (Plains) for the Indian Army at an overall cost of over Rs 9,100 crore.

The contract for procurement of improved Akash Weapon System (AWS) for 3rd & 4th Regiments of Army Air Defence, comprising live Missiles & Launchers with upgrades, Ground Support Equipment, Vehicles and Infrastructure was signed with Bharat Dynamics Limited, worth over Rs 8,160 crore.

The AWS is a Short Range Surface to Air Missile (SRSAM) Air Defence System, indigenously designed and developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). In order to meet aerial threats, two additional Regiments of AWS with Upgradation are being procured for Indian Army for the Northern borders (China). Improved AWS has Seeker



Technology, Reduced Foot Print, 360° Engagement Capability and improved environmental parameters.

The project will give a boost to the Indian missile manufacturing industry in particular and the indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem as a whole.

The project has overall indigenous content of 82% which will be increased to 93% by 2026-27.

The induction of the improved AWS into the Indian Army will increase India's self-reliance in Short Range Missile capability. This project will play a role in boosting the overall economy by avoiding outgo of precious foreign exchange to other countries, increasing employment avenues in India and encouraging Indian MSMEs through components manufacturing.

Around 60% of the project cost will be awarded to the private industry, including MSMEs, in maintaining the supply chain of the weapon system, thereby creating large scale of direct and indirect employment.

The contract for WLR Swathi (Plains) was signed with Bharat Electronic Limited (BEL) at a cost of over Rs 990 crore. It is an indigenously designed WLR which is capable of locating guns, mortars and rockets firing own troops, thereby facilitating their destruction through Counter Bombardment by own fire-power resources.

This will enable troops to carry out their operational tasks without any interference from the enemy and also provide them safety against enemy fire. Induction is planned to be completed in 24 months.

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

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Following investigations into the Udhampur IED blast cases by the banned terror group Lashkar-e-Tayabba (LeT) through their Pakistan-based handlers, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Thursday filed a chargesheet against two Lashkar operatives.

Accused Mohd Aslam Sheikh alias Adil and Mohd Amin Bhat alias Abu Khubaib have been charged for their efforts towards revival of terrorist activities in Jammu by carrying out recruitments from the pool of over ground workers (OGWs) and surrendered terrorists and activating and motivating them to carry out terrorist acts.

The NIA had taken over investigations into the case on November 15 last year from Jammu and Kashmir Police.

NIA Investigations revealed that Mohd Aslam Sheikh was in touch with Mohd Amin Bhat, an 'individual terrorist' of the LeT listed by the Union government, who was now operating from Pakistan.

Pinna recruited Adil to carry out the two IED blasts on buses parked in the public areas of Udhampur district of Jammu and Kashmir, which had inflicted injuries to two persons.

Mohd Amin Bhat was initially a resident of Doda district in the Valley. In 1997, he joined the terrorist ranks of Hizb Ul Mujahideen and was involved in the execution of various terrorist acts in Jammu and Kashmir. Later, he escaped to Pakistan in 2009 and is presently an active LeT handler who is playing a vital role to revive and accelerate terrorist activities in the Jammu region, the NIA has alleged in the chargesheet.

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The ships of First Training Squadron (INS Tir, Sujata and ICGS Sarathi) on overseas deployment made port call at Port Victoria, Seychelles on Wednesday after undertaking joint Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) surveillance with Seychelles Coast Guard.

Giving details here on Thursday, navy officials said Senior Officer First Training Squadron along with Commanding Officers of ships

called on High Commissioner of India Kartik Pande and Brigadier Michel Rosette, Chief of Defence Force (CDF), Seychelles Defence Forces.

In a ceremony onboard INS Tir, machinery spares and stores meant for Seychelles Coast Guard were handed over to CDF. The squadron presently has trainees from six friendly foreign countries in addition to 120 Indian trainees. It was a proud moment for young Trainee Benjamin from Seychelles to interact with his CDF.

Same-sex marriage issue: Minority groups write to CJI



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Some minority religious groups have written to Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud to cite their religious beliefs to express opposition to same-sex marriage, an issue being heard by the Supreme Court.

Sayed Salman Chishty of the Chishty Foundation, Ajmer, has conveyed his "concerns and reservations" to CJI, claiming that any legal validation for same-sex marriage will contradict India's religious, social and moral values, and cause "havoc" with the delicate balance of personal laws and accepted societal values.

