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RANCHI RAIPUR CHANDIGARH
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Furore over German interference

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

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

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

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

This statement by Germany sparked a political slugfest in the



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

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

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

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

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

said in a tweet.

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

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

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

Global scamsters coming to help, Cong slams Lalit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

Patna court summons Rahul

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

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

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 Illaiyaraja 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.



Rescue operation underway after the roof of a 'bawdi' (well) collapsed at Beleshwar Mahadev Jhulelal, in Indore, on Thursday. At least 8 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.

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 Baalu, 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.

Govt inks ₹36.4K-cr def 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

BANGA SET TO BE WB CHIEF UNOPPOSED

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. 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."

BABUS TOLD TO REVEAL STOCK HOLDINGS

New Delhi: The Centre has asked IAS, IPS and IFS officers to intimate it in case the total transactions in stock, share or other investments that they hold exceed their six months' basic pay during a calendar year, according to a latest order by the personnel ministry.

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 Guneeet 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 Guneeet Monga and director Kartiki Gonsalves, in New Delhi, on Thursday. PTI

S'jung neurosurgeon 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.

Festive spirit grips Jamshedpur with Ram Navami celebrations



PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

After a gap of three years with no restrictions clamped on darshan owing to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, Ram Navami was celebrated with fervour in the city.

Devotees across the city thronged temples and celebrated Ram Navami- the day which marks the birth of Lord Rama. Devotees were seen offering special prayers to seek the blessings of Lord Rama. Swami Dayananda, a priest at the temple, said:

"Devotees take holy dip on this day because visiting every religious place is not possible for everyone and it is believed that on this day, all the gods and goddesses come here to take holy dip. So today's dip is considered as the most sacred holy dip in the world."

"Today is Ram Navami. On this day lord Rama was born. There is a special belief in this place. Devotees celebrate this occasion in their homes also. All the nine days are celebrated with full fervour," said, a devotee.

Meanwhile, temples were decorated and the idol of Lord Rama was richly adorned with garlands. Thousands of devotees thronged the temples and offered prayers. People believe that Lord Rama fulfils everyone's wishes on this special occasion.

Police conduct flag march, CCTV camera for sensitive areas

Jamshedpur police, RAF and JAP on Thursday undertook flag march along with riot control vehicles from Sakchi and covered areas like Telco, Burmamines, Jugsalai, Sakchi, Dhaktidih, Kadma Bistupur and culminated at Gandhi Maidan in Mango.

As part of the safety measures medical teams will be deployed at 19 locations designated primarily on routes taken for immersion procession namely, Gandhi Maidan

roundabout and Mango roundabout (in Mango), Kapali Ghat, Domuhani, Ram Mandir, Bharat Sevashram Sangha (all in Sonari), Ram Mandir (in Bistupur), CCR, Sakchi roundabout (in Sakchi), Bhalubasa roundabout (in Sitaramdera), Agrico roundabout (in Agrico), Golmuri roundabout (in Golmuri), Tata Motors labour bureau (in Telco), Rankini Mandir and Sati Ghat (both in Kadma), Baroda Ghat, Jugsalai railway crossing and

Station roundabout (all in Jugsalai), Burmamines roundabout (Burmamines).

Meanwhile, the East Singhbhum police also carried out a flag march in view of the Ram Navami procession tomorrow. During the flag march which started from Sakchi, policemen went around various sensitive pockets. Apart from senior police officials, Jamshedpur's senior SP Prabhat Kumar also participated in the flag march.

akhara committees have been asked to complete immersion by 8 pm.

Along with Rapid Action Force units, additional forces from the districts were drawn for security arrangements for the procession in which an estimated 25,000 devotees would take part. Chanting religious slogans and 'bhajans', the rally would pass through lanes and by-lanes.

"It would take an hour for the tail-end of the procession to cross some points where the road is narrow," the police said. All the important routes for the procession would be barricaded with district traffic police enforcing 'no-entry' of heavy vehicles from morning. Plying of private and commercial vehicles also would be prohibited after 2 pm on all major roads of the city.

TSF pens MoU to strengthen public health services

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

With an aim to enhance public health services across Jamshedpur, Tata Steel Foundation (TSF) signed two MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with - Sri Sathya Sai Health and Education Trust (SSSHET) and Aarogya Vahini Trust (AVT).

The collaboration will boost the implementation and outreach of all public health initiatives in Jharkhand.

Chanakya Chaudhary, Director of TSF and Vice President Corporate Services, Tata Steel and Sourav Roy, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), TSF, Dr Anuj Bhatnagar, Head of Public Health, TSF and Amrita Ganguly, Head of Partnerships, TSF were present at the event. The event was attended by Dr C Sreenivas, Chairman SSSHET,

Amrita Roy Mukherjee, Chairperson of Aarogya Vahini Trust.

Chanakya Chaudhary said, "The signing of these two significant MoU come at an interesting juncture, as we recalibrate our approach to public health in Eastern India and become more agile with suitable linkages for effective health interventions".

Sourav Roy said, "I take this opportunity to thank Sri Sathya Sai Health and Education Trust and Aarogya Vahini Trust for reposing trust in us and enabling an ecosystem for change. This calls for more emphasis on strengthening healthcare services underscored by aspects of accessibility, strengthening of infrastructure and monitoring for overall success, for everyone to benefit from it".

