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WORLD 8 MYANMAR RESISTANCE DRONES HIT CAPITAL TARGET

MONEY 10 SENSEX, NIFTY HIT RECORD FRESH HIGH

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FORMER ENGLAND GREAT BACKS MAYANK YADAV 12 SPORTS

Modi knocks hard on Mamata's door in Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and West Bengal Chief Minister engaged in a war of words on Thursday over the issue of the Centre's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). While the former emphasised the significance of enacting such a law, the latter cautioned people to be wary of the controversial Act, which she claimed would strip citizenship from many.

Both the leaders addressed Lok Sabha poll rallies in West Bengal. The Prime Minister's rally took place in Cooch Behar barely a couple of hours after the TMC supremo held an election rally at Mathabhabga town about 28 km away.

Attacking the partners of the INDIA for spreading canards against the CAA, the Prime Minister said the law had been introduced to offer citizenship to those who cherished, believed, admired and repose faith in the "ideals of Maa Bharti (Mother India)".

Attacking the TMC for unleashing a reign of terror in Bengal where the women were at the receiving end and of which Sandeshkhali was a striking example, the Prime Minister with an apparent eye on the women voters said, "India saw with horror what happened with the women and poor at Sandeshkhali ... the TMC tried its level best to shield and protect the culprits of Sandeshkhali ... but it is my guarantee that they will never get away with whatever they have done ... they will have to spend



Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to supporters during an election campaign rally ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in Cooch Behar district on Thursday

their entire lives in jail." Raising the issue of CAA — which has a good relevance in the northern part of the State — the Chief Minister asked the people to handle the Act with care lest it sucked them into the vortex of National Citizenship Register making them liable to be thrown into detention camps. "It is for the people to decide as

to whether they will apply for citizenship through CAA ... because this will make them vulnerable to NRC ... I have said earlier that CAA is only the head and NRC is the tail ... Once you register in it you concede that you are not the citizen of India and then you make yourself liable to be thrown into detention camps like it happened in Assam where the people are imprisoned

in detention camps in their own country," Mamata said. Modi said a strong and stable Government, which would lead India to become the third strongest economy in the world, is what the Prime Minister offered to the people of India as he addressed a jam-packed election rally at Cooch Behar in North Bengal. "It is important to make India — and along with it Bengal — the third strongest economy in the world and for that to happen the

country needs a strong and stable Government and not a weak coalition," the Prime Minister said listing his Government's achievements in the past one decade.

"The people saw the Congress model for 6-7 decades after Independence and then they saw the BJP model which acted decisively to remove Article 370 from Kashmir and construction of the grand Ram Temple at Ayodhya which was overdue for the past 500 years," Modi said reminding how "the world says Modi is a strong leader who takes strong decisions" and adding all those decisions he takes was for the 140 crore people of India whom he serves.

Once again vouching for his guarantees the Prime Minister said apart from making India a strong nation he would continue to fulfill his guarantees. "Where the hope of others ends Modi's guarantees begins ... and Modi's guarantees include free ration to people, 40 lakh pucca houses and toilets, health insurance under Ayushman Bharat scheme which enables the insured to get free treatment all over the country, taking electricity and water lines to every household," Modi said insisting on his dream to create 3 crore Lakhpati Didis. Vowing to continue his crusade against corruption as a part of his guarantees, Modi said, "I have acted against corruption which is for everyone to see and will continue to come down on the corrupt people as a part of my strong resolve to bring about a corruption free India."

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BJP's reclamation plan for 16 lost LS seats in UP

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In a determined bid to reclaim the 16 Lok Sabha seats lost in Uttar Pradesh during the 2019 elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has rolled out an intricate strategy tailored specifically for these crucial constituencies. The party's relentless focus on electoral dynamics and meticulous planning underscores its commitment to regaining lost ground in the politically significant State.

Nomita P Kumar, from the Giri Institute of Development Studies in Lucknow, remarked, "The BJP is a party which is always in election mode. Winning or losing an election matters least to this party, and as soon as the election is over, the party leadership starts the evaluation process." This sentiment reflects the BJP's proactive approach towards electoral challenges and its unwavering determination to learn from past setbacks.

Political analyst Rajesh N Bajpayee emphasised BJP's analytical approach, stating, "If BJP loses some seats, it minutely dissects the election results - booth by booth - to understand the dynamics of voting patterns so that it can rectify the same in the next election."

This meticulous evaluation process forms the bedrock of BJP's strategic planning and decision-making. Following the NDA alliance's victory of 64 seats in the 2019 elections, the BJP embarked on a comprehensive evaluation process, with a particular emphasis on OBC and Dalit dominated regions. This introspection paved the way for a multi-pronged strategy encompassing candidate selection, grassroots organisation, targeted campaigning, and strategic alliances. The BJP's candidate selection process demonstrates a nuanced understanding of Uttar Pradesh's demographic dynamics.

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HC for swift hearing for MPs/MLAs criminal cases

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court has asked its judges to give priority to the criminal cases pending before them against members of Parliament and legislative Assemblies to ensure their expeditious and effective disposal.

The High Court was informed by its registry that presently there are 34 pending cases or appeals or revisions involving MPs and MLAs before a single judge bench of the High Court in which orders of stay of trial have been passed and are continuing for a period of more than six months.

A bench of Acting Chief Justice Manmohan and Justice Manmeet PS Arora transferred the cases from the single judge concerned and directed the registry to reallocate or re-distribute those 34 cases to other courts or benches as is considered appropriate and effective for their expeditious disposal so that stay applications are disposed of expeditiously and trial of such cases can conclude before the designated special courts.

"In line with the directives passed by the Chief Justice of India...We direct the registry of this court to circulate this order to brother and sister judges assigned with such cases so that priority is given to all criminal cases/appeals/revisions pending before them against the members of Parliament and Legislative Assemblies, as it is essential for expeditious and effective disposal of such cases," the division bench said in an order passed on April 2.

According to the present roster, Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma's court is the designated special court in the High Court to deal with MPs and MLAs cases. On Thursday, when several MP/MLA cases came up for hearing before Justice Sharma, the court said it cannot hear them now as she has received a judicial order as per which certain cases have been transferred from this court.

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Stung by a mass exodus, Congress seeks solace in the Gandhi family

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

While exodus continues to haunt the grand old party, the Congress, with general elections around the corner, another family member of the party's first family, Robert Vadra, is speculated to throw his hat in the ring in electoral battle from the erstwhile Gandhi-Nehru family bastion of Amethi which is currently represented by Union Minister Smriti Irani who defeated former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi in 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

On a day when three big leaders — Sanjay Nirupam, Gaurav Vallabh and Anil Sharma — quit the party, reports trickled that Priyanka Gandhi's husband could be fielded from Amethi Lok Sabha as Rahul Gandhi apparently declined to contest again from Uttar Pradesh seat and filed his nominations from Wayanad in Kerala which he represents now.

Vallabh and Sharma joined the BJP on Thursday hours after they quit the Congress while Nirupam was yet to open his cards but asserted he will contest the Lok Sabha elections. Vallabh said he can neither raise anti-Sanatana slogans nor abuse "wealth creators" day in and day out and was joining the ruling party due to his support for Prime Minister



BJP National General Secretary Vinod Tawde with newly-joined leaders Gaurav Vallabh, Anil Sharma and Upendra Yadav in New Delhi on Thursday

Narendra Modi's agenda of "Viksit Bharat". Former Bihar Congress president Anil Sharma too joined the BJP in the presence of its national general secretary Vinod Tawde. Vallabh, seen as an articulate Congress spokesperson, earlier shared his resignation letter written to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on social media platform X. He said he was not feeling

comfortable with the directionless way the party was moving. Further, a day after being expelled from the Congress, former MP Nirupam hit out at the grand old party and claimed there is "tremendous arrogance" in the party leadership. Nirupam further claimed the Congress is now history and has no future and that the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) is a merger of three "sick units".

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General Election nominations done and dusted in Kerala

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Battle lines are drawn for the Lok Sabha election from Kerala scheduled for April 26 as the last of the candidates submitted their nomination papers on Thursday, the last day for filing the same. There are 20 seats at stake from the State and the main contest in Kerala is between the CPI(M)-led LDF, the Congress-led INDIA alliance and the BJP-led NDA.

The NDA's challenge is limited to just three or four constituencies while in the remaining 16 seats the fight is between the LDF and the INDIA alliance. The Muslim League and various Islamist parties have asked the Election Commission of India to shift the polling day as Friday is inconvenient for the Muslim community. They point out that even the CPI(M), which calls for bandh/hartal at the drop of a hat makes it a point not to disturb the community by calling for shut down on Friday.

V Muraleedharan, Union Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, who is the BJP candidate in Attingal, suffered a setback on Wednesday as



File Photo PTI

two senior members of the Karavaram Panchayat resigned from their posts and the party. Karavaram is the only local body from the Attingal constituency which is under the control of the BJP.

Earlier, two BJP Councillors of Attingal Municipality had quit the party because of their Opposition to Muraleedharan being made the candidate at Attingal.

The Union Minister, known as P Chidambaram of Kerala (as he does not interact with party cadres) is pitted against the CPI(M) district secretary V Joy and the sitting member Adoor Prakash (Congress).

Both Joy and Prakash are known for their easy accessibility while Muraleedharan, who hails from northern Kerala, always keeps away from party cadres.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Prakash won by a margin of 38,247 votes against his nearest rival A Sampath of the CPI(M) while Shobha Surendran of the BJP sprang a surprise by polling 2,48,000 votes (24.9 per cent). The party cadres were hoping that the party would field Shobha from Attingal in this election as she had established a good rapport with the voters.

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Reel Ram faces trust hurdle in winning voters hearts

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ MEERUT

With rampant economic growth, infrastructure development like Rapid Rail and developers lining up to build colonies as part of extended Delhi-NCR, the voters of 'City of Revolution'- Meerut — is a bit confused this Lok Sabha elections though it has sent BJP's Rajendra Agarwal to Parliament three straight term. The regional heavyweight who boasts of a large accepted base of party workers, supporters has now been replaced by famous tele-serial Ramayan's 'Ram', Arun Govil, causing a bit of reluctance within the volunteers who continue to vow their allegiance to incumbent Parliamentarians.

Polling in Meerut will be held in the second phase on April 26 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi kick-started his Uttar Pradesh's campaign from Meerut early this week. Some of the residents expressed their concern and sought to know whether



File Photo PTI

'Arun Govil' will do a 'Nitish Bhardwaj' here in Meerut. Another popular tele-serial Mahabharata's Krishna essayed by Nitish Bhardwaj who made a political debut as BJP's MP from Jamsheedpur and then had to shift to neighbouring Mathura and during his

both tenure his posters came across in the cities stating that their Lok Sabha MP has gone missing as he never returned after being elected. On his part, 72-year-old Govil said he is contesting Lok Sabha polls not to do politics but to serve the people of

Meerut where he was born and brought up. The yesteryear 'Prabhu Ram' will face a triangular contest and hence an advantage against the two others — BSP's Devrit Tyagi and INDIA alliance backed Samajwadi Party's Sunita Verma.

Interestingly the SP changed its candidate two times from Meerut. First, it fielded Bhanu Pratap Singh but replaced him with Atul Pradhan and again replaced Pradhan with Sunita in the constituency which reflects a diverse demographic and remains a crucial constituency of Uttar Pradesh with 64 percent Hindus and half of its Muslims.

In the 2019 General Elections, Meerut witnessed a fierce electoral battle where Agarwal won with a margin of less than 5,000 votes. Agarwal defeated BSP's Haji Yaqoob Qureshi while in 2014, Agarwal defeated BSP's Mohammad Shahid Akhlaq.

"Meerut people are very sentimental which is evident from its past history. We have always been lucky to have our own locals to represent the city in legislation.

According to the election affidavit filed by Govil, he is a resident of Versova in Andheri West area of Mumbai and also a voter of the Versova Assembly constituency. Am not saying that actor turned politicians have not been not successful given examples of Hema Malini, Shatrughan Sinha, Jaya Prada, but there have been instances of Dharmendra, Sunny Deol and Mahabharata's episode Nitish Bhardwaj. We are only concerned whether he will remain consistent," says Shyam Rana, a trader in the Meerut Cantonment area.

In his campaigning and public meetings, Govil has maintained he was born in Meerut and spent the first 17 years of his life in the city.

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After expulsion, Nirupam attacks Congress, indicates he might contest from MahaYuti

T N RAGHUNATHA ■
MUMBAI

Hours after he was expelled from the Congress on disciplinary grounds, former MP Sanjay Nirupam on Thursday launched a vicious attack against the Mallikarjun Kharge-led party and indicated that he might contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls on behalf of the one of the constituents of the BJP-led MahaYuti from Mumbai north-west constituency. Amid speculation that he might join the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena which is a part of the BJP-led ruling alliance, Nirupam dropped a broad hint about his next destination by raising a chant "Jai Shri Ram" and said: "I have plans. Certainly I am joining somewhere. I will announce it on April 9. You can derive mean-

ing out of Jai Shri Ram". Hours after the All India Congress Committee (AICC) put out a statement expelling Nirupam from the party for "indiscipline" and "anti-party statements" on Wednesday night, Nirupam claimed that the Congress expelled him from the party after he resigned from the party. Fifty-nine-year-old Nirupam posted his resignation letter dated April 3 addressed to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on social media on Wednesday, which read: "I have finally decided to fulfill your much awaited desire and hereby announce that I choose to resign from the primary membership of All India Congress Committee. This communication may be considered as my resignation letter." While sharing his resignation

letter on micro-blogging site "X", Nirupam said: "Looks like, immediately after the party received my resignation letter last night, they decided to issue my expulsion. Good to see such promptness." Talking to media persons later during the day, Nirupam castigated the Congress, by alleging that its ideology lacked direction, it had "five power centres" instead of the one "power centre" that existed earlier and that these "power centres" were "extremely arrogant" and had no connect with the grass root-level workers. "Earlier there was only one 'power-centre' in the Congress, but now there are five independent power-centres. They are led by Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Vadra, Mallikarjun Kharge and K. C. Venugopal, who have their own independent caucuses of



leaders". Nirupam said that the leaders owing allegiance to the five "power-centres" were surrounded by people who had no "connect" with the grass-root level workers. "They are extremely arrogant, they clash among themselves despite the fact that they have no political experience and speak objec-

tive things". "The leaders within the Congress are saying that the party lacks direction. The Congress is becoming history and it has no future. As far as Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance is concerned, it is a merger of 'three sick units' and (Maharashtra President) Nana Patole is like a Vibhishan. Nobody understands what language Venugopal speaks, whether Hindi, English or Malayalam," Nirupam said. Warning those who "are writing my political obits", Nirupam said: "I will contest from Mumbai north-west constituency and win. Wait till June 4 (he day of counting of votes in the LS polls)".

Replied to a question, Nirupam said that he would not contest the LS polls as an Independent. "On April 9, you will know the party that will field me" Given that the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena --- which is one of the constituents of the BJP-led MahaYuti --has not announced its candidate for Mumbai north-west constituency so far, there's a possibility that Nirupam might have got an informal nod from Shinde. During the course of his news conference, Nirupam heaped praise on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, by saying that "the prices of gold and PM Modi's popularity are continuously rising in India". Informed sources said in the Congress said that after the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) announced the name of Amol Kirtikar as his party candidate, Nirupam had ridiculed Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray for abruptly announcing the name of his party candidate for Mumbai North-west seat. Nirupam indirectly targeted Uddhav though a post on micro-blogging site "X" in which he wrote: "Yesterday, bachi-kuchi Shiv Sena ke pramukh announced his party candidate for Mumbai north-west seat". Nirupam, who has served one

term each in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, was eyeing for the Mumbai north-west seat. What has miffed Nirupam is that Uddhav has announced the name of Amol Kirtikar as the party candidate from Mumbai North West Lok Sabha seat. Incidentally, Amol is the son of two-time Shiv Sena MP Gajanan Kirtikar, who has switched sides and joined the rival Shiv Sena, led by Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. It may be recalled that in 2014, the senior Kirtikar had defeated late Congress leader Gurudas Kamat, in 2019, Senior Kartikar defeated Nirupam. Singling out Amol Kirtikar for an attack, Nirupam had said that Amol was allegedly involved in the alleged Covid 'khichdi scam' when Uddhav was the Chief Minister.

Modi, Rahul, Kharge to address rallies in Vidarbha

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Top leaders and star campaigners of the ruling BJP and Opposition Congress, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and Wayanad MP Rahul Gandhi will descend on Vidarbha region later this month to campaign for their respective parties in the first phases of the Lok Sabha polls. The first phase on April 19 will see voting in five Lok Sabha constituencies in Vidarbha region -- Ramtek, Nagpur, Bhandara-Gondia, Gadchiroli-Chimur and Chandrapur. The remaining five constituencies

in Vidarbha -- Buldhana, Akola, Amravati, Wardha and Yavatmal-Washim -- will go to polls on April 26. Modi is expected to kick off his Lok Sabha poll campaign in Maharashtra by addressing a rally at Kanhan in Nagpur district on April 10. Ahead of Modi's rally, senior BJP leader and Union Home Minister Amit Shah will address an election meeting at Gondia. Mallikarjun Kharge will address a rally at Ramtek on April 8 and 9. Rahul Gandhi is expected to address a rally at Bhandara-Gondia on April 13, while Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi is scheduled to address a rally at Chandrapur on April 15.

BJP star campaigners to bolster party poll campaign in Jammu

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU


Star campaigners of the Bharatiya Janata Party including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath are all set to bolster the party's poll campaign across the Jammu region in the coming week. The party candidates MoS PMO Dr. Jitendra Singh and Jugal Kishore Sharma aim to score a hat-trick from the Udhampur-Doda and Jammu-Reasi Lok Sabha seats. So far both candidates have been leading their campaigns holding roadshows and street corner meetings in their respective constituencies. The response of the electorate on ground zero neces-

sitated changing gears by introducing star campaigners in the last leg of the campaign to plug the gaps. Keeping this in mind the poll management committee of the party finalised the schedule of the public meetings. As per the senior BJP leaders of J&K Unit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be addressing a massive rally at Udhampur in Udhampur-

Doda Parliamentary constituency on April 12 while Union Home Minister Amit Shah will address a huge election rally in Raipur-Domana on April 9 falling under Jammu-Reasi Lok Sabha seat. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will be holding another big rally at Kathua on April 10. Former Union Minister Shah Nawaz Hussain will address a rally at Doda on April 13. Udhampur-Doda constituency will go to polls in the first phase on April 19 while the Jammu-Reasi seat will have voting in the second phase on April 26. On the other hand, the top leaders of the Congress party are also planning an aggressive campaign strategy to help the party candidates give a

tough fight to their rivals in the poll arena. Both Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi are set to hit the campaign trail along with senior party leaders in Jammu and Kashmir. Vice President of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference Omar Abdullah Thursday said his party is putting all its efforts to ensure that the Congress candidates secure victory in the Jammu and the Udhampur-Kathua seats. Interacting with the media Omar said, "My responsibility is towards the three seats (in Kashmir) for the National Conference and to help the Congress on the two seats in Jammu." "The way the situation is developing in Ladakh, we are hopeful of a win there as well".

I am real INDIA in Bengal, not LF, Congress: Mamata

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
KOLKATA

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has once again claimed herself to be the real flag-bearer of Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance in Bengal dismissing both the Congress and the CPI(M) as stooges of the BJP and asked the people to ignore the other two parties and vote for her Trinamool Congress if they wanted to oust BJP and the Alliance to strive in Delhi. Apparently playing on the Muslim's fear of the saffron party, Banerjee said, "the CPI(M) and Congress are the partners of the BJP and are only helping to cut the minority votes so that the TMC can be defeated ... They are doing this in the name of INDIA alliance but I am reiterating that

there is no Alliance in Bengal ... this alliance is only there is Delhi from where we all want to oust BJP". Claiming that it was she who had conceived the name of INDIA Banerjee said "no one is keener to save INDIA -- which I conceived -- than me ... after the TMC wins from here, Bengal will then lead INDIA in Delhi ... giving vote to the CPI(M) and Congress means minority to divide votes and help the BJP win. Earlier Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury said that Mamata Banerjee had dissociated herself from the INDIA in order to help the BJP not only in Bengal but also in Delhi. "She has gone out of INDIA which she made clear earlier ... now she has realized her mistake and is trying to shed crocodile's tears the minorities," he said.

Modi knocks hard...

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Asking the people to bring the BJP back to power, the Prime Minister said whatever his Government had done in the past 10 years were "only trailers ... as I will have to take India and along with Bengal far ahead in the path of development," adding his Government was planning to arrange for easy people-to-people border trade with neighbouring Bangladesh. Taking on the Left and the Congress for attacking the BJP in Bengal, the Prime Minister said "in Bengal they indulge in mock fights among themselves but in Delhi they hobnob with each other ... so neither the TMC and the CPI(M), nor the Congress must be believed as they are all hands-in-gloves and have teamed up to defeat the BJP".

The Prime Minister was campaigning for sitting Cooch Behar MP and junior Home Minister Nisith Pramanik and Alipurduar party candidate Manoj Tigga who is presently the BJP's Chief Whip in Bengal Assembly.

Mamata poured as much venom as she could on the BJP telling the crowd why they should prefer even a cobra to the saffron party and calling upon the Election Commission of India to ensure a level playing field both for the rulers and the Opposition. In a no-holds-barred attack on the BJP, Mamata told an election rally at Mathabanga in Cooch Behar district of North Bengal how the powers that be in Delhi were destroying the nation. "You can trust a poisonous cobra but you cannot trust the BJP for its is destroying the country," Mamata said alleging how the saffron Government had been depriving the Bengal electorate of their rightful funds in order to teach the Trinamool Congress a lesson and how they were unleashing Central agencies to terrorise the Opposition. "They are ruling by the agency in their bid to impose one-nation-one-party rule ... there is law only for the opposition parties and not the BJP," she said.

Raising the issue of Bengal's deprivation by the Centre, she said, "Ever since they came to power in 2014 they started torturing Bengal and its people ... They took away Rs 6.8 lakh crore as tax since 2019 but have withheld Rs 1.74 lakh

crore of State's funds ... including MNREGA wages and funds for housing, roads and other infrastructure schemes ... and when you raise your voice they will send central agencies at your home," asking the ECI to take measures to stop unlawful use of agencies against the opposition leaders. "I will request the ECI to see how the BJP has been indulging in hooliganism ... I will request the ECI to see how BSF, CBI, NIA, Income Tax and ED are being used to harass and torment the Opposition and the common people if they do not vote for them ... this is not a level playing field ... So I will ask them to ensure that a democratic level playing field is given to all of us," Mamata said.

In a veiled reference to an alleged understanding between the election panel and the saffron party, Mamata said "here it is so happening that the person who is marrying is acting as the priest," asking "why only the officers of the State administration --- and not the central agencies --- would only be transferred ... my question is how many officers of the NIA, CBI and I-T have been transferred... is it a level-playing field when all the central agencies are being used against the opposition during the elections".

Stopping short of naming Modi, the Chief Minister alluded how the dreams of acche din were shown to the people before 2014.

