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MONEY 10 SENSEX, NIFTY TANK OVER ONE PER CENT

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## Delhi Government's Vigilance Department exposes Kejriwal

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Close on the heels of multi-crore excise and Delhi Jal Board scandal, Arvind Kejriwal's AAP-led Delhi Government's Vigilance Department has found gross irregularities in procurement of certain medical items purchased to favour 'a few individuals' and 'companies' which ultimately favoured the companies, causing huge loss to the Government's exchequer during the Covid pandemic. The Vigilance Department on Monday issued a show cause notice to the Health Minister's OSD RN Das in connection with alleged irregularities in procurement of various items like personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, gloves, masks and RAT kits worth around ₹60 crore during Covid pandemic in 2021. In a show-cause notice issued

on Monday by the Vigilance Department, it said in various cases, committees headed by RN Das (who was OSD to Health Minister Satyendra Jain and currently OSD to Health Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj) was in the forefront in managing the tenders in favour of a particular family in different company names. Jain is currently lodged in Tihar facing a probe in a money laundering case while Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia too are in Tihar Jail for the liquorgate scam. The vigilance department has sought a response from Das within seven days and it said the conspiracy was hatched in the backdrop of Covid crisis and the pandemic was used as a reason and basis to swindle crores of rupees from public exchequer and all the procurements were done completely ignoring the

procedure to be followed by the mandate issued by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). "Health department officials have used the context of Covid for enriching these private companies and intentionally allowed cartelisation among the companies," said the notice pointing Das chaired three committees for procurement of single use gloves, sterilised gloves and N-95 masks. Reacting to the show cause notice, the AAP-led Delhi Government in a statement said, "The laughable allegations borne out of desperation pertain to the time period when Das was neither OSD of Saurabh Bhardwaj nor Satyendra Jain. Neither was he recommended by the then Minister." Meanwhile, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva

has welcomed the notice and has said this will help bring out the truth of the scam of purchase and distribution of fake and poor quality medicines in the Delhi Government hospitals. The BJP leader said no OSD or ministerial employee can do such a big scam without the consent of the concerned Minister. According to notice, the cartelisation and giving wrongful gain to the suppliers is also established by the fact that the initial tender of RAT Kit was given to M/s SD Biosensor, Healthcare private limited at the unit price of ₹450. This tender was awarded based upon the circular of ICMR dated 26.08.2020 as per the supply order dated 16.06.2020 and 29.06.2020 for ₹49.50 crore (approximately together). The logic that was given for M/s SD Biosensor

Healthcare Pvt Ltd is that it was recognised as a valid supplier for the RAT Kit. In the said circular of ICMR, there is no mention of Pharma Surge Impex or M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd Dr RN Das and company have introduced the concept of tendering through GeM instead of directly ordering as per the ICMR circular so as to roping in Pharma Surge Impex and M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd, which are owned by the family of Sandeep Gupta and Chetan Makhija. The notice further said in the tender the rate that was quoted is ₹459.20 per unit. It is observed that as to how these officers have awarded contracts and adopted tendering methods contrary to ICMR circular. Even in the tender, the unit price is ₹9.20 higher than the initial unit price. It is

observed that the rate of RAT Kit has progressively declined every month so much so that within a span of 6 months, the RAT Kit was available at a rate of ₹31.50 per unit. It further stated that RAT Kit orders were given jointly to M/s Pharma Surge Impex (Proprietor is Vandana Gupta wife of Sandeep Gupta) and M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt. Ltd. (Proprietor is Chetan Makhija). These two companies were together and were given 4 orders which indicate strong collaboration. Pharma Surge Impex does not figure in the list of ICMR circular dated 26.08.2020. The vigilance department said Chetan Makhija is also director of M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd as well as M/s AC Surgipharma Pvt Ltd. Approvals were either given to M/s SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd or M/s AC

Surgipharma Pvt Ltd. "And whereas, outwardly, they are two different companies but it is manned by Chetan Makhija which is again proof of cartelisation," it said. The notice said the omissions and commissions have been noticed on the part of RN Das, OSD to then Minister (Health) Satyendra Jain in the purchase of various medical items, such as single use gloves, sterilised gloves, N-95 masks & RAT kit, in the backdrop of Covid crisis during the year 2020-2022. The department said Health Department officials used the context of Covid for enriching these private companies and intentionally allowed cartelisation among the competitors. "It is observed that certain medical items were purchased so as to favour a few individuals and companies/firms and thereby causing

wrongful gain to these companies and wrongful loss to the Government," the order a show cause notice copy said. The notice said the direct order was placed to SD Biosensor Healthcare Pvt Ltd as per ICMR circular. But subsequent procurement was not done u/s 50 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, it was done based upon recommendation by committee under Chairmanship of Dr RN Das, Dr ZSIC Marak and Dr Poonam Panwar. In its observation that led to a needle of suspicion, the vigilance noted that three members were common in all the committees formed to be involved in the procurement of several items and incidentally flouting the norms all these committees were headed by RN Das in the capacity of chairperson in all the committees.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders greet supporters during a public meeting, ahead of Lok Sabha elections, in Alathur, Kerala, on Monday

## Kerala under shackles of drug mafia: Modi

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

In a whirlwind election campaign that saw him heli-hopping from Kochi to Kunnamkulam and back to Kochi from where he flew down to Kattakkada in southern Kerala on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made startling disclosure. "Kerala has emerged as the narcotics capital of South India and the State is under the shackles of a drug mafia. Politicians ruling the State are offering patronage to these drug syndicates while campuses in the State have become killing fields where students are murdered while the law enforcing agencies look the other way," said the Prime Minister. He also disclosed that both the Congress and the CPI(M) were hands-in-glove with banned extremist outfits. "These organisations themselves have declared their alliance with these

parties," pointed out Modi. Modi said there was no difference between the Congress and the Communists except in their names. "When they are in Kerala, they act as if they are enemies. Once they cross the border and enter Tamil Nadu, both these parties are friends and allies. They are cheating the public of Kerala," charged the Prime Minister. He pointed out that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has not uttered anything against the cooperative bank scam in Kerala in which the CPI(M) embezzled hundreds of crores of rupees belonging to the poor people. Modi promised the electors of Kerala that his Government would make the State a hub of heritage tourism. He also made an irresistible offer to all homemakers' liberal financial assistance to arrange homestay facilities for promoting tourism.