While the MoU with SSSHET will enable free treat-



ment and diagnosis of maternal and child health; the MoU with AVT will enforce a health-camp like module, with modern amenities in mobile units. The staff at SSSHET and MANSI- staff of TSF will work in cohorts to ensure the implementation at ground level.

Joining in the conversation on effective public health measures, Chairman of Sri

Sathya Sai Health and Education Trust, Dr C Sreenivas said, "This MoU was long overdue, and we are overwhelmed that this has finally happened. It is like coming together with different individuals united by one goal - of providing quality healthcare to everyone - within the communities and beyond."

Tata Steel Foundation's

scope of association with Aarogya Vahini Trust lies in the detection and referral of patients with - non-communicable diseases, paediatric congenital heart diseases, cataract screening and surgeries, common medical conditions, basic primary healthcare, ANC/PNC care, paediatric heart surgeries and awareness sessions.

Chairperson of Aarogya Vahini Trust, Amrita Roy Mukherjee added her thoughts on the collaboration and commented, "I am overjoyed that these three organizations have come together to implement necessary health interventions and work towards the underserved people of the society. We started Arogya Vahini Trust in 2016 and it makes me immensely happy to see young brave hearts bracing for development and change in the society."

Hazaribag woman becomes Memsaab No. 1 in Zee show

SHAILESH SHARMA : HAZARIBAG

A woman of village Revali, Katkamdag block of the district Priyanka Giri has been declared winner of Memsaab Number , a Zee (Ganga) show of Zee. This show is open for all India levels. In the competition the married women from all over India took part.

Priyanka has shown her talent in the signed film "The Great Mountain". The film has been completed and will be released very soon on India level.

Priyanaka was born in Bikramganj of Bihar. She was married to Hare Krishan Giri of Revali village of Hazaribag. Her father Shankar Dayal Sharma was



not interested in the art and culture field.

Priyanka said that from childhood she was fond of art and culture. She said that after her marriage when her husband came to know about her interests, he started training in dance and acting.

She further said that the first time she was selected was in the 2013 Ranchi reality show DID Super Moms. The journey of this show ended at studio level. In the dance competition namely Dancing Star 2017 in Jamshedpur she got first place.

She was also winner of Mahua channel reality show Dance Ghamashan in the year 2018. She further said that my aim is to get a good name in the film industry.

Whereabouts of tiger uncertain?

M F AHMAD : DALTONGANJ

The whereabouts of the tiger in the tiger reserve Palamu are uncertain. It has not been sighted or camera trapped in the last 50 or 60 hours or so.

Kumar Ashutosh chief conservator of forest and field director of the tiger reserve Palamu too conceded there is no sighting of it either by eyes or by camera traps in the last two days and above.

He said there is no kill of it nor any pug mark. Pug marks can be found but the discovery of kill is when the stench of the kill spreads in the jungles he said.

Where could it have gone after all? There is none to answer it. The last time that this tiger was sighted was when it was climbing up a hillock. The Pioneer here is withholding the name of the hillock for the safety of the big cat. There are two routes on climbing down. One for the tiger reserve Palamu. The other for the forests of Latehar. The hillock is on the border of Palamu tiger reserve and Latehar. It's a guess that the tiger has gone to the jungles of Latehar forest division. No one has found its presence there.

This tiger came from Chhatisgarh on March 17. It had so far attacked 3 people, two of them males. The biggest consolation is that all three people attacked by the tiger are alive and recovering.



Devotees showcase arms skills as they celebrate Ramnavmi procession in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

Jamshedpur Brings Nibav Home Elevators to Jharkhand

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

Country's most popular and the only TUV SUD certified home lift brand from India, Nibav Home Elevators today proudly announced entry into the state of Jharkhand by setting up its first experimental centre in Jamshedpur. The 1000 sq ft facility located at Jawahar Nagar houses Nibav safest and elegantly designed pneumatic in-home lift models - Series III and Series III MAX.

Nibav's home lifts are globally certified with an award-winning patented design which can be installed virtually anywhere in the home, advanced technology with affordably priced customisable packages. There is no need for any extra civil work burden on the home due to the innovative product design, and easy installation that can be completed in just less than 24 hours. The latest Series III home lifts from Nibav is the world's first wire-free pneumatic home lift that makes vertical moments entirely on air, eliminating the use of ropes, belts, wires, and oil or lubrication. to European standards, Nibav has been installing home lifts that works to transform the quality of life in every home - allowing homeowners to embrace the sustainable eco-friendly home lift, safe entry and exit for those using a wheelchair or walking frame, those wishing to travel with loved ones, affected by a reduction in mobility, recovery from medical procedure, retirement, disability or suffering with severe asthma. Nibav's patented home elevators use less power than conventional hydraulic systems and come with industry-leading features such as Zero Civil Work, Self-Supporting Structure, Grease Less Technology, and Wheelchair Compatibility.

Commenting on the milestone entry, Vimal Babu said, "We are excited to bring our safest and eco-friendly in-home lift innovations to the homeowners in Jamshedpur who are looking for appealing and safest in-home mobility solutions."