FIRST COLUMN

JAPANESE THRUST TO OUR LOOK EAST POLICY

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



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

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

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



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

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

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

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

(The author is a foreign affairs commentator)

Societal needs stretch beyond skill formation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A film festival with its heart in the right place

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

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

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

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



SANTANU GANGULY

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four films in the MUBI

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

Eight biggest attraction at HIFF were: *Elvis*, the buzzing Austin Butler-starrer, Baz Luhrmann biopic that premiered at Cannes (and has won many awards subsequently); *Rheingold*, Fatih Akin's (Germany, Netherlands, Morocco, Mexico) high-octane adaptation of the swag-er and bombast of German rap star Xatar's 2015 autobiography '*All Or Nothing*'; winner

of 16 awards and 51 nominations, including the much-coveted Golden Bear (Berlinale 2022) - Carla Simon's (Spain), *Alcarras*, a deeply intelligent and empathetic humane drama that engulfs you in the heat and dust and dysfunction created by market forces; *Perfect Number* - the return of veteran Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi and his search for philosophical answers in mathematical theories; the poignant *We are Still Here*, an anthology film about stories of indigenous heroes from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific; winner of the Best Screenplay at Cannes 2022, *Boy From Heaven*, takes us into the heart of a ruthless power struggle between Egypt's religious and political elites; the latest Berlinale awardee (2023), *The Survival of Kindness*, follows a black woman's escape from a cage in the middle of the desert to the city, recapture, and tragedy; and Oscar nominee '*EO*' by Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland) follows a donkey that encounters good and bad people, experiences joy and pain, exploring a vision of modern Europe.

Further enriching the feature line-up are some equally remarkable documentaries, shorts, and animation films. DOC NYC 2022 nominee *Closed Circuit* by Tel Inbar (Israel) is a documentary that captures the heart-pounding trauma of the 2016 terrorist attack in Tel Aviv's Saron Market; Winner of 'Best Documentary Feature' at The Roxbury International Film



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Russia arrests WSJ reporter for spying

AP ■ MOSCOW

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

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

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

Chinese State-sponsored hacking group highly active, says report

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

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

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

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

'Russian spy operations weakened in Nordic nation'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ MOSCOW

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

'Huge win' for Russia as TikTok propaganda fails

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

Vatican: Pope's health condition improving

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

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

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

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

China to SCO countries: End disputes through cooperation

PTI ■ BEIJING

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

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



Wang Xiaohong

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

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

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

Ohana: 26/11 perpetrators should pay heavy price

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

Stating that the menace of terrorism is a common concern, Ohana, a former Shin Bet (Israeli internal security agency) official, told PTI that the fight to counter it requires all the progressive countries to come together. Both India and Israel face the problem of terrorism, and the fight against it is a joint one, Ohana said. "We all remember the abominable terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008 in which over 207 people were murdered, of which 178 were Indians. Among the foreigners who were murdered were unfortunately also Israelis and Jews who came to the Chabad house," Ohana pointed out.

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



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

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

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



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

Bahrain sentences 3 for questioning Islamic teachings

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thailand uses helicopters to fight mountain wildfires

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

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

Ethnic conflict must be resolved to achieve prosperity: Lanka Prez

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

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



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

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

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

Taliban terrorist attack in Pak kills 4 cops, injures 6

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

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

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

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

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



heavy weaponry, the Dawn newspaper reported.

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

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

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

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

Pakistan court strikes down sedition law

PTI ■ LAHORE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three more Khalistan supporters held in Aus

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

AP/PTI

King Charles III addresses German parl

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

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

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

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

The 74-year-old largely

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

Tsai arrived in New York on

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UAE leader designates his son as crown prince

AP ■ DUBAI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Bolsonaro returns to Brazil after 3-month stint in Florida

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

Kenya Opp in fresh protests amid warning by Government

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

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

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

“strengthening ties.”

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

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

Mexico investigates 8 over deadly fire at migrant facility

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

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

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



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

AP/PTI

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

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

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

Covid during pregnancy may increase obesity risk in children: Study

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

pregnant women and their children,” she said.