A massive crowd has turned up at Kunnamkulam and Kattakkada to greet the Prime Minister and listen to him. Waxing eloquence on the natural beauty and salubrity of the State's climate, Modi said he is at a loss to understand why the Congress-led UDF and the CPI(M)-led LDF kept Kerala as an underdeveloped region despite the fact that nature has been very kin to the State. Explaining the salient points in the election manifesto released by the BJP on Sunday, which happened to be the Vishu Day, the Prime Minister told the gathering that what they have witnessed in the ten years was just a trailer while the mega action is to be expected in the next tenure of the NDA Government. The Prime Minister said the bullet train connecting Ahmedabad and Mumbai will become a reality in the next few months.

## Boost for Indian agriculture as IMD predicts above normal monsoon

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In good news for the farmers and Agriculture sector which is the main fulcrum of the Indian economy, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast above-normal rainfall during the upcoming June-September southwest monsoon season. The seasonal rainfall forecast is expected to be 106 per cent of the long-period average (LPA), which is 870 mm (1970-2020 average). This is the first time in a decade the IMD has predicted above-normal rainfall, that too in its first-stage long-range forecast, which is issued nearly 45 days in advance of the actual onset of the southwest monsoon over Kerala on June 1. The IMD categorises the seasonal rainfall as above-normal when it ranges between 105-110 per cent of the LPA.



"The country can expect good monsoon rainfall during the southwest monsoon season this year. The seasonal rainfall will be 106 per cent of the LPA," said Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, director-general of the IMD at a Press conference during the release of the first-stage long-range forecast for the southwest monsoon season in 2024.

M Ravichandran, secretary at the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences said "there are multiple favourable factors indicating a high probability for above-normal rainfall during the June-September period this year". "Of these, the vital oceanic factor is the El Nino, an event associated with the above-normal sea-surface temperatures prevailing over the equatorial Pacific Ocean. It is known to cause extreme heatwaves and suppress the Indian summer monsoon rainfall," he said. The ongoing El Nino event, the IMD said, is weakening. "But it continues to remain in the 'moderate' category. Closer to the onset of the southwest monsoon season, El Nino Southern Oscillation neutral conditions are likely to establish," added Mohapatra.



## Registration for Amarnath yatra begins

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The 52-day-long Shri Amarnathji Yatra will commence on June 29 this year and it will culminate on August 19, 2024 amid tight security arrangements. Meanwhile, the advance registration for the annual Amarnath pilgrimage began on Monday across designated bank branches. The Shrine Board authorities have also taken up the task of snow clearance on both tracks on a war footing. The leftover track expansion work will be taken up further after the completion of the snow clearance work. "The advance registration has started today at bank branches here. The exercise is being conducted at 540 branches of PNB (Punjab National Bank) across the country," an official involved in the registration process said. It is Aadhaar authentication-based form generation for Yatris rather than the manual procedure followed in 2022, said the officials, adding that forms will be system-generated now. "For registration, it is mandatory for the pilgrims to produce a health certificate. However, children below 13 years of age, elders above 70 years and six-week pregnant women will not be permitted for the pilgrimage." For issuing a Compulsory Health Certificate (CHC) for advance yatra registration, more than 230 doctors have been authorised in various medical centres in all 20 districts of Jammu and Kashmir.

## Iran to allow Indian officials to meet seized cargo vessel crew

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Iran will soon allow Indian Government officials to meet with 17 Indian crew members who are onboard an Israel-linked ship seized near the Strait of Hormuz on Saturday by Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar. Amir-Abdollahian conveyed this to Jaishankar during a telephonic conversation on Sunday, according to an Iranian readout. In the talks, Jaishankar called for the release of the Indians onboard Portuguese-flagged cargo vessel MSC Aries. "We are following up on the details of



the seized ship and soon it will be possible for the representatives of the Indian Government to meet with the crew of the said ship," the Iranian

readout quoted Amir-Abdollahian as saying. He also reportedly called for India's role to stop the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. The readout said Jaishankar expressed his concern about the situation of the 17 Indian crew members and requested assistance from Iran in this regard. Special Naval Forces of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) seized 'MSC Aries' reportedly in view of its links with Israel. The MSC (Mediterranean Shipping Company) said on Saturday that it is working closely with relevant authorities for the well-being of 25 crew members and the return of the vessel.

## EC's crackdown on money power, ₹5,000 crore seized

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With the 'mystery' and 'controversy' over the Electoral Bonds yet to settle, the flow of 'unaccounted' money of about ₹5,000 crore by the Election Commission in the last one and a half months has raised eyebrows. In a move to crackdown on black money in form of cash, liquor, drugs, precious metals and freebies supply ahead of the first phase of polling for the 102 Lok Sabha seats on April 19, the poll watchdog has seized ₹4658.16 crore since March 1. So on an average the poll watchdog has seized ₹100 crore per day. What is more concerning is the seizure of drugs worth ₹2,069 crore during this period. Out of the total recoveries worth ₹4,658 crore, freebies and other items stand at over ₹1142.49 crore, the cash component stands at over ₹395.39 crore, while liquor stands at more than ₹489.31 crore. Significantly, 45 per cent of the seizures are of drugs (₹2,069

crore). Data shared by the EC showed that authorities have been making seizures worth ₹100 crore every day since March 1. The EC said the seizures made since March 1 exceed the over ₹3,475 crore recovered during the 2019 parliamentary polls. If the amount of January and February which stood at ₹7,502 crore added to this will bring the total seizure to over ₹12,000 crore so far. Meanwhile, the EC has ordered the removal of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) of Murshidabad in West Bengal over violence in the district and the officer's alleged "lack of supervision" to immediately prevent more incidents, according to sources. With over ₹778.52 crore, Rajasthan is top in the list, followed by Gujarat (₹605.33 crore), Tamil Nadu (₹460.84 crore), Maharashtra (₹431.34 crore), Punjab (₹311.84 crore), Kerala (₹281.43 crore) Delhi (₹236.06 crore), West Bengal



(₹219.60 crore), and Bihar (₹155.76 crore) are among the top in the seizures list. Karnataka, West Bengal and Rajasthan are among the top in distributing liquor to voters during polls. Significantly, 45 per cent of the seizures are of drugs and narcotics that are under the special focus of the commission. Notably, there

was a substantial focus on drug seizures, which accounted for approximately 75 per cent of the total seizures in January and February 2024. According to the EC, drug seizures accounted for approximately 75 per cent of the total seizures in January and February this year with the poll panel focussing on the menace much before the poll

schedule was announced. Over the past few years, significant seizures have been made during elections to state assemblies in Gujarat, Punjab, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, and Mizoram. In an incident in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, the commission suspended the flying squad leader for laxity in duty and selective checking of a cavalcade of a prominent leader.