AUVI MUKHERJEE

Olive Ridley turtles are among thousands of marine animals highlighted as endangered. Yet, in a pristine stretch of the Konkan coast of India, a little-known nesting site for Olive Ridley turtles is threatened by a proposed road construction project. The road project, which is a template for unplanned development across different parts of the world, has thankfully been stopped for now by the state administra-

tion. Not all such endangered species are lucky as global warming, loss of habitat due to unplanned development, marine pollution and oxygen depletion are leading to mass extinction of marine life on the planet. The threat to Olive Ridley turtles may seem to be an isolated case but there are several other issues building up around our entire marine ecosystem which, together with the impact of climate change, can destroy both lives and livelihoods.

WHAT IS BLUE ECONOMY AND WHY IS IT RELEVANT

It may therefore be important to first understand the Blue Economy more holistically. What is it and why is it critical? We need to really start by thinking of water as a resource and put together a list of every economic activity that inland water bodies and oceans provide for us.

There have been significant

changes in our water bodies due to pollution, disposal of wastes (including plastics) and pollution caused by ships. These together have the potential to impact traditional livelihoods such as fisheries, tourism and harm the entire economy dependent on it. Authorities should therefore recognize the criticality

of the oceans and its resources and solve for the degradation of the marine ecosystem.

The size puts it in perspective. The worldwide ocean economy is valued at around \$1.5 trillion per year, making it the seventh largest economy in the world. It is set to double by 2030 to \$3 trillion. The total value of ocean assets (natural capital) has been estimated at \$24 trillion.

WHAT'S ENDANGERING IT

In recent times, the pressure imposed on marine resources has risen drastically.

In turn, a lack of sufficient action to mitigate harmful practices has led to the endangerment of marine life. Dredging, the act of clearing the waterbed for various purposes adversely affects marine organisms through habitat degradation, contamination, and collisions. It must be planned in a manner that avoids environmental windows (periods in which marine animals are sensitive). Furthermore, cargo handling must be made more efficient and acts of ocean dumping must be scrutinized closely. Additionally, it is also important to monitor and prevent pollution from ships and oil spills as well as reduce harmful emissions like nitrogen and sulfur dioxide. Plastic pollution in open waters itself poses an immediate threat to the destruction of marine ecosystems, along with human health in the form of microplastics.

Creation and maintenance

of improved shipping infrastructure and prudent use of resources while at sea, and effective management of plastic waste are all effective antidotes to the crisis. In turn, we must also recognize the grim hand of increased carbon emissions while dealing with phenomena such as ocean acidification and the rapid rise in seawater levels. The damage in this case extends far beyond marine ecosystems to include human life and ecology. Wetland flooding, contamination of agricultural land, and erosion are only a slice of the entire picture unfurling in front of our eyes if we fail to mitigate climate change and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

STEPS NEEDED TO PROVIDE FOR IT

India has taken note and launched the shipbuilding, fisheries, and maritime vision for 2030 in 2021. The initial draft for developing a com-

prehensive framework for the Blue Economy was released in 2020. The G 20 nations, which are all in the coastal region, have reportedly identified it as a priority. They now need to adopt it expeditiously.

Overall, respect for the environment and the Blue Economy needs to be brought right inside the planning process for any economic or development activities - marrying sustainability along with development. A comprehensive policy framework for the Blue Economy and to suitably mitigate and adapt to climate change was never more crucial.

THE WRITER, A 12TH GRADE STUDENT, IS PASSIONATE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY AND WRITES OCCASIONALLY ON ISSUES AROUND CLIMATE CHANGE. VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE PERSONAL.

CM seeks blessings from Lord Rama for the State

'RAMNAVMI GIVES MESSAGE OF STRONG CULTURE, UNITY AND BROTHERHOOD'



Chief Minister Hemant Soren offers prayers at Tapovan Mandir on the occasion of Ramnavmi festival in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Ratan Lal

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Minister Hemant Soren today reached Tapovan Temple at Hinoo locality in the State Capital and bowed down before Lord Rama's statue to seek blessings,

progress, affluence, peace and health of the State residents. Wishing people of the State on the auspicious festival of Ram Navami, the CM said, "Maryada Purushottam Lord Shri Ram ji is our ideal.



Devotees take part in a Ramnavmi procession at Albert Ekka Chowk in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

Ramnavmi Mahaparva strengthens mutual unity, brotherhood, harmony and the tradition and culture that have been going on for years." After visiting Lord Shri Ram Janaki at Tapovan temple, Chief Minister Hemant Soren said

that we should imbibe the ideals of Lord Shri Ram in our lives, because everyone's welfare lies in it. Addressing thousands of devotees present at the site, the Chief Minister said that last year on the occasion of Ramnavmi festival, it was



Chief Minister Hemant Soren holds a sword on the occasion of Ramnavmi procession at Tapovan Mandir in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murm

announced to develop the holy land of Tapovan. This year the renovation and beautification work of the temple and surrounding area has started on Ram Navami and next year on the auspicious occasion of Ram Navami you will see

the grand temple of Lord Shri Ram Janaki here. More than 14 crore rupees are being spent on the development of Tapovan temple complex. More funds will be made available if needed. The Chief Minister said



Chief Minister Hemant Soren waves to devotees on the occasion of Ramnavmi procession in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murm

that the government is committed to preserve and develop historical-religious places. The development of the Tapovan temple complex and surrounding area is an important part of this link. This temple is being developed as a sym-

bol. Raja Sabha MP Mahua Maji and members of Ram-Janki Tapovan Temple Committee and Shri Shri Mahaveer Mandal Nivaranpur Committee were present on the occasion.