"They promised Rs 15 lakh in your bank accounts and 2 crore jobs every year but I want to ask even if one person has received that money in his account..." she said, adding that how "the unemployment rate in the country has broken all the records and is highest of all times." Slamming the BJP Government for "forcing the use of Prime Minister's picture on the ration bags and the advertisements of Prime Minister Awaas Yojna (housing scheme) Mamata said, "while the State gives 50 per cent of funds for PMAY the picture of the Prime Minister appears in the advertisements ... Similarly they will give him the Prime Minister's picture on the ration bags ... why will I accept such pictures when the food grains are produced by me or purchased from my tax ... I will starve than accept that ration."

BJP's reclamation plan for 16 lost LS seats...

From Page 1

Departing from previous elections, where upper-caste candidates were prominent, the party has adjusted its strategy to field a more diverse slate. Out of the 16 seats, five candidates hail from upper castes, six from OBC, and two from Dalit communities. Notably, former BSP MP Ritesh Pandey's inclusion symbolises the BJP's efforts to attract leaders from other parties, showcasing a broad-based approach to representation. The BJP has committed significant resources to bolstering its organisational presence in the 16 targeted

seats. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's over 70 visits to these constituencies underscore the party's emphasis on grassroots engagement. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inauguration of developmental projects worth thousands of crores signals the Government's investment in uplifting backward and Dalit communities, aligning with BJP's electoral objectives. Recognising the pivotal role of social engineering in electoral success, the BJP has enlisted prominent leaders from Dalit and OBC backgrounds as star campaigners. Figures like Yogi, Mohan Yadav, and

Keshav Maurya have been tasked with rallying support among their respective communities. Additionally, the deployment of leaders like former IPS officer Aseem Arun highlights BJP's efforts to broaden its appeal across caste lines, reflecting a strategic approach to voter mobilisation. In a bid to consolidate support, the BJP has attracted defections from other parties, including the induction of two BSP MPs and over 20 other significant leaders. By incorporating key figures like Ritesh Pandey and Sangeeta Azad, the BJP aims to bolster its electoral prospects and weaken the Opposition's

stronghold in certain constituencies. Furthermore, alliances with regional parties like the RLD underscore the BJP's meticulous approach to navigating Uttar Pradesh's complex political landscape. As the countdown to the 2024 elections commences, the BJP's concerted efforts to reclaim lost ground in Uttar Pradesh signal a highly competitive electoral contest characterised by intricate political manoeuvring and strategic calculations. With stakes running high, the forthcoming polls are poised to shape the trajectory of Indian politics in the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh.

General Election nominations done...

From Page 1

Muraleedharan had made it to the Union Council of Ministers through the Rajya Sabha and is yet to win even a panchayat election from the State, said Sudheer Damodaran, a commentator. In a nearby Thiruvananthapuram constituency, Shashi Tharoor is slowly inching ahead in the campaign though he was trailing behind Union Minister of State Rajeev Chandrasekhar of the BJP. The TV news channel owned by Rajeev Chandrasekhar (Asianet) is a known pro-CPI(M) channel and is popular because of its anti-Narendra Modi blitzkrieg. Rahul Gandhi, who filed his nomination papers at Wayanad on Wednesday

returned to Delhi after a road show which saw thousands of INDIA alliance activists coming together to express solidarity with the young leader. "It is a foregone conclusion as he is going to win by a record margin this time too," said VD Satheshan, Leader of Opposition in Kerala Assembly. K Surendran of the BJP and Annie Raja (spouse of D Raja) are his rivals. In 2019, Rahul had won by more than 4,00,000 votes from the constituency. As things stand today, the BJP may have to wait for years to touch the double digit seats in Kerala. "If they win one seat, that will be a major achievement," said A Jayashankar, author and political commentator.

Stung...

From Page 1

The Opposition MVA comprises the Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT) and the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar). There are five power centres in the Congress -- the three Gandhi family members, AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge and (party general secretary) K C Venugopal, Nirupam said. "The Nehruvian secularism which has no place for religion in the society has expired," he claimed. Nirupam declined to spell out his future course of action, but said he will contest the Lok Sabha poll and win. Nirupam, who was eyeing the Mumbai North West Lok Sabha constituency, has been miffed with the Congress for allowing the Shiv Sena (UBT) to take the seat for the parliamentary polls.

Reel Ram faces...

From Page 1

He did his Class 10th from Government Inter College, Meerut in 1966, and he passed his Class 12th from Government Intermediate College Saharanpur in 1968. He did BSc from Shahjahanpur College, affiliated to Agra University, in 1972. "I was born in Meerut and spent 21 years of my life there, including the school days," Govil said. To a question about his contribution to society and Meerut in particular, he said, "I can say that I served society spiritually, infused the sense of duties, relations and heritage through my role in the Ramayan. Those who remain connected with roots keep associating with nationalism."

HC for swift hearing for...

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The court then listed those matters for another date. Regarding the cases involving lawmakers pending before district courts, the High Court directed the designated courts concerned to give priority, first of all criminal cases against MPs and MLAs punishable with death or life imprisonment, then to cases punishable with imprisonment for five years or more and thereafter hear

other cases. "We also request all the judges to refrain from adjourning the subject cases except for rare and compelling reasons," the bench said and listed the matter for further hearing on May 20. The High Court was hearing a case it had initiated on its own (suo motu) about disposal of criminal cases against Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs). In October 2020, the Delhi High Court had initiated suo motu proceedings on the Supreme Court's direction to

all High Courts to monitor the pending criminal cases against MPs and MLAs and asked the Centre, Delhi Government and the Delhi High Court registry to state the steps taken by them about it. In April 2022, the High Court had directed the trial courts to give priority to the cases relating to the sitting and the former MPs/ MLAs and asked its administrative side to file a monthly status report with respect to the status of pendency of such cases. The court had then appointed senior advocate Sandeep Sethi to act as

amicus curiae to assist in the proceedings and suggest further measures to ensure expeditious disposal of such cases. The Supreme Court had in September 2020 asked the Chief Justices of all High Courts to forthwith list before an appropriate bench all pending criminal cases involving sitting and former lawmakers where stay had been granted. The direction came on a petition filed in 2016 which raised the issue of inordinately delay in disposal of criminal cases against former and sitting lawmakers.

Elections and wars should never be taken lightly, Yogi tells BJP workers


PTI ■ GORAKHPUR (UP)

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday asked the BJP workers to avoid overconfidence while simultaneously working hard for the victory of the Narendra Modi government for the third consecutive term in the Lok Sabha polls. Emphasising alertness among the party cadres up to the booth level, Adityanath said there is a tremendous atmosphere in favour of the BJP in the entire country and the result of the coming Lok Sabha elections will also be in accordance with this. What is needed is activism, promptness and alertness up to the booth level, Adityanath said, giving the mantra for winning elections. In an important meeting with the BJP's election steering committee for Gorakhpur, Bangaon and Sant Kabir Nagar Lok Sabha seats, the chief minister exuded confidence that the Modi government will return to power for the third consecutive term, but stressed that elections and wars should never be taken lightly. "Therefore, we have to work (hard) while avoiding overconfidence," he said, stressing

that winning the booth is the most effective formula to win the elections. "We do not have to feel assured and we need to pay more attention to the booth-centric system in the Lok Sabha elections. Booth committee, 'panna pramukh' and social group are the most important organs for the BJP. The booth committee should have details of every voter of the concerned booth," he said. Adityanath said all the officials and the public representatives have to take the responsibility of continuous public relations. Teachers, advocates, officers, employees, doctors, businessmen, social, business and cultural organisations have to meet everyone, he said. These sections of the society have to highlight the achievements of the double engine government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For this, the BJP officials and the public representatives should give their full strength at the local level, he said. The chief minister said the BJP Mahila Morcha also has an important responsibility in the elections. Mahila Morcha office-bearers should go among half the population and do intensive public relations, he added.

AAP Government misleading courts: LG Principal Secretary to Home Secretary

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a communiqué to Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla, Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena's Principal Secretary Ashish Kundra has alleged that there have been concerted attempts by AAP Government at misleading the courts, with an apparent aim of influencing the justice delivery system by way of filing frivolous and frivolous litigations wasting several precious man-hours of public officials and trying to secure an endorsement of the same from the courts by presenting patently false affidavits. "There have been concerted attempts at misleading the courts, with an apparent aim of influencing the justice delivery system by way of filing motivated and premeditated petitions and trying to secure an endorsement of the same from the courts by presenting patently false affidavits. The attempts obviously are, apart

from misleading the Courts, to create a false Media narrative which maligns the constitutional office of Lt. Governor in public domain," Kundra said. "In a matter relating to upgradation of infrastructure in the Delhi High Court and subordinate judiciary in the city, the Supreme Court of India came down heavily on the GNCTD over lack of infrastructure for the judiciary and the inordinate delay in granting funds for infrastructure projects approved by the Delhi High Court. Projects pertaining to various District Courts had been pending even after due approval of the Delhi High Court from 2019." "Prior to this, the Lt. Governor upon being apprised of these inexplicable delays caused by the GNCTD in clearing files and proposals pertaining to courts, judicial infrastructure, had invoked Rule 19(5) of ToBR of GNCTD, 1993, on 7th December, 2023, directing that all such files be submitted

to him for decision within 03 days. While recalling the files, he had expressed his serious concern on the pendency of such a large number of important proposals, which was creating barriers in administration of justice in the Capital of the country and affecting people at large. These files had been pending with the Minister (Law), GNCTD for a long. Subsequently, the minister in charge cleared the proposals and sent the same to Lt. Governor through the Chief Minister, thereby finally addressing the issue," it said. Kundra further stated that the entire matter was obviously a smoke screen, yet again aimed at creating a negative imagery about the Lt. Governor, since the Minister concerned knows fully well that Finance and Water are transferred subjects, and the Lt. Governor has not taken whatsoever in decisions taken thereof and no file whatsoever is routed through or presented to the Lt. Governor for



decisions in this regard. In another similar instance, the Delhi High Court, on 02.04.2024, in a WP(C) No. 280/2024, "Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) vs. Office of Lt. Governor & Ors.", after hearings on 10 earlier occasions, disposed the petition as withdrawn by the petitioners. Another important matter relates to an ongoing case in the Delhi High Court on the Excise Policy. In pursuance of the High Court order dated 29.03.2022, a Committee was constituted for the purpose of identification and classification of conforming and non-conforming wards in NCT of Delhi w.r.t. implementation of the "New Excise Policy 2021-22" (now rescinded). "The said Committee submitted its report on 18.08.2022,

and the file to this effect was received for the first time by the Lt. Governor's Secretariat for submitting the report to the High Court, only on 16.01.2024 i.e. after a lapse of almost 01 year and 05 months. However, the Government Counsel kept misleading the High Court on several occasions of hearing that the file was pending approval of the Lt. Governor. This misrepresentation of facts by the government counsel also got reflected in various orders of the High Court, wherein High Court kept requesting the Lt. Governor to dispose the file, even though no such file was pending in this secretariat," read the letter. This case is a sad reflection on the manner in which standing counsel of government make patently false and misleading statements in the Hon'ble Courts, projecting the Lt. Governor and his office in poor light. Kundra also cited the case of "Farishtey" Scheme and releas-

ing pending hospital bills and making timely payments to private hospitals. The same was played up in the Media, apparently at the Government's behest, as a supposed 'legal tussle', where the government counsel attributed the stoppage of the "Farishtey" Scheme to the Lt. Governor, before the Hon'ble Supreme Court, which subsequently issued a notice to LG Office. The facts, as far as the operationalization of the Farishtey Scheme and payments made thereunder to private hospitals are concerned, belie the very basis of this Writ Petition. The total number of beneficiaries under the Farishtey Scheme during FY 2022-23 was 3698 and the same stands at about 3900 in 10 months, till mid-February during FY 2023-24. The payments done to private hospitals for the same in FY 2022-23 stood at Rs. 4.85 crores and the same till 12 February this year, stands at Rs. 4.99 crores. These figures, prima facie neither

indicate a "halt" in the Scheme, nor do they support allegations of "non-payment", made by the Hon'ble Minister and endorsed by the Hon'ble Chief Minister - in fact they refute the claims. "While many similar cases are going on in different courts, it is pertinent to highlight that such misleading measures undertaken by the GNCTD, apart from spending crores of rupees of the public exchequer on scurrilous litigation and wasting several precious man-hours of public officials, also burdens the already overburdened Courts, with frivolous litigations. Such attempts apart from misleading the Courts create a confusing and skewed narrative that maligns the image of the Lt. Governor in public mind. This communication is meant to keep the Home Ministry apprised of the developments in Delhi with regard to avoidable litigation in various court by the Delhi government", read the letter.

AAP under fire for putting Kejriwal photo between Bhagat, Ambedkar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has come under fire for placing jailed Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's photo between the portraits of Bhagat Singh and BR Ambedkar on Thursday. As Sunita read out a fresh message on Kejriwal's behalf for the MLAs of Delhi, the picture of him behind bars being used as display pictures by various AAP's social media handles, placed between Bhagat Singh and BR Ambedkar's portraits caught the attention of the BJP and social media.



the AAP chief's message. "The people of Delhi should not face any trouble because I am in jail. The two crore people of Delhi are my family, no one in my family should be sad for any reason. God bless everyone," the chief minister said in his message. An official statement said despite being in jail, the chief minister is concerned about the two crore people of Delhi rather than himself. He spoke to his wife through video-conferencing and, during this conversation, sent a message to all AAP MLAs through her. This message comes a day after AAP MP, Sanjay Singh's release from prison after six months, over alleged money laundering charges in the Delhi excise policy case. Sanjay Singh on Wednesday said that CM Kejriwal will not resign. Kejriwal has sent several messages from ED custody and then from Tihar jail since his arrest on March 21. Notably, Kejriwal's wife, Sunita, who stayed away from politics while her husband

was at the helm, has come out with three impassioned video statements in the recent past. In the last video message on March 29, Sunita Kejriwal announced the 'Kejriwal ko Aashirwad' campaign, urging people to support her husband. "Damn!!! Guys did you see that portrait of Kejriwal behind Sunita? Cringe Pro Max," wrote one X user. This is cinematic level of nonsense drama! Unbelievable. The portrait of kejriwal on wall IS FOR REAL," wrote another X user. Kejriwal has so far sent four messages, first from ED custody and then from Tihar jail since his arrest on March 21. In his first message on March 23, the chief minister had assured the women of Delhi that he would fulfil the promise of providing them a monthly honorarium of Rs 1,000. In all his messages, he has reiterated his resolve to serve the two crore people of Delhi, the statement said.

Protest on campus: JNU sexual harassment victim among 21 issued notice

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Jawaharlal Nehru University administration has issued a proctorial enquiry notice to 21 students, including the victim of an alleged sexual harassment incident, who have been sitting on an indefinite strike here at the main gate of the campus against alleged inaction by the varsity administration in the matter. The students have been staging a protest against the alleged incident since April 1. The incident allegedly took place on the night of March 30. The chief proctor's office asked the protesting students to appear before it to explain their position. The alleged victim could not be contacted for an immediate reaction. The varsity's chief security officer on April 2 submitted a report to the proctor's office saying that the students had allegedly obstructed the north gate of the campus, where the protest is taking place. The chief proctor's office has also issued proctorial inquiry notice to JNUSU officer bearers, including the students' union president Dhananjay. "A complaint dated April 2, 2024 from the chief security officer has been received by the Chief Proctor Office. In the complaint, it has been alleged that you obstructed the north gate (entrance) of the university from April 1, 2024 (5.24pm) causing difficulty for the students, residents, staff, senior citizens, differently abled persons, school children, patients, and so on," the notice sent to students read

asking them to join the proctorial inquiry at 3 pm on Thursday. According to the complaint of the chief security officer, the varsity officials tried to hold talks with JNUSU president Dhananjay several times asking him to convince students to clear the gate, after which the varsity would issue a letter to declare the two former students accused in the case "out-of-bound" from the campus. However, the students demanded that the varsity should first release the order and then they will end the protest, the officer added. Condemning the proctorial inquiry notice to the alleged victim and the students standing in solidarity with her, Left Students' Federation termed it an attempt to "intimidate" the victim. "Instead of ensuring time-bound redressal of sexual harassment cases and taking actions to ensure a gender-just campus, the JNU administration is trying to target and intimidate survivors of sexual harassment and other representatives and activists demanding a gender-just campus," the DSF said in a statement. A female student of JNU was allegedly sexually harassed near the JNU Ring Road late night on March 30 by fellow students travelling in a car. The four students accused by the complainant include two women, who are ex-students of the varsity. The complainant has been sitting on an indefinite strike at the main entrance of the campus since April 1 against alleged inaction by the varsity administration over her complaint.

Court directs ED to supply chargesheet copy to accused

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A city court on Thursday directed the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to supply a copy of the chargesheet to the accused in a money laundering case related to alleged irregularities in awarding tenders of the Delhi Jal Board. During the proceedings, two accused - Jagdish Arora, former DJB chief engineer, and Anil Aggarwal, a contractor - who are currently under judicial custody - were produced before the court by the jail authorities, in pursuance to court orders passed on Wednesday. In pursuance to the summons issued by the court while taking cognisance of the charge sheet on Wednesday, another accused, Tejinder Singh, also appeared before the court, while the fourth accused, D K Mittal, former NBCC general manager, moved an application seeking exemption from personal appearance for the day. The court has posted the matter for hearing on April 20 for scrutiny of documents. The about 8,000-page-long prosecution complaint, which included 140 operational pages apart from annexures, was filed by the federal agency before the court on March 28. Besides the accused people, the central probe agency also named NKG Infrastructure Limited as an accused in the charge sheet. The ED has alleged that bribe money generated from corruption in a contract issued by the DJB was "passed on" as election funds to the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi. The agency had also summoned Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for questioning in



the case, but he did not depose before it. Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on March 21 in another money-laundering case linked to alleged irregularities in the Excise policy for the national capital. He is currently in judicial custody in the case. The agency had raided the premises of Kejriwal's personal assistant Bibhav Kumar, AAP's Rajya Sabha MP and treasurer N D Gupta, former DJB member Shalabh Kumar, chartered accountant Pankaj Mangal and some others as part of the probe in February. An FIR lodged by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which accuses Arora of awarding a DJB contract to NKG Infrastructure Limited for a total cost of Rs 38 crore even though the company "did not meet" the technical eligibility criteria, is the basis of the ED case. The ED arrested Arora and Aggarwal in the case on January 31. NKG Infrastructure Limited bagged the contract by submitting "forged" documents and Arora "was aware of the fact that the company does not meet the technical eligibility", the agency has claimed. An ED statement has alleged that Arora "received" a bribe in cash and in bank accounts

after awarding the contract to NKG Infrastructure Limited and "passed on" the money to various people managing the DJB affairs, including "persons connected with the AAP". "Bribe amounts were also passed on as election funds to the AAP," the federal agency has alleged. This is the second case in which the ED has charged the AAP with taking kickbacks. It has alleged that bribe money of Rs 45 crore, out of the total of Rs 100 crore, from the scrapped Excise policy of 2021-22 was used by the AAP for campaigning in the Goa Assembly polls. The agency has said the DJB contract was awarded at "highly inflated rates" so that the bribes could be collected from the contractors. "As against the contract value of Rs 38 crore, only about Rs 17 crore were spent towards the contract and the remaining amount was siphoned off in the guise of various fake expenses. Such fake expenses were booked for bribes and election funds," the ED has alleged. Delhi minister Atishi had denied the charges at a press briefing and claimed that the case was another attempt to tarnish the image of the AAP and its leaders.

INBRIEF

IPU ACCEPTING CUET SCORES FOR 20 UG PROGRAMMES
New Delhi : IP University will accept CUET scores also for the admission to 20 odd UG programmes, however, CUET scores will be second preference after the University conducted common entrance tests (CETs) or national level tests for these programmes. As the last date of submission of online form for CUET UG 2024 is April 5, the University has advised the students aspiring to take admission in 20 UG programmes through CUET score to apply on Samarth portal by 5th April 2024 and also register online on the University online apply portal by 10th April 2024 positively.

DTU CONFERENCE DRAWS PARTICIPANTS
New Delhi: Delhi Technological University recently hosted the "Industrial Multi-Disciplinary Socio-Technical Innovation Conference," drawing a diverse array of participants from academia, industry, and society. Led by distinguished figures such as Atul Dinkar Rane and Prof. Prateek Sharma, the conference showcased innovative projects aimed at addressing societal needs through technical solutions.

DIBBER LAUNCHES FIRST PRE SCHOOL IN GK
New Delhi: Dibber, Northern Europe's leading education group, has launched its first preschool, marking its seventh center in India within a year. The event took place in Greater Kailash last week and was graced by the presence of May-Elin Stener, Ambassador of Norway to India, along with Marvin Dsouza, CEO Dibber Schools, India, and Mr. Pal Odegaard, Chief Growth Officer, Dibber Global. Norway-based Dibber leads in Nordic early childhood education with 600+ preschools in 10 countries, serving 45,000+ children. Built on the esteemed Nordic curriculum, Dibber excels in literacy, math, creativity, and confidence-building. Dibber, known for its exceptional Nordic pedagogy, is renowned for its focus on the holistic development of children aged one to six years.

GUPTA, ATISHI MEET CEO TO FILE COMPLAINT
New Delhi : AAP National Secretary Pankaj Gupta along with senior AAP leader and cabinet minister Atishi, to file the Chief Electoral Officer of Delhi along with the party's legal team to a complaint against objectionable posters and hoardings circulated across Delhi by the BJP. Atishi, stated while addressing media queries, "The BJP has put up several obnoxious posters across Delhi, some of which even feature photos of Arvind Kejriwal. Our legal team filed a complaint against these objectionable hoardings six days ago. Today, we met the CEO (Chief Electoral Officer) of Delhi."

Court dismisses PIL seeking removal of Kejriwal as CM

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Thursday refused to entertain a PIL seeking the removal of Arvind Kejriwal as chief minister following his arrest in the excise policy-linked money laundering case, saying it was his "personal call". A bench of Acting Chief Justice Manmohan and Justice Manmeet P S Arora said it recently dismissed a similar PIL seeking Kejriwal's removal from the chief minister's post and thus, it cannot take a different view. "At times, personal interest has to be subordinate to national interest but that is his personal call. If he does not want to do that it is up to him. We are a court of law and have to go by the law. Your remedy does not lie here, it lies elsewhere. You go before the competent forum," the bench said. "After some arguments, learned counsel for the petitioner states that in view of the observations made by this Court while disposing of the earlier writ petition being W.P.(C) No.4578/2024 Surjit Singh Yadav vs. Union of India and Ors., he has instructions to withdraw the present writ petition and file a representation with the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. Accordingly, the present writ petition along with



the applications is disposed of in accordance with the statement made by Mr. Barun Kumar Sinha, learned counsel for the petitioner. This Court clarifies that it has not commented on the merits of the proposed representation to be filed by the petitioner," the court while dismissing the petition. During the hearing, the petitioner's counsel said a constitutional deadlock has been created following Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on the night of March 21. The court, however, made it clear that it cannot decide the matter and it is up to the LG or the President of India to take a call on the

issue. "How can we declare that the government is not functioning? The LG is fully competent to decide it. He (LG) does not need our guidance. We are no one to advise him. He will do whatever he has to in accordance with law," the bench said. The bench said it has recently dismissed a similar PIL seeking removal of Kejriwal from the post of chief minister and thus, it cannot take a different view. As the court refused to interfere in the issue, petitioner Vishnu Gupta's lawyer said he has instructions to withdraw the petition and that he will approach the Lieutenant Governor with his plea.