Similarly, officials checked vehicles in the convoy of the Chime Minister of a State and also vehicles of a Deputy Chief Minister in another State. The commission has also taken strict action against approximately 106 Government servants who have been found assisting politicians in campaigning, thereby violating the Model Code of Conduct and instructions. "The seizures have been possible by comprehensive planning, scaled up collaboration and unified deterrence action from agencies, proactive citizen participation and optimal engagement of technology. The commission has also collaborated with the Directorate General of the Narcotics Control Bureau and its senior officials to identify key routes and corridors for drug trafficking and ensure effective counter measures are in place," the EC said in a statement. Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, while announcing the polls last month, had

underlined money power as one of the '4M' challenges, the poll authority recalled. The poll panel pointed out that it has been taking action to ensure level playing field such as checking vehicles of prominent leaders and even removing officials for laxity in carrying out their mandate. The commission, it said, has also taken strict action against nearly 106 Government servants who were found assisting politicians in campaigning, which is against various rules and ethics. The EC sources also pointed out that there is "nothing new" in search of helicopters, as was done in case of TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee. In the run-up to the polls, all district magistrates and superintendents of police were told to keep a strict watch on airfields and helipads. Such searches are taking place in airfields, both public and private, across the country to ensure inducements are not ferried by air, the sources said.













## FIRST COLUMN

### BALANCING WELLBEING IN WORK AND LIFE

In the intricate dance of work and life, boundaries save individual sanctuaries



SAKSHI SETHI

**B**oundaries serve as the invisible fences that portrays an individual's personal as well as professional spaces, safeguard the individual wellbeing and preserve harmony in their interactions. Be it in the workplace or in life, setting and maintaining boundaries is paramount for fostering healthy relationships, achieving balance and nurturing self-respect. In today's world, where the pace of life is often hectic and boundaries can easily be overlooked or disregarded, establishing and maintaining boundaries is essential for promoting individual well-being, healthy relationships and a more compassionate and equitable society. Moreover, boundary setting is an indispensable aspect of both the workplace and life at large.

When talked about the workplace, setting boundaries are essential for maintaining professionalism, productivity and helps the employees reduce misunderstandings, conflicts and instead maintain a healthy work-life balance, prevent burnout and improve job satisfaction. It also promotes efficiency, prevents distractions, safeguard individuals from exploitation, harassment and undue stress.



In a competitive and demanding work environment, it becomes crucial to set limits on workload, deadlines and expectations to prevent over-commitment and exhaustion. Numerous studies have also highlighted the importance of setting boundaries to maintain a healthy work-life balance. By defining clear limits on workload, working hours and availability, employees can better manage their work-related stress and maintain a positive attitude towards their jobs. In doing so, they can protect themselves from intrusive inquiries or demands that encroach upon their emotional well-being. Furthermore, boundary setting cultivates respect and professionalism in workplace dynamics and encourages others to treat self with similar respect. By clearly communicating the expectations and limits, the individual establishes a culture of mutual respect and accountability in the workplace. When individuals assert their boundaries assertively yet respectfully, it communicates self-confidence and self-worth, fostering a culture of mutual respect and dignity. Respect for boundaries encourages open communication, empathy and understanding, strengthening interpersonal relationships and teamwork. Beyond the workplace, boundary setting is equally indispensable in personal relationships and daily life too. In interpersonal relationships, boundaries define acceptable behaviours, emotional intimacy and personal space. Healthy boundaries empower individuals to prioritise their needs, values and aspirations, fostering relationships based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Whether it's setting limits on time spent with certain individuals or communicating preferences regarding personal space, boundaries nurture healthier and more fulfilling connections. Remember, setting boundaries is not about being selfish or uncooperative rather it's about taking care of individual self and ensuring that one can perform their best while maintaining the individual well-being. When done thoughtfully and respectfully, setting boundaries can strengthen the individual's professional relationships and enhance their effectiveness at work. Remember, boundaries are never about telling other people what they can and cannot do. It is about telling people what they will and will not do. Setting boundaries is an act of self-love and self-respect which is essential for individual wellbeing. Setting boundaries around leisure time, self-care routines and social engagements will allow an individual to recharge, replenish their energy and cultivate resilience in the face of challenges. By honouring their boundaries, individuals assert their agency and reclaim control over their time, energy and emotions.

*(The writer is an educator; views are personal)*

# Challenges galore for NATO@75



K S TOMAR

The alliance confronts formidable challenges amidst mounting criticism from European nations and the surge of right-wing nationalist movements



**O**ne of the biggest challenges being faced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on its 75th anniversary pertains to combating and addressing the severe criticism from some European countries and the spread of right-wing nationalist movements. Hence, it needs to adopt a cautious and balanced approach to stay relevant in the 21st century. **Challenges ahead to stay relevant:** NATO, with 32 member states and five aligned nations including Japan, New Zealand, Israel, Australia and South Korea, must enhance defence capabilities and security arrangements to ensure mutual trust and better cooperation. NATO also called Washington Treaty, was created on April 4, 1949 to counterweight to Soviet military forces stationed in Central and Eastern Europe after world war 2nd, has traversed a hazardous journey and sustained faith of security and protection from aggressors hinges on its commitment to stay united and germane. Secondly, NATO's military potential is being perceived as a tool and weapon of the United States to ensure its hegemony over nations that do not pose military threats. There is a calamitous need to dispel such impressions of supremacy, evident from its 200 military interventions worldwide in 75 years, including 20 major ones like the questionable outcome of combating terrorism in Afghanistan, unlawful interference in Syria, invasion of Iraq, bombing of Yugoslavia, destabilisation of Libya and the creation of ISIS. Thirdly, as a parting gift, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg has proposed a \$100 billion package of military aid to Ukraine for five years, aimed at avoiding a potential halt in aid if Trump wins the 2024 American presidential elections. Former President Trump has made it