BJP attacks Govt on delay in filling important posts

PNS : RANCHI

Launching a scathing attack on the coalition government in the State State BJP president cum Rajya Sabha MP Deepak Prakash said that the State government is not only misleading the 3.25 crore people of the State, but is also misleading the State's highest panchayat -- Assembly. Prakash said that the post of Speaker of the Legislative Assembly is above party politics. But the Speaker of the Jharkhand Legislative Assembly is breaking the limits of both his post and the house at the behest of the state government.

He said that the BJP has not received any letter to elect a new leader of the Opposition. Prakash said that this intention has been refuted through the media earlier also. He said that the government is trying to run the state for self-benefit and is also causing huge damage to the State.

He said that the BJP has duly elected the leader of the Legislature Party and gave it to the Assembly Speaker in the beginning, but at the behest of the Chief Minister, the Assembly Speaker has deliberately suspended the Constitutional appointments of the State, making it unnecessarily controversial.

He said that the State government is trying to hide its failures when the matter of complete formation of institutions like Lokayukta, Women's Commission and Information Commission went to the court.

Prakasg said that the State government is resorting to another mistake to cover up its mistakes. While the government should know that mistake cannot be hidden by mistake.

He said that in the interest of the state, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly should clarify his position on the pending case related to the Leader of the Opposition in his tribunal. They should refrain from becoming weapons of the ruling party and should pave the way for the complete formation of essential constitutional institutions of the State.



Artists dress up Lord Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman as they celebrate Ramnavmi procession in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

DC and SSP inspect Ramnavami processions

PNS : RANCHI

In a move to prevent any untoward incident during Ramnavami procession on Thursday Ranchi Deputy Commissioner (DC), Rahul Kumar Sinha and Ranchi Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), Kundan Koushal reached the State Capital's Albert Ekka Chowk main road to inspect the situation and gave required instruction to concerned officials.

Both the administrative officials of the District reached the spot as the processions started reaching the Chowk.

To provide fool proof security blanket on the occasion apart from all the major square-intersections of the city, magistrates and police force have been deployed at sensitive places. In view of the apprehension of unnecessary fear and tension arising due to rumours, each magistrate-police officer has been instructed to keep special vigil in their respective areas. At the same time, from the point of view of security, monitoring



Ranchi DC Rahul Kumar Sinha and SSP Kishor Kaushal during Ramnavmi procession at Albert Ekka Chowk in Ranchi on Thursday. PNS

will also be done through CCTV and drone cameras.

More than 2000 additional police forces have been deployed in the capital. On the other hand, talking about Jharkhand, more than 13000 additional police forces have been deployed. Ambulance and fire brigade vehicles have been stationed at major places of the city to deal with the emergency situation. These vehicles were deployed at Namkum Chowk, Doranda Police Station, Tapovan Mandir, Ratu Police Station, Ratu Road Chowk, Bariatu Police Station, Chutiya Chowk,

Akra Masjid Chowk, Daily Market Police Station, Ranchi University Gate, Albert Ekka Chowk, Lalpur Chowk, Mahavir Chowk and others.

All police station In-Charges have been instructed to maintain constant contact with the officials of the local intelligence department and to maintain contact with the peace committee regarding security, especially in Ranchi, two companies of Rapid Action Force of CRPF have been deputed whereas seven companies of central security forces have been deployed across the State. One compa-

ny each of Rapid Action Force has been deployed in Ranchi, Jamsheedpur, Giridih, Palamu, Lohardaga and Dumka. At the same time, a company of CRPF women's battalion has also been deployed in Palamu.

Deployment of health workers has also been done at various places in case someone has any health related problem during the procession if someone gets hurt during the procession. Weapons can cause minor cuts in someone's body. Or even if there is a serious injury, the district administration has put ambulances with doctors on duty at many busy places in the city.

The doctors were deployed with lifesaving medicine, and medical equipment. The places where health workers were deployed include City Control, Firayalal Chowk, Chutiya Chowk, Tapovan Mandir, Akra Masjid, Trikon Havan Kund, Lalpur Chowk, Ratu Road Chowk, Namkum Chowk, Mahavir Chowk Upper Bazar and Nivaranpur Mela.

Birsa Harit Gram Yojna gives new dimension to rural livelihood

PNS : RANCHI

Apart from mango horticulture, other fruit bearing plants like guava, lemon, pear, custard apple, ber, jackfruit, drumstick horticulture have to be promoted. Horticulture of mixed fruit plants is to be encouraged. Under MGNREGA, mango horticulture, guava horticulture, shady tree plantation will be done through Birsa Green Village Scheme, said Secretary, Rural Development Department, Prashant Kumar while addressing the meeting of the State Horticulture Advisory Committee organized in the auditorium of FOPP building here on Monday.