Cops rescue woman, dog from burning apartment in Kotla Mubarak Pur

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police rescued a 70-year-old woman living on oxygen support and an unconscious dog after a fire broke out in a flat in a south Delhi multi-storey in the Kotla Mubarak Pur area due to a spark in the air conditioner on Wednesday. According to the police on Thursday, at around 07:50 pm in the evening a PCR Call about a fire in a house on the first floor in Triloki Colony was received at Kotla Mubarak Pur police station. A team rushed to the spot immediately and made way for the fire tenders and ambulance. The police found a woman trapped inside who suffers from lung disease, diabetes, and relies on an oxygen cylinder for survival. "While the fire was being controlled, the police staff found a woman trapped inside, struggling to breathe due to the fumes. Further it was revealed that she suffers from lung disease, diabetes, and relies on an oxygen cylinder for survival. Additionally, she is unable to move from her bed due to a fractured hip," said Deputy Commissioner of Police (south) Ankit Chauhan.



The police shifted the septuagenarian to a safe place. "The woman was trapped inside a room, she was struggling to breathe due to the fumes. While the fire was being doused, a team of police along with the son of the woman entered the room where she was trapped and safely shifted her from the engulfed room to another room," he said. Meanwhile, a dog was also found lying unconscious at the spot who was rescued by giving CPR with the help of the public. Subsequently, the dog was shifted to a Veterinarian Hospital in Defence colony area. With timely treatment, the dog's life was saved as well. According to the police, the fire was completely extinguished which was probably caused by sparking in the air conditioner in the house.

34 candidates in fray for LS polls in Gautam Budh Nagar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NOIDA

As many as 34 candidates, including 25 Independents, have thrown themselves into the fray for the Lok Sabha polls in Gautam Buddha Nagar, officials said on Thursday, as curtains drew on the nomination process for the second phase of general elections on April 26. The number of nominations filed this time has gone up from 2019, when a total of 21 candidates had applied but ultimately 13 were able to contest as eight others got rejected. Almost half of the nominations (16) were made on Thursday - the last day - at the Collectorate in Surajpur, the local election office said. "The date for scrutiny of nominations has been fixed for Friday (April 5) and the last date for withdrawal of nominations has been fixed for Monday (April 8). The second phase of voting will be completed on April 26 and counting of votes will be done on June 4. The election process will be completed by June 6," District Election Officer Manish Kumar Verma said. Of the total 34 nominations received, 25 are fighting as Independent candidates while the rest are backed by political parties.

Ignore spelling errors in voter identity card, poll officers told

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Seeking to ensure that no genuine elector is deprived of the right to vote, the Election Commission (EC) has told state poll officers to ignore clerical or spelling errors provided the voter's identity can be established through the voter I-card.

It has also said a voter I-card issued by the electoral registration officer of another assembly constituency will be accepted for identification provided the elector's name is in the electoral rolls of the polling station where he or she has turned up. In case of a mismatch of photograph, the elector will have



to produce one of the alternative photo documents listed out by the EC. In an order issued last month, the EC said the electors who are not able to produce their voter I-card will have to furnish one of the alternative photo identity documents for

establishing their identity. These include the Aadhaar card, MNREGA job card, passbooks with photograph issued by a bank or post office, health insurance smart card issued by the Labour Ministry, driving license, PAN card, and the smart card issued by the Registrar General of India under National Population Register (NPR).

The Indian passport, pension document with photograph, service I-cards with photo-

graph issued to employees by central or state governments or PSUs, official identity cards issued to MPs, MLAs and MLCs, and Unique Disability I-card issued by the ministry of Social Justice are also accepted.

Overseas Indians who are registered in the electoral roll based on the particulars in their Indian passport, will be identified on the basis of their original passport only "and no other identity document" at the polling station. Lok Sabha elections will be held in seven phases beginning April 19. Simultaneously, assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh are also being held.

CPI(M) releases party manifesto

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The CPI(M) on Thursday here released its manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections, promising to scrap all "draconian" laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The CPI(M) appealed to voters to defeat the BJP, strengthen the Left, and ensure the formation of an alternative secular government at the Centre. In its manifesto, the party pledged to fight for "an uncompromising adherence to the principle that religion is separated from politics".

"The CPI(M) stands for the scrapping of all draconian laws like UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act) and PMLA," the manifesto stated. The party said it will "fight for a law against hate speech and crimes, is committed to scrap-



Ranjana Dimri

ping" the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) promised to tax the super rich and introduce a law on general wealth tax and

inheritance tax. The party said the budgetary allocation for job guarantee scheme MGNREGA must be doubled and a new law guaranteeing urban employment

must be legislated. The Lok Sabha elections will be held in seven phases between April 19 and June 1. The results will be declared on June 4.

Army plans transformative reforms to boost combat capabilities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Given the fast changing nature of warfare and induction of cutting-edge technology, top Army commanders have decided to explore the feasibility of creating a tailor-made organisation to function as "adversarial force" to carry out realistic war gaming and training. It is part of overall efforts to enhance the force's combat prowess to deal with future security challenges.

The Army top brass, at the recently concluded Commander's Conference here, also decided to revise the force's human resource management policy to make it more innovative towards meeting the requirements of a technology-enabled future-

ready Indian Army, it said here on Thursday. The meet ended on April 2.

The top Army brass also resolved to undertake organisational and procedural transformation in the 1.2 million force to ensure induction and absorption of niche technology towards futuristic capability development with a focus on 'Atmanirbharta' (self-reliance).

Towards this, the innovation potential of Army Design Bureau will be upscaled besides separate cells of the bureau are being established at command headquarters.

"To further bolster the initiative, the option of creating a separate fund head will be explored. In addition, test bed brigades/formations will be nominated to ensure greater efficiency and continuity in

operations and finalisation of trial reports," the Army said. "Moreover, to ensure lifetime support, future procurements will include aspects catering for holistic sustenance requirements during contract finalisation stage," it said.

In another significant decision, the top Army brass decided that the force's human resource management policies will be revised and attuned to facilitate absorption of niche technology with matching training infrastructure. "The revised policy will be more innovative towards meeting the requirements of a tech-enabled 'future-ready Indian Army'," the Army said in a statement.

"To ensure realistic wargame and training, feasibility of creating a tailor-made organisation to function as



Adversarial Force will be explored," it said. The commanders also decided to explore more opportunities to collaborate with other ministries to optimally utilise resources and synergise efforts for enhanced capability building and infrastructure develop-

ment in border areas. The Army Commanders' conference concluded in Delhi on Tuesday.

The biannual event, held in a hybrid format, commenced with a virtual session chaired by Army Chief General Manoj Pande on March 28 and it was followed by in-person discussions on April 1 and 2. The senior leadership of the Army brainstormed a wide array of security-related aspects, including ongoing transformation initiatives, leveraging technology and innovation for capability development, enhancing operational preparedness, addressing emerging security and Human Resources-related issues. In his address at the conference on Tuesday, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reaffirmed the nation's trust in the Indian Army, acknowledging its indispensable role in national security. He applauded the stellar role of the Army in guarding the borders, fighting terrorism and providing aid to the civil administration during crises. Rajnath exhorted the Army

leadership to constantly review doctrinal, structural, and organisational reforms to meet future challenges in view of the evolving security dynamics. He emphasised the importance of developing a trained and motivated workforce that can handle the challenges of contemporary combat while being adept at futuristic evolution in warfighting.

The defence minister called on the leadership to invest in human capital by adhering to the traditions and principles of mutual respect, loyalty, and discipline. The conference was also addressed by Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan, Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar and Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari. During the two-day delibera-

tions in Delhi, the senior Army leadership delved deep into current and emerging security landscapes, contemporary subjects affecting the Indian Army and HR aspects affecting serving personnel, their families and the veteran community, the Army said in a statement.

"The necessity to align the training with technological advancements to harness the innovation potential of the Indian defence industry was also emphasised," it said. "The senior leadership reviewed the progress made on the ongoing transformative initiatives and future thrust areas were identified. The Commanders expressed their satisfaction with the steady pace of achieving 'Atmanirbharta' in line with the national resolve," it added.

Army Medical Corps 260th Raising Day celebrated

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Army Medical Corps (AMC) celebrated its 260th Raising Day here on Wednesday, Army said here on Thursday. Raised in the year 1764, the Corps has rendered selfless service to the nation over centuries of progress, development, dedication and sacrifice, both in combat and in peace, living up to the Corps motto of 'Sarve Santu Niramaya' meaning 'let all be free from disease'.

Army chief General Manoj Pande and IAF chief V R Chaudhari attended an event in New Delhi that was organized to mark the Raising Day, and to honour the achievements and celebrate the Esprit-de-Corps of AMC.

A video commemorating distinguished achievement of the Armed Forces Medical Services was also screened during the event which was attended by more than 700 veterans of



AFMS as well as by civil and service dignitaries.

The AMC Raising Day celebrates the contributions of thousands of Officers, JCOs and other ranks of the Army Medical Corps who have been successful in impacting the lives of the Armed Forces personnel, families and veterans.

As part of UN Peace Keeping Missions and HADR activities on foreign soil, the Corps has

excelled in every sphere of medical care.

In its endeavour to enhance optimal Combat Medical Care and superlative state-of-the-art peace time medical care, the AMC in its 260th year has set a benchmark in professionalism, courage and compassion beyond the call of duty while relentlessly marching towards the ultimate goal of 'Swastha Bharat, Viksit Bharat'.

New generation ballistic missile Agni Prime successfully test fired

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In an effort to further enhance self-reliance in highly sophisticated missile technology and strategic deterrence capability, Strategic Forces Command (SFC), along with Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), conducted the successful night flight-test of New Generation Ballistic Missile Agni-Prime on Wednesday, defence ministry said here on Thursday. Giving details, officials said the test was conducted from Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Island off the coast of Odisha at around 7.00 pm. The test met all the trial objectives validating its reliable performance, as confirmed from the data captured by a number of range sensors deployed at different locations, including two downrange ships placed at the terminal point. The missile can a hit a target at a



distance of 1,000 km to 2,000 km.

The launch was witnessed by Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan, Chief of Strategic Forces Command and senior officials from DRDO and the Indian Army. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has congratulated DRDO, SFC and the Armed Forces for the successful test. He stated that the successful development and induction of the missile will be an excellent

force multiplier for the Armed Forces.

Last month, India successfully carried out the first flight test of indigenously developed Agni-5 missile with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) under its 'Mission Divyastra'. By carrying out the test, India joined a select group of nations having such a capability. The MIRV feature ensures that a single missile can deploy multiple war heads at different locations.

IAF Apache helicopter makes emergency landing in Ladakh, both pilots safe

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An Indian Air Force (IAF) Apache attack helicopter made an emergency landing in Ladakh during an operational training sortie on Wednesday, IAF said on Thursday. Both the pilots are safe and successfully recovered to the nearest base, it said.

The IAF said the incident occurred due to the challenges posed by the undulating terrain and high altitude in the Ladakh area of responsibility (AOR). As a result, the helicopter sustained damage. IAF has initiated a Court of Inquiry to investigate and determine the exact cause of the emergency landing. "An IAF Apache helicopter carried out a precautionary landing during an operational training sortie in Ladakh on

April 3. During the process of this landing, it sustained damage due to undulating terrain and high altitude," the IAF said in a brief statement. "Both the pilots on board are safe and have been recovered to the nearest airbase. A Court of Inquiry has been ordered to ascertain the cause," the IAF said.

Under a deal signed with the United States in September 2015 worth Rs 13,952 crore, the IAF inducted 22 of these advanced helicopters. Additionally, the Indian Army is in the process of receiving six Apache helicopters under a separate contract inked in February 2020, valued at Rs 5,691 crore.

Produced by the American aerospace company Boeing, the Apache is one of the cutting-edge multi-role combat helicopters and serves as a key asset for the US Army.

NIA gold smuggling case accused repatriated from Saudi Arabia: CBI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Accused in the National Investigation Agency (NIA)'s gold smuggling case, facing an Interpol Red Notice, was repatriated from Saudi Arabia in an operation coordinated by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), officials said on Thursday. The Global Operations Centre of the CBI has coordinated via Interpol channels with the National Central Bureau-Riyadh for the return of Shokat Ali to Mumbai from Saudi Arabia on Wednesday night, the CBI spokesperson said. Ali was wanted by the NIA in a gold smuggling case registered in 2020 related to the seizure of smuggled gold bars at Jaipur International Airport, Rajasthan.



accused in illegal smuggling of gold bars from Saudi Arabia into India," the official said. He was booked under stringent provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) pertaining to offences of unlawful activities and criminal conspiracy and was earlier geo-located in Saudi Arabia with close follow-up through Interpol, he said.

The CBI got a Red Notice issued against him from the Interpol General Secretariat on September 13, 2021. The Red Notice was circulated to all Interpol member countries to locate and arrest the accused, the spokesperson said in a statement.

Sonia, Vaishnav among 14 take oath as RS members

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Railway minister Ashwini Vaishnav were among the 14 who took oath as members of the Rajya Sabha on Thursday. Vice-President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar administered the oath to them in the new Parliament house building. While Sonia took oath as a member of the Upper House from Rajasthan, Vaishnav was sworn in as a member of the same house from Odisha. Sonia Gandhi has become a Rajya Sabha member for the first time. She took oath in the presence of Leader of the House Piyush Goyal and Congress president and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge. Her daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra was also present during her oath-taking.

Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh and secretary general P C Mody were also present.

Sonia Gandhi will be the second member of the Gandhi family to enter the Rajya Sabha after former prime minister and her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, who had a two-and-a-half-year tenure (from August 1964 to February 1967) as a member of the Upper House. Congress leaders Ajay Maken and Syed Naseer Hussain from Karnataka, BJP leader R P N Singh from Uttar Pradesh, and BJP member Samik Bhattacharya from West Bengal were among the 14 who took the Rajya Sabha oath. Sanjay Kumar Jha of JD(U) also took oath as a member from Bihar, Subhashish Khuntia and Debashish Samantary, both of BJD took oath as members from Odisha, while Madan Rathore of BJP took oath as RS member representing Rajasthan.

CAR T cell therapy for blood cancer launched

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Country's first cost-affordable indigenous gene therapy, known as CAR-T cell therapy for treatment of blood cancer was launched by President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday, offering a new ray of hope for such patients whose number is on increase across the country due to various reasons.

"The home-made therapy is a major breakthrough in our battle against cancer. As this line of treatment is accessible and affordable, it provides a new hope for the whole of humankind, Murmu said, expressing confidence that the therapy named as 'NexCAR19 r' will be successful in giving new lives to countless patients. She further said that there used to be many life-threatening ailments that have been wiped out and forgotten now. Cancer, however, remains one of those complications that remind us of our limits. It has claimed a large number of lives around the world. In India, 14.6 lakh people succumbed to it in 2022, and the



number is likely to rise to 15.7 lakh by 2025. "We can only imagine the pain and sufferings of so many patients and their families," said the President. Blood cancers constitute 8.2% of all cancers, and in India, its incidence is 5.5 cases per 1 lakh population per year. About 80,000 new blood cancer cases are detected per year, and one new blood cancer is reported every 7 seconds in India, and one person is dying from blood cancer every 20 seconds. It is hoped that this cutting-edge treatment developed by a collaboration between the

Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay and Tata Memorial Centre, Mumbai will come as a boon to lakhs of such patients. Director Sudeep Gupta of the Tata Memorial Centre highlighted the substantial cost reduction achieved with this therapy, making it accessible to a larger population. "While the therapy typically costs around Rs 4 crore abroad, it is now available in India for approximately Rs 30 lakh. This affordability significantly expands access to life-saving treatment for cancer patients

across the country." IIT Bombay director Prof Subhasis Chaudhuri emphasized the significance of this achievement by comparing it to India's entry into elite space exploration with Chandrayaan-3. "The low-cost CAR T-cell therapy not only signifies India's prowess in medical innovation but also firmly establishes the nation on the global stage of cell and gene therapy," he said. Gupta stressed the practical impact of the treatment, estimating that it could benefit around 20,000 Indians annually. The rollout represents a monumental step forward in cancer care and genetic engineering, promising to save numerous lives and alleviate the suffering of countless individuals and families affected by cancer. Dr Rahul Bhargava, a well-known Haematologist and BMT Oncologist from Fortis Noida and Gurugram in Haryana termed it a pride moment for India and Indians and emphasised that it's yet another weapon in our arsenals to fight against cancer.



Shah, Rajnath, Nadda to campaign in Arunachal

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and BJP president JP Nadda will visit Arunachal Pradesh from April 8 onwards to campaign for party candidates. The northeastern state will go to simultaneous polls for two Lok Sabha and 50 assembly constituencies, in the first phase on April 19. The ruling BJP has already won ten seats unopposed in the 60-member assembly. Shah will arrive at Pasighat in East Siang district on April 8 for a day-long visit and will address an election rally in the centurion town, senior vice-president of the party's state unit Tarh Tarak said. Singh will arrive in Namsai district on April 9 to address another election rally, Tarak said. Nadda will arrive in the state capital on April 10 and will release the party's manifesto for the polls and later address a rally at Doimukh near here. The ruling BJP has fielded 50 candidates for the remaining



assembly seats, while the opposition Congress has named 19 nominees followed by National People's Party (NPP) in 20 seats, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in 14, regional outfit People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) in 11 seats, Arunachal Democratic Party in four, Lok Jana Shakti Party

(LJSP) in one seat, respectively. The BJP has nominated Earth Sciences Minister Kiren Rijiju as its candidate for the Arunachal West Parliamentary constituency and sitting MP Tapir Gao from the Eastern parliamentary seat. The Congress has fielded PCC

president Nabam Tuki and party's state unit vice-president Bosiram Siram for the West and East Lok Sabha seats. Counting of votes for the assembly elections will be held on June 2 while the counting for parliamentary elections would be held on June 4.



Rahul declares assets worth ₹20 crore

PTI ■ WAYANAD

Rahul Gandhi, who is seeking a successive term from the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat, has declared assets of over Rs 20 crore in his nomination papers. Gandhi filed the papers before the returning officer on Wednesday. He has declared movable assets to the tune of Rs 9,24,59,264 and showed the purchasing price of his self-acquired immovable assets as being worth Rs 7,93,03,977 in the affidavit. He has also declared that the current market value of the self-acquired immovable assets is Rs 9,04,89,000 and the value of the inherited assets is Rs 2,10,13,598. Gandhi has stated that he has a liability of Rs 49,79,184. He has declared Rs 55,000 as cash in hand. The incumbent Wayanad MP has declared that there are 18 cases registered against him in various states across the country. He claimed that the "politically motivated cases" were filed by the BJP/RSS and in most of the matters, "even charges

have not been framed". The Congress leader has Rs 26.25 lakh as deposits in various banks. He also has investments worth nearly Rs eight crore in bonds, debentures and shares in various companies in mutual funds. The assets also include 333.3 grams of gold. Gandhi continues to own a share in the inherited farm in Sultanpur Village in Delhi. The affidavit also shows that Gandhi owns two office spaces in Gurugram. Gandhi has declared that his source of income was MP's salary, Royalty income, rental income, interest from bonds, dividends and capital gain from mutual funds. He has declared total income for 2022-23 as Rs 1,02,78,680. The Congress leader has stated his education qualification as M.Phil (Development Studies) from Trinity college, University of Cambridge, completed in 1995. The affidavit shows that he doesn't own a car. In the last election, he had declared total assets worth Rs 15,88,77,083 whereas in 2014, it was Rs 9.4 crore.

Independent MP Ambareesh to join BJP today

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Mandy's independent MP Sumalatha Ambareesh has announced she would join the BJP on Friday. The actor-turned-politician had won the 2019 general elections with the support of the BJP, defeating former Prime Minister and JD(S) patriarch H D Deve Gowda's grandson and H D Kumaraswamy's son Nikhil Kumaraswamy. Sumalatha said on Wednesday she would not contest the coming Lok Sabha elections and would join the BJP. In a post on 'X' on Thursday, she said she had declared that she would support the BJP for

the development of Mandya and also to see Narendra Modi becoming Prime Minister again. "Accordingly, I am officially joining the Bharatiya Janata Party in the presence of BJP leaders on Friday April 5, 2024 at 11.30 am at the Bharatiya Janata Party office in Bengaluru," she said. JD(S) joined the NDA in September last year. As part of the seat-sharing arrangement in Karnataka, the BJP would contest in 25 constituencies and the JD(S) the remaining three, including Mandya, from where former Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy has entered the fray.

Arif asks for Bengal Minister removal for violating poll code

PTI ■ KOLKATA

West Bengal Governor C V Ananda Bose on Thursday said Education Minister Bratya Basu has "deliberately" violated the election Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by holding a meeting with politicians at the University of Gour Banga recently, and asked the state government to remove him from the cabinet, a Raj Bhavan official said. Bose, the chancellor of all state-run universities, also said Basu's act of holding the meeting on the institute's premises has brought "discredit to the university system". "In light of the meeting held in Gour Banga University under the leadership and presence of Basu with other ministers, MPs, MLAs, and political leaders on March 30, the chancellor has directed the state government to take strict action against him for deliberately violating the MCC,

including his removal from the cabinet," the official told TDP has no representation in RS after lone member retires Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), Apr 4 (PTI) For the first time in its over four decades of existence, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) finds itself without any representation in the Rajya Sabha as its lone member, K Ravindra Kumar retired on Wednesday. The vacuum may continue until 2026, when three of the incumbent members in the upper house retire and new members are elected from the state. YSR Congress party nominees YV Subba Reddy, Golla Babu Rao and Meda Raghunath Reddy were elected to the upper

2019 Assembly polls, which shifted the power balance towards the YSRC in the state and the NDA at the Centre. "I retired yesterday. The term of the new members will start today. This is the first time that the TDP does not have representation in the Rajya Sabha. I was the lone representative during the past four years. Democracy is a numbers game," Ravindra Kumar told PTI. Founded by the charismatic leader Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (NTR) in 1982, the party quickly rose to prominence, capturing the imagination of the Telugu-speaking populace and over the years, the party has been a significant player in state and central politics.

house unopposed in February this year, making the ruling party the fourth largest party with 11 members. Vice-President and Rajya Sabha chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar administered the oath to the new members on Thursday in the national capital. Four of the TDP members-YS Chowdhury, CM Ramesh, TG Venkatesh, and G Mohan Rao joined the BJP soon after the

65 nominations filed in five seats for second phase of polls in Assam

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

Altogether 65 candidates have filed their nominations for five Lok Sabha seats in Assam that are going to polls in the second phase on April 26, an election official said on Thursday. As many as 38 candidates filed their nominations on the last day on Thursday. Polling will be held in Karimganj, Silchar, Nagaon, Diphu and Darrang-Udalguri seats in the second phase. BJP's Lok Sabha candidates

Suresh Bora (Nagaon) and Dilip Saikia (Darrang-Udalguri) filed their nomination papers in the presence of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. In Nagaon, sitting Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi filed his nomination papers along with eight others on Thursday, taking the total number of candidates to 15 in the constituency. In Karimganj, 20 candidates, including Hafez Rashid Choudhury of the Congress, filed their nominations on the final day, taking the total number of nominees to 25

with sitting BJP MP Kripanath Mallah and AIUDF's Sahibul Alam Choudhury having filed their papers earlier. In Silchar, Rajib Das of Bahujan Maha Party and Independent candidate Ananta Mohan Roy submitted their papers during the day, taking the total number of nominees to eight, including Assam minister Parimal Suklabaidya of BJP, Surya Kanta Sarkar of Congress and Radheyshyam Biswa of Trinamool Congress.

of nominees to 11. Congress candidate Madhab Rajbongshi, Bodo Peoples' Front's Durga Das Boro, SUCI's Jitendra Chaliha, Republican Party of India's Abul Kasem, Gana Suraksha Party's Swarna Devi and Lalit Pegu of Voters Party International had filed their papers earlier. In Karimganj, 20 candidates, including Hafez Rashid Choudhury of the Congress, filed their nominations on the final day, taking the total number of nominees to 25



Ashok Chavan joining BJP has given party booster dose: Fadnavis

PTI ■ CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR



The induction of former chief minister Ashok Chavan has given a "booster dose" to the BJP in Nanded, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said on Thursday. Fadnavis was addressing a BJP rally in Nanded, some 270 kilometres from here, after party colleague and sitting MP Pratap Patil Chikhlikar filed his nomination papers. Chikhlikar had defeated Chavan, who was with the Congress at the time, by more than 40,000 votes in the 2019 polls. "Chikhlikar had got 43 percent votes when Chavan was contesting against him. Now, Chavan is with us and Chikhlikar's vote percentage will go above 50. Chavan joining BJP has given a booster dose to the BJP in Nanded," Fadnavis said. Fadnavis said Chavan, when he was in the Congress, supported the Nagpur-Mumbai Samruddhi Expressway plan while his party colleagues at the time as well as leaders of the NCP and Uddhav Thackeray had opposed it. "When the idea to connect Nanded with the Samruddhi Expressway came up, we decided to do it. We have an agenda to develop Marathwada and Vidarbha. Now, the development of Nanded and

all of Marathwada will gather pace," the deputy CM said. Chavan said he and Ajit Gopchade (in Rajya Sabha) and MPs from Nanded, Hingoli and Latur will work jointly to develop Marathwada. A chance has come after a long time that Nanded will have five MPs, Chavan claimed. "The opposition parties held rallies here and had only one agenda and that was Ashok Chavan. They should speak about development and other issues as well. We don't want to experiment by giving the country in the hands of others. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken the country on the path of development with speed," Chavan said. Hailing Chikhlikar, Maharashtra BJP chief Chandrashekhar Bawankule said people should vote for him as he worked for every segment of Nanded. "Chavan has accepted the leadership of PM Modi. He is senior to me and I will work under his leadership," Chikhlikar said on the occasion.