**NATO MUST ADOPT A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY THAT WILL BE PRODUCTIVE AND FRUITFUL ONLY IF IT INTEGRATES ITSELF WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS, BESIDES STRENGTHENING ITS MILITARY CAPABILITIES**

clear to keep his country away from such conflicts and he is seen as pro-Putin, which might upset NATO. Experts feel that NATO members should get this proposal approved at the upcoming meeting in Washington and counter Russia's aggression in Ukraine. **NATO Needs Reforms:** Foreign policy experts argue that NATO needs to focus on non-traditional threats such as terror attacks, disinformation campaigns, cyber assaults and risks to disrupt supply chains to preserve its allies. Otherwise, it will lose its credentials and effectiveness. Secondly, NATO must adopt a comprehensive strategy that will be productive and fruitful only if it integrates itself with international organisations besides strengthening its military capabilities. Thirdly, it should put in place an effective mechanism to foster a shared sense of purpose and make relentless efforts to ensure cohesiveness and unity among the member states. Consensus-building should be the primary motto of the alliance, guided by essential elements like discussion, dialogue, unified planning and political alignments. Fourthly, transparency is obligatory to create mutual trust and internal synergy, as well as to improve coordination among the five main policy formation committees, including the executive working group, political committee, policy formalisation group, military group and senior resource board. Why did India reject the US offer to be part of NATO? From the Indian perspec-

ive, experts say that India has already rejected the US offer to be part of an alliance to safeguard against Chinese aggression. India is capable of independently countering such threats and, therefore, does not need the assistance of a military grouping like NATO. If India joins NATO, it will pave the way for the US to establish military bases, which is unacceptable to Delhi. US allies like Australia, Israel, Japan and South Korea have permitted military bases, but India cannot allow the infringement of its sovereignty and degradation of its positioning in the world arena. While maintaining strategic autonomy, India will never jeopardise its age-old trustworthy ties with Russia, which is at odds with America and its allies after the Ukraine conflict. A United States Congressional committee had recommended that the US should strengthen NATO Plus to safeguard borders from China and enhance its capabilities to counter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region hence it warrants India's inclusion in the organisation. The successes and failures of the organisation go hand in hand, but conflicts' contamination is spreading among major powers and frozen encounters may always heat up in the future, attributed to growing state brittleness and spill-over threats, thereby disturbing the world order. The recent Global Risk Report has come out with curious findings pertaining to the Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS) which is the culmination of the analysis of fifteen hundred global experts who have investigated the global

risks through three time frames to support decision-makers responsible for balancing current crises and long-term policies and priorities. One major failure of NATO relates to the lack of allocation of 2 per cent of funds by defence ministers of state members of their GDP agreed upon in 2006 towards security — related expenditures, especially when the United States accounts for two-thirds of the alliance's spending, which needs to be shared by other nations in the organisation. NATO had focused on restricting communism, discouraging militant nationalism and controlling the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but now the situation has become volatile in post-Cold War era as Russia has indulged in annexing neighbours, posing a threat to other smaller nations as well. Analysts feel that as NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2024, it stands at a vintage point of passing through a litmus test of its core mission of safeguarding the security and freedom of its members, based on a principle-oriented international order and mandate. Trump's potential return to the White House may jeopardise the existence of NATO as it may encourage aggressors like Putin and give a boost to China's over-ambitious expansion policy to annex Taiwan in the future. Trump may encourage Putin to continue his onslaught on Ukraine, putting Europe's security at risk.

*(The writer is a political analyst based in Shimla; views are personal)*

# A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines

With focus on accountability and progress, it's imperative to scrutinise governmental performance across key sectors

**I**ndia is undeniably a youthful nation, with a significant portion of our population comprising the younger generation. Every year, countless young individuals come of age, reaching 18 years and gaining eligibility to vote. This message is directed not only to those who have recently attained this milestone but also to those who did so in the past few years. With the power to vote comes a profound responsibility—the responsibility to elect leaders who possess the competence and integrity to effectively govern our nation.



RAVI KOCHHAR

As citizens, it is imperative that we transcend party lines and critically evaluate the progress of our nation. Are we moving in the right direction? Are there tangible improvements

in various sectors? Are we receiving value for the taxes we pay? These are fundamental questions we must ask ourselves as we assess the state of our nation. While political parties often prioritise winning elections, it is our duty as responsible citizens to vote for candidates who prioritise the welfare of the people and deliver on their promises. Over the past 75 years, India has made remarkable strides, earning recognition as a responsible global player. Whether it's our nuclear capabilities or our humanitarian efforts during crises, we have demonstrated our commitment to progress and compassion. The electoral process grants us the opportunity, every five years, to hold our leaders



accountable for their actions. We must evaluate their performance across various sectors, including- **1. Infrastructure Development:** Assess the improvement in infrastructure, particularly in terms of connectivity by rail, road and

waterways, which directly impacts ease of doing business and facilitates movement across the country. **2. Industrial Growth and Policies:** Evaluate the government's plans and policies for industrial growth and decision-making processes, ensur-

ing there is no policy paralysis hindering progress. **3. Impact on Poor and Middle Class:** Examine how Government policies impact the poor and middle class, with a focus on initiatives aimed at upliftment and improvement. **4. Healthcare Sector Performance:** Evaluate the government's performance in the healthcare sector and assess the affordability and accessibility of healthcare for all citizens. **5. Education and Skill Development:** Analyse initiatives in education and skill development, focusing on improving literacy rates, bridging urban-rural gaps and empowering the youth. **6. Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity:** Assess improvements in digital infrastructure and connectivity, particularly

in urban-rural sectors and how they benefit citizens. **7. Agriculture and Rural Sector:** Review Government initiatives in agriculture and rural development and their impact on rural communities. **8. Transparency and Accountability:** Ensure transparency and accountability in public administration, with efforts to curb corruption and promote good governance. **9. Foreign Policy and International Relations:** Evaluate the government's performance in foreign policy and international relations, considering India's standing on the global stage. Remember, our national identity, symbolised by our flag, transcends religious and caste divisions, uniting us as one nation. As we exercise our

right to vote, let us remember the significance of our national flag and the unity it represents. Your vote holds immense power. History has witnessed elections being decided by a single vote. Therefore, before casting your vote, consider crucial factors such as the government's performance and policies, rising above religious and caste affiliations for the greater good of the nation. While this list is not exhaustive, it underscores the importance of informed decision-making and prioritising the wellbeing of our nation. Let us unite in our commitment to building a stronger, more prosperous India.

*(The writer is group Pro VC Amity University; views are personal)*

# Israeli military warns Palestinians not to return to Gaza

AP ■ DEIR-AL-BALAH

The Israeli military renewed warnings on Monday for Palestinians in Gaza not to return to the embattled territory's north, a day after Gaza hospital officials said five people were killed as throngs of displaced residents tried to reach their homes in the war-torn area.

ganizing militants, most prominently at Gaza's main hospital, Shifa, which is in ruins after a two-week raid and fighting last month. Israeli military spokesman Avichay Adrae wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that Palestinians should stay in southern Gaza, where they have been told to shelter, because the north is a "dangerous combat zone."



ran's U.N. Ambassador, Amir Saeid Irvani, top left, listens to Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations, Gilad Erdan's address in the United Nations Security Council chamber during an emergency meeting at U.N. headquarters, on Sunday.

displaced from the northern city of Beit Hanoun and was trying to return, said the military was allowing women and children to cross, but when a group of Palestinians did not make room for them to pass, two tanks arrived and opened fire. Forces also

threw smoke bombs, dispersing the crowd. "People started to run away. People were afraid and could not take the risk and enter a dangerous area," she said. Ahead of the violence Sunday, throngs of people crowded a coastal road and moved north by foot and donkey cart. The returnees said they were prompted to make the dangerous journey because they were fed up with the difficult conditions they are forced to live under while displaced.

while Hamas says it wants a free flow of returnees. The war has had a staggering toll on civilians in Gaza, with most of the territory's 2.3 million people displaced by the fighting and living in dire circumstances, with little food and often in tents and no end in sight to their misery. Large swaths of the urban landscape have been damaged or destroyed, leaving many displaced Palestinians with nowhere to return to.