Kumar said that tree plantation work is being done in all the districts of the state under Birsa Harit Gram Yojana. He informed that for the successful implementation of Birsa Green Village Scheme, all the representatives of MGNREGA and JSLPS will be re-trained for the horticulture scheme to be held in the year 2023-24.

It was decided in the meeting that Didi Bagiya Yojana, run by the sisters of SHG, training and other assistance should be provided to the entrepreneurs to prepare fruit plants so that quality plants can be produced in the nursery. It was also decided to consider getting the nurseries established under the Didi Bagiya scheme registered with the National Horticulture Board through JSLPS.

It is necessary to train Horticulture Sakhis for the purpose of timely capacity building and to make them technically more capable, as continuous technical advice is given by them in the horticulture being done by the beneficiaries. Therefore, after training them, timely payment of wages should be ensured in lieu of the work done by them under horticulture.

Successful implementation of horticulture scheme is possible only on a large scale when necessary human resources are deployed at Panchayat/Block and District level for cooperation in the scheme. Therefore, for this work, it was decided by the members of the committee to coordinate with the representative of Tasar Vikas Foundation and prepare a detailed report related to the human resources required for tree plantation, so that further action can be taken in this regard from the departmental level.

It was decided to provide drip irrigation facility in horticulture through JSLPS under convergence under Birsa Harit Gram Yojana. Work should be done to connect the institutions to which the members of the advisory committee are associated with the horticulture scheme being implemented in their work areas/districts so that the current status of the plants can be monitored during field visits from time to time and technical advice can also be given to them. Can be given Along with this, technical cells will be formed in the state and district.

Under the Birsa Green Village Scheme, besides mango plants, other fruits like pear, orange, lemon, guava, jackfruit, dates, custard apple, etc., which can be grown according to Jharkhand's climate, have also agreed to include bamboo, drumstick. Along with this, it was also decided that mixed fruit horticulture should be ensured in at least 25 percent of the total horticulture area under each district in the financial year 2023-24.



Devotees brave rains during Ramnavami procession

PNS : RANCHI

Rain welcomed the devotees of Ram involved in the Ramnavami procession on Thursday in some districts of the State including Ranchi. The devotees braved rain and participated in very large numbers in the procession. Some parts of the State witnessed heavy rain with fast blowing wind.

People from every strata participated even women and girls participated in large numbers even after there was prediction of heavy to moderate. The citizens witnessed such a huge procession after three years of gap due to various kinds of Corona infection wave.

Indian Meteorological Center (IMC) Ranchi has issued a warning regarding the bad weather on the auspicious occasion. According to the Meteorological Center, strong surface wind speed of



Woman devotees show fencing skills as they participate in Ramnavmi procession at Albert Ekka Chowk in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

30 to 40 kmph is likely to occur with thunder at isolated places over southern and adjoining central parts of the State. On the other hand, on March 31, along with the warning of hailstorm at some places in the southern and nearby central parts of the

State, there has been a warning of wind speed of 40 to 50 km with thunder and lightning could be witnessed in the State.

Apart from this, on April 1 also, the Meteorological Center has said that there will be thunder and lightning at

some places in the State with wind blowing at a speed of 30 to 40 km.

IMD, Ranchi, Scientist Abhishek Anand said that there is more weather activity on March 31 and April 1. Due to the low pressure and local system in the Bay of Bengal,

there are chances of thunder and hail accompanied by thunder. That's why people should be alert for two days. Stay indoors when the weather is bad. Avoid going out. However, he has said that the weather will be normal from April 2.

Anand further said that there is no change in the maximum temperature during the next 24 hours across the State including Ranchi. In this regard, the forecasting officer of the Meteorological Center has said that there may be a drop of 3-4 degrees in the next two days. Then after this the temperature will rise by 2-4 degrees. According to the Meteorological Center, on March 30, the maximum temperature of Ranchi will be 34 and the minimum temperature will be 21 degrees. While on March 31, the maximum temperature is expected to be 32 and the minimum temperature is 19 degrees. There, on April 1, the maximum tem-



Devotees with biggest Mahaviri flags participate in Ramnavmi procession at Albert Ekka Chowk in Ranchi on Thursday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

perature will be 30 and the minimum temperature will be 18 degrees.

The Meteorological Department has appealed to the people to be alert. The nine districts where weather will change include Ranchi, Simdega, Gumla, Lohardaga,

Khunti, Ramgarh, Bokaro, Dhanbad and Jamtara. The possibility of rain has been expressed in many districts of the state on Wednesday. Apart from this, there is a possibility of rain on 30 and 31 March. The weather will be normal from April 1 to 3. The maxi-

mum rainfall is likely to occur on March 31. That's why the Meteorological Department has asked people to be alert. Farmers should be careful in view of the possibility of rain. Stay away from the fields for two days. Lightning can cause loss of life and property.

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

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

₹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.

BSY hints at fielding son against Cong strongman Siddaramaiah

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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.