52 candidates file papers for three LS seats in Chhattisgarh

PTI ■ RAIPUR

As many as 52 candidates, including former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel, have filed nominations for the three Lok Sabha seats going to polls in the second phase of the general elections in Chhattisgarh, officials said on Thursday. During the day, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Santosh Pandey filed his nomination for the Rajnandgaon Lok Sabha seat. Elections to the 11 Lok Sabha seats in the state will be held on April 19, April 26 and May 7 and votes will be counted on June 4. Polling in Rajnandgaon, Mahasamund and Kanker (Scheduled Tribe reserved), all having Naxalite presence in some pockets, will be held in the second phase on April 26. The BJP had won these seats in 2019. The nominations for the second phase had to be filed by Thursday evening. A total of 52 candidates have filed 95 nominations for these three seats, a poll official here said. Some of the candidates have filed nominations in more than one seat, he said. Twenty-three candidates filed nominations from Rajnandgaon, 19 from Mahasamund and 10 from

Kanker, he said. The BJP candidate Pandey was accompanied by Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai when he filed his nomination at Rajnandgaon collectorate. Deputy Chief Ministers Vijay Sharma and Arun Sao, state BJP chief Kiran Deo and other leaders were also present. Sitting MP Pandey, who had polled 6.62 lakh votes last time, is seeking his second term from Rajnandgaon. Congress has fielded senior leader and former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel in this seat. Talking to reporters, Sai exuded confidence that the people of Rajnandgaon will re-elect Pandey, whom he described as an "energetic MP". "Pandey has always raised the voice of common people in Parliament. He never ignored the interests of people in his constituency. People of Rajnandgaon will again elect Pandey and he will do all-round development of Rajnandgaon under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the double engine government," he added.

LOST & FOUND

1, Jitender Kumar Juneja, S/o Smt. Bimla Rani Juneja R/o K-37, Kailash Colony, New Delhi, have lost the Original Allotment Cum Demand Notice Letter, DDA File No. FZ/60/2004/LSR/R, in Book Serial No.11640 in Block No.1, Vol.No.1650 at Pages 170 to 178 dt. 18/08/2005 of Our Property DDA Ltd. Land situated in Plot No.92, Pocket-2, Jasola, New Delhi. Anybody find out please contact 9958948111

NORTHERN RAILWAY NOTICE INVITING TENDER

30-ELECT-03-T-2024-25-E3 Electrical work in connection with renovation of 5th, 6th, 7th, & 5A floors of MSSR building, New Delhi. Rs. 54.79 lacs. Sr. Divl Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi. Rs. 109600.00. 30.04.2024, 12.00 Hrs. www.ireps.gov.in & Sr. Divl. Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi. 998/2024

NORTHERN RAILWAY NOTICE INVITING TENDER

30-ELECT-04-T-2024-25-E3 Electrical work regarding construction of Media cell Railway Board at 2nd floor of traffic accounts (TA) Buildings, S.E.Road New Delhi. Rs. 23.90 lacs. Sr. Divl Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi. Rs. 47800.00. 30.04.2024, 12.00 Hrs. www.ireps.gov.in & Sr. Divl. Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi. 999/2024

NORTHERN RAILWAY TENDER NOTICE (Through e-tendering)

Provision of reliable and uninterrupted power supply arrangements at Auto Huts/Porta huts in DSA-Noli Section of ADST/PS. Rs. 47,90,324.42/- only. Senior Divisional Signal & Telecom Engineer-C, Northern Railway, 3rd Floor, Annex-1, DRM office, New Delhi-110055. Tender uploading 04.04.2024 / closing date & time- 06.05.2024 up to 15.00 hrs. www.ireps.gov.in & Notice board at S&T branch, 3rd Floor, DRM office, State Entry Road, New Delhi-110055. No.: 558-Sig-16-M-TENDER-1399 Dated: 04.04.2024 1007/2024

BEFORE THE KARNATAKA STATE CONSUMER DISPUTES REDRESSAL COMMISSION BASAVA BHAVAN, HIGH COURTS, BANGALORE-560004

Under the Consumer Protection Act, 1986. First Appeal No. 1052/2018 (Against the order dated 27 Apr 2018 in Complaint Number CC/29/2018 of the District Forum Dakshina Kannada) Smt. Vasanthi Shetty vs. The Authorised Signatory. The Appellant has filed the above appeal against the orders passed by the District Consumer Forum, Dakshina Kannada in complaint No.29/2018 dated: 27/04/2018. You are hereby notified to appear before this Commission in person or through a pleader or person authorized to answer all the material facts relating to the Appeal on 31 May 2024 at 11.00 AM.

FORM NO. 14

[See Regulation 33(2)] By Regd. A/D, Dasti failing which by Publication. OFFICE OF THE RECOVERY OFFICER - III DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL CHANDIGARH (DRT 3) Ground Floor, SCO 33-34-35, Sector 17-A, Chandigarh-160 017 DEMAND NOTICE (PUBLICATION)

NOTICE UNDER SECTIONS 25 TO 28 OF THE RECOVERY OF DEBTS & BANKRUPTCY ACT, 1993 AND RULE 2 OF SECOND SCHEDULE TO THE INCOME TAX ACT, 1961

RC/805/2018 02-02-2024 ICICI BANK LIMITED Versus SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA To. (CD 1) SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA S/O. PITAMBER NATH BHARDWARJ, R/O. H.NO. 3036, TOP FLOOR, SECTOR 20-D, CHANDIGARH. This is to notify that as per the Recovery Certificate issued in pursuance of orders passed by the presiding Officer, DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL CHANDIGARH (DRT 3) in OA/1897/2017 an amount of Rs. 14,03,160.91 (Rupees Fourteen Lakhs Three Thousand One Hundred Sixty and Paise Ninety One Only) along with pendente lite and future interest @ 12.00% w.e.f. 25/06/2015 till realization and costs of Rs. 59,560 (Rupees Fifty Nine Thousand Six Hundred Fifty Only) has become due against you (Jointly and severally/Fully/Limited).

DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL-1, DELHI

4th Floor, Jeevan Tara Building, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001 T.A. No. 614/2022 PUNJAB NATIONAL BANK Vs. SHRI DEVENDER SINGH AND ORS. To. (1) Shri Devender Singh And Ors, 3 115 First Floor Rajendra Nagar Sahibabad, Sahibabad, Ghazabad UP Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh-201301 (2) Smt. Neetu Dharma, W/o Shri Devender Singh R/o 3/115, 1st Floor, Rajendra Nagar, Sahibabad, Ghazabad, UP (3) Ajay Tyagi S/o Shri C Tyagi, R/o 916, Shalimar Garden Extn-1, Sahibabad, Ghazabad, UP (4) Mis Shri Balaji Hi-tech Construction Pvt. Ltd. R/o At- D-3, Vivek Vihar Delhi-110095

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PAPER WITH PASSION

A Dignified Liberal

Dr Manmohan Singh ends 33-year parliamentary career with quiet dignity, just as he had worked

In a quiet but significant moment in Indian political history, two-term former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh has bid farewell to public life and the Rajya Sabha after 33 remarkable years in Parliament. His retirement from the Upper House culminates a distinguished career that has left an indelible mark on the nation's economic landscape and political discourse. Born on September 26, 1932, in Gah, Punjab (now in Pakistan), Manmohan Singh's journey from an academic economist to the highest echelons of politics is a testament to his intellect, integrity and dedication to public service. After completing his education at Panjab University and the University of Cambridge, where he earned his doctorate in economics, Dr Singh embarked on a prolific academic career, holding prestigious positions at institutions like the Delhi School of Economics. However, his foray into policymaking catapulted Dr Singh into the national spotlight. In 1971, he was appointed the Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India, where his expertise in economics and prudent policymaking earned him widespread acclaim. His tenure as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India from 1982 to 1985 consolidated his reputation. His role as the Finance Minister in the early 1990s, however, truly defined his legacy. When India was grappling with a severe economic crisis, Dr Singh spearheaded bold reforms that liberalised the economy, dismantled stifling regulations and opened the doors to foreign investment. The historic liberalisation measures paved the way for India's emergence as a global economic powerhouse.



In 2004, Dr Singh scripted another chapter in his illustrious career when he took over as the Prime Minister, leading the UPA Government. As the first Sikh to hold that office and the first non-Hindu to serve consecutive terms, his tenure was marked by a focus on inclusive growth, social welfare schemes and infrastructure development. Through his 10-year tenure, Dr Singh faced both praise and criticism: While supporters lauded his statesmanship, economic acumen and commitment to secularism, his detractors accused him of being a weak leader overshadowed by the Congress leadership. He was often ridiculed as 'Maun Mohan Singh'. But the gentleman that he is, Dr Singh never retorted, a virtue long lost in Indian politics. In contrast to the later leadership, Dr Singh regularly conducted press conferences and faced challenging questions. His unwavering dedication to public service continued even after demitting the PM's office in 2014. He continued to serve as a member of the Rajya Sabha, offering his insights and expertise on matters of national importance. As the soft-spoken Dr Singh bids adieu to the hallowed halls of Parliament, it marks the end of an era in Indian politics. While critics may question his political legacy, few can dispute the profound impact he has had on shaping India's economic trajectory and global standing. The lessons gleaned from Dr Singh's tenure will continue to resonate, guiding policymakers towards a more prosperous and equitable future.

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PICTALK



Tulips in bloom at Tulip Garden at the foothills of Zabarwan mountains, in Srinagar

PTI

A tribute to India's maritime legacy

It is imperative that India take proactive measures to safeguard its marine resources and promote responsible maritime practices

Every year on April 5th, India commemorates National Maritime Day, a day steeped in history and significance for the nation's maritime industry. It's a time to reflect on India's rich maritime heritage and the pivotal role that the sea plays in its economic, cultural and strategic landscape.

This day holds special significance as it marks the maiden voyage of the first Indian-owned merchant vessel from Bombay to London. Back in 1919, on April 5th, the SS Loyalty, under the ownership of Sindhya Steam Navigation Company, embarked on its historic journey, symbolising India's entry into the world of maritime commerce. The journey of the SS Loyalty wasn't just a physical voyage from one port to another; it represented India's aspirations for economic prowess and global connectivity. It laid the foundation for India's emergence as a key player in the maritime domain, shaping its trade routes, fostering international relations, and fueling economic growth. Alfred Mahan, the renowned



Woodrow Wilson's concept of the freedom of the seas, articulated during World War I, emphasised the idea that all nations have the right to access the sea for trade and navigation. This notion laid the groundwork for modern maritime laws and regulations, ensuring that countries like India could benefit from the open seas.

With sovereignty over a marine area spanning 8,118 kilometres, India exercises paramount authority over its maritime domain. The presence of 118 minor ports and 12 major ports facilitates the movement of 1400 million tonnes of cargo annually, vital for the nation's trade and economic growth. Additionally, the rich biodiversity of India's coastal waters, comprising approximately 665 species of fish, supports the livelihoods of 40

lakh fishery workers engaged in allied activities. Seventeen crore people reside in coastal areas. Additionally, there are twenty lakh cubic metres of oil and natural gases present in our maritime borders.

As we celebrate National Maritime Day, it's essential to recognise the contributions of seafarers, maritime professionals, and organisations dedicated to the advancement of India's maritime sector. From shipping companies to port authorities, naval forces to maritime academies, countless individuals and institutions work tirelessly to ensure the smooth functioning of India's maritime ecosystem. One prominent advocate of the blue economy is Gunter Pauli, whose "Blue Economy" concept proposes innovative solutions inspired by nature to address global challenges while promoting economic growth. Pauli's ideas advocate for a shift towards a circular economy model, where waste is minimized, and resources are utilised efficiently, creating value while reducing environmental impact. His vision

aligns with India's goals of sustainable development and offers valuable insights for shaping the future of its maritime sector. With growing concerns about climate change, marine pollution, and maritime security threats, it's imperative that India takes proactive measures to safeguard its marine resources and promote responsible maritime practices. In recent years, India has made significant strides in modernising its ports, enhancing maritime infrastructure, and expanding its maritime capabilities. Initiatives like Sagarmala and Bharatmala have been instrumental in boosting coastal and inland connectivity, facilitating trade, and driving economic development. By leveraging emerging technologies, fostering innovation, and strengthening international partnerships, India can further enhance its maritime competitiveness and establish itself as a global maritime leader.

(The writer is an associate professor, views are personal)



SANTOSH MATHEW

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(The writer is an associate professor, views are personal)

Katchatheevu: A case of half sovereignty

The 1974 cession of Katchatheevu Island to Sri Lanka by India has sparked renewed scrutiny into the country's historical attitudes towards sovereignty



PRAFULL GORADIA

So it has been revealed that Katchatheevu island off the coast of Tamil Nadu was given away by India to Sri Lanka in 1974. Much earlier in 1961, Jawaharlal Nehru had earlier opined, perhaps in Indira Gandhi's knowledge, that he attached "no importance at all" to this little island. "I would have no hesitation in giving up our claims to it" India's first Prime Minister had said.

It was with similar casualness that Nehru in the late 1950s on the floor of the Lok Sabha had stated: "It is true that China has built a road in Aksai Chin connecting Tibet with Sinkiang (now Xinjiang). True, Aksai Chin is part of Indian territory, but not a blade of grass grows there", obviously implying that the region was of no importance. It is with the same cavalier attitude that Nehru had obeyed Viceroy Mountbatten's advice to take the Kashmir issue to the United Nations Organisation. He did this merely because Sheikh Abdullah, called Sher-e-Kashmir (Lion of Kashmir), was a lion only in those parts of J&K where Kashmir-speaking people resided.

Abdullah's charisma did not extend to the Punjabi-speaking Muzaffarabad and Mirpur, and he did not want them to be a part of his future domain. We have PoK as a consequence. When China invaded Arunachal Pradesh in 1962 (then called North Frontier Agency), for most Indians, it was a national humiliation. But except for the then defence minister Krishna Menon—who was responsible for the 1962 disaster—no one showed even the basic courtesy of a resignation. This clearly showed that in the early years of our independence, loss of territory was taken rather casually. This is a symptom of a half, and not sovereign state. Certainly, we did not understand the responsibilities of sovereignty.

The US declaration of independence in 1776 was the first document to enunciate sovereignty as an essential element of the new state. French Constitution of 1791 stated: "Sovereignty is one, indivisible, unalienable and



imprescriptible; it belongs to the nation: no group can attribute sovereignty to itself nor can an individual arrogate it to himself." The conceit was first thought of by Jean Bodin of 16th century France to signal the progress from feudalism to nationalism.

Mamata Banerjee, when she was part of late PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA once threw a sheaf of papers at the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha to protest at the delimitation of constituencies in West Bengal. In many constituencies, she had discovered Bangladeshi nationals listed in Indian rolls. The same lady as chief minister of West Bengal today doesn't mind West Bengal becoming another Bangladesh. What is happening in West Bengal isn't accidental. It has been the policy of the Congress and the Left Front to encourage infiltration for expanding their vote-banks. Mamata has only copied their strategy.

The story in Jammu & Kashmir before the advent of Narendra Modi was the same. Years ago, Parliament had resolved that the whole of J&K is an integral and unalienable part of India. This includes PoK. Yet, Article 370 of the Constitution continued for an entire 70 years. The state had a separate constitution. A



WHEN CHINA INVADED ARUNACHAL PRADESH IN 1962, FOR MOST INDIANS, IT WAS A NATIONAL HUMILIATION. BUT EXCEPT FOR THE THEN DEFENCE MINISTER, KRISHNA MENON, WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE 1962 DISASTER, NO ONE SHOWED EVEN THE BASIC COURTESY OF A RESIGNATION

Kashmiri could freely buy property in any part of the country, but non-Kashmiri Indians couldn't do so in J&K.

Yet, pre-Modi regimes expected people to believe that we were a sovereign state. Meanwhile, those regimes felt no embarrassment in negotiating autonomy in Jammu & Kashmir with all and sundry, including separatists and jihadi terrorist-supporters, not minding Kashmiri separatists from hobnobbing with Pakistani diplomats or visiting dignitaries from Islamabad. It took the iron hand of a truly nationalist Government, with firm commitment to sovereignty, to end this toxic charade. The Congress has always been pro-Muslim. This is clear from the fact that waqfs and Muslim personal law still remain on the statute. Collectively, the waqf properties represent the biggest urban landlords in India.

The demand for TaI Mahal by the UP Sunni Wakf Board and that for Bibi ka Maqbara at Aurangabad by the Maharashtra Wakf Board is on the ground that these contain graves. A sovereign state should nationalise all their properties as they are deemed to belong to Allah, who is supreme and above any country. Similarly, Muslim person-

al laws still continue to exist in a country whose Constitution proclaims it to be a 'secular' country. There have also been vociferous demands from the Muslim community to set up Sharia courts known as Darul Qaza to adjudicate on matters concerning marriage, divorce, etc.

The apparent conclusion would be that India is a half-sovereign state. This concept was innovated by the German jurist on international law, J.J. Moser, who lived in the 18th century. India has some attributes of sovereignty like its belonging to the nation and not to any individual; it being also imprescriptible. But till Sharia, personal and waqf are allowed to remain as law, sovereignty will be shared and not absolute. The India before 2014 confirmed to this conclusion.

Sovereignty cannot be shared with anyone. Many Muslim countries have nationalised their waqfs. Fortunately, India after 2014 has had a Government which believes in absolute national sovereignty and has been acting in the manner befitting it.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CHINESE MACHINATIONS

Madam — Apropos news article "India sees red as China runs riot renaming Arunachal towns" published on April 03, this is my response. China has once again resorted to a renaming spree targeting Arunachal Pradesh. They seem to have made a hobby of it, having now renamed 30 places. The masterminds behind this operation hail from China's Civil Affairs Department, whose primary goal seems to be poking India in the ribs. The External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has rightly asserted that changing a name doesn't magically change ownership. China's persistent poking at Arunachal Pradesh stems from its displeasure over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inauguration of roads and tunnels in the region.

But China's antics are about as effective as a cat trying to catch a laser pointer. If they couldn't snatch "Zangnan" back in 1962, what makes them think they stand a chance now? It's like bringing a butter knife to a gunfight. However, it is in their DNA to claim territories left, right, and centre. From Vietnam to Myanmar, Nepal to Bhutan, they've got a dispute for every neighbour. They may have patched things up with Russia and Mongolia, but they still can't resist using territorial disputes as their favourite pastime. But, the fact remains the same Arunachal Pradesh is an integral and inalienable part of India.

N Sathasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

CARE FOR THE FELINES

Madam — Apropos news article "Rare Indian felines get international protection" published on March 27, this is my response. The Pallas' cats, also called manul, named by the Prussian zoologist Peter Pallas in 1776, adjust well to continental climate with little rainfall but wide-ranging temperatures, mainly in central Asia and Mongolia in grasslands and shrublands. These are threatened by poaching and habitat fragmentation. Poachers eye the cat's fur which is in great demand in the international market. These cats are rightly included in the Red List of Threatened Species of the

Corruption is on the rise



Apropos the editorial "Dead and Buried" published on April 2, this is my response. The Supreme Court of India has rightly pointed out that anonymous donations by the rich to the ruling party in electoral bonds could help them influence policymaking. By declaring the NDA Government's electoral bond scheme of 2018 as "unconstitutional" the Supreme Court has struck a blow against cronyism. While an aggregate amount of Rs 14.56 lakh crore NPAs has been

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the "Least Concern" category which denotes 'low risk'. Perhaps their widespread areas of distribution influenced their addition to the low-risk category.

However, the decline in the number of both these felines is worrying. Hearteningly, however, both have now been added to the United Nations list of Appendix 2 of the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) for better conservation. Appendix 2 entails species with unfavourable conservation status. Conservation and management of the two lovely cats will be rendered easier through international cooperation via information dissipation.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

BUILDING DIGITAL RESILIENCE

Madam — In today's digital era, the negative impact of social media on adolescents' mental health and the online safety of children have become pressing concerns. Recognising the urgency to mitigate the adverse effects proactive measures are being taken by the Government like holding social media platforms accountable for

written off during the last nine financial years, many poor families have to bear the brunt of a policy to keep a tight rein on spending for them. As a result, many MGNREGA workers are not getting their due wages in West Bengal. A few years ago, 11-year-old Santoshi Kumari died of starvation in Jharkhand as her family was denied ration for not being able to link their ration cards with Aadhar.

The policy of high tolerance for corruption for the rich and zero for the poor pushed India further down in corruption and inequality. India slid down eight places from 85 to 93 in the 2023 Corruption Perception Index published by Transparency International. First, corruption at higher levels must be stopped because corruption pollutes the creamy layer first rather than the poor. It is said that a fish rots from the head down.