The U.N. food agency on Monday said it managed to deliver fuel and wheat flour to a bakery in isolated Gaza City in the north for the first time since the war started. The conflict started on Oct. 7, when Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, in a surprise attack and incursion into southern Israel. Around 250 people were seized as hostages by the militants and taken to Gaza. A deal in November freed about 100 hostages, leaving about 130 in captivity, although Israel says about a quarter of those are dead. Israeli bombardments and ground offensives in Gaza have killed more than 33,700 Palestinians and wounded over 76,200, the Gaza Health Ministry says.

## PM Sunak's Rwanda bill returns to House of Commons

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's flagship legislation aimed at flying illegal migrants out to Rwanda, which has been plagued with delays and parliamentary hurdles, returns to the House of Commons on Monday on its journey towards becoming law. The Safety of Rwanda Bill returns to the Lower House after the House of Lords made amendments and sent it back to the Commons, triggering a democratic process referred to as parliamentary ping-pong between the two chambers.

unfold against the backdrop of small boat crossings by asylum seekers across the English Channel hitting a new daily high for 2024 - at 534 on Sunday. It will be seen as a fresh blow to Sunak, who has made "stopping the boats" a central plank of his leadership as the UK prepares for a general election later this year.

## Blinken calls Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi FMs

AP ■ WASHINGTON

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Sunday reached out over phone to the foreign ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, while Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had calls with his Saudi and Israeli counterparts, amid signs of an escalating crisis in the Middle East following Iran's strikes on Israel.

They also reaffirmed the importance of diplomatic efforts to achieve an enduring end to the crisis in Gaza that provides lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike, the state department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a readout of the calls that Blinken had with Jordan's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ayman Safadi, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.

Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, Blinken reiterated that while the US does not seek escalation, it will continue to help Israel defend itself. The secretary and the foreign minister agreed on the importance of a coordinated diplomatic response, Miller said. According to Pentagon Press Secretary Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Austin, in his call with Saudi Minister of Defense, Khalid bin Salman, emphasised that US does not seek escalation, and will continue to defend Israel and U.S. personnel.

Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries to discuss Iran's unprecedented attack against Israel. On the call, the president discussed the urgent need for the House of Representatives to pass the national security supplemental as soon as possible," said the White House.

ing itself and the security supplemental would replenish the kind of anti-missile and anti-drone defences that are in the Arrow, in the David's Sling, and in the Iron Dome," he said. White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby joined several shows where he asserted that Biden and the US are 'making good on its ironclad commitment to defend Israel. He also made clear that the United States is not seeking a conflict with Iran.

## FBI opens probe into Baltimore bridge collapse

New York (PTI): The FBI has opened a criminal investigation into the deadly Baltimore bridge collapse incident that will also look into whether the ship, mostly manned by Indians, left the key US port "knowing the vessel had serious systems problems," a media report said on Monday.

## 'Police officer, shooter killed in exchange of gunfire in upstate'

Liverpool (New York) (AP): A police officer and a sheriff's deputy in upstate New York were shot and killed Sunday night in an exchange of gunfire with another person, who also was killed, police said.

## Man arrested after stabbing at church service in Sydney

Sydney (AP): Police in Australia say a man has been arrested after a bishop and three churchgoers were stabbed in Sydney. There are no life-threatening injuries. It occurred during a televised service at the church on Monday evening, police said. The Orthodox Assyrian church streams services online. A video on social media shows a man dressed in black approaching a cleric at the altar identified as the bishop at Christ the Good Shepherd in suburban Wakely and appearing to stab him repeatedly in the head and upper body.

him to a hospital, and three others were treated for one or more cuts at the scene. "A large police response is underway and the public is urged to avoid the area," police said. Crowds gathered outside the church and the hospital. The premier of New South Wales, Chris Minns, described the scenes as "disturbing" on social media and urged the community to remain calm and "stick together." Religious leaders expressed shock and condolences.

## US Prez Biden to host Iraqi leader

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden is set to host Iraq's leader this week for talks that come as tensions across the Middle East have soared over the war in Gaza and Iran's unprecedented weekend attack on Israel in retaliation for an Israeli military strike against an Iranian facility in Syria.

on economic, trade and energy issues that have become a major priority for Iraq's government, according to US officials. Biden and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin are both expected to address the US troop presence in meetings with al-Sudani. "It is not the primary focus of the visit ... but it is almost certainly going to come up," one senior US official said last week.

Iraq through Iraqi airspace have further underscored US concerns, although al-Sudani had already left Baghdad and was en route to Washington when the drones and missiles were launched. The US has also sought to apply financial pressure over Baghdad's relationship with Tehran, restricting Iraq's access to its own dollars in an effort to stamp out money laundering said to benefit Iran and Syria.

2021 elections. Sadr ultimately withdrew from the political process, giving the opportunity to the remaining Shia politicians to form a government headed by al-Sudani. Since then, al-Sudani has attempted to maintain a balancing act between Iran and America despite being seen as being close to Tehran and despite several incidents that have put his government in an embarrassing position in relation to Washington.

The officers found the vehicle at the home and saw what appeared to be guns inside the auto. They then "heard what sounded like someone manipulating a firearm from inside the residence," Cecile said. At least one person then exchanged gunfire with the officers. The Syracuse officer, sheriff's deputy and the suspect were shot and brought to Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse.



Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a videoconference meeting with Astrakhan Region governor Babushkin in the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, Monday.