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

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Same-sex marriage issue: Minority groups write to CJI



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

India sees 3,016 fresh Covid cases

Highest in nearly six months

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

The number of people

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

Delegates warm up for G20 Sherpa meeting in Kerala

PTI ■ KUMARAKOM

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

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

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

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



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

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

But this time they are going

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

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

Saying that she had

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ HARIDWAR

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TN Assembly witnesses sharp exchanges over Amma Canteen, breakfast scheme

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

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

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

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

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

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

ISIS threatens mass murders against 'love jihad' law

RAKESH K SINGH ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gujarat: 6 farm labourers killed in road accident

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Retired judge handed over task to refund 10 cr investors money back

New Delhi: The Union Ministry of Cooperation, under the supervision of the apex court appointed retired Judge RK Subhash Reddy has a mammoth task on hand—to process the refund to around 10 crore investors of cooperative societies of Sahara Group from the Sahara-SEBI refund account within December this year.

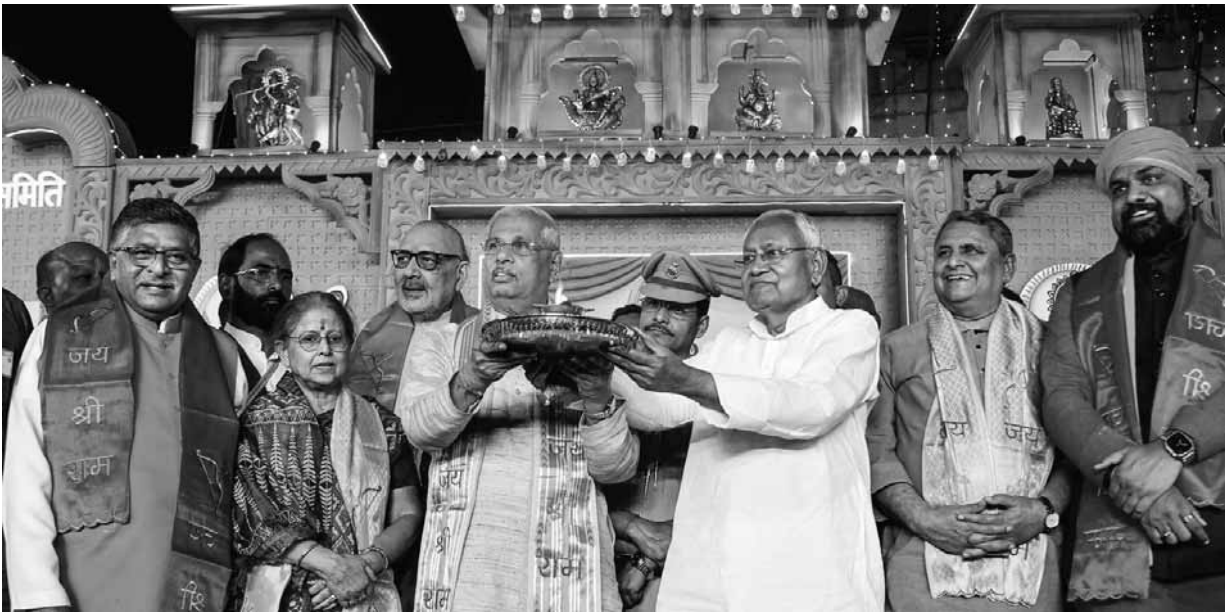
This payment will be made through a transparent process to the valid investors of Sahara Societies through their bank accounts on providing proof of their proper identity and deposit, said an official from the Ministry which has started making the blueprint to execute the task. The move follows the

Supreme Court order on March 29, asking the Ministry to make payment from Sahara-SEBI refund account to the crores of investors of 4 cooperative societies of Sahara Group.

These are Sahara Credit Cooperative Society Limited, Saharayan Universal Multipurpose Society Limited, Humara India Credit Cooperative Society Limited and Stars Multipurpose Cooperative Society Limited, all registered under the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act, 2002 between March, 2010 and January, 2014. The order came in response to a petition filed by the Centre in a PIL by

one Pinak Pani Mohanty, who sought a direction to pay the amount to the depositors who invested in several chit fund companies and Sahara credit firms." This is the hard-earned money of people who invested in several chit fund companies and Sahara credit firms over years.

Taking cognizance of complaints, initially notices were issued to the societies and hearing was held before the Central Registrar. However, despite Central Registrar's direction, the societies refused to pay the unpaid amount to the investors and continued taking fresh deposits and renewing existing ones." PNS



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

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Fighting hate speech

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

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

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

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

PICTALK



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

Let them write an essay on Khalistan

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Nobody has yet seen a draft Khalistan constitution

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

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

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



PRİYADARSHI DUTTA

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

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

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



PRİYADARSHI DUTTA

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

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



THE CHINESE MAKE NO QUALMS ABOUT SIMPLY 'BUYING OUT' THE LAST BASTION IN SOUTH AMERICA, AS THE USA CANNOT MAKE A COUNTEROFFER THAT IS FINANCIALLY ATTRACTIVE ENOUGH TO SPURN BEIJING'S ADVANCES

WELCOME MOVE BY HIMACHAL DY CM

Sir — Deputy Chief Minister Mukesh Agnihotri who announced in the HP Vidhan Sabha on March 28 that no appointment would be made on an out-sourced basis in the Jal Shakti Department in future is a praiseworthy decision. Outsourcing recruitment is a backdoor entry. It violates all recruitment requirements, such as ads inviting applications, competitive tests followed by personal interviews, meanwhile germinating corruption and exploitation by service providers because it is typically only known individuals who are appointed. The employees recruited through the out-sourcing method need to be stopped in every department which generates corruption and hampers government functioning. The government should appoint the required staff regularly in all departments after following the due selection process.