Sujit De | Kolkata

their content and reducing the use of addictive features targeting youth while increasing child lock features. Simultaneously as the primary guardians of children parents and academia play crucial roles in shaping Minors' online behaviours. Encouraging youth to engage in offline pursuits like spending time with family, participating in sports or pursuing artistic interests serves as a positive distraction from excessive social media consumption. Incorporating digital literacy and online safety education into the school curriculum helps students develop the essential abilities to navigate the digital world safely. With the helping hands of parents, schools and the Government minors can develop resilience against the negative effects of social media while embracing its benefits within a supportive environment, that prioritises responsible online behaviour. They can enjoy the advantages of the digital realm while ensuring their safety.

Shalini Sharma | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

NO FOREIGN POLICY IN MANIFESTOS

No political party is telling people about its foreign policy in its election campaign



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

Most large national political parties are busy providing finishing touches to their election manifestos. These documents will hold stated promises, from political parties, if voted to power and most of them would swing between populist measures such as free electricity, water or promise a dream for a developed India in next twenty-five years or so. However, none of the manifestos from political parties, so far, are showing any promise of having dedicated chapters on India's foreign policy outlook, if their group has majority in June 2024.

The ruling BJP, which has been power for a decade now, is widely bene perceived to have steered India's foreign policy in direction, where India is seen taking influential positions on the geopolitical theatre. One of the most significant aspects became visible with the party appointing career diplomat Dr S Jaishankar as India's foreign affairs minister, in 2019, thereby bringing in a suitable candidate for the post. In hindsight, it may also be argued that with Mr Jaishankar, a veteran diplomat, having several senior level contacts across the aisle, in US and in China, the Government set the ball rolling for its visual ascendancy on geo political map, culminating in a grand finale of India's G20 presidency with a consensus joint statement.

Dr Jaishankar it seemed delivered on his brief, of managing the volatile tension prevailing between the western world (led by US and Europe) and China, Russia group, to deliver a joint statement during India's G20 presidency. Meanwhile, India continued to posture itself as the authentic voice of the global south, holding a conference just before, the G20 summit.



The global south, has broadly been dubbed by many analysts, as the new nomenclature for Non Aligned Movement (NAM), due to the commonalities. The NAM group of countries (including India) chose a middle path away from the prevailing tensions of the cold war era power blocks (US and erstwhile USSR) a situation, similar, the broad common agendas of global south countries, even though, the realities have changed drastically on ground. India, by assuming the lead position as voice of the global south, engages with every relevant global power (read US and China) for a fair and equitable say in common issues, including climate change, energy prices impacted by war and restructuring of multilateral bodies, to name a few.

Prime Minister Modi ensured that India could keep its domestic inflation under control by purchasing west sanctioned, Russian oil, while convincing/communicating policy makers and influencers in Washington DC, New York and several other European capitals about India's position on the war. India in two years moved from being on the verge of being sanctioned to being recognised for the balancing act it played in preventing a nuclear attack on Ukrainian territory by Russia. India meanwhile also managed to expand the bilateral strategic relationship with US moving beyond defence cooperation to a technology partnership, specially, for new and emerging frontiers such as artificial intelligence. With this background, it is hard to believe that the current ruling party at the centre, which has made foreign policy as one its showstoppers for an awed electorate, may exclude definitive statements in its election manifesto. Meanwhile the principal opposition party, except for making few remarks on the West Asia crisis and Ukraine, has steered clear of commenting on Mr Modi's foreign policy outlook. It is hardly likely that there will be significant mention regarding same, in either their individual manifesto or any combined alliance manifesto. At a time when the promise of becoming the world's third largest economy looks real and India gets more integrated with the global affairs, absence of clear stated foreign policy agenda by political parties, may be a yawning gap.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Dilemma of the unemployed youth

The issue of unemployed youth has become a focal point in political discourse. The interpretation of unemployment rates and its politicisation are exacerbating the situation



BALWANT SINGH MEHTA



Youth unemployment is a global concern, carrying significant economic, social and political implications for both developed and developing nations. It's a key focus of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) for 2030, adopted by countries across the world, including India. Recently, the issue gained significant attention in India following the release of the India Employment Report (IER) 2024 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Institute for Human Development (IHD), New Delhi on March 26, 2024. The report emphasised India's demographic advantage due to its large youth population, which is expected to remain for at least another decade.

However, it also highlighted a pressing challenge: the high and rising unemployment rate among youth, especially those with higher educational qualifications, and enter the labour force each year. This issue has grabbed headlines in both national and international media and has become a prominent topic in political discussions and debates. However, the misinterpretation of youth unemployment rates and politicisation of the issue by various commentators and political parties are exacerbating the situation. This article aims to provide a closer analysis and interpretation of this issue. A large proportion in total unemployed population consists of young people, but they make up only a small percentage of overall youth population: The youths made up 83 per cent of India's unemployed population, whereas out of around 361 million total youths and 664 million adults (30+ years) in India, only 5 per cent youth and negligible 0.6 per cent adults were unemployed in 2023.

The main point here is that while it may seem like there are a lot of young people in the labour force (both employed and unemployed) who don't have jobs, when you compare it to the total number of youth in the country, it's actually a small percentage. Therefore, when considering unemployment, it becomes clear that this is primarily a youth issue, who often enter in the labour market for the first time and faced greater challenge than the experienced adults.



THE SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH GRADUATE AND HIGHER EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS OVER THE PAST DECADES IS A GOOD THING

The surplus youth labour force has concealed a significant increase in job opportunities over the recent decade compared to the previous one: A good number of jobs were created for young people from 2012 to 2023 (the recent decade) than from 2000 to 2012 (the previous decade). However, this positive trend was overshadowed by a significant increase in the number of young people entering the labour force in the recent decade. This surge in the youth labour force resulted in a rise in their unemployment figures and rate. Specifically, nearly twelve times more jobs were created for young individuals in the recent decade (7.9 million) compared to the previous decade (0.7 million). However, the increase in the youth labour force was much higher in the recent decade (16.1 million), compared to the previous decade (1.6 million). Consequently, the number of unemployed young people increased more than eight times in recent decade (8.2 million) compared to the earlier decade (0.9 million), leading to an increase in the youth unemployment rate from 6 per cent in 2012 to 10 per cent in 2023.

The significant increase in the number of young people with graduate and higher educational qualifications over the past decades is a good thing. However, this has also led to a rise in their unemployment rate, despite there being more jobs generation. This could be because of skill mismatch or rise in their level of expectations and aspirations: To explain further, let's look at trends. In 2000, only 5 per cent of young people had graduate or higher qualifications. By 2023, this had increased to 20 per cent. That's a big jump! During the previous decade, 7.6 million of these highly qualified young people entered the job market. In the recent decade, that number jumped to 24.6 million. But here's the catch: only 6.5 million of

them found jobs in the first period, and 17.5 million found jobs in the second period. This increase in the number of jobs available for highly qualified young people should be a good thing, right?

However, the number of unemployed graduates also rose, from 1.2 million to 7.2 million. Also, the unemployment rate among them also increased from 19.9 per cent in 2012 to 28 per cent in 2023. So, even though more jobs are being created for highly qualified young people in recent years, their unemployment rate is still going up. This could be because there are too many highly qualified young people for the available lower number of jobs, their skills don't match what employers need, or there are jobs being created, they often don't meet their expectations and aspirations.

The ILO-IHD report also highlighted "Educated youth, whether male or female, want stable white-collar jobs. The economy is generating jobs but not enough secured well paid public sector or white-collar jobs as aspired by highly educated youths. In addition, the technological advancement rapidly affected the demand for skill and certain types of employment."

The labour market surveys in India may not be adequately covering the information of youth involved in emerging new types of jobs, which may lead to inaccuracies in employment and unemployment data. This is a problem because emerging digital technology is changing the job market, making it more complicated. For example, there are now jobs in the gig economy and on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram. These jobs are especially popular among young people. However, there haven't been any studies to figure out how many of these jobs there are, especially since they've become more common after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The national labour force surveys also don't include these new types of jobs because they haven't been defined properly. As a result, the national labour statistics might not count all the jobs that exist, which could make it seem like there are more unemployed young people than there really are.

During the report's release, Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran mentioned that it's not always necessary for the Government to intervene in every social or economic issue. He emphasised that businesses should take the lead in hiring more people. He stated, "We need to change our mindset. In usual circumstances, it's businesses, especially those involved in making a profit, that should be doing the hiring." He acknowledged various Government initiatives while also admitting, "There's room for improvement, and I believe the Government is aware of that."

From the above discussion, we can see that a significant number of job has been created for young people in recent decade. But there are still employment challenges for young people, especially those who have graduate and higher level of educational qualification because more of them are completing for available jobs. Other factors like technological changes, higher aspirations, and skill mismatches also contribute to this issue. In this context, it's important to interpret sensitive data such as youth unemployment rate with caution and care. Doing so will benefit healthy discussions and debates and also assist both the national Government and other relevant stakeholders in devising appropriate policies for suitable job creation for youth.

(The writer is Professor at Institute for Human Development, Delhi and Co-Author of India Employment Report, 2024. The views expressed are personal)

Dynastic politics and the mirage of leadership

As India navigates its political landscape, the verdict is clear: Leadership must be earned, not inherited

There is an adage in south India which when translated into English would read like this; "The moment you see a kid, you can make out the plight of the village from where he hails". This means that the kid can never hide the intensity of the poverty and sufferings he undergoes in the village. This is true in the case of many of our politicians who are out in the street seeking votes from the electorate. The truth that they are misfit as leaders is written clearly on their body language. We can also make out true leaders from their attitudes and behaviour towards society. However hard they try to project an artificial behaviour, their failure as a potential leader would be as clear as



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

daylight. The offsprings of leaders of dynasty politics is a clear proof of the adage mentioned above. The chief minister of Tamil Nadu M K Stalin, who is the president of the DMK, is a case study. Stalin is incapable of addressing a gathering of even 100 persons without the help of a written speech. He has a battery of beauticians in attendance wherever he goes to address public meetings. One

can never see Stalin sans make-up and neatly starched and ironed dhoti and shirt. Stalin, who prefers to be addressed as Thalpathi (Tamil for Commander) has no leadership qualities and he became the DMK chief only because he happened to be the son of M Karunanidhi, the former party president and chief minister.

The same can be said about M K Kanimozhi, daughter of Karunanidhi by his third wife Rajathi. Courtiers of Karunanidhi clan always portray Kanimozhi as a poetess but literary critics describe her as a product of sycophancy and flattery. It is not difficult for a person with vast connections in the Government and party to get her works published.

Moreover she presides over TV channels, newspapers and periodicals owned by the Karunanidhi family. This has resulted in qualified writers like Salma, a big sensation in contemporary Tamil literature getting pushed backward.

Udhayanidhi Stalin, Tamil Nadu minister for sports and youth affairs, who is Stalin's son too has proved that he does not belong to the group of people with leadership qualities. The speeches delivered by him during the 2019 and 2021 elections were vituperative and blatant lies. In a speech (video of which is available in social media), the junior Stalin accuses Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the untimely deaths of Arun Jaitley and Sushama

Swraj. He is living up to the "reputation" of DMK, which according to former chief minister late J Jayalithaa was a bundle of falsehoods and lies.

Stalin's nephew Dayanidhi Maran, a party MP, is seen as an accompanying artist whenever Kanimozhi addresses the House. This is the scenario everywhere when the near and dear ones getting promoted in party hierarchy and the dynasty is set in motion. Family ties and names will not help anyone to emerge as a leader.

One need to be hard working, should have sterling qualities and dedication to the job at hand to make a place for himself in this competitive field. There are young politicians like Sachin Pilot,

Jyothiradhitya Scindia and K C Venugopal who rose in party hierarchy though the first two named had surnames that commanded respect. But Venugopal is the person to be watched in Congress as there is every possibility of him getting elevated to the top job in years to come.

Supriya Sule, daughter of Sharad Pawar of the NCP is no different from Udhayanidhi Stalin. The question being asked in political circles is that should India need an outfit like NCP in this era of mergers and acquisitions. The NCP was launched to prevent Sonia Gandhi from becoming Prime Minister in 1998. Much water has flown through Mahanadi and

Godavari since then and Pawar has become a strong ally of Sonia Gandhi. The best option available to Pawar is to merge NCP with Congress. If Pawar has the leadership qualities, nobody would be able to out hurdles in his way to the Prime Minister's Office. That would be a major development in Indian politics. But he has to stop the obsession of promoting his daughter to high places as the young lady is yet to prove that she needs to be taken seriously by the electorate. Baramati is not India and the Indian voters have come of age.

The same is true in the case of Lalu Prasad Yadav dynasty in Bihar. Pataliputra, the great city of yore, became Patna and the modern presiding deities are Lalu Yadav and his

clan. The less said the better. In neighboring Uttar Pradesh, people hoped to see a generational change when Akhilesh Yadav was elevated to the post of chief minister and party president. There was no generational change except the fact that an old feudal lord gave way to the new zamindar.

All are not Rahul Gandhi too. The Gandhi clan is lucky to be blessed by God Almighty with a wonderful youth. But all political families are not the same as that of the Gandhis and all young leaders are not like Rahul Gandhi. One has to work really hard to emerge as an undisputed leader like him.

(The writer is special correspondent with the pioneer; views are personal)

Diplomatic crisis erupts between Poland & Israel

AP ■ WARSAW

A new diplomatic crisis has erupted following the death of a Polish aid worker in Gaza, with the Polish president on Thursday denouncing a comment by the Israeli ambassador as "outrageous" and the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw saying it was summoning him for a meeting. A 35-year-old Polish man was among seven people who were killed while delivering food to besieged Palestinians with the charity World Central Kitchen. Israel has called the incident a "mistake" that followed a misidentification. The charity said its vehicles were clearly marked. Amid shock in Poland over the death of the charity worker, Israel's ambassador to Poland, Yacov Livne, pushed back at what he said were attempts by the "extreme right and left in Poland" to accuse Israel of "intentional murder in the attack". He said on social media on Tuesday that "anti-Semites will always remain anti-Semites, and Israel will remain a democratic Jewish state that fights for its right to exist. Also for the good of the entire Western world."

Polish President Andrzej Duda on Thursday called the comment "outrageous" and described the ambassador as "the biggest problem for the state of Israel in relations with Poland". Duda said authorities in Israel have spoken about the tragedy "in a very subdued way," but added, "Unfortunately, their ambassador to Poland is not able to maintain such delicacy and sensitivity, which is unacceptable." Prime Minister Donald Tusk, while a political opponent of Duda's, voiced a similar position. He said Thursday that the comment was unacceptable and had offended Poles, and said that the ambassador should apologize. The deputy foreign minister was quoted in the Polish media as saying that Livne was summoned to a meeting on Friday morning. A day earlier, Tusk published a comment on social media addressing Prime Minister

UK jurists join calls to stop arms sales to Israel

AP ■ LONDON

More than 600 British jurists, including three retired judges from the UK Supreme Court, are calling on the government to suspend arms sales to Israel, piling pressure on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak after the deaths of three UK aid workers in an Israeli strike. Britain is just one of a number of Israel's longstanding allies whose governments are under growing pressure to halt weapons exports because of the toll of the six-month-old war in Gaza. In an open letter to Sunak published late Wednesday, the lawyers and judges said the UK could be complicit in "grave breaches of international law" if it continues to ship weapons. Signatories, including former Supreme Court President Brenda Hale, said Britain is legally obliged to heed the International Court of Justice's conclusion that there is a "plausible risk of genocide" in Gaza. The letter said the "sale of weapons and weapons systems to Israel... falls significantly short of your government's obligations under international law."

Britain is a staunch ally of Israel, but relations have been tested by the mounting death toll, largely civilian, from the war. Calls for an end to arms exports have escalated since an Israeli airstrike killed seven aid workers from the aid charity World Central Kitchen, three of them British. Israel says the attack on the aid workers was a mistake caused by "misidentification". The UK's main opposition parties have all said the Conservative government should halt weapons sales to Israel if the country has broken international law in Gaza. Several senior Conservatives have urged the same, including Alicia Kearns, who heads the House of Commons foreign affairs committee. Sunak has not committed to an arms export ban, but said Wednesday that "while of course we defend Israel's right to defend itself and its people against attacks from Hamas, they have to do that in accordance with international humanitarian law". British firms sell a relatively small amount of weapons and components to Israel. Defence Secretary Grant Shapps has said that military exports to Israel amounted to 42 million pounds (USD 53 million) in 2022.

Benjamin Netanyahu and Livne saying that "the vast majority of Poles showed full solidarity with Israel after the Hamas attack. Today you are putting this solidarity to a really hard test. The tragic attack on volunteers and your reaction arouse understandable anger." Duda on Thursday also called for Israel to pay "appropriate compensation" to the family of the aid worker, Damian Soból. Soból had been on an aid mission to Gaza for the past six months following work in Ukraine, Morocco and Turkey. Polish and Israeli relations have recently been on the mend after several difficult years. Ties were badly damaged due to disputes over how to remember

Polish behavior during the Holocaust, when Nazi Germany occupied Poland and carried out the mass murder of Jews. For eight years until December, Poland had a nationalist government that played down Polish participation in the German killings of Jews and focused largely on Polish aid to Jews. Israel's government believed that approach amounted to historical distortion. Israel also objected to a law that limited property restitution claims, something that affected the heirs of Polish Holocaust victims, and recalled its ambassador in 2021 before sending Livne the next year as ties improved.

Myanmar resistance drones hit capital target

AP ■ BANGKOK

Myanmar's main pro-democracy resistance group said on Thursday its armed wing launched drone attacks on the airport and a military headquarters in the capital, Naypyitaw, but the country's ruling military said it destroyed the drones as they attacked. The opposition National Unity Government's "Defence Ministry" said in a statement that special units of the People's Defence Force used drones to attack the targets simultaneously. The group, known by the acronym NUG, calls itself the country's legitimate government, while the People's Defence Force is made up of many local resistance groups with a good deal of independence. Although there was no immediate evidence of any damage caused by the attack, the military's acknowledgment that it had taken place

in one of the most heavily guarded locations in the country will be seen by many as the latest indication that it is losing the initiative to its determined opponents, a trend first evident late last year when it lost critical territory in the northeast and west. NUG said there were reports of casualties. The country's military said it shot down seven drones and there were no reports of casualties. BBC's Burmese-language service and Khit Thit, an online news service sympathetic to the resistance, said the airport was shut down for a while after the attacks. It wasn't possible to independently verify most details of the incident. People who live near the airport who were contacted by The Associated Press said they were unaware of any attack, and photos released by the government showed only what appeared

to be crashed drones. There had been claims in September of an earlier attack on the airport in Naypyitaw, but it drew little attention. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military seized power from the elected civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021, triggering nationwide peaceful protests that were suppressed with deadly force by the security forces, leading to armed resistance that amounts to a civil war. The airport compound, which includes both a military air base and a civilian airport, is about 25 kilometers (16 miles) southwest of the military headquarters that the resistance group said it attacked. The resistance group that claimed responsibility for the attack, Kloud Team (Shar Htoo Waw), specializes in drone warfare, which is frequently employed by People's

Defence Force units, which lack the army's heavy firepower. Kloud Team said it targeted the house of Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the ruling military council, as well as the military headquarters and air base. Despite its great advantage in armaments and manpower, the military has been unable to quell the resistance movement, and frequently carries out air strikes in disputed territory. Civilian targets are often hit, and about 2.4 million people have been displaced since the 2021 army takeover. For the resistance forces, drones have become crucial weapons for fighting back. Initially, smaller drones with lighter payloads were used, but now the opposition groups are using more sophisticated systems to drop explosives on military targets. Resistance groups frequently

post videos on social media of their drone attacks. The People's Defence Force and its local units have allied themselves with major ethnic guerrilla groups in border regions that have been carrying out armed struggles against the army for decades seeking greater autonomy. Last October, a surprise offensive by an armed ethnic alliance captured towns and overran military bases and garrisons along the Chinese border. The operation by the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Arakan Army and the Taang National Liberation Army, who named themselves the Three Brotherhood Alliance, was such a stunning success that it buoyed others in the resistance and represented a turning point, though victory for the opposition is still not in sight, experts said.

Rescuers in Taiwan search for those missing after major quake kills 10

AP ■ HUALEIN (TAIWAN)

Rescuers searched Thursday for missing people and worked to reach hundreds stranded when Taiwan's strongest earthquake in 25 years sent boulders and mud tumbling down mountainsides, blocking roads. Ten people died and more than 1,000 were injured. The powerful quake struck during the morning rush hour a day earlier, sending schoolchildren rushing outdoors and families fleeing their apartments through the windows. The ground floors of some buildings collapsed, leaving them leaning at precarious angles. Though the island is regularly rattled by earthquakes and generally well prepared, authorities did not send out the usual alerts because they were expecting a smaller tremor. Some residents of the eastern coastal city of Hualien near the epicentre were staying in tents, and the main road linking the county to the capital, Taipei, was still closed Thursday afternoon, but much of Taiwan's day-to-day life returned to normal.



Some local rail service to Hualien resumed, and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., one of the world's most important manufacturers of computer chips, restarted most operations, the Central News Agency reported. Nearly 1,070 people were injured in the quake. Of the 10 dead, at least four were killed inside Taroko National Park, a tourist attraction famous for canyons and cliffs in mountainous Hualien County about 150 kilometres from Taipei.

One person was found dead in a damaged building and another was found in the Ho Ren Quarry. Rescuers also carried out the body of a man, who had severe wounds on his head, from a hiking trail. Hundreds of people were stranded when rocks and mud blocked the roads leading to their hotel, campground or work site — though most were safe while they awaited rescue. It wasn't clear Thursday if any people were still trapped in buildings. Liu Zhong-da, a 58-

year-old construction worker, and his colleague were on their way to work on a road in the national park and were inside a tunnel when the quake hit. A boulder blocked their exit and they were trapped along with some other people. "We almost got covered up," Liu said. "No communication could be made (to the outside world)." Liu and his colleague were rescued Thursday afternoon and received a quick medical checkup outside the park. About 60 workers who had been unable to leave a quarry because of damaged roads were also freed, authorities said. Six workers from another quarry were airlifted out. Some 700 people remain cut off, the vast majority of them employees and guests at a hotel in the national park. Authorities said they were safe and had food and water, and that work to repair the roads to the hotel was nearly finished. Another 10 workers from the same hotel were stranded elsewhere in the park, after most of the others in the group were rescued or managed to walk out.

Austrian minister aims to tighten espionage law to ban spying

AP ■ BERLIN

Austria's justice minister said Thursday that she plans to tighten the country's rules on espionage, which currently is explicitly banned if directed against Austria itself but not if it targets other countries or international organisations. Justice Minister Alma Zadic's push to tighten Austria's laws comes as the arrest of a former Austrian intelligence officer on allegations of spying for Russia focuses attention on espionage activities in the country. Austria is a European Union member that has a policy of military neutrality. Its capital, Vienna, is host to several UN agencies and other international groups such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC. Austria's criminal code currently states that anyone who "sets up or operates a secret intelligence service to the detriment of the Republic of Austria or supports such an intelligence service in whatever way" faces a prison sentence of between six months and five years. It also bans setting up, operating or supporting a "military intelligence service" for "a foreign power or a supra- or international body," which can carry a prison sentence of up to two years. Zadic said in a statement to the Austria Press Agency that the country has long been accused of being an "island of the blessed" for intelligence services from around the world and lamented that "gaps in the law so far have allowed foreign intelligence services to spy with impunity in Austria". "We want to expand the espionage paragraphs so that, in the future, our law enforcement authorities can also act against foreign spies when they are not targeting Austria itself, but international organisations based here such as the UN or friendly states," she said. Zadic is a member of the junior party in Chancellor Karl Nehammer's governing coalition, the Greens. Interior Minister Gerhard Karner, a member of Nehammer's Austrian People's Party, told Oe1 radio he sees the need for tougher penalties for spying — but also renewed a call for authorities to be allowed to eavesdrop on calls via messenger services, something the Greens have balked at.