## Trump in court for historic hush money trial

AP ■ NEW YORK

Donald Trump arrived Monday at a New York court for the start of jury selection in his hush money trial, marking a singular moment in US history. It's the first criminal trial of any former US commander-in-chief and the first of Trump's four indictments to go to trial.

the prospective juror can assure us that they will set aside any personal feelings or biases and render a decision that is based on the evidence and the law," Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records. Prosecutors say he was trying to conceal an alleged effort to keep salacious — and, he says, bogus — stories about his sex life from emerging during his 2016 campaign.

actual purpose. Trump's lawyers say the disbursements indeed were legal expenses, not a cover-up. Trump himself casts the case, and his other indictments elsewhere, as a broad "weaponisation of law enforcement" by Democratic prosecutors and officials. He maintains they are orchestrating sham charges in hopes of impeding his presidential run.

to many Americans, even for a president whose tenure left a trail of shattered norms, including twice being impeached and acquitted by the Senate. The scene inside the courtroom may be greeted with a spectacle outside. When Trump was arraigned last year, police broke up small skirmishes between his supporters and protesters near the courthouse in a tiny park, where a local Republican group has planned a pro-Trump rally Monday.



Israel response to Iranian attack shows what Kyiv needs: Kuleba

AP ■ KYIV The success of Israel and its allies in largely thwarting a massive Iranian missile and drone attack shows what Ukraine could achieve against Russian aerial barrages if it had more support from its partners, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Monday.

by Ukraine. "Russian forces launch drones and missiles from throughout occupied Ukraine and in close proximity to Ukraine from within Russia, affording Ukrainian air defenders a fraction of the time that Israel and its allies leveraged to successfully blunt the mass Iranian missile and drone strike," the Washington think tank said in an assessment late Sunday.



In this photo released by the Russian Defence Ministry Press Service on Monday, April 15, 2024, Russian soldiers participate in a military exercise somewhere in Russian-controlled Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine AP/PTI

Top diplomats meet in Paris to mobilise aid for war-ravaged Sudan

AP ■ PARIS A yearlong war in Sudan has devastated the country and pushed its people to the brink of famine. Top diplomats and aid groups are meeting Monday in Paris to drum up humanitarian support for the northeastern African nation to prevent further collapse and misery.

Review says Abbey Gate bombing wasn't preventable

AP ■ WASHINGTON The suicide bombing at the Kabul airport that killed US troops and Afghans in August 2021 was not preventable, and the "bald man in black" spotted by US service members the morning of the attack was not the bomber, according to a new review by US Central Command.

more specific about the timing, saying details are classified. Family members of those killed in the blast received similar briefings over the past two weekends and some are still unconvinced.

Singapore PM Lee to step down on May 15, Wong to succeed

Singapore (PTI): Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced on Monday he will step down on May 15 after nearly 20 years of heading the government of the economically prosperous country as part of the long-planned leadership transition and will be succeeded by his deputy Lawrence Wong.

Iran Prez to visit Pak on April 22

Islamabad (PTI): Amidst spiralling tensions in the Middle East, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is set to visit Pakistan on April 22 and hold meetings with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, President Asif Ali Zardari and the military leadership, according to a media report on Monday.

Bilawal urges politicians to unite around 'Charter of Reconciliation'

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has proposed that all politicians should unite around a 'Charter of Reconciliation' as he accused them of playing with the cash-strapped country's fate because of their ego, media reports said on Monday.

Bushra Bibi moves HC for medical exam at hosp run by Imran trust

Islamabad (PTI): Jailed ex-Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi, on Monday moved the Islamabad High Court seeking a medical examination at a hospital after alleging that she was poisoned while incarcerated at their private residence, which was turned into a sub-jail.

ASEEFA TAKES OATH AS PAKISTAN MP Aseefa Bhutto-Zardari, the youngest daughter of slain former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto, on Monday formally launched her political career after taking oath as a Member of Parliament.

18 killed in landslides at Indonesia island

AP ■ TARA TORAJA A search and rescue team found 18 people killed by landslides on Indonesia's Sulawesi island and are still looking for two missing, officials said on Monday.

Dozens of soldiers, police and volunteers joined the search in the remote hillside villages of Makale and South Makale, Mundu said. Rescuers early Sunday managed to pull out two injured people, including an 8-year-old girl, and rushed them to a nearby hospital.

Germany's Scholz warns against dumping during China visit

AP ■ BEIJING German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called for fair competition in trade relations with China while warning about dumping and overproduction as he spoke to students in Shanghai on Monday.

news agency dpa. "Of course we would like our companies to have no restrictions, but conversely we behave exactly how we are demanding here," he said, adding there must be no dumping or overproduction.



# BAYER LEVERKUSEN WINS FIRST BUNDESLIGA TITLE

AP ■ LEVERKUSEN (GERMANY)

It's "Neverkusen" no more. Coached by Xabi Alonso, Bayer Leverkusen won the Bundesliga title for the first time Sunday to end Bayern Munich's 11-year reign as champion. In the end, it wasn't even close - Leverkusen leads second-place Bayern by 16 points after stretching its German record unbeaten run to 43 games across all competitions this season. Florian Wirtz scored a hat trick as Leverkusen routed Werder Bremen 5-0 and the game ended with a pitch invasion Sunday to secure the club's first-ever German league title with five games remaining. "It's indescribable ... I don't think it's possible, or I personally can't even realize it yet," Wirtz told broadcaster DAZN. "I need a little more time in the locker room to really get my head around what we've achieved. But yeah, so far it's just been nice to party outside with the fans and also have a bit of a party in the locker room." Fans had already stormed onto the field when Leverkusen

scored its fourth goal with seven minutes to go, and the final minutes were played in thick red smoke from supporters' pyrotechnics while players on Leverkusen's bench clapped along to songs, danced and hugged one another.

The fifth goal in the 90th brought more fans onto the field - hundreds this time - and the referee ended the game amid confusion and jubilation. Thousands of supporters crowded the field waving flags, flares and cardboard copies of the Bundesliga trophy.

Leverkusen finally shed its reputation as perennial runner-up after five second-place finishes in the league and one in the Champions League. Alonso, who took over as coach when Leverkusen was in the relegation zone in October 2022, reflected on ending Bayern's dominance. "Perhaps it's healthy for the Bundesliga, also for German football, for another team to win," said Alonso, who won three Bundesliga titles with Bayern as a player from 2015-17.