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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

“I can assure you that talks are going



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

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

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

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

to discuss such agreements.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Srinivasan to lead Wipro's India, Southeast Asia biz

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

Ajay Banga poised to become World Bank chief unopposed

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIEF

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

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

While delivering the Inaugural Address at the 4 th Dr Paarivendhar Research Colloquium (DPRC) 2023 at SRM Institute of Science and Technology Kattankulathur, Prof Ganesh said only science-based solutions could find alternatives to problems of pollution caused by fossil fuels, whose resource was also fast depleting. Prof Ganesh, who was bestowed with Padma Shri this year, said addressing energy-related challenges with the current availability of global infrastructure was one of the main problems today and science alone could design effective strategies and new technologies to find solutions and ensure sustainable development.

CIRSTEA UPSETS SABALENKA IN MIAMI



AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS

World number two Aryna Sabalenka suffered a shock straight sets Miami Open quarter-final loss to resurgent Romanian Sorana Cirstea, who reached her first WTA 1000 semi-final in a decade. Cirstea, ranked 74th in the world, triumphed 6-4, 6-4 against the Australian Open champion to secure her first WTA 1000 semi-final since Toronto in 2013. The 32-year-old is enjoying an upturn in form since taking on Swede Thomas Johansson as her coach, reaching the quarter-finals at Indian Wells and beating world number four Caroline Garcia of France in both legs of the "Sunshine Swing."

In her first meeting with the big-serving Belarusian, Cirstea looked comfortable and composed as she broke Sabalenka's first service game.

The 24-year-old from Minsk, who is now based in Miami, broke back to make it 4-4 but Cirstea swiftly got back in

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

The veteran reacted with a broad smile and a fist pump and conceded she was surprised by the victory.

"I am a bit speechless," she said. "I came out hoping that it would be a really tough match. I tried to hold my ground. I'm very happy with my performance today, it is a bit unexpected to be honest."

"I had confidence in my game. I knew I was playing well, and I knew that if I come out swinging and being aggressive, I would have my chance," she added.

"I'm very happy to get the win against Aryna, because she has been playing great lately.

She's probably one of the two or three best at the moment. So this gives me a lot of confidence."

Sabalenka, whose year began with victory at the Australia Open before she reached the final in Indian Wells, losing to Elena Rybakina, said she had struggled with the heat.

"It definitely wasn't my best match. I was struggling a lot with the conditions, like heat. I felt like balls were flying too much and I couldn't find control," she said.

"I was just trying to do my

best 'til the last point. I just couldn't adjust to these conditions unfortunately."

"The first three months of the year were fantastic for me. I'm just proud of the consistency of my game and I have to keep working, keep improving," said the Belarusian.

In the last four, Cirstea will face the winner of the quarter-final between Ekaterina Alexandrova and Petra Kvitová which was postponed due to heavy rain and will be moved to Thursday.

Sinner into Miami semis after beating Ruusuvuori

AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS

Italy's Jannik Sinner eased into the semi-finals of the Miami Open after a comfortable 6-3, 6-1 win over Finland's Emil Ruusuvuori on Wednesday.

The game was delayed for two hours by rain with Sinner 2-0 up in the second set but the stoppage did nothing to change the momentum of the match.

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

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

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

The Italian, who has not lost to a player



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FIFA strips Indonesia of Under-20 WC

AP ■ LAUSANNE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ BARCELONA

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

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

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

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

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

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

Barca have now reached the semi-finals



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Australian F1 chief keen on night race

AP ■ MELBOURNE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAX STILL FEELING EFFECTS

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

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

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

Spurs managing director Paratici handed worldwide FIFA ban

AP ■ LONDON

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

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

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

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

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



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

Both Paratici and Juventus have appealed against the initial decision.

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

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

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

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



AP ■ MELBOURNE

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

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

He insisted that was not the case after a more competitive

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ MANCHESTER

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

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

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

Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim

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

Both parties made second bids last week.

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

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

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

Zilliacus, said to be a United sup-



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IPL TURNS ‘SWEET 16’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CSK, MI remain premier contenders as RCB eye fresh start



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

PTI ■ CHENNAI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

IPL beckons Northeast as Guwahati gears up for 2 matches

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sindhu, Srikanth enter quarterfinals of Madrid Spain Masters

PTI ■ MADRID

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

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

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

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

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

Nishimoto was handed a walkover by France's Arnaud



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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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