18 gunmen, ten security members die in Iran clashes

AP ■ DUBAI

Iran's state media said security forces were able to release hostages taken by gunmen Thursday following clashes in three separate areas in southeastern Iran that left 18 militants and 10 troops dead. The fighting erupted overnight in Sistan and Baluchistan province when gunmen opened fire on Revolutionary Guard posts in Rask and Sarbaz towns and a coast guard station in Chahbahar city, some 1,400 kilometers (870 miles) south-east of the capital, Tehran, the agency said. The gunmen took several civilians hostage at two sites and some of the assailants wore suicide vests, state TV reported. Shootouts ensued before security forces gained control of the three areas. The 10 security forces killed included six members of the Revolutionary Guard and its

affiliated troops, two policemen and two members of coast guard, state TV said. At least 10 others were injured, some of them in serious condition, it said. State media blamed the militant group Jaish al-Adl, which allegedly seeks greater rights for the ethnic Baluch minority. No group claimed responsibility. Authorities arrested two militants from the group Thursday on suspicion of involvement in the clashes, state TV said. The restive area, bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been the site of occasional deadly clashes involving the militant group, armed drug smugglers and Iranian security forces. In December, militants killed nearly a dozen police officers in an attack on a police station in the province.

UK's higher salary thresholds for overseas skilled work visas kick in

PTI ■ LONDON

Significantly higher salary thresholds for overseas workers, including Indians, applying for the UK's Skilled Worker visas kicked in on Thursday, as part of tough new measures announced earlier to cut Britain's overall migration figures. For those applying under the Skilled Worker visa route, the salary threshold for an application will rise from GBP 26,200 to GBP 38,700 — an increase of 48 per cent. The UK Home Office said it forms part of a "robust and fair package of measures", which will mean 300,000 people who arrived in the UK last year would now not be able to and also prevent undercutting of domestic workers by cheap overseas labour. "It's time to turn off the taps and end the flow of cheap

workers from abroad. Mass migration is unsustainable, and it's simply not fair. It undercuts the wages of hard-working people who are just trying to make ends meet," said UK Home Secretary James Cleverly. "We are refocusing our immigration system to prioritise the brightest and best who have the skills our economy needs while reducing overall numbers. I promised the British people an immigration system that serves their interests, and to bring numbers down — these tough measures deliver on that commitment. Employers must also play their part and put British workers first," he said. On April 11, an incremental increase to the minimum income required for overseas applicants to bring their dependents on Family Visas will also come into force — rising to GBP

29,000 from GBP 18,600. By early next year, this is set to match the Skilled Worker visa threshold of GBP 38,700, which the Home Office said would ensure family dependents brought to the UK are supported financially. "The government is clear that no sector should be permanently reliant on immigration, so today, the Shortage Occupation List has also been abolished, with employers no longer able to pay migrants less than UK workers in shortage occupations," the Home Office said. Under a new Immigration Salary List (ISL), created on the advice of the independent Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), roles will only be included where they are skilled and in shortage, considering the efforts being made by sectors to invest in the resident workforce.

Free blue checks are back for some accounts on X

AP ■ NEW YORK

Elon Musk's X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, has begun restoring complimentary blue checks for some of its users, the latest unexpected shift to cause a lot of confusion on the platform. For years, Twitter's blue checks mirrored verification badges that are common on social media, largely reserved for celebrities, politicians and other influential accounts. That changed months after Musk bought the platform for USD 44 billion in October 2022. Last year, X began issuing verification checks only to those who paid the starting price of USD 8 per month for it, and stripping verification badges from many celebrities and other prominent accounts. That also led to confusion, complaints, and a large number of fake accounts pretending to be someone else, blue check included. But late Wednesday night and early Thursday, numerous users reported see-

ing the blue checks return to their accounts, or appear for the first time, despite the fact that they were not paying for "premium" service on X. Musk said last week that all X accounts with more than 2,500 verified subscriber followers would get Premium features — which includes a checkmark — for free going forward, and that accounts with over 5,000 would get Premium+ for free. Specific reasoning behind this new policy was not clear. X did not immediately respond to a request by The Associated Press for comment Thursday. Reactions were mixed. While a handful of users were excited about the verification, others were frustrated. "What happened? I didn't pay for this. I would NEVER pay for this," actress Yvette Nicole Brown, who appeared to be among the prominent names to see a blue check return, wrote in a post Wednesday evening. The Muslim community in the US is frustrated and angry at the Biden administration. They believe that it has not used its leverage against Israel to stop killing of innocent people in Gaza. Many Muslim American groups in some of the critical battle ground states like Michigan have announced that they will not vote for Biden in the November general elections. "White House officials have travelled outside of Washington to meet with Muslim American community leaders in Detroit and Chicago in recent months but were not welcomed by some who were invited to participate. The Biden campaign has also tried to engage with key Arab American voters in swing states like Michigan, where more than 100,000 people chose 'uncommitted' on their primary ballots in February," NBC News said.

S Korea's pres meets leader of doctors' strike as he seeks to end their walkouts

AP ■ SEOUL

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol met the leader of a strike by thousands of junior doctors on Thursday and said that the government is open to talks about its contentious push to sharply increase medical school admissions. The meeting was the first of its kind since more than 90 per cent of the country's 13,000 trainee doctors walked off the job in February, disrupting hospital operations. But there was still no immediate report of a breakthrough after the meeting. During a lengthy televised public address Monday, Yoon defended his plan to recruit 2,000 more medical students each year, from the current cap of 3,058. But he said his government remains open to talks if doctors come up with a unified



proposal that gives logical reasons for their calls for a much smaller hike of the enrollment quota. On Thursday, Yoon met Park Dan, head of an emergency

committee for the Korea Intern Resident Association, for more than two hours, during which "the president said he would respect the position of trainee doctors in the event of talks

with the medical circle on medical reform issues including an increase of doctors," according to Yoon's office. It didn't say whether the government plans any immediate talks with the doctors and whether Yoon's comments would mean he's willing to lower the size of his proposed medical school admission increase. The strikers have earlier demanded the government withdraw the 2,000-student admission increase plan. In a brief Facebook message posted after the meeting, Park wrote that "there is no future for the medical service of the Republic of Korea" without elaborating. Repeated calls to Park went unanswered. Another striker, Ryu Ok Hada, earlier accused Park of having unilaterally met with Yoon without approval from fellow strikers.

'Muslim community members in US decline WH Iftar dinner invitation'

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Members of the Muslim community in the US have declined the White House's iftar dinner invitation this week, protesting the Biden administration's continued support for Israel amid humanitarian concerns in Palestine, according to multiple media reports. "Many of the invitees, distressed over President (Joe) Biden's support for Israel's war in Gaza, said they would not attend an iftar meal with the president on Tuesday evening while so many Palestinians were under siege," The New York Times newspaper reported on Wednesday. The White House held a pared-down meal just for staffers. "How can we talk to you about famine and starvation over bread and steak?" Dr Thaer Ahmad, a Palestinian American doctor who was in Gaza in January was quoted as saying by The New York Times report. Dr Ahmad attended a separate hour-long meeting of the community leaders and President Biden. The meeting on Tuesday was attended by Vice President Kamala Harris and National Security Advisor Jake

Sullivan. "Some people who were invited to attend the White House events on Tuesday flatly declined, according to the sources familiar with the planning, who said the invitees did not feel comfortable celebrating with the president while many Palestinians are currently facing starvation and malnutrition," NBC News reported. Muslim advocacy group Engage, which declined the invitation from the White House, said a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions has been unfolding with millions now facing famine and disease. "In this moment of tremendous pain and suffering, we have asked the White House to postpone this gathering and to convene a proper policy meeting with representatives of the community's choosing, rather than those selected by the White House," it said in a statement. Engage said in order to resolve the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the Biden administration can and should leverage its enormous support for Israel and begin to take demonstrable actions on an immediate and permanent ceasefire. The US should also ensure an unfettered

access for humanitarian aid convoys and the resumption of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) funding; an end to any Israeli plans to invade Rafah where 1.5 million Palestinians are sheltering; and the initiation of a legitimate political track that leads to Palestinian statehood, it said. The Muslim community in the US is frustrated and angry at the Biden administration. They believe that it has not used its leverage against Israel to stop killing of innocent people in Gaza. Many Muslim American groups in some of the critical battle ground states like Michigan have announced that they will not vote for Biden in the November general elections. "White House officials have travelled outside of Washington to meet with Muslim American community leaders in Detroit and Chicago in recent months but were not welcomed by some who were invited to participate. The Biden campaign has also tried to engage with key Arab American voters in swing states like Michigan, where more than 100,000 people chose 'uncommitted' on their primary ballots in February," NBC News said.

Finland to keep border with Russia closed

AP ■ HELSINKI

Finland will extend the closure of its border crossing points with Russia beyond the current April 14 deadline "until further notice" due to a high risk of organised migration orchestrated by Moscow, the Finnish government said on Thursday.

The Finnish Interior Ministry said in a statement that the Nordic country's national security and public order would be under serious threat if the estimated hundreds of third-country nationals were to continue to attempt to enter from Russia without proper documentation. "Based on information provided by public authorities, the risk that instrumentalised migration (by Russia) will resume and expand as seen previously remains likely," the ministry said.

Finland closed the 1,340-kilometre land border late last year after more than 1,300 migrants without proper documentation or visas — an unusually high number — entered the country in the three months since September, not long after Finland joined the NATO alliance.

Most of the migrants hail from the Middle East and Africa, from countries including Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. The vast majority of them have sought asylum in Finland, a European Union member state with a population of 5.6 million. The Finnish Border Guard has earlier said that many migrants hold valid visas for working or studying — or have a residence permit — in Russia, which is considered a safe country.

Accusing Russia of deliberately ushering migrants to the normally heavily guarded Russia-Finland border zone that serves also as the EU's external border in the north, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo has extended the closure of checkpoints several times. All eight Finland-Russia land border crossing points for people have been closed since December 15. The southeastern rail checkpoint for cargo

MIGRATION CONCERNS

Russian minister casts prospective Ukraine peace talks

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia's top diplomat warned on Thursday that prospective negotiations to end the fighting in Ukraine could be successful only if they take Moscow's interests into account, dismissing a planned round of peace talks as a Western ruse to rally broader international support for Kyiv.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov charged that Ukraine's Western allies are currently involved in a massive diplomatic blitz to persuade as many countries of the Global South as possible to join a meeting in Switzerland to discuss a potential peace plan. Speaking to reporters after a meeting with about 70 foreign ambassadors to Moscow, Lavrov argued that the West is seeking to boost attendance at the planned round of negotiations in Switzerland by claiming that its participants would be free to discuss only certain aspects of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's peace plan, such as ways to ensure global food security. Lavrov described such arguments as a Western ploy to attract more hesitant countries of the Global South and draw up to 140 participants in order to cast the conference as a show of overwhelming support around the world for Ukraine.

trains in Vainikkala remains open but the government said on Thursday it would close three maritime checkpoints starting April 15. Migrants can continue to seek asylum in Finland, part of EU's passport-free Schengen zone, at Finnish airports and harbours, the government said.

"Finnish authorities see this as a long-term situation," Interior Minister Mari Rantanen said. "We have not seen anything this spring that would lead us to conclude that the (migration) situation has changed meaningfully."

In addition, warmer spring weather is estimated by the Finnish government to increase the number of migrants reaching the border, putting pressure on Helsinki to find a sustainable solution.

"There are hundreds and possibly thousands of people close to Finland's border on the Russian side that could be instrumentalized against Finland," Rantanen said. "Instrumentalised migration is one way that Russia can put pressure on and affect the security and social stability of Finland and the EU."

The Finnish Cabinet is currently drafting a legal act on measures to combat instrumentalised migration, including allowing the so-called push-back method in expelling migrants and asylum seekers, on the border with Russia. Pushbacks, the forcible return of people across an international border without an assessment of their rights to apply for asylum or other protection, violate both international and EU law. However, EU members Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have previously resorted to the controversial measure when dealing with migrants attempting to enter from Belarus.

The interior ministry said the legislative proposal on migration is to be submitted to Eduskunta, or the Parliament, as soon as possible. It must have the support of a wide majority of lawmakers to pass and the proposal has already been widely debated by experts, politicians and citizens. Earlier, the government said it had received international support for the law from the EU and other organisations. Finland acts as the EU's external border in the north and makes up a significant part of NATO's northeastern flank.

AFTERMATH OF MOSCOW ATTACK

A harsher era under Putin in the works?

AP ■ MOSCOW

Video and photos of suspects in a mass shooting show them apparently being brutalised by Russian security forces — without any rebuke from authorities. A top Kremlin official says that hit squads be sent to assassinate Ukrainian officials. Senior lawmakers call for restoring capital punishment, abolished decades ago.

The aftermath of the Moscow concert hall attack that killed 145 people in the bloodiest assault in Russia in two decades seems to be setting the stage for even harsher rule by President Vladimir Putin following his highly orchestrated electoral landslide last month. Putin vowed to hunt down the masterminds of the March 22 attack that he linked to Ukraine despite Kyiv's vehement denials and a claim of responsibility by an offshoot of the Islamic State group. He warned ominously that terrorism is a "double-edged weapon".

Putin lieutenant Dmitry Medvedev declared that if Ukrainian involvement is proven, Moscow should respond by deploying hit men to kill the country's leaders "in Kyiv or any other convenient place". The attack dealt a heavy blow to Putin less than a week after the vote that extended his rule for another six years. It marked a major failure by his security agencies that were given an advance warning by the US that extremists were planning an imminent attack. Critics of the Kremlin argue that security forces are so focused on conducting the harshest crackdown on dissent since Soviet times that they are distracted from tackling real threats. In an apparent attempt to divert attention from the security lapse and rally support for the war in Ukraine, Putin and his lieutenants alleged — without evidence — that the arrest of the four suspects near Ukraine indicated Kyiv's likely involvement.

The four, all citizens of Tajikistan, were detained by security forces in a forest about 140 kilometres (86 miles) from

the Ukrainian border. Video confessions of their involvement in the attack were released by Russian news outlets, but the veracity of those statements has been called into question because the men seemed to have been severely beaten and bore other signs of brutality when they appeared in court. One had a heavily bandaged ear — reportedly cut off during interrogation. Another had pieces of a plastic bag on his neck, a possible sign of attempts at suffocation. A third was in a wheelchair, barely conscious, accompanied by medical personnel.

Russian police and other security agencies have long been accused of torture, but many incidents also brought official condemnation, dismissals of those involved and criminal prosecutions.

In stark contrast, authorities refused to comment on the grisly video that emerged or the signs of maltreatment seen in court. One video showed a man in combat fatigues cutting off part of one of the suspects' ear and forcing it into his mouth while threatening to do the same with his genitals.

Another suspect was seen with his trousers pulled down and wires attached to his genitals. The Associated Press was unable to verify the authenticity of the images, but Human Rights Watch said it determined the men in the photos and videos were the same as those in court for their pretrial hearings. "The rapid and widespread sharing of these videos appears to be no accident but rather some kind of appalling boast by the Putin government of its brazen disregard for basic rights, fundamental humanity, and the rule of law," said Tanya Lokshina, HRW's associate director for Europe and Central Asia. Kremlin propagandists sought to cast their treatment as a proper response to the massacre. Margarita Simonyan, head of state-funded broadcaster RT, dismissed criticism and said the law enforcement personnel involved shouldn't face any punishment.

Russia launches drone attack on Kharkiv, killing 4

Kyiv (AP): Russian troops

launched waves of Shahed drones against the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv overnight, killing four people and wounding 12, regional Gov Oleh Syniehubov said on Thursday. Russia attacked Ukraine's second-biggest city with at least 15 drones, some of which were shot down by air defense. Three rescuers were killed when Russia struck a multistory building damaged in an earlier strike. Six people were wounded at that location. Another 14-story building was hit by a drone, killing a 69-year-old woman.

Kharkiv has become a frequent target for Russian troops in recent weeks. The eastern city is close to the border with Russia and has been hit with both ballistic missiles and drones. A recent massive missile attack that aimed to significantly damage Ukraine's energy infrastructure plunged most of Kharkiv into darkness, and the situation there is still being stabilized. "Each manifestation of Russian terror once again proves that the country-terrorist deserves only one thing — a tribunal," Ukraine human rights chief, Dmytro Lubinets, published on Telegram in response to the attack.

Macron dismisses Russian remarks on Kyiv, Paris role in Moscow attack

Paris (AP): French President Emmanuel Macron dismissed

Thursday as "ridiculous" Russia's defense minister's remarks suggesting Ukraine and France could have had a role in last month's deadly Moscow concert hall attack. Macron's comments came a day after a rare phone call between the French and Russian defense ministers that led to diverging media statements afterward. A statement from the Russian Defense Ministry quoted Sergei Shoigu as telling his French counterpart in regard to the Moscow attack that "the Kyiv regime does nothing without approval of its Western handlers" and "we hope that the French special services weren't involved in it." Macron said such comments "were indeed baroque and threatening, which is nothing new," as he was speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the inauguration of a swimming pool built for the Paris Olympics in a northern suburb of Paris.

"In other words, it's ridiculous," Macron added. "It makes no sense and doesn't fit with reality" to say that France "could be behind it (the Moscow attack) and that the Ukrainians are behind it," he said. "But it's a manipulation of information, which is part of Russia's arsenal of warfare today."

France's defense ministry said in a statement following Wednesday's phone call that its minister, Sébastien Lecornu, firmly condemned the March 22 attack on a suburban Moscow concert hall that killed 145 in the deadliest assault on Russian soil in decades. Lecornu "confirmed that France had no information linking this attack to Ukraine," the statement said. He also condemned Russia's war in Ukraine and said France would continue to support Kyiv "as long and as intensively as needed," according to the French defense ministry. The Russian readout said Shoigu warned France against the possibility of deploying troops to Ukraine in the future, an option that has not been ruled out by Macron. The call marked the first such contact between Russian and French defense ministers since October 2022. Macron argued Thursday that it was prompted by France's willingness to share "useful information" on the Moscow attack as part of "joint work with all those who are hit by terrorism."

US treasury secretary in China to talk trade, anti-money laundering

AP ■ GUANGZHOU

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen arrived in China on Thursday for five days of meetings in a nation determined to avoid open conflict with the United States, yet the world's two largest economies still appear to be hashing out the rules on how to compete against each other.

There are tensions over Chinese government support for the manufacturing of electric vehicles and solar panels, just as the US government ramps up its own aid for those tech sectors. There are differences in trade, ownership of TikTok, access to computer chips and national security — all of them a risk to what has become a carefully managed relationship.

The 77-year-old Yellen, a renowned economist and former Federal Reserve chair, laid out to reporters the issues that she intends to raise with her Chinese counterparts during her five-day visit.

Yellen begins her trip in Guangzhou and later moves to

Beijing for meetings with finance leaders and state officials. Her engagements will include Vice Premier He Lifeng, Chinese Central Bank Governor Pan Gongsheng, former Vice Premier Liu He, leaders of American businesses operating in China, university students and local leaders.

Yellen, speaking to reporters on Wednesday during a refuelling stop in Alaska en route to Asia, said her visit would be a "continuation of the dialogue that we have been engaged and deepening" ever since US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in 2022 in Indonesia. She noted that it would be her third meeting with China's vice premier.

Yellen recently accused China of flooding global markets with heavily subsidised green energy products, possibly undercutting the subsidies the US has provided to its own renewable energy and EV sector with funds provided by the Democrats' Inflation Reduction Act. She said she intends to

repeat her concerns to Chinese officials that they're flooding the global market with cheap solar panels and EVs that thwart the ability of other countries to develop those sectors. "We need to have a level playing field," Yellen told reporters. "We're concerned about a massive investment in China in a set of industries that's resulting in overcapacity."

Yellen didn't rule out taking additional steps to counter Chinese subsidies in the green energy sectors, adding, "It's not just the United States but quite a few countries, including Mexico, Europe, Japan, that are feeling the pressure from massive investment, in these industries in China."

The Treasury secretary's travels come after Biden and Xi held their first call in five months on Tuesday, meant to demonstrate a return to regular leader-to-leader dialogue between the two powers. The leaders discussed Taiwan, artificial intelligence and security issues. The call, described by the White House as "candid and con-

structive," was the leaders' first conversation since their November summit in California, which renewed ties between the two nations' militaries and enhanced cooperation on stemming the flow of deadly fentanyl and its precursors from China.

Still, it appears to be difficult for the two countries to strike a balance between competition and antagonism.

For instance, Xi last week hosted American CEOs in Beijing to court them on investing in China. Meanwhile, Biden last August issued an executive order that instructed an inter-agency committee, chaired by Yellen, to closely monitor US investment in China related to high-tech manufacturing.

Jude Blanchette, a China expert at the Center for Strategic & International Studies, said, "the Biden administration's efforts over the last year to stabilise the relationship are clearly working, but the main friction points all remain unresolved and will likely challenge the relationship for the foreseeable future."

Zardari notes with concern 'baseless' claims against Army

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan

President Asif Ali Zardari has voiced his grave concern about the "baseless and unsubstantiated" allegations levelled by a specific political party and its few individuals against the Army for their political interests. Zardari made the veiled jibe at jailed former prime minister Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party when Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen Asim Munir called on the new President on Wednesday.

During the meeting, the Army chief also extended felicitations to Zardari on his appointment as the 14th President of Pakistan last month. An official press release issued by the Presidency said, President Zardari noted with "grave concern the baseless allegations levelled by a specific political party and its few individuals against the institution and its leadership to accrue narrow political interests and resolved to deal with such disruptive elements with an iron hand".

PTI party calls off Islamabad rally

Islamabad (PTI): Citing religious

reasons, jailed former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's party has announced cancelling its much-hyped rally that was scheduled to be held here on Saturday to demand the release of the party founder, who has been incarcerated since August last year after his conviction in various cases.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan took to X on Wednesday to inform his party's supporters that the decision has been taken because of the Laylat-ul-Qadr — the blessed night that Muslims seek in the odd-numbered nights of the last 10 days of Ramadan, Geo News reported.

He also urged the supporters to pray for the release and safety of all party workers and leaders, including Imran Khan and his spouse Bushra Bibi. Last month, the PTI had announced to stage a grand power show at the Parade Ground to ensure 71-year-old Khan's release, who has been jailed since August last year in different cases

ranging from corruption to leaking state secrets. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) had also directed the authorities to grant permission to the party to hold a public gathering in the federal capital. "One's right of assembly cannot be taken away," IHC Chief Justice Aamer Farooq said on March 27 while hearing PTI's petition seeking the court's permission to hold a public rally in Islamabad.

The decision to cancel the rally comes two days after the Islamabad High Court suspended the 14-year sentence given to Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi in the Toshakhana corruption case. The two were sentenced to 14 years in jail each by an accountability court on January 31 for alleged corruption in state gifts they got from the state depository, days before the general elections. They challenged the conviction in the IHC where a two-member bench headed by IHC Chief Justice Aamer Farooq heard the case.