"It's a great joy and we have to enjoy it. We need a bit more

## ENDING BAYERN MUNICH'S 11 YEARS REIGN



time to realize what we've achieved. But it's a super moment and yes, we'll see what happens next," Alonso said, referring to the other trophies that his team can win this season. "But now is the time to celebrate." Victor Boniface — starting a Bundesliga game for the first time since December because of injury — settled Leverkusen's nerves with the opening goal from the penalty spot before Granit Xhaka hit an audacious long-range shot to make it 2-0 with half an hour to go. Bremen folded after that with substitute Wirtz scoring a goal very similar to Xhakas, then another on the counter in the 83rd and a third to end the game, his first career hat trick. Leverkusen is aiming for a historic treble of trophies. Alonso's team will play second division Kaiserslautern in the German Cup final in Berlin on May 25 and has a 2-0 lead over West Ham after their Europa League quarterfinal first leg. The title puts the spotlight firmly on an industrial city of just under 170,000, which has been overshadowed by larger,

more famous neighbors. "Not in Cologne and Duesseldorf, no, we're at home here," is the third line of the club song played just before kickoff. Soccer is how Leverkusen stands out. The club started as a workers' team for the Bayer pharmaceutical giant 120 years ago and is a rare exception in Germany, where most clubs are majority-controlled by members under the so-called 50+1 rule. Twelfth-place Bremen was in difficulties even before kickoff as the club accused midfielder Naby Keita of walking out on the squad after he was disappointed not to be in the starting lineup. Leverkusen goalkeeper Lukas Hradecky dealt with the few chances Bremen created. In the early game, Ritsu Doan's first-half strike was enough for Freiburg to win 1-0 at last-place Darmstadt, which moved closer to automatic relegation. Darmstadt, with 14 points, was 12 points from the relegation playoff spot with five matches to play. No team in the Bundesliga has ever overcome such a deficit at this stage of the season to survive.



## Fans get a new track colour and maybe record breaking times at Paris Olympics

AP ■ PARIS

Paris will be seeing purple at the Olympics when athletes try to set records at this summer's Paris Games. In a move away from a more traditional red-brick clay color, an Olympic track is going purple for the first time. The pieces of vulcanized rubber track were produced at a factory in northern Italy and workers have been laying them down at Stade de France, the national stadium hosting track events. Workers even appeared to be doing an event of their own. Call it track rolling. Getting down on their hands and knees, and with their hard hats on, they patiently and meticulously unfurl each strip before hammering a nail in to keep it in position. More than 1,000 such rolls will be used for the track, which requires about one month's work and 2,800 pots of glue in total. Three years ago, three world records and 12 Olympic marks were set on the red-brick track in Tokyo. Mondo has provided the track at every Summer Games since

Montreal in 1976, and the company hopes to do even better in Paris. New generation granules are more elastic and cohesive, while multiple algorithms create a more optimal shape and dimension for the air cells inside the track, reducing energy loss and thereby improving performance. Expect more records to fall at the Stade de France, said Alain Blondel, the sports manager overseeing athletics events at the July 26-Aug. 11 Paris Games and the Aug. 28-Sept. 8 Paralympics. "The first indications are that it will be a very, very good track," said Blondel, a former Olympic decathlete. "If we see athletes with personal bests on the scoreboard, it means we did a good job. They will come into their best form, best shape of their life." But why choose purple? "That's one of the colors of the Games that we have (along) with, blue (and) green," Blondel said. "The rubber itself is a perfect quality, the best quality. I'm pretty confident that we will have something exceptional in this stadium."

## After troubled start to season, Jehan Daruvala bags first points in Formula E

PTI ■ MISANO (ITALY)

India's Jehan Daruvala has scored his first points in Formula E after enduring a troubled start to his rookie season in the all-electric racing series. Daruvala, who came to Formula E after four mixed seasons in Formula 2, finished ninth in race two here of the Misano E-Prix on Sunday to collect two points for Maserati MSG Racing. His previous results in the FIA World Championship status series included two retirements besides a 16th, 20th, 15th and 17th place finish. The team entered the second race of the weekend after

finishing on the podium on Saturday, with driver Maximilian Günther gaining third following the disqualification of Antonio Felix de Costa after a technical breach. In Qualifying for Race Two, the 26-year-old narrowly missed out on the duels and started from 12th while Daruvala lined up 21st after failing to set a representative lap time in the session. By securing a strong getaway, Max moved up to seventh on lap one while Daruvala lost ground after struggling for traction off the line. After activating his first Attack Mode on lap five, Max danced between fifth and ninth before a Safety Car, caused by an



accident for Robin Frijns, paused the race on lap eight. This race neutralisation provided a critical opportunity for Daruvala to close in on the field and when the race was resumed at the end of lap nine,

the Indian racer set out on a strong recovery drive. With the pack punched up, Daruvala vaulted from 20th to 16th on the restart and continued to fight forward, using surplus energy to

negotiate his way into the top 10 on the final lap. "It feels good to score my first points in Formula E. We were starting from the back row, but as a team, we decided on a strategy which we executed very well. "We stuck to our plans, our communication was clear, and it resulted in my first top 10 finish of the season. I'm very happy, and from here, the goal is to fight for more in the future. "Even after six races, I'm learning all of the time, and I know that there's still scope for me to learn from today's race. Monaco is up next and it's a circuit that I've had some success at before," said Daruvala.

## Another ankle injury rules Dortmund forward Haller out of Champions League

AP ■ DORTMUND (GERMANY)

Borussia Dortmund forward Sebastian Haller has been ruled out of Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal second leg against Atlético Madrid by a recurrence of his left ankle injury. Dortmund coach Edin Terzic said Monday that Haller "injured his ankle again unfortunately. He will now have complete rest for a week. There will be a final diagnosis on Saturday to determine the downtime a little more precisely. We assume he won't be available for two to three weeks." Haller scored a late goal in Dortmund's 2-1 loss at Atlético in the first leg on Wednesday, but got injured early in the team's Bundesliga win at Borussia Mönchengladbach on Saturday. He recovered from a left ankle injury to play for Ivory Coast at Africa Cup of Nations - scoring in the final to win the title - but returned with a recurrence of the injury and made only substitute appearances for Dortmund until getting his first league start since mid-September on Saturday. He had to go off in the ninth minute. English forward Jamie Bynoe-Gittens also went off with a back problem but Terzic said he "already feels better and we hope he can take part in training with us." Jadon Sancho missed the trip to Mönchengladbach with illness but was back with his teammates on Sunday and looked set to return to the squad for Atlético.