SK Khosla | Chandigarh

RAHUL'S MANOEUVRES

Sir — After being disqualified as an MP, Rahul Gandhi appeared before the media and said that whatever may come, he would keep asking questions in the Adani case. Rahul Gandhi's attention is more focused on the political fight than on the legal fight. Rahul Gandhi and Congress want to turn this court sentence into BJP revenge. But Rahul Gandhi and Congress have to accept that Rahul Gandhi has been punished for defamation. Rahul Gandhi has 30 days to appeal. It will be interesting to see how Rahul Gandhi's politics overshadow the BJP in the coming days and how Rahul Gandhi overcomes these difficulties..

Rohit Pandey | New Delhi

AMERICA'S DIVERSIONARY TACTICS

Sir — Playing blame games is the order of the day. As a result, our politicians play a crucial role in making the public feel bad about our country's expansion abroad. Moreover, they seek the help of a superpower and are not ready to face



THE CHINESE MAKE NO QUALMS ABOUT SIMPLY 'BUYING OUT' THE LAST BASTION IN SOUTH AMERICA, AS THE USA CANNOT MAKE A COUNTEROFFER THAT IS FINANCIALLY ATTRACTIVE ENOUGH TO SPURN BEIJING'S ADVANCES

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Why not set up a JPC on Adani?



Addressing a gathering after inaugurating an extension of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) headquarters in Delhi, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi linked the coming together of opposition parties against the BJP to his Government's campaign against corruption and said "anti-India" forces are attacking constitutional institutions — the "strong foundation of a rising India" — to stall the country's growth. To hear this, an aam aadmi with heavy hearts wants to know from PM Modi, why the Government is not investigating Adani. In addition, what about shell companies, stock parking, and stock inflation? And don't forget the recent controversy over Elara and Shell's companies receiving defence contracts — what is going on there? People want to know if corporate cronies were given undue favours to jump from 600 to the top 10 in top business

elections in India as the winning chances are dim. It is impossible for a country as large and about to be the most populous in the world as India to function according to the whims and fancies of Johnnies and Alices in Wonderland at the US Department. The US has no *locus standi* to lecture India on democratic values. As the US's pathetic position worsens, they left their business and entered the Indian politics scene. When the US could not play a decisive role in bringing about its own economy's revival, the show

rankings under your rule? They also want to know if the Government was involved.

Moreover, why the reluctance to call out fugitives Lalit Modi, Nirav Modi, Mehul Choksi and Vijaya Mallya? The public wants transparency and accountability, and it's time for the government to answer these burning questions. Not only this, PM Modi fought to change the election funding law to secretly allow black money. Is PM Modi not the same who supports his Karnataka MLAs to take crores of bribes? He remains silent, even when BJP politicians get caught 'red-handed' there, with crores of cash? Why are there no investigations by the CBI, ED or IT? Why do corrupt politicians from opposition parties join the BJP, and cases against them miraculously disappear? It means all BJP MPs/MLAs/politicians are absolutely above corruption. As people wonder when the honest PM Modi implemented demonetisation and secretly converted his friend's money from Black to White, or who changed coal mining tender rules for Adani so that he would benefit from them? Is he not the PM who doesn't have a problem with foreign companies owning defence projects? And the list goes on and on. In view of this, before PM Modi's declaration that all those involved in corruption have come together on one platform, the anti-corruption crusader should set up a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) to investigate the Adani matter. Alas! He has no courage.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

diverted towards India. That country's GDP is falling drastically and there is no hope for immediate improvement. India is better placed and so it could not see Indian progress and wanted to exhibit and poke its nose into Indian political scenario. However, India stands united and the erroneous elements will be eliminated sooner or later.

CK Subramaniam | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



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

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

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

Four films in the MUBI

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

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

of 16 awards and 51 nominations, including the much-coveted Golden Bear (Berlinale 2022) - Carla Simon's (Spain), *Alcarras*, a deeply intelligent and empathetic humane drama that engulfs you in the heat and dust and dysfunction created by market forces; *Perfect Number* - the return of veteran Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi and his search for philosophical answers in mathematical theories; the poignant *We are Still Here*, an anthology film about stories of indigenous heroes from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific; winner of the Best Screenplay at Cannes 2022, *Boy From Heaven*, takes us into the heart of a ruthless power struggle between Egypt's religious and political elites; the

latest Berlinale awardee (2023), *The Survival of Kindness*, follows a black woman's escape from a cage in the middle of the desert to the city, recapture, and tragedy; and Oscar nominee '*EO*' by Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland) follows a donkey that encounters good and bad people, experiences joy and pain, exploring a vision of modern Europe.