Pak rules out talks with banned TTP militants

Islamabad (PTI): Pakistan

on Thursday ruled out any talks with the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and vowed to fight all militant outfits and defeat them, a day after a senior Afghan Taliban leader urged Islamabad and the banned terrorist organisation to sit together and negotiate for peace. Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch was responding to a question at her weekly briefing about a suggestion to Islamabad by Afghanistan's deputy interior minister to hold talks with the rebels. Afghan Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad Nabi Omari, while addressing an iftar gathering in the southeastern Khost town on Wednesday, advised Pakistan and the outlawed TTP to resolve their issues through dialogue as the violence in Pakistan "is spreading to Afghanistan". "Pakistan remains committed to fighting against all the terrorist outfits which have targeted Pakistan and the symbols of Pakistan-China friendship," she said.

NATO marks its 75th birthday as Russia's war in Ukraine gnaws at its unity

AP ■ BRUSSELS

NATO marked on Thursday 75 years of collective defense across Europe and North America, with its top diplomats vowing to stay the course in Ukraine as better-armed Russian troops assert control on the battlefield.

The anniversary comes as the now-32-nation alliance weighs a plan to provide more predictable longer-term military support to Ukraine. Plagued by ammunition shortages, Ukraine this week lowered the military conscription age from 27 to 25 in an effort to replenish its depleted ranks.

"Ukraine is under heavy attacks, like daily, 24-seven," Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna told reporters, appealing for more military materiel for Ukraine like air defense systems, drones and artillery shells. "We need to give these systems which we are not

using to Ukraine, to take and protect their people, civil infrastructure and also energy infrastructure," he said, before a ceremony with his counterparts to mark the day NATO's founding treaty was signed: April 4, 1949, in Washington. A bigger celebration is planned when NATO leaders meet in Washington from July 9 to 11. Hundreds of staffers filled the vast air terminal-like space at the centre of NATO's sprawling Brussels headquarters, while scores of others looked down from glassed walkways and stairways as Belgian and Dutch military bands played the NATO Hymn, the original Washington Treaty laid before them.

"I like the Washington Treaty. Not least because it is very short," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said with a smile. "Just 14 paragraphs over a few pages. Never has a single document with so

few words meant so much to so many people. So much security. So much prosperity, and so much peace." Outside Brussels on Wednesday evening, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had paid tribute "to the millions of soldiers, sailors, and aviators whose courage and willingness to put their lives on the line have given weight to our sacred commitment to defend one another."

Blinken said that even as foreign ministers mark more than seven decades of peace, "that security — together with the Alliance's core principles of democracy, liberty, and the rule of law — is once again being threatened by those who believe that might makes right... and who seek to redraw borders by force."

Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, also attended on Thursday. His message was more direct.

"Only today, 20 Shahed drones



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, right, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken address the audience during a ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, in Brussels, on Wednesday. AP/PTI

were shot at the city of Kharkiv and four people have been killed," he said, adding that rescuers trying to help victims in the area were also killed. "It is impossible to comprehend why allies cannot find additional batteries to deliver them to the place where ballistic missiles are being fired every day," Kuleba said.

Sweden's foreign minister, Tobias Billstrom, was taking part in the first ministerial-level meeting since his country became NATO's 32nd ally last month. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 drove Sweden and Finland into NATO's arms.

"NATO represents the freedom to choose," Finnish

Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen said, reflecting on the way the Nordic neighbours recently joined. "Democratic nations, free people chose to join. Unlike how Russia expands its by aggression or by illegal annexation." President Vladimir Putin said he launched the war, in part at least, because NATO was expanding closer to Russia's borders.

The alliance's ranks have almost tripled from its 12 founding members, but Finland and Sweden joined in record time to shelter under NATO's collective security guarantee.

That promise — Article 5 of the Washington Treaty — stipulates that an attack on any one of their number must be met with a united response. It's only ever been used once, after the Al-Qaeda attacks on US soil in 2001.

Among the more recent successes as it grew from the Cold

War and after the Berlin Wall collapsed, NATO would count its 1999 air campaign against former Yugoslavia to end a bloody crackdown on separatist ethnic Albanians and its effort to avert near civil war in Macedonia in 2001.

At the other end of the scale lies the operation in Afghanistan. NATO took command of the security effort in 2003 and it became the longest, costliest and deadliest in alliance history. It was marked by a chaotic retreat in August 2021, many of the successes over almost two decades abandoned.

Today, Ukraine also wants a seat at NATO's table, but the alliance works on unanimity and there is no consensus on whether it should join. Most allies oppose membership while war rages on anyway. For now, NATO promises only that its door is open for Ukraine in the future.

NATO allies cannot agree on

whether to arm Ukraine either. As an organization, the alliance only provides non-lethal support like transport vehicles, fuel, combat rations, medical supplies and demining equipment.

However, many members provide arms and ammunition bilaterally or in groups. The bulk of NATO's efforts since Russian troops began massing for the invasion has focused on reinforcing its own borders near Russia and Ukraine to dissuade Putin from targeting any of the allies next. Article 5 was given perhaps its toughest test during Donald Trump's term as president of the United States — by far NATO's most powerful member country. Trump suggested the US might not defend any NATO ally that failed to boost their own defense spending to at least 2 per cent of gross domestic product, as all had agreed to do in 2014.

Sensex, Nifty hit record fresh high

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded sharply to hit record fresh highs on Thursday, propped up by buying in IT, consumer durables and financial stocks amid expectations of a robust corporate performance. Besides, investors lapped up select banking stocks expecting a status quo in the interest rate decision of the RBI's monetary policy committee, analysts said.

The six-member rate-setting panel, which began its deliberation on Wednesday, will announce the decision on Friday.

The 30-share BSE Sensex surged 350.81 points or 0.47 per cent to settle at its lifetime high of 74,227.63. During the day, the index oscillated between the high of 74,501.73 and the low of 73,485.12.

The broader NSE Nifty also hit its fresh peak of 22,514.65, gaining 80 points or 0.36 per cent. As many as 31 components of the 50-share benchmark ended with gains.

Both indices had ended lower in the previous two sessions.

On March 7, Sensex recorded its



previous peak of 74,119.39. Nifty scaled its previous high of 22,493.55.

"Market breadth displayed a positive trend within a narrow trading range, with attention focused on the RBI's upcoming monetary policy announcement tomorrow. Expectations lean towards the likely status quo in the repo rate due to prevalent inflation worries."

"Meanwhile, the broader market has shown resilience in select sectors like banks in anticipation of decent Q4 results and exports based on composite PMI data reflecting strong

business conditions," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

Among the Sensex constituents, 20 stocks ended the session in green with HDFC Bank, Titan, Tech Mahindra, and Asian Paints being the major gainers.

TCS, Maruti, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Bajaj Finserv were the other gainers.

In contrast, SBI, Bharti Airtel, JSW Steel, PowerGrid, ITC and Reliance closed the trading with losses.

Among sectoral indices, IT rose 0.93

per cent, followed by consumer durables which went up by 0.85 per cent. While utilities gained by 0.78 per cent, financial services climbed by 0.69 per cent. Bankex, teck and auto advanced by 0.57 per cent, 0.47 per cent and 0.25 per cent, respectively.

On the other hand, oil & gas lost 1.64 per cent, energy fell 1.01 per cent and services declined by 0.59 per cent.

BSE largecap gained 0.34 per cent and smallcap rose 0.54 per cent, while the midcap index lost marginally by 0.11 per cent.

Elsewhere in Asia, Seoul and Tokyo ended with gains, while Hong Kong and Shanghai were closed for a holiday.

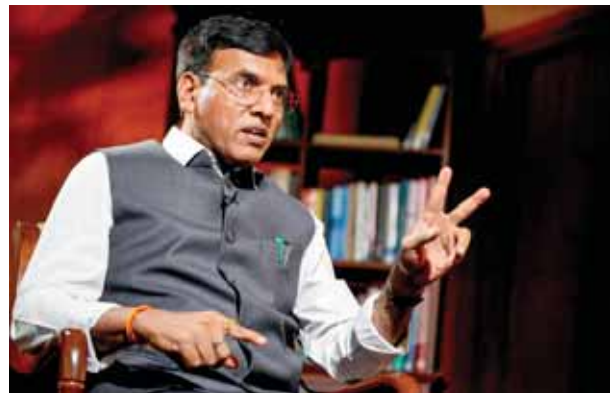
European markets were trading in green. The US markets closed Wednesday's session on a mixed note. Meanwhile, global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.36 per cent to USD 88.67 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,213.56 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

On Wednesday, the BSE benchmark Sensex declined by 27.09 points or 0.04 per cent to settle at 73,876.82. The NSE Nifty declined 18.65 points or 0.08 per cent to 22,434.65.

Jatin Gedia, Technical Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, said in his Nifty outlook that the index is heading towards the upper end of the rising channel placed at 22,700.

"On the downside, the zone of 22,350-22,300 shall act as a crucial support from a short-term perspective. Minor degree pullbacks towards support zones should be used as a buying opportunity," he added.



Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare & Chemicals and Fertilisers Mansukh Mandaviya

No hike in essential medicines prices this fiscal year: Mandaviya

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said on Thursday there will be no increase in prices of essential medicines this fiscal year in view of negligible growth in wholesale price-based inflation.

In an interaction with PTI editors at the news agency's headquarters here, Mandaviya — the Union Chemicals and Fertilisers Minister — assured that this is "Modiji's guarantee".

When asked about reports and speculations of hike in rates of essential drugs, he said, "It is absolutely incorrect. There will be no increase in the price of medicines".

The minister said the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA), which is under the Department of Pharmaceuticals, annually revises the ceiling prices of scheduled medicines on the basis of Wholesale Price Index (WPI). "NPPA monitors and fixes the prices of essential medicines based on WPI," Mandaviya said.

When inflation rises, it leads to a hike in prices and when it goes down, the prices come down, the minister said.

"This year the inflation has not increased. It is just 0.0051. Therefore companies are not going to increase prices this year. This is Modiji's guarantee," Mandaviya asserted.

As per the provisions of Drug Price Control Orders (DPCO) 2013, drugs are categorised as scheduled and non-scheduled formulations. The formulations, which are listed in Schedule-I of DPCO 2013, are scheduled formulations also referred to as essential medicines. In case of non-scheduled formulation, a manufacturer is at liberty to fix the price, the minister said, adding that prices of essential medicines would not go up this fiscal.

During the calendar year 2023 over the corresponding period in 2022, the annual change in WPI with base year 2011-12 was +0.00551 per cent as per data published by Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT).

Accordingly, the NPPA in its meeting on March 20, 2024 approved the WPI increase of 0.00551 per cent for the scheduled medicines.

Based on the above mentioned WPI, there will be no change in the prevailing ceiling prices for 782 medicines and the existing ceiling prices will continue to prevail up to March 31, 2025, according to an official statement earlier this week.

Ceiling price of 54 medicines, ranging from Rs 90 to Rs 261, will have a minuscule increase of Rs 0.01.

As the permissible price increase is miniscule, the companies may or may not avail of this increase.

RBI, NPCI make presentation to WTO members: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Senior officials of the RBI and the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) have made a presentation to the WTO members on reducing cost of remittances on March 25, an official said.

India is pressing for the adoption of open and interoperable payment systems like UPI, among WTO (World Trade Organisation) members with a view to cut the cost of money transfers or remittances.

To cut the cost, India is suggesting to encourage digital transfers, fostering interoperable systems, promoting competition, streamlining regulations, and enhancing pricing transparency.

A proposal in this regard was pushed by India in the 13th ministerial conference, which was held in February in Abu Dhabi.

"We had requested to make a

presentation on the cost of remittances. The RBI and the NPCI gave presentations online on March 25. The meetings will continue on the subject at Geneva," the official said.

The remittance costs are about 6.18 per cent globally which is well above the United Nation's target of 3 per cent.

"We have told the WTO members that this cost is high. Our expatriates are large in number. Remittances are a major component in balance of payment and it is an important source of income."

"India has developed digital public infrastructure like UPI. Through mobile phones, payments are now easy and cheap," the official said.

The official said that banks and clearing houses impose high charges on these remittances.

"Our demand is that there should be a better understanding between



countries and banks so that charges are imposed on one side only, that is 3 per cent. Double taxation is never a good idea for trade," the official said.

Though a large number of WTO member countries are supporting India's proposal, the US and Switzerland are opposing because they have "big banks and they get huge earnings through these charges," the official said.

developing countries, including poor nations.

Out of total remittances of USD 860 billion in 2023, USD 669 billion (about 78 per cent) went to low and middle income countries.

Cross-border payments and money transmission service is a critical financial service used by the sender and receivers for cross-border remittances, thus providing a point of contact with the financial sector that can be leveraged to increase access to other financial services, achieve financial inclusion and enhance participation in financial services trade.

"In view of the close relationship between such services and sustainable development, we underline the need to reduce the cost of cross-border remittances. We reaffirm our commitment to the UN SDG (sustainable development goal) to reduce to less than 3 per cent the

transaction costs of remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 per cent by 2030," according to a WTO's draft ministerial declaration on facilitating cross-border remittances.

It said that the Ministerial Conference instructs the Committee on Trade in Financial Services to undertake a work programme consisting of efforts to understand the development impact of cross-border remittances; review the cost of cross-border remittances, trends and developments; consider how technology, emergence of new market players, different types of providers and new channels, and consumer behaviour are impacting the cross-border remittance services; and examine the drivers of cost of cross-border remittances and challenges associated with reducing it.

Gold hits all time high

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices surged by Rs 850 to reach a new peak of Rs 70,050 per 10 grams on Thursday on strong global cues, according to HDFC Securities.

This is the second straight session that precious metal prices have hit all-time high levels. In the previous trade, the precious metal had settled at Rs 69,200 per 10 grams.

Silver prices also zoomed Rs 1,000 to hit record Rs 81,700 per kg. In the previous session, it had finished at Rs 80,700 per kg.

"Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 70,050 per 10 grams, up by Rs 850, amid a bullish trend in the overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, spot gold at COMEX was trading at USD 2,297 per ounce, up by USD 22 from the previous close.

Gold touched yet another record after Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell confirmed that an interest rate cut would likely be appropriate "at some point this year". Traders focus on rate cuts rather than the timing of the first rate cut, Gandhi said.

Silver was also trading higher at USD 27.05 per ounce. It had closed at USD 26.25 per ounce in the previous session.

"Gold continues to hover around its all-time high levels on the back of weakness in the dollar amid uncertainty over US interest rate cuts, while increased safe-haven demand also aided prices."

"Additionally, silver prices too marked an all-



time high on the domestic front, amidst a sharp rally in industrial metals," Navneet Damani, Senior VP of Commodity Research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services, said.

Persistent geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and between Russia and Ukraine, coupled with a devastating earthquake in Taiwan, spurred safe haven plays into bullion and other precious metals, Damani added.

According to Praveen Singh - Associate VP, Fundamental Currencies and Commodities at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, "Major US economic data, including weekly jobless claims to be released on Thursday, will provide more insights on the US Federal Reserve's monetary policy outlook".

Investors will also look forward to services and composite PMIs out of the UK and the Eurozone, Singh added.

RBI defers implementation of directions on currency derivatives to May 3

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) deferred implementation of its directions on exchange traded currency derivatives (ETCD) linked to rupee by a month to May 3 in view of feedbacks received from stakeholders.

A circular issued on January 5 on 'Risk Management and Inter-Bank Dealings — Hedging of Foreign Exchange Risk' was earlier scheduled to come into effect from Friday (April 5, 2024).

In a statement, the Reserve

Bank of India (RBI) also said the regulatory framework for ETCDs involving the Indian rupee (INR) without any change.

"As hitherto, participants with a valid underlying contracted exposure can continue to enter into ETCDs involving the INR up to a limit of USD 100 million without having to produce documentary evidence of the underlying exposure," the RBI said.

The regulatory framework for participation in ETCDs involving the Indian rupee is guided by the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act

(FEMA), 1999 and regulations framed thereunder which mandate that currency derivative contracts involving the INR — both over-the-counter (OTC) and exchange traded — are permitted only for the purpose of hedging of exposure to foreign exchange rate risks.

The RBI also said the regulatory framework has been made more comprehensive in respect of all types of transactions — OTC and exchange traded — under a single master direction to enhance operational efficiency and ease access to foreign exchange derivatives.

US has not asked India to reduce Russian oil imports, say officials

New Delhi: The US on Thursday said permitting an unrestricted Russian oil trade was "unacceptable" and the western price cap on Moscow's petroleum products is designed to force it to continue selling oil but for lower prices than it could otherwise obtain.

At the same time, US officials said Washington has not asked India to reduce the volume of its oil import from Russia.

The G7 price cap mechanism made it possible to stunt a major source of funding for Moscow's war machine while also maintaining a stable energy supply to Europe and to emerging markets, US Assistant Secretary for Economic Policy Eric Van Nostrand said at an interactive session at the Ananta Centre. "Emerging markets like India benefited from the discounted price of Russian oil relative to global markets," he said, asserting that the price cap mechanism was aimed at forcing Russia to sell oil at lower prices.

regulatory framework for participation in ETCDs involving the Indian rupee is guided by the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act

Telangana in talks with Tesla to set up electric car plant

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

The Telangana government is holding discussions with Tesla by putting in all efforts to establish their plant in the state, Industries Minister D Sridhar Babu said on Thursday.

In a message on X Sridhar Babu said since December 2023 the state government has been actively focusing on major investment opportunities by global giants, and as part of its focus, Tesla's planned investment initiatives in India are also being tracked.



"We have been studying and tracking Tesla's planned investment initiatives in

India. We have been making all out efforts to bring Tesla to Telangana for some time... Our team is continuing the dialogue and discussions with Tesla by putting in all efforts for Tesla to establish their plant in Telangana," he said.

Telangana with its Industry friendly policy, is working with a progressive and futuristic vision by creating a world class Infrastructure and hassle-free permissions system to enable best-in-class companies like Tesla to do business in Telangana, he added.

Demand trends remained sluggish in March quarter: Dabur

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Demand trends in the March quarter "remained sluggish" but rural growth picked up, FMCG major Dabur said, adding that it expects consumption to pick up in the coming month, helped by a good rabi crop harvest and forecast of a normal monsoon.

The rural growth is "fuelled by price roll-backs" in staple food that led to the gap between rural and urban narrowing, said the home-grown firm in its quarterly updates.

"With a positive outlook for the rabi crop harvest and monsoon forecast to be normal, we expect consumption to pick up in the coming months," said Dabur.

It further said, "While the past year was challenging in terms of consumer demand, we expect improvement in consumption going



forward as macro-economic indicators continue to be robust." The consolidated revenue of the company, which owns brands such as Dabur Chyawanprash, Dabur Honey, Dabur Pudin Hara, Dabur Lal Tail, Dabur Amla, Dabur Red Paste, Real and Vatika "is expected to register mid-single digit growth during Q4 FY24".

The topline growth is also helped by its spice

brand Badshah, which was acquired by the Burman family-promoted firm in October 2022.

Besides, Dabur's gross margins are likely to "continue to witness expansion" on account of deflation in input cost and cost-saving initiatives.

In domestic business, Dabur's HPC (home & personal care) is expected to grow in high-single digits, while healthcare and F&B segments are expected to register low single-digit growth.

"F&B had a high base last year and the healthcare portfolio was impacted due to delayed winter. Badshah Masala continued to perform well and is expected to post strong volume-led growth in the high teens. We continued to gain market share across our categories driven by strong execution in the market," it said.

Do not terminate concession agreement of IL&FS group entity: NCLAT to NHAI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal has directed the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) not to terminate the concession agreement of an IL&FS group entity — Baleshwar Kharagpur Expressway Ltd, and take appropriate measures for its insolvency resolution.

The appellate tribunal said the resolution of Baleshwar Kharagpur Expressway Ltd (BKEL), a SPV set up by IL&FS Transportation Networks Limited (ITNL), "is in final stages" and any termination at this stage would "further complicate" the process.

"It is also relevant to notice that when Resolution of Respondent No 2 (BKEL) is at the final stages, there is no occasion for Respondent No 1 (NHAI) to proceed to terminate the concession agreement to further complicate the resolution of an entity," said NCLAT.

NCLAT observed that the insolvency resolution of BKEL, which is for the development of a road project in Baleshwar-Kharagpur Section of NH-60, is as per the framework approved by appellate tribunal for recovery of debts of crisis-hit IL&FS group and its entities.

It further said when an entity is to be resolved as per the resolution framework, payments to all

creditors/ claimants including the lenders have to be as per the resolution process.

"We further direct that the applicant as well as respondents to take appropriate measures for final resolution of the entity, i.e. Respondent No.2," said NCLAT while disposing of the interim application moved by State Bank of India (SBI).

A concession agreement was signed on April 24, 2012 between NHAI and BKEL, in which it had availed financial facilities from the SBI.

As per the concession agreement, BKEL was obliged to pay concession fees and premium to the NHAI. However, a deferment in payment of premium

was granted by NHAI by entering into a supplementary agreement in 2016.

However, in 2018, IL&FS crisis happened and in 2019, BKEL was categorised as "Red Entity" of the IL&FS Group as per the roadmap approved by NCLAT.

In the red list, those IL&FS group companies were listed which were not able to meet financial and operational obligations, including payment obligations to their creditors.

Meanwhile, NHAI wrote several letters demanding repayment of premium dues, interest, default interest, penal interest, interest overdue etc, which was objected by SBI as it may derail the resolution process.

PTI

SINDHU OPTS OUT OF UBER CUP

Strong side for Thomas Cup title defence

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Double Olympic medalist P V Sindhu and the two top women's doubles pairs have opted out of the Uber Cup but a strong men's team will take the court for its title defence in the Thomas Cup, commencing in Chengdu from April 27.

Sindhu, who has played six tournaments since returning to action at the Badminton Asia Team Championships in February, pulled out of the event to give herself more time to recover and be battle-ready for the Paris Olympics. Top women's doubles pairs -- Treasa Jolly-Gayatri Gopichand and Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto -- also withdrew since it is not a full strength team with Sindhu missing. They chose to focus on the other assignments as they strive to earn the Olympics qualification.

Following the withdrawal of Sindhu and the two pairs, Badminton Association of India (BAI) decided to reward the players who performed at the Senior National Championships by giving them



the India cap. "Sindhu opted out as she is coming back from an injury and she wants to give herself enough time to prepare for

Paris Games where she will hope to win another medal for the country," BAI secretary Sanjay Mishra told PTI.

"The doubles pairs also decided to skip the event as they too have been playing a lot of tournaments and want to focus on their

qualification, so we have rewarded the semifinalists of the national championships by including them in the team."