## Bayern faces uncertain future and tough transfer decisions after losing the Bundesliga title

AP ■ DUESSELDORF (GERMANY)

Three of Bayern Munich's senior figures did something Sunday that no one at the club had done since 2012. They congratulated another team on winning the Bundesliga. President Herbert Hainer, CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen and sporting director Max Eberl each offered praise for new champion Bayer Leverkusen and coach Xabi Alonso - who Bayern had been keen to sign - and each vowed Bayern would fight to reclaim the trophy it held for 11 long years. "The goal for FC Bayern now is: the trophy must come back to Munich!" Hainer wrote. The question is how. Bayern didn't just lose the Bundesliga title to Leverkusen, it lost it by 16 points with five games to go. Bayern wrapped up the

crown that early only three times in its 11-year reign. That means a comprehensive rebuild is looming. Bayern's 2023-24 season isn't over yet, and coach Thomas Tuchel could yet salvage some pride in the Champions League before he leaves. It's not impossible that Wednesday's quarterfinal second leg against Arsenal, poised at 2-2, could be Bayern's next step to the June 1 final and a first trophy for Harry Kane. Despite the jibes on social media about how the England captain managed to join Germany's perennial champion team and still not win a league title, Kane has been a resounding success in Munich with 39 goals in the Bundesliga and Champions League. A year ago, Bayern's need for a striker was clear when the team held onto the Bundesliga on goal difference as a strong Borussia Dortmund challenge crumbled.



Tuchel, though, argued Bayern needed a defensive midfielder as well, and was concerned that the central pairing of Leon Goretzka and Joshua Kimmich were both too keen to make impactful attacking runs, leaving a gap. After wrapping up the

Kane deal in August for over \$100 million, Bayern switched focus to Fulham defensive midfielder Joao Palhinha and even got him to Munich for a medical before the deal broke down. With Eberl heading into his first transfer window in overall charge of Bayern's sporting approach, he will have to decide how to fix the problem Tuchel identified a year ago, and how much to allow the club's new coach - whoever that may be - to shape the team. Eberl may also need to replace left back Alphonso Davies, whose contract is due to expire at the end of next season amid reported interest from Real Madrid. He's one of seven starters from Bayern's 2020 Champions League final win who are still at the club and whose places in the lineup - with the exception of goalkeeper Manuel Neuer - no longer seem quite as secure.

## Augusta Masters: Bhatia T-35, Theegala T-45; Scottie Scheffler wins again

PTI ■ AUGUSTA

Indian American golfers, Akshay Bhatia and Sahith Theegala finished Tied 35th and Tied 45th respectively even as World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler secured a four-shot win at Augusta National to claim his second Masters in three years. Bhatia (72,75,74), who was making his debut, carded a one-over 73 in the final round, while Theegala, who was playing for the second time after being in the Top-10 last year, stumbled to a three-over 75 after three successive 74. Bhatia, who has had a whirlwind fortnight including a win and a spot into the Masters, said, "I haven't truly understood what's happened the last couple weeks. Everything about it is amazing. Volunteers, all the green jackets, they were so kind, so welcoming, so congratulating. "I think being my first Masters, it's pretty cool kind of being the last person in. All in

all, it was an awesome week. Had a lot of family out there, and it was a special week for a lot of us." Theegala said he made few "mental mistakes." "I was just so happy last year with how I played. I played great all week last year. My game feels better than it did last year. I just made so many mental mistakes. "Just got a little antsy and tried to push things, and my short game was off. I putted probably four or five three-putts today." Scheffler lived up to his billing to win a second Green Jacket in three years at Augusta National Golf Club. Scheffler, who started as a big favourite, opened the week with a 66 and had rounds of 72 and 71 in the tougher windy conditions. He entered the final day with a one-shot advantage. Scheffler pulled away to sign for a 68 and finish at 11-under, while Swede Ludvig Aberg carded 69 to be the nearest challenger at seven-under on



his Major Championship debut. Aberg was three shots clear of Ryder Cup team-mate Tommy Fleetwood and American duo Max Homa and Collin Morikawa. Korea's Byeong Hun An posted his best Masters Tournament finish with a tied 16th but was left ruing a cold putter which saw him miss out on an automatic return to Augusta National by a single stroke. The 32-year-old signed off on

his fifth appearance at the year's opening major with a 3-over 75 where his scorecard included a mix of five birdies, six bogeys and a double bogey. The top-12 finishers and ties earn invitations back to next year's Masters. Tom Kim fired the day's lowest of 66, highlighted by eight birdies, to share 30th place with amongst others, compatriot Si Woo Kim, who signed off with a 70 in what was his eighth successive Masters appearance. Japan's Hideki Matsuyama, the lone Asian to win the Masters in 2021, closed with a 74 for tied 38th. For some time, Scheffler did have to share the lead. Yet, a hat-trick of birdies from the eighth steadied him and there was no scare after that. He survived Amen Corner in level par while his challengers faced a lot of problems. Scheffler arrived at Augusta on the back of finishing first, first and second in his last three starts, with top 20s in each of his four Masters appearances, including his win in 2022.

As well as the favourite's tag, he also had the possibility of having to withdraw mid-event with wife Meredith expecting the couple's first child imminently but he took it all in his stride and produced one of the most dominant Masters performances of recent years. "It's a very special time for both of us. I can't put into words what it means to win this tournament again. I really can't put into words what it's going to be like to be a father for the first time. I'm looking forward to getting home and celebrating with Meredith," he said. "It's been a long week here without her but I'm just looking forward to getting home. I will definitely enjoy the birth of my first child but with that being said, I still love competing. My priorities will change here very soon. "My son or daughter will now be the main priority, along with my wife, so golf will now be probably fourth in line. But I still love competing. I don't plan on taking my eye off the ball anytime soon, that's for sure." Fleetwood made birdies on the first, seventh and 13th in a bogey-free 69 to finish two shots clear of Bryson DeChambeau and Cameron Smith, with Xander Schauffele the only other player in red numbers at one under.

## Indian team leaves for Special Olympics South Asia football tourney in Dhaka

PTI ■ FARIDABAD

A 28-strong Indian contingent, comprising both men and women, left for Dhaka on Monday to participate in the Special Olympics South Asia Unified seven-a-side football tournament. The contingent includes 22 players, and five coaches representing eight different states and was given a sendoff here on Monday. "We are assured of bagging one medal from the female team of SOB for sure, the men's team however has to improve their skills a bit more, the important thing is to defend the goal, but we are hoping for the best," Harpreet Singh, the sports director of Special Olympics Bharat, said at the ceremony. Special Olympics Bharat is a National Sports Federation for people with intellectual disabilities. It is recognised by the sports ministry. Intellectual disability is

characterised by significantly below-average intellectual functioning (generally regarded as IQ below 70) combined with impairment in carrying out varying aspects of daily life and adapting to the normal social environment. "This is my first time working with SOB, and it has transformed me very much. I have become more understandable, compassionate and hardworking," said captain of the women's football team, Ankita. "I want to make India and my parents proud. They (the team) are performing well and from the first camp to the last camp, we have developed more skills. We will give our hundred percent to get the gold" she added. The players underwent a training camp here as part of their preparations for the tournament which will also feature Indonesia, Hong Kong and Maldives.