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

Festival and Filmocracy Fest, *Hostile* by UK filmmaker Sonita Gale explores the UK's complicated relationship with its migrant communities; Winner at the Warsaw Film Festival 2022, *Region of Heroes* by Artur Lerman (Ukraine) is the story of those who selflessly saved thousands of Ukrainians during the Russian occupation; winner of the Special Jury Award at Roxbury Film Festival and the International Humanitarian Award at Flickers' Rhode Island International Film Festival, *The Bengali* by Kavery Kaul (USA) is the story of a writer from Louisiana who embarks on a quest to India to look for her grandfather's descendants. Curated packages from Poland and Sri Lanka also embellished the festival.

Russia arrests WSJ reporter for spying

AP ■ MOSCOW

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

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

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

Chinese State-sponsored hacking group highly active, says report

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

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

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

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

'Russian spy operations weakened in Nordic nation'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ MOSCOW

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

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

But Russia intends to stick by its pledge last month to keep notifying the U.S. about missile tests in line with a 1988 U.S.-Soviet agreement, Ryabkov said. Russian President Vladimir Putin suspended the country's participation

in the New START treaty last month, saying Russia could not U.S. inspections of its nuclear sites at a time when Washington and its NATO allies have openly declared Moscow's defeat in Ukraine as their goal.

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

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

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

In comments this week, senior U.S. officials said the administration believes that would be the best way to hold Russia accountable for its year-old invasion. However, they also acknowledge that the prospects for a court to actually take custody of any Russian official for trial are slim. "The United States supports the development of a special tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine in the form of an internationalized court that is rooted in Ukraine's judicial system, with international elements," the State Department said in comments emailed to reporters. The officials said they envision a hybrid tribunal based on the Ukrainian justice system but with interna-

tional components — similar to previous ad hoc war crimes courts set up for Cambodia, Chad, the Central African Republic and Bosnia — and likely based in The Hague, Netherlands. "This kind of model — an internationalized national court — will facilitate broader international support and demonstrate Ukraine's leadership in ensuring accountability for the crime of aggression," the State Department said. "It also builds upon the example of other successful justice mechanisms." The Hague will be home to the International Center for Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression, a Ukraine-focused investigations unit that is expected to be fully operational this summer. The center's offices and staff could be incorporated into whatever tribunal is eventually created, the U.S. officials said. The Hague also hosts the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice.

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

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

'Huge win' for Russia as TikTok propaganda fails

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

Vatican: Pope's health condition improving

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

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

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

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

China to SCO countries: End disputes through cooperation

PTI ■ BEIJING

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

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



Wang Xiaohong

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

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

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

Ohana: 26/11 perpetrators should pay heavy price

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

Bahrain sentences 3 for questioning Islamic teachings

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thailand uses helicopters to fight mountain wildfires

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

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

Ethnic conflict must be resolved to achieve prosperity: Lanka Prez

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

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



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

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

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

Taliban terrorist attack in Pak kills 4 cops, injures 6

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

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

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

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

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



heavy weaponry, the Dawn newspaper reported.

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

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

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

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

Pakistan court strikes down sedition law

PTI ■ LAHORE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three more Khalistan supporters held in Aus

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

AP/PTI

King Charles III addresses German parl

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

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

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

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

The 74-year-old largely

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

Tsai arrived in New York on

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UAE leader designates his son as crown prince

AP ■ DUBAI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Bolsonaro returns to Brazil after 3-month stint in Florida

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

Kenya Opp in fresh protests amid warning by Government

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

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

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

“strengthening ties.”

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

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

Mexico investigates 8 over deadly fire at migrant facility

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

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

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



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

AP/PTI

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

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

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

Covid during pregnancy may increase obesity risk in children: Study

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

pregnant women and their children,” she said.

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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

“I can assure you that talks are going



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

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

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

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

to discuss such agreements.

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

“They have assured me that they will be coming with very attractive proposals 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 capital, 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 benches 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 profi- tability 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 capi- talise 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 Polic- ies’ said the global economy's ‘speed limit’ — the maximum

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIEF

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

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

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

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

CIRSTEA UPSETS SABALENKA IN MIAMI



AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS

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

The 32-year-old is enjoying an upturn in form since taking on Swede Thomas Johansson as her coach, reaching the quarter-finals at Indian Wells and beating world number four Caroline Garcia of France in both legs of the "Sunshine Swing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I was just trying to do my

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

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

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

Sinner into Miami semis after beating Ruusuvuori

AP ■ MIAMI GARDENS

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

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

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

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

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

The Italian, who has not lost to a player



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FIFA strips Indonesia of Under-20 WC

AP ■ LAUSANNE

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

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

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

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

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.

Assiat 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 insisted

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



AP ■ MELBOURNE

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

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

He insisted that was not the case after a more competitive

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ MANCHESTER

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

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

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

Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim

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

Both parties made second bids last week.

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

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

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

Zilliacus, said to be a United sup-



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IPL TURNS ‘SWEET 16’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CSK, MI remain premier contenders as RCB eye fresh start



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

PTI ■ CHENNAI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

IPL beckons Northeast as Guwahati gears up for 2 matches

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sindhu, Srikanth enter quarterfinals of Madrid Spain Masters

PTI ■ MADRID

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

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

Second seed Sindhu has been struggling for form this

season since returning to action following a long injury lay off. It is the first time in 2023 that the 27-year-old former world champion has crossed the second round.

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

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

Nishimoto was handed a walkover by France's Arnaud



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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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