India are the defending champions in Thomas Cup, having clinched the epic crown in 2022. The selectors decided to field a strong squad with a perfect mix of youth and experience. The Indian men's team had created history in Thailand when they defeated formidable Indonesia 3-0 in the final to clinch their first-ever Thomas Cup crown. The senior selection committee also decided to have more options in singles considering the hectic schedule of all players this season. A 10-member team for Thomas Cup will have five singles players with Kiran George joining HS Prannoy, Lakshya Sen, Kidambi Srikanth and Priyanshu Rajawat, while Sai Pratheek will be the back-up doubles player to the two first-choice combinations, namely World No. 1 pair Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty and MR Arjun and Dhruv Kapila. The final decision on the Thomas Cup squad was taken after an online meeting of the selection committee that comprises Chief National

coach Pulella Gopichand, former India stars U Vimal Kumar, Jwala Gutta, Manjusha Kanwar, Partho Ganguly and Mallika Baruah Sarma. "The committee felt we needed to have one additional player in the singles, while in doubles they have picked top two pairs and Sai Pratheek is selected as an additional doubles player after consultation with Mathias Boe (Danish doubles coach) just in case somebody is not fully fit or needs recovery," Mishra said. For the Uber Cup, the selectors decided to give an opportunity to youngsters after top players in both singles and doubles pulled out. The 17-year-old Anmol Kharab, who is India's latest badminton sensation, will be watched keenly at the big stage where she will have Ashmita Chaliha and Tanvi Sharma as her teammates in singles. "The Uber Cup team also looks good with the young talented players. I wish them the best of luck and hope they will make the nation proud with their performances."

In Thomas Cup, the Indian men's team has been clubbed with heavyweights Indonesia, Thailand and England in Group C, while the women's side has been drawn in Group A alongside 15-time winner China, Canada and Singapore in Uber Cup. Indian women have reached the semifinals of the Uber Cup thrice in 1957, 2014 and 2016. The Indian men's team qualified automatically for the tournament by virtue of being the defending champions, while the women made the cut after winning a historic gold medal at the Badminton Asia Team Championships in Malaysia earlier this year. Thomas Cup squad: (Singles) HS Prannoy, Lakshya Sen, Kidambi Srikanth, Priyanshu Rajawat and Kiran George; (Doubles) Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, Chirag Shetty, MR Arjun, Dhruv Kapila and Sai Pratheek. Uber Cup squad: (Singles) Anmol Kharab, Tanvi Sharma, Ashmita Chaliha and Isharani Baruah; (Doubles) Shruti Mishra, Priya Konjengbam, Simran Singhi and Ritika Thaker.



Five Indian women shuttlers, including Anmol, enter quarterfinals

Kazakhstan Challenge

PTI ■ ASTANA

Young shuttler Anmol Kharab continued to impress as she progressed to the women's singles quarterfinals along with four other Indians in the Kazakhstan International Challenge here on Thursday. Besides Anmol, in-form Devika Sihag, former national champion Anupama Upadhaya, seventh seed Tanya Hemanth and Isharani Baruah also entered the last 8 in women's singles. Reigning senior national champion Anmol, who played a pivotal role in the Indian women's team winning an unprecedented gold at the Badminton Asia Team Championships in February, beat UAE's Nurani Ratu Azzahra 21-11 21-7 in the second round. The 17-year-old Anmol will face Japan's Sorano Yoshikawa next. Sihag, who won two international challenge titles out of the four finals that she reached this season, outwitted fourth-seeded Azerbaijan's Keisha Fatimah Azzahra 21-12 21-12 to set up a meeting with compatriot Anupama, who beat Czech Republic's fifth seed Tereza Svabikova. The seventh seed Tanya saw off

Saudi Arabia will host women tennis WTA Finals for next three years

AP ■ RIYADH

Saudi Arabia will host the SWTA Finals as part of a three-year deal announced Thursday by the women's professional tennis tour that will increase the prize money for this November's season-ending championship to a record USD 15.25 million, a 70 per cent increase from 2023. The event for the top eight singles players and top eight doubles teams will be held in Riyadh from 2024-26, part of a recent wave of investment by the kingdom in tennis and various sports, despite questions about LGBTQ+ and women's rights there raised by Hall of Famers Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova and others. "We're going into this eyes wide open that the investment in sport by Saudi certainly provokes strong views from people," WTA Tour Chairman and CEO Steve Simon told The Associated Press. "We've met with Chris and



sites for the WTA Finals, which have moved around to five cities over the past five editions after a deal to put the tournament in Shenzhen, China, through 2030 was disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic and concerns over the safety of retired Grand Slam doubles champion Peng Shuai, who accused a Chinese government official of rape. The cities that hosted in 2022 (Fort Worth, Texas) and 2023 (Cancun, Mexico) were not revealed until September each year, and last November's event was strongly criticised by players. Four-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek beat Jessica Pegula in last year's title match; US Open champ Coco Gauff and Australian Open winner Aryna Sabalenka were among the other participants.

Simon said Riyadh was selected by the WTA in late December, but the details of the agreement were just completed. "This partnership will build on our exposure to a market and a region whose impact on the sports industry is certainly growing rapidly," Simon said. "We certainly expect that you'll see more events coming there in the future. So at the end, we believe that the WTA should be a part of this development, versus being on the outside." Saudi Arabia's Private Investment Fund (PIF) formed the LIV Golf tour and put money into soccer, for example, and the kingdom's role in tennis has been rising. The ATP Tour moved its Next Gen Finals for leading 21-and-under players to Jeddah in November; the PIF is the title sponsor for the men's rankings; 22-time Grand Slam champion Rafael Nadal recently became an ambassador for the Saudi Tennis Federation; he will join 24-time major champ Novak Djokovic and rising stars Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner at an exhibition event in Riyadh in October. There have been discussions about placing a top-tier Masters 1000 tournament in Saudi Arabia, too, part of a possible larger restructuring involving the WTA, ATP and the country. Rights groups say women continue to face discrimination in most aspects of family life and homosexuality is a major taboo, as it is in much of the rest of the Middle East. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has enacted wide-ranging social reforms, including granting women the right to drive and largely dismantling male guardianship laws that had allowed husbands and male relatives to control many aspects of women's lives. Men and women are still required to dress modestly, but the rules have been loosened and the once-feared religious police have been sidelined.

Praggnanandhaa to meet Firouza in opener

AP ■ TORONTO

India's best bet, Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa will start his campaign against French Alireza Firouza and it will be an all-Indian affair between D Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi in the first round of the Candidates chess tournament that has begun here. An all-American duel will be fought between two highest-ranked players Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura. In the other contest of the day, Nijat Abasov of Azerbaijan will take on the lone Russian Ian Nepomniachtch. In the women's section too, the two Indians, R Vaishali

and Koneru Humpy are pitted against each other and the two Russians Aleksandra Goryachkina and Kateryna Lagno will also be battling out in the first round. The two Chinese Lei Tingjie and Tan Zhongyi are also slated to meet each other and Anna Muzychuk of Ukraine will face the youngest participant Nurgul Salimova of Bulgaria. While the pairings were announced a few weeks ago, the only thing that might matter is the start for each of the eight participants in the double round-robin events that will select the challenger to the next world championship match. The time control for the event is 40 moves in two hours and 30 minutes for the rest of the game with an increment of 30 seconds per move starting from move 41. "This is going to be interesting; the time control means that we have to keep an eye on the clock as there is no increment for first 40 moves," Pragg said. Going by the announced pairing, Pragg may have an edge as the second half is where most of the things unfold. The Indian is slated to play Nakamura and Caruana with black pieces in the first half and also compatriot Gujrathi. It may be a vital element as in the return games the young Indian will have white pieces and towards the end of the event a lot can change with a positive approach that Pragg possess. Gukesh also has things under control but for that he will need to use his white pieces for good effect in the first half.



Indian football team drops four places to 121

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian football men's team dropped four places to 121 in the latest FIFA rankings, its worst in recent years, following an embarrassing 1-2 defeat against Afghanistan in the second round of the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers in Guwahati last month. The Igor Stimac-coached side, which had broken into the top-100 last year, having won the Intercontinental Cup, the Tri-Nations tournament and the SAFF Championship, on March 26 suffered a shocking defeat at home to lowly-ranked Afghanistan to continue its poor run of late. Even though the team registered a win against Kuwait in the World Cup qualifiers, its first away win in over two decades, the forgettable outing at the AFC Asian Cup 2023 in Qatar, where the side lost all its matches without scoring a single goal, saw it plummet 15 spots to 117th after the continental tournament. India ended their Asian Cup campaign in January pointless and goal-less after losing to Australia (0-2), Uzbekistan (0-3) and Syria (0-1). It finished at the bottom of the four-team Group B. Last month, the Blue Tigers were held to a goalless draw by Afghanistan in their first leg second round World Cup qualifiers in Abha, Saudi Arabia, and then lost the home fixture, prompting outrage from fans and calls for sacking of Stimac. India's worst ranking, though, is 173. Before dropping 15 places to 117 in March, the Indian team was placed at 102nd in the FIFA rankings, issued on December 21, 2023. Reigning world champions Argentina continue to top the chart followed by 2022 World Cup runners-up France, England, Belgium and Brazil. Netherlands occupy the sixth place and they are followed by Portugal, Spain and Italy with Croatia completing the top 10.

Satwik recovering from shoulder injury

Pulls out of Badminton Asia Championships

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Star Indian shuttler Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty on Thursday pulled out of their men's doubles title defence at next week's Badminton Asia Championships with the former recuperating from a shoulder injury. Last April, Satwik and Chirag, currently ranked world number one, had made history by breaking a 58-year-old drought as they became the first Indians after Dinesh Khanna to be crowned



champions at the Asia Badminton Championships in Dubai. Dinesh Khanna had achieved the rare feat of winning gold in 1965. However, Satwik and Chirag, who have been in rollicking form this season, having won the French Open Super 750 and finishing runner-up in two finals, on Thursday decided to opt out of the tournament. "It is not a new injury, it is something which happens due to overuse of shoulder and Satwik is already on road to recovery. They are still

rush things." It is a recurrent injury as Satwik has been troubled by his right shoulder in the past but he had recovered from it as he and Chirag went on to win laurels for the country. But following the European leg this season, it seemed to have flared up a bit. Satwik and Chirag are currently into their 10th week as world number one, surpassing Saina Nehwal's record of nine successive weeks at the top of BWF rankings. The crack pair had a stellar season in the last two years, winning the 2022 world championships bronze, 2022 Commonwealth Games gold

medal, 2023 Asia championships gold, the 2023 Asian Games gold medal, 2022 Thomas Cup winners, 2023 Indonesia Super 1000 champions and 2023 Korea Open winners. The duo has been named in India's strong Thomas Cup team which will look to defend their title in China from April 27. "Thomas Cup remains an important event and they will be back for the prestigious tournament as we are the defending champions," the source said. The withdrawal of the top pair means HS Prannoy, Lakshya Sen and PV Sindhu will now lead India's charge at the prestigious tournament.



FORMER ENGLAND GREAT BACKS MAYANK YADAV

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Indian pace sensation Mayank Yadav does not need to go through the domestic grind and can be fast-tracked into international cricket which will toughen up his body for the inevitable injury breakdowns, feels England fast bowler great Stuart Broad.

Broad, who retired from all formats last year with 604 Test wickets, feels that like him, Yadav too can learn at the highest level by starting young but must also brace himself for the ups and downs.

"I don't think he needs to come through a grind of playing (domestic) cricket, his body will naturally harden up with the quality of cricket he is going to play," Broad, a member of the Star Sports Incredible Star Cast, told PTI in an exclusive interaction at the channel's studio here.

"He has got a really smooth run up, he has got a brace front-leg delivery (when the bowler's leg acts as a brake to help transfer the run up speed into action), he knows the line and length, he is trying to bowl and has genuine pace," he said.

"The best learning place for any young bowler is as high a



standard as you could possibly play. I did a lot of my learning at international cricket, played at a young age, he is learning on the job in the IPL, playing against the best - that is just the best place to learn.

Broad said expediting the 21-year-old to top-flight cricket would only work in his favour,

since India have "got something special" in him.

"I would be very tempted to get him in and around the Indian setup, just not necessarily (he) has to play, just to learn from the quality of players that they have because India have got something special on their

hands if they manage him well," he said.

Broad, however, said Yadav will have to prepare himself for the tough challenges that every player faces.

"Yes, he is going to pick up injuries, he is going to have time out of the game because of the genuine pace that he

bowls, but he looks in fantastic rhythm. Two Player of the Match (awards) in his first two IPL games is almost unheard of as a fast bowler," he said.

"I expect him to play all three formats. I am sure he swings the red ball just judging by his seam position with the white, but we also need to manage expectations around him. He is not going to get a Player of the Match every single game," Broad added.

As a former teammate of England captain Jos Buttler, Broad feels spending time at the crease and not taking extra pressure could help the Rajasthan Royals' batter come out of the slump.

Having ended the last IPL with three ducks in a row, Buttler has not been able to fire yet in this season.

"He will be a bit frustrated that he has not converted his starts into big scores, but it is such a long tournament, there is plenty of time for him to strike. Ultimately, the biggest positive is that the team are three from three (in terms of wins)," Broad said.

"When you are playing in a winning team, that always gives you a boost. I have got no concerns as a former teammate of his, he is in a good place, he is happy, loves

playing for Rajasthan Royals, (and) he is just waiting to get through that powerplay," he said.

The England great also spoke about the slump that five-time champions Mumbai Indians find themselves in. He said the only way Mumbai Indians can stop what is happening inside the stadiums - incessant jeering of skipper Hardik Pandya by fans - is by winning matches.

"As a player it doesn't bother you at all, to be honest. It's part and parcel of international and top-flight sport," Broad said.

"You don't necessarily get that sort of environment and hostile feeling on your home ground. But I don't think the atmosphere can affect you as a proven performer. You still need to go out and deliver your skill."

"Ultimately, Mumbai Indians is a winning franchise. It has got a winning mentality, and they're not winning. That's the most difficult thing they're coping with at the moment. What they need to do is just get back on winning ways," he said. However, he has no such hope from Royal Challengers Bengaluru as he feels the side does not have enough fuel in the tank to go the distance.



Mustafizur less CSK face unpredictable Sunrisers Hyderabad

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Without their in-form bowler Mustafizur Rahman, Chennai Super Kings will need to sharpen their all-round game when they take on an unpredictable Sunrisers Hyderabad in the IPL here on Friday. Consistency is the hallmark of CSK who would be looking to restore "normal service" following their first loss of the season against Delhi Capitals.

It is a long tournament and an odd dip in performance is expected, as mentioned by the CSK captain Rituraj Gaikwad after the game in Visakhapatnam.

However, he and his opening partner Rachin Ravindra will need to be ready for the moving ball after being found wanting on that front against Delhi.

The majority of cricketing world wants M S Dhoni to bat higher than number eight, especially after his 16-ball 37 in his very first outing with the bat this season.

However, that is unlikely to happen as Dhoni would want the likes of Shivam Dube and Sameer Rizvi to finish the job ahead of him.

In the bowling department, CSK will need to rethink their combination with Mustafizur back in Bangladesh to process his visa for the T20 World Cup in the USA and Caribbean.

The overseas combine of Mustafizur and Matheesha Pathirana had been working well for CSK who could bring in a like-for-like replacement for the Bangladesh cricketer in Mukesh Choudhary. Shardul Thakur is also yet to get a game thus far.

Their opposition Sunrisers Hyderabad will be looking to make the most of home comforts in their second game at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium.

The batters will take immense confidence from their record showing against Mumbai Indians here. The pressure is piling

up on opener Mayank Agarwal who is yet to make an impact.

The game against Gujarat Titans was Sunrisers' first batting failure in the tournament and they would be looking for immediate course correction.

Even on the bowling front, the likes of Jaydev Unadkat, Mayank Markande and Bhuvneshwar Kumar have proved expensive. The seasoned Bhuvneshwar has especially been disappointing with the new ball and is yet to pick up a wicket in three games.

Skipper Pat Cummins have kept things tight with a sub 8 runs per over economy rate to complement his four wickets in three games. He will need support from others on Friday night.

The pitch in the opening game here produced more than 500 runs, raising hopes of another six-hitting slugfest.

Squads: Sunrisers Hyderabad: Jaydev Unadkat, Jhatavedh Subramanyan, T Natarajan, Mayank Markande, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Pat Cummins (c), Washington Sundar, Shabbaz Ahmed, Sanvir Singh, Glenn Phillips, Nitish Reddy, Marco Jansen, Abhishek Sharma, Umpendra Yadav, Rahul Tripathi, Aiden Markram, Heinrich Klaasen, Travis Head, Anmolpreet Singh, Mayank Agarwal, Abdul Samad, Akash Maharaj Singh, Waniindu Hasaranga, Umran Malik.

Chennai Super Kings: MS Dhoni, Aravelly Avanish, Devon Conway, Rituraj Gaikwad (c), Ajinkya Rahane, Shaik Rasheed, Moeen Ali, Shivam Dube, RS Hangarekar, Ravindra Jadeja, Ajay Jadav Mandal, Daryl Mitchell, Rachin Ravindra, Mitchell Santner, Nishant Sindhu, Deepak Chahar, Tushar Deshpande, Mukesh Choudhary, Mustafizur Rahman, Matheesha Pathirana, Simarjeet Singh, Prashant Solanki, Shardul Thakur, Maheesh Theekshana, Sameer Rizvi.

IPL records highest ever TV viewership in first 10 matches

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Indian Premier League recorded a TV viewership of 35 crore in its first 10 matches, which is higher than any previous edition of the tournament including the seasons played during the COVID-19 pandemic, the event's official broadcaster claimed on Thursday.

As per BARC data released by Disney Star, the overall watch-time for the tournament has sky-rocketed to 8028 crore minutes which is 20 per cent higher than last year.

"We are overwhelmed with the record-breaking viewing figures for TATA IPL 2024. Disney Star has started the 17th season from where it left off last year, doubling down on fan-centred initiatives that seek to drive passion and

fandom for the tournament," Sanjog Gupta, Head of Disney Star (Sports) said in a press release.

Disney Star is broadcasting IPL across 14 feeds in 10 languages with a special feed in Indian Sign Language for Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, and Visually Impaired fans.

The tournament had opened to blockbuster viewership numbers with 16.8 crore tuning in to watch the season's first game between Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru on March 22.

Disney Star said the opening day also registered a watch-time of 1276 crore minutes -- the highest-ever for the first day of any season. The watch-time minutes are a compilation of the time spent by each viewer in watching the game.

Time for reflection : DC skipper Pant after crushing defeat to KKR

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

We just didn't turn up on the day, said Delhi Capitals captain Rishabh Pant while asking his teammates to introspect following the side's crushing 106-run defeat to Kolkata Knight Riders in the IPL here on Wednesday.

Delhi Capitals bowlers had a forgettable outing as KKR batters toyed with them, piling on 272/7.

"Our bowlers were all over the place. We just didn't turn up on the day. Today was one of those days," Pant said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

"As a batting unit, we only wanted to keep going hard as a team. I would rather get all out as a team than not go for the target," he added.

Sunil Narine, who blazed away to 85 off 39 balls, got a life as Pant was late in calling for DRS on an outside edge by the West Indian early in the game.



"I think it was quite loud here. At the same time, couldn't see the timer on the screen. There was some problem on the screen. But there are some things you can control, some things you can't," said Pant.

Axar Patel, the lone spinner in the DC team, bowled only one over that yielded 18 runs.

"See the thought process was that we didn't want to use

spinners but our fast bowlers were going through the motions. I think it is time for reflections as an individual. We need to learn from these mistakes and come out positive in the next match."

Pant, who is coming off a long layoff, himself looked in fine touch as he scored his second consecutive fifty.

"Doing fine. Getting out there.

Enjoying every day but cricket has its own ups and downs." Player of the Match Narine who notched his highest T20 score said he is looking to contribute with the bat.

"Cricket is all about batting so looking to contribute more as a batter. That said, I still enjoy bowling.

On the team joke that he does not attend batting meetings, he said, "I have one role and the less I know the better it is for me."

"At the end of the day it is what the team needs. If they need me to bat, I will bat," he added.

Winning captain Shreyas Iyer was lavish in his praise for Narine and young Angkrish Raghuvanshi, who both scored blazing half-centuries.

"As I said in the toss interview, Sunny is there to take on the bowlers, and if he cannot the rest of us should. That's the plan.

Angkrish thanks guru Nayar after stunning fifty against DC

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Angkrish Raghuvanshi remained unsung despite amassing 278 runs during India's triumphant U-19 World Cup campaign in 2022. But on Wednesday, Raghuvanshi waived his anonymity in a matter of 27 balls, paving the way for Kolkata Knight Riders' 106-run hammering of Delhi Capitals in the Indian Premier League here.

Coming from the Abhishek Nayar school of coaching, the 18-year-old played down his

effort and thanked his "guru", saying he has influenced him the most and dedicated his stunning 54-run knock to the former Mumbai opener.

"He has helped me in everything, the way I think about the game, the way I work towards the game, the things I eat, the way I train, he is basically my guru and everything. That's my relationship with him," Raghuvanshi said in his post-match press conference.

Over the last few years, Nayar has established himself as a prominent coach in domestic



and franchise circuits, and most notably, played a key role even in the resurgence of seasoned campaigners like Dinesh Karthik.

Speaking about his training regime, Raghuvanshi reiterated the role played by Nayar.

"It was pretty simple, the way I have been practicing the past few weeks, the past few years with my coach Abhishek Nayar...The way he has made me practice I didn't really have to think too much when I went out to bat.

"I just batted with my

instincts and I just trusted that. What I did during practice was enough, the way he has made me practice.. He has made me face tough circumstances during practice," he said.

India's highest run-getter at the 2022 U-19 World Cup, Raghuvanshi was born in Delhi but moved to Mumbai when he was 11 to train under Nayar and Omkar Salvi.

Since moving to Mumbai, Nayar has been a mentor to him. He played for Mumbai in the recent Mushtaq Ali and Vijay Hazare Trophies.

"I would like to dedicate this knock to my coach, Abhishek Nayar and my teammates and the support staff. I have a learned a lot staying with them."

"Abhishek sir has been working with me since my childhood. All this reverse sweep and all, he made me practice a lot. So, the main man is him only," said Raghuvanshi. All those shots were on display when Raghuvanshi stitched together a 104-run stand with Sunil Narine as KKR posted 272/7 in their 20 overs.

UNACCEPTABLE, EMBARRASSING

Ponting lashes out after DC 106 run loss

PTI ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Delhi Capitals head coach Ricky Ponting has lashed out at his side after the "unacceptable" and "embarrassing" 106-run battering at the hands of Kolkata Knight Riders.

The Capitals endured a forgettable outing here on Wednesday, first conceding

272 runs in the allotted 20 overs and then getting bowled out for 166 in 17.2 overs for one of their heaviest defeats in the tournament's history.

"It's pretty hard to assess right now. I mean I was almost embarrassed with our first half of the game today," Ponting said at the post-match press conference.

"To concede that many runs...We bowled 17 wickets and it took us two hours to bowl our overs as well, so we were two overs behind again, which means the guys bowling last two overs only get to bowl with four fielders outside the circle."

The Capitals never looked like they were in the game be it with the ball or the bat,



crumbling under the weight of the mammoth total, the second highest in the history of the IPL.

"Lot of things happened in this game that were unacceptable and a lot of things we will talk as a group tonight that we have to fix immediately to go forward in the competition. There will be some good open discussions

in the changing room for sure," Ponting said.

Skipper Rishabh Pant not going for review on a couple of occasions did not help DC's cause, one of them including Player of the Match Sunil Narine, who set up the game for KKR with his 39-ball 85.

Narine was batting on 24 when Ishant Sharma expressed confidence that the

all-rounder had edged the ball, but by the time Pant had signalled to the umpire for a review, the time was up.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to Rishabh about those. I mean, obviously, Rishabh hasn't heard them, other fielders and bowlers did hear something on both occasions. But look, at the end of the day, they are little